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### Who Are We?

by **AgentGrey**

**Summary**

Sequel to Alone Together. In Season 3, Faith met Buffy in LA during the events of the episode Anne, and it changed everything. Now, a few months after Faith turned on the Mayor and helped Buffy save the day, the Chosen Two are finding their way along new paths. Buffy is figuring herself out in her new college environment, while Faith works to build a life for herself around more than just slaying. As the two grow, the only question becomes what will it take for them to finally act on their feelings for each other. (Season 4 rewrite, building on the changes established in Alone Together.)

If you ever wanna chat about my stories, or anything really, my Twitter handle is @baileygrey789

**Notes**

Based loosely on the events of The Freshman.
“Oof,” Faith grunted, as the unexpected blow knocked her on her back. But she was back up in a heartbeat, not ready to back down. Instead, she kept a sultry grin across her lips as she moved back in towards her opponent, bare feet moving with precision and arms up in a defensive posture. “That the best ya got?” she teased, waggling her eyebrows suggestively.

“Oh please, like I don’t know you’re just trying to cover up the fact that I caught you off guard just now.” The retort was taunting but playful. Faith made her move in an instant, but she put any effort into masking her intentions. The two traded a couple of soft blows that were easily blocked, both of them analyzing the other’s stance and movements.

“You get that one, Blondie, but it’s not my fault I got distracted. Have you seen your outfit?” Her sparring partner was small, blonde, and incredibly sexy. Buffy wore a soft pair of pants, loose but clingy in the right places, and a simple, but distractingly tiny, tank top. Her tanned skin glistened with the mild sweat she had already worked up, even though they had only begun their sparring session a few minutes ago. Her muscles were perfectly toned, a testament to the work the two Slayers had put in that summer.

Their defeat of the ascended demon formerly known as Mayor Richard Wilkins III months earlier had included both the destruction of the high school library they had previously used as a makeshift training space, and the Slayers’ declaration of independence from the Watcher’s Council. Shortly thereafter, Giles had rewarded their work by renting them a small space to set up a sort of Slayer gym. The small room, 400 square feet of space, was located in the back part of a business building roughly halfway between the Summers’ house and the campus of UC Sunnydale, and it was outfitted with two punching bags, a few weapons racks, and copious amounts of thick padding on the floor and walls. Buffy and Faith had been meeting there at least three or four times a week ever since, honing their skills and toning their bodies.

Buffy sidestepped a punch, sliding behind Faith as she began to wrap one arm under Faith’s shoulder and the other around her neck into a firm hold. Buffy was pressed tightly against her, their bodies moving in a familiar rhythm as Faith anticipated the hold and threw her body forward before Buffy could get a good grip. The blonde flipped forward over Faith’s body, gracefully catching herself by pressing both hands to the ground and using her momentum to push herself into a continued flip, landing on her feet a few feet away from Faith. Buffy spun, her arm already extended to counter the charge she anticipated from Faith. “Felt me comin’, did ya?” Faith asked as she ducked Buffy motion, and the two resumed their sparring stances.

“I always do—ugh, Faith.” Faith’s raised eyebrows had clued the other Slayer into the hidden meaning of her suggestive comment, and Buffy blushed as she caught onto it. It was so easy to make the blonde blush these days, and it happened to be one of Faith’s favorite pastimes. “I really hope you aren’t this crass at The Gallery.”

“I am, but Joyce ain’t as dainty as her princess of a daughter.” Faith winked as they continued to circle each other, trading blows in a delicate, dangerous dance. “She thinks I’m hilarious.” After everything had calmed down and Faith had moved back into the Summers’ house, she had begun to work part-time at the shop Joyce owned and operated. As a high school drop-out, Faith couldn’t exactly join Buffy, Willow, and Oz at UC Sunnydale, but she wanted to make something out of herself. She didn’t want to be a mooch, and Joyce had suggested that she could use some help at The Gallery. Though Faith thought ‘gallery’ was an odd choice of term for the business.
From what she had gathered in the months she’d been working with Joyce, the elder Summers woman had been kind of a big deal in the LA art world before moving to Sunnydale. She’d had a pretty well-known art gallery there, but after Buffy burned down her high school gym fighting vampires, they’d been forced to move. Sunnydale wasn’t big or fancy enough to support the sort of art gallery Joyce had built from the ground up in LA, so she’d had to improvise. The Gallery in Sunnydale was equal parts art gallery, antiquities shop, and event space, and Faith suspected business was only as good as it was through the sheer charisma, skill, and force of will Joyce poured into it. So far, Faith hadn’t learned to do much more than move the heavier inventory and work the cash register. But it gave her something to do during the day, and honestly, Faith just enjoyed hanging out with Joyce and learning from her.

“I think you’re screwing with me,” Buffy pouted.

“I’d certainly like to be,” Faith purred, and Buffy groaned dramatically.

“I walked right into that one.” Taking it easy on her opponent, Faith walked right into a poorly disguised countermove by Buffy. In a heartbeat, she found herself pinned against the padded wall, Buffy’s forearm pressed lightly against her neck, holding her to the wall. Buffy’s breathing was heavy, and Faith couldn’t help but notice that the other Slayer’s body was closer than strictly necessary, enjoying the light points of contact between their knees, thighs, and chests. Buffy’s breasts rose and fell against Faith’s own to the time of the other Slayer’s breathing. “You goin’ easy on me?” Buffy teased, and she seemed like she was enjoying the contact every bit as much as Faith was.

“Maybe I just like having you on top of me,” Faith growled. Surprisingly, Buffy pushed a little tighter. Usually, a comment like that was enough to lead Buffy to force some space between them. Their sparring had always carried with it a bit of flirtation, and there had been more than a little body-on-body action. But Buffy always pulled back before anything could cross a line, and Faith wasn’t looking to push beyond flirting. Not yet.

But if Buffy was ready to take things a little further, go with the flow, Faith wasn’t about to resist. Without another word, Faith ducked, slipping free of Buffy’s arm and kicking her feet out from under her. As Buffy toppled to the floor, Faith leapt atop her, straddling her hips and searching her face for a reaction. Buffy’s eyes were wide, and Faith willed herself not to read into how open and dark her pupils were. Buffy’s lips were quirked into the faintest of smiles, and Faith pressed down against her, leaning forward just a little as she pinned Buffy’s arms to the floor.

“So, tomorrow’s the big day, huh?” Faith asked the question nonchalantly, as if she wasn’t at all distracted by the warmth rapidly pooling between her legs. As if there was nothing at all out of the ordinary about her body and Buffy’s pressed together like this. As if she couldn’t feel Buffy’s racing pulse under her hands.

“Yup,” Buffy whispered, breathless as she kept her eyes fixed firmly on Faith’s. Her arms tensed as if she was going to fight Faith, force her off, but it she didn’t actually want to break their connection. She just wanted to do the bare minimum required to keep up the façade that they were still sparring. Faith grinned, pressing down a little harder against Buffy’s hips and ignoring the increase in the pace of her own breathing. “You sure you don’t wanna come help out?”

Buffy was moving into the dorms tomorrow, and Faith knew that the other Slayer was more than a little nervous about beginning her big college adventure. The dorms came with furniture—beds, dressers, desks—but Joyce was still taking the day to help move what stuff Buffy did need. Willow’s parents were helping out too, and honestly, Faith wasn’t looking to join in on all the family time. She leaned in a little closer, only a few inches separating her lips from Buffy’s. “Nah. I gotta
hold down the fort at The Gallery. But I’m sure I’ll find a reason to come visit soon. Any classes in particular you lookin’ forward to?”

Buffy’s eyes darted back forth between Faith’s, and she could’ve sworn Buffy’s head lifted ever so slightly off the mat, bringing their lips that much closer. “Will says our psych professor is this world-renowned lady psychologist, so that might be cool.” Faith could feel her the slight quiver in Buffy’s breath on her lips, the anticipation. Then those lips curved into a silly smile. “Say, how do you think a person gets to be renowned? I mean, like, do you have to be ‘nowned’ first?” Buffy’s eyes looked no less sultry, even though her voice was playful and joking. Faith bit her lip, unable to fight the grin that broke out along her lips. *How the hell does she manage to be so adorable and so sexy at the same time?*

“Yeah, I’m not an expert on language or whatever, B. Might wanna try askin’ Red.” Faith glanced down at Buffy’s lips, for just a moment. Her mouth was slightly open, the very tip of her tongue tracing nervously along her top row of teeth. “So, a badass lady prof, huh? I could get behind that.”

“Oh yeah?” Buffy whispered, and Faith could definitely feel both of their heads moving, their parted lips slipping closer and closer to each other. Her eyes fluttered closed, and her chest tightened in anticipation. But then, at the last moment, Buffy thrust her hips up into Faith. For the briefest second, Faith thought it was about to go down, but then she realized Buffy was just pushing her off. She didn’t fight it, respecting Buffy’s boundaries and rolling off the other Slayer. She pulled herself away from Buffy, to where she had a water bottle waiting for her at the edge of the mat.

When Faith glance back at Buffy, the blonde was on her feet again, going for her own water bottle and blotting at her face with a small towel. “Have you heard anything about Xander?” she asked, her voice betraying how much another almost kiss had gotten under her skin. Faith rolled her eyes at the back of Buffy’s head, as they both started to put their shoes back on.

“I think he should be back from his summer-long road trip soonish. That’s what he told Anya anyway.”

Buffy chuckled, then turned to face Faith again. “I still can’t believe you two hit it off so quickly. That girl is so weird.”

Faith laughed at that. “No doubt. But the girl has wicked great stories. And I like her whole blunt honesty thing.” She pushed up onto her feet. “We done for the night? Wanna get in a quick patrol before we head back to the house for your final night living with your mom?”

“Oh god, that makes it sound so …” Buffy frowned. “I don’t know. Something.” She shrugged, stepping closer to Faith. “I know I’ve already asked a couple times, but are you sure you’re going to be okay staying there once I’m gone?”

“As opposed to what exactly?” Faith challenged. She didn’t wait for an answer, throwing an arm around the other girl. “It’s gonna be great, B. You know Joyce and I are cool now.” Faith still hadn’t told Buffy that she was saving up to get her own place. She was determined to make something of herself, but she wanted to wait before she confided any of it to Buffy. Faith wanted to impress Buffy with what she had accomplished, not set up an expectation that she might fail to meet.

Buffy smiled at her, a flash of joy in those emerald eyes. “Okay. Sorry. I know. It’ll be great. Everything is going to be different, but it’ll be fine. I’m sure.” Faith hip-checked her, cutting off the rambling.

“B, it’s gonna be great. You’re the big bad college girl now. Embrace it.”
As Buffy opened her eyes, an unfamiliar ceiling greeted her. She blinked several times, fighting away the remnants of sleep as her ears began to register the soft but insistent beeping sound beside her. Sun streamed down through the thin curtains over the two large windows behind her. To her right was an oak nightstand, its surface home to a simple lamp and a white alarm clock whose red digital numbers read ‘7:00.’ She turned off the alarm, then sat up in her twin-sized bed.

To her left was her weapons chest, the only piece of furniture she had brought with her. Beside it was a six-drawer dresser, a small mirror hung on the wall over the top of it, and just beyond that was the door to her closet. The dresser and the door featured the same oak finish as her nightstand and bed, as did the chair at her desk on the wall directly in front of her. The desk itself was white, with matching shelving building into the wall above it. The door to the room was the dividing line between her side of the room and Willow’s, which was a mirror image of Buffy’s. As she finally glanced all the way over to her right, Buffy saw that Willow was also awake, watching her with an amused smile.

“Well waking up to a new room, huh?” Buffy nodded, making a face that was broken up by a long yawn as she stretched languidly. It was her first day of classes, and Buffy could already feel a small knot of anxiety forming in her chest. “How did you sleep?”

Buffy cracked a mischievous grin. “Slept pretty great once I was able to get past all your snoring.” Willow’s bright face fell, first to a frown, then a full-on pout. Buffy was lying—Willow didn’t snore. Not that she had noticed anyway. But it had taken her a long time to fall asleep. She didn’t do well sleeping in new places, and her mind had taken over an hour to stop racing.

Yesterday had been eye-opening. Campus felt like a massive, beautiful labyrinth. Even simple tasks like getting her student ID and buying her necessary textbooks had been daunting challenges that tested Buffy’s patience and willpower. The center of campus, the Quad, had been the most terrifying, filled with a crowd of loud, aggressive students inviting her to everything from Bible study to a massive frat keg party. Willow’s steady guidance had been the only thing that got Buffy through it, and she had never been more grateful that the witch had not only chosen to come to UC Sunnydale, but to be her roommate. But that still wouldn’t prevent her from a few playful roomie jabs.

“I don’t snore,” Willow insisted, huffing. “Do I?”

“No,” Buffy admitted. “I’m just being a big meanie.”

“Oh, I see,” Willow mused, a hint of mischief in her own tone now. “Someone had trouble sleeping without a certain sexy brunette Slayer sleeping just down the hall?” Buffy fixed Willow with an immediate glare, but there was no real enmity in the expression. In fact, she found herself fighting against her lips’ instinct to curve upwards at the mention of Faith.

I wonder if she’s awake yet? Joyce usually tried to get to The Gallery by nine, to prepare for the day before opening shop at ten. But Faith wasn’t really one for early mornings, often rolling out of bed a mere ten or fifteen minutes before jumping in the car with Joyce. Faith hadn’t contributed to Buffy’s inability to sleep, but Willow was right that it felt weird being away from the other Slayer. The two of them had forged such a familiar and comfortable routine over the summer, and now instead of sharing a comfy home bathroom with Faith, Buffy was faced with the unnerving task of sharing a communal dorm bathroom with a floor’s worth of strangers. It was going to be an adjustment.

Buffy threw off her covers and stretched further as she pushed herself up and out of bed. As she rummaged through her dresser, then closet, Willow’s voice called out from behind her. “So … how
are things between you two?” Buffy wasn’t sure how Willow managed to make such a vague question sound so pointed. Her best friend had been slowly and surely pushing Buffy more and more about the obvious closeness between the two Slayers of late. For a long time, Willow had been the only person who knew about the mutual romantic feelings growing between Buffy and Faith since Christmas last year. But those feelings had been confused and awkward and put on the backburner by Faith’s brief, but fraught, turn to the dark side.

Things had shifted after they took out the Mayor, who had manipulated Faith’s inner darkness and brokenness to turn her against Buffy. She could still remember watching the sunset that night, not yet in any kind of place where she could explore anything romantic with Faith, but confident in the path they were finally on together. And over the course of the summer, that path had led them to an intense and fulfilling friendship, which Buffy could no longer pretend wasn’t constantly on the verge of falling off a cliff into something else entirely. Except that Buffy still wasn’t ready for it. Not yet.

“Things are good.” If Willow was going to ask vague questions, Buffy would provide vague answers. She continued searching for a day one outfit, eventually settling on a cute, lacy, white spaghetti-strap tank top and a patterned pink skirt.

“Buffyyyy,” Willow whined plaintively. “You gotta give me more than that. It’s been months. You’re telling me you two haven’t even kissed yet?” Buffy sighed, laying her outfit out on her bed before grabbing a towel and going in search of her toiletries.

“Willow, I don’t know what to tell you. Things with Faith are complicated. They always have been.” Buffy gathered her things, ready to head to the bathroom. “Neither of us is looking to rock the boat. Things are good. They’re nice and comfortable, and yeah, a little flirty. But … that’s enough for now. Especially with me going to college, and everything changing. Okay?” Willow shrugged, as if to say ‘if you say so,’ and Buffy rolled her eyes. “I’m gonna go take a shower. This is going to be so weird.”

Why does every door have to look the same in this building? Buffy was still on edge from the insanely rude way she had been shamed out of the room by the professor teaching an elective that she would definitely never be taking. She was just trying to find one last course to fit into her schedule this semester, and the guy had been so damn full of himself, he couldn’t bear to have a student whispering quietly while he ranted away about how somber and important media studies were. Now she was in the psych building, but she couldn’t seem to find the doors she was looking for.

Psych 105 was in the big lecture hall in the building, but as far as Buffy could tell, there was nothing to set the lecture hall apart from any of the other classrooms, not based on the numbers on the doors, or even the doors themselves. I knew I should’ve brought a map. Or at least my schedule. That had the number of the room on it right? Buffy couldn’t believe how overwhelming and stressful college was. And UC Sunnydale isn’t even that big a school!

Buffy craned her head to the side, her attention focusing on the passing doors, trying her best to look in through small windows in search of her class. As such, she didn’t see the empty soda can littering the floor in the front of her, and she suddenly found herself thrown forward as it kicked out from under her foot and threw her off balance. Buffy caught herself, but not before she plowed into a tall, broad-shouldered guy with sandy blonde hair and a pained expression on his face as he toppled down to the floor and back into the nearby wall. “Oh god, I am s-so sorry!” Buffy stammered immediately, wincing as his expression shifted from pained to embarrassed.
He attempted and failed to hide how gingerly he stood as he collected himself, before assuring her, “I’m okay. It’s okay.” He brushed back the bangs of his slightly off-center parted hair and flashed a soft smile at her, and wow, he was really cute in a down-to-earth, corn-fed farm boy sort of way. He was wearing jeans and a rust-colored button-up with only the bottom button done, exposing much of the dark red shirt underneath. “That was, uh, bracing,” he quipped. “Are you alright?”

Yes, let’s just pretend that it’s normal that the girl who is a foot shorter and at least sixty or seventy pounds lighter than you tossed you forcefully to the ground just by accidentally stumbling into you. Buffy genuinely hoped she hadn’t hurt him. In addition to being difficult to explain away her disproportionate strength, he had a kind face that made her instantly worry about him. And why is he staring—oh right! He asked me a question. “Uh, I’m fine. Just tripped. There was a soda can, and then I was stumbling forward, and then everything was bad.” She smiled sheepishly, hoping he wouldn’t judge her for her tendency to stumble through an explanation when she was feeling awkward.

“Can I help you find your way to a class?” He smiled brightly, and yeah, it was a very nice smile. Still, Buffy couldn’t help noticing how peculiar his stance was. His expression and tone were so casual that they were an odd juxtaposition against his posture, back straight, shoulders back, and head held high as if at attention.

Buffy pouted. “Ugh. Is it that obvious that I’m lost?”

“Only a little,” he chuckled. “Seriously though, where are you headed? I know this building like the back of my hand.”

“Psych 105,” she answered, and his eyes lit up in recognition, a slight grin playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Well, you’re in for some fun. Professor Walsh is quite the character.”

Buffy looked at him with equal parts curiosity and puzzlement. “Is that so?”

“It is. And lucky for you, I’m headed there now. I’m actually your TA for that class.” Buffy hadn’t realized he was that much older, but she smiled up at him nonetheless. At least the view this semester will be nice. “I’m sorry,” he added, wincing a little as a thought occurred to him, “I must’ve forgotten my manners in all the concussion. I’m Riley.” He held out his hand, and she took it softly.

“Buffy,” she introduced herself, noting the crooked grin that formed in reaction to her name. “Nice to meet you, Buffy. Gotta say, that name’s a new one for me.” Buffy shrugged awkwardly, and Riley thankfully moved on. “Anyway, the lecture hall is right through here.” He pointed down a nearby hallway, to his left and Buffy’s right. “Come on, I’ll make sure you get there without any more nasty run-ins with stray bits of litter.” She giggled. Normally Buffy would’ve found the whole protective nice guy routine annoying, but Riley seemed genuine, and she was still worried she might have hurt him more than he was letting on. Plus she still had no idea where she was going. She was more than happy to follow her TA to the big double doors of the lecture hall, which did in fact look different than the doors to the smaller classrooms. She had just been in the wrong part of the building.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked cautiously, as they approached the open doors.

He nodded. “It just stung a bit. And I lost most of my basic motor functions there for a couple seconds. No biggie.” He grinned mischievously, and her lips moved to match his expression. “Here we are.” He gestured as if to say ‘ladies first,’ then followed her into the room. She
immediately spotted Willow and Oz saving her a seat. She turned back to Riley, but as she did so, her eyes lingered on the podium and the big desk in the front of the room. Her brows furrowed as she remembered her most recent classroom experience.

“Hey, so … I was just wondering. Professor Walsh isn’t planning on yelling at me and kicking me out of the class, is she?” Her shoulders slumped, and she was fully aware of how dumb the question sounded now that it was out of her mouth.

Riley’s eyes darted back and forth in slightly amused bewilderment, and he leaned in towards her, conspiratorially. “It’s not in her lesson plan,” he assured her, and he was obviously holding in a laugh at Buffy’s peculiar behavior.

“Great,” she muttered, feeling fully embarrassed now, and she turned on a dime and headed up to where Willow and Oz waited for her in the third row. They only barely had time to exchange pleasantries and for Buffy to brush off Willow’s question about the pop culture elective she had been considering before Professor Walsh marched through the doors to the classroom with an authoritative, “Okay.”

Riley handed her a piece of paper, and she took it without breaking stride, setting her briefcase down on the table and turning her piercing blue eyes on the crowd of students for the first time. “This is Psych 105, ‘Introduction to Psychology.’ I’m Professor Walsh.” She was a tough-looking woman in her late forties or early fifties, and she made an immediate impression on Buffy. Her presence was commanding, almost regal, and her short, choppy blonde hair and chiseled jaw gave her a sort of masculine edge that only added to her mystique. She wore a simple dark blue v-neck sweater with the sleeves pulled up to her elbows, exposing surprisingly toned forearms. Professor Walsh paced back around the podium and around to the front of her desk as she continued her introduction.

“Those of you who fall under my good graces will come to know me as Maggie.” She paused, a wry grin playing along the edges of her thin lips. “Those of you who don’t will come to know me by the name my TAs use—and think I don’t know about—’The Evil Bitch Monster of Death.’ That drew a chuckle from a few people, including Riley. Buffy honestly found it a little much, but the silly, overwrought nickname didn’t make Walsh any less intimidating. “Make no mistake, I run a hard class, I assign a lot of work, I talk fast, and I expect you to keep up.” Her eyes darted from student to student, and Buffy had the distinct impression that she was sizing each of them up in turn. “If you’re looking to coast I recommend Geology 101. That’s where the football players are.”

*Faith would love this woman.* The thought sprang to mind out of nowhere, and Buffy couldn’t really figure out what it was about Professor Walsh that she thought Faith would appreciate. The professor had moved into a discussion of the syllabus, the coursework, and the exam schedule for the class, but Buffy’s attention was now elsewhere, as always happened when her mind turned to Faith. She rolled her eyes as another thought followed that earlier one. *Faith does have a thing for strong women, I suppose.* She could just picture Faith slouching in the chair next to Buffy, leaning in to whisper, “Damn, B, think I might be hot for teacher,” right into Buffy’s ear in that way that always sent a tingle down her spine, Faith’s cool breath tickling her earlobe.

Part of Buffy wished the other Slayer could be there, along for the ride on the terrifying new adventure that was college. But at least the additional space and time apart would give Buffy the freedom to take her time in figuring out what she really wanted from Faith. Whether she could ever really let that turn into something … more than friendship.

Despite all the chemistry and the undeniably strong connection between them, Buffy dreaded the day when Faith inevitably forced a conversation about what there was between them. What there could be. For whatever reason, she just felt like she couldn’t let it happen. A relationship with Faith felt at
the same time unfathomable and inevitable, and the whole big mess of it confused Buffy to no end. Which is probably why, as much as the thought of Faith’s sultry whisper in her ear gave Buffy the most delightful fluttering in her gut, she was grateful that Faith was a high school drop-out with no real shot at a college career. The less time they spent together, the less likely it was that things between them would have to change. Buffy wasn’t ready for that kind of change yet. She had enough change on her plate as it was.

“Alright fine, I’ll admit it. This burger is fucking delicious.” Oz’s only recognition of the praise was a slight nod of his head in Faith’s direction, and she rolled her eyes at the stoic ginger. She had met up with Buffy, Willow, and Oz at this burger joint near campus that Oz had vouched for, hoping to hear about the first day of classes for the intrepid college kids over dinner. She had pretended to be skeptical of the place, even though the smell of the food had won her over the minute they walked in.

Beside her, Buffy picked at her fries quietly, the dainty princess to Faith’s sloppy knight, as always. But she was even quieter than usual, and she seemed distracted. Faith leaned over and nudged Buffy’s shoulder with her own. “Hey there, college girl. What’s on your mind?”

Buffy’s eyes sprang up to look at Faith. “Oh. Uh, I just … there’s this student missing.”

Faith narrowed her eyes, pretending to be interested. “Oh?”

“Eddie.” Buffy looked over at Willow. “He’s in our psych class! … Or, uh, he would’ve been. He’s supposed to have left school but... I just don’t think he did. I met him outside last night, and then I went back where we met, and it looked like there had been a struggle.

“So, what?” Faith asked. “You think vamps got him?”

Buffy’s eyes darted back and forth, and she bit her lip nervously. “Well, yeah! And Eddie’s RA said kids disappear a lot. There could be a gang of vampires working the campus.” Faith didn’t think much of it. She figured people dropped out of college. It happened, and Buffy, of all people, should understand being overwhelmed by it all. But, it couldn’t hurt to dig a little deeper.

“Tell you what, B. Let’s finish up our dinner. Red can talk a little more about her new Wicca group, and Oz can sit there quietly, offer the occasional heavy one-liner.” Oz pursed his lips but nodded playfully, in good fun. “And after that, you and I will go see G, and see if we can’t put a plan together. Maybe he’s heard something about a gang of vamps operating around campus. Either way, you and me can patrol a little. You can show me around campus. It’ll be a hoot and a half,” she joked, utilizing her Joyce voice for that last part.

Buffy rolled her eyes, but Faith could tell she was feeling better. She just needed someone to take her seriously and support her. College was big and scary and clearly a little too much for the blonde, and hunting a pack of vamps was exactly the sort of simple and familiar task that Buffy thought might help ground her. Of course Faith was happy to help.

They finished off dinner just like Faith suggested, and she couldn’t help but notice an interesting twinkle in Willow’s eye as she talked about her Wicca group. Something to bug her about later. Tonight was about Buffy’s thing. They said goodbye to the ginger couple, and Buffy followed Faith out to her car. It was a dark blue 1991 Jaguar XJ Sovereign, which had turned out to be a fairly distinctive car in Sunnydale, maybe second only to that grey hunk of junk Citroen that Giles drove. The car had previously belonged to Faith’s first Watcher Diana, and it was the only thing Faith had left of her. Not even Buffy knew what the car meant to her, and even though it was going on a decade old at this point, Faith had done enough homework to know how to take care of the old
beauty. Diana’s murder at the hands of an ancient vampire had been what drove Faith out of Boston, eventually landing her in Sunnydale. Even in death, Diana had pushed Faith to find a better life for herself.

And she was a hell of a lot better Watcher than Rupert Giles. As they drove towards his apartment in relative silence, Faith wondered how Diana would’ve handled Faith’s Cruciamentum. It hadn’t come up—Kakistos murdered Diana when Faith was only sixteen. But she had to believe that Diana would’ve warned her. Even if she didn’t openly revolt against the Watcher’s Council, she wouldn’t have betrayed Faith the way Giles betrayed Buffy. She wouldn’t have covertly poisoned her for days, stealing her powers in preparation for an unexpected battle to the death with a vampire. Before she had come to Sunnydale, Diana was the only person who had ever cared about her. The only person who had given a single damn—she had offered her a home, clothes, food, and most of all, a purpose. For a few wonderful months, Diana had provided encouragement, support, and structure, things Faith couldn’t remember having had at any point growing up. She wouldn’t have done that to me.

With her eighteenth birthday coming up, Faith was thinking about the Cruciamentum more and more lately. She didn’t know what to expect, given that she and Buffy had cut ties with the Council. And she wasn’t ready to talk to Buffy about it yet. The blonde didn’t even know when her birthday was, and Faith blew out a frustrated breath. She hated how much trouble she had letting Buffy in. She wanted to, so badly. But it was so fucking hard for her. You don’t live the life Faith had lived without building up very thick, very tall walls around your heart.

She parked in the street outside Giles’ townhouse, and before she could get out of the car, Buffy stopped her with a hand around her wrist. “Hey, are you okay?” The girl’s voice was soft and earnest, her emerald eyes shimmering with concern. Guess I’m not as good at hiding my emotions as I used to be.

“Five by five,” she assured her.

“Are you still wiggy about being around Giles?” Faith shook her head, meeting Buffy’s gaze. “No. Honestly, it’s fine. I might not ever trust him or care about him the way you do, but he’s proven himself. That shit is in the past. We’re cool now, especially with him covering the rent for our little home away from home.” Buffy blushed slightly, as she always did when Faith referred to their training room that way.

“Okay,” she conceded, finally removing her seatbelt. “You’d talk to me if something was up, right?”

Faith rolled her eyes, deflecting Buffy’s honest worry as best she could. “Yes, Mom.” The jab was enough to get Buffy to back off a little, and they both got out of the car and headed straight for Giles’ front door. It was unlocked, so they didn’t bother knocking, opening the door and walking in like always.

As they walked in, Faith could sense a different vibe than the last few times they’d been to Giles’ place. There was a classic rock band playing softly from the speakers hooked up to his antique record player, and the faint aroma of recently burned candles in the air. The former Watcher was nowhere to be seen, and Faith hung back a little even as Buffy barged right into the apartment. There were a couple of stray noises from the kitchen, which were followed closely by a silvery voice calling out, “Rupert, is this Bleu cheese or is it just cheese that’s gone blue?” Faith caught sight of the woman through the opening in the wall that served as a window around the bar area, directly into the kitchen. Then she was around the corner and facing them, warm eyes appraising the two Slayers carefully. “You’re not Giles,” she mused, lips quirked slightly. The woman was drop-dead
gorgeous, probably in her early- to mid-thirties. She wore nothing more than a slightly over-sized, pale blue men’s dress shirt, which ended just below her hips and exposed long, dark legs. Her short braided hair didn’t quite touch the collar of the shirt, and Faith could tell from her delightful accent that she was British.

Faith flashed a sultry smile at the woman, but Buffy just stood their sputtering. *B never did know how to handle herself around a sexy lady.* “Umm ... you know the door was open, so I just ... uh, Giles does still live here, right?” Buffy looked as though she might flee the conversation at any moment, and Faith took a step towards her, putting a soft hand on her back to steady the other Slayer. She could hear Giles making his way down the stairs now, but Buffy continued to gape at the half-naked woman.

“He does,” the woman confirmed, smirking at the silly question. Then Giles himself coughed quietly before turning off the record player. Buffy and Faith turned to face him. “Rupert, you have some guests.” Giles fixed them with a wry grin and greeted them both. He was wearing nothing but a long dark robe, made of something like velvet maybe? Faith did her best not to giggle, immediately comparing the former Watcher to Hugh Hefner in her mind. It was very clear to her what the two Brits had been up to before the Slayers arrived. Buffy, on the other hand, continued to act like she had been stricken deaf, dumb, and blind by the sight in front of them.

“Is this a bad time?” she gasped, and again, Faith got the distinct impression she was one wrong word from running out of the room with her tail between her legs. It was adorable.

“No! Oh, uh, forgive me.” Giles came to stand by the woman. Hands in the pockets of his robe.

“This, uh... this is, uh, Olivia. She's, uh, an old friend, she's staying here for a few days.” Right, friend. Sure, G.

“Couldn't pass through sunny Cal without looking up ole Ripper,” Olivia clarified, and Faith couldn’t pretend she didn’t find the woman’s voice enthralling. *Ripper, huh?* The only person Faith knew who called Giles by that name was Ethan Rayne, and she wondered if this Olivia had run in their little black magic gang.

Buffy continued to flounder, and Giles explained, “Buffy is a, uh, was a student of mine. And, uh, Faith is her … friend.” He said ‘friend’ in the exact same tone as when he referred to Faith as he had when he introduced Olivia, and she couldn’t pretend not to catch the implication. He looked slightly embarrassed when Faith raised an eyebrow, but then turned his attention back to Buffy. “How’s university?”

Buffy chuckled nervously. “Pretty much the same as high school, in the sense that I need … help.”

Giles narrowed his eyes, looking between the two Slayers curiously. “Ahh... help... yes.” Faith got the distinct sense that he figured he was going to leave his quasi-Watcher duties behind once Buffy went to college, which made zero sense to Faith. Just because Buffy was nominally an adult now, with Faith trying her best to get there as well, didn’t mean the Slayers suddenly had all the wisdom, knowledge, and books that Giles did. He was every bit as necessary a part of the team as always, so why was he being weird?

Buffy continued to squirm, then took a step back, forcing Faith to drop her hand to her side. “This just looks like a bad time.”

Olivia waved her hands in a small motion of reassurance. “No, no. You guys talk. I'll just go slip into something a little less comfortable.” She and Giles shared a knowing, amused look, and Olivia headed upstairs. Faith’s eyes watched her walk away, her toned legs moving with such grace that
the brunette couldn’t help but be captivated. Then Giles cleared his throat pointedly, and Faith’s
eyes snapped back to him, her cheeks reddening slightly as she realized she had been caught ogling
his girl.

“I take it this is a Slayer issue?” he asked, but only after giving Faith a stern look.

Buffy shook her head, eyes darting between Faith and Giles. “This is a bad time.” Again, she
chuckled nervously.

Giles crossed his arms, eying her curiously. “You keep saying that,” he teased. *Holy shit, G is
teasing her. He’s enjoying this as much as I am!*

Buffy’s nose crinkled and her nostrils flared, and she took a step towards Giles. “Well … it looks
pretty bad! I think someone had just a little too much free time on their hands.” Her voice sped up
and lifted about half an octave in that way it did when she was uncomfortable about sex and sex-
related things.

Giles and Faith exchanged a bemused glance before he asked, “I’m not supposed to have a private
life?” His eyebrows raised and his face was a mask of faux confusion, but Faith could see that he
was messing with Buffy.

“No!” Buffy whined. “Cuz you're very, very old, and it's gross.”

Faith stepped in, placing a hand on each of Buffy’s shoulders and turning her away from Giles. “B,
that’s pretty rude.” She kept her face stern and scolding, fighting the urge to break into hearty
laughter. “First of all, G ain’t that old. And second of all, did you see Olivia? Dude has excellent
taste in lady friends, and we should be congratulating him, not judging him.” Buffy pouted. “’Sides,
I thought we were past your whole repressed, ‘I can’t imagine my parental figures as sexual beings’
phase.”

“We are *so* not,” Buffy murmured, but her fixed gaze on the floor told Faith that she had sufficiently
shamed the girl into feeling bad about her outburst.

Giles shot Faith an appreciative glance. “Well, before I succumb to the ravages of age, why don't
you tell me what brings you here.” Buffy looked back at him, appropriately chastised. Then she
explained the whole situation with the missing psych student. “B, that’s pretty rude.” She had run into him after getting lost
on her first night on campus, and they had traded stories about security blankets they brought with
them to help adjust to the big scary world that was a small suburban college. Faith did her best not to
scoff. Apparently, the dude’s security blanket was some book about bondage, which Faith
appreciated. *For a nervous guy lost on campus, gotta give him props for being open about his kink.*
But he hadn’t shown up for class, and when she’d gone by his dorm, all his stuff was missing. Save
for the book. That’s what set off Buffy’s Slayer instincts, and now Faith understood that maybe this
wasn’t a wild goose chase after all.

After Buffy finished, Giles fixed them both with a long, searching look, then he turned and poured
himself a glass of whiskey on the rocks. “I appreciate the visit, Buffy, but I still don't see where I fit
in. You haven't described anything that you and Faith can't handle yourselves.” Faith thought he
had a point, actually. This wasn’t some big bad, not likely. Probably just a pack of vamps like
Buffy suspected to begin with.

Buffy wasn’t having it, though. “Ok, remember before you became Hugh Hefner when you used to
be a Watcher?” This time, Faith couldn’t help but laugh out loud. *She sees it too!*

“Officially you know longer have a Watcher,” he corrected, as if they weren’t well aware of that
fact. He fixed Buffy with a caring, but impatient look. “Buffy, you know I'll always be here when you need me. Y-your safety is more important to me than anything but, you're going to have to take care of yourself.” He nodded at Faith, as if to say ‘I already know you can take care of yourself, please excuse the focus on Buffy here.’ Then he continued, “You're out of school and I can't always be there to guide you.”

Buffy deflated rapidly. “I'm sorry to bug you,” she whispered. Faith felt bad for her, and she could tell her reaction hurt Giles. Faith tried to right the ship.

“G, we just wanted to know if you’d heard anything. About a pack of vamps around the college campus, or any news reports about missing students. Surely that’s not outside your purview as our cool older not-Watcher friend, right?”

Giles looked absolutely befuddled by Faith’s pointed comment, and he took another sip of his whiskey. “Well, no. I'm not aware of anything. And obviously, you two can come to me for information and guidance when you really need it, but if you’re right about this being the work of vampires, I believe you can handle it. You certainly don’t need me for this.”

Buffy had softened, realizing that she was letting her general anxiety about college life overtake her Slayer instincts. She exchanged a confident look with Faith, and they both knew Giles was right. Nothing they couldn’t handle. “Alright. We've got it. Sorry to, uh, interrupt … whatever. We're on it.” Buffy turned to leave, not able to look at Giles again after the ‘whatever’ comment, and Faith nodded a quick goodbye before following Buffy out.

“Good luck!” he shouted after them, and Faith turned just enough to toss him a joking salute before closing the door behind them.

Despite all of her earlier misgivings, it was nice to have Faith on campus with her. It was different at night, less labyrinthine. A little less crowded, though there were still enough people around that slaying vamps was going to be difficult to keep covert. When they’d first parked on the outskirts of campus, Faith had been as playful and flirty as ever, but she kept her distance, just enough that Buffy noticed it. And while she refused to think too hard about it, that bugged Buffy. She had hip-checked Faith, staying close to her until the taller Slayer put her arm around Buffy like she usually did when they were on patrol together.

Faith didn’t call attention to it, and neither did Buffy. But it just felt right. Safe. Buffy tried not to laugh at herself. For all the talk about Mr. Gordo being her security blanket, maybe Faith was the more effective one. Buffy’s first couple of days on campus had been horrible. She had no idea what she was doing, and it wasn’t like she could admit how lost she felt, since everyone else seemed to be thriving. Seriously, how did Willow know where everything was already? It was like she had been in college for three years already, and it kinda pissed Buffy off how easy she made it look.

So, she guessed maybe it wasn’t so bad that she felt the urge to hold onto Faith and try to maybe integrate her into college life. Faith was the most confident, laid back person she knew—maybe some of that would rub off on Buffy. Maybe her presence, even just for tonight, and hopefully a few other times in the next few days, would help demystify everything. Help make it all seem a bit smaller and more manageable. Because deep down, Buffy was starting to wonder if she wouldn’t have been better off getting crappy day job and focusing on her slaying. It certainly sounded appealing right then. She wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. She tried not to dwell on it, pointing out the few landmarks and buildings that she recognized to Faith and answering questions about her first day and life on campus. Until she saw him.
“Eddie?” she whispered under her breath. Buffy pulled herself free of Faith’s arm, but just as quickly grabbed her by the wrist and led her after the tall guy with the dark hair. Faith followed without another word. “Eddie!” Buffy called out, “Eddie, hey, wait up!” Either she was wrong about who this was, or he was a vampire. Or maybe he just changed his mind about dropping out? Deep down, it wasn’t the prospect of a gang of vampires or some other big bad that had Buffy freaked—it was college itself. Focusing on evil things afoot was like a lifeline, and if she could just save Eddie, maybe she could tackle the rest of college with a bit more poise.

“B,” Faith cautioned from behind her, already sensing the thing Buffy was avoiding. Sometimes, Buffy wondered if Faith’s Slayer senses and intuition weren’t more finely tuned than her own. It felt like Faith could just sense vampires nearby, like she could pick up on their lack of a heartbeat from across a room. Or maybe it was the lack of breathing? Buffy wasn’t sure. For her, it was just a general ‘having the willies’ about someone or other obvious signs, like an outfit still stuck in the ‘70s. Faith, though, was like a vampire bloodhound. But sexier. Still, the closer she got to maybe Eddie, the more Buffy could feel that something wasn’t right. She ignored her senses anyway, holding onto some hope that she was wrong.

“Eddie! God, I was worried that something had happened to you.” She caught up to him, and that was when he turned to face her finally, vamp face in full effect. “And of course you’re not, cuz you’re a vampire.” She frowned, and her heart sank. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not,” the demon wearing Eddie’s face growled. He moved to attack, but Faith’s stake was in his chest before he could take a step. His look of shock was momentary, fading into dust in seconds. “Sorry, B.” Faith tried to reassure her. “But at least you were right. We got ourselves a definite vamp problem goin’ on.”

“Oh, you have no idea.” The taunt came from behind them, where a blonde vampire stood atop a concrete dais. “So, you’re the Slayer.” The vampire had eyes only for Buffy, and she assumed word hadn’t made its way to the college campus that Sunnydale was home to two Slayers now. The vampire looked like if a spoiled rich girl was trying way too hard to seem goth, resulting in a sort of bubblegum punk rock look that just screamed tacky. She looked at Buffy without any fear in her eyes. “I heard you might be coming here.”

That was when she sensed the other vampires surrounding them, at least four or five of them. Eddie had been bait to lure her in. Faith took up a defensive position behind Buffy, the Slayers now back-to-back. “This is, I mean, what a challenge!” the vampire mocked. “The Slayer!”

“Slayers,” Faith corrected, emphasizing the final ‘s’ in the word.

The vampire looked the slightest bit wary now, surprised by Faith’s assertion, and Buffy took a step towards her. “And you are?”

At this point, the wannabe goth got cocky. “Oh, I’m Sunday. I’ll be killing you here in a minute or so,” she sneered. Buffy couldn’t help herself. She fought the laugh, but it found its way out anyway. She glanced behind her, and she could see Faith was smirking too.

“I’m sorry,” Buffy waved her hand at Sunday apologetically, and she caught her breath. “Your name is Sunday, and you dress like that? Irony much?” Sunday growled at her, but the vampire to Sunday’s right just watched them in puzzlement. He looked like the stereotypical stoner, chilling his way through the college afterlife.

“Uhh…. Are we gonna fight?” he asked, and Buffy nearly started laughing again. His voice sounded exactly the way you would’ve expected it to, equal parts surfer drawl and stoner airiness.
“Or is there just gonna be a monster sarcasm rally?”

“I’m in for a piece.” This came from another girl vamp, a thicker girl with curly red hair.

“Everybody gets to play,” Faith quipped, though she stayed close to Buffy, not wanting to give up their position. They both knew it was easier to fight a crowd back-to-back like this. Buffy had other ideas though.

Sunday wasn’t done speechifying yet. “Guys, the blonde is totally mine—” She turned to dust before she could finish her thought. Sunday’s superiority complex had gotten too annoying, and it was very clearly unjustified. She hadn’t even registered Buffy’s hand moving until after she had already released the stake, slinging it straight at Sunday’s chest. Buffy and Faith both sprung into action as Sunday crumbled into nothing, Buffy running to retrieve her stake before the stoner could attack, and Faith getting the drop on the redhead. The Slayers moved with practiced precision, their hard work over the summer put to good use. All six vampires were dust in minutes.

This was familiar at least. Slaying was simple, straightforward, and yes, fun. With the energy flowing through her, her breath just a bit heavier than normal and that Slayer strength tensed in her muscles, Buffy felt like herself for the first time on campus. With Faith at her side, the pack of vampires had been a piece of cake. Faith thought so too.

“Good work, Blondie. Guess you’ve got a decent grasp on this college thing after all.” Faith waggled her eyebrows as she pocketed her stake. “Now, I need a tour of you and Red’s dorm room.”

Faith stepped out of the bathroom in the back just before opening, as she did nearly every day. In order to maximize her ability to sleep in, usually after a late night of slaying, she often woke up only a few minutes before Joyce left for The Gallery, threw on some clothes, grabbed whatever breakfast was available, and jumped in the car with Joyce. She handled her hair and makeup at the store, and as a result, she wore significantly less makeup at work than in her private life. Which actually worked out well. Joyce liked that she didn’t have such a hard look when she interacted with customers, and Faith got the opportunity to get used to a different side of herself.

“Good to go, Joyce. You got a crowd lined up, just beggin’ to be let in yet, or what?” Faith always made a joke about opening the shop in the morning, since they rarely got more than a customer or two before lunch. Joyce, as always ignored her, and unlocked the front door before turning back to Faith just as she took her spot behind the cash register. “Well now, Faith, honey. Don’t you look beautiful for someone who woke up less than an hour ago.”

Faith cracked a smile, and though she would never admit it, Joyce’s compliments always made her feel valued and seen. “What can I say? Vamps got a little rough with me last night, and a Slayer needs her beauty sleep.” Often, Faith felt like kind of a different person at The Gallery, a softer version of Faith Lehane. But the wisecracking remained the same.

Joyce hummed distractedly, then headed back into her office in the back. Faith surveyed the empty space, which had become sort of her domain in the mornings. Joyce usually went in the back to make calls, coordinate new pieces or shipments, and check over the books, leaving Faith mostly alone, save for the occasional customer. The front desk was right at the front of the store, along the right wall as you entered through the front door. There was a wide open corridor that led from the door past the desk and back into the antiquities space, which took up the bulk of the store.

But to the left of that corridor, directly in Faith’s line of sight from her perch behind the cash register,
was the art gallery space. As opposed to the rest of the store, which was all dark wood and muted colors, the gallery space was a bright white, with sleek lines and asymmetrical half walls that perfectly accented the art. The floor of the gallery space was a step down from the corridor, which gave the customer a feeling of stepping into a different world. Smart design, in Faith’s opinion. The artwork was mostly canvas pieces hung on the walls, but there were a few sculptures as well, the larger ones standing freely in the open spaces and the few smaller pieces on raised pedestals and protected by glass cases. They didn’t make many art sales, maybe one or two a week, but there were a range of pieces at varying price points.

In the corner of the far wall, which was exposed brick that contrasted nicely with the large windows of the front wall, was a small raised stage. The Gallery hosted an open mic night on Tuesday nights, and there was usually some sort of small acoustic set or jazz quartet or poetry reading on a couple of nights on the weekends. The whole thing was really an impressive business model, and Faith was blown away by Joyce’s creativity in pivoting from her previous career that focused solely on the art world. She genuinely appreciated the lessons she was learning here.

Which was crazy! She only started working at The Gallery because she hated being a charity case. Joyce had been good to her, even after Faith had fucked up and gotten all violent towards Buffy and Angel and even a little bit towards Willow. But Faith refused to just mooch off the woman’s kindness. She wanted to give back, and this seemed the most straightforward way. Faith had never expected to actually want to learn more about the business. Yet here she was. A brave new world in Faithland.

There were no customers this morning, and Faith spent her time studying, careful not to get so deep into her GED prep book that she lost track of the flow of foot traffic just outside the shop. It was important to shoot the customers a flirty grin the second they walked in the door. The GED had been Joyce’s idea, but Faith had jumped on it. The next test was scheduled in early December, so Faith had plenty of time to prepare. Which was good, since this school stuff was wicked boring. Even if she hadn’t been expelled for fighting, she probably would’ve dropped out anyway, especially once she was living on the streets. Book learning just wasn’t her thing. But this was important, even if Faith couldn’t exactly explain why. She just felt like it was something she needed to prove to herself.

After a couple of hours, Joyce came back into the front of the shop. “I can take over for a bit if you wanna grab your lunch, Faith.” Faith shrugged, but her stomach growled at the same time, so she conceded the point.

“You want anything?” Most days Faith just grabbed something from the nearby Doublemeat Palace. She much preferred Happy Burger, but the DP was just down the street.

“I really don’t see how you can live off a burger and fries every day, sweetie. Slayer metabolism must be black magic,” Joyce mused. “No thanks, dear. I have the salad I brought from home.”

“Sure thing, Joyce. Be right back.” And she was right back. There was still no one in the shop, so Faith decided to eat right at the front desk, where she could talk with Joyce. “You talked to B in the last couple of days?”

Joyce looked up from her book. “No, not since I moved her into the dorms. Why, is something wrong?”

Faith immediately felt bad, eyes darting away from Joyce as she took another large bite of her grilled chicken sandwich—fine, Joyce’s comments get to me sometimes. “No, umm. Shit. I didn’t think this through when I brought it up.”
“Faith, it’s fine. You’re her friend. She’s gone to college, and she doesn’t need her mother anymore. Not that she really needed me all that much to begin with.” Joyce smiled brightly, just to be sure Faith didn’t take that comment the wrong way. “My point is, I get it if you don’t want to rat out any of her secrets.”

“Thanks, Joyce.” She was such a cool mom. Faith didn’t really understand why Buffy kept her at such a distance, but then again, Buffy seemed to have this whole weird thing where she didn’t think of the adults in her life as real people. Faith hoped she would grow out of that tendency soon. “And it’s not a biggie, no huge crisis or anything… She just seems a little overwhelmed by it all. Which is weird, because she’s Buffy, ya know?”

She swallowed a few fries, eyes watching as a group of three pedestrians strolled past the front windows, looking in but not stopping to enter the store. Joyce caught her gaze. “You know that Buffy’s allowed to have flaws, right? I mean… she’s a remarkable girl, but she’s still just that: a girl. She’s got plenty of learning and growing to do.”

“Oh, believe me, I get that. I’m well aware of B’s many, many flaws,” Faith joked, flashing a devious grin. “But this feels weird for her. Being a little fraidy cat isn’t really one of B’s flaws. It’s just school, only bigger. It’s nothing she hasn’t done before, other than living on her own. But even then, she’s with Red. I don’t get it.” Faith shoveled a few more fries into her mouth, adding as she chewed, “Plus I think she’s kinda bein’ like … clingy all of the sudden.”

“Well, sweetie, maybe you could just give her a little nudge, you know? Encourage her to really explore herself and her new environment. Make new friends, that sort of thing. College isn’t going to get any less scary unless she just jumps in and embraces it. You don’t have to push her away exactly, just encourage her. Make sure she knows you believe in her.”

Faith laughed. “Sounds like some real mom shit there, Joyce. But yeah, maybe that’ll work. We still got patrolling together and training, but she doesn’t need me there for every dinner, party, and study session.” She grinned, and Joyce smiled back. It still baffled Faith that Joyce hadn’t seemed to notice the massive crush Faith had on her daughter. She was pretty sure Joyce knew Faith was gay … or at least, she should know, if she was paying any attention. But they’d never really had a conversation about it—Joyce was cool, but people still got plenty weird when it came to the whole gay thing. Whatever, they could talk about it once Faith had her own place, when she wasn’t at risk of being kicked out of the house. Not that Faith really thought Joyce was capable of that, but … it was a convenient excuse to continue avoiding anything close to a vulnerable conversation.

“Alright, back to work. Gotta attend to all these many customers who need our help,” Faith jested. Joyce sighed dramatically. “Wednesday is our slow day! You know this.” Joyce pouted at her, looking more like Buffy than in any other expression she made. “You don’t have to be so mean, Faith. I could fire you, you know?”

“You won’t, though,” Faith said as she threw away the remnants of her lunch. “The Gallery has never been as much fun as it’s been since I came around. You’d be dying of boredom in less than an hour.”

“Fine. You do bring a certain amount of youthful vigor to the place,” Joyce conceded, her lips quirking up just slightly at the corners. “But you are on thin ice.”

As she entered the Bronze with Willow and Oz, her eyes found Faith immediately. And right there next to her was Xander, and unsurprisingly, Anya. Guess Faith was right about those two.
“Xander!” she and Willow shouted in unison.

Her friend’s smile was big and dopey as she rushed forward to hug him. “The whole world in front of ‘em,” he snarked, looking from Buffy to Willow to Oz as he then moved to hug Willow, “and they come back to this dive!” He turned to Oz. “Do we hug?”

“I think we’re too manly,” Oz deadpanned.

“When did you get back?” Buffy demanded, as she took a seat between Faith and Willow.

“Couple days ago,” he muttered, taking a long swig of his soda in anticipation of the combined outrage by Buffy and Willow.

“You freak of nature!” Buffy shouted.

At the same time, Willow’s brow furrowed and she demanded, “Why didn’t you call us?” Xander shrank away from them, but it was Anya who answered.

“We were busy having sex,” she explained matter-of-factly. Faith snorted in laughter. Buffy and Willow both made faces. Oz watched passively. So Faith jumped in.

“I think what B and Red were trying to say was that they missed you, dorkus. How was your trip? Bet I’ve got better roadtrip stories.”

Xander made a confusing face, then looked between Faith and Anya like he wasn’t really sure what to say. Buffy figured she would help him out. “Come on, Xan. What’d you do? What’d you see?”

“Well...” His voice drifted off awkwardly, and this was starting to get suspicious. A waitress stopped by and dropped off a soda for Buffy, but it was in a smaller glass than usual, with a tiny straw. She raised an eyebrow at Faith.

“Easy there, B. I ordered you a drink. A real drink. Just give it a shot.” Buffy rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t avoid the grin that broke across her lips. She was surprised by the warm feeling she experienced low in her gut at the idea that Faith felt comfortable ordering her drinks. Willow hadn’t paid their back and forth any attention, though, instead insisting that Xander tell them where he went.

“Grand Canyon!” he sputtered, and Anya shot him an amused look.

Buffy asked, “You saw the Grand Canyon?”

“Well, I saw the movie Grand Canyon on cable. Really lame.”

“Dude,” Oz muttered.

“Xander, what the heck?” Willow asked, almost at the same time.

Xander sighed, wilting under all the confused looks from his friends. “Basically, I got as far as Oxnard and the engine fell out of my car, and that was literally. So, I ended up washing dishes at The Fabulous Ladies Night Club for about a month and a half while I tried to pay for the repairs. No one really bothered me or even spoke to me until one night when one of the male strippers called in sick, and no power on this earth will make me tell you the rest of that story.”

“It’s a really good story,” Anya butted in. “I have masturbated while thinking about it several times.” She smiled brightly, and while Buffy felt intensely uncomfortable by the anecdote, Faith snickered beside her.
Xander looked embarrassed and decided to just keep going. “Suffice to say I traded my car in for one that wasn't entirely made of rust, came trundling back home to the arms of my loving parents, where everything was exactly as it was except I sleep in the basement and I have to pay rent. How’s college?”

“College is good,” Buffy muttered, and she could tell immediately that no one was buying her sincerity.

“Ok, uh, once more with even less feeling,” Xander mocked.

“N-no, really!” Buffy tried again. She could feel Faith’s eyes on her. “I-I mean, Willow’s in heaven with classes and her Wicca group and stuff. A-and Oz has this really cool house off campus with the band.” Oz shrugged, and Willow nodded enthusiastically. Bless you, Will. “Plus, uh, Faith and I took out a whole pack of vampires on campus last night.”

Xander’s eyes went from Buffy to Faith and back to Buffy, and he grinned at her in this knowing way that Buffy didn’t care for one bit. “Oh yeah, Faith’s been comin’ to see you on campus, huh?”

“Easy there, bro,” Faith snarked. “I grabbed dinner with all three of our crazy college kids, and B mentioned a kid going missing. We touched base with G, then did some patrollin’.” Just when Buffy thought she was actually going to play nice for once, Faith turned and leered at her hungrily. “Did get a nice tour of B’s dorm room though.”

Buffy blushed before she could stop herself. Dammit Faith! She took a first sip of the drink Faith had gotten her. It tasted mostly like soda, but much harsher, with a bite and just a hint of something like vanilla. She managed not to make a face, and the warm feeling in her throat after she swallowed was actually kind of nice. She and Faith hadn’t done anything during the so-called dorm tour, but Faith had made a few pointed comments on how small Buffy’s bed was and how two people would practically have to be on top of each other to share it. She could tell from the shimmer in Xander’s eyes that his mind was jumping to awful conclusions, though. Buffy rolled her eyes, then shook her head emphatically at him, wordlessly conveying that he was wrong about what was going on.

Just a moment of awkward silence passed, and that was enough for Anya to try to jump back in with her own special form of small talk. “Xander’s story reminds of this time, back when I was a vengeance demon—” Buffy opened her mouth to cut Anya’s story short (she really didn’t wanna hear about whatever torture Anya had thought up back when she was a demon), but Faith put a hand on her thigh to stop her. She mouthed ‘let her talk,’ as she smiled brightly, and she squeezed Buffy’s thigh just a little. No one else could see Faith’s hand, since it was under the table, and Buffy couldn’t pretend that she didn’t feel a pleasant electric thrum from the contact. Buffy raised her eyebrows, then mouthed ‘fine,’ dramatically at Faith, then she put her own hand down softly on top of Faith’s, as nonchalantly as she could manage as she turned back to Anya.

“So, there was this man, and he had broken up with his girlfriend because she had syphilis. Or … maybe it was herpes? Yeah, I think it was herpes. Anyway! The thing was that he was the one who gave her herpes, and it turns out, he got it because he was cheating on her, like constantly.”

“That’s awful,” Willow gasped, her eyes wide and horrified.

“I know!” Anya agreed enthusiastically. “What a dick. I enjoyed punishing him, let me tell you. She wished that no woman would ever touch his disgusting penis ever again, and I may have gone a little overboard.” She bounced a little as she said this, shrugging as though she had just added a little too much laundry detergent to the wash or something. “I covered him from head to toe in herpes sores, permanently. I guarantee you, no one ever touched his penis again, or any part of him. It was hilarious!”
Faith laughed at the story, and Xander chuckled uncomfortably, but everyone else just looked at Anya in dismay and disgust. Faith squeezed Buffy’s thigh again and made a really cute face. Buffy shrugged. “I guess maybe the guy got what was coming to him, but you eventually fixed him right?”

Anya looked at Buffy like she was crazy, and Faith jumped in to change the subject from the obvious answer to the question. “See B, I told ya Anya had great stories.”

“Yeah … um, great,” Willow muttered. “Hey wait! What did that have to do with Xander’s story?”

“Oh!” Anya remembered what had prompted her tale in the first place. “The girl was from Oxnard. Or … was it Oxford?” She shrugged again, and Faith continued laughing softly beside Buffy.

“Hey so—” For once it was Oz changing the subject, and Buffy took another sip of her drink. “Did you guys hear that Cordelia is working for Angel in LA now?” The mention of Angel caught Buffy off guard, and her stomach sank a little at the mention of his name. She was mostly over him, and all the flirting with Faith—as confusing as it was—had been a tremendous help on that front. But it still felt weird to talk about him. Apparently, he had set up some sort of detective agency in LA, helping solve mysterious cases and assisting people with supernatural problems. The Cordelia thing was news to Buffy, though.

“What the heck could Cordy offer Angel?” Xander blurted. “Did he need a stylist or something? All black all the time isn’t good enough in the big city?”

“I think she’s sort of his assistant and she handles the money and … yeah, it’s weird to me too,” Willow explained. “Guess the acting thing wasn’t working out for her?” Buffy drank the last of her drink, swallowing what should probably have been more than one sip in a long, slightly painful gulp. And of course, Faith noticed. Her hand moved from Buffy’s thigh to her wrist.

“Hey B, how about a dance?” The music had just switched to something a bit more upbeat, and Buffy was feeling all warm and tingly inside from the drink. She was grateful for the lifeline Faith was throwing her.

“Count me in.” Faith led her to the dance floor, and she could hear Willow scolding Oz just slightly about the Angel mention as they walked away. “So, what was in that drink?”

Faith smirked, one hand resting lightly on Buffy’s hip as the two of them began to move with the beat, a few inches of space separating their bodies. “Just a regular ole vodka soda, B. You liked?”

Buffy bit her lip, then nodded. “Don’t tell my mom!” Faith chuckled.

“B, she wouldn’t care. You don’t give her or G nearly enough credit, you know that?” Buffy did actually know that, but it was hard not to see them as just her mother and her Watcher. She understood, in the abstract, that moving out of the house and going to college was the first step into adulthood, and that part of adulthood was becoming more like … equals or whatever with them. But it was still so weird imagining Giles having a sex life, much less with a hot woman a decade younger than him (she guessed).

“Hey, are you doing alright?” Faith quirked an eyebrow in question, not sure what Buffy was really asking. “I mean … with me not living at home anymore, and not being around all the time and stuff.”

“B, I’m five by five. Not to say I don’t miss your sexy ass, but it’s fine.” Buffy rolled her eyes again, but she also inched a little bit closer to Faith, enjoying the warmth of her body near her own. “I think the real question is how are you doin’? And don’t bullshit me.”
Buffy frowned, knowing that Faith had seen through her. “It’s that obvious how pathetic I am, huh?” This time Faith was the one who moved closer, draping her other arm over Buffy’s shoulder.

“Hey, no! Not pathetic. But … yeah, it’s obvious that this whole college this is a little overwhelming for you.” Faith licked her lips ever so slightly, and Buffy’s body tensed in immediate reaction. Faith’s brown eyes looked warmly into her own. “You know I believe in you, right? Like … I dunno what it is about the big college life that is so rough, but I do know that you can handle it. No matter how scary it seems.” The sheer nakedness of Faith’s compassion took Buffy’s breath away. She knew the other Slayer cared, but it was rare for her to express her feelings for Buffy in forms other than flirting and innuendo. Buffy wasn’t exactly sure what to do with it.

“Really? You do?”

“Fuck yeah, B. You’re a badass. I know everything is new and different, but you’ve stopped how many apocalypses now? You can handle this. I promise.” The music shifted again, and again, Faith moved a little closer. “Still, I figure the best way to get past your nerves is to just jump in, head first. Be the brash, bold Buffy Summers we all love.” She smiled softly, and seriously, this was the sweetest Faith had ever been to Buffy. It was like a whole new side to the girl. A side that was giving Buffy even more confusing ideas. “You and I never really patrolled much up by the college campus, but last night proved there’s definite baddie activity around there. Maybe you should do a bit of solo patrolling around the school the next few nights. Get to know the area, build some confidence doing what comes natural, really spread your wings, ya know?”

Buffy smiled back at her, feeling a distinct gooey warmth inside at Faith’s support for her. But she was still a little worried. “You sure you can handle the normal haunts on your own for a few nights?”

“Oh come on, you know I can. We’ve been trainin’ our asses off all summer. Ain’t nothin’ can stop us. And trust me, I’m not gonna feel left behind or anything. I’m still here, like always. You just gotta really take the time to find your new rhythm. Can’t do that if you keep blowin’ off the college life to hang with me. As much as I love the company.” Faith smiled brightly at her, and Buffy resisted the very strong urge to lean in and kiss the other Slayer.

Instead, she bit her lip and whispered, “Thank you. It means a lot to know you care, Faith.” She tried to say the other girl’s name with all the affection and appreciation she was feeling.

“I do,” was Faith’s quiet response. And it felt like something between them had shifted, ever so slightly. Oh boy.
What are we doing?

Chapter Notes

This chapter utilizes some plot and dialogue from the Harsh Light of Day and Beer Bad. For the three of you who were fans of Kathy and Parker, so sorry, but they won't be showing up in my story.

Content warning: Spike is an asshole in this and uses some really awful, slur sorta language

“Hey girlfriend, where’s this party at?” Faith met Buffy at her dorm, since that was the only part of campus Faith actually knew how to get to, and now Buffy gleefully grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her off into the evening.

“Oh right, cuz you haven’t been to Oz and Devon’s house yet. It’s right off campus,” Buffy answered. “They’ve got this Canadian band who happened to be coming through town and agreed to play the party; Oz thought you would like them. It’s a pretty short walk, don’t worry.”

“Oh no,” Faith deadpanned. “I have to spend time walking with you at night? I hate doing that, which is why I go out of my way to do it at least three nights a week.” Faith’s grin was positively lascivious, as she looked Buffy up and down in the warm light of the sunset. She wore a black top with just a hint of red along the bottom hem of it—Faith couldn’t tell if it was a blouse or a tank top because of the thin black leather jacket over the top of it, but Faith could definitely tell that Buffy wasn’t wearing a bra tonight. Look at B, playin’ it risqué. Wonder if that’s for me or if it’s just a little fun and flirty college experimentation. The outfit was completed by a tight pair of dark pants, and other than the messy bun, the whole thing was a very Faith look, all things considered. Faith wasn’t sure what it said about her that she found it incredibly sexy.

As was often the case, though, Buffy blew her off, rolling her eyes and shoving Faith gently. Then she immediately followed that up by moving in closer, which Faith knew by now meant that she wanted Faith to put her arm around her while they walked. “Thanks for coming with me.”

“Hey, you know I’m always down to party. Plus I’m stoked to see Wolfy’s new digs. Bet he and Red have been goin’ at it like bunnies in that place.” She could feel Buffy tense next to her, then she chuckled awkwardly.

“I’m sure they’re not,” she stammered. “I mean, not like bunnies. Are bunnies really that …” Buffy’s voice trailed off, not even capable of finishing the thought. Faith shook her head in amused exasperation.

“Yes, B, bunnies are incredibly horny animals. Put two of ‘em together, and they basically fuck nonstop.” Faith made an adorably horrified face, probably because she was picturing bunny sex now.

“But, they’re so cute!”

“Hey, I mean Red is all kinds of cute, but you and I both know she and Oz are doin’ the dirty on the regular.” Buffy huffed, knowing Faith was right. Faith laughed, then changed the subject, having
gotten in her minimum amount of Buffy embarrassment for the day. "Hey, so, I wanted to talk to you ‘bout somethin’.” Buffy’s eyes darted to meet hers, emerald orbs filled with sudden concern. “No, no, don’t freak or anything. I mean … ugh, whatever, I just wanted to tell you that my birthday is comin’ up.”

Buffy’s face lit up. “You’re finally gonna tell me when your birthday is?”

Faith pretended to be annoyed by her friend’s enthusiasm. “Fuck, come on, don’t make this a big deal. It’s just a day.”

Buffy nodded in faux somberness, but she couldn’t stop grinning. “Yes, just a day. A day that is so not important that you have refused to tell me what it is every time I ask. Which has been at least like five or six times now.”

Faith fought hard against the matching grin that threatened to form along her own lips. Dammit, B is makin’ me soft. “I’m not fishin’ for presents or a party, okay. In fact, if you try to pull any sort of party shit, I will punch you and run away. Don’t test me.” Buffy’s eyes were taunting and playfully, clearly not intimidated at all by Faith’s threat. It made her want to kiss the blonde so badly, just to wipe that smirk off her face. “I just … I’m going to be eighteen.”

“Oh.” Buffy’s face dropped, and Faith knew that she understood the implication. They both remembered vividly what had happened on Buffy’s eighteenth birthday. She stopped then, taking both of Faith’s hands in her own. “Faith, I won’t let them do that to you.”

Faith nodded. “I know you won’t. Hell, wasn’t like I was planning on layin’ down and takin’ it. I’ll kick the ass of any Watcher that tries to get near me. But I just … do you think they’ll even bother?”

Buffy hummed thoughtfully, then dropped one of Faith’s hands and pulled the other back around her shoulder where it had been before. They continued walking. “I honestly don’t know. I can’t imagine they’re happy with us for blowing them off, but it’s not like they’ve made any moves against us since then.” Faith blew out a frustrated breath, forgetting for a moment to mask her worry, and Buffy hip-checked her softly. “Let’s talk to Giles about it. I’m sure he has contacts still; maybe he can figure out if they’re planning anything.”

“Maybe he can give them a message, too.” Faith glowered. “They come after this Slayer, they’re gonna get all kinds of dead.”

“Faith,” Buffy scolded.

“Fine! Not dead. But pain, lots of pain.”

“Pain we can definitely threaten,” Buffy assured her. Faith could hear the muffled sound of live music now, and she assumed they were getting close. “Hey, you still gotta tell me when it is.”

Briefly distracted by the music, Faith glanced at Buffy in confusion. “When what is?”

“Your birthday, dummy.” Faith raised an eyebrow at the ‘dummy’ comment, but let it go.

“Promise you won’t tell anyone else?”

“It’ll be our little secret, weirdo. Just tell me.” They were at the house now, but Buffy was making it clear that they weren’t going in until Faith revealed her birthday. She sighed, loudly.

“Fine. It’s October 19.” Buffy’s eyes glittered as a crooked smile formed along her lips.
“Exactly nine months after mine. That’s kinda cool.”

“Oh god, don’t tell me you’re into that astrology mumbo jumbo,” Faith muttered, but Buffy just chuckled at her.

“After all the things you and I have seen, astrology is where you draw the line of believability? Really, Faith?” Buffy kept laughing but started moving towards the front door. There were a couple of people hanging out on the front porch, but they didn’t pay the Slayers much mind. “And no, I’m not really into astrology. But I am a Capricorn, whatever that means.”

Faith almost considered asking if Capricorns were supposed to be compatible with whatever sign she was, but she bit her tongue. Not going down that rabbit hole. She couldn’t see Oz or Willow around anywhere, but the werewolf had been right about the band. The black banner on the wall behind the band read ‘Bif Naked’ above a cute stick figure of a girl with bangs making the universal ‘rock out’ hand gesture on both hands, but Faith had eyes only for the lead singer. She had long, jet black hair with short bangs in the front that drew a sharp line across her face just above her eyebrows. Her dark, sleeveless top exposed toned arms covered in tattoos and equally toned abs. Her movements were graceful but aggressive as she sang into the mic, her electric voice perfectly suited for pulsing rhythm of the slightly poppy punk rock music that filled the house.

Between the killer music and the reddish mood lighting that created exactly her kind of ambiance, Faith could feel her body responding to the beat the second they walked in. “You wanna dance?” she whisper-shouted into Buffy’s ear, over the din of the crowd and the band.

Buffy smirked. “No,” she shouted jokingly, “let’s have a meaningful talk instead.” They were standing close enough that Faith could see Buffy’s pupils were blown wide already, and the smaller girl grabbed her by the wrist and began pulling her towards the dance floor. Which is right when they caught sight of William the Bloody strolling out of the next room, a worryingly pale man carried between him and a tragically dressed blonde girl, probably another vampire. Faith stopped Buffy and directed her towards the vamps. Finally. B better lemme stake him this time.

They blocked the vampires from their desired exit route, and Spike’s face immediately fell at the sight of the Slayers. The blonde just looked confused, which lined up with what Faith had expected based on her outfit. “Spike. And Harmony.” Buffy’s voice raised a little at the end of the name Harmony, all wry amusement as if she found the pairing to be the most hilarious odd couple. She chuckled, and Faith wondered how Buffy knew the blonde vamp.


Faith immediately snapped back. “Look, I know vamps got a thing with mirrors and all, but have you seen what you’re wearin’ right now, Bimbo Vamp Barbie?”

Harmony glared at her, but Spike butted it in. “Well, this is interesting.” His eyes surveyed the two Slayers with equal parts hunger and wariness. “Sort of a double date.”

“Is he alive?” Buffy asked about the unconscious student between the vamps.

“Oh we’re savin’ this tasty treat for later, ‘course he’s alive,” Spike assured her. His lifted his index finger, gesturing between the two of them. “So now, is this finally a thing?”

Harmony chortled beside him. “Oh of course! I always got such butch vibes off you, Buffy. That makes so much sense.”
In what was probably the most interesting turn of the night, at least as far as Faith was concerned, Buffy didn’t deny it. Instead, she turned it back on Spike, a mocking grin on her face. “And you with Harmony.” She snickered. “What’d you do? Lose a bet?”

“Hey!” Harmony protested, but Buffy wasn’t done taunting.

“Dru dump you again?”

Spike frowned. “Maybe I dumped her,” he whined, but then Harmony contradicted him, drawing a spiteful look from her new boy toy.

“She left him for a fungus demon,” she prattled. “That’s kinda all he talks about most days.”

Visibly seething now, Spike roared. “We’re leavin’, Harm.” He made a point of looking around the room, dramatically emphasizing his lurid stare as he traced tongue over his top row of teeth. “And you Slayers are going to let us be on our merry way. Wouldn’t wanna start a big to do with such a lovely crowd around. Might end up with some collateral damage. Can’t have that, now can we?”

Faith was about to tell him to go to hell, but Buffy’s hand tightened on her wrist. “Fine, not like we can’t track you down now that we know you’re back in town. But leave the boy.” Spike growled in frustration, rolling his eyes like the drama queen that he was. But he complied.

They dropped the student, who collapsed to the floor, as Spike muttered, “Let’s go.” But Harmony couldn’t resist one last taunt.

“Fine! But as soon as we have the Gem of Amara, you’re gonna be sorr—” Her sniveling jeer was cut off as Spike roared at her in fierce anger, pulling her away at a dead sprint as they knocked over several people on their way out of the house.

“B, seriously, I’m goin’ after them.” Buffy’s eyes flashed with worry, and she held Faith back. She seriously considers Spike that much of a threat?

“Faith, no. We need to get this guy help, and we should talk to Giles about this gem of whatever before we track them down. Okay?” As much as Faith preferred a more direct approach, Buffy was probably right. She sighed but relaxed into Buffy’s grip to signal she wouldn’t go chasing after the annoying vampires.

“Fine. Let’s find Oz. He can point us to a phone.”

“It’s uh, the vampire equivalent of the Holy Grail.” Giles’ voice got slightly distant over the line, and it sounded as though he had gone in search of books. “The source of some enormous power that is always conveniently vague.” He paused again, then his voice came back stronger. “Oh, here it is, yes. There was a great deal of vampiric interest in locating it during the, uh, … oh the tenth century. Questing vampires combed the earth, but no one ever found anything. It was concluded that it never existed.”

Buffy sighed, more than a little distracted by Faith’s warm presence stretched out along the bed beside her, waiting for her to finish explaining the situation to their former Watcher. “Well, Spike seems to think it exists. And he’s looking in Sunnydale.” She was having trouble ignoring the soft touch of Faith’s thigh against her hip.

“Yes, well I’ll research it as best I can,” Giles reassured her absentmindedly. “You’ve done all you can for tonight. Why don’t you go to bed?” Buffy glanced at the decently sized bed she and Faith
were perched on currently, then exchanged an amused look with Faith. The other Slayer promptly bit her lip in a way that made Buffy feel like squirming, stretching out further along the length of the bed while batting her eyelashes at Buffy.

“Uh huh. Sleepy. Yawn. Bye.” She hung up, turning back to Faith. The other Slayer pushed herself up into a seated position, leaning forward towards Buffy.

“So, G’s gonna hit the books on the gem thing?” Buffy nodded, trying and failing to keep herself from fixating on Faith’s lips, which suddenly felt oh so close. The party continued on in the rest of the house—Spike’s victim had come with a friend, who volunteered to drive him to the hospital, allowing everyone else to pretend nothing had happened. But here in Oz’s bedroom, Buffy could imagine it was just her and Faith alone in the entire world.

“Yeah, he is,” Buffy murmured, and Faith’s eyes searched her own. Why is my heart pounding? What is Faith thinking? Her eyes darted from Faith to the room behind her, then back again. Why did we close the door behind ourselves?

Faith scooted a little closer, pushing Buffy softly to the side with her legs before coming to sit along the edge of the bed between Buffy and the nightstand where the phone now sat forgotten. “So, we gonna head back down to the party, or …” Her voice trailed off suggestively, and Buffy swallowed. She knew what she should say. But the words wouldn’t come. Instead, she licked her lips.

Their eyes stayed locked together, save for the occasional flicker a few inches lower. Faith was painfully gorgeous tonight, and Buffy thought, not for the first time, that she should just tell her she thought so. She wondered if anyone had ever told Faith that she was beautiful. Someone should, and yet Buffy couldn’t get her voice to work right then. The other Slayer was so close now. It wasn’t like they hadn’t been physically close before. Their sparring was always flirtier and more physical than it had to be, and more than a few times it had come close to tipping over into something else entirely.

But they weren’t sparring now. They had never really bothered with any concept of personal space between them, but this wasn’t like their normal interactions. This wasn’t casual closeness, this was something more brazen. No excuses to hide behind, no pretense of training for why they were pressing up against each other. And yet, Faith hadn’t made a move, content to just watch Buffy carefully, looking for an indication of what was going on in Buffy’s mind. The only problem with that was that Buffy had no interest in thinking anymore. Thinking just ended with them both confused and frustrated, and honestly, Buffy was so tired of trying to fight against the longing and desire in her gut.

She registered the flicker of surprise in Faith’s eyes in the split second before she closed what little distance was left between them. Faith’s lips were soft, just like she remembered them, and they pressed back welcomingly against her own. For a few moments, that was the only point of contact, the two Slayers feeling each other out slowly with soft, slow kisses. Then Faith pulled back, searching Buffy’s eyes. Looking for confirmation that this was what she really wanted. That this was okay.

But Buffy didn’t want those questions. She reached a hand into Faith’s long dark waves, fingers grasping at the back of her head and pulling her back into the kiss. This time, Faith didn’t hesitate. With a sharp hiss of breath, Faith’s tongue parted Buffy’s lips further open, finding its way into her mouth. Buffy’s other hand found itself fisting at Faith’s blouse and pulling her closer, no longer content with any distance between their bodies. Faith’s hands started on her hips, but quickly moved up her body until they were pushing her jacket roughly up and off her shoulders.
For a first kiss—technically second, but who was really counting—everything felt so familiar. Their bodies, so well acclimated to each other’s movements in battle, synced up just as effortlessly in this situation as well. For weeks, Buffy had felt like their mutual attraction had been looming over them, like a large wave growing and growing before it inevitably crashed down upon them. And now, Buffy was drowning in it. All she could taste and touch and hear was Faith.

Faith, who took Buffy’s lower lip between her teeth, biting softly and sending electric thrills through Buffy’s body.

Faith, whose fingernails dragging along the bare skin of Buffy’s back burned in the best possible way.

Faith, whose other hand traced gently along Buffy’s abs, inching slowly upwards in a way that had Buffy panting and wanting it to go higher faster, to take advantage of the thin fabric of the backless black top Buffy had chosen specifically because she couldn’t wear a bra with it.

Buffy let out a gasp as Faith’s hand finally worked its way to her breast, a finger tracing lightly around her stiff nipple through the soft fabric of her top. Her fingers closed, tentatively at first, then more firmly as Buffy hummed into the sheer pleasure of Faith’s hand massaging her. Buffy’s body moved on instinct, grabbing at Faith’s hips as she pushed her back onto the bed before fitting herself between her legs. Faith’s hand stayed on her chest, but the other fell to Buffy’s thigh, her tight grip proving how intensely she wanted Buffy. Faith’s neck craned upwards, her mouth pushing deeper into Buffy’s, gasping and kissing her even more desperately. Faith’s tongue curved along the roof of Buffy’s mouth, and then she caught it between her own teeth, sucking on it and drawing the sexiest groan out of Faith.

Then Faith’s hand was sliding up Buffy’s thigh, and as Faith’s fingers found purchase along the top button of Buffy’s pants, she drew in a sharp breath. Her eyes shot open, and her whole body tensed. *What are we doing?*

Buffy pulled away with lightning quick reflexes, off of Faith and back onto her feet before the other Slayer could register what was happening. All the thoughts Buffy had been pushing down, all the questions and confusion and hesitation, came rushing back in, and Buffy needed to get out of that bedroom *right now*. “I’m sorry,” she gasped, unable to look at Faith anymore. “I-I … we shouldn’t … I … need to study. I forgot—”

Buffy grabbed her jacket and had the door open in a heartbeat. She was out into the party before she could even begin to feel some amount of embarrassment about how lame the excuse had been, fully aware that Faith wasn’t an idiot. They both knew that Buffy had just freaked out, and now she was running away like the coward she was. *Damn it. Damn it!*

The second that she was out into the cool air of the night, she took off at a sprint. Her lips still tingled, and she could feel the ghost of Faith’s hand on chest. Her nerves continued to thrum with all the delicious energy of their bodies being pressed together. But now it was all tinged with regret and frustration and self-loathing. Buffy hated that she didn’t know what she wanted. That she couldn’t even tell if she was frustrated at herself for letting the kissing happen or instead for breaking it off.

All she knew for sure was that she couldn’t handle it. She didn’t slow down until she was back in her dorm room, door locked behind her. Buffy didn’t even make it to her bed, slumping down with her back against the door. *What is wrong with me?* she thought angrily, then slammed her head back into the door. Sharp, white pain stabbed at the back of her skull and clouded her vision for a second, and she was lucky that she hadn’t broken the door. She rubbed at the back of her head, feeling that much stupider. Buffy felt like such a mess. And she hadn’t even said goodbye to Willow or Oz.
“You know, this whole eating thing is truly disgusting.” Faith chuckled, and Anya’s distaste for the practice clearly wasn’t as strong as she claimed, not based on the speed with which she swiped the Happy Burger bag out of Faith’s outstretched hand. “But thank you.”

Anya’s apartment was kind of a shitty hole in the wall, but it was all a former demon with no references or social graces could afford on a secretary’s salary. The place was maybe 500 square feet, with a bed, a tiny table with two chairs, a kitchenette, and a bathroom that had a toilet, sink, and shower stall practically all on top of each other. The one positive thing Faith could say about it was that Anya kept the place spotless. Shitty apartment buildings like this usually attracted roaches or rats, but Faith was pretty sure she could’ve eaten off any surface in the place. She wondered if maybe there was lingering demon-ness about Anya that scared critters off.

The two of them had become friends, of a sort, over the last few months. Faith still hadn’t quite figured Anya out. The ex-demon didn’t really have a firm grasp on the whole living a normal life thing, and Faith wasn’t exactly sure that Anya actually gave a damn about her or anyone else. Was she really human or some sort of mystical mirror of one, frozen that way after she lost her powers? Honestly, Faith didn’t really care. The girl wasn’t great with human emotions, and that worked just fine with Faith’s general approach to human interaction. Plus, what Anya knew about relationships, she had learned from watching shitty men treating women poorly over the centuries. Meaning that she shared Faith’s general viewpoint that they were all garbage and not to be trusted.

Which made her next statement all the more hilarious to Faith. “Faith, I need you to explain Xander to me. His behavior does not make any sense.” She just barely avoided choking on the bit of burger that she had been in the process of swallowing.

“I’m sorry, what now?” Faith sucked down some soda, trying to clear her throat. “Xander’s about the most straightforward dude I’ve ever met. What’s trippin’ you up, exactly?”

“Lots of things. Like, I don’t understand why he still tries to be friends with Buffy and Willow. He has nothing in common with them!” Faith grinned, then shrugged.

“Hell, you’ve got a point there. But human friendships don’t always work like that.” Anya watched her with rapt attention, which was noteworthy. Usually, it was about a 50/50 chance whether Anya would find the explanations of human interaction interesting or blow them off entirely as frivolous and not worth her time. For now at least, she was interested in this. “You see, us humans have these things called emotions, and they don’t always make sense. We get attached to people for a lot of reasons, and not always because we have things in common with them. And hell, Xander used to have more in common with B and Red. It’s pretty common to just coast along on shared history with people because that’s more comfortable than trying to meet new people.”

“Fine. I concede that that makes some amount of sense.” Anya shoved some fries in her mouth, chewing furiously before she swallowed. “But that’s not really what I’m pissed about. The real problem is that—” She paused, pouting a little. “Like … he sent me all these nice letters while he was trapped in Oxnard, and then he came back, and we’ve been having all this sex, which is great!”

“And that’s a problem why?” Faith would love to be having lots of great sex, but Buffy was making that really difficult.

“Because he refused to explain where our relationship is going!” She huffed. “He says that things have to develop on their own, and that it just happens, but that is, frankly, garbage. Things have
been developing plenty, and he still can’t even say whether he would call me his girlfriend!”

Well that’s poignant. At least Anya had the courage to bug Xander about his feelings. As frustrated as Faith was about Buffy’s own mixed signals, it wasn’t like her behavior was unusual. Ever since Faith had met her in LA, Buffy hadn’t ever really known what she wanted. And Faith had been well-aware when she had started to let the other Slayer in that it would eventually end in disappointment. It always did. But it wasn’t like she would ever consider actually talking to Buffy about it. Better to just keep flirting and playing with innuendo and pinning her during sparring sessions, and hey, that had totally worked out for her so far. Faith snorted into a loud peel of laughter, which drew a scornful look from Anya. “Sorry. Look, you and me are friends, right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“How do you know that we’re friends?”

“I don’t get annoyed spending time with you, and you’re the only person who actually enjoys my awesome stories. Plus you usually smell nice.” Faith smirked. She liked that about Anya. There were no mixed signals; what you saw was what you got.

“Aw, you big sap,” Faith joked. “Anyway, I don’t really have a point there, I just wanted to hear you compliment me.” Anya glared at her. “What? You want relationship advice, I am definitely not your girl. I’ve never even had a girlfriend.”

“But you don’t want a girlfriend,” Anya protested. Faith was glad that the ex-demon was so bad at picking up on body language and subtle clues. Because she definitely did want a girlfriend. Just not yet. Probably not. But great sex, at least, was something she definitely wanted. From Buffy. Faith hadn’t told Anya about her feelings for Buffy, because well, she didn’t do the whole opening up and being vulnerable thing. But also, as much as she enjoyed hanging out with the weirdo, Anya was in no way capable of keeping a secret.

“No, I don’t, but that’s all the more reason why I don’t really have any good advice for you.” Faith shrugged again. “Far as I can tell, being blunt and straightforward is sorta your thing. Stick to that. If Xander actually likes you, I promise, he likes that. Just go up to him, tell him how you feel, and tell him you want a relationship. No more wishy washy bullshit.” And Faith was definitely not projecting with that advice. Wishy washy bullshit wasn’t an issue in her own life whatsoever.

“Maybe,” Anya conceded. She finished off her burger than grinned. “Wanna hear about the time I had a guy vomit his small intestine once a week for a year?”

“Hit me.”

It had been three days since Buffy ran out on Faith at the party, and there could be no doubt at this point that the other Slayer was avoiding her. Buffy could feel her patrolling at night, but she stayed away from campus. She had left a couple of vague voicemails at the house, but Faith hadn’t called her back. Buffy couldn’t exactly blame her though. She had no clue what she would even say to Faith if they were in the same room. They had crossed a line, and Buffy had been the one to push them across it. And she didn’t know where to go from here.

It was a sunny day on campus, but Buffy felt like she was in a caught in a perpetual fog. She could no longer ignore her attraction to Faith, even if she was still firmly confused about her larger and more romantic feelings towards the girl. But what did that mean? Should they just talk about it? Everyone always said college was for experimentation—maybe it was okay that Buffy just really
wanted to kiss Faith a lot and not worry too much about making it anything more serious than that?

Buffy was so caught up in her thoughts about Faith that she paid no attention to her surroundings whatsoever. As a result, all she saw was a flash of platinum blonde hair before pain blossomed across her face, as a powerful punch drove her backwards and into the ground. Buffy managed to roll away, but she was too disoriented to push herself back to her feet. So, she had to suffer through the grating sound of Spike’s trashy British accent monologuing at her from nearby.

“Birds singing, squirrels making lots of rotten little squirrels. Sun beaming down in a nice, non-fatal way.” Finally, Buffy’s vision began to clear, and while she could taste blood in her mouth, the pain began to fade into the background. She sprang to her feet, eying Spike warily, and he just grinned at her. “It’s very exciting. I can’t wait to see if I freckle.”

In all her concern about what kissing Faith had meant and how she should handle trying to repair things between them after running away like a giant chicken, Buffy had let the pursuit of Spike fall onto the backburner. She hadn’t forgotten him, not exactly, but after the last few interactions between them, Buffy couldn’t say that she really took Spike all that seriously anymore. And now that was coming back to bite her in the ass.

She slid her backpack off her shoulder, but not before drawing her stake from it. This whole encounter felt bizarrely jarring. Buffy glanced around furtively, worried both about Spike hurting standers by and about all her Slayer wackiness getting exposed to random students on campus. And then there was Spike himself, who looked so out of place in the sun. He was sallow and unnaturally pale, in ways that weren’t obvious in the shadowy light of the night but which stood out drastically in the bright light of day. Never had a vampire looked so obviously inhuman to Buffy, and he hadn’t even vamped out yet.

But she shook off the weirdness threatening to overwhelm her senses, and rather than wait for him to taunt or more or to really think too hard about his sudden ability to not burst into flames, she charged Spike and drove her stake deep into his chest. At which point he laughed at her. “Oh, do it again,” he begged her mockingly. “It tickles! You know, in a good way.” She withdrew her stake, and the skin around the gaping hole in his chest promptly stitched itself back together. Buffy shuddered as her mind flashed back to the Mayor’s face doing the same thing after he removed the knife Faith had lodged in his head. That beautiful knife that now rested in Buffy’s discarded backpack, a meaningful gift from Faith to her.

“The Gem of Amara?” she asked, startled to see that it was actually real and actually made Spike unkillable. He wiggled his left hand, showing off a golden ring that featured a deep emerald gem behind thin grating that gave the appearance of a stylized skull. Curiously, he was wearing it on his ring finger, like some creepy wedding band. She was so distracted by it that Spike managed to land another painful blow, backhanding her hard enough to knock her backwards again.

“Official sponsor of my killing you.” Buffy frowned. Quipping is my thing, jerk. She pulled out her knife, its silver blade shimmering in the bright sunlight, and stood to face him again. Maybe I can’t kill him, but I can damn sure hurt him, at least until I can find a way to get that ring off. Fangs out, he charged her, and she blocked a punch then slashed out with the knife. Spike ducked under the wild swipe and got off a kick to Buffy’s gut. She recovered quickly enough to sidestep his charge, catching the sleeve of his leather duster with her knife, but he caught her arm on his way by, swinging her around and tossing her into a metal light pole. Pain shot up her spine, white and hot, and she crumpled back to the ground. He kicked her hard in the face, and while she again found herself temporarily blinded, her battle instincts were working overdrive by then. She rolled away from him, trying to buy herself time to recover from the blow to her head.
“Getting tired, Slayer?” He strolled calmly toward her, and she backed away at roughly the same pace, maintaining her defensive posture while she fought through the pain she was feeling. “You know, you seem distracted. Where’s your dirty li’l Slayer pal? Did you two have a row? She mad that the good Slayer won’t put out?” She glared at him but refused to let him goad her into making a mistake. “I wonder what it would take to pry apart your dimpled knees.”

“You’re a pig, Spike,” she spat, hating that way he leered at her with open lust. She charged at him this time, and he easily parried her blows. Changing tactics, she blocked his next strike, grabbing firmly onto his arm. With one hand, she spun him around to toss him into a nearby stone bench, but with the other one, she stabbed him repeatedly in the gut, hoping to distract him with the pain. It worked, and for a moment she had the upper hand.

Buffy leapt up onto the bench beside Spike, slashing him across the throat and then kicking him repeatedly in the head. She was trying to figure out how to get around to his left hand, but the stab wounds healed too quickly. He grabbed her next kick, lifting her into the air and bringing her down forcefully onto the a nearby table, the glass of its top shattering under her. Her breath was briefly knocked out of her lungs, and she could feel several bits of glass cutting into her back, but so far, she had avoided serious damage beyond the ever-increasing amount of cuts and bruises from the battle with Spike. She couldn’t expect to keep getting luck though. Buffy didn’t know if the Gem was actually giving him additional strength or if he was just that much more ferocious without any real fear of death or lasting damage, but this was one of the toughest battles of Buffy’s life so far. She couldn’t keep this up much longer.

Spike continued to stalk her like prey, waiting for her to get up and trade blows with him again. Instead, she backed away again, and she could feel the atmosphere of the battle change as he followed her into a shady grove. He was so sure of his victory at this point, and Buffy refused to let it go down like this. She refused to be the third Slayer dead by the hands of William the Bloody, but she had to play this just right. Her strength was waning, and she wasn’t going to have too many more shots at the ring.

“Who coulda seen this coming? Two Slayers? That’s already nonsense that’s never happened before, and you’re tellin’ me you’re both bloody rug munchers?” Spike chortled as if it was the most absurd thing he had ever heard of. “The sapphic Slayers, coupla right fucking cunts the both of ya!” He closed in, and they trade blows again, but much less aggressively. He was playing with his food, and she was playing it safe, looking for a way to end the battle decisively.

“What happened? When I left, you and Angel were tripping over each other making heart eyes, pretendin’ to be friends, and the other one could barely even contain all her anger and jealousy. How did she convince you to kick my dear old grandsire to the curb? I would ask if you just got tired of driving stick, but then again you and Angel weren’t really big on the bumpin’ uglies now, were you?”

He smiled cruelly, and Buffy finally saw her opportunity, summoning all the fury of her building rage at his taunts and sprang up at him from her low center of gravity. She drove her entire weight, the full force of all her Slayer strength, into his body and drove him stumbling backwards against a nearby half-wall, raised up only a couple feet off the sidewalk. He fell back, catching himself with outstretched hands on the concrete surface of the half-wall, and as he did so, Buffy didn’t hesitate. She drove the tip of her blade down as hard as she could, severing his left index finger just above the lowest knuckle, and immediately, Spike’s skin began to sizzle in the indirect sunlight. He roared in pain at losing the finger, and with it, the Gem of Amara, but the sudden return of all his normal vulnerabilities didn’t give him time to dwell on it. He immediately retreated into a nearby open manhole covering and down into the sewers, screaming bloody murder at the pain of having his flesh slowly seared off while clutching at his left hand.
Buffy was left to catch her breath, and as the adrenaline began to wear off, her body screamed at her to get some help. She had cuts up and down her back from the glass, multiple bruises along her arms, spine, and face, and was probably suffering from a concussion. But that didn’t stop her from being fascinated by the revelation that Spike severed finger, once separated from the ring, immediately turned to dust. Would ya look at that? Buffy winced at the throbbing in her temple and, ring in hand, moved to retrieve her backpack and head to Giles’ apartment and his waiting first aid kit. Except that there was no way she was walking there in this shape.

Instead, she made her way to the dorms, trying and failing not to seem overly conspicuous with her bruised face and bloody shirt. But she made it with minimal embarrassment, and fortunately, Willow was in the room when she got there. “Buffy! What happened?” Her eyes were wide and frightened, and she sprang forward to help Buffy over to her bed.

“Got into a spat with Spike. Turns out the Gem of Amara was real after all. Is Oz around? Can he drive us to Giles’ place?” She winced as she reached back and removed another small shard of glass from her back, blinking rapidly at another headache.

“B-Buffy, are you sure you don’t wanna lie down for a bit first?” Buffy really didn’t, but it wasn’t a bad idea to try to clean herself up a little before assembling the Scoobies.

“Not really feelin’ nap time, Will. But I do think I’ll take a shower really quick, try to wash away some of this blood and rinse out any cuts. Hopefully, Slayer healing will handle the rest. Can you call everyone while I’m in there? Tell ’em to meet at Giles’ in an hour?”

Willow did as she was told, and by the time they made it to the home of the former Watcher, Buffy was feeling significantly better. Soothed muscles, fresh clothes, and a clear head worked wonders, it turned out. But nothing could soothe the ache in her chest when she realized Faith had no intention of showing up to the meeting. Some part of her really just wanted to curl up under Faith’s arm and forget everything else.

The Scoobies—save for Faith (and Anya, if she could be counted among their ranks at this point)—assembled around Giles’ coffee table, the Gem of Amara resting ominously between them all. Fortunately, Willow was determined to lighten the mood.

“I like it,” she offered cheerily.

“It’s small,” was the most agreement that Oz could offer, and the group continued to sit there staring at the ring, the terrifying weight of its power lingering in their minds.

“It’s also very dangerous,” Giles cautioned. “And we’re destroying it. I just have to figure out how —”

“We don’t destroy it,” Buffy interrupted. She hadn’t mentioned it to Oz or Willow on the way over, but Buffy had already decided what they should do with it. She just wasn’t sure everyone was going to be happy with her decision.

Giles wasn’t following her at all. “Well, Buffy,” he began, “any vampire that gets his hand on this is going to be essentially unkillable.” He met her gaze, and something about the look in her eyes opened his. “Oh,” he muttered. Buffy looked from him to Oz, then Willow. She avoided Xander’s gaze entirely, already knowing how he would feel about her decision.

Without anyone saying aloud what they were all realizing was Buffy’s intention, Oz offered a quiet olive branch. “I have a gig in LA tomorrow. I could swing by.”
Buffy smiled softly at him. “Thanks Oz.”

Finally, Xander spoke up, not in frustration or anger, but in confusion. “What's going on? What's in LA?”

Willow leaned across the table, catching his eyes in a firm look. “She's giving the ring to Angel. Don't make a fuss.” Xander made a face, but otherwise followed Willow’s instruction. Giles, on the other hand, felt it necessary to question her further.

“Buffy, are you sure?” His voice wasn’t challenging, and she could tell he asked out of concern and not because he thought she was making a mistake.

She nodded in answer. “He should have it. He’s doing his own thing now, but he’s still a champion for good. He’s here—or not here, but you know what I mean—for a reason. He’ll put the ring to good use, and he can still destroy it himself, if he decides that is the right thing.” Buffy was just glad that Oz had volunteered. She had zero interest in seeing Angel anytime soon. She was over him, but she wasn’t close to being in the right headspace for dredging up any old feelings or lingering desire. She had enough confusion on her hands with Faith.

“Well, if we're done deciding to make Buffy’s scary vampire ex invincible—” Buffy glared at Xander, and he put up his hands defensively, cringing away as if he half expected her to take a swing at him. “Sorry, old habits die hard. Anyway, I gotta get going.”

Buffy’s eyes narrowed. “Where do you have to be?”

“New job,” he explained. “I’m finally an essential part of your collegey life. No more lookin’ down on the townie, because I’m the new bartender at the pub just off campus.”

“Aren’t you too young to be a bartender?” Willow asked.

Xander eyed Giles warily, but withdrew a fake ID as he joked, “Au contraire, mon frere.”

“Frere means brother,” Giles muttered in exasperation, picking up the ring and handing it to Oz before walking off towards the kitchen.

“Mon … girlfrere,” Xander attempted to correct himself. “Behold!” He held out the ID, and Willow took it.

“I don’t believe this is entirely on the up and up,” she scolded.

“What gave it away?” he asked seriously, as if it wasn’t obvious.

“Looking at it,” Oz deadpanned, offering Xander a conciliatory face.

“Whatever. No one’s going to see it anyway. I’m the bartender. I’m the one who does the carding and the kicking out.”

“You know there’s more to it than kicking people out, right? Mixing drinks, for example?” Xander started with a comeback, and Buffy cut him off. “You know, never mind. Good for you. With the job-having. Now, let’s go.”

He smiled brightly, standing up with her, then his eyebrows quirked up. “Wait, what?”

“I’m coming with. It’s been a long day, and I would like a drink.” She shot him a look warning him not to argue. And he didn’t, instead gesturing for her to lead the way out to the piece of junk he
called a car. Xander tried to make small talk along the way, but Buffy found herself having trouble focusing on his words. Instead her thoughts were back in Oz’s bedroom two nights ago, Faith’s warmth beneath her. She thought of the feel of Faith’s hands on her chest, her back, her thigh, her hip. She could feel her body react at even the thought of those touches, that familiar electricity pulsing down her spine and pooling warmth between her legs. Buffy jumped away from that thought as quickly as possible, glancing sideways to be sure that Xander hadn’t caught the slight tensing in her body or the pink that had risen to her cheeks.

Unfortunately, the only other thought her mind would dwell on was the look on Faith’s face. Buffy had only caught a glimpse of it, and she had avoided looking at Faith as she hastily broke away from her and fled the room for a reason. It hurt. It would’ve been one thing if Faith had just been confused, maybe a little disappointed, at Buffy’s sudden reversal. She could’ve handled that. But … when Faith had looked at it her, those dark brown eyes were filled with nothing but resignation. Buffy’s mind hadn’t registered any of it at the time—she couldn’t think of anything but escape, and even that was more instinct than true thought.

But in hindsight, Buffy could see what she had done. Faith had let her in. Faith had been open—or as open as Faith was capable of being—about her feelings. And rather than wait to process her own feelings, Buffy had given into impulse. Had jumped into something she knew she wasn’t quite ready for, without a thought to the consequences. And then, like every other person who Faith had ever let get close to her, Buffy had abandoned her. She hadn’t been able to handle the feelings coursing through herself so powerfully, and instead of trying to talk to Faith, she had run. The worst part was that Faith wasn’t surprised that Buffy had let her down, because that was what Faith expected from life. It was probably what she thought she deserved, and Buffy’s chest ached at the thought of that. No wonder she isn’t talking to me.

“Buffy!” She blinked rapidly as she realized they were no longer moving, and she started at the proximity of Xander’s face as he tried to get her attention. Buffy blushed wildly, wondering how long she had been so lost in her own guilty conscience that she couldn’t hear the person right next to her.

“Sorry.” She immediately undid her seatbelt and pushed open the passenger side door, stepping out of the car before Xander could push her on what was going on. He called after her, but fortunately she was a lot faster. The crowd in the pub was bigger than she expected, and she posted up on a stool at the corner of the bar, watching as Xander was forced to temporarily abandon her to jump in behind the bar. Based on the tongue lashing he received, she guessed that he was late for his shift. Still, Xander was looking out for her, setting a glass of beer down in front of her before turning to the crowd of students.

A beer wasn’t exactly what she had in mind when she insisted on tagging along. She’d been hoping for a vodka soda, like Faith had ordered her at the Bronze. That had been tasty, and it had made her feel light and tingly in a way that she hoped would help alleviate the heaviness in her gut that made her feel like she was the worst. But the beer was what she had. College. May as well experiment.

Buffy took a sip, and it wasn’t at all what she had expected from the golden orange liquid. It was foamy and thicker than it seemed, with a bitter sort of citrusy caramel flavor that wasn’t entirely off-putting. So, she sipped away quietly, letting the sights and sounds of the crowd distract her. Xander stayed busy for a good ten or fifteen minutes, and Buffy had almost stepped in when an obnoxious guy in a snot green button-up shirt tried to make Xander feel like an idiot. Xander had been casually talking to a girl, and snot-shirt guy came up and wanted to talk to the girl instead, so he figured it would be fun to first embarrass the bartender by spouting pseudo-intellectual nonsense at him. It was insufferable, and she could tell it was rough on Xander, but she knew he didn’t want her fighting his battles unless there were demons involved. No obvious horns or fangs on snot-shirt boy, so no
Regardless, Xander made his way back to Buffy as soon as he could. “So, you ready to talk to me about whatever is weighin’ ya down there, Buff?” Her fingers played with each other nervously, and Buffy wasn’t sure how honest she really wanted to get with Xander. Most of her beer was gone, and it hadn’t given her the same sensation that the vodka soda might’ve, but she did feel the faint hint of something different. A slight fuzziness to her thinking that wasn’t unpleasant.

“It’s Faith.” She frowned, her eyes darting up to measure his reaction before returning to their fixed stare down at her hands. He hadn’t seemed surprised, which was something at least. “Look, I’m sure everyone already knows that she … that we …” Buffy found her tongue tied in knots, unsure how to phrase what was on her mind without just admitting the thing she was so terrified of admitting.

“That there’s something more than friendly goin’ on between the Slayers?” he finished, his voice a little amused, but thankfully not in an overly mocking way. She glanced away from him, then back, then down at her hands again as she nodded softly.

“It’s just … I’m not …” Buffy drew in a deep breath, and then she just said it. Quietly. “I’m not gay,” she hissed, looking around to be sure no one was listening. “I mean … I’m not, right? I’m pretty sure of that. But with Faith …” She thought of those dark lips, that scent of leather and sweat and something just a tiny bit spicy, that electricity that jumped so pleasantly between their skin. She sighed. “I don’t know.”

“It’s okay to not know, you know?” She tried and failed to smile at him, wishing she could seem reassured. “Did something specific happen?”

“We kissed. Kind of a lot.” Her eyes widened as she realized what she had just said out loud, her cheeks reddening as she sucked in an anxious breath. Xander looked equally surprised, and Buffy rushed to try to minimize the damage. “Xander, please don’t get all dude on me. I can’t take any of the ‘tee hee hot Slayers kissing’ creepy boy crap right now, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he responded tersely, and she could tell she had hurt his feelings a little by assuming he would go there. But she knew Xander pretty well, and even if he had grown up enough to censor himself, she knew he had been thinking it.

She continued to fiddle with her fingers as she tried to explain further. “It only happened the once. We were sitting there, and she was so close, and after everything, I was just so tired of feeling confused and overthinking everything. And then we were just kissing, and it was …” Incredible. That was the thing that really scared her about it. Kissing Faith had felt inevitable the longer the summer went on, the more training sessions they had, the further they had gotten from the ugliness of the spring. But Buffy had never imagined that it would be so easy. It had felt so right. Kissing a girl was supposed to be awkward and uncomfortable, something they would maybe figure out slowly.

She hadn’t expected to flow into Faith like their bodies were just meant to touch each other like that.

“Anyway, so we were kissing, and it wasn’t weird like I thought it would be. It was nice. And then things just got more—” She paused awkwardly then gestured with both hands without really thinking about it. Which ended up being mortifying, since her fingers, seemingly of their own accord, made a sort of groping motion. She starred in wide-eyed horror at Xander, completely unable to finish the thought.

So, he finished it for her, venturing the word, “handsy?” as he waggled his eyebrows, an amused grin forming along his lips. Her hands tensed into fists, her mind racing. She felt exposed, because
'handsy' was exactly the word she had been going to use, and it just sounded so awful coming out of Xander’s mouth like that. Buffy reacted, pointing her index finger at him aggressively as she glared and stammered, “Not like! … ugh, you … shut up!” She huffed, crossing her arms. “Say another word, and I will make with the leaving. Won’t even pay for that silly beer.” He eyed her warily, and she added, haughtily, “I didn’t want a beer anyway.”

Buffy hated that she was so flustered by this. This wasn’t supposed to happen. She had never imagined that it would feel like that when she finally gave into that gravity between her and Faith. The sensations, the way her body had reacted, the sheer, undiluted desire and passion and joy … she had never felt like that before. Not with a boy. Not even with Angel. And she had no interest in thinking any further about what that might mean.

“Buffy.” Xander was trying to be cautious and supplicating, not wanting to push her away. “Obviously, I don’t know what’s going on with you and Faith, not really, but you shouldn’t be so hard on yourself—” He was cut off by a new crowd of students pushing up to the bar, vying for his attention. “Okay, okay,” he responded, turning apologetically back to Buffy.

“It’s okay.” It wasn’t, because Xander was dead wrong about how hard she should be on herself. He hadn’t seen Faith’s eyes when Buffy recoiled away from her hand on the button of Buffy’s pants. He didn’t know that Buffy had hurt Faith in a fundamental way, playing into all of her most deeply held fears and insecurities about letting people in. And she wasn’t about to tell him. “I’m better. You helped.” She tried again to sound like he had reassured her, but even she could hear the fakeness in her tone.

“Do not go anywhere,” he demanded, clearly wanting to talk more. But she was done with this conversation. The minute he turned away from her, she was up, grabbing her bag and making a hasty move towards the exit. Almost immediately, she ran into someone. At least she didn’t send this guy toppling to the ground, like had happened with her psychology TA. She made a quick apology, avoiding too much eye contact in the hope of slipping away quickly, but unfortunately, the guy had other things on his mind.

“Hey, no problem at all. You weren’t thinking of leaving are you?” He gestured towards a nearby table, which featured two large pitchers of the same goldeny orange beer she had been drinking and three other guys. “Because we have a strict policy against you leaving. At least until you’ve had a beer with us.” She tried her best not to roll her eyes, imagining it would be easier to get away politely if she didn’t actively antagonize the guy. And it wasn’t like she got any sort of creepy vibes from him—the guy seemed like kind of a dork, if she was being honest—she just didn’t really want to …

Buffy’s mind halted mid-thought. What else do I have to do, really? She knew, deep down, that she’d probably just end up out patrolling, wallowing about having to do it alone and wishing she could find a way to clear the air with Faith. Would a distraction really be so bad? It was at this point that snot-shirt guy came up behind him, casually draping an arm around his dorky friend and leering at Buffy in the most annoyingly pretentious way.

“What my friend is just saying is that you shouldn’t be sad and alone right now. I mean, you’re a very beautiful girl who should be covered with men.” Buffy couldn’t keep the grimace off her face as her skin crawled at the comment. “And, could we be those men? Drinks are on us.” She could tell from his tone that he was trying to seem casual and joking in a way that some women might find charming. ‘Some women’ being a group in which she was most definitely not a part. But for some reason she couldn’t really explain, Buffy was liking the idea of free beer, and if that meant she’d have an opportunity to take snot-shirt guy down a few pegs, even better.
“Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug!” Buffy had no idea what number the beer she had just downed was—she knew only that she didn’t care. Beer was great. You really couldn’t have too much beer. Beer even made the idiots at this table sufferable.

“My mother always said that beer was evil,” Buffy scoffed. What did Joyce even know? The guys around her all shared her disbelief at the notion. They agreed with her on the quality of the beer’s goodness.

“Evil. Good. These are moral absolutes that predate the … um, the *absolution*—” snot-shirt guy threw that word in, pretending to be sure it made sense in his sentence, and definitely not just because it sounded fancy, “—of malt and fine hops. You see? Wait … where was I?”

Buffy narrowed her eyes. “I really don’t know.”

Snot-shirt guy couldn’t take a hint, so he just kept on talking. “You know, the thing is that really all socio-economic…nal and psychological problems inherent in society can actually just be solved by the judicious application of way too much beer,” pondered his friend, and the other guys all looked at him like he was way wise. But then his friend, the nice boy in the pale blue sweater, figured he would one-up him.

“Well, Thomas Equines and—” Dork guy groaned and threw a balled up napkin at him while greasy-haired guy in the sweater vest shoved him lightly.

“There will no Thomas Horses at this table,” instead dork guy.

“Keep your theology of providence to yourself, frat boy!” scolded vest guy.

These guys were really full of themselves, but interestingly, none of them seemed to care much that Buffy kept needling them about it. Snot-shirt guy decided they had gone too long without his voice. “Beer! Had the earliest morality developed under the influence of beer there would be no good or evil. There would just be kinda nice and pretty cool. Everything would be different.”

Buffy was pretty sure one bad encounter with a vampire would change his mind on that. “You guys really like to hear yourselves speak, don’t ya?”

Snot-shirt guy frowned. “Alright, we’re losing her guys.”

“Say something interesting,” dork guy begged his friends, not seeming to get how pathetic that sounded.

“Tell us about yourself,” vest guy urged quietly, glancing at Buffy as he poured the remains of the pitcher into his glass.

Nice guy added, “Yeah, what do you like?”

Buffy felt cornered. *Don’t talk about Faith. Don’t talk about Faith. No Faith. Faith bad.* “I like beer!” she blurted on a whim, and hey, at least it wasn’t Faith. She picked up the empty pitcher and waved it dramatically at Xander. He seemed unhappy, but Buffy had no clue why. Maybe he was sad that almost everyone other than Buffy and the dumb boys had left. “My friend will bring us more beer,” she assured them. “Beer is a good thing. Nice, foamy, comforting.” They all nodded, seeing how right she was.

Xander brought them another pitcher, and Buffy took it from him before he could even set it down,
filling her glass before the others could get to it. “Xander, why so grumpy?”

“You think maybe this’ll be the last round, Buff?” She frowned, then laughed loudly. He must be joking. Beer good. Why would she stop drinking the beer?

“You silly,” she joked, and smiled brightly at him. He frowned again but left to go handle his bar duties again. Everyone else had poured themselves another beer, but nice guy had left, probably to go pee.

Beside her, snot-shirt guy slammed his hand down on the table, declaring, “I like girls!”

“Me too,” Buffy whispered, thinking fondly of Faith’s pretty hair and soft skin. Then she noticed the boys looking at her like she was a weirdo, and she realized what she had said. She shoved snot-shirt guy. “You stupid,” she mocked.

“No, you stupid,” he argued back, unable to think of his own insult. She glared at his dumb face.

Dork guy was leaning his head down on the table, relaxing. He giggled, then added, “You stupid.” Buffy didn’t know who he was talking to, but then he fell out of his chair, and they all laughed. It was hilarious.

She was still annoyed at snot-shirt guy, so she glowered at him. “Smelly head.” That’ll show him. Xander watched as he walked over to a big silver box thing. He pushed some buttons, and then there was nice music in the air. Like magic. “Hey!” It was the coolest thing ever. Buffy leapt from her chair and ran over to her friend. Her eyes darted from him to his magic music box, and she banged on it playfully, laughing in amusement. This better than sadness. Would be better with Faith though. “Sings! I like it,” she beamed at Xander. He was a good friend, with his magic box.

But Xander wasn’t smiling. Buffy didn’t know why. Maybe he needed some beer. “I like music,” she said, trying to cheer him up. But he kept frowning. “Want more singing. Want more beer.” Remembering that she still had half a glass of beer back at the table with the dumb boys, she turned away from Xander. But he grabbed onto her.

“No! Buffy want beer. Beer good.” Why didn’t he understand that?

Wincing in pain, Xander stood up to her again. “Beer bad. Bad, bad beer.” He made a face. “What am I saying? Buffy—” he put a hand on her shoulder, and she wondered if there was a stick or a bat nearby. Xander could really use a bump on the head. He shouldn’t get between her and the beer. “—Go home and go to bed. Don’t make me call Faith.”

Buffy’s eyes flashed with fear and guilt. “No call Faith!” She knew she wasn’t ready. Needed more beer first. “No Faith, just beer,” she pleaded, then snuck away from him. She was back at the table and downing the rest of her beer before he could stop her.

“Alright, time to pay up and go home guys.” Buffy didn’t mind him bothering the dumb boys, as long as he didn’t mention Faith again. They all threw money at the table, and Xander picked it all up. He flipped through the paper bills, and Buffy watched, not sure why he took so long to count. “You know, I’ve always had a problem calculating the tip and you guys being so dapper and brainy—” He looked right at snot-shirt guy, who grunted and smiled proudly, but Buffy thought Xander was probably making fun of snot-shirt guy. Good for Xander. “—maybe you can help me out.
Okay great.” He smiled at the rest of them, but Buffy’s attention was drawn to the bathrooms, even as Xander kept babbling about tips and dollars and silly math stuff.

Nice guy looked different. He was hairier, and somehow he had found a stick in the bathroom. *Not fair! I want stick!* Nice guy howled and charged at Xander, but Buffy was faster. She tackled him. *Protect Xander.* Nice guy kept grunting and howling at her, but Buffy was stronger. She took his stick. *My stick now.*

The last couple of people looked at their group and screamed. They ran away. But Buffy didn’t care. She only had one desire. She turned the stick on Xander. “More beer!” she demanded, and Xander looked afraid of her. *Good. Buffy strong. Deserves more beer.* She liked intimidating Xander, and also the dumb boys. But Xander had a surprise for her.

Rather than bring her more beer, he reached into his pockets. She could sense the other dumb boys crowding around her, watching Xander. She glanced around, and they were hairier now too. Then her eyes went wide with fear and amazement. She leapt backwards, shocked at the bright, flickering light in Xander’s hand. “Fire,” she marveled. It terrified her, but it also fascinated her. Fire was so pretty and hot and dangerous. *Like Faith.*

“Fire bad,” someone insisted from behind her. She understood, but also fire was pretty.

Xander waved the fire wildly at them, and they backed away warily. “Fire angry!” he shouted, and Buffy did not want to make the fire angry. She did not know what it would do. Fire could be warm and pretty, but it could also burn and sting and blind. Not worth the risk. Instead, she watched warily as Xander backed away from them, hiding behind the fire. “Buffy, I’m sorry. But I will bring help.” Then the fire was gone, and Xander ran out the door. It slammed behind him and made a clicking noise.

“Fire bad.” She turned back to face vest guy, who seemed glad the fire was gone. She waved her stick at him, making sure he knew she was the strong one. Then she turned to find more beer. Buffy knew there was beer behind the bar, but she could not remember how to get it out.

Before she could get to the beer, snot-shirt guy challenged her. “I like girls. Want girl. Girl mine.” He grabbed at her, and Buffy immediately slammed the stick down on his head. He crumpled to the ground.

“Buffy not boy’s. Buffy strong.” She glared at the other boys, and they backed away, turning their attention to the rest of the bar. She understood. There were many interesting smells in the bar. The boys turned over some tables, maybe clumsy or maybe stupid. She wasn’t interested. She wanted to explore. Maybe she would find more beer. *Then find Faith. Want to kiss Faith.*

As Faith approached the small pub just off campus, Xander and Giles were bickering like two children waiting to be called into the principal’s office. *Oh god, does that make me the principal? Fuuuuck that.*

“I can’t believe you served Buffy that beer.”

“I didn’t know it was evil!” Xander protested.

Giles retorted, “You knew it was beer.”

“Well excuse me, Mr. ‘I spent the sixties in an electric Kool-Aid funky Satan groove.’” *He’s got a*
Giles' brow furrowed. "It was the **early seventies**," he corrected. "And you should know better." It was at this point that Faith began to sense that something was very wrong, beyond just the whole 'evil beer turning students into cavemen' thing that Xander had warned her about over the phone. Faith continued towards her arguing acquaintances, glancing around but unable to figure out what was tingling her Slayer senses.

"I'm not the dad of her. Buffy's a grown up. It wasn't enough to—"

"Do you smell smoke?" Faith asked, finally registering what was bothering her just as she reached Xander and Giles. Both men's eyes widened as they turned back to the bar, and yeah, there was definitely a warm glow coming from the windows.

"Crap!" Xander gasped. "They can't burn down the pub! Where will I work?"

Faith smacked him on the head. "Focus on the important here, dumbass. You said you locked Buffy and the cavemen in there?" His face fell.

"Oh. Uh, yeah. You should probably save them." His voice started as a guilty murmur and gained volume and pitch throughout.

"No shit, Sherlock." That was the only reason Faith had shown up. UC Sunnydale was really Buffy's territory. But if she was out of commission, Faith was the only backup available, obviously. If Faith was really being honest, she was here more to make fun of cavewoman Buffy than anything else, but she sure as hell wasn't about to let some random bar fire kill Buffy before she could even get to third base with her.

Faith looked around. "That your car?" she asked Xander, pointing to the junker of a sedan parked on the street nearby.

"Yeah, why?"

"Looks like it'll make a good makeshift prison for four cavemen frat bros." She glared at him to head off any arguments, and he shrank from her, nodding meekly. Locking eyes with Giles, she tossed him the tranq gun she had brought with her. "I'm goin' in. Any of them escape, take 'em down." He nodded, then Faith was off. She could feel the heat coming from the building the closer she got, and it was nearly unbearable as she kicked the door in. Her first glimpse of the bar was a sort of fiery hellscape, the interior already a much more disturbing picture than the exterior had led her to believe. Tables had been overturned and piled up in the corner, with broken chairs and other bits of kindling tossed on top to form a pyre that had clearly been where the Neanderthals had started the fire. But it had already spread around to the walls of the pub, and one of the beams across the ceiling of the building had fallen down in the far corner. The room blazed orange and yellow, and dark, hanging black smoke that was clawing at Faith's lungs already.

Shit. Hang on, B. I'm comin'. She didn't immediately see Buffy. One caveman escaped the building as she ran into the bar, shrieking about the fire. *Hope you were ready, G.* Another was unconscious on the floor. Without looking further, she grabbed the unconscious boy and tossed him out of the building as quickly as possible before heading back in. "**Buffy!**" she called out frantically, the full name sounding weird in her voice. She saw movement in her periphery, and there was that flash of blonde hair. She breathed a sigh of relief, and immediately started to cough violently as the smoke filled her lungs. Shit. Her eyes watered, and once she cleared her vision, Buffy had found her. The other Slayer was hunched forward and her walking was stilted as she edged cautiously toward Faith. Over one shoulder was another unconscious caveman in an ugly snot-green shirt, and
she was carrying some sort of stick in her other hand. Her eyes were wild and dark, and yet Faith could still see recognition there. Buffy watched her warily.

“Go!” Faith ordered, pointing emphatically at the door. She moved aside, just in case cavewoman Buffy was afraid of her for some reason. But the other Slayer didn’t move.

“Faith go too!” Buffy insisted, her voice low and breathy. “Fire bad. Get out!” The craziest urge to burst out laughing fought at the edges of her mind, despite the life and death situation rapidly engulfing them. Cavewoman Buffy sounded so ridiculous. But they didn’t have time to argue, and Buffy had a big stick.

“B, get the fuck outta here! I’ve gotta find the last guy.” Xander had said there were four guys—where was the last one? She searched the bar again, but the fire and smoke were making it increasingly impossible to see. And she couldn’t hear any noise or movement over the roar and cackle of the flames. She blew out a frustrated breath, then stifled another cough. Faith was damn sure not going to get herself killed searching for a shitty frat guy as a bar burned down around her. “Fuck it, let’s go.” She turned towards the door, and finally Buffy moved, locking eyes with Faith for a brief second, then lumbering out the door with Faith hot on her heels.

As they got out, she could see that Xander had already pulled the unconscious guy away from the building, and Giles was loading a tranquilized caveman into the driver’s seat of Xander’s car. But it wasn’t the first guy she had seen escape the bar. Fucker got out on his own. Relief caught in her chest. Shit, I’m getting soft. Since when do I care about random assholes? Especially ones who were hitting on B and tryin’ to get her drunk.

Buffy had enough sense to see what Giles and Xander were doing, and she tossed her knocked out friend into the backseat of the car. Xander locked all four guys in, and that’s when Buffy turned to face Faith again. She looked no less wary, but there was something so different about this version of Buffy. Her face was scrunched up more than usual, as if concerned but in a sort of permanent way, and her eyes didn’t quite seem to focus in the way that Faith was accustomed to. They were no less intense than usual, but the intensity was somehow of a different sort. It was hard to explain all the differences exactly, but it was weird to be staring down someone who both was and wasn’t the Buffy Summers that Faith knew so well by then.

Faith cautiously extended a hand, palm open and facing up. “Gimme the stick, B.” Buffy’s brow furrowed even more, her lips pressing into a tight line. Never once did she look away from Faith, though. They stood at a standstill for several seconds before Buffy’s arm twitched forward, but she hesitated, as if she couldn’t decide between handing the stick over or swinging it at Faith’s head. Come on, B. Do this the easy way. Don’t make me put you down. Almost as if reading her mind, Buffy immediately sighed, then almost seemed to pout as she placed the stick in Faith’s hand. For whatever reason, she sensed that the stick was symbolic of power to Buffy, and Faith gripped it tightly. Glancing over just long enough to catch Giles’ eyes, she explained, “I’m takin’ B back to the house. I’ll stay with her till this wears off.”

“Yes, of course,” Giles agreed.

Oddly, Xander was looking at her suspiciously. “What?” she scowled. He started to say something, eyes darting between the Slayers, but then he halted. Again, his eyes focused on Buffy, then he swallowed hard. “Dude, seriously. What the fuck?”

He winced away from the word, which she found hilarious, but then he shook his head. “Nothing. Forget it. Just take care of her, okay?”

Faith narrowed her eyes. She knew that the Scoobies were aware of her attraction to (and yes, fine,
protectiveness over) Buffy. It wasn’t like she was subtle about it, even if the Mayor hadn’t called her out in front of the entire group the day before his Ascension. But Xander was looking at her differently now. She couldn’t quite tell whether it was good or bad—and frankly, she wasn’t all that interested in what Xander thought of her and Buffy right then. “Of course I will,” was the only response she offered, then she turned back to Buffy.

*Probably not the best idea to make any sudden movements or try to touch her. Not till I get a better grasp on how her cavewoman brain works.* Faith figured she would try orders. That worked with the stick at least. She stood at her full height, giving her several inches over this slightly hunched over version of Buffy. “Come on. Follow me.” She nodded with her head, keeping her eyes focused on Buffy as she gave the order. Then she took a step forward, and Buffy simply watched her, still wary. “B, seriously, come on. We’re going home.” This time, when she took another step, Buffy fell in line. She followed, a couple steps behind and to the right of Faith, as she led her back down the street to where she had parked the car.

Surprisingly, Buffy didn’t challenge her any further, and while she seemed a little freaked by the noises and vibrations of the car—and then the speed at which they were moving—they made it to Joyce’s house without incident. For a second, Faith considered tossing the stick away or just leaving it in the car, but Buffy’s fixation remained strong throughout the car ride and after they had stopped. In fact, Buffy wouldn’t get out of the car until Faith came around, stick in hand, and physically pulled her out. But after that, Buffy seemed content to let Faith lead her into the house.

They walked side-by-side up the sidewalk, and Faith suddenly felt awkward again. *Should I try talking to her? What would I even say? Can she understand—* All thought ceased as Buffy slid closer, into Faith’s bubble of personal space. It was the same thing that Buffy always did when she wanted Faith to put her arm around her. The motion was so fluid and natural that Faith’s arm reacted to it without any conscious thought, moving up and across Buffy’s shoulders just before they reached the stairs up to the front porch. And with that simple, unspoken gesture, it felt like so much of the tension Faith was feeling washed away.

She opened the front door without taking her arm off of Buffy, which was hard to do without dropping the stick either, but she managed it, then shut the door behind them with her foot. From the sound of it, Joyce wasn’t home yet. *Open Mic Night must be goin’ well.* Faith led Buffy into the living room, hoping that maybe the television would be enough to distract the girl’s wild mind until the beer had worn off. Pulling her arm back, Faith ordered Buffy to sit on the couch. The blonde pouted—and Faith genuinely didn’t know if that was because she had withdrawn her arm or because Buffy didn’t want to sit—but did as she was told.

*B followin’ orders is actually pretty nice. I could get used to this.* Faith set the stick down, leaning it against the coffee table as she grabbed the remote and plopped down next to Buffy. Immediately, Buffy grabbed her arm and pulled it back around her. *Could get used to that too.* But the minute she turned on the TV, Buffy’s attention was fixed, immovably, on the screen. “TV good,” she whispered. The Friends gang were in awe of some wacked out dollhouse Phoebe had constructed, and Buffy appeared equally captivated by it.

“Cave-Buffy is an easy date,” Faith muttered, but Buffy didn’t register the veiled insult.

“TV is a good thing. Bright colors. Music. Tiny little people.” Her eyes never moved from the screen, so she didn’t see Faith grinning at her. *Goddammit, how am I supposed to stay mad at her like this?*

“Yeah, B. Tiny little people. Just like you.”

Buffy’s brow furrowed, but she didn’t look at Faith. “Buffy not tiny. Buffy strong.”
“Not as strong as Faith.” Surprisingly, Buffy didn’t argue that point. They watched Friends in silence for ten or fifteen minutes, until Faith realized she needed to get up. “Gotta take a piss.” She pulled away, much to Buffy’s chagrin, and fixed her with a stern look. “Watch TV. Do not break anything.” She locked her eyes on Buffy’s long enough to make sure her point got through, then, as an afterthought, she grabbed the stick. “I’m takin’ this with me, so don’t get any ideas.”

When she returned, Buffy hadn’t moved, and Faith paused just outside the living room, watching. The other Slayer looked less wild now, painfully adorable with her wide, attentive eyes and slightly open mouth. The house was mostly dark, and Buffy was illuminated only by the pale light of the TV screen. She seemed so soft and delicate right then, and Faith’s urge to protect her was palpable. Faith was still hurt by Buffy’s seeming rejection of her, and yet, the girl had responded to her instantly, even in her beer-fueled haze. Buffy had been worried about her, and only her, when it came to saving people from the fire. Buffy had given her the stick, and in doing so, had seemingly surrendered her power to Faith. And Buffy had been constantly seeking Faith’s touch since they got to the house. These were not the actions of someone who didn’t want her.

But that had never really been in doubt. The problem was the mixed signals, and Buffy’s apparent unwillingness to see Faith as anything more substantial than forbidden fruit. For a second, Faith seriously considered turning around and heading back upstairs. Buffy was captivated by the TV, and likely would be until she returned to her senses. Maybe it’d be better if she had the option of sneaking out without any further interaction with Faith. She’d probably go back to being awkward and confused about her feelings the second the beer wore off anyway.

Just as she began to turn, Buffy’s head snapped towards her, emerald eyes cutting into her as if Buffy knew that Faith was about to run away and couldn’t bear the thought of it. The wildness was still there in her slightly wider than normal pupils, but it was less pronounced. Realizing she had been caught, Faith sighed, then walked back into the living room. As she sat down, Buffy again grabbed her by the wrist and pulled Faith’s arm back around her.

They continued watching in silence, and Buffy seemed to slowly and steadily move closer into Faith’s body. It was curious. The girl didn’t seem cold, so it probably wasn’t a body heat issue. And it wasn’t like her cavewoman instincts were pushing her to make a move or anything, since all she did was cuddle into Faith. It was a softer side of Buffy that Faith had only gotten glimpses of, but it was also completely different than the behavior she had been displaying so far as a result of the beer. Faith didn’t understand what was going on, and she felt the nagging suspicion that she was like the dude in the old myths, who built those wax wings but flew too close to the sun.

Which is why she blew out a very sharp, very shocked breath when she suddenly felt Buffy’s lips ghosting across her neck. Faith was the one who stiffened, but she couldn’t avoid biting her lip as Buffy continued, a hand gently pulling Faith’s hair aside as her lips continued sweeping slowly and softly upward towards Faith’s ear. She knew that she should stop this. Ask Buffy what she was doing or check in to see whether this was a side effect of the beer. But Faith was frozen, her mind able to focus only on the sensation of Buffy’s soft lips and warm breath.

When Buffy finally reached her ear, Faith felt teeth graze softly over her earlobe, sending an involuntary shudder through her body. Buffy giggled—she fucking giggled—then finally, she spoke. “Thank you for watching over me,” Buffy murmured, her voice as warm as her breath. Faith worked hard to keep her breathing under control, and as much as she wanted to turn and look into
Buffy’s eyes, try to figure out what was going on, she still couldn’t seem to make her body move at all.

The best she could managed was a whisper. “B, what are you—”

“I’m sorry,” Buffy cut her off gently. Then she rested her forehead against the left side of Faith’s head, her steady inhale and exhale tickling at Faith’s ear and neck. “I am so sorry I ran out on you like that.” Oh. Faith’s eyes widened, and she was suddenly very aware of Buffy’s body pressed against her own. At some point, she had turned herself into Faith, and her right thigh was pressed firmly against Faith’s left hip. Her right hand, the one that had lifted Faith’s hair away from her neck, was now nestled firmly in Faith’s hair, a finger stroking ever so slightly along the upper curve of Faith’s right ear. Buffy’s chest was pressed against Faith’s upper arm, and she was captivated by the sensation of feeling Buffy’s breathing not only against her neck, but also through the gentle movements of her breasts against Faith’s arm. But Buffy seemed blissfully unaware of exactly how her proximity was affecting Faith, and she continued with her apology.

“I wanted to kiss you again, for real this time, for so long. And I don’t know what that means. For me. For us. I don’t …” Buffy trailed off, unmoving from the position she had found herself in. Faith got the strong impression that if she had actually turned to face Buffy, it might have become impossible for the other Slayer to admit to what she was feeling. Faith was very glad she hadn’t been able to do so. “Faith, I’m sorry, but I don’t know what I want. Not yet. And I know I shouldn’t have just … like, jumped you like that.”

Faith snorted, and Buffy’s face jerked away from her, just slightly. “Sorry, B. It was just funny to hear you phrase it like that. Didn’t mean to interrupt.” She put a hand on Buffy’s thigh in the hopes of settling her, and it worked. Buffy settled back into her comfortable position against Faith, forehead nestled in her hair above her ear.

“Ugh. I hate that I’m so awkward about this. Even though I get the distinct feeling you enjoy mocking me over it.” Damn right I do. “But I really feel awful that I freaked like that. The whole thing was overwhelming for me. First in how much I just wanted to be kissing you, and then in all the confusing freaking out about what that might mean and what I want and—” she blew out a frustrated breath, “—see, there I go again.” Faith squeezed her thigh reassuringly. “I don’t want to hurt you. And I know that’s exactly what I did when I ran out like that.”

“I mean, it’s good that your schoolwork is so important to ya. Joyce’ll be happy to hear that.” Buffy chuckled into her ear, the sound of it mixing mortification and genuine amusement.

“You don’t have to do that. I’m well aware it was the lamest excuse of all time. I just need you to know I wasn’t in my right mind. Your hand—” Again, she cut herself off, and for a second, Faith was back in that bedroom. Buffy’s sudden passion had been unexpected, and Faith had become giddy, almost drunk on it. After all the bad stuff and then all the flirtation and expectations and tension after that … she finally had tangible, indisputable proof that Buffy felt the same way. That the attraction wasn’t just some silly flirtation or Slayer-based chemistry. That moment between them had been like a wildfire, setting each and every nerve in Faith’s body aflame. And she had let it burn just a little bit too far out of control.

There hadn’t been any specific, intentional thought to move her hand, to get Buffy’s pants off. All she could really remember was that heady rush of desire. She couldn’t get enough of the other Slayer. And then she was suddenly cold again, and Buffy was standing several feet away, a look of complete and utter terror on her face. That was when Faith had known, not only that she’d let herself push it too far, but also that Buffy wasn’t giving her the firm signal she had hoped for either. The girl was still every bit as mixed up about things as ever, she had just let herself get carried away.
Then she ran, and Faith just figured that was that.

Buffy’s current behavior painted a very different picture, though. Faith found herself right back in that frustrating mental and emotional inner turmoil. So much of her wanted to hope for something more—something real—with Buffy, even as all her experience, everything she knew, told her it was impossible. And here was Buffy, pressed against her, literally whispering sweet nothings in her ear. It was too much. And simultaneously not enough.

“I can’t take much more of the mixed signals, B.” Faith was shocked by the honesty of her own words, since she hadn’t actually had any intention of saying them out loud. Shit. What am I doing? I’m gonna scare her off for good, and then what?

Defying any worried expectations Faith was harboring, Buffy just nodded slightly into Faith’s hair. “I get that. And I don’t actually know what’s different now than a few days ago. Maybe it was three days of radio silence that made me hate myself.” Faith frowned. That hadn’t been her intention. Not really. “Maybe it was the fight with Spike.” Faith’s head spun to the side, and Buffy’s face jolted back at the unexpected motion. They caught eyes for a second, Faith’s concerned and questioning and Buffy’s apologetic and sad.

“Sorry. Yeah. Spike ambushed me on campus in the middle of the day. All super-powered and Gem of Amara having. But don’t worry, he was no match for me and my special Faith knife.” Faith couldn’t help the way her lips quirked up into a proud smile, and Buffy’s did the same.

“Is he dust?”

“I doubt it. He’s kinda like the cockroach of vampires—can’t ever quite seem to get rid of him.” Faith had every intention of doing just that one day soon, but that wasn’t important at the moment. She turned her head forward again, hoping that Buffy would resume her previous position. And she did. “What was I saying? … Oh! I think maybe the last few hours—that was something weird and magical about the beer, right? I remember most of it, though it’s sorta dreamlike and almost like I was seeing everything through someone else’s eyes.”

Faith just nodded, taking care not to move so much that it would disturb Buffy. The other Slayer continued. “Thought so. So, I was like … a cavewoman or something?” Faith chuckled softly. “That’s a yes, then. I just remember thinking how dumb the boys were and how pretty the fire was. It reminded me of you actually. Beautiful, but dangerous.” Buffy sighed. “Faith, I don’t know. It’s been a really weird, really long day. And I just know that I’m not ready for anything serious. There are a whole bunch of questions that I still need to figure out for myself, and they are all kinds of terrifying.”

Faith had no idea how to take that, and she realized that she was holding her breath. Waiting for the other shoe to drop. But then Buffy’s teeth were on her earlobe again, drawing a soft gasp from her lips and forcing her to start breathing again. Buffy pressed a couple of soft kisses where Faith’s jaw met her ear. “But I can’t pretend that I’m not attracted to you. I guess I’m just wondering what you’re thinking about all this.”

And that was when Buffy finally pulled away, but just enough that they could face each other a little better. She wanted to see Faith, to measure her reactions. The thing was, Faith didn’t know what to say.

“Fuck.” The muttered word was all she could get out, and Buffy just eyed her with an amused half-smile, a finger stroking softly along Faith’s forearm. Faith licked her lips, eyes darting from Buffy to random points in the room as her mind considered everything. She felt nervous. Intensely nervous, in a way she had never really felt before. What the fuck is this? “I don’t know what I want either.”
She blew out a frustrated breath. “That night … was fucking incredible. I’m sorry I got uh carried away, but it was just—”

“I know,” Buffy agreed. “I was there too. I felt it too. That’s part of why I freaked.” And if Buffy was going to be this brutally honest, despite very obviously seeming terrified of how Faith would take it, then the least Faith could do was try to match her level of honesty.

“I really just wanna kiss you again. And see where that goes. I . . .” Faith looked away, then back at Buffy. She felt so intensely naked in the moment. “I don’t think I’m ready for anything like … like, a relationship or anything. Hell, I’m not even sure I’m capable of that. Ain’t exactly the most emotionally stable chick, ya know?” Buffy frowned, and her mouth opened to argue, but Faith cut her off. “But it doesn’t sound like you want that right now either.” Buffy closed her mouth, then shrugged.

For several seconds they just looked at each other. All that same tension from three nights ago was there again, and the air between them felt as though it were thick with electric energy. Faith’s desire for Buffy was nearly unbearably, especially after how close the other Slayer had just been. Faith tensed again, remembering the soft kisses along her neck, the whispered voice in her ear. The words were across her lips before she could think.

“Can’t you just be kissing me right now? Does it have to be more than that?”

Buffy’s only answer was to tackle Faith, swinging a leg over her thighs as she caught Faith’s lips in her own. Buffy pressed down into her, and their tongues found each other in an instant. The heat of it, the sudden force of it all, rippled through her, setting Faith’s body on fire all over again. They kissed roughly and passionately, all hungry mouths and searching fingers and soft moans over heavy breathing. It was every bit as thrilling as the first time, and Faith knew that kissing Buffy was something she would never, ever tire of.

Buffy’s hand found its way under the hem of Faith’s shirt, and the soft scrape of nails across her abs drew a sharp hiss of pleasure from her lips. She bit down on Buffy’s lower lip in retaliation, earning a similar hiss from the other girl.

_I hope I never get used to this._
“So, we’re not really telling people about this thing, right?” Buffy did her best not to grimace at the question, which hit her right in that small guilty knot in her gut. But that guilty feeling may have partially been Faith’s intention, as she used Buffy’s hesitation to catch her off guard. The brunette slid into her space with practiced ease, landing a light pop under Buffy’s chin before taking out her legs and pinning her to the mat.

“What thing?” Buffy gasped, ignoring the minor pain along her jaw and back and doing her best to fight a grin at Faith’s tactics. Then she headbutted the other girl, distracting her just long enough to flip their positions. She enjoyed the feel of Faith’s hips under her, savoring the thrum she could feel passing back and forth between their bodies.

Faith eyed Buffy’s legs, which were spread wide as she straddled Faith, then pointedly glanced from one of her pinned hands to the other. “The thing where you can’t get enough of touching me and are dying to kiss me right now.” Buffy blushed as it became evident that Faith had caught her staring at her lips. “Ya know, that thing.”

Rather than resume sparring, Buffy decided to press her luck. She ground against Faith, the friction sending a thrill up her spine, and leaned down to whisper in the other girl’s ear. “Is there something to tell?” Ever since they had finally talked about this, Buffy had been dealing with her own insecurities by feigning cockiness and going out of her way to focus on their physical connection rather than any further serious conversation. So she appreciated it when Faith’s only answer was to turn her head and bite Buffy’s earlobe, teasing a sharp hiss from her lips. Then Faith bucked her hips and flipped Buffy up and over her head.

Buffy recovered quickly, but not quickly enough. Faith pinned her against the wall, the full weight of her body pressed against Buffy, one hand twisting Buffy’s wrist behind her back in a slightly painful hold and the other along the back of Buffy’s head, just under her ponytail. Faith kissed along Buffy’s neck, and she couldn’t help but close her eyes and enjoy the sensation.

“I’m thinkin’ you like the idea of keepin’ me as your dirty little secret, B,” Faith growled, low and sultry in her ear. She pressed in more firmly against Buffy’s ass, pulling a low moan from her throat. Part of Buffy worried that it wasn’t fair to Faith, but she couldn’t pretend that the other Slayer wasn’t 100 percent right about that.

“At the time, I was just computing the pain of that big bag she carried.” Buffy shrugged, and Faith furrowed her brows. “You know, it was a big bag.”

“What’s up?” Rather than answer, Buffy pushed off the wall with enough force to move Faith, but she grabbed the other Slayer’s wrist immediately. She also caught Faith’s eyes as she waggled her
eyebrows in a teasing gesture, leading her over to the bag.

“I’ve got a surprise for you.” She avoided Faith’s expression, fully aware that she didn’t want Buffy to make a big deal out of her birthday. But that was a stupid thing to expect from Buffy. **Of course** she was going to do something for Faith’s birthday. Maybe she couldn’t yet put into words exactly what she felt for the other Slayer, and she sure as hell didn’t have any idea what to do about those feelings, but that didn’t mean she didn’t care deeply. And she never wanted to miss an opportunity to give Faith the support and affection that she suspected Faith hadn’t ever gotten growing up.

They reached the bag, and Faith waited as Buffy unzipped it and dug around. “Close your eyes,” Buffy insisted. Faith rolled her eyes, but she complied. As she almost always did. For all of her tough façade, Buffy reveled in the knowledge that it wasn’t really that hard for her to get Faith to do anything she wanted. She pulled out the first gift as silently as possible and snuck closer, stopping just in front of Faith. She was leaned against the wall, eyes closed but body slightly tense in anticipation.

Buffy took great care to silently slide the baseball cap onto Faith’s head quickly enough that she could get it in place before Faith’s eyes sprang open and her hands moved to catch Buffy’s by the wrist. “B, what is—” Her eyes darted up, and apparently catching only a glimpse of the white brim, she moved to pull the cap off her head and take a look at it. It was a simple white Boston Celtics baseball cap, and for such a silly gag gift, it had been annoyingly difficult to find on short notice. But the wry grin along Faith’s soft lips and the amused twinkle in her eyes made it all worth it. “You got me a hat?” Faith asked, voice thick with disbelief.

“I know you like the Celtics—that’s ummm b-**basketball**, right?—but that’s not the best part.” Faith caught her bottom lip between her teeth thoughtfully, raising an eyebrow.

“What *is* the best part?”

“It’s white!” The hat was a clean, unblemished white, other than the bright green outline of the team’s primary logo on the crown. Faith’s eyes narrowed, and Buffy practically bounced as she explained, “Because you’re a white hat again! Get it?”

A flash of disbelief crossed Faith’s face, then she completely broke down into laughter. Which was exactly what Buffy was going for. The other Slayer immediately fought her laughter, admonishing Buffy for being such a massive dork. “So, I tell you when my birthday is, just to avoid any painful surprises from our shitty British friends, and I specifically tell you I don’t want a present—so you get me a fucking baseball cap, all to make a joke?”

This time Buffy was the one who couldn’t help her laughter, and Faith joined her just for a moment. “Do you like it?”

“Course I do.” And for the briefest of moments, Faith’s eyes were vulnerable and affectionate, and Buffy knew her idea had been a good one. Not that she was done yet.

“I’m just glad the Watchers were telling the truth. Would’ve sucked if they had ruined this.”

Faith chuckled. “Hey, it mighta been fun to kick some pasty British asses on my birthday. But I guess you gotta point. Good thing we’re not worth their time anymore, huh?” Giles had called them to inquire about any potential plans to attempt a Cruciamentum for Faith’s eighteenth birthday, and he had been promptly informed that the Council couldn’t care less about the two mutinous Slayers. They were apparently content to wait until one or both of them got themselves killed, and they would start fresh with a new Slayer. Until then, they thought of themselves as too good for the insolent young women in Sunnydale.
“I think we can think of a few more enjoyable ways of spending the evening,” Buffy purred, and Faith licked her lips. “But that wasn’t even your real present.”

“B, no!” The cap was still in Faith’s hands, and she fiddled with it nervously as Buffy turned back to the bag.

“Oh please, don’t even. You get me this gorgeous knife for my birthday—okay, so way after the fact, but still—and you think I’m just gonna get you a joke hat?” Buffy rolled her eyes playfully, then pulled the present out. This one actually was wrapped, the squarish cardboard box wrapped in dark blue paper with a bright white bow. How she had managed to carry it in her bag without screwing up the bow, Buffy didn’t know, but she hadn’t wanted Faith to know about it. She held it out to Faith, trying to hide her nervousness.

Faith looked like she was just as nervous, and wow, this is like totally new territory for us. Then she blew out a long breath, glanced away and then back at Buffy with a roguish twinkle in her eyes, and put the hat back on, playing with the brim of it theatrically as if she had to wear it just so. Only then did she take the present, eyeing it with a raised eyebrow. “Well, well. What have we here?”

“Oh, just open it.”

“Bossy much?” Buffy gave Faith a playful shove at that, barely holding onto her last shred of chill. She was dying to know what Faith was going to think of her present, and she glared at Faith until she finally turned her attention to the wrapping paper. “Fine, fine. I guess I’ll open it. But only because you’re cute when you glare at me, Blondie.” And then she did, ripping the paper to shreds until she could get her hands on the lip of the box beneath, lifting it aside to reveal the contents contained within.

Buffy watched every single tiny movement of Faith’s face as she pulled the maroon leather moto jacket from the box. Faith’s eyes initially widened, and she sucked on her own lip in an expression of surprise. Then she looked like she was actively trying to control her facial expression, as if she didn’t want Buffy to know what she was thinking. She wished she could get through that barrier, that natural instinct to hide. Maybe someday.

But then Faith was just grinning at Buffy like a jackass, and Buffy could feel her own face light up at the sight of it. Faith turned the jacket back and forth, analyzing it without her grin losing any of its brilliance. “Because you need more color in your wardrobe, but I realize I can’t push you too far too fast, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Faith muttered, but her eyes never left the jacket. Finally, she zipped it completely open and slid it on, and only then did she turn back to catch Buffy’s eyes with her own. Faith bounced her shoulders a few times, then posed, hands playing along the lapels of the jacket. “Well, how do I look?”

Buffy looked her up and down, from her bright hat down her dark hair, her black tank top and light blue jeans contrasting nicely with the maroon leather of her new jacket. The black nails of her long, dexterous fingers working over the lapels as she waited for Buffy to say something. Her mind was working through so many adjectives. Gorgeous. Sexy. Bold. Incredible. Delicious. Powerful. So pretty it hurts. And yet, Buffy couldn’t quite get her mouth to work. The best she could managed was an open-mouthed, “Wow,” and she immediately felt stupid at how awestruck she sounded.

Faith mouthed ‘wow,’ smirking pointedly. Buffy blushed wildly, but still managed to squeak out, “So, you like it?”

“Seriously, B?” Buffy just kept gaping, trying not to blush again, so Faith rolled her eyes and
stepped closer. “What if instead of answering that question, I just show you how much I love it?”
She continued stepping forward, and Buffy took a step back. She bumped back against the wall, and then Faith was pressing against her. She smiled mischievously, placing a hand on Buffy’s hip and tracing slowly upward. Her touch was hot, even through the fabric of Buffy’s pants and tank top. Her hand found its way up over her breast, and as much as Buffy wished it would have, it didn’t linger. Instead, it kept going, over her collarbone and neck until it wrapped around the back of her head.

“How were you thinking of showing me?” Buffy gasped, locking eyes with Faith. For a moment, they just stared at each other, the fire building between them. Then Faith was nipping at her neck.

“I was thinking something like this.” She slid her tongue along the outer curve of Buffy’s ear, causing Buffy to gasp at the feel of it. “Or maybe like this.” She traced kisses from Buffy’s ear down along her jaw, until her lips hovered just over Buffy’s. “Why? Did you have something else in mind?”

“Shut up,” Buffy whispered, and then Faith’s lips crashed into hers. Buffy wrapped one hand around Faith’s lower back and the other threaded into her dark wavy hair, and she pulled Faith in as close as possible. “Mmm, it sure feels like you like it,” she murmured between kisses, and that’s when Faith tackled her to the ground.

Faith stopped kissing her just long enough to answer, “I do like it.”

“Maybe I should take it off you,” Buffy suggested, “Just to be sure nothing happens to it.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Faith purred. Buffy removed the leather jacket carefully, though not so carefully that it required her to stop kissing Faith. She folded it as best she could without interrupting Faith’s kissing along her neck and collarbone, then set it aside. Kissing Faith was the most amazing thing. It still felt so new, yet each and every time it just felt so familiar and right. The pressure of her legs bracketing Buffy’s hips. The soft graze of her breasts against Buffy’s as she leaned in to kiss her that much deeper. The desire she could convey simply through the gentle strength of her fingers as they sought to explore every inch of Buffy’s body. Kissing Faith made her feel so fucking alive.

And then Faith’s hands were under her shirt, tracing delicious patterns across her abs and sides. Minutes later, Faith’s jacket was no longer the only article of clothing that was being taken off. Buffy’s breath hitched as she felt Faith pulling at the hem of her tank top, lifting it slowly up over her bra and then off of her completely. She tossed it aside, then caught Buffy’s gaze for the first time since she’d tackled her to the floor. Faith’s pupils were blown wide with arousal, but that didn’t hide the question in her eyes, the search for confirmation that Buffy was alright with taking things a little further this time.

Buffy didn’t have to think much at all to know that she was. In fact, all she wanted was to know what it would feel like to have Faith’s lips press against every inch of skin that was not exposed in the warm air of their intimate training room. So, Buffy grinned, kissed Faith hungrily, and then pushed her head down towards her collarbone. Faith chuckled happily and, needing no further direction, took things from there.

“Don’t be so afraid of the zucchini, dear.” Faith made a wry expression of skepticism across the table at Joyce, but dutifully speared one of the green and yellow circles along with a few of the bowtie-shaped bits of pasta and a string of what Faith guessed was a pepper of some sort. Then she shoved it all into her mouth theatrically, starring Joyce down as she chewed. Except that it actually tasted awesome, and Faith had to work to keep the pleasure off of her face. She couldn’t give Joyce
that kind of satisfaction after her snarky comment, after all.

Instead, she turned the conversation away from the food, so she could enjoy it without any gloating from Joyce. “You sure you don’t need me at The Gallery Friday night?”

“Faith,” Joyce scolded her, “We already talked about this. I didn’t help you put that costume together for nothing. You kids have fun; us olds will be just fine.” Faith cracked a grin, and Joyce made a face. “You’re going to a frat party?”

“Yeah, B said they’re doin’ some sorta scary haunted house thing. I’m gonna be a little late though. Gotta get ready after work, then swing by and pick up Anya on the way.” If the dumb frat bros had just had the party on Halloween, it wouldn’t have been an issue, but apparently Sunday nights weren’t as cool for campus parties as Fridays. Regardless, she couldn’t wait to see the slack-jawed expression on Buffy’s face when she saw Faith’s costume in all its sexy glory. She wasn’t exactly sure why Anya had insisted on getting a ride from Faith rather than Xander, but Anya didn’t always make a lot of sense. She’d gotten used to that fact by now. Maybe they had gotten into a fight or something—Faith wasn’t big on prying. “I would say you should invite Giles to the thing at The Gallery, but I’m sad to say you’ve missed out on that hot piece of British ass, Joyce.”

Joyce blushed. “I certainly have no idea what you’re talking about, Faith.” *Bullshit you don’t,* Faith thought as she chuckled. She loved finding new and creative ways of reminding Joyce about her brief, candy-curse-fueled dalliance with the former Watcher. On this topic, Joyce was just as easy to make squirm as Buffy tended to be. For whatever reason, both Joyce and Giles avoided each other like the plague after that, even though they would’ve been a cute couple. Alas.

“I’m sayin’ he’s got a new girlfriend now. Wicked hottie with a British accent, though she looked a little young for him in my opinion. That’s what you get for waitin’ around.” Joyce completely ignored the teasing, and Faith decided to drop it. But only because she remembered something she had wanted to ask earlier in the day, before a customer distracted her. “Tell me more about that new painting that we put up in the gallery space today.” Faith was a little surprised by Joyce’s reaction. The woman’s head tilted slightly as her eyes narrowed, concern and curiosity dancing in her chocolatey irises in equal measure. *What did I say?*

The painting in question was two and a half by two feet on canvas; a sort of pale electric purple in the background with a deep black silhouette in the foreground. The silhouette was hazy in a way that obscured the figure’s race, gender, or any other identifying features. But that wasn’t what had captivated Faith when she looked at it. The figure’s head was an explosion of black paint, wild strings and dots of thick paint spreading outward from the figure’s head and neck. She hadn’t yet decided if she thought it looked more like a literal depiction of someone’s head exploding, as if shot, or a more figurative sort of explosion, a symbol of the figure’s expanding mind. Whichever it was, the painting’s darkness and ambiguity appealed to her on a spiritual level.

That was the most fascinating discovery Faith had made since she had started working for Joyce. Art was something that actually mattered to her. Some of it was complete bullshit, but that probably just meant that she wasn’t the appropriate audience. Art was like comics, but more visceral. Less obvious. Sometimes a piece would just catch her, force her to really think and feel in a way she never imagined an object could. In those moments, Faith felt like she could be more than herself, more than a white trash drop-out Southie who was good for little more than sarcasm and violence. In those moments, she imagined she could be the sort of person worthy of being with Buffy for real, rather than just a fun little secret experiment.

“That’s one of Richard Hambleton’s ‘Shadow Head’ series,” Joyce finally answered, her voice modulated in that pleasant way that indicated she was going into full art-nerd mode. But there was
still a searching tone to it that Faith couldn’t quite figure out. “Hambleton is Canadian, but he started as a street artist in New York. His work focuses on depersonalization, a fascination with shadow selves. He actually used to paint a lot of his shadow men on the sides of buildings.” She took a sip of her red wine, which was another of Joyce’s interests that Faith was beginning to develop a taste for. “Do you like it?”

Faith nodded, suddenly feeling a little bashful. She still wasn’t used to being open and honest about her feelings, even though Joyce was good about making her feel comfortable to the point that she didn’t constantly feel the urge to hide herself. “It made me think. Not really sure ‘bout what yet. Hell, I can’t even decide yet whether I think the painting is a person getting their brains blown out or something a little less violent. More uhh symbolic or whatever.”

Again, Joyce’s eyes narrowed in concern, and this was why Faith had trouble opening up to people. She didn’t need concern or pity or people picking apart her brain. But Joyce didn’t push it, not immediately. She took another bite of her pasta, chewing thoughtfully. A slightly uncomfortable silence hung between them as they continued to eat, and then finally, Joyce spoke again. “There’s a certain amount of darkness to Hambleton’s work. I’ve never asked you about your past, Faith, but I wonder why that sort of thing might appeal to you.” Subtle. “When you were gone for those weeks in the spring, Buffy mentioned that you had a lot of darkness in you, but she wouldn’t get into it with me. She’s very protective of you in that way. But if you ever feel like opening up to someone, talking about your childhood or what you’ve been through … well, I guess I just want you to know that I’m here.” Joyce met her gaze, and Faith immediately looked back down at her plate. “And I’m a very good listener.”

Faith’s first thought was not about what, if anything, to confide in Joyce. She found herself instead wondering whether Joyce would be so warm and inviting if she knew about the topless make out session Faith had shared with her daughter a couple of nights ago. Faith had to bite her lip at the thought of Buffy’s warm skin under her hands.

She hadn’t ever discussed her sexuality with Joyce, not specifically. She wasn’t hiding it, not any more than any other part of her personality. Unlike Buffy, Faith wasn’t at all confused about who she was or who she was attracted to, but she had no idea what to expect from Joyce in terms of a reaction. However, she suspected the older woman had some idea—after all, she never bothered Faith with questions about boys and dating. But she was completely certain that Joyce had no idea what was going on between her daughter and her … geez, what even am I to Joyce? Houseguest? Employee? Ward? Faith didn’t know that any of those words quite fit the unique relationship she’d established with Joyce.

She had a feeling that the relationship wouldn’t remain so easy if Joyce ever discovered the full extent of the connection she and Buffy shared. And Faith wasn’t really ready to test that feeling anytime soon. Not that Buffy had an interest in telling anyone what was going on between them. All that in mind, Faith finally returned to Joyce’s invitation to open up. “What did you want to know?” she asked cautiously.

Joyce’s eyes immediately softened. “Sweetie, I’m not trying to pry. I would love to get to know you better, but I don’t need you to tell me anything you don’t want to. I just imagined that at some point, it might help you to unburden yourself, so to speak.” Faith continued to play with the few remaining pieces of pasta and vegetable on her plate, refusing to look across the table. “For example, what can you tell me about your parents?”

Competing images sprang to mind, the haunting memory of her mom’s pale, still body slumped against the wall juxtaposed against the final time Faith saw her father’s face, filled with rage and dark intention as the cops dragged him away. “My mom’s dead. Dad’s in jail.” Faith tried her very best
to sound aloof, and she wasn’t entirely sure why she was admitting any of it. She felt as though a wrong word either way would close her heart off instantly.

“How old were you?” Joyce seemed to recognize the tentative nature of Faith’s vulnerability, her question asked sotto voce.

“They took dear old dad away when I was 11. I was barely 16 when I found mom.” The sharp gasp across the table clued Faith into what she had just admitted, and there was that wrong word. ‘Found.’ She hadn’t meant to reveal the circumstances of her mother’s death, any of them. Immediately, all her walls closed off again. “I really don’t wanna talk about it, Joyce.”

There were a few moments of silence, and when Joyce finally responded, she couldn’t keep the emotion out of her voice. It was exactly what Faith hadn’t wanted. “You poor dear. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’m not lookin’ for pity. It’s in the past.” Faith just wanted Joyce to drop it.

But Joyce wasn’t quite done pushing now that she had actually gotten some information out of Faith. It wasn’t lost on the Slayer that this sort of pushing was exactly what Joyce had promised that she hadn’t wanted to do when she started this conversation. “Have you ever considered speaking to a therapist about your past?”

“Fuck that,” Faith snapped, slamming her fork down onto her plate and grabbing both as she stood from the table. “I don’t need some shrink poking around in my mind. My past is no one’s business.” Joyce didn’t stop her from stalking away into the kitchen, and Faith proceeded to the sink to wash her plate. Her hands needed to be doing something right then.

As Faith dried her now clean plate and moved to put it away, Joyce joined her in the kitchen. “I’m sorry,” she apologized softly. “I promised I wouldn’t pry, and then I did it anyway.” Faith paused, facing the cabinets instead of Joyce. “I just worry about you. I know I’m not your mom, and you don’t owe me anything.”

Faith disagreed. As much as she hated this feeling of vulnerability and wanted to escape the conversation promptly, she was well aware of how very much she owed Joyce. Joyce Summers had given her the closest thing to a normal life Faith had ever experienced, and she had never guessed just how much she was missing something like that. She just wished that she was capable of opening up in the way Joyce hoped she would.

The older woman continued, “I just … you’ve done some remarkable things for yourself, Faith. You’re so strong, stronger than anyone your age should ever have to be. I just want to help, if I can. If it’s too hard to open up to me, or to Buffy, it might be easier for you to talk to a stranger. Someone who knows what they’re doing.” Faith stiffened, not wanting to have to repeat herself. “But it’s always your decision, dear. No one is going to force you to do anything you don’t want to. Just know that we’re here for you.”

Faith sighed. The scariest part was that she was starting to believe that. Joyce and Buffy were both becoming permanent installations in her life, to the point where she couldn’t imagine living without them. And that terrified her. She knew from experience that everything ends eventually. No one sticks around forever. As much as she knew she had grown in the last months, nothing had shaken that fundamental truth from her mind. Whether because of choices, circumstances, or death, everybody leaves.

And she knew already that it would crush her when it happened.
Buffy hoped that she had finally found the right hallway. It was embarrassing enough that she had to track down her professor’s office just to pick up the assignments from the class she missed yesterday. Getting lost and taking nearly thirty minutes just to find said office was bordering on mortifying—what if I miss her office hours entirely?

This was all Faith’s fault. She had lured Buffy away from campus with the promise of lunch and much slayage—she had found another vampire nest, and there were few things that Buffy and Faith loved to do together more than take out a nest. Of course, after taking out said nest, Buffy had been tempted by Faith’s pouty lips and tight jeans to engage in one of the few activities they both firmly enjoyed a great deal more than exterminating vampires. It really wasn’t Buffy’s fault at all that she had gotten carried away in the hot and heavy make outs. But before she knew it, she had missed class entirely. The worst part was that she couldn’t even wear that off-the-shoulder top she had gotten last weekend because Faith left several dark hickies along her collarbone.

Worth it, whispered her rebellious mind, before she could, with a put-upon frown, scold herself with a reminder that she was about to have to face a no doubt standoffish Professor Walsh, thanks to Faith and her stupid sexy lips. None of it is my fault.

Buffy finally found the office, but the only reason she was sure of that fact was that Walsh and the TA—Riley, she reminded herself—were leaving the office just as Buffy approached. “Excuse me, Professor Walsh? I came to get yesterday’s assignments, from Psych 105. I, uh, couldn’t make it to class for … personal reasons.” Buffy had no idea how she managed to keep the blush off her cheeks as she sputtered out that lame excuse, and Walsh eyed her with thinly veiled disapproval.

“Right. I count four limbs, a head, and no visible scarring, so I assume your personal issue wasn’t a life-threatening accident of any kind. I’m therefore uninterested.” Behind her, Riley winced. “You got problems, solve them on your own time. Miss another class and you’re out.” She gave one final glance to Riley, then walked past Buffy without another word.

“She means it, you know.” Riley’s expression was sympathetic, but his tone was just north of scolding. She still didn’t have a very good read on this guy. Something about him seemed more than the solid nice guy persona he projected in class.

“Yeah,” Buffy acknowledged wryly, nervously surveying the ugly brown carpet at her feet before turning her gaze back to the TA. “I got the impression she wasn’t saying it to make me laugh.”

Riley began shuffling through some papers in a folder he was carrying, muttering, “You’ve got to be aware your work’s taken a little down turn lately,” as he pulled out a small packet of papers. The assignment, she assumed. But he smiled at her as their eyes met again. “I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen your hand up in class.”

Buffy made a face. She couldn’t pretend that her head was exactly in the game when it came to school the last couple of weeks, and especially in psychology. It was interesting enough, but she didn’t love it the way Willow did. She’d much rather be out getting physical with Faith. She tried to handle her awkwardness with humor. “Does stretching count?”

He handed her the assignment, his fingers grazing hers for the briefest of moments as she took the packet. He really did have a very nice smile. “Look, things get pretty intense freshman year—” he made a face of his own, eyes darting to the floor then back to Buffy, “—as I dimly recall.” She chuckled. Come to think of it, she wasn’t sure how much older he was. She knew he was a grad student, but they hadn’t really talked much so far. His next question sounded plenty knowing, as if he could remember his freshman experience better than he was letting on. “Too much fun or not enough?”
This time Buffy couldn’t prevent the heat that rushed to her cheeks as she thought about yesterday afternoon’s activities. She felt bad that she had missed class, but at the time, she hadn’t exactly been desperate to escape the situation either. “Both actually,” she admitted softly.

He shrugged playfully, eyes glittering as if he had a few guesses at what that meant. “Yeah, well, you just got to keep your priorities. Professor Walsh is worth your time.” His fondness for the woman was obvious, and given how much of a complete hard-ass she was, Buffy found that a bit curious.

“Thanks, I’ll get this done tonight,” she muttered absent-mindedly, eyes searching the paper in her hands.

“Tonight?” Riley questioned her, voice incredulous. She looked back at him, surprised by the tone. “It’s Halloween! Well, … kinda.” Halloween was Sunday, but there were a bunch of big parties that night instead. “What, you’re not going to dress up and go party?” Buffy bit her lip, embarrassed by how much she found herself blushing in Riley’s presence. She’d been so distracted that she forgot about the party that night. Immediately, her mind returned to the lingering question of what sort of costume Faith was going to be wearing. The other Slayer had refused to reveal any details, and it was driving Buffy insane with curiosity.

“I completely forgot what day it was. Oops!”

He leaned back against the wall, and if she didn’t know any better, Buffy would’ve thought he almost looked shy. “I may be out of line here, and it’s not really my business, but—you seem like the kind of person that makes things really hard on themselves.” Buffy frowned. She hadn’t realized he had thought about her enough to have reached any such conclusion, much less one that was so spot-on. “Halloween isn’t a night for responsibility. It’s when the ghosts and goblins come out.”

“That’s actually a misnomer,” Buffy quipped, so thrown off by Riley’s heartfelt advice that she again found herself speaking before she could think over her words. Fortunately, he was looking at her not like the bizarre girl who seemed to know way too much about supposedly fictional supernatural creatures, but rather like she had made a joke—if still a pretty weird one.

“Well, I didn’t mean real ones,” he chuckled, and Buffy felt her lips quirk up at the edges. This guy made her feel at ease for some reason. She wondered if it was just his ‘aw shucks’ farm boy thing.

“But, hey, there is some good scary fun to be had on campus tonight.”

“Oh yeah? And what are you doing?” She wasn’t entirely sure why she was asking.

He pushed off the wall, gesturing towards the file of paperwork in his hand. “Well, I’m going to sit here and grade papers.”

Buffy deadpanned, “Scary,” as she turned to walk away from him, unable to help herself.

But he agreed, just as sarcastically. “Very.”

Buffy paused by the stairwell and looked back. “Well, thanks for the pep talk, coach.” She made a fist and swung her arm in a sort of ‘go get ‘em’ sportsy gesture, immediately regretting it.

“Don’t make fun. I worked long and hard to get this pompous.”

Buffy frowned, unsure how to take that. “No, I mean it,” she assured him. The most confusing part was that she absolutely did mean it.

Riley’s lips twisted into a thoughtful expression, then he smiled. “Well, you’re welcome.” She
smiled back, then headed on her way. Much preparation was needed to get ready for the party, starting with swinging by the house to pick up her costume. Joyce had let out the hem of the cape of her old little red riding hood outfit, promising not to reveal it to Faith. *If she can play with secrets, so can I.* They should both still be at The Gallery, so Buffy was free and clear to grab it and rush back to campus to get ready with Willow.

Buffy knew she could get around a lot faster if she had a car, like Faith or Xander, but honestly, she liked walking. She felt in her body and connected to the town she protected. Plus, she was still a garbage driver, and she knew it. One of these days, Faith was going to teach her to drive, but it hadn’t happened yet. And she could move pretty quickly, regardless.

She had her cape and was back to the dorm in less than an hour, and Willow was already back from her last class of the week. The sun was setting on the horizon, and Buffy glanced at the alarm clock as she entered the room, confirming that they had about an hour before Xander met them to walk over to the frat house. “Will, whatcha got goin’ on costume-wise?” The witch was wearing dark pants and a thin tank top, but she had some definite costumey items waiting on her bed.

“Guess you’ll just have to wait and see, Miss Riding Hood,” Willow joked, glancing at the cape Buffy laid down on her bed. Buffy rolled her eyes, then started to undress as she poked around in her closet for the actual costume. Her first thought was to just reuse the old costume from when she was thirteen, but Faith’s mystery about her own costume had prompted Buffy to rethink her plan. She had no intention of letting Faith show her up, and she couldn’t pretend she wasn’t a little bit thrilled by the idea of dressing up all sexy-like for the other Slayer. The red checkered circle skirt was more or less the same as her old costume, except where it had previously hit her just above the knee, it now halted at the middle of her thighs. *Thank you, growth spurt. Those few inches really count.* The rest of the costume—matching red fishnets and a black velvet corset—were decidedly more adult. The cape, hood, and wicker basket completed the look.

Buffy was careful to tie the cape around her shoulders immediately after getting into her corset, since it was the only thing that would cover her still fading hickies. *Not having that conversation with Willow any time soon.* Once she had all of it on, she only had to touch up her makeup and braid her hair into pigtails. The fishnets were more comfortable than she had expected, to be honest, and this corset was much less constricting than the one from her fancy lady costume a couple years ago. Once she finished with her hair, she turned to face Willow, who was predictably watching her with an annoyingly knowing smirk. “Trying to make an impression on someone, I take it?”

Willow’s costume was too adorable to allow Buffy any good comeback. She wore a thick hooded top that looked like an elaborate set of chainmail, extending from her head down to nearly her knees, under one of those plastic knight’s chest pieces you would buy for a little boy’s costume. Buffy had known that Willow would give her grief about the costume. She hadn’t yet told her best friend that she and Faith had progressed from veiled flirting to regular make outs, and she wasn’t yet sure if she wanted to. She liked having her little secret between the two of them. Telling Willow would make it real.

So instead, she ignored the pointed comment, loading up her wicker basket before sliding on a pair of black heels. “Ready? Oz and Xander should be waiting for us outside.” Willow rolled her eyes but didn’t push it any further.

“Fine, let’s go.” Willow locked the door behind them, and they headed downstairs. Sure enough, the boys were there when they exited the dormitory. Oz and Willow embraced, but all Xander could do was stare at Buffy. So she promptly punched him on the arm, hard enough to leave a bruise.

“OW!” he protested, but after a pointed glared, he admitted, “Fine, I deserved that. But I mean, Buff
… wow. Whatcha got in the basket?

“Weapons,” she answered gruffly.

“Oh.” He looked worried, and she jumped to reassure him, having made her point.

“Just in case.” She smiled. “Like the tux, Xander.”

“Bond. James Bond.” He did his best to seem a little less like the massive dork that he was, but Xander couldn’t escape being Xander. “Insurance, you know, in case we get turned into our costumes again. I’m going for cool, secret agent guy.”

Buffy chuckled. “I hate to break it to you, but you’ll probably end up cool head waiter guy.”

“As long as I’m cool and wield some kind of power.” He turned to survey Willow’s costume. “Hail, ye olde – varletty– thou.” Buffy had no idea what the hell he was talking about, but Willow’s grin said that she got it.

“I’m Joan of Arc. I figured we had a lot in common, seeing as how I was almost burned at the stake —” Buffy shuddered at the memory, but Willow smiled brightly. “And plus she had that close relationship with God.”

Xander shrugged, then looked at Oz. “And you are?” Oz’s response was to open his jacket just enough to reveal a nametag with the word ‘God’ on it, and Buffy couldn’t help but laugh. They all started walking, and Xander muttered, “Of course. I wish I’d thought of that before I put down my deposit. I could have been God.”

Oz quipped, “Blasphemer,” in such a dry tone that Buffy laughed that much harder, and as a result, she accidentally found herself colliding with a person sneaking across the sidewalk, darting out of some nearby shrubbery. The person was broad-shouldered and much taller than Buffy, probably a guy, but his features were hidden behind military fatigues and a ski mask. He went toppling to the ground, and the whole thing felt so strangely familiar. But before she could think about it any further, his friend had helped him up, and they ran off without a word to the group.

Only as they fled did Buffy notice the assault rifles they were carrying, and she really hoped those were just props. “Nice costumes,” she muttered in frustration. “Very stealthy.”

“What are they supposed to be?” Xander asked in confusion.

Oz speculated, “NATO?” Not having a satisfying answer, they all kept walking, but it wasn’t long before Willow brought up the question of the two members of their group currently missing.

She glanced from Xander to Buffy as she asked, “So, Faith and Anya are meeting us there?” Buffy and Xander both nodded, and Willow raised an eyebrow at Xander. “Hey so, why exactly is Anya grabbing a ride with Faith instead of, you know, her boyfriend?”

Xander grimaced, but immediately tried to hide it behind a goofy grin. “Hey, well ya know. They both had to work today, and I didn’t know how to get to the frat house, so I wanted to meet you guys early, and it just made more sense for Faith to swing by, and—”

“You two got into a fight over something?” Buffy interrupted.

“Yeah, just a little,” he admitted, deflating. “Guys, you have no idea how hard it is dating an ex-demon. Somehow we ended up talking about the Spanish Inquisition, and don’t ask me how because I really, really don’t know. And she was talking all about the torture and how hilarious it
was that the touchy the Catholics were so touchy about blasphemy and stuff. And hey, I was justifiably a little confused and concerned, and she just frowned and told me I had to be there.” Buffy was doing her very best not to laugh, but the whole thing was just so absurd. She really didn’t get the fondness for Anya that Xander and Faith had, but she had to admit that the girl brought a different flavor to their group. “Anyway … she thinks I’m a bad boyfriend for being so judgmental about her past, but like … *demon*!” He looked exasperated, glancing from Willow to Buffy. “I’m not crazy, right?”

“Not crazy.” Buffy confirmed. “Can’t really give you much advice there, though. Angel was properly ashamed of his past demon-ness. Maybe trying seeing it from her perspective? The Catholics were pretty judgey, right Will?”

Rather than answer, Willow was the one to bust out laughing, and she was only barely able to get it under control by the time they reached the frat house.

“Ya know, I get that you’re new to the whole hot, young human chick thing, but uh …”

“What?” Anya huffed, glaring at Faith as she entered the passenger side of the car.

“No, no, no, I mean, I’m new to the whole Halloween thing too, but generally I think the idea is more sexy scary fun than … adorable bunny.” Which is really the only way Faith could think to describe the full-body, fluffy white costume Anya was wearing. Faith was doing her best to focus on driving and not on laughing.

“Xander said I should wear something scary. And whatever the hell are you, anyway?”

Faith ignored the question. “He said scary, and so your first thought was ‘adorable bunny?’”

Anya shuddered. “Bunnies are *not* adorable. They’re fucking terrifying. I don’t understand why humans would keep them as pets. Disgusting.” She drummed awkwardly on the dashboard. “Now, seriously, what the hell are you supposed to be? Is this a well-known human thing that I’m missing?”

Faith debated whether to be honest, and immediately decided it would be funnier to see if she could convince Anya that her costume was some sort of ubiquitous character. “Oh yeah, *everyone* knows who Elektra is.” Faith glanced over, gauging Anya’s credulity. The ex-demon was watching, not exactly with rapt attention, but there was no hint of skepticism on her face. “She’s a superhero of sorts, a badass mother-fucking assassin, ya know?”

“This is one of those things I’m not supposed to take literally, right? Although…” Anya’s brow furrowed. “Honestly Faith, with you I’m never sure. Is this Elektra actually well-known for sexual intercourse with people’s mothers, because that sounds like something you might find interesting. But not really something everyone else would be super familiar with. Seriously, tell me.”

“Jesus, Anya. You’re a fucking trip.” Faith chuckled. Her costume was the closest thing to an authentic Elektra costume as she could manage on her own—and by on her own, she meant she and Joyce together. Parts of it were simple. Tight red leather pants, a thicker red tank top with one of the shoulders cut out, thin red arm warmers on her forearms, and finally, a few red sashes and a red bandana tied around her head. That stuff was easy enough, plus she had straightened her hair, which was such a pain in the ass, as it turned out. The hardest parts of the costume were the thigh-high red leather boots and the sai. Joyce had jumped onto the costume idea once she had coaxed it out of Faith, and somehow, she had accomplished a task that Faith had assumed was impossible. The boots
existed, and Joyce found them. *It’s really crazy how much Buffy underestimates her mom.*

The sai—not exactly common weapons—were something Faith had actually always wanted to learn to use in her slaying, so she’d had her eyes out for them all throughout her cross-country trip a year ago. But she hadn’t come across them, and no store in Sunnydale carried them. Ultimately, it had been an old Watcher contact of Giles’ who had come through, and only after Faith convinced Giles that it would do her and Buffy a lot of good to start mixing in more obscure and complicated weapons and training now that they were on their own, free of the Council. He had no idea that she was in a rush mostly just for her Halloween costume, and she had one tucked into the outside of each boot. All things considered, she was beyond proud of her ability to put together the costume—she just hoped Buffy would be impressed by it.

And of course, Anya was still waiting for her to explain whether or not she had meant mother fucker literally. “I was using ‘mother-fucking’ figuratively, Anya.” Faith parked on the street, and as they got out, she continued explaining, “As far as I know, Elektra is disappointingly straight. No actual mother-fucking.”

“Oh. Okay. So, an assassin in red leather is supposed to be scary?”

“Trust me, plenty of villains find her terrifying. But, like I said, I’m mostly goin’ more for sexy than scary. Plus, she’s basically my fave.” Once upon a time, Faith would never have admitted to anyone that she read comic books, not that she had technically admitted it this time. *Come a long way since I found my way into this shit town.* Faith couldn’t help but smile. Unfortunately, that smile only lasted up to the front door of the frat house. Or … where the front door should have been.

“Uh, where’s the front door?” She walked past Faith and pounded on the blank white wall in front of the welcome mat. “Hey! Hello!” For a moment, there was no answer, and then Faith could hear what sounded like muffled screams.

“Fuck,” she muttered, before leading Anya off the porch so they could get a look at the whole house. Just in time to see a girl screaming, “Help me!” through a second-floor window over and over as the stonework around the window closed over it.

“Xander!” Because of course that was all Anya cared about sometimes. Faith shook her head, then started scouting the building. She had to find a way in.

“Anya, go get Giles. I’m gonna break in, see if I can’t help B and the others out.” She turned and met Anya’s gaze. “Okay? He’ll be able to figure out what we’re dealing with.” Finally, Anya nodded, then turned and headed back down the street. It’d take her a while on foot, but at least Giles lived nearby. She sure as shit wasn’t trusting Anya with Diana’s car.

Fortunately, the massive frat house had a ton of other windows, and Faith scaled the wall and broke in through a different second-story window. She figured since that was where they’d seen the shit going down, that was the most likely place to find Buffy. But she found there neither Buffy nor the mysterious screaming girl, but instead, Willow. Willow, who was dressed up like some sort of renaissance fair knight in chainmail and a breastplate, yet who was also flailing about at what Faith could only guess were an imaginary or invisible swarm of terrifying somethings flying around her head. Willow, whose normally bright ginger hair had turned raven to match her equally black eyes, which sent a shiver of concern and fear down Faith’s spine.

She sprang into action, despite a moment of hesitant unease about the possibility of Willow accidentally cursing her, dashing across the room to grab Willow. “Red! It’s okay, it’s me.” She put a firm hand on each of Willow’s biceps and shook her just a little, and after a few seconds, the witch’s flailing ceased. Her eyes continued to dart about in fear for another few seconds, and Faith
could feel the dark energy pulsing through her. Then she finally met Faith’s gaze, and immediately the darkness faded from her hair and eyes. She was Willow again.

“Faith! You got in!” Her voice retained an edge of panic, and her breathing was faster and more shallow than normal. Faith didn’t want to know what the witch had been seeing when Faith found her. “Something very bad is going on here.”

“Yeah, no shit, Red. When I got here a window swallowed a girl, then I break in to find you drunk on magic and swatting at invisible bees or whatever.”

“They weren’t bees,” Willow muttered, offering no further explanation of what she had been going through. “I just … wow, I couldn’t control it at all. It was terrifying, Faith.” She paused, considering as she glanced around the room. She seemed like she was trying to get her bearings. “I don’t even know how I got to this room. I-I think the house is creating some sort of temporal manifestations of our fears, but I don’t know why.”

“Where’s B?” Willow seemed calm enough now, and Faith released her arms, though not her gaze. The witch’s eyes widened.

“I don’t know. We kinda got into a fight about whether I could do a spell to help us escape, which … okay, seeing now that maybe magic wasn’t the best strategy. Not the point, though. But we split up. Then Oz started to wolf out and ran away to protect me.”

Oh good, a werewolf running around, and I’ve got no tranq gun with which to stop him peaceably.

“So I tried to do a locating spell, but something dark took over, blew the whole spell out of whack. And now here we are.”

“Alright well, I sent Anya to get Giles. Hopefully he can figure out what the fuck is going on here. In the meantime, we need to find the others. Try to stop Oz from hurting himself or anyone else.” Willow just nodded, her features twisted with worry. Faith pulled her sai. “Stay behind me. Let’s do some explorin’.”

Faith hoped beyond hope that her Slayer-ness might protect her from whatever fear mojo the house was working. She had some pretty gnarly nightmares for such a force to play with. The hallway was empty, as was the next room. She had tensed up as they entered the next room, sensing another presence there, but it was just a party-goer hiding under the bed and trying not to cry. It was when she left that room that she saw it—a trail of slightly wavy blonde hair ducking around the far corner of the hallway. Without a thought, she called out, “B?” and ran after the other Slayer, not checking to see if Willow was following.

What she found when she turned the corner froze her in her tracks, a deep, soul-shattering chill instantly spreading from her chest. No no no no no. The blonde wasn’t running. She was facing Faith with a heart-breakingly mocking grin, exposing the rough edges of sharp fangs over familiar lips. Formerly energetic emerald eyes were now a lifeless yellow, dark and taunting under a twisted and deformed brow. The former Slayer wore a full-body black pleather suit, like one of those cheesy catsuits girls wore to parties with a simple pair of cat ears. And she was eyeing Faith with a mix of hunger, contempt, and wicked glee.

“Welcome to the party, Faith.” A thin trail of blood trickled out from her bottom lip, and Faith knew in an instant that it wasn’t hers. She wiped it away, then licked her finger with naked satisfaction. “Sorry I had to get started without you, but the Council didn’t exactly ask me when would be a convenient time to feed me to a vamp, then release me on a haunted house full of tasty treats.” The Watchers? Faith was speechless, gaping in open-mouthed horror at the implications of what she had just been told. “Don’t act so confused. You didn’t think they’d really leave you be, did you? It’s the Watchers. They’re just as sadistic as the vampires—maybe moreso, since they’ve got souls. And they’ve got this fetish about eighteenth birthdays. Wasn’t enough for them to go through the normal
Crucia-whatever. They planned this out ***special***, just for you. The dark Slayer, the betrayer, the black stain on their record. You corrupted the good Slayer, and now you’re being punished.” She glared viciously at Faith as she spat, “It’s your fault they did this to me.”

Faith’s chest ached. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t move. ***This can’t be real. Even those fuckers aren’t this twisted. They wouldn’t sacrifice Buffy just to make a point, would they?***

“Don’t you worry, though. I don’t hold much of a grudge. I promise there’s plenty of fun to be had. Why don’t we start with a little light torture?” Vampire Buffy winked at her, then glanced at her sai. “Cute, but those aren’t going to be much use against me.” She looked beyond Faith, momentarily distracted as her face twisted into a soft pout. “Interruptions are no fun. Tell you what—” she licked her lips, leering at Faith again, “—catch me if you can.” She turned and ran with a speed only another Slayer could match, but Faith’s legs wouldn’t follow her orders to give pursuit.

Faith was vaguely aware that Willow was beside her, and she might have been saying something, but all Faith could hear was the pounding of her own heart. It wasn’t until Buffy tossed back a sultry, “What’s the matter, baby? Don’t you wanna catch me?” that Faith finally snapped out of it. Without a word to Willow, she tucked her sai back into her boots and tore down the hallway after her prey. The problem was that Faith had no idea what she would do if she caught her.

The chase took her down hallways, through rooms--some occupied and others not--down stairs and over furniture, but she couldn’t quite get her hands on Buffy. But the worst part was the taunts. There could be no doubt that this was Buffy. No one could hurt Faith like Buffy could.

“You’re so pathetic, Faith. As if I could ever see you as anything more than a dirty little experiment.”

“You always knew it would end this way. Only shocking part is that I’m the one who finally became vamp food. I always figured it would be you. You’re so sloppy. You’re also so dark and twisted already. Probably would’ve have been much of a change, really, for you to lose your soul.”

“We can still get back at them, you know. After I torture and use you, I’ll turn you. If you beg for it. Then who knows how many of those stuffy old Brits we can find and kill before they have a new pet Slayer come chase us down.”

“Surely you never imagined that I could love you. That Joyce could love you. That you could ever have real friends like mine. Ooooo, I bet Will’s gonna be tasty. I’ll track her down once you and I have had our fun.”

“In the end, I was just like everyone else you got close to. Dead and gone. You’re like a poison, Faith. Nothing and no one can live while you’re around.”

On and on it went, a thousand little cuts that drew more and more blood even as Faith began to gain ground. Faith didn’t bother with a response. She could only focus on the pursuit. Any higher level thought might destroy her. Finally, the vampire tripped, just slightly, over the outstretched arm of an unconscious girl—Faith hoped she was just unconscious anyway—as she moved into a large, dark doorway. It was enough. Faith pushed off her feet forcefully, leaping at the sadistic creature and tackling her to the ground. The room was dark and cavernous, only hints of light here and there to illuminate Faith and her opponent.

Faith pinned Buffy to the floor, and it was so painfully similar to the many other times they had found themselves in this position. It only made the differences that much more stark, each realization more biting than the last. Buffy’s body didn’t move beneath her with the regular rhythm of her breathing. She couldn’t feel that usual pulse through the wrists Faith now had pinned to the floor.
The differences in Buffy’s eyes hurt the most—and it wasn’t just the color. Where there had previously been joy and wonder and passion and desire mixed with confusion and nervousness and any number of other nuanced and beautiful emotions, now Buffy only looked at Faith with animal desire and mockery. *Please just be the house. Please don’t be real. Please don’t make me do this.*

“Whatcha gonna do, Slayer?” Buffy bit her lip seductively, but the effect was lost on Faith. Vamp face was not exactly a turn on. “No stake. Guess you’re gonna have to find some other way of slaying me. Something more fun.” Buffy’s voice dripped with suggestion and heat in a way that Faith had never heard her speak before. “I know you want me. You’re obsessed with me. Always have been. I’m everything you want to be. This is your chance Faith. Take me.” She growled, not in the usual vampire way, but more subtle, more purr than roar. “Make no mistake, I won’t hesitate to take you.”

Faith punched her. “You’re not her!” she snarled. “Shut the fuck up! Just shut up!” She couldn’t take it anymore. Couldn’t take this thing wearing her face. Manipulating every little thing Buffy had ever felt for Faith, twisting it into something perverse. With an angry shout, Faith slammed the vampire’s head into the dirty concrete floor, then flipped off of her, scanning the dark room for any bit of wood that would do the trick. In the far corner, she thought she saw a chair. *Please be wood.*

But the vampire wasn’t done with her. She grabbed Faith by the ankle and yanked her back to the floor, but Faith responded swiftly, kicking out with her free leg and catching Buffy in the face with a vicious kick. Acting solely on Slayer instinct, she yanked the sai from her right boot and tossed it. She heard it strike its target with a sickeningly moist thunk, but Faith was already sprinting towards the chair, grabbing it and tossing it against the wall as hard as she could. It was only once she turned back, wooden shard in hand, that she saw the gruesome image. The demon clawed frantically at the grip of the sai, trying to pull it free her throat, which was now oozing blood. Faith moved without thought, refusing to let emotion or sentiment interfere with her duty. She owed this to Buffy.

With another thud and throaty hiss, all that remained of her was dust. One tear, then another and another, slipped free as she reached down and retrieved her sai. Numb legs carried her out of the room into, bizarrely, what seemed to be the attic. But Faith was done. Someone else would have to save the world tonight. Faith collapsed against the wall, practically catatonic. Her entire world, what little of it she had managed to build, was gone. Ash. Dust.

She had always known she would lose Buffy. Just like she lost her mom. Just like she lost Diana. It was like that Frost poem Willow had given her. *Nothing Gold Can Stay.* She just never imagined it would end like this. Especially not so soon. Not when she was so close to finally getting her life on track. Finally proving herself to be the sort of person Buffy could be with. And now she would never get the chance.

“Faith?” Willow dropped into a crouch beside her, waving a hand in her face and then rubbing her arm soothingly. “What happened? Did you catch that vampire? That vampire? Faith couldn’t believe how calm Willow seemed, or the way she referred to Buffy so nonchalantly.

“I did what I had to do,” Faith whispered. She couldn’t focus her eyes, on Willow or anything else. Couldn’t see the rest of the room beyond the couple feet immediately in front of her. “What happened? How did you miss the fact that she was a vampire?” Buffy must’ve been turned last night, sometime after they had parted ways. It was Faith’s fault. The Watchers must’ve been watching, waiting until Buffy was alone. Willow lived with her—how could she have missed it?

“Faith, what are you saying? You knew her?” Faith’s brow furrowed. *What the fuck was Willow talking about?*
“Of course I fucking knew Buffy, Red. What the fuck are you even talking about?” Her angry lashing out was met with stunned silence.

“T-that … Faith, that wasn’t Buffy.” Her vision snapped back into clarity, eyes locking onto Willow’s. The hazel-green irises were warm and reassuring.

“What?” Willow winced, and Faith looked down to see that she was gripping the witch’s forearms, strong fingers digging into her sleeves. She let go.

“It must have been the house. That was just some blonde vampire, Faith. It wasn’t Buffy.” Faith shook her head in disbelief. She had seen Buffy. The taunting, the feel of her skin, the smell of her … it was Buffy. No one could hurt her like Buffy. “She’s wearing a red riding hood costume. She was definitely human when I saw her earlier tonight, before we got split up. I know it felt real,” Willow placed a hand on Faith’s cheek, pulling the Slayer’s attention back to her face. “But I promise, she’s alive. That wasn’t her. It was all in your head.”

Faith wanted to believe her. She wanted nothing more than to believe her. But it had been so real. So visceral. “She’s alive?” Willow nodded. And as if the universe could sense Faith’s need for something tangible to silence any lingering doubts, that was when Buffy burst into the room, with Oz right behind her.

Faith’s eyes widened. “B.” She was up in a heartbeat, and across the room in another. Then the other Slayer was in her arms, and Faith held her tightly for several seconds. She breathed in her scent, felt the warmth of her skin and the soft movement of her breathing. It wasn’t real. She’s okay. It wasn’t real. But then the spell was broken, as Buffy pushed away from her rather forcefully. All the usual emotions of care and desire and nervousness were there, but mixed in was an unusual glint of guilt and shame. Buffy immediately put about a foot of space between them, eyes darting around to Oz and Willow as if she was worried about what they might have thought about Faith’s sudden show of affection. What the fuck is going on?

Willow getting upset and walking away, Oz in tow, was one thing. Xander completely disappearing was another. But wandering through this probably actually haunted house for a good thirty minutes without encountering another face was too much.

Maybe they abandoned me. The voice felt foreign to her mind, subtle but with increasing insistence. Faith must have arrived by now. Maybe they know.

Buffy roamed from room to room, hoping for someone to save or something to fight, but there was just nothing. Faith should have been here by now. Why wouldn’t she find me? Where is everyone?

She wasn’t sure if it started in her gut or in her chest, but by this point, the nagging sensation of dread had fully taken hold in her torso.

What if she told them? Buffy stiffened at the thought. Faith wouldn’t do that. She had asked her to keep the thing between them secret. Why was that so important? You’re ashamed. You know it’s wrong. Deep down you know she’s wrong. What does it say about you that touching her feels so right?

Faith wouldn’t do that. And Faith wasn’t someone she should be ashamed of. There had to be another explanation. Another reason everyone had abandoned her. But Buffy could still feel her heartbeat pounding, feel the throb of the adrenaline pulsing through her veins. The fears continued to build as that voice became more and more insistent.
Faith told them how easy it was to break down your walls. How desperate you were to feel her hands on your bare skin. They know what sort of freak you are deep down.

Buffy gripped the polished wooden edges of the dresser in the bedroom she had found herself in. She sucked in a deep breath, then pushed it back out, repeating that process in an attempt to clear her head and regain some semblance of control over her mind. Her thoughts were rapidly threatening to spin out into full-blown paranoia.

But she couldn’t silence the voice. You’re gay. Just admit it. You’ve never been normal. Never will be normal. It’s amazing you hid it this long. Buffy thought she remembered Giles expressing some support for her feelings, and Willow too … but the voice told her otherwise. Giles needed you to focus on the task at hand. He was in the doghouse. He’d say anything to get you to trust him again. The voice continued to pepper her with panicked doubts. Willow never trusted Faith. Still doesn’t. And why should she? The girl is trash. Broken beyond repair. That’s what you like about her, isn’t it?

Buffy started walking again, hoping beyond hope that she might be able to clear her head. But the voice continued to spiral, trapping her in a fog of dread. It tormented her, ripping her open and tearing out all the dark thoughts she had always worried were true. You never loved Angel. You’re not capable of love. You’re every bit as much a monster as the creatures you maim and kill on a nightly basis.

One room bled into another, then another. She couldn’t escape the paranoia. Your mom kicked you out for being the Slayer. She couldn’t handle you literally saving the world. What do you think she’ll do when she finds out you’re gay? Deviant? You can barely keep your hands off Faith anymore—you really think she can’t see that? See how much of an uncontrollable slut you are?

Buffy’s heartbeat thundered in her ears. She’ll kick Faith out of the house. Fire her. No more college tuition for Buffy either. You’ll both be on the street. No one will want either of you. Not the Watchers, not your friends, not your mom. No one will want a freak like you.

Then the sound of another voice broke through the fog. It was faint, but steady. “You’re not going to change. You’re not going to change.” She focused on the second voice, willing herself to ignore the one shouting in her head. She walked through another door, and there was Oz, half-wolfed out and rocking back and forth in a bathtub, muttering the same mantra on repeat. It’s not a full moon. This can’t be real. I’ve gotta help him. Her mind fixated on the task at hand, the insistent voice was temporarily quieted.

“Oz!” She put a hand on his shoulder, gently—she wanted to help, but she was prepared to knock him out if necessary before he could change fully. But when he snapped out of his trance, he was fully human again, aside from some lingering wild fear in his eyes.

“Buffy?” He glanced around, unsure of how he ended up in a bathroom. “We’ve gotta get Willow and Xander and get out of here.”

“Workin’ on it,” she assured him. Every moment that she spent talking to Oz, the voice grew that much quieter. He hadn’t abandoned her. He was dealing with his own fears. Maybe everyone else was too. Maybe it was the haunted house messing with her mind. Maybe.

Buffy helped him out of the tub, but as they walked out of the bathroom, it wasn’t out into the hallway from which Buffy had entered. Instead, they were in the attic of the frat house, where the party was originally supposed to happen. She briefly glimpsed a few remaining party goers cowering along the walls, each trapped in their own delusions. But then her eyes fell on the subject of the paranoia that had so thoroughly captured her only moments earlier.
Faith. They met each other’s gaze at the same time, and Buffy watched as countless stormy emotions passed in quick succession through those umber eyes. She looked gorgeous. For a moment, Buffy felt completely stunned, the voice in her head deafeningly silent. Faith’s hair was straightened for the first time since Buffy had ever known her, falling in silky sheets from a deep red bandana tied firmly around the top of her head. Her eyes were smokey; her lips scarlet. Which was fitting, since she was dressed head-to-toe in red, much of it leather and all of it hugging her body perfectly.

Buffy was still staring when Faith rose and shot across the room. One moment, Buffy was ogling the other Slayer. The next, she was caught in a tight hug, Faith’s body pressed against her as if Faith’s life depended on touching Buffy, on being as close to her as possible. For a moment, she hugged Faith back just as tightly. It just felt right. But then everything the voice had told her came flooding back in, and she stiffened, then pushed Faith away. She didn’t know what was going on, but she knew she couldn’t let Oz—or Willow, when did Willow get here?—know about what was going on between the two Slayers. Buffy couldn’t risk it. She couldn’t risk losing everything. She couldn’t.

Faith looked confused, and more than a little hurt. But she still just looked so happy—so relieved—to see Buffy. Guilt flooded her chest, and Buffy knew she shouldn’t give into the fear. But her eyes kept darting from Faith to the others in the room, and it was just so hard not to drown in her fears. “Are you okay?” Faith whispered, and her voice was so haunted that Buffy nearly teared up just hearing it.

“What has she been through? What did she go through to get here?”

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“Are you okay?” Faith whispered, and her voice was so haunted that Buffy nearly teared up just hearing it. What has she been through? What did she go through to get here?

“We’re not okay, none of us. We need to get out of here.”

From across the room, Xander snapped, “I’d offer my opinion, but you jerks aren’t gonna hear it anyway.” Buffy’s brow furrowed. Where did he come from? Was he here the whole time? Was he watching us hug? Xander was sitting in a small chair, facing away from the rest of the Scoobies. He continued complaining. “Not that ‘didn’t go to college’ boy has anything important to say. I might as well hang out my new best friend, bleeding dummy head, for all you dorks care.” He glanced over at a fake severed head on a nearby table, and Buffy had officially had enough.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she demanded, and his head snapped towards her, eyes wide with surprise as he stood in a hurry.

“You… you heard that? Y-you can see me now? Buffy nodded, eyes narrowed in confusion. Then she put two and two together. Xander hadn’t abandoned her either. He had just turned invisible or whatever. She could feel Faith’s warm presence walking cautiously up behind her, and Xander just smiled at them in relief. “Good. Oh God, good!”

Oz suggested that the house separated them, to subject each of them to their greatest fear. I don’t know if that was my greatest fear, but it was something.

“But… we got away?” Willow speculated, still watching Faith with something akin to worry. Buffy shook her head emphatically.

“No. We were brought here. I know for a fact that the house led me through all kinds of weird unconnected rooms. Nothing here makes sense. And yet, we all got so scared that we ended up here.” She glanced from Willow to Oz to Faith. “The question is, why?”

Xander pointed at the black and red pentagram on the floor in the center of the room, and Buffy felt stupid that she hadn’t noticed it before. “I saw them painting that. They were copying it out of—” he looked around the room until he spotted an old, leather-bound book on the table with the severed head, “—that!”
Willow picked up the book and looked it over for a few seconds. “I think it’s Gaelic.”

Buffy winced. *Is Gaelic a big witchy language?* “Can you translate?” she asked, trying to convey through her tone that she was well aware that Willow never exactly claimed to be an expert in ancient languages.

That was the moment when the air all around them roared with a booming voice that demanded, “Release me!”

Her fear starting to pick up again, Buffy hissed, “Will, give me something.”

Willow, to her credit, didn’t shrink from the task. Maybe Gaelic was a witchy thing. “Okay, um … um, the icon’s called the-the Mark of Gachnar. I-I think this is a summoning spell for something called—”

“Gachnar?” Xander supplied, taking a little bit of the tension out of the room with his goofy delivery.

Willow managed a small smile. “Well, yes. Somehow the beginning of the spell must have been triggered. Um, Gachnar is trying to manifest itself, to-to come into being.” She caught Faith’s eyes, then Buffy’s. “It feeds on fear.”

*Did you see the way she looked from Faith to you? She knows.* As soon as she has used you to get out of here, she’ll shun you. She’ll tell everyone. Buffy shook her head, trying again to shake the nagging voice of doubt. “Our fears are manifesting it. We’re feeding it. We need to stop.”

“Easier said than done,” Faith whispered, and her voice sounded no less haunted. She caught Buffy’s gaze, then glanced around at the crowd of party-goers who were all currently feeding the manifesting demon.

“And it isn’t like we can escape,” Willow reminded them. “We’ve been trying to do that, and all it’s gotten us is further into the house. It won’t release us.” Again, the demand came for them to release the demon, booming like thunder all around them.

Then, the walls start knocking and shaking. Xander was the one who broke, and he sprinted to the only visible door. Just before he could reach it, however, the racket from the walls was replaced by the distinctive sounds of a chainsaw, and then a shadowy figure kicked the door open. It was straight from a cheesy horror flick. Only after he shut off the chainsaw did Buffy realize who the figure was.

“Giles?” Xander asked incredulously. Then her turned back to the group, trying his best to act as though he hadn’t just fallen apart in front of all his friends. “Everyone, it’s Giles! With a *chainsaw*—” He was cut off by the fluffy white form of Anya running in from behind Giles and catching Xander in a warm embrace. It reminded Buffy of the way Faith had hugged her, and she immediately blushed again, watching to be sure that no one could see the emotions nakedly displayed on her face. Fortunately, they were all focused on Anya and Giles. “Glad you could make it,” Xander grunted.

Giles approached the Slayers, face stern. “The walls closed up behind us.” Buffy nodded, already aware that the house had no intention of allowing them an escape route. He smiled warmly at her, seemingly happy to see that she was unharmed, then he turned to take the book from Willow. “Gachnar, of *course.*” Faith and Buffy rolled their eyes in unison, but the former Watcher’s attention was on the book. “Its presence infects the reality of the house, but it’s not managed to achieve full manifestation.” He glanced from the pages to the Slayers. “We cannot allow this to come into being.”
Faith frowned. “But if it does, I can fight it, right?”

Giles walked over and showed them both the picture in the book. “This is Gachnar.” The figure was dark, with a massive horned head over hunched shoulders that gave way to long, sinewy arms with long, hooked claws. It looked like a thing of nightmares, even more so than the demons she had encountered so far in her career as a Slayer. Except for maybe the thing with the bulging eyeballs that ate kids’ faces.

“I don’t want to fight that,” she gasped, not giving Faith an opportunity to make the inevitable argument that they could handle it together, no problem. Instead, she looked from Giles to Willow. “So, we break the spell.”

Giles flipped through the pages, until he settled on something that caught his eye. “I have it, I have it.” He began to read. “Um, ‘The summoning spell for Gachnar can be shut down in one of two ways. Destroying the Mark of Gachnar—’ Faith didn’t hesitate, sauntering over to the pentagram and driving a fist through the wooden floorboards before anyone could think to protest. She turned with a satisfied grin displayed crookedly across her tantalizing lips, only to have Giles groan in exasperation. “Is not one of them,” he continued to read, “and will in fact immediately bring forth the fear demon itself.”

Faith’s face fell, but then the Mark grabbed all their attention, the fist-shaped hole in the floor radiating a bright white glow. The entire floor rumbled as they all stared in horror. And then the situation shifted, in a heartbeat, from horror to comedy. The Gachnar demon that rose from the hold in the floor, was maybe six inches tall, if that.

“This is Gachnar?” Buffy giggled.

“Big overture. Little show,” quipped Xander.

Gachnar’s voice was a tinny squeak. “I am the dark lord of nightmares!” Faith laughed out loud beside her, but the demon was unfazed. “I am the bringer of terror! Tremble before me. Fear me!”

Willow was laughing now, too. “He… oh no, he’s so cute!”

“Tremble!” Gachnar insisted, and Xander stepped forward, kneeling down to face the demon.

“Who’s a little fear demon?” He spoke in a baby voice, as if addressing a beloved dog. “Come on! Who’s a little fear demon?”

“Don’t taunt the fear demons” Giles scolded.

“Why not?” Faith chuckled. “He’s no threat.”

“No, it’s just … tacky. Be that as it may, girls, when it comes to slaying…” He trailed off, and everyone knew exactly which tired euphemism he had been thinking.

Buffy could barely contain her laughter as she finished the thought. “Size doesn’t matter?”

Gachnar fixed his beady red eyes on her, and Buffy had to admit they would be horrifying if he was full-sized. “They’re all going to abandon you, you know.” And that was way too close to the paranoid thoughts she had been fighting all night. She really wished she wasn’t standing barefoot in fishnets right then, having kicked off her heels much earlier. Fortunately, Faith got the message, and she crushed him under the toe of her boot, his tiny body making a satisfying crunch before Faith kicked his broken corpse back into the hole it had risen from.
Immediately, Buffy felt as though an existential weight had lifted off her chest, and she could tell she wasn’t the only one. The party-goers all came out of their delusions at the same time, and Buffy breathed a sigh of relief. “Let’s get out of here,” Willow suggested, and they were all quick to agree. As they all moved, Faith put an arm softly around Buffy’s shoulders, just like always. It was a bit more awkward than usual, however, since Buffy was flat-footed and Faith’s thigh-high leather boots included a four-inch heel. “Hold on,” Buffy muttered awkwardly, then she retrieved her wicker basket from where she had, apparently, left it near the door.

As she slid her heels back on, she could feel Faith’s eyes on her. For the first time in weeks, this wasn’t entirely welcome. After everything, she felt so more conflicted than ever, but she couldn’t deny that Faith’s arm around her still felt just as right as always. Nor could she deny the thrill of pleasure that shot down her spine as Faith leaned in to whisper sultry words, warm breath feeling exquisite with Faith’s mouth so close to her ear. “How’d you know Little Red Riding Hood was a secret fantasy of mine, B? Gotta say, I never pegged you as a fishnets kinda gal.”

Buffy bit her lip, and the words escaped before she could stop them. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me yet, Faith.” She hated the way the word ‘yet’ sounded. Hated how some part of her seemed so sure about the inevitability of her romance with Faith, when so much of her conscious mind was still so freaked about even the idea of it.

No one will want a freak like you. Buffy wanted to ignore it. Wanted to blame the house, the Gachnar. But it only brought out the concerns that had always been there. And now, Buffy didn’t know what to do about those fears. Someday soon, something would have to give.
“Hey girlfriend, where’s Red at?” Faith closed the door as she entered the dorm room, looking at the empty bed on her left before leaping onto Buffy’s bed. She smiled automatically at the feeling of Faith’s warmth settling against her on the small bed.

“At her Wicca group. You know, I feel like that group has been meeting a whole lot lately. I can’t even remember the last time she just took a night to go sleep over at Oz’s.” Buffy shrugged. Willow’s behavior of late had been just a little weird, but Buffy had other things on her mind. “Anyway, she shouldn’t be back till at least nine.” Buffy bit her lip, hoping that sounded subtler than it had in her head. Faith glanced at the time on Buffy’s alarm clock—7:19—then grinned wickedly.

“Sounds like you’re saying we’ve got the place to ourselves for a while,” she purred, tracing a finger suggestively across Buffy’s exposed collarbone. The touch felt electric, taking Buffy’s breath away. Her body was such a traitor with how easily it reacted to Faith. Waggling her eyebrows then turning her gaze downward, Faith chuckled, “Sorry, Mr. Gordo. You gotta go visit Red’s bed for a while.” She tossed the stuffed pig across the room before Buffy could stop her, grabbing Buffy’s arms and pinning her to the bed. Faith was on top of her in an instant, and already she could feel the desire for the brunette building between her legs.

But for once, Faith wasn’t all ‘want, take, have.’ Instead, she was nothing but crooked smiles and soft touches. “Faith?” Buffy started to ask, but Faith shushed her. The only explanation she offered was a sultry wink, and that was all the explanation Buffy needed. The only thing she knew for sure was that she needed Faith to keep touching her. Buffy eyes trailed to Faith’s mouth, where her tongue slipped softly across her lower lip, wetting it in anticipation.

Faith’s left hand continued to pin Buffy’s right one to the bed, but Faith’s right moved to tangle softly in her hair. It sent the tiniest jolt of pleasure down her spine, and Buffy stiffened under Faith. “You seem tense, B.” Her voice was low and husky. “Let’s see what I can do about that.” Yes, please. Buffy refused to let her face show how much she wanted Faith to just touch her all over. Which of course, Faith only took as a challenge.

She leaned forward, and Buffy closed her eyes, lifting her head slightly in anticipation of a kiss that didn’t come. Instead, Faith just chuckled, her lips tantalizingly close to Buffy’s as her hand trailed from Buffy’s hair to her ear, caressing it softly before moving down to begin a light massage along her neck. “Not yet,” she murmured, then took Buffy’s lower lip between her teeth, scraping softly before releasing it as Buffy hummed with pleasure. Her legs flexed involuntarily, and her hips moved against Faith’s with growing need. Still, she intended on keeping her reactions under control, daring Faith to push her further. Buffy couldn’t say why she was feeling so feisty that night. Maybe it was just a reaction to Faith’s teasing.

Except then Faith’s hand pulled back from massaging her neck and dragged her short fingernails along the top of Buffy’s collarbone. The soft moan escaped her throat before she could stop it, and
Buffy giggled through a grimace. “You’re the worst.”

“Oh baby, you don’t even know the half of it,” Faith joked, her voice still every bit as husky as before. Buffy tried her best to ignore how her breath caught in her throat at the way Faith called her baby. Fortunately, Faith distracted her with teeth along her jaw. Finally, their lips met, and Buffy breathed a sigh of relief into Faith’s mouth as soft lips caressed her own. At the same time, Faith’s right hand tightened around the back of her neck while her left released Buffy’s wrist and began a teasing journey down her arm.

By the time Faith’s hand reached the hem of her tank top, Buffy could feel the heat burning between her legs. As if sensing Buffy’s desire, Faith readjusted her position slightly, bringing a thigh between Buffy’s legs. The friction sent waves of delicious electricity up her spine and out into her extremities. “Shit,” she whispered against Faith’s lips, cheeks reddening slightly at the admission. But Faith just kept kissing her—the only indication that she even registered the word was the faint smile Buffy could feel on her lips.

Heat radiated between Buffy’s inner thighs as Faith pushed against her, and Faith’s fingers continued to drag along the skin of Buffy’s side, taking the fabric of her tank top with it. Faith’s tongue traced along the inside of her teeth, the tip teasing at the roof of her mouth before sliding down to regain contact with Buffy’s tongue. Faith’s other hand continued to press against the back of Buffy’s neck, fingertips scratching gently at the roots of her hair. Buffy felt as if her entire body was on fire, and she wanted nothing more than to burn.

Faith pulled away from her lips, and Buffy looked up to see umber eyes made all the darker by pupils blown wide open with longing. Then all she could see was bright fabric as Faith pulled her top over her head and tossed it away. The sudden chill of the cool air on her bare skin was exquisite against the raw heat coursing through her. Still, it did nothing to cool the searing heat pooling in her center, and her hips bucked, seeking more friction along Faith’s thigh between her legs.

Lips crashed against hers again, and everything felt so good. Buffy’s arms and legs trembled slightly, but she was so beyond thought at that point that she barely registered it. Faith’s hands moved against her, one cupping and delicately squeezing along the outside of her breast and the other stroking strong fingers along her ribcage. Buffy gasped loudly, any intention of hiding her reactions completely banished at this point. Faith continued to smile against her lips, even as she kissed Buffy with increased hunger.

The fire that pulsed through her radiated not only from between her legs but also from every single point of connection between the two Slayers. In some ways, it was the same energy that flowed between them when slaying, but that energy never overwhelmed Buffy like this on the battlefield. Here, it was thick and insistent, playing at every nerve in her body. Buffy shivered, and her hand grabbed wildly at Faith, finding purchase along her neck and pulling her in tighter. She felt heady, like she couldn’t breathe. But in the best possible way.

Oh god. Oh god. Oh … fuck. Her whole body began to tense and move, and a low moan dragged from the back of her throat into Faith’s mouth. No no no. Her mind raced along with her body as she flew recklessly off the metaphorical cliff, sensations erupting through her as she gripped at Faith with uncontrollably tight fingers. unbearably long moments passed without any control over her body, and then Buffy began to come back to herself.

Faith stopped moving against her, the kiss broken but her face not pulled back so far that they would have to look each other in the eye. Instantly, the air was thick with discomfort. Buffy’s chest felt tight, her breathing still ragged. She hadn’t meant for that to happen. She had gotten carried away. Worst of all, she didn’t know how to deal with the unshakeable knowledge of how good it had felt.
Buffy didn’t mean to, but she reacted viscerally. She pulled herself out from under Faith, not forcefully, but not delicately either. She couldn’t look at the other Slayer either, and things felt uncomfortably similar to that night over a month ago, in Oz’s bedroom. “I’m sorry,” she gasped. “I-I didn’t mean to …”

“B, it’s okay.” Faith’s voice was confused but kind, and it came from just behind her. Faith was respecting her unspoken request for some distance, but only just barely. “It happens. It’s no big deal. Please just … don’t blow this out of proportion.” Buffy groaned without meaning to, her brow furrowing at Faith’s plea. She shivered, the cold air suddenly unbearable against her sweaty exposed skin. She stood and retrieved her tank top, putting it back on as quickly as possible.

Her mind continued to race. This is wrong. What are we doing? What am I doing? Her thoughts leapt from one wild scenario to the next, first Willow walking in on them just as Buffy accidentally orgasmed, then Joyce shouting at them for letting this happen. All the while, the quiet memory of how insanely good it had felt refused to silence itself.

Regardless, Buffy told herself that she needed to not freak out. Her hang ups weren’t Faith’s fault. She didn’t deserve this. Buffy swallowed, then agreed with Faith’s suggestion that it wasn’t a big deal with a shaky, barely audible, “Yeah.” She felt Faith move closer, and then there was a soft, tentative touch of a single finger along the outside of her hand. Buffy stiffened, but before Faith could pull away, she moved her hand into the touch, allowing Faith to intertwine their fingers. Neither of them seemed to know what to say. “I’m not freaking out,” Buffy whispered, the tight, high pitch of her voice betraying the lie.

“Tell me what you want, here,” Faith answered. “I promise everything is fine, but …” But you’re a weirdo who doesn’t know what she wants. But I don’t understand why you can’t just let yourself enjoy this. But I’m getting annoyed with the mixed signals. Buffy’s mind supplied any number of increasingly more paranoid ‘buts.’

“I don’t know.” The truth escaped her lips, meek but so much more certain than the lie that preceded it. “I’m sorry.” Buffy’s body still tingled, and she wondered if Faith could feel it through their Slayer connection.

“It’s okay. I just wish I knew what I could do.” Faith sounded frustrated and lost, and Buffy blew out a stressed-out breath before releasing Faith’s hand. She walked away, pressing a hand to her mouth. After what felt like an eternity, Buffy finally worked up the courage to face Faith again. Her eyes were tender yet somehow also guarded. Again, there was that sense that Faith fully expected to be hurt, and it cut straight through Buffy. She covered the ground between them in three fast steps, and she pressed a hand to Faith’s cheek as she pressed a soft peck on her lips.

“I’m sorry. I am freaking. And you don’t deserve that. It’s not your fault. I’m really, really sorry.” Faith searched her eyes, but Buffy couldn’t read the thoughts running through the other Slayer’s head.

“No you don’t.” Buffy’s other hand rose and bracketed the other side of Faith’s face. “I mean it. This isn’t on you. I’m the weirdo. Buffy’s the one who can’t deal, okay?” Faith teeth caught her lower lip, chewing on it nervously, but she nodded. Buffy kissed her again, just as softly. “I’m sorry.” She pressed her forehead against Faith’s, and they stood there for a long while, breathing in unison and trying to find their way back to some sense of calm. Of normalcy. Buffy glanced back at
the clock, and it read ‘7:48.’ Part of her wanted to take the easy way out and ask Faith to leave. But she couldn’t do that to her. Not again. Buffy knew that it wasn’t fair to dump all her own insecurities and inner conflict onto Faith. So, she offered the best compromise she could think of.

“Will rented a movie. *The Mummy*, I think. Please stay and watch it with me?” She pulled back and looked into Faith’s eyes again. The other Slayer still seemed unsure. “Faith. Please? I think probably it’s too scary for me to watch on my own. Might have nightmares.”

Faith’s eyes continued to dart between Buffy’s, and finally, she rolled her eyes and blew out an exasperated sigh. “You’re such a pain,” she mocked. “Your life is an actual horror movie, and you still can’t watch them alone at night. So embarrassing.”

Buffy just smiled. “That’s me, big ole ‘fraidy cat. So you’ll stay?”

“Just till Red gets back.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Buffy packed up her things quickly as Professor Walsh dismissed them, leading Willow and Oz out of the classroom. “Alright, I’m out.” Willow halted, and Buffy took a few steps further while she waited, giving the couple the space to say their goodbyes.

“Kay! Have fun! Tell Veruca I said hi?” Oz nodded, then kissed Willow goodbye. It was no more than a small peck, and then Willow was back at Buffy’s side.

“Who’s Veruca?” Buffy didn’t think she had heard Willow or Oz mention anyone by that name, but it wasn’t like she’d seen much of Oz lately.

“Oh, umm, you remember … maybe a few weeks ago, when we were at the Bronze and there was this girl singing. The one you didn’t really like because her voice was all deep and moody and way too melodramatic?” Buffy raised an eyebrow, and Willow explained further, “She kinda dresses like Faith. Voice like an albatross?”

Buffy chuckled, mostly because she would’ve thought Willow was being mean if it weren’t for the cheery tone of her voice. “Yeah, I remember her. That’s Veruca? And Oz is hanging out with her?” Buffy was a little surprised. She hadn’t really ever known Willow to be the jealous type, but still, Oz hanging out one-on-one with another girl seemed like it should’ve been at least nominally worrisome.

“Yup! He knew the drummer in Veruca’s band, and they asked him to sit in one time. He and Veruca sorta hit it off. They’re working on a side project thing, some sort of dark and broody acoustic thing. They let me listen once—really different from anything that Oz’s done before, but they’re really good. If you’re one of the five people who might find that sorta thing appealing.” Willow chuckled, and she definitely didn’t seem worried about it at all.

“Well, cool?” Buffy felt awkward, but Willow just nodded. It was another bright, sunny day as they walked along the usual path from the psych building back to their dorm. After a bit of internal conflict, she decided not to push any further for information on Willow’s relationship with Oz. It sounded like they were fine, and Buffy didn’t want to invite any questions about Faith in retaliation.

Unfortunately, Willow didn’t need prompting. “So, how are you and Faith? You seemed pretty cuddly the other night when I got home.” Buffy groaned, completely unable to stop the blush that rose to her cheeks as she remembered the earlier events of that night.
“Will, when are you going to accept that there is no me and Faith? We’re just really good friends, I promise.”

“I’ll accept that never, because you’re clearly being dumb.” Willow said it with her cute Willow voice that made it impossible to be mad at her for insulting you. “What happened? I know she still has feelings for you, and it sure seemed like those feelings were reciprocated before everything went to crap in the spring.”

“But everything did go to crap,” Buffy snapped. “And I never said I had feelings.”

“You almost kissed her,” Willow reminded, drawing a sharp glare from Buffy. It’s so annoying trying to argue with Willow when she’s right and she knows it.

“Key word being almost. And … I don’t know what happened there. It’s …” Buffy wasn’t exactly sure how to plausibly deny the attraction to Faith she felt. “It’s a Slayer thing.”

“Oh huh. A Slayer thing. Sure.”

Buffy pouted, even as she held the door to the building open for Willow. “Look, it’s in the past. There’s nothing going on. Faith’s moved on, and I’m n-not…” Willow was a step ahead of her, so Buffy couldn’t see her face. But it did seem like Willow’s shoulders tensed a bit in anticipation of the way Buffy was going to finish that statement. It was odd, but Buffy didn’t dwell. “I’m not gay,” she whispered, and at this point it was getting harder and harder to convince herself of that fact.

“Would it be so bad if you were?” Willow didn’t seek out her eyes, as if the witch knew the topic filled Buffy with the sudden and immediate need to run away.

“No,” Buffy muttered. “I mean… I don’t have any problem with gay people. Faith’s gay…ish? And she’s one of my best friends. But I… I mean, I’m just n-not….”

Willow sighed. “You’re not gay. Yeah, Buffy, I know. You’ve said it before. Kind of a lot.” Buffy frowned at the way Willow said that, highly uncomfortable with the implication underlying the statement. Willow unlocked the door to their room and walked in without looking back to Buffy. She tossed her backpack down in a huff, then muttered, “If you’re so straight, maybe you should hang out with Riley more. He has a massive crush on you, after all.” The admission was made of pure frustration, and Buffy didn’t think she meant it seriously at all. But it stunned Buffy into silence nonetheless.

“Riley? The TA? That didn’t make any sense to Buffy. They’d barely had two conversations, and one of them had started with her tossing him bodily to floor by accident. “How do you know that?”

Willow rolled her eyes, transferring her things from her backpack to her purse. “He came by the dorm to talk to me about it.”

Buffy’s face scrunched up. “What?”

“Yeah, I guess he’s like ‘Mr. Nice Guy’ or whatever, because he just came here talking about how he’s never ‘courted someone like Buffy’—and yes, he used the word ‘courted.’” Willow made a face that was part exasperation, part amusement. “Then he asked me for advice on how to ask you out. What kinda things you like.”

“And what did you say?” Buffy kept her voice even and emotionless. This was all surprising, but in a sort of harmless way. She didn’t really feel anything other than curiosity.
“Does it matter?” Willow asked pointedly, pouting slightly. “I deflected, made up something about you liking cheese. The big dork took the information with a smile and left.”

Buffy grinned. *Yeah, that sounded like Riley.* “Sorry. Just, um, processing. It never really occurred to me that … I mean, wow. He’s really cute, but—”

“But you aren’t interested because you already have such a strong connection with *someone* else?” Buffy widened her eyes as she glared. *Geez, let it go, Will.*

“I’m not … not interested,” Buffy murmured, thinking aloud. Deep down, there was a nagging feeling that wanted to contradict that statement, but she buried it even deeper. “I don’t know. I’ve tried normal guys—Scott didn’t exactly work out.”

“Because you were too distracted by Faith,” Willow grumbled.

“Nope, not distracted. If anything, I was distracted by Angel.” Buffy knew she sounded defensive but couldn’t figure out how to make her voice stop doing that. “But that’s my point. I don’t fall for normal guys—I’m cursed to fall for the dark broody dangerous ones.”

“Yeah, because I don’t know *anyone* who matches that description. Who you spend all your time around. If only you could find such a person and date them.”

“Willow, sarcasm is really not your thing,” Buffy groaned.

“Fine,” she huffed. “Well, the party tonight is at Riley’s frat anyway. You know, the party that Faith is meeting us at. That won’t be awkward for you, will it?”

Buffy’s chest tightened, but she blew out a long breath to try and calm herself. “No,” she squeaked. “Why would that be awkward?”

“You’re an idiot,” Willow shook her head, but there was genuine love mixed in with her frustration. “I’m gonna go grab some food. *Alone*. I’ll be back in time to walk over to the party together.”

Faith arrived at the party fashionably late, as usual. She didn’t recognize anyone as she entered the frat house, but she did her best to maneuver through the crowd, looking for that familiar shock of blonde hair. Instead, she found herself colliding with the only other face she was likely to recognize, as she reached the edge of a crowd of boring frat bros. “’S’up, Red?”

Willow grinned. “Hi, Faith! Glad you could make it!” The enthusiasm was unexpected but sweet, and Faith’s lips curved into a crooked grin. The witch was definitely growing on her. “Did you get held up by some vampires on the way, or just tryin’ to be cool?”

“Not too long,” she averred, then took a sip of the beer. She made an adorable face, but otherwise didn’t react to the beer.

“Where’s B—” Her voice trailed off as the crowd parted a bit, revealing the subject of her question. Buffy was standing across the room, her hair up in a low, messy bun and her toned arms exposed by a slouchy, backless top. Faith’s fingers immediately twitched the tiniest bit at the sight, as if longing
to drag across that skin again. Buffy was talking to someone Faith didn’t recognize. He was a good
foot taller than Buffy and built like a football player, with foppish, dirty blonde hair. Buffy’s facial
expression was fairly neutral, but her shoulders were just tense enough that Faith could tell she was
slightly on edge. “Who’s the beefcake?” she asked Willow, trying for nonchalance.

“Oh, that’s Riley, our psychology TA.” Willow’s voice was light and teasing in a way that told
Faith she wasn’t buying the aloof act. “He’s got a big ole crush on Buffy.” Faith tensed, and
Willow pounced on her body language. “Feeling jealous, are we?”

Faith tore her gaze from Buffy to look back at Willow, pursing her lips in a sardonic expression.
“Do I seem like the jealous type to you, Red?”

“Well, you worked with the Big Bad to try to steal Buffy’s boyfriend’s soul, just so you’d have a
shot at kissing her… so, um, yeah?” Faith glared, then busted out laughing.

“Damn. Got a point there. Kudos.” She glanced back at Buffy, then turned so that she was facing
Willow, Buffy to her back. “But B’s a big girl, doin’ her college thing. She’s a free agent, can do
what she wants. Why would I be jealous?”

Willow didn’t answer immediately, flashing a shit-eating grin instead. “Not you too,” she scolded.
“You’re honestly gonna stand here and tell me there’s nothing going on between you and Buffy?”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Faith confirmed, but she made no real effort to sell the lie. She was
keeping things a secret because that’s what Buffy wanted. And Buffy was still highly skittish. In
her gut, however, Faith was beginning to see that she wasn’t going to be satisfied being Buffy’s dirty
little secret much longer. After the Halloween party gone wrong, Faith could no longer hide from
her desire to have a real relationship with Buffy. For the Slayers, there were no guarantees, and
anything could happen to either of them. She didn’t know how much time they had left, and she was
no longer comfortable wasting it.

Unfortunately, she also knew that Buffy needed that time. So, she continued to wait. Faith still held
onto hope that Buffy’s fears would all be answered once Faith could prove herself. The GED test
was in less than a month, and she was getting close to saving enough money for a deposit on a small
apartment of her own. Right now, she was just the broken girl seeking redemption and living with
Buffy’s mom, but soon, she would be able to show Buffy just how much she had grown. Show her
that she was an adult, an independent person capable of taking care of herself and living a real,
normal life. In other words, she’d be able to show Buffy that she could be a worthy partner.

“We’re good friends, Red. Things are comfy, and that’s enough for us right now.” Willow’s face
clouded a little, and Faith leaned in, placing a hand on her elbow. “Seriously, please don’t push B
on this. Things will happen when they happen—she’s not gonna react well to being pushed, okay?”
Willow looked suddenly guilty, in a way that set off instant alarm bells in the back of Faith’s mind,
but she let it go.

“Well, okay. That makes sense.” She took another sip of her beer, and this time, she hardly even
made a face. “But if we’re not gonna talk about your love life, can we talk about mine?”

Faith smirked. “You lookin’ for some tips on how to spice things up with Wolfy?”

Willow blushed, then looked nervously around Faith’s shoulder, as if confirming that Buffy wasn’t
heading over. “Hardy har. No.” Oh, now this is interesting, Faith thought, attention firmly on the
witch. “The thing is … I met this girl in my Wicca group.”

“B mentioned you’d been off with your coven or whatever a lot lately,” Faith acknowledged. “You
sayin’ that’s more about a crush than the magic?”

“Yes,” Willow squeaked. “I mean …” she sighed, “I haven’t actually been to the group in weeks. They aren’t even real witches. Just pretentious hippie feminists.” Willow’s eyes widened, and a faint blush painted her cheeks. “Not that I’m saying I have a crush! A-and not that I have a problem with feminists! I mean, I’m a feminist, and hippies are f-fine too, and—”

“Easy there, Red. Have another sip of beer. Take a breath. No judgment here.”

Willow did as she was told, then smiled awkwardly. “Okay but … like, how do you even know if you—”

“The fact that you’re asking me is a pretty good sign, babe.” She shrugged. “So you’ve got a crush. On a girl. It happens. But lemme ask you this: what’s up with you and Oz?”

“I love him,” Willow insisted, and there was no hesitation. “That hasn’t changed. It might never change. But … ugh, you promise you’re not gonna judge me?” Faith furrowed her eyebrows in a clear expression of ‘oh please, it’s me.’ “Right. Okay. Well … it’s just that things are so comfortable with Oz, and th-that’s not bad or anything. But it isn’t exactly the same as it used to be. We don’t see each other as much, and—” she frowned, again looking guilty, “—I feel like that should bother me more than it does, you know? Like he’s doing his thing, and I’m doing mine, and we both seem happy with that, even if sometimes we go days without seeing each other.”

“And now you’re gettin’ that low down tingle for someone else, and it’s gotcha freakin’ a bit, huh?” Willow took a long sip of her beer, long enough for the renewed blush on her cheeks could fade a bit. Then she nodded her head once. “Alright well … hey, I’m no expert on relationships, right? I’ve only ever really cared about one girl, and I still can’t seem to get her to go out with me.” Faith grimaced, definitely not having meant to get that honest about her own situation. All this having friends stuff was really starting to mess with her head. “Maybe you just tell me a little about the girl, yeah?”

Willow brightened. “She’s adorable. And she’s a powerful witch—she gets it from her mom. She’s got this shy confidence about her and talking to her is so easy. I mean, sometimes I’ll just completely lose track of time hanging out in her dorm room, and all we were doing was talking the whole time and then it’s hours later.” Faith’s grin grew wider and wider as Willow rambled. Oh man, she’s got it bad.

“And you’re pretty sure it’s a more than just friends sorta thing?”

The redhead’s eyes darted down to her cup, then tentatively back to Faith. “I think so,” she whispered. Faith was so impressed with Willow. Less than a year ago, she had been so terrified of even the suggestion that she might be queer, and now she was developing a crush, recognizing it for what it was, and seeking out her only supportive friend for affirmation and advice. What a fucking badass.

“Have you talked to B about it yet?” Faith was genuinely curious, not just for Willow’s sake but also because she had no idea what Buffy’s reaction might’ve been.

But Willow shook her head pretty vehemently. “No. I—” she blew out a heavy breath, “—I’m not ready for that yet. Not sure she is either, honestly.” Faith chuckled wryly, since she had a bunch of personal experience that tended to agree with Willow’s assessment. She wondered if Willow was as worried about Buffy’s conflicted feelings on gay stuff—for lack of a better term—as Faith was. It definitely seemed like a stumbling block for the blonde. Faith was doing her best not to dwell on it, since Buffy refusing to accept her own sexuality might put a serious damper on whatever was going
on between them.

“I get it, unfortunately.” Faith glanced back at Buffy and the tall piece of man, and wow, did that whole thing look awkward. “So, here’s whatcha do, Red. Keep getting to know the girl—hey, what’s her name?”

“Tara,” Willow supplied, and she said the name with such adoration that Faith couldn’t help giggling.

“Tara. So, keep hanging out. Get to know her. Maybe test the waters a little, get a sense of whether she might be into you too. No harm in that.” Willow looked concerned at that, so Faith reassured her. “I’m not advocating for cheating. You’re just getting to know a cute new friend. If it starts to go beyond that, have a conversation with Oz. Really figure out what you want. But right now, you genuinely don’t know what you want, do ya?” Willow shrugged, then shook her head to answer no. “May as well try to figure that out before you go potentially hurting anyone. And I know that the possibility of maybe breaking up with Oz is scary. Probably hurts to even think about it. But it’s normal. People break up. No one ends up with their high school sweetie, not really. Doesn’t mean anything is wrong with you, or with him, or with the two of you.”

Willow nodded but was clearly uncomfortable with the idea. Whatever, she’ll figure it out. Faith glanced back at Buffy and the beefcake. “Anyways, you’ve clearly got your shit well in hand. I’m gonna go help out your roomie, who very clearly does not.”

Riley had been trying, very awkwardly, to make conversation with her for about five minutes, and the only reason Buffy hadn’t fled to go find Willow again was the sight of a familiar maroon leather jacket under an even more familiar head of wavy brunette hair. She had salvaged the awkward situation with Faith a couple nights ago, but that didn’t make her any less conflicted about what was going on between them. Hence, the avoiding.

“So, uh, did you do the reading on chapter 9?” She couldn’t help the incredulous look that sprang to her face.

“Uh huh,” she chuckled. “Do you check up on all your students at random house parties?”

“Well, no, I mean … I wasn’t … Also, it’s not random. I live here.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” He bounced a little with an awkward energy, then as if having a sudden idea, he smiled, reached around a nearby guy to something on a table. When he turned back to her, he had an orange little cube stabbed through by a tiny little stick. “Cheese?” he offered, and Buffy burst out laughing. She remembered Willow’s comment on feeding Riley a line about how Buffy liked cheese. Yeah, she liked cheese, but who didn’t? Yet he somehow took Willow’s comment at face value. Who thinks the way to a woman’s heart is through something as mundane as cheese? If this guy was really crushing on her, he was very bad at showing it.

For good or for ill, Buffy suddenly felt an arm settle over her shoulders. Her body relaxed into the touch as if it didn’t care about the anxious thoughts that began to race through her head with renewed vigor. Her eyes darted from Faith, who was wearing her usual confident smirk, to Riley, who suddenly looked very confused. “Hell of a party, huh B?” Buffy looked back to Faith, whose body language was easy and free. Then Faith glanced at the cup in her hand. “Really? We sure beer is a good idea? Remember last time?”
Images of cavemen and a pub burning down around her flashed to mind, and Buffy shook them off. “Uh, hi Faith. You know that that was…” Faith didn’t wait for an actual answer, instead turning to face Riley. She gave him a head nod, which Buffy read as mocking, but to most people would probably have seemed friendly. “Hey, what’s up? I’m Faith. Red said you’re a teacher or something?”

“Um, teacher’s assistant… uh, hi. I’m Riley.” Buffy could feel Faith’s finger tracing soft patterns on the bare skin of her shoulder, a motion that she couldn’t help but see Riley notice. *Oh, great. Is she jealous?*

“Riley. Well now, that’s a name.” She grinned at Buffy, her smile blinding. “College really is fancy; even the teachers here get assistants.”

“I’m not …” Riley was very clearly flustered by Faith’s boisterous cool girl routine. “I’m a student. A grad student.”

“Ah, so you’re like twenty-five or somethin’? Payin’ your way through an extra degree by workin’ for your teacher? Respect, man.”

“No, that’s not…” Buffy almost felt bad for Riley, who clearly had no idea that Faith was messing with him. Buffy wasn’t 100 percent sure that Faith knew what a TA was, but she knew Faith well enough to know when she was screwing around. Fortunately for everyone, that was when Xander appeared from nowhere to interrupt.

“Hey! Buffy, Faith…” He looked shaken. “I’ve been looking all over for you. We need...” He glanced from them to Riley. “Oh uh … we need to talk, uh, not here. It’s sort of… unfinished business. With our _platinum blonde friend_.” Buffy felt immediately frustrated. She was so tired of dealing with Spike. But beside her, Faith brightened. Either she just really wanted to get Buffy away from Riley, or she was really looking forward to finally dusting Spike. Both seemed highly plausible.

Faith leaned in and whispered, so that only Buffy could hear her, “I’ll let Red know what’s up, make sure she gets back to the dorm, and I’ll catch up with you and Xander at G’s place, okay?” Buffy forced herself not to linger on the warm tingle down her spine at the feel of Faith’s lips so close to her ear.

“Thanks, Faith. See you in a bit.” She turned to Riley. “Right. Uh, thanks for the cheese! Excuse us.” Faith moved towards Willow, and Buffy turned to follow Xander out of the frat house. *Holy wow that was uncomfortable.* As soon as they were away from the crowd, she asked Xander if he was okay.

“Only my pride was bruised.”

“You ran into Spike and got away with only a bruised pride?” Buffy was amazed.

“Well … actually … I ran into a different blonde.” He kept walking, refusing to meet Buffy’s gaze.

“A different blon—Harmony?” He nodded. “And how did that go?”

“She’s still a vamp, Buff, and I nearly had her.”

“Yeah, okay. You’re still a big, strong man, I get it.” She rolled her eyes. “Now, what did she say?”

“Just that he’s back in town. She seems pissed at him because he’s too obsessed with you to make
the big smoochies with her, or whatever. I didn’t exactly stick around.” They walked up the few steps onto Giles’ porch and knocked. “We just have to wait for—”

As Giles opened the door, Faith swooped in from behind them, breathing heavily. “Howdy, boys and girls. Whose gonna hand me a stake at point me in the right direction?”

“Um, does uh, someone want to explain what’s going on?” Giles asked, and they all entered the apartment. Buffy sat down on the couch with Giles, Xander in the chair beside her and Faith in the far chair.

“Spike’s back in town,” Buffy explained, not bothering to keep the frustration out of her voice. “What is wrong with him? Doesn't Spike get that this is my town?”

“Our town,” Faith corrected, drawing a wry grin to Buffy’s lips.

“He’s resilient,” Giles murmured, pulling his glasses from his face and moving to wipe them clean.

“We were having a night off,” Buffy whined.

“I’m sure he’d pick another night if he knew you were busy with teutonic boy toy,” Xander muttered.

Faith laughed at that. “You even know what ‘teutonic’ means there, Xander?”

This was so not a conversation Buffy wanted to have, much less in front of Giles. “Riley's a doof,” she corrected. “He's not teutonic.” She had no idea what the word meant, but Xander’s use of it reminded her of the annoying faux-intellectual dudes who turned into cavemen last month.

Fortunately, Giles wasn’t interested in the college rumor mill. “We have to assume that Spike's main target is you, Buffy.”

“Fine. You know what? He's worn out his welcome. Tonight, I kill him.”

“Hey hey hey,” Faith protested, standing from her chair. “I already called dibs, B.”

You two can fight over this later,” Giles scolded, then looked at Buffy. “Do you have a plan?”

“I am the plan. If Spike wants me, I go alone.” She looked directly at Faith. “No arguments.”

“Fuck that, since when have I ever avoided an argument?” Faith shook her head dismissively. “You wanna be bait fine, but no reason I can’t play sniper. Just gotta get my bow outta my car.”

It was a good plan. “Fine,” she agreed. “He’ll be looking for me on campus, we’ll find a good spot for me to wait for him, a bench or something, and wait for him to pick up my scent, so to speak.”

“Sounds like you two have the problem handled,” Giles commented. “Do you need anything further from me.”

“No,” Buffy answered, smiling. “Thanks, Giles. And you, Xander. Thanks for letting us know, but we’ve got it from here.”

“Alright, cool. Good luck, Slayer gals.”

They had been waiting for a good thirty or forty minutes. Watching over Buffy from her vantage
point in a nearby tree reminded Faith of that very first night in LA. How many times had she watched over Buffy like this, and for how many different reasons? There was no sign of Spike yet, and she could tell Buffy was starting to get a little antsy.

Sensing movement in the distance, Faith’s arms moved on instinct, aiming the bow towards the disturbance. But it wasn’t Spike who popped out from around the bushes, making a beeline towards where Buffy was sitting on a bench. Instead, it was the newest thorn in her side. Riley the TA. *Just what I need.* She relaxed her grip on the arrow slightly but didn’t remove it from the bow.

He wasn’t exactly moving with any amount of stealth, and Buffy spotted him immediately. She stood up awkwardly from the bench, hiding her stake in her jacket. “Riley! What are you doing here?”

Their voices were faint from this distance, but Faith could still hear them. Riley approached Buffy, just as awkward as he had seemed when Faith found Buffy at the party. “Well, I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to you after the party. You left so fast. You know, with your friend ... Who's a boy.” *Seriously, bro?* Not only was this guy not subtle, he was also fucking clueless. Faith leapt down silently, leaving her bow and the quiver of arrows in the tree.

Meanwhile, Buffy continued to look at Riley incredulously. “Uh, Xander? He's not anyone that I... want to talk about, right now.” Her brow furrowed. “Um, you know, I don't want you taking this the wrong way. It's just, um, I need a little alone time now... *Alone.*” Throughout her speech, Riley was looking around as if worried about something, but he looked straight down at Buffy when she finished.

“*Why?*” This guy really was a doof. Faith stayed in the shadows, waiting to see how this played out.

“I need space,” Buffy insisted, adding just a hint of steel to her voice. But the massive doof continued to ignore Buffy’s demands.

“We're outdoors,” he joked, hiding his insistence on staying behind humor. *What is he playing at?* Faith was this close to crashing the party.

Buffy looked at him like he was an idiot, but she didn’t seem to have a good idea how to deal with him. Not like she could say, ‘hey doof, there’s a vampire on the loose and you’re in danger, so get the fuck out of here.’ Instead, she tried to play the troubled college girl act. “Emotionally.” He still wasn’t getting it, and she corrected her tone from chipper to morose. “I mean, *emotionally*...”

“You know,” he offered, voice full of obviously fake cheer. “There's plenty of space back in your room; why don't I take you? You wouldn't believe the weirdos out at this hour—” As he warned her about the weirdos, he reached forward to take her by the arm, and Buffy immediately flinched away, interrupting him.

“Whoa! Okay. Look, it's a free campus,” she argued. Buffy was clearly done playing a part, and also very clearly done with his whole protective nice guy act. Faith smirked, waiting for the other Slayer to drop the hammer. “Who died and made you John Wayne?”

“I'm just trying to help.”

“You think I need help?” She stared him down. “Believe me, I don't. You know, if you were a real gentleman, then you would just—” she sat back down on the bench, very clearly dismissing him, “— leave. You would go far, far away, now! Shoo!” She waved him off.
“Are you drunk?” he asked, incredulous. *This fucker ain’t takin’ no for an answer. Maybe it’s about time someone intervene a bit more directly.* She resisted the impulse to jump back in the tree and deliver an arrow to his knee, electing to take a slightly more peaceful approach. She was growing as a person, after all.

Buffy continued trying to persuade him, jumping on the drunk idea. “Yes! *I am* drunk.” She looked at him pointedly. “Go and report me.”

“I’m taking you home. Come on.” He grabbed her by both arms and picked her up off the bench. Buffy immediately shoved him off of her, but Faith shouted to break up the conversation.

“Pretty sure she said no, pretty boy.” Faith exuded confidence and ‘don’t fuck with me’ attitude as she strode towards them. She didn’t put her arm around Buffy this time, but she made sure that she stood close as the two of them faced Riley down. “Us ladies got this, bro. Don’t need a big strong man lookin’ out for us.”

“Faith, right?” He seemed pretty frustrated to see her, which gave Faith no small amount of joy. “Look, I’m not trying to be a pain here, but it’s not always safe at night, especially in this town. Please, just let me—"

“Wow, you are so teutonic,” Buffy muttered, and Faith couldn’t help but laugh at the comment. Riley just looked that much more confused.

“Maybe we’re just fine, and you’re the one who should be worried about bein’ alone at night,” Faith warned. She didn’t mean it to sound like a threat, but that was definitely how Riley took it. But before he could make a comeback, there was a scream in the distance. Buffy and Riley reacted in unison

“Gotta go.”

“See ya!”

Buffy immediately grabbing Faith by the wrist and pulling her away in the direction of the scream. Riley, instead, ran back towards the bushes where she had first seen him come from. Faith couldn’t resist a final taunt. “Byyyyyyyyye, Rileeeeeeeey,” she called out, making her voice as sardonic and petulant as possible. But he just ducked out of sight behind the bushes, and Faith turned to keep pace with Buffy.

“Really, Faith? You thought that was necessary?” Buffy sounded pretty frustrated with the whole thing, and Faith suddenly felt very defensive.

“Hey, I resisted the urge to put an arrow through his self-righteous knee. Guy’s a pig.” Faith yanked her hand free but kept following Buffy at a brisk pace.

She didn’t look back at Faith, but her response was no less frustrated. “Maybe, but he was just trying to be nice. He doesn’t know we have superpowers.”

They had to be getting close to the source of the scream. Faith just hoped it was Spike. She was going to enjoy killing him. Ultimately, any vamp or demon would do, but dusting Spike was just about the most satisfying end to the night Faith could imagine at this point. “Yeah, whatever. Him and every other creepy guy. They’re all the same.”

Buffy didn’t get a chance to answer. What they found was perhaps the most shocking part of the night. There was no victim in sight, only Spike. He was slumped against the side of a building, face
half shrouded in shadow but very visibly sulking. There was no trace of blood around his mouth. He was mumbling to himself about how this has never happened to him before, when he realized he was no longer alone. Glancing up at the both of them, he made no move to escape or attack. Instead, his shoulders slumped even further, and he whined, “Oh. Just bloody great, that is. ‘Course the both of you would show up right fucking now.”

Faith drew her stake, but Buffy just looked at Spike’s pitiful demeanor with guarded amusement. “Spike, what the hell are you doing? Where’s the girl?”

“Ran off,” he moaned. “Didn’t even get a taste. Couldn’t do it.”

“Oh goddammit, don’t tell me this one’s got himself a soul now too,” Faith quipped, and Spike glowered at her.

“You take that back!” he shouted pathetically. “Not a soul. I don’t know what’s gone wrong. The weirdos in that underground lab must’ve done something to me.” It was taking all of Faith’s willpower not to stake him, but he seemed so pathetic right then, and his story was very clearly sparking Buffy’s curiosity.

“What lab?”

“Fuck if I know,” Spike growled. “I was comin’ here to take you out, next thing I know I’m wakin’ up in a bloody glass cell, white walls and floors and drugged bags of blood droppin’ from the goddamn ceilings.” He stood, and Faith took a step forward, holding her stake ominously in case he got any ideas. Spike didn’t seem to like that at all, and after the slightest hesitation, he vamped out and charged her.

Before she could drive her stake into his chest, however, he recoiled from her, shrieking in pain and clutching his head. Then all hell broke loose. Faith heard the tell-tale sound of two tranquilizer rifles firing, and she and Buffy both reacted with lightning quick reflexes. Faith dodged the dart, and it looked like Buffy actually caught hers, which was so incredibly sexy. But Faith didn’t have time to admire her.

“It’s him! Hostile 17!” She heard the shout of a hoarse male voice, but then a smoke grenade went off nearby. It obscured nearly everything, and Faith’s body tensed, her Slayer instincts taking over and ready for a fight. She caught a glimpse of a larger masked figure nearby, and she pounced. He was surprisingly easy to take down, which told her immediately that he was human. She reacted accordingly, tackling him to the ground, disarming him, and giving him a strong kick to the gut to dissuade him from coming at her again. The guy was dressed like some sort of army commando, other than the ski mask, which seemed more bank robber than semper fi. Who the fuck are these guys?

From the sound of it, Buffy was taking out another of the commandos with the same ease that Faith did, and she focused on the other Slayer’s energy, finding her in the smoke. Faith coughed but managed to choke out a suggestion that they get clear of the smoke. Buffy nodded and followed her.

“Did you see which direction Spike went?” she asked.

“No,” Faith answered. Behind them she heard a sharp order to retreat, and by the time the smoke cleared, the commandos were gone. “Don’t think he’s much of a threat though. Whatever that lab was, they neutered him. Mother fucker tried to bite me, and it seemed like it hurt like hell for him to even try. He could barely touch me.”

“Well, that’s convenient.” She gave Faith a once over. “You okay?”
“Five by five.” Faith glanced back towards the building, her eyes coming to rest on the empty cannister that had clouded their vision during the fight. “They were human. What’s goin’ on here, B? You think the commandos are with whatever lab did this to Spike?”

“Seems like a strong possibility,” Buffy agreed. “Let’s go talk to Giles, maybe he’ll have some ideas.”

“Screw that. We can catch him up tomorrow. I need a stiff drink and a good night’s sleep.”

“Oh.” Buffy eyed her warily, and Faith was suddenly on her back foot. *Why the sudden shift in demeanor?* “Yeah, okay. I’ll walk you to your car?” Faith nodded, and they started walking. This time, however, Buffy didn’t do that thing she always did. She kept just enough distance to make it clear to Faith that she wasn’t looking for the usual arm over her shoulder. It was disconcerting. They continued in silence all the way to her car. Faith didn’t know why Buffy refused to talk, but she didn’t have any good thoughts of her one with which to break the silence. *Why are you being weird?* In her gut, Faith had a nagging suspicion why, and she wasn’t in any rush to get that answer.

Buffy halted several steps away from the car, leaving Faith to cover the final few feet on her own. Rather than unlock the car, she turned back to the other Slayer, and with a frustrated sigh, she finally asked the question. “What’s goin’ on, B?”

She wouldn’t look Faith in the eye. *That’s a great fucking sign.* “Why didn’t you stay in the tree?”

The question caught Faith off guard, mostly because she didn’t have any idea what difference it made.

Faith leaned back against her car. “Why?”

Buffy’s eyes continued to dart around, not stopping or focusing on anything for long, but refusing to look towards Faith. “Please, just answer the question.”

“Fine. Guy’s a dick. I didn’t like the way he was talking to you.”

“You were jealous,” she whispered. Faith started to deny it, but decided lying was probably the wrong idea. Buffy shook her head. “I think we need to stop … whatever this is. Go back to the way things were before.”

“Which before?” Faith scoffed. This was exactly what she had been worried about over the entire silent walk to the car. Frustration and anger coursed through her, driving her next words. “When we were super flirty and physical, trying to pretend like we weren’t dying to kiss each other? Or when I was screwing you over and working for the Mayor? Or do you wanna go all the way back to when I was pretending I wasn’t fallin’ for you while you focused your attention on some guy who you knew was bad for you?”

“I can’t do this.” Buffy glanced at her, eyes wide, then looked back at her feet. “I know how you feel about me. It isn’t fair to you. I can’t … I know what you want, and I can’t give it to you.”

Faith stepped towards her, tamping down on her anger and trying her hardest to focus on the good. To focus on how much she cared about the girl in front of her. She placed a hand on Buffy’s cheek and forced her to look into Faith’s eyes. “You don’t have to be afraid of this. I know it’s scary. But we’ll figure it out. We’ll take it slow. You don’t have to do this.”

Buffy’s eyes lingered on hers, watery and unsure. Then she shook her head and stepped away. “I—I can’t be that. I’m not—”
Faith’s frustration bubbled over. “Not what, B? Not gay? Are you so fucking scared to even say it? Fuck.” She slammed her fist down on the roof of the car, then unlocked the driver’s side door. “You’re the strongest person I know. That’s what makes it so disappointing that you’re being such a damn coward, Buffy Summers.” She opened the door, but before she stepped in, she added, “Lie to yourself all you want, but straight girls don’t kiss like that. And they sure as fuck don’t cum like that.” Then she slammed the door and drove off.
“So, we’ve got nothing, is what you’re telling me?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Giles wiped at his glasses. “If the Council knows anything about a covert military operation in Sunnydale, they aren’t telling me. And I can’t think of any reason they would have to withhold that information.”

“I wonder if the Mayor might’ve known something,” Willow speculated. “I mean he was around for basically all Sunnydale’s hundred-year history, and he had contacts everywhere right? Surely, if there was some secret army base experimenting on demons, he would’ve known about it, right? We should ask Faith.” Willow frowned. “Speaking of, where is Faith?”

Buffy did her best to hide the frown that formed along her lips at the mention of the other Slayer’s name. Faith hadn’t talked to her in days, not since Buffy put a stop to their regular make out sessions. And Buffy really didn’t want to draw attention to the rift. She was still holding onto hope that after Faith had some time to sulk, they would find their way back to some sense of normalcy. Given the fact that Joyce was hosting everyone for Thanksgiving next week, she hoped they could at least be civil to each other by then. She’d never been in a situation like this, so she really didn’t have any idea what to expect. But she and Faith had worked through worse than this before—surely things would get better eventually.

“Faith said she had other plans. Wasn’t too big on details.” That was a lie, obviously, since Buffy had no idea what Faith was up to. She hadn’t invited her to this little gathering, because she was terrified to talk to her again. “But she was just as mystified by these commandos as I was. If the Mayor knew anything, he didn’t share with Faith.”

“I suppose we’ll just have to wait until—” Giles was interrupted by a heavy and insistent knocking at the door. Giles stood to answer the door, and Buffy followed. Waiting just beyond the threshold was a rather wretched-looking Spike. Even in the fading light of the sunset, he was thinner and paler than normal, sizzling ever so slightly under the tattered blanket he was holding over himself to hide from the sunlight. There were dark circles under his eyes, and lips were chapped and dry.

“Help me,” he gasped. Rather than answer, Buffy shoved him. She barely used any of her strength, but it was enough to send him tumbling back and to the ground. He stood back up, wrapping his blanket tighter as he shook his hand, which had been briefly exposed to the waning sunlight. “Oww! What part of ‘help me’ do you not understand?” he growled.

“The part where I help you,” Buffy deadpanned, glancing back into the apartment for anything she could use to stake him.

“Come on, I'm parboiling out here.”

Willow brought Buffy the stake from her bag, and she turned to face Spike, holding it threateningly. “Want me to help make it quicker?” she quipped.
Spike looked to Giles. “Invite me in.” His voice was tight and plaintive.

“No. I’d say that’s fairly unlikely.”

“Oh, damn it! Look, I'm safe. I can't bite anyone. You saw!”

“Oh, you mean the part where you attacked Faith, and then ran away squealing in pain like the pathetic weasel you are?”

“You don’t have to phrase it that way, but yes, fine.”

“You still haven’t told me what exactly happened with all that.” Buffy reminded him. “Our conversation got interrupted.”

He blew out a frustrated breath, cowering in the shadow of the porch as close to the door as he could get. “Spike had a little trip to the vet and now he doesn't chase the other puppies anymore,” he moaned. “I can't bite anything. I can't even hit people.”

“So you haven't murdered anybody lately?” She made a face. “Well in that case, let's be best pals.” Buffy wasn’t sure why he was bothering. There was no way she was letting him in, and the only reason she hadn’t staked him already was the fact that he was so pitiful. Maybe he deserved to suffer a bit.

Spike frowned, thinking as he looked down at the ground. Then his brows raised, and he looked Buffy right in the eyes. “I've got information,” he explained. “About the soldier boys you were fighting. Got the inside scoop.” Buffy and Giles traded a look. “Come on, what have you got to be afraid of?”

“Fine, come in,” Giles invited.

“But if you so much as look at one of us wrong,” Buffy finished the thought with a pointed staking motion. He flinched away, and she pinned him against the wall. “Now, what do you know?”

“I'm starving, you know.” Buffy pressed the point of the stake against his chest. “Ow! Threaten all you want, Slayer, but I'm not tellin’ you anything till I get somethin’ to eat. Not sure I could remember much in this state. I’m bloody fallin’ apart, I am.” Buffy ground the stake in just a little harder, then released him with a huff.

“Fine.” She turned back to Giles. “I’ll make a quick trip to the butcher’s. Do you have chains or shackles or something?” He nodded, and she grabbed Spike and followed Giles. They chained him up in the downstairs bathtub, and Buffy made her blood run in under thirty minutes. When she got back, not much had changed, save for Spike shouting from the bathroom that they could at least set up a TV or something for him. “Has he been whining the entire time?” Giles and Willow nodded in unison. “Wow. Good job with the restraint, guys. I probably would’ve dusted him by now.”

“Yes, well, I’ll be sending in my petition for sainthood shortly,” Giles joked dryly. “May we get on with this?”

Buffy nodded, then handed him the brown bag. “I’ll head in there. You heat up the blood.” Spike glowered at her as she entered the room.

“If I’m gonna be your little errand boy, Slayer, I expect decent treatment. I want—”

“Shut the hell up, Spike.” He started to retort, and she raised her eyebrows in challenge. He shut his mouth, pouting but remaining silence. “There’s a good boy. Now, here’s how this works. You
give me intel. I give you blood. Maybe I don’t kill you. That’s the best deal you’re gonna get.”

“And if I don’t.”

“I stake you. Or maybe I let Faith have a crack at you, see if she can’t come up with some creative solutions on how to make you talk. She’s much less forgiving of vampires than I am.” Spike didn’t answer, content to glare at her from his seat in the tub. She took that as an agreement. “So, start talking about the lab.”

“Like I told you and your little girlfriend, they caught me by surprise with their high-tech lightning guns, and I woke up in a nightmarish sterile white glass cage. I refused their drugged blood bag, and bein’ the clever bloke that I am, I faked bein’ passed out until they came to get me. There were several men in lab coats. I caught ‘em off guard, let another guy out of his bloody cage, and used him as a distraction so that I could escape.”

“What did the men in coats look like?”

His brow furrowed, as if it was a stupid question. “I wasn’t really payin’ attention, love. Bit preoccupied with getting the fuck out of there.”

“So. You saw their faces, but you can't describe them,” Buffy recapped dryly, already annoyed with Spike’s cageyness.

“Well,” Spike drolled, “they were human. Two eyes each, kind of in the middle.”

“Uh huh. And the lab?”

“Underground.” He shook his head. “I came out through an air vent. I don’t know exactly where. I’m done. Give me my blood.”

As if Spike heard (or as was more likely the case, smelled) him coming, Giles entered the bathroom at precisely that moment, carrying a yellow mug that read ‘Kiss the Librarian.’ The sight of it, especially with the straw sticking out of it, was so absurd that Buffy snorted into a laugh she tried to repress.

“It's about time,” Spike snapped, ignoring Buffy's amusement. “Hope you got it warm enough.” Giles handed Buffy the mug, and she took it with a theatrical sigh, as if debating whether to actually allow Spike the nourishment he so desperately craved. Then she rolled her eyes and leaned over the tub, holding out the mug so that Spike could take the straw into his mouth.

Spike went out of his way to make a show of drinking the blood, sucking loudly and watching her pointedly as he drank. She looked away, not particularly interested in any part of that show. “I don’t know why you're so dainty all of a sudden. You've done this for Angel — you must have.” Buffy yanked the mug away, disgusted with the comment. “Hey! Give it!” Spike demanded, and between the straw dangling from his mouth and the petulance of his demands, Buffy started to laugh again.

“Okay, that's it,” she warned, trying her best to stifle the laughter as she placed the mug out of his reach. “The invalid amnesiac routine is over. The kitchen is closed until you can tell me something useful about the commandos.”

“I'm tryin' to remember. It was very traumatic,” he deadpanned.

“How long are you going to pull this crap?”

Spike’s tone was a half octave lower when he answered, suddenly serious as he watched her with an
actually hint of fear in his eyes. “How long am I going to live once I tell you?”

Before Buffy could answer truthfully that she would stake him pretty quickly after he gave her all the information she wanted, Giles jumped in with some reassurance for the neutered vampire. “Look, look, Spike — we have no intention of killing a harmless, uh, creature.” Buffy held her tongue, but she wasn’t inclined to take it easy on Spike even if it was true that his biting days were over. Giles continued, “But we have to know what's been done to you. W-we can't let you go until we're sure that you're, er … impotent.”

Spike glared at the older Englishman. “Hey!”

“Sorry, Giles apologized, though Buffy’s own face was filling out with a wide, shit-eating grin. “Poor choice of words. Until we're sure you're, you're…”

“Flaccid?” Buffy supplied, only barely trying to hide her glee at taunting Spike.

“You are one step away, you bloody bint,” Spike warned, trying for ominous.

Buffy looked at him incredulously, then turned dramatically back at her former Watcher. “Giles, help! He's going to scold me.” Spike’s reaction to the taunting was to growl angrily and lunge at her, pulling helplessly against his chains. Buffy knelt down by the tub, leaning in. “You know what? If you’re not gonna talk, maybe it’s because we made it a little too comfy in here for ya.”

“Comfy? I'm fuckin’ chained in a bathtub drinkin' pig's blood from a novelty mug. Doesn't rank huge in the Zagat's Guide.”

“You want something nicer? She pulled back, just out of his reach, then turned her head to the side. She ran a finger along the curve of her now extended neck. “A look at my poor neck? All bare and tender and exposed.” She dragged her words out, then finally glanced back at Spike to see the naked hunger in his eyes. “All that blood just pumping away”

“Oh, please,” Giles muttered, while at the same time Spike fought against his chains again.

“Giles, make her stop,” he begged. Spike begging, now that's something I could get used to. But she had made her point, and she stood, signaling to Giles to head out of the bathroom. She shut Spike in so it would be harder for him to overhear them. Back in the living room, Willow was looking through one of Giles’ books on witchcraft.

She had apparently been listening in. “What about a truth spell?” she suggested. “I'm not positive it would work on a vampire, but we could try. Make him fess up?”

Giles sighed. “A truth spell, of course! Why didn't I think of that?”

“Cuz you had your hands full with the undead English Patient?” Willow retorted, drawing a grin to Buffy’s face. She handed Giles the book. “Looks pretty simple. I'll stop by the magic shop tomorrow.”

“Excellent.”

“Alright,” Willow chirped. “I'll be back in the morning with donuts and motherwort.” Buffy assumed that was a spell ingredient. She hoped it was, anyway. Sounds like it’d be a real crappy flavor of donut. “Buff, you ready to head back to campus?”

“Yup.” They said their goodbyes to Giles, confirmed that he would be safe with Spike chained up, and headed out. Once they were halfway down the block, Buffy brought up the subject that had
been tugging at the back of her mind all afternoon.

“So … Riley asked me out.”

“Uh huh,” Willow answered cautiously, and Buffy wasn’t surprised at her friend’s lack of interest. Buffy had been avoiding any further conversations about Faith lately, but Willow had already made it pretty clear she wasn’t big on the whole ‘dating Riley’ thing. To be fair, Buffy wasn’t too sure about it herself, but she was trying desperately to run in the opposite direction of whatever the thing she had blown up with Faith was.

“Come on, Will. At least listen. I don’t know what to say.”


“It’s just, different, you know?” Buffy shrugged. “He’s different. He invited me on a picnic. A picnic, Will. First of all, daylight—kind of a new venue, Buffywise.”

“You know, Fai—”

“Enough,” Buffy sighed. “He’s different. He invited me on a picnic. A picnic, Will. First of all, daylight—kind of a new venue, Buffywise.”

“Very, very,” Buffy confirmed. It was the only thing about the guy of which Buffy was absolutely certain.

“And there’s actual sparkage?”


“But?” Willow pressed.

“I don’t know. I like being around him, you know? And I think he cares about me… But, I just feel like something's missing.”


“Exactly.” Buffy jumped on that idea. “Riley seems so solid. Like he wouldn’t cause me heartache.” And definitely won’t make me ask any disconcerting questions about myself.

Willow stopped to face her, and Buffy realized they were already nearing their dorm. “Look. Buffy. I don’t know why you don’t want to … whatever.” Buffy frowned. “I won’t bring her up again. You’ve made your point. Just … don’t feel like you have to jump into something you don’t really want, just to avoid something that scares you.” And with that point, Willow turned and walked inside, leaving Buffy in a cloud of confusing emotion yet again. Dammit, Will.

“Faith! Hey! Over here!” Willow’s insistence and excitement told Faith all she needed to know.
This is definitely gonna be about that Tara girl. But what more is there to discuss? As far as Faith knew, Willow hadn’t broken up with Oz since the last time they spoke. Probably she just wanted some more hand-holding. Someone to tell her it would be okay. The only problem was, Faith was really not in the mood (or the mental place) for a big conversation about girl on girl romance. She’d never let it show—much less admit it—but she was still hurting from Buffy’s rejection.

“Hey Red. I’m getting a drink. What do you want?” Willow started to wave her off, but Faith cut her off. “Nope. You brought me here, and you’re gonna make me talk more mushy stuff, so we’re drinkin’. Ya know what, don’t worry. I’ll getcha somethin’ good.” Willow looked taken aback, but Faith was already heading to the bar. She ordered them both whiskey cokes, smiling at the bartender who knew her well at this point. Faith had a fake ID, but they never carded her anymore.

When she got back to the table, Willow was noticeably more nervous. She set the two glasses down, slid Willow’s toward her, and finally took a seat. She took a long swig of her drink, then said, “Alright. Hit me with it. What’s gone wrong with you and your witch crush now?”

Willow’s nose crinkled as a slight frown spread over her lips. “How did you know?”

“You’ve never asked me to come hang out at the Bronze just the two of us, and I’m guessin’ I’m the only one you’ve confided to about this little crush.” Guilt flooded into Willow’s usually bright eyes, and Faith sighed. “Hey. Sorry. You’re fine. I’m just … grumpy.”

“You wanna talk about it?” Willow offered.

“Fuck that,” Faith snapped. Then she added, “Unless you can convince B to get her head out of her ass,” before she could stop herself.

“Slayer drama or something more juicy?”

“Drop it, Red.” Faith gave her a menacing look that told her she wasn’t screwing around. “What’s your thing?”

Willow watched her for several more seconds, debating whether to push her luck, and ultimately decided to let it go. Good choice, Red. “So … I’m still completely torn. Nothing’s really changed since we talked before. ‘Cept everything is more? Like … okay, so I definitely like Tara. Like … like like. But I don’t love Oz any less. The thought of hurting him or-or of leaving him—” Her eyes got a little watery, and even Faith could tell that the witch looked so terribly lost. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, and you’re right. You’re the only person I feel comfortable talking to about this stuff.”

Faith felt the odd sensation of wanting to reach across the table and place a comforting hand over Willow’s. It caught her completely by surprise. Faith never let herself care about people. She’d never had friends, not really. Is that what this feels like? Willow was like the brave little toaster, and Faith actually cared. She didn’t want her friend to suffer as she worked through this thorny decision.

But that didn’t mean she had any idea how to advise her. “Sounds like you’ve found yourself in somethin’ of a pickle,” was the best response she could muster. And it did some good—at least in the sense that it made Willow crack up a bit.

“A pickle. That’s one way of putting it,” she chuckled. Then she blew out a long, heavy breath. Notably, she refused to meet Faith’s gaze. “So um…” She cut herself off, a finger nervously tracing along the lip of her glass.
“Spit it out, Red. What aren’t you telling me?”

“I did a spell!” she squeaked. Oh fuck.

“Oh. Okay.” Faith downed the rest of her drink, then shook her head. “Alright. What shit are we dealin’ with here? What do you need me to kill?”

“No killing.” Willow took a sip, still acclimating herself to the whiskey. “The spell didn’t work. I just thought … I’ve given this a lot of thought, you know? But I’m just as lost as always. I thought maybe I could use a spell to reveal my will, show what’s going on deep down inside. Bring out my subconscious desire or whatever. But obviously it didn’t work.” Faith had a very bad feeling about this.

“You’re sure it didn’t work?”

Willow’s face screwed up as her eyes darted back and forth in theatrical disbelief. “Uh, hello, just as confused as ever. So, no!”

“Well … good,” Faith muttered. “You shouldn’t be fucking around with the dark stuff just to decide between a boy and a girl. I can tell you’re screwed up over this, but it’ll do you some good to figure it out like the rest of us. It’ll mean more when you figure it out for yourself, sans shortcuts. Save the voodoo for the big bads, yeah?”

“Ugh, not you too,” Willow moaned, then took another sip.

“Me too, what?”

“Giles already gave me the speech about being careful with magic.”

Faith shrugged. “You know I’m not one to side with G, but maybe he knows what he’s talkin’ about. Didn’t him and that Ethan guy fuck around with a bunch of magic when they were our age?” Willow nodded reluctantly. “Didn’t seem to work out great for them. Not sayin’ you’re not a badass, but no reason to rush anything. You’ve still got a lot to learn, and it ain’t like this isn’t something you can’t figure out on your own. Just put in the work, yeah?”

“Maybe,” Willow conceded. “And how exactly is figuring things out on your own working for you?”

Faith slammed a hand against the table, not hard enough to destroy the table—which was well within her ability—but enough to make an impression. “Red, seriously, fuck off. I’ve got my shit figured out. I’m not the problem.” Faith blew out a frustrated breath. “Just be sure Tara is comfortably out of the closet before you go makin’ any decisions, that’s all I’m sayin’.”

“You weren’t kidding when you said you were grumpy.”

Faith considered actually telling Willow everything. But that seemed too easy and too hard, all at once. And as pissed as she was at Buffy right then, Faith didn’t know if she would ever forgive her for spilling their secrets to Willow. Even now, it wasn’t a risk she was willing to take. “I fucking told you, I don’t wanna talk about it. Can’t talk about it. Suffice to say, your best bud needs to figure her shit out.”

“Geez, don’t bite my head off,” Willow grumbled. “I’m so tired of all this crap from both of you. All this nonsense and lying and pretending. Honestly, just bang already!”

Faith felt an odd warmth in her chest, and Willow’s words made a hell of an impact. Maybe she was
right. It may have been an inelegant solution, but damned if it wouldn’t be an effective one. “Damn, I think you might have a point.” She pulled out some cash and slammed it down on the table. “For the drinks. Think I’ve gotta see a girl about a horse. Or whatever.” And with that, Faith headed straight for the door.

Willow got home just as Buffy was throwing on her jacket. Her face fell as she entered, eyes lingering on Buffy’s jacket and the crossbow she was slipping into her bag. “What’s goin’ on?”

“Giles just called. Spike escaped.” Buffy frowned. Nothing about this made sense. “He said he was having some vision issues—which, I have no idea what the hell he meant by that—but apparently something happened while Giles was trying to do that truth spell, and Spike got free.” She slid the strap of her bag over her head, then turned back to Willow with a curious look. “Hey, weren’t you supposed to do that together?”

Willow blushed, the tiniest bit of guilt creeping into her eyes. “Yeah … uh, I kinda forgot. Got distracted by, er, some schoolwork at the library last night, and it completely slipped my mind. Don’t worry, he already gave me crap about it.”

Buffy could tell that Willow was in something of a funk, and she wondered where the redhead was coming from. But she couldn’t get into it right then. Probably Spike wasn’t a threat, but they weren’t completely sure of that just yet. She couldn’t just let him run loose. “Giles just worries,” Buffy assured her. “Spells can be dangerous. It doesn’t mean he thinks you’re a bad witch.”

Willow murmured, “I am a bad witch.”

“No, you’re a good witch,” Buffy argued, grinning slightly at the sudden image of Glinda from *The Wizard of Oz* that sprang to mind.

“I’m not kidding anyone. I couldn’t even …” her voice trailed off suspiciously. “Anyway, your leaving right now?”

“Kinda have to,” Buffy answered, filing away Willow’s suspicious behavior for later conversation. “Duty calls and what not.”

“Well, I mean, what's the rush? Spike can't hurt anyone, right?” She looked at Buffy with open vulnerability. “I … was hoping to maybe talk to you about something. Kinda going through a thing I could use some best friend advice on.”

Buffy honestly wanted nothing more than to connect with Willow, especially if she was finally moving away from Faith-related topics. But she was the Slayer first. “Will, I can't hang out with you until I get Spike back to Giles, you know that.” She stood back up. “Okay? I'll be back as soon as I can. I promise.”

Willow pouted. “Fine. I see how it is. Spike is important; Willow isn’t.”

“Will, come on, don’t pull the pouty routine on me.”

“No no, it’s fine. I’ll be fine.” As Buffy turned and took a step towards the door, Willow added under her breath, “If Spike’s so important, why don’t you marry him?” Buffy felt an odd sensation, like a warmth in her chest but stranger, at Willow’s words. *Oh geez.* Then she shuddered at the thought of what Willow had suggested, even mockingly.

She turned on her friend, gaze stern. “Seriously cut it out. You don’t have to be so dramatic. I’ll be
Willow continued looking at her in that adorably petulant way only Willow could pull off, but Buffy could see real frustration bubbling just under the surface. “I don’t see the big. He’s probably just standing out there. You could find him in two seconds.” Buffy rolled her eyes, then left. *If only it were that simple.*

Except that, bizarrely, it **was** that simple. Spike was literally waiting for her just outside the dorm. Even more bizarrely, when she approached and locked eyes with him, a strange energy passed between them, and after a few moments, he got down on one knee. An unexpected thrill shot threw her, and she could believe this was actually happening. She couldn’t fight the wild grin that broke along her lips. *Wait, but why I am so excited by this? Shut up, this is one of the happiest moments of your life!*

“I honestly have no idea why I am doing this—or why it never occurred to me to do this sooner…” he looked briefly confused, then shook his head, facing her again with a warm look filled with love, “—but screw it, Buffy Summers will you marry me?” His eyes darted back and forth as he drew in a sharp breath. “Dammit. Uh…” he pulled a silver ring from his pinky, shaped in the form of a skull with small red rubies for eyes. “I’ll get you a proper ring soon, I promise.” He held it out, face imploring.

Buffy’s breath caught in her throat for a moment. She felt completely thrown off by the proposal. Something scraped at the back of her mind with a vague sense that this was off, but that didn’t make any sense to her in the moment. She felt such nervous excitement—how could any of this be wrong? “It’s just so sudden,” she gasped, still smiling brightly. “I don’t know what to say.”

It wasn’t strictly true, and Spike immediately called her on her bluff. “Just say yes,” he insisted, “and make me the happiest man on Earth.”

“Oh, Spike! Of course it’s yes!” She waited while he slid the ring onto her left ring finger, and it fit surprisingly well. The ring was definitely not her style, but she would endure it. All that mattered was marrying the man that she—**all of the sudden**, a thin voice whispered in her mind—loved so very much. He stood and wrapped in a tight embrace. She melted into his arms, leaning up to kiss him with all the overwhelming joy coursing through her. Technically, it was their first kiss, but that wasn’t important.

Her body tingled with a mix of feelings she only felt around Faith these days, but unlike with Faith, something was preventing her from overthinking it. From feeling any kind of shame or questioning it in any way. So what if Spike was an evil, soulless monster? And so what if they were mortal enemies? Things would change once they were married. And she wanted to marry him so badly. Buffy couldn’t remember ever wanting anything more.

“Come on, we have to go tell Giles!” She intertwined their fingers and led him forward.

“You’re not going to let him chain me up again, are you?” She glanced over at him. He was the same old Spike: annoying voice, sallow skin, disgustingly slicked-back bleached-blonde hair, and—yes, admittedly—perfect cheekbones. But she felt like she was seeing him with different eyes. She couldn’t say when it had happened, but she had no doubt how much she loved him. How dreadfully much she wanted to marry him.

Buffy squeezed his hand. “No more chains for my man. You just have to promise me you won’t be mean to my friends and family anymore.”

“Even Xander?” he asked in clear frustration.
Buffy pursed her lips. “Okay fine, you can be mean to Xander sometimes. But only when it is absolutely called for!” He rolled his eyes, but shrugged his agreement. She turned to happier thoughts. “There's so much to decide. Ceremony, guests, reception.”

“Well, first thing I'd say, we're not having a church wedding.” That made sense. She wasn’t really a church sorta gal, and anyway, she’d always had her heart set on an entirely different sort of ceremony, at least back when she had entertained the idea of maybe someday getting married.

“How 'bout a daytime ceremony? In the park?” He immediately stiffened.

“Fabulous,” he deadpanned. “Enjoy your honeymoon with the big pile of dust.”

Buffy knew he had a point, and the strange thing was that, as much as she desperately wanted to marry him, the thought of Spike as a pile of dust didn’t actually sound that awful. “Well, maybe an evening wedding then? Under the trees? Indirect sunlight only.”

He looked at her like she was an idiot, and part of her felt the sudden urge to punch him. “Warm spring breeze tosses the leaves aside, and again, you're registering as Mr. and Mrs. Big-Pile-of-Dust.” The urge to punch him passed as quickly as it came, but she was still annoyed at the sarcasm as she knocked on Giles’ door.

“Stop it!” she insisted. “This is our wedding, and you're treating it like a big joke!” Before he could respond, Giles opened the door. He squinted as he looked at her, then at Spike, then back at her. He rubbed at his eyes with his hand, then continued squinting.

“Buffy? Who is that with you?”

“It’s Spike, of course.” Who else would I be with? “Oh Giles, you’ll never believe what’s happened!” She raised her left hand and waggled the ring excitedly, but he continued to look at her without any real recognition in his eyes.

“Buffy, I believe something’s happened. Please, come inside, and we’ll chain Spike up. Then we need to—”

Spike reacted with an immediate pout, and Buffy rushed to reassure him. “Actually Giles, I promised Spike there would be no chains this time.”

“Maybe another time, when it’s just us, pet.” Buffy’s skin crawled at the suggestion, but she had no idea why. She just gave him an exasperated look. Giles closed the front door, then felt his way along the wall as he moved forward. There was definitely something wrong with his vision.

“Buffy, what is going on?”

“Spike and I are getting married!” she proclaimed, bursting with happiness. Giles’ face immediately fell. She knew he’d struggle with the news. Spike was, after all, an evil, soulless monster who had tried to kill them all on multiple occasions. But it still hurt a little. She sighed, releasing Spike’s hand as she shared a warm look with the vampire. He moved to go sit in the lounge chair on the far side of the apartment, and Buffy led Giles to sit on the couch. “Look, I’m not crazy, and I know that you probably don’t approve.” A wonderful thought occurred to her, and she continued, “And my father's not far away, I mean, he could… but this day is about family—my real family.” Giles continued to rub his head as if nursing a sudden headache, but he did finally turn to try and look at her again, as if sensing the importance of the moment. “And I would like you to be the one to give me away.”
For the briefest moment, he seemed touched. “Oh, Buffy! That's… that's so—”
Then he shook his head. “Oh, for God's sake! This is nonsense. Something is making you act this way. Don't you realize what you're doing?” His voice was agitated, bordering on despair, but Buffy wasn’t about to let that sort of negativity mess with her happy day.

She turned her head and locked eyes with Spike again, a bright, toothy smile across her lips. “Living the dream.”

Spike beamed back at her. “He's gonna have to take a bit of time to get used to it, pet.” Buffy felt conflicting emotions—at once awash with both delight and revulsion—at the unique term of endearment.

“They all will,” she muttered, before turning back to Giles. “But you guys weren't crazy about Angel at first, either.”

“You aren’t gonna say that fucking name,” Spike growled, drawing her attention back to him. His brow was furrowed, and his entire body had tensed as he sat forward in his chair. For the briefest moment, Buffy saw through the fog and glimpsed at the violent creature she knew he was deep down. But in less than a heartbeat, that glimpse was again overwhelmed by warm feelings of love.

“Sorry,” she apologized sheepishly. It was a sore subject—she really shouldn’t have brought him up. “Why don't we talk about where we're going to register?”

She stood and began to saunter over to him, but Spike was still pouting. “Well, where would Angel like to register? And can we have the photographer Angel would've wanted? And, flowers Angel would have liked?” She shook her head in faux—yet real—exasperation, and sat down beside him, curling into his side and trying to soothe him.

“Hey!” she scolded, voice firm but comforting. “You think I don't live with the shadow of Drusilla over my head?” That got his attention, and he looked her in the eyes again. He almost looked apologetic. “That I'm not wondering if you're going to be thinking of her on our honeymoon when you're making sweet love to me?” The sudden jealousy in her chest faded slightly as he leaned in to kiss her, his lips cool against hers. She was going to have to get used to this vampire thing again, and some part of her actively missed the supple warmth of Faith’s lips.

The sound of a glass spilling as it fell broke her out of the haze of hormones and mushy feelings. Giles had knocked his glance of scotch—when did he pour a glass of scotch?—to the floor by accident. “Giles, are you okay?”

He stared blankly across the room. “I rather think not.” His voice was thin, almost fearful. “I seem to be rather, um … rather blind. Completely, in fact.” However, before she could say anything, or move to try and help him, the front door opened, and Faith swaggered into the room. For a moment, all thought of Spike was gone.

Under her denim jacket, the other Slayer was wearing a low-cut red tank top that showed off perfect cleavage that Buffy suddenly felt the irrepressible urge to explore with her teeth and lips. Her eyes were wild and hungry behind dark, smokey makeup, and her lips curled slightly into a tantalizing grin. Dark leather pants clung to the elegant curve of her hips just so, and Buffy wasn’t sure why she wasn’t already running her hands over them. The desire to cross the room and pull Faith into her body was as intense as it was unexpected. Again, some mysterious force worked to silence all the usual voices of uncertainty that echoed through her head.

“Hey there, B.” Faith’s voice was sultry, and Buffy could feel her body respond to the sound of it.
Faith hadn’t gone straight to find Buffy, despite the powerful pull she had been feeling ever since she left the Bronze. Instead, she had run back home, wanting to change into some sexier underwear and touch up her makeup. She had ended up changing her outfit, too. *Let’s see B try to resist me in this.*

From there she had driven straight to campus, but neither Willow nor Buffy were at their dorm room. She headed for Giles’ place next, since it was both nearby and the most likely other place Faith figured she would find Buffy. And she had been right. From the moment she stepped into the apartment, she could feel the raw, animal magnetism between their bodies. It wasn’t a new feeling, but it was somehow dialed all the way to eleven. She could feel her desire for Buffy pulsing through every molecule of her body, and because of that, she hadn’t even noticed anyone else in the room. Not at first.

But before she could give into the urge to tackle Buffy, her eyes caught on the person Buffy was still, albeit loosely, cuddled up against. “Spike?” she growled, eyes wide with shock and anger. She looked from the cocky asshole of a vampire to Buffy, and then finally to Giles, who had apparently also been in the room. “What the fuck is going on here?”

Buffy stood, glancing down at Spike then back at Faith. Her feet moved as she explained, almost as if she wasn’t actively controlling them. As if she was giving into the gravity between their bodies, same as Faith. “Spike and I are getting married!” Buffy exclaimed, as if it was the most joyful news she could imagine. The declaration, in addition to being absurd and impossible, should’ve put a damper on the growing heat between Faith’s legs, but it definitely did not. If anything, she felt an even stronger urge to have Buffy right then and there. To show Spike who Buffy truly wanted.

Before she could ask another question, Buffy crashed against her, tackling her to the floor. Faith hummed into Buffy’s mouth as the other Slayer quickly moved to push Faith’s jacket off her shoulders. Buffy straddled her, pressing down and grinding against her with more glee than she had ever allowed herself in their previous encounters. *Girl could get used to this.* Buffy smelled incredible, and she tasted even better. Faith traced kisses along Buffy’s jaw, nuzzling her nose against her ear as she breathed in the soft tropical scent of her shampoo. At the same time, one of Buffy’s hands threaded through Faith’s hair as the other found its way under her tank top and along the skin of her lower back. “B,” she gasped, sucking in a jagged breath at the intensity of the shared desire between them.

Rather than answer, Buffy moved her head to take Faith’s lips in her own again. Faith’s hands grasped at Buffy’s hips as the other Slayer sucked on her tongue provocatively, tightening against Buffy’s jeans as she pulled her hips harder down against her. Buffy gasped in pleasure, and the sound of her voice sent shivers down Faith’s spine. She felt drunk on Buffy, the various sensations of their bodies moving against each other flooding her with stimuli.

And then it was all ripped away, and Faith opened her eyes to see a glowering Spike pulling Buffy up and onto her feet. “Hey!” Buffy and Faith both protested in unison.

“Oy! That’s my fiancée!” he roared, and Faith flipped herself up and onto her feet, eyes searching the room for a piece of wood.

“Faith, no!” Buffy insisted, standing between her and Spike, a mediating hand on each of their chests. “I am his fiancée. We’re getting married. Please, you can’t hurt him.” Faith looked at her incredulously, but rather than register just how insane this all sounded, Buffy turned back to Spike. “And Spikey—” Spikey?! Seriously, what the fuck is going on? “—just because we’re in love and
getting married and stuff doesn’t mean that I can’t still have a little fun with Faith, does it?” He scowled and started to argue, but she lifted her hand to place her index finger over his lips. “It’ll make me happy, babe. Don’t you want me to be happy?”

He frowned and continued to glare at Faith, but somehow, Buffy’s words had an effect on him. “Fine,” he sighed. “Can’t deny my little lady a little lady fun, I suppose. But I get to watch.”

“Fuck that,” Faith spat, and now Buffy was facing her again. She didn’t say anything, not out loud anyway. Her eyes told Faith everything she needed to know. Buffy wouldn’t let Spike watch, but there was no need to make a big stink about it. Rather than try to argue with the clearly out of her mind Slayer, Faith turned to Giles. “G, what the hell kinda dark voodoo curse is goin’ on here?”

Buffy looked offended at the suggestion, but Giles continued to stare into the distance. He was standing now, a scotch glass held firmly in his hand, and he faced them, at least somewhat, though his eyes didn’t meet any of theirs. “I’m afraid I don’t have a good answer for that yet, Faith.”

“What?” Faith asked, but her body was moving against Buffy’s again. The other Slayer’s wrapped her arms around Faith’s lower back and hips, pulling her in as her lips found their way to Faith’s collarbone. “How could this happen?”

Spike made a face at the Slayers but turned away with a frustrated breath. Giles answered, “A spell, I believe.” In the back of her mind, a tiny spark of recognition sprang to life, but it was quickly drowned out by the feel of Buffy’s tongue dragging along the outer curve of Faith’s ear. She hummed with pleasure at the sensation.

“We’ll fix it,” Buffy murmured from her position against Faith. “Don’t worry.” Then she caught Faith in a passionate kiss, her hand sliding under Faith’s top and along the curve of her back again.

Meanwhile, Spike was looking through some of Giles’ books. “What you want is a general reversal spell.” He flipped a page, then looked pointedly at Faith and Buffy. “Gonna need supplies.”

“Are you… helping me?” Giles gaped. Faith was also pretty shocked by Spike’s sudden development of anything vaguely approximating a conscience. But she was too distracted by the blonde pushing her back against the nearby table to give it much thought. Buffy lifted her ass up onto the table and pressed into her, kissing hungrily.

“Well, it's almost like you're my father-in-law, innit?” Spike muttered. At that, Buffy pulled herself away from Faith with a bright smile for the asshole vampire.

“See?” she beamed, looking from Spike to Giles to Faith and back to Spike. “This is how it's gonna be. Spike'll even take care of you while Faith and I are at the magic shop.” Buffy took Faith by the wrist and started leading her towards the door. “From now on, we’re all a big, weird family.”

“I don’t think that’s the best idea,” Giles argued, halting Buffy in her tracks.

“Damn right,” Spike agreed.

Buffy pouted. “Why not?” Then she pressed herself against Faith and started making out with her again.

“Stop that right now!” Giles ordered, and he sounded as though he was nearing the end of his rope. “I can hear the smacking! Spike, would you please separate them?” Spike moved to pull Buffy
“Faith!” Buffy scolded. “It’s okay. I’ll go. You stay here and look over Giles.” She cupped Faith’s face in both her hands, eyes full and insistent and pleading. “Promise me you won’t kill Spike.” Faith didn’t answer, but she held Buffy’s gaze. “You remember how much it hurt me when you went after Angel, right?” For a moment, all of the blazing desire Faith was feeling was doused under a frigid wave of guilt and self-loathing. She could still remember the haunted, terrified look of betrayal painted across Buffy’s face that night. She had promised herself to never hurt Buffy like that again. She blew out a frustrated breath, then nodded. She would keep that promise, for as long as she lived.

“Fine, B.” She put her hands over Buffy’s. “This is some magic nonsense between you and Spike, even if you can’t see it yet. But you have my word, I won’t hurt him while you’re gone.” That was good enough for Buffy. She kissed Faith, then she turned and did the same to Spike. Faith resisted the urge to stake him, walking away and glowering in the corner as Spike and Buffy discussed the necessary ingredients for the reversal spell. And then, with a lingering, hungry look towards Faith, Buffy headed out.

Before Buffy could make it all the way to the Magic Box, she found herself lingering at the storefront window of a bridal boutique a few stores down. The dress displayed in the window was absolutely not her style, but it still captivated her. For the first time since she had become the Slayer, the possibility of a real, stable future—or at least, the symbolism of one—seemed realistic. That was a crazy thought, she knew, but it was how she felt. She could see herself in the gorgeous white gown, her friends and family all around her. Spike would be there too, obviously, but the faces she saw most clearly were Faith, Willow, and her mom. And Giles and Xander.

“Hey, Buffy. What's up?” The voice from behind almost startled her, and she turned to see Riley approaching with an adorably boyish grin on his face. As he approached, she glanced back at the dress.

“Riley, look — isn’t it beautiful?” He frowned, taken aback by the question. But Buffy continued to survey the dress dreamily, lost in her own imagination.

“Um, yeah. It's nice.” He smiled as if humoring her, clearly not getting any of the underlying implications of her question. “A little dressy, maybe, for school, but…” Buffy felt genuinely guilty all of the sudden. The night before she had been seriously considering taking him up on his offer to go on a sweet little picnic date, and now, she was planning out her future with Spike (and a side helping of ongoing physical satisfaction with Faith, probably). She took a few steps towards him.

“Riley…” She didn’t know what to say exactly. She wanted to apologize, she guessed, but it wasn’t like she had anything to really apologize for. They weren’t dating, not yet, and the heart wants what it wants.

“Buffy?” he asked, finally starting to catch on that things weren’t the same as they had been when he asked her out a day ago.

“I really like you,” she assured him. She tried to make her face as sympathetic as she could, hoping to let him down easy. “I hope you know that you mean a lot to me, and if things were different—”

His eyes narrowed. “Different than what?” She took his hand in both of hers, trying to soften the blow that was coming. He continued to look confused.
“I want you to promise me that we can always be friends, and I’d really like you to be there on the day.”

“The day when?”

“The wedding!” she explained.

“The wedding,” he repeated dryly. Riley looked very concerned at this point. “What wedding?”

Buffy’s joy began to bubble over again, pouring out of this place inside of her that she couldn’t understand or control. “My wedding!” she gushed. “I’m getting married—can you believe it?”

He couldn’t look at her any more, seemingly lost in his thoughts. “I don’t think ‘no’ is a strong enough word,” he muttered glumly.

“I know! It’s crazy!” She released his hand, again losing herself in the swirl of conflicting emotions and impulses in her mind. “I mean, we fought for all these years, and then…” She thought first of Spike, and then of Faith. “Sometimes you just look at someone, and you know…” Her voice trailed off. She wasn’t sure how to put what she was feeling into words. She felt like she didn’t understand any of it herself. She looked back at Riley, hoping he might understand. “You know?”

“No,” he deadpanned, and he almost looked like someone with Slayer strength had punched him in the gut.

She tried to explain, still not sure if she was talking about Spike or Faith. “I think maybe we fought because we couldn’t admit how we really felt about each other.”

Riley shook his head. “Can we start again?”

The question barely even registered with Buffy as she plowed forward with her thoughts. “You’ll really like h-him.” Why did I say that? There’s nothing about Spike that Riley would like. There’s nothing about Spike that I like. “Well…” she chuckled nervously, “nobody really likes him.”

Riley continued to shake his head, seemingly lost in an earlier part of the conversation. “I just need to clear a few things up,” he begged.

Buffy again ignored him. “Hell, I don’t even really like him.” I like Faith, insisted that little voice in the back of her head. It was quickly drowned out by the more insistent, I want to get naked and hot and sweaty with Faith. Followed immediately by a similarly insistent, But I love Spike. Her head was a mess right then.

“Buffy?” Riley asked, trying to get her to focus. Unfortunately for him, she did not.


“Who?” Riley gaped.

That was the moment when Buffy remembered that she was actually having a conversation with another person. That person being Riley. Who she had been considering dating until an hour ago. More or less. “What?” she asked, trying to get her bearings back. What is going on with me?

“What’s his name?”

His? Buffy was really confused now. “Who?”
“The groom.” *Oh right! I’m getting married.*

“Oh!” Buffy chuckled. *Of course.* “Fa—Spike!” Buffy blushed. She had nearly misspoken, and definitely not in any kind of Freudian slip sort of way. *Get outta my head Professor Walsh.*

“That’s a name?” he asked, tone haughty and condescending. Buffy frowned, then decided to cut him some slack. This had to be disappointing news for him.

“Don’t be mad,” she implored. Riley was a nice guy, after all. She didn’t want him to feel bad. None of this was his fault.

“I’m not mad!” he insisted, despite very clearly being agitated.

“No, you are mad!”

“No, I am!” he admitted, reacting viscerally to her last statement. Then he breathed out a frustrated exhale. “Ugh, I really…” For a moment, he seemed at a loss for words. He just looked at her in shock. “Wow. Who is this guy? Does he go here?”

Buffy burst into laughter, and it took her a good fifteen or twenty seconds to rein herself in. “Spike?” she chuckled. “Oh, no. He’s totally *old.*”

“Old?”

Buffy frowned, mind racing. “Well, not as old as my last boyfriend was.” Angel had a good century on Spike, if Buffy was remembering correctly, and that wasn’t counting however long Angel spent in that hell dimension she sent him to in order to stop Acathla.

“Okay,” Riley grimaced. “It’s late, and I’m—I’m very tired now. So, I’m just gonna go far away, and be… away.”

“But—” Buffy started to argue, not wanting Riley to feel bad, but he cut her off.

“No, you stay.” He turned and left. Buffy thought about pursuing him, but it was probably better to let him work through this. She knew it was a lot to drop on someone. She only hoped they could be friends going forward. He really was nice.

*Now, I’ve gotta get those ingredients for Giles’ spell.* After that there would be plenty of time for hot, sweaty sex with Faith, and then some cute, mushy wedding planning with Spike.

On her way back, Buffy took a slightly different route, lost in churning thoughts and tempestuous emotions. As such, she ended up coming through Giles’ neighborhood from the side, ending up in the courtyard he shared with his neighbors that led to the side door to his apartment. Surprisingly, she found Faith there, pacing around in a distinctly feline manner. She looked so good that Buffy was temporarily stunned. Which is precisely when Faith noticed her.

“Hey there, gorgeous,” Faith purred. Buffy immediately blushed, and she felt as though she was being dragged towards Faith by a mysterious sexy force.

“Hi,” Buffy whispered, dropping the bag of supplies and falling into Faith’s waiting arms. Her lips felt so soft and warm, and Buffy absolutely loved the way her tongue felt in her mouth. “Faith,” she groaned, as the other Slayer pushed against the wall. Faith’s mouth moved from Buffy’s lips to her jaw, then her neck, then her collarbone. Heat spiked through her body, and she couldn’t think of anything other than touching Faith. She needed to eradicate the distance between them, to feel as much of Faith’s skin on her own as possible.
She pushed against Faith, and they tumbled to the ground, Faith rolled with it, though, and she ended up being the one on top this time. An electric thrill shot through her as Faith pressed against her, hands tracing along her body. Faith kissed her fervently, her tongue tracing tantalizingly along the inside of Buffy’s mouth before Faith moved to drag her teeth along Buffy’s jaw again. But she was very clearly done with the foreplay this time, and Buffy’s entire being hummed in satisfaction with that realization. Faith’s hand slid along the side of Buffy’s thigh, rising until it couldn’t rise any further. At the same time, she traced kisses and teeth along Buffy’s skin, tossing in a provocative suck or tease here and there as she moved steadily downward.

Buffy whimpered, panting through new sensations. Faith pulled one of the straps of her top down around her bicep, and for a moment, Faith’s lips lingered on Buffy’s chest. Her tongue tracing gentle patterns from one breast to the other, and when she mixed in a quick suck at her left nipple, followed by the slightest graze of her teeth, Buffy moaned loudly. She could already feel herself coming undone, just a little bit. And then Faith moved on. Buffy’s top was still on, but Faith had no trouble moving it aside to continue her path downward.

Teeth scraped against her abs, and Buffy gasped in pleasure. “Shit.” Faith giggled at her profanity, and Buffy was momentarily more amused than aroused. “Oh, you like that?” In answer, Faith bit down against Buffy’s hip bone, drawing a sharp hiss of delight. Having obtained Buffy’s silence, Faith continued to paint soft kissed along Buffy’s hip bones, while at the same time her hands traced along the top of Buffy’s jeans.

“Please let me take these off,” Faith whispered, and for a heartbeat, Buffy thought back to the two previous moments they had shared like this, when things had become so charged that Buffy couldn’t handle it. There was a soft buzzing in Buffy’s ear, and a warmth in her chest. Whatever tension or conflict she had felt before was completely blocked.

Which left her free to gasp, with sheer delight, “Please do. I just… uh, mmm, I’ve never… I-I mean, with a girl.”

Faith flashed a cocky smile. “No worries, B. I’ll steer ya ‘round the curves.” And with that, Faith decided she didn’t need any further encouragement. She quickly unbuttoned Buffy’s pants, and began to pull them off slowly. Buffy lifted her hips to help Faith, who trailed kisses along the newly exposed skin of her legs as she pulled. Faith’s lips moved from Buffy’s hips, just past her center to her inner thigh, then down her thigh to her knee, and at that point, Faith yanked deftly and pulled Buffy’s jeans off. It was a good thing that Buffy was wearing looser pants, since Faith had completely forgotten to remove Buffy’s shoes. Which was entirely beside the point now. Faith began trailing kisses back up Buffy’s leg, one hand on her ribs just under her breast and the other clenched tightly against her hip. “Oh god, Faith,” she gasped. Faith’s lips moved agonizingly slow, as she savored the taste and texture of Buffy’s skin, her head barely moving between Buffy’s now bare legs. It was driving her wild with desire, and she needed Faith’s mouth to move much higher much faster. She bit her lip, dragging her fingers through Faith’s hair and begging her to stop teasing.

And just as Faith slipped her hand down to move Buffy’s underwear aside, they were interrupted by a loud gasp, followed immediately by a high-pitched, but clearly masculine, voice crying, “Oh my god!”

Buffy’s attention was dragged away from the gorgeous, incredibly sexy woman between her legs, and she looked across the courtyard to see Xander and Anya gaping at them. For a moment, Buffy was frozen with a mix of embarrassment and frustration at being interrupted. And then she and Faith both hurried to compose themselves. Faith tossed Buffy her pants as she stood, and Buffy wasted no time in putting them back on, then smoothed down her top. “Hi guys,” Buffy squeaked.
“Anya, your hair!” Faith gasped, very clearly trying to distract from what Xander and Anya had walked in on. She rushed forward to put her hands on her friend. “I love it!” Buffy might not have noticed it if Faith hadn’t said anything, but Anya’s hair was definitely much shorter. Not quite a pixie cut, but definitely a bob. Buffy honestly didn’t care, but she was desperate for anything that would distract from the embarrassment of Xander walking in on her and Faith right on the verge of having sex, for real.

“Yes, my hair is quite excellent, thank you,” Anya beamed. “We are very sorry for interrupting your sex, but we’ve got a problem that needs Slayers. You can have sex later, okay?” Already Buffy could feel her arousal building again, especially once Faith’s arm came to rest in its usual spot along her shoulders. Easier said than done. Maybe Spike could help them while Faith and I stay behind and have some private time.

“Oh okay, so we’re just all pretending this—” he pointed a finger, waggling it back and forth between Faith and Buffy, “—is normal?” Xander leaned in to Buffy. “I thought you said you weren’t gay, Buff?”

Buffy’s mind freaked out for a split second, but then the question just rolled off of her. “I’m not,” she lied, shrugging.

“Uhhhh, that looked pretty gay there.”

“Again, we’ve got bigger problems,” Anya insisted, looking around suspiciously as if expecting to get attacked at any moment. “You can pry into our friends’ love life after we figure out what is going on.” With that she led everyone inside. Buffy was still feeling a mix of emotions from the awkward encounter, but that changed the minute they entered the apartment. Xander immediately began to shout about barricading the doors and windows, but Buffy didn’t have time for that. She ran straight to Spike and wrapped him in a warm hug.

“Hi, honey!” she greeted, smiling into a quick kiss. “I missed you.” She turned briefly back to Giles. “Sorry, Giles, but the Magic Box was all out of the Tagas root. I’ll have to go back in the morning.”

Giles groaned. “So the plan is to cure my total, incapacitating blindness tomorrow?”

“No guarantees we’ll make it to tomorrow, people!” Xander yelled. But Buffy didn’t really care much about his story of multiple demon attacks. Faith and the others could handle that; she had a wedding to plan.

“Spike, we need to talk about the invitations.” He shrugged, nodding his head in agreement. “Now, do you wanna be William the Bloody, or just Spike? Cuz either way, it's gonna look majorly weird.” ‘You are formally invited to the wedding of Buffy Anne Summers and William the Bloody’ didn’t exactly have an adorable ring to it. Buffy frowned, not seeing any way around the issue.

Spike’s answer was a petulant snark. “Yeah, cuz the name ‘Buffy’ really gives it that touch of classic elegance.” She shoved him lightly.

“What's wrong with Buffy?” She hadn’t realized Spike had an issue with her name. What else don’t I know about the man I’m going to marry? She could still hear everyone else in the background arguing about … something. Something unimportant.

“Well, it’s a terrible name,” Spike explained bluntly, and this time she did shoved him for real, enough to create some real space between them.
“My mother gave me that name!” Buffy chided.

But Spike just looked at her like she was being silly. “Your mother, yeah, she’s a genius,” he mocked.

Suddenly Faith was at her side, eyes flashing angrily at Spike. “Don’t you fuckin’ talk about Joyce, you greasy-haired little bitch. I’ll stake you right here.”

“Come at me, Slayer. My fiancée will beat you up,” he jeered. Buffy got between them again, and that’s when Anya whistled loudly to get everyone’s attention.

“Why is everyone being so damn weird?” she demanded.

“Bint’s got a point,” Spike muttered. Buffy wasn’t sure what bint meant, but she was pretty sure it was rude. She glared at him scoldingly, but he continued to scoff. “This is the crack team that foils my every plan? I am deeply shamed.” You should be! she thought triumphantly, savoring the many times they had defeated Spike. The thought was immediately followed by a proud acknowledgement that her fiancé very much had an excellent point. My Spike is so smart.

She slid her hand into his, turning to face the rest of the room as a couple. “Spike's right. We really should get organized.” Xander and Anya just gaped at her, while Faith continued to bristle at her closeness to Spike. She is going to have to learn to share.

“Why are you holding hands? I thought you and Faith were—”

“We are,” Faith snapped, and Buffy felt her body pulling away from Spike again, drawn to Faith like a moth to a flame.

But Spike pulled her back, and she met his warm, loving gaze. “They have to hear it sooner or later.” She grinned. Again, he made such excellent points.

Buffy turned to face Anya and Xander, exclaiming, “Spike and I are getting married!”


“Three excellent questions,” Giles muttered, taking another sip of his scotch. Buffy pouted at him, forgetting briefly that he couldn’t see her.

“Well, clearly there’s some sorta spell affecting people in different ways. G’s gone blind. Buffy thinks she wants to marry this idiot—”

“You watch yourself, Slayer,” Spike spat, and Faith made a jerking off motion towards him.

“And Xander’s got the whole demon thing goin’ on.”

Xander’s eyes widened. “Wait… I know something. What is it? Everything’s so familiar… Work, brain, work! Oh! Oh! Oh! Willow!”

Buffy had briefly allowed herself to take Faith’s arm and begin tracing intentionally seductive kisses along its length, but at the mention of the redhead, she looked up. “Mmm… wait, what about Will?” She didn’t release Faith, nor did she move away from her place at Spike’s side. She just watched Xander patiently for an answer.

“I don’t know. She was really frustrated with you and Faith for some reason. And with you—” he
pointed at Giles, “—and she was just sorta moody and going on and on, and I mean … I tried to pay attention, but—”

Faith cut him off. “What does it have to do with what's going on?”

“She told me I was a demon magnet, a-and right after she left was when the first couple of them showed up out of nowhere.”

Giles sucked in a sharp breath. “And she told me that I couldn’t see anything.”

Faith chuckled. “I mean, she told me I should go bang B, but hell, I already wanted to do that.” Buffy’s gut reaction was to blush, mortified to hear Faith admit that in front of everyone. But the very next moment, it just made her want to take the other Slayer to the ground right there and rip all her clothes off, everyone else be damned.

“She must have done a spell,” Anya surmised. Buffy’s eyes narrowed. Maybe that was what Willow had wanted to talk about when she got back to the dorm earlier.

“Yeah,” Faith confirmed. “Something about trying to have her will revealed. But she said it didn’t work.

“She must have mixed it up just slightly. Instead of revealing her will, it’s made it so that whatever she wills is done. Whatever she says is coming true.” Giles explained.

“And you both were affected!” She sighed in relief. “Faith and I probably only escaped because we’re the Slayers. Some kind of natural immunity.” She smiled at Faith, who was looking at her with amusement.

“Yeah right, B.” Buffy looked at her in surprise. “Come on. You know you hate Spike as much as I do. You’ve been affected too.” Buffy frowned. Faith was absolutely right—just that morning, Buffy had been all for dusting Spike. But now, now she loved him with all of her heart. Why does romance have to be so complicated and confusing?

“If you think you’re invited to the ceremony,” Spike warned, point a finger at Faith, “you can just forget it.”

“People!” Giles chided. “Willow is out there, and she probably doesn’t know what she's doing.” Instantly, the room chilled just slightly. Whatever else was going on, no one wanted to see Willow get hurt. Well… except probably Spike, since he was evil. And maybe Anya. She didn’t seem to get along with Willow all that well. But still.

“We gotta find her, before somebody gets really hurt.”

“So this D’Hoffren, you said he’s a lower being?” Xander inquired.

“Yes,” Anya confirmed. “He’s a very powerful demon, not native to Earth, but not on the same level as the pure demons or the Old Ones. Often, they end up being the leaders of particular orders of demons—in D’Hoffren’s case, he is the master of all vengeance demons.”

“And that’s what you used to be?” Faith asked. Anya nodded. “And we think he’s got Willow, and he’s lookin’ to make her a vengeance demon too?”

“We can’t let that happen!” Buffy growled. She was walking between Faith, who had an arm over
her shoulder, and Spike, who was holding her hand. They had done their best not to bicker as the group searched for Willow. She hadn’t been in the dorms, but they had found a circular scorch mark on the floor, which Anya immediately recognized. Apparently this spell had attracted the attention of Anya’s former master D’Hoffren, and now they were heading to a crypt where Anya would be able to summon him. For his sake, Faith hoped that he hadn’t done anything to Willow.

“I don’t think we have anything to worry about. Vengeance demons aren’t evil, you know.” Anya explained this as if it were indisputable, drawing confused looks from Xander and Buffy.

Faith, however, found the idea fascinating. “What do you mean?”

“Vengeance isn’t necessarily evil. I mean, sure, something we let ourselves get carried away, but our victims are nearly always very deserving of the fate they receive. And D’Hoffren’s a sweetheart. Willow’s not in any danger, I promise.”

“She better not be,” Buffy huffed. Didn’t seem like she was buying Anya’s pitch, but Faith thought it made sense. Over the last year, she had grown to see that the supernatural world, much like the natural one, was full of shades of grey. Things weren’t nearly as black and white as the Watchers had led her and Buffy to believe.

“But what does he want with her?” Xander still wasn’t getting it.

“I’m actually surprised it only took this one spell,” Anya answered, and Faith thought she sounded a little petulant. “I mean, when it was me, I’d been dumped, and I was miserable. Doing a few vengeance spells—boils on the penis, nothing fancy.”

Xander cut her off. “Please skip ahead.” She glared at him, but did as she was asked. Faith chuckled. Of course Xander couldn’t handle a good story about penis boiling.

“The lower beings got wind of me, and they offered to elevate me.”

“Meaning?” Buffy followed up.

“They made me a demon.” Noticing the pain along Buffy’s face, Anya added. “But it’s her choice. She has to want to become a vengeance demon, and Willow just doesn’t have what it takes, if you ask me.”

“Hey! Demon!” Xander yelled, and for the first time that night, Faith realized she hadn’t brought any weapons with her. Neither had Buffy. They’d been so distracted by each other, and the intense desire continuously pulling at them—everything else seemed so secondary in comparison.

This demon was an ugly fellow, unlike any Faith had ever seen. It had slick, grey, scaly skin, with a massive brow and forehead extending up and out into two large yellowish horns, each the size of her forearm. It made a low, guttural chattering sound as it approached them, slow and menacing, and it was actually wearing a pretty badass-looking black studded coat.

“You guys get to the crypt,” Buffy ordered, then locked eyes with Faith. “I’ve got this guy, you protect everyone. I’ll catch up.” Faith nodded, but she couldn’t help that her gaze lingered on Buffy’s soft, pink lips. Forgetting everything else, she started to lean in, and Buffy moved closer to meet her. But the demon grabbed Buffy from behind before they could kiss, and it tossed her aside. The thing had eyes only for Xander, and the sudden distance from Buffy brought Faith back to her senses.

She flipped a powerful kick upwards, catching the demon on its chin and flipping it over and to the
ground. She hurried everyone else along, looking back to be sure Buffy was back on her feet and handling things. She was, so Faith followed the others as they made their way to the crypt.

They barely made it fifty feet before two more demons approached. “B!” Faith shouted, as she positioned herself between the Scoobies and the demons. She blocked an attack from one, dropping down and swinging a low kick to try to take them both off their feet. She only got one, but Buffy leapt to tackle the other one, pounding on his head. Both demons were momentarily stunned, but Faith could see the first one had recovered from his encounter with Buffy and was approaching again.

“Run!” Buffy ordered, and the others had already made their way into the crypt. Buffy and Faith sprinted to join them, and they slammed the heavy door behind them. Faith pressed herself against it, as the demons converged and began slamming themselves against it. Spike and Buffy worked together to lift the lid to a nearby tomb, moving to prop it up as a barricade against the door. Faith and Buffy shared a look—they both knew it wouldn’t hold long.

In the corner, Anya was kneeling, a faint circle drawn in the dust around her as she chanted under her breath. Xander stayed by her side, while Spike, Buffy, and Faith all did their best to hold the tomb lid firmly against the door. For a split second, Faith remembered how fucking pissed she still was at Buffy, but that sentiment was swallowed up by the combined thrill of the impending fight and her burning desire to have Buffy’s hands on her body again. Meanwhile, Spike decided to open his stupid mouth again.

“Buffy, they're strong, and I can't fight.” His voice was low and patronizing. “If they get in, I don't know if I can protect you.”

Buffy and Faith both bristled, glaring angrily at the vampire. “You think you have to protect me?”

“She’s the fuckin’ Slayer, you misogynist pig!”

Spike’s brow furrowed. “Oh, not with the girl power bit,” he jeered. But their bickering had distracted them from the door, and the combined force of the demons allowed them to bust in, shoving the lid back to the floor.

“Fuck, now look what you did,” Faith shouted at Spike. I’m so going to stake this fucking idiot, as soon as the spell wears off. Faith and Buffy each took a demon, leaving a third to tackle Spike. She hoped it beat him up good. As she fought off her demon with relative ease, Faith was disappointed to find that Spike could actually fight back against the demons. Fucking science chip—you had one job to do.

“No pain!” he shouted. “Hey babe, I can hurt demons!”

“That’s great, Spike!” Buffy shouted back, in between dodging a blow and kicking the shit out of her demon. For a moment, both Spike and Faith were captivated by the effortless grace with which she snapped its neck.

“Hot,” Faith muttered.

“So hot,” Spike agreed. Then one of the demons smacked him across the back of his head, sending him toppling to the floor. Faith stifled a laugh, turning to dodge the demon’s next blow as it moved on to her.

Buffy, however, rushed to Spike’s side. “Sweetie, are you okay?” She wrapped her arms around him, holding him close.
“Slayer…” he murmured. *Oh, fuck that.* Faith broke the neck of her demon, leaving just one more, which was closing in on the couple. Spike leapt at the demon, and Faith helped Buffy to her feet.

“Faith,” she gasped. In a heartbeat, Buffy had her pinned against the wall, one hand in her hair and the other at her crotch, as if the Slayer just couldn’t wait any longer. Faith groaned into the kiss, then sucked on Buffy’s lower lip. Around them, the sounds of fighting and chanting and, suddenly, something else, continued to echo, but Faith found herself increasingly lost in the experience that was Buffy Summers. Her hands roamed freely, and her need to take Buffy felt even more urgent than before, as if some part of her knew the moment was about to pass them by. She rocked her hips against Buffy’s hand, and her own hand slipped under the back of Buffy’s pants.

Then lightning stuck, thunder rolling through the crypt. Willow was suddenly behind them, looking lost and scared, but chanting nevertheless. “Let the healing power begin. Let my will be safe again. As these words of peace are spoken, let this harmful spell be broken.” There was a flash of bright light, and everything changed. As Buffy’s expression shifted from lust to panic, Faith could see that really, nothing had changed.

She pushed Buffy off of her, and briefly considered staking Spike then and there. But she didn’t give a shit. She didn’t care about anything. Faith felt like she was being rejected all over again, even as she could still feel some of the lingering thrill of the raw passion she and Buffy had so openly shared all night. Except now Buffy couldn’t even look at her. “Screw this,” she muttered, and with a quick, hurt look to Willow, Faith ran away.

“Did I mention about the sorry part?” Willow had been apologizing all night, and apparently felt like she needed to get one last one in before bedtime. They had both finished their nightly routines and changed into PJs. Buffy honestly just wanted to put this night behind her.

“We may be into a forgetting spell later.” She shuddered, remembering how mushy she had felt all night. “I *loved* him. We were betrothed.” Buffy’s stomach roiled at the memory.

“At least you were getting along?” Willow offered, trying to find the silver lining. Buffy just gaped at her with wide, disbelieving eyes.

“We weren’t!” she insisted. “It wasn’t even nice. The bad boy thing? Over it. I get it now.” Willow saw through Buffy’s attempt to focus the conversation on Spike rather than Faith. “Okay, but did the spell at least help you figure out some things with—”

“No,” Buffy murmured. She couldn’t shake the image of Faith from her mind, the pain in her eyes as Buffy pulled away from her in panic as the spell wore off. She had been so ecstatic, and it had melted away so quickly. She hated being the cause of Faith’s pain, but she wasn’t ready to take the only step she knew would end that pain for sure. “It was just the spell,” Buffy lied.

“Buffy…” Willow sighed. “No. I get it. I don’t like it, let me be very clear about that. I think you’re missing out, and she is too.” This was the first time Willow had unequivocally told Buffy that she wanted her to date Faith. Not that she said that exactly, but Buffy could tell that’s what she meant. It was almost enough to shake her from her deeply held terror at the idea. But Buffy just wasn’t ready. “I’m sorry I got so frustrated. Sorry I pushed. And you know, sorry most of all for all the dangerous magic.” She grinned mischievously. “Even though I know you enjoyed getting all down and dirty with Faith, even if you won’t admit it.” Willow’s eyes went wide, suddenly remembering what exactly she had said to cause that particular aspect of the spell. “Wait, did you two actually—”
“No,” Buffy sputtered, thinking again how very close they had gotten before Anya and Xander interrupted. Some part of Buffy, deep in her lizard brain, regretted that they hadn’t gotten there, with the excuse of magic to fall back on. But it didn’t do anyone any good to think that way. Buffy blew out a frustrated breath. “Honestly, I’d be really happy to be in a nice relationship with a decent, reliable —” Buffy nearly choked on her own breath as her eyes turned to saucers, “—oh my God, Riley thinks I’m engaged.”

“What?” Willow gasped.

Buffy’s chest was suddenly tight with anxiety, her breathing heavy. Shit. “Riley! He saw me... and..” She stood up, looking in sheer horror at Willow, and then pacing away. “What the hell am I gonna say to him?!”

“You told him you were engaged? Did you mention Spike by name?” Buffy couldn’t answer that; all she could do was groan. “Maybe you could just convince him you were joking? Spike is a pretty ridiculous name—he might believe it?” Willow’s tone made it clear she didn’t think he would actually buy it, but she also didn’t seem that invested in the Buffy-Riley romance anyway.

But Buffy thought it might actually be a credible plan. “That … might work,” she murmured. Riley was so kind and good-hearted, and he already seemed to think she was peculiar. It was the best plan she had, anyway.

“Seriously? You really think it will work?” Willow shook her head. “And that’s the sort of doof you wanna date?”

“Uh huh,” Buffy chuckled. She still wasn’t 100 percent sure she wanted to date him, but she felt like she needed to. It was her only way out of the weird, destructive spiral she had set up with Faith. The only way she could see them reestablishing a friendship without any temptation to go back to a place Buffy didn’t want them to go.

And she would continue to bury that nagging voice in the back of her mind telling her that eventually, she wouldn’t be able to lie to herself anymore. Eventually, she would have to risk it all. Because deep down, a part of her knew she was only putting off the inevitable. But Buffy wasn’t ready to face that yet.
What is normal?

Chapter Notes

Hush is finally here! I also mixed in some stuff from Doomed at the end, since I'm not covering that episode in this story.

This is the end of the first part of the story. I know everyone is frustrated that Buffy is struggling with stuff, but be patient with her. She's a confused bisexual teenager in 1999; this would be difficult for her even if she wasn't the Slayer. And I warned you all this was a slow burn :P Still, hope everyone is enjoying.

“So this is what it is. We’re talking about communication. Talking about language. Not the same thing.” Buffy isn’t sure what exactly Professor Walsh means by this. Or what it has to do with the lesson. Or even what the lesson is supposed to be about today. She is only half paying attention, more interested in the tall TA to Walsh’s left. In the back of her mind, there’s a vague sense that something is off about this class, but she isn’t focused on the feeling at all.

Walsh continues, her voice hazy and vague. “It's about the way a child can recognize and produce phonemes that don't occur in their native language. It’s about inspiration. Not the idea, but the moment before the idea, when its total. When it blossoms in your mind and connects to everything.” Riley’s gaze is firmly on Walsh, his features darkened by the shadows of the setting sun streaming in from the windows behind the class. “It's about the thoughts and experiences that we don't have a word for. A demonstration.”

Buffy feels the professor’s eyes burning into her before she actually hears her name said aloud. “Buffy… Summers—” Her attention is snapped away from Riley and down to the front of the class. Walsh’s face is a mask, unreadable beyond a sly, knowing smirk. “—come on down to the front here.” Buffy makes a face but hands her notebook to Willow before standing. Oddly, Oz isn’t sitting on Willow’s other side, replaced instead by a blonde girl Buffy only vaguely recognizes.

She steps down to stand beside Walsh, who places a hand lightly on her back, just between her shoulder blades. “A typical college girl.” Buffy should laugh at this suggestion, since she was the least normal person in the class, but she doesn’t. She wishes it were true. Ever since learning she was the Slayer, being normal was the elusive thing she yearned most often for. That desire continued to drive her, to claw at her. As if she knows Buffy’s inner struggle, Walsh adds a needling, “Ones assumes,” to her previous assessment of Buffy’s normalness.

Walsh turns and faces her. “Lie down on my desk.” There is no question that it is an order, and Walsh gives it with the tone of a person well accustomed to having her commands followed.

Not used to taking orders, Buffy manages only a confused response. “What?”

“Go ahead,” Walsh assures her, and Buffy feels compelled to obey her. “You’re perfectly safe.”

“Oh.” Buffy lifts herself up to sit on the desk, turning so that her entire body is on its surface, but she can’t quite bring herself to lie down. She feels supremely silly, resting back on her elbows and awaiting further commands. For a brief moment, she feels more like she is on a lab table rather than in a classroom, as if Walsh intends to dissect her in a more literal than figurative sense. But the
feeling passes quickly as Riley comes to stand in front of her at Walsh’s behest.

“A demonstration, right.” He repeats Walsh’s early phrase, smiling broadly at Buffy.

“Be a good boy,” Walsh commands, and nothing about that phrase strikes Buffy as odd. She is too fixated on Riley, who is leaning over her now. Their eyes are locked, and she can read a mix of confusion and desire in his baby blues. He places one hand around her side, just under her ribs, while threading the other through her arm and onto the desk underneath her.

“This feels very strange,” she notes, very aware of the fact that they haven’t kissed yet. She wants it to happen, but it feels wrong that it would happen here.

“Don’t worry,” he promised. “If I kiss you, it’ll make the sun go down.” His eyes looked harder in this moment, less gentle farm boy and more hardened soldier. Buffy doesn’t have time to think about how strange that observation is, because he is leaning in for the kiss now. His lips feel nice, but there’s no spark. She stretches her arm around his neck, then brings it to the back of his hair, allowing him to hold her up as she attempts to deepen the kiss. Still, she feels nothing special, and that is when the classroom goes dark.

Their lips part, and now the class is empty. Riley acts as if nothing is amiss. “See.”

Buffy sits up, moving to slide off of the desk. “Fortune favors the brave,” she mutters, unsure if she means that Riley was brave for kissing her or that she needs to be brave to face the sudden darkness. From the hallway beyond the classroom, she suddenly hears someone humming in a very sing-song fashion. Combined with the sudden darkness, it fills her with dread. “Do you hear that?”

Walking out into the hallway, she finds that it too is dark. As she moves forward, the humming turns to singing, in the voice of a little girl. “Can’t even shout. Can’t even cry. The Gentlemen are coming by.” Buffy turns a corner, and at the end of the hallway, in front of the doors leading out of the building, is the little girl. She has very long, straight blonde hair and is wearing a simple red dress. She holds a small wooden box in her hands that radiates with an unseen power.

The girl stares at Buffy as she continues her song. “Looking in windows. Knocking on doors. They need to take seven, and they might take yours. Can’t call to mom. Can’t say a word. You’re gonna die screaming, but you won’t be heard.” A cold hand grabs Buffy’s shoulder from behind, and she jumps at the contact. As she spins around to face Riley, his features twist into something demonic. His skin turns pale, his head bald, and his mouth twists into an unnaturally wide grin, teeth gleaming and almost metallic in the glint of the moonlight. His visage is so horrifying that it snaps her awake.

“So, I’ll see you all Monday for a final review session,” Professor Walsh was saying, signaling the end of the class just as Buffy woke from her impromptu nap. Shit. I hope she didn’t notice me. The worry was quickly followed by a second. Ah! I hope I didn’t miss anything important that’s gonna be on the final.

“Man, that was an exciting class, huh?” Willow quipped, drawing quiet chuckles from Oz and the blonde girl who had taken to sitting behind Willow in class lately.

Buffy tried to cover, even though she knew her friends had caught her. “Oh yeah well—”

“And the last twenty minutes was a revelation just laid out everything we need to know for the final.” Buffy’s heart sank. Please be joking. “I’d hate to have missed that.”

“Just tell me I didn’t snore,” Buffy muttered.

Oz reassured her, “Very discreet. Minimal drool.”
The three of them took the steps down from their row and towards the door.

“So were you dreaming?” Willow asked.

Buffy’s chest tightened. If Willow could tell she was dreaming, that meant it had to have been obvious to everyone that she was sleeping. *At least there was no screaming in my dream. My dream.* It all came rushing back to her, and wow, that was a creepy one. “Yeah, it was kind of intense.”

Before Willow could press her further on the details, Oz stopped just outside the classroom. “Alright, I’m off to catch up with Devin,” he explained, and Willow nodded as if she already knew that was his post-class plan. They hugged briefly, then he was off. And just like that, Buffy’s hackles were raised. Willow and Oz had been so differently lately, and she had mostly been letting it slide. But she needed an explanation. She was seriously concerned for her friend.

Except she couldn’t just ask her right then, because there were two other people suddenly hanging around them expectantly. Riley had followed them out, apparently hoping to talk to Buffy, and when she noticed him, Buffy also saw that the blonde girl was similarly waiting on Willow. In a flash of recollection, she realized that she was the same girl from her dream. *Okay, that’s a little too much déjà for my vu.* Willow smiled at the girl, then turned back to Buffy, her eyes darting only briefly (and somewhat dismissively) to Riley. “Okay, I’m off to Wicca group now.”

The blonde girl must be one of Willow’s witch friends. That made sense. But Buffy wasn’t going to let this pass. “Actually, Will, could we talk for a bit?” She glanced apologetically to the girl, then looked pointedly at Riley. “*Alone*?” Riley was a gentleman about it, simply nodding with a smile and heading back into the classroom. Buffy stifled a shudder as she remembered the word ‘gentlemen’ from the little girl’s song and then the way Riley’s face had shifted just before she woke up. Willow frowned, though. “I just need a minute, I promise.”

Willow sighed but nodded. “You go ahead,” she told the quiet blonde girl. “I’ll catch up, I promise.” With a smile and a nod, the girl headed off. “Alright, Buffy, what’s the what?” They started walking together, and Buffy pondered how best to phrase the question. She decided to go for subtle.

“I haven’t really seen Oz around much lately.”

Willow’s brow furrowed just slightly, as if not really sure why Buffy had gone out of her way to point out a noticeable lack of Oz. Rather than address the insinuation, Willow made up an excuse. “Yeah well, the Dingos have been crazy busy lately, plus he’s got that side project with Veruca, ya know?” She kept her voice casual, but Buffy felt sure it was an act. *Why won’t you open up, Will?*

“It doesn’t bug you that he’s spending a lot of time with another girl?”

“No,” Willow responded immediately, then took in a sharp breath as if she was surprised by how quickly she had blown off the concern. “I mean. I trust Oz. He trusts me. We’re just …” For a moment, Willow seemed oddly lost in thought, and Buffy couldn’t quite read the redhead as well as she usually could. “It’s fine. He’s got his stuff, and I’ve got mine. It’s college; things change. We don’t have to spend every waking moment together.”

“But Veruca—”

“But Buffy, seriously.” Willow’s voice had a slight edge now. “I’m not jealous. And if it’s not an issue for me, I don’t know why it would be an issue for you. They have a different sorta bond, what with the music and the werewolfing and—”
“She’s a werewolf?” Buffy gasped.

Willow grimaced. “Ugh. I wasn’t supposed to tell you that.” Buffy was sure all of her concern was now showing on her face because Willow immediately tried to reassure her. “She isn’t a danger. She’s like Oz. Responsible and stuff. And that’s not even . . .” Willow blew out a frustrated breath. “You don’t have to worry about me and Oz,” she promised. “Seems like you’d much rather be focusing your attention on Riley lately anyway,” she added, and Buffy didn’t much care for her tone.

“Will, what’s that supp—”

“No, I’m sorry, that was rude.” Willow looked abashed, both for the comment and for cutting Buffy off. “I’m being a bad friend.” She awkwardly forced a smile. “So, how are things with Riley?”

They had been on the one picnic date, and they had casually hung out in group settings a couple times since. There was something there, and the mutual interest was obvious, but it hadn’t gone past that yet. “I don’t know—so far it’s mostly just talk.” Willow’s eyebrows raised in question. “I just like . . . get nervous and start babbling, and then he starts babbling, and it’s a babblefest.” She frowned. “Plus, every time we talk I have to lie. The Slayer thing comes up one way or another. It’s just different. This sorta thing was always so much easier with Angel and—” She cut herself off, realizing what she was about to admit to.

But by the look on her face, Willow already had a damn good idea what the next word out of Buffy’s mouth would’ve been. Thankfully, she didn’t ask. Even so, she looked impatiently at her watch, then at the doors to the building. “Buffy, I really do have to get to Wicca group, okay?”

“Yeah, okay, I get it,” Buffy said, a little surprised that the redhead was blowing her off like this. Willow gave her a brief side hug, then took off. Leaving Buffy stewing in a very weird mood. She was super frustrated about the lack of smooches with Riley, and she was still weighed down by the complete lack of any real progress back towards a meaningful friendship with Faith. The other Slayer was talking to her again, but only begrudgingly. And never about anything substantial. The easy, flirtatious banter that had become so common between them was completely gone, and Buffy hadn’t realized how much she had come to depend on it as a mood-booster, if nothing else. She missed Faith, and she could at least admit that much to herself. Now, on top of all that, Willow was being weird, and she was having creepy dreams in class, and she had no one she could really talk to about any of it.

The dream! Buffy couldn’t solve any of her other problems right in that moment, but the dream might be important. It sure felt like a Slayer dream, and it could mean something bad was on the horizon. She took off for the dorm. She needed to call Giles and explain the dream in as much detail as she could remember, while it was still fresh in her mind. Only then would she let herself get back to wallowing over her many confusing problems.

Turning off the alarm and taking in a deep breath to start the morning, Faith swung the covers off her body and placed both feet on the ground. Already, sunlight was streaming in through her curtains, and she could hear all the muffled little noises outside that accompanied the beginning of the day. She cracked her neck, then pushed off the bed. Quickly fishing out a fresh pair of underwear and a thin tank top, Faith got dressed and then padded out of her bedroom towards the bathroom.

Faith was getting better about her morning routines lately. Gone were the days when she would roll out of bed just in time to catch a ride to work with Joyce. It turned out that Faith actually operated just fine on five hours or less of sleep. Even when she was out late slaying, the only thing standing between her and waking up at a decent hour was willpower and habit. Both of which she had been
working on lately.

She pondered this as she stretched, throwing off any remaining grogginess before she brushed her teeth. She was proud of the growth she could see in her life lately, even if it was all just a bunch of little stuff like getting up an hour earlier or eating slightly healthier. The GED was in two days. And she had nearly saved up enough for that security deposit. Faith reminded herself to float the idea of getting a place together next time she saw Anya. The poor girl needed to get out of that shithole, and between the two of them, Faith thought they could find a decent place.

Spitting out the backwash and rinsing with water from the faucet, Faith thought about the other stuff. Her trust issues lingered, never far below the surface, but despite them, Faith had managed to build good relationships with Joyce and Willow and even Anya. As she looked up and into the mirror over the sink, she couldn’t help but think that she no longer hated the person looking back at her. All the defensiveness and self-loathing that had driven her to betray Buffy and work for the Mayor was, if not completely gone, firmly in check. For the first time in her entire life, she felt stable.

And Buffy didn’t have a clue. Faith hated that her thoughts always went back to the other Slayer. To what ifs and what could have been. The fact that Buffy’s rejection hadn’t sent Faith into a self-destructive tailspin was itself a firm indicator of her personal growth, not that the other girl cared. She was too lost in her own self-loathing to notice. Faith set about applying her makeup for the day. For all the good in her life, part of Faith wanted nothing more than to be able to share it all with Buffy. She wanted to believe that Buffy would be proud of her, and she was the one person she wanted to celebrate her accomplishments with. Especially if she passed the GED.

But that wasn’t an option anymore. Buffy didn’t get to jerk her around and play with her emotions and still be a person Faith trusted. She barely trusted anyone, and she had no patience for letting herself get hurt emotionally. Buffy didn’t get to explore the spark between them when it was convenient or easy and then just pussy out when she got scared by her own bullshit. So, Faith had shut her out, even as her heart cried out to keep trying. She had to protect herself. Even if that made things uncomfortable for a while. She shook her head at the memory of how stilted conversation had been at times last week, when Joyce had hosted everyone for a Thanksgiving meal. Faith had no problems talking to Joyce or Willow or Giles—Xander and Anya had Thanksgiving with his family, but Willow’s family didn’t celebrate the holiday—but she had gone out of her way to ignore Buffy as much as possible without being obvious about it. She knew it was petty, but she just didn’t care. Buffy’s discomfort was nothing compared to the pain Faith was carrying after everything that had happened between them.

Faith finished up in the bathroom and headed back to her bedroom. She picked out a pair of dark-washed jeans and a colorful printed shirt, tossing them on before lacing up and tying her go-to pair of combat boots. Then she headed downstairs, hoping she had time for a few pieces of bacon before they left the house. As she turned the corner to walk through the dining room towards the kitchen, she definitely detected the distinctive scent she was hoping for, but it almost smelled like it was burning. Which was not something Joyce ever let happen. What the fuck?

As she rushed into the kitchen, she found Joyce frantically mouthing as if she was shouting, but it was like she was in a silent movie. Faith’s lips moved to form the words, “Joyce, what’s goin’ on?” except that her vocal chords produced no sound. Their eyes met, and Faith could tell that Joyce was freaked. And for good reason, obviously. She pointed at the stove, where the bacon was now burnt crispy, and Joyce turned and moved the skillet off the burner. Faith continued to try speaking, but the only sound she could manage was loud breathing. Okay but really, what the fuck?

Looking around, she noticed a small pad of paper attached to the refrigerator by a magnet, and she pulled it off before grabbing a pen. She wrote out, ‘When did you first notice?’ then displayed the
question to Joyce. “Just as you were coming downstairs,” she mouthed, over-enunciating so that Faith could read her lips. *Freaky.* Faith held up a finger, then walked over to the phone in the hallway. She picked it up and quickly called Giles, hoping that maybe she and Joyce were the only ones affected. Someone answered the phone, but based on the resounding silence on the other end of the line, the problem was much more widespread. “Shit,” she mouthed.

Heading back to the kitchen, Faith took up the pad of paper again and wrote out a quick explanation for Joyce.

‘Tried to call G, but it isn’t just us. Stay here. Don’t open the gallery. Gonna head to G’s place. B and everyone else will probes be there. Until we can figure out what is going on, stay inside and don’t let anyone in.’

Joyce read the note and nodded. Her eyes looked worried but also confident. Joyce had done some growing of her own in the past year, and Faith knew that she trusted the Slayers to do their duty and to keep each other safe. And she was right about that, even if she wasn’t aware just how fucked up things were between Faith and Buffy at the moment. As Faith grabbed her keys and a jacket, Joyce stopped her and wrapped her up in a big hug. Then she held up a finger and jotted down a quick note of her own.

‘Be safe. Don’t worry about me. Please tell Buffy I’d like to see her, at least once you all have this figured out. A mother worries.’

Faith smirked but nodded that she understood. As she headed out, she couldn’t help but think that maybe things would be a little less awkward with Buffy. At least now they had a damn good excuse for not talking to each other.

Giles opened the door within seconds of her knock, and as they walked in, Buffy could see that she, Willow, and Oz were the last ones there. Buffy and Willow waved as they entered, and Xander stood and waved back. Anya seemed less than friendly, and from beside her, Faith went out of her way to make it clear she was waving only to Willow and Oz. *Real mature,* Buffy thought wryly. A new face was also in the room, surprisingly, but Buffy quickly realized she wasn’t new. Giles’ “friend” Olivia was back in town, and she looked every bit as shaken up as some of the other townspeople, her hands tight around a glass of dark liquor even though it was still morning. Buffy wondered if this was her first experience with the supernatural.

Only Spike was absent, not that Buffy would’ve expected him to show up. Now that he was harmless to humans, they had allowed him to continue living. He swore that he would assist with their fight against evil, and while Buffy didn’t trust him half as far as she could throw him, she did trust his desire to inflict violence. Since he could only do that against demons now, he’d make for a halfway decent ally, as much as she hated him. But Giles refused to keep him in his apartment, so the vampire was on his own in terms of finding a place to live, getting his own blood, and doing it all without attracting any further attention from the mysterious commando guys.

The Scooby gang looked just as shaken as Buffy felt. The walk through town had been haunting, to say the least. Reactions to the sudden voicelessness that seemed to plague the entire town ranged from hysteria to depression to gatherings of the more religious-minded people in town who seemed to think the end of the world was upon them. Buffy couldn’t yet say for sure whether they were right about that, but she still found their antics frustrating. This was Sunnydale after all—they had an apocalypse once or twice a year on average.

Giles put a supportive hand on Buffy’s shoulder, and she smiled up at him, trying to seem less scared
than she felt. They’d never faced anything quite like this before, and it was wicked unnerving. Buffy frowned slightly as her own internal word usage—‘wicked’ was really more of a Faith thing, but Buffy didn’t want to think about how many of Faith’s little quirks she had begun to pick up over the last few months. None of it really mattered lately, since the other Slayer was going out of her way to make things as uncomfortable as possible. Noticing the many open books on the desk behind him, Buffy’s eyes widened, and she turned questioning eyes on her former Watcher as she mouthed, ‘Anything?’

He looked sadly down at his books and shook his head. Beside her, Willow brightened, as if with an idea. She wrote furiously on the small dry erase board around her neck—she and Buffy had bought them at the exorbitant price of $10 each from a street salesman taking advantage of the terrible situation. But all she wrote was ‘Hi Giles’ and her sad little smile was almost painful to look at. Giles gave her a reassuring side hug, and Buffy looked to see what progress he had made. Instantly, the notes he had jotted down caught her attention. They were lyrics from the haunting song the little girl sang in what was now very clearly her prophecy dream: ‘Can’t even shout. Can’t even cry. The Gentlemen are coming by.’

Grabbing the notepad and holding it up to Giles, she pointed at the word ‘Gentlemen’ and looked at him questioningly. Was this who they were dealing with? What did he know about these Gentlemen? Apparently nothing, as Giles just shrugged and shook his head in frustration. Xander caught their attention by snapping his fingers, which created a sound that seemed disconcertingly loud in the absence of any human voices. He turned on Giles’ old TV, switching it to the news, then sat back down on the couch by Anya. Buffy had no idea if this was a spell or a curse or something else entirely, but whatever it was, it was apparently only affecting Sunnydale. The anchorman explained that the entire area was being quarantined due to an outbreak of laryngitis that had rendered everyone unable to speak. Buffy glanced over at Faith just in time to see her mouthing what looked suspiciously like ‘Laryngitis my ass’ to no one in particular, and despite everything, Buffy couldn’t stop the slight crooked grin that formed along her lips.

As the anchor continued on about how schools and businesses were closed until the CDC could figure out what was happening, Buffy was already formulating a plan in her head. They just didn’t know enough yet, and that was what really scared her. Looking pointedly at Faith until she met her gaze, and then back to Giles, Buffy began writing out a message on her dry erase board. She showed it to Giles, then Faith.

‘Keep Researching. I should be in town.’

Giles mouthed, ‘Why?’ as Faith stood and walked over to stand in front of them. Buffy wrote out her answer, more than a little frustrated that Giles couldn’t figure it out himself.

‘We don’t know what’s going on, and neither do the people in town. Things could get crazy. Obvs something took our voices for a reason. It might be out there.’

Or they, she thought. Giles nodded at the explanation, and Faith shrugged, which was the closest thing to agreement Buffy figured she would get from her. She turned to Faith and wrote out another message. She pulled her knife—Faith’s eyes traced it with a hint of sadness as she did so—and her crossbow, setting them down on the table before showing Faith her question.

‘Weapons?’

Faith simply nodded, pulling a stake from her jacket. Then she pointed outside, and Buffy took that to mean she had others in her car. Buffy nodded at her, then mouthed, ‘Let’s go.’ Without looking for any further agreement, she turned back to Giles and scribbled one last message.
‘We’ll stop by every now and then to see if you’ve figured anything out.’

And with that, Buffy swung the dry erase board back around her neck, loaded up her weapons, and followed Faith out into the creepy silence.

The day had been intensely awkward for Faith. Other than a lunch break and a couple of check-ins with the Scoobies, she and Buffy had been silently roaming Sunnydale together for hours. A couple of times, Buffy had tried to lighten the mood with a scribbled joke, but each time Faith had either rolled her eyes or ignored the blonde entirely. And they were no closer to figuring out what the fuck was going on. Other than a few fights they had broken up between hysterical Sunnydale residents, they hadn’t seen any real action. And none of the research had turned up any answers.

If there was a reason someone had rendered the entire town mute, it hadn’t revealed itself yet. But it was only a matter of time, and the Slayers knew it. As a result, both of them had grown increasingly more tense as the day passed, and now, with the sun beginning to set, Faith felt intensely on edge.

They noticed the scrum at the same time, but only Buffy moved toward it. Two men in suits were scuffling, and by the look on the one guy’s face, it was about to get ugly. It wouldn’t come to that, however, at least not if Buffy’s boy toy had anything to say about it. The boy scout had apparently taken it upon himself to patrol the streets too, and he moved in to interrupt the scrum. Buffy walked towards him as Riley pushed the white guy away. As he turned to make sure the black guy was doing alright, the white guy reached down to pick up a piece of pipe laying on the sidewalk.

He had barely picked it up before Buffy grabbed him by the hand, and it sounded as though she broke the guy’s hand as she forced him to drop the pipe. The guy dropped to his knees silently, his face a mask of pain. Well, ain’t that just so fuckin’ sweet, Faith sneered internally. And here I thought I was supposed to be the loose cannon.

Buffy and Riley hugged warmly, and it sure as hell wasn’t the sort of hug you shared with someone who was just your TA. They exchanged silent words, but Faith didn’t bother trying to read their words. Instead she walked around them until she was in Buffy’s line of sight again. She made a face and gestured with her head that they should keep moving. Buffy shook her off, like a pitcher disagreeing with the signaled pitch from her catcher. Then she looked up into his eyes with genuine concern. Faith felt the desire to punch him in his stupid farm boy face bubbling up like acid in her gut. But Buffy gestured to him that she needed to go. Good.

Except that as she moved past him, he grabbed her by the wrist and spun her around, and then they were kissing. The sight of it burned through Faith, and she reacted viscerally, slamming a forceful kick into a nearby mailbox that completely knocked it off the ground and tumbling across the sidewalk. Wincing at the clatter it made, Faith glared daggers at Buffy, who had been startled out of her kiss. Then she turned and strode away, refusing to run (she wasn’t about to show even a hint of weakness in front of Riley), but she made it very clear that she was storming off.

She didn’t make it far before Buffy stopped her with a firm grip around her wrist, and Faith turned on her angrily. ‘What?’ she mouthed emphatically. Behind Buffy, she could see the beefcake walking in the opposite direction. Faith looked down to where Buffy was still holding onto her wrist, and what she saw there sent an electric thrill through her body. Buffy was still wearing the bracelet Faith gave her for Christmas last year, even though Willow’s magic had long since worn off. Even after everything. Even though she had made it clear she didn’t want Faith.

That she’d rather be kissing a tall boring frat boy with the nice smile and the floppy haircut. Faith’s hands twisted into tight, angry fists, and she pulled her arm free of Buffy’s grip. Fuck her. She
couldn’t understand what Buffy thought she was doing. But she sure as shit didn’t have to stand here and be okay with it.

With a furious glare, Faith flipped the other Slayer off and turned away again. This time, she did run, and Buffy was smart enough not to chase after her. The sun was going down, and the town was in crisis. But for Faith, the only thing that mattered was finding some vampires to take her frustrations out on.

Buffy didn’t see Faith again until the entire gang met up the next day, just after lunch. Without the use of phones, it had taken a while to get everyone organized. Xander and Anya were there when Buffy swung by Giles’ apartment first thing in the morning, and he had indicated that he had some idea what was going on. He had the bright idea to find an empty classroom on campus, to make use of a projector to facilitate communication in the group. From there, it took a concerted effort to let everyone else know. Buffy went back to campus to let Willow and Oz know and to find a suitable room—they ended up just using the psychology lecture hall. Giles and Olivia went to retrieve Faith from the house, while Xander and Anya went to go grab food for everyone. It was around one in the afternoon when everyone finally met up.

The only change in Faith’s demeanor was that now, instead of avoiding Buffy’s gaze, she was very intentionally glaring daggers at her every chance she got. Buffy tried to tell herself that she had nothing to feel guilty about, but it was nothing more than a rationalization. True or not, she felt guilty. Buffy should never have given into her physical attraction, not when she had always known she wouldn’t be able to let it go anywhere. And her weakness had hurt Faith. Was still hurting Faith.

The other Slayer didn’t deserve any of this, but Buffy couldn’t take back what they had shared. Part of her really didn’t want to. She just wished she knew how long it would take for them to get back to any semblance of friendship again. And even though she knew nothing had changed between them—the same raw attraction was always there between them, even with the current bad blood—Buffy held onto the hope that they could find their way back to friendship.

It just seemed like an impossible hope at the moment. And they had bigger problems to tackle. Buffy had seen a lot of horrific things in her time as a Slayer, but a dead student with his heart cut out of his body was near the top of that list. And it was entirely likely that he wasn’t the only one—it didn’t make sense to silence the entire town all for one victim. She just hoped Giles had some answers.

Buffy, Willow, and Oz sat down in their usual seats towards the middle of the classroom, while Faith went out of her way to sit as far to the back as possible. Anya sat behind the three students, a few seats over, and Xander just plopped down on the stairs nearby. Meanwhile, Giles set up his presentation in the front of the room, which included a small portable stereo, which he set to play some weird fairy-tale-esque orchestral music. Buffy thought it was a little morbid that he felt the need to create an ambience, but it wasn’t like she could scold him. Not verbally, at least.

His first slide was placed onto the projector upside down and backwards, but Giles didn’t notice it because he was facing the class. Buffy and Faith both pointed at the screen onto which the image was projected and after a moment of confusion, Giles turned and noticed his mistake. He quickly flashed a look of embarrassment, then flipped the transparent page over.

‘WHO ARE THE GENTLEMEN?’

Giles watched them for a moment, ostensibly to ensure everyone had a chance to read, and Buffy
and Willow shared a look. This whole thing was so strange. Giles replaced the sheet.

‘THEY ARE FAIRY TALE MONSTERS’

Beside his large handwriting, there was a crudely drawn picture that roughly matched the disturbing smiling visage of the creature Riley had become in her dream. The memory made Buffy shudder. Nevertheless, Giles continued.

‘WHAT DO THEY WANT?’

Giles held up finger but was immediately distracted by Willow emphatically raising her hand in the air. Geez, everyone is really getting into this whole classroom thing. With the full attention of the room, Willow pointed repeatedly at her chest, turning a little to be sure Faith could see too. Xander made the most obvious crass assumption, mouthing, ‘Boobies?’ in confusion and gesturing with his hands as if he had a pair of his own. Anya and Buffy both glared at him, and Willow just rolled her eyes and pointed at the new page Giles was displaying on the projector.

‘HEARTS’

Above the word were three cartoon hearts, and Buffy couldn’t help but grin a little at Giles’ attention to detail. His drawings were unnecessary and a little silly, but somehow they helped her feel a little better about everything.

Xander’s inane question answered, Giles moved on.

‘THEY COME TO A TOWN’ was written above a picture of two Gentlemen on a hill overlooking a couple of very simple depictions of buildings.

The next page depicted the same two Gentlemen on a hill, but this time there were people instead of buildings. ‘THEY STEAL ALL THE VOICES’ read the text above the drawing, and thin wavy lines were drawn connecting the mouths of the townspeople to the outstretched hand of one of the Gentlemen. Beneath the image was the rest of the sentence, ‘SO NO ONE CAN SCREAM.’ Even though Buffy was living it, the idea of what was being done to them, and the reasons behind it, gave her the willies.

Another picture of a single Gentleman was displayed, its too-wide grin accompanied by only one word: ‘THEN.’ Giles lifted his index finger for affect, then replaced the page with another crude drawing. The Gentleman was standing over a person in bed with a knife held high, a red marker having been used to portray blood and viscera around the person’s chest and dripping to the floor, with more in the tip of the knife and splatter on the Gentleman’s face. Even though it was cartoonish, it was creepy, and again Buffy thought of the body she had found in a campus dorm room that morning. The next page was a continuation of that scene, this time with the Gentleman holding a very large, bright red cartoon heart, with even more blood this time.

Willow and Buffy exchanged disturbed looks. Buffy glanced behind her, and Faith seemed unfazed, meeting Buffy’s gaze with hard, angry eyes. Anya seemed to be enjoying herself, and Buffy thought that she would never really understand that girl.

The next slide features seven cartoon hearts bunched together, shaded in with a black marker but still clearly dripping blood. What the hell, Giles? Above and below the hearts was text that read, ‘THEY NEED SEVEN. THEY HAVE AT LEAST TWO.’ That was when Xander had a question, which he wrote out on his own miniature dry erase board.

‘How do we kill them?!’
Everyone looked to Giles, then immediately to Buffy. In answer, she made a pumping motion with her fist, trying to signal that she would stab them. Unfortunately, no one took her gesture the way she meant it. Willow and Xander both looked at her as if slightly disturbed, while Giles seemed like he was trying very hard to keep a straight face. From the back of the class, Buffy could hear light, airy sound that, even without the sound of Faith’s voice, could only be chuckling.

Suddenly realizing that it had very much appeared like she was making the universal motion for jerking a guy off, Buffy grabbed a stake from her bag. Brow furrowed, she refused to let anyone see how embarrassed she felt internally. She made the same motion again, this time with her stake in hand. and now everyone understood. Except that Giles’ next page made it clear that her plan wouldn’t work.

A cartoon of a Gentleman stabbed through by three swords was surrounded by the text, ‘IN THE TALES NO SWORD CAN KILL THEM.’ The next slide, however, gave her the answer she needed. It just wasn’t the one she wanted. The page very unhelpfully indicated that ‘THE PRINCESS SCREAMED ONCE …. AND THEY ALL DIED.’ A very poorly drawn cartoon girl had her head and hands raised, three sharp lines coming from her mouth, and at her feet were two very dead Gentlemen.

Faith knocked against the wooden back of the chair beside her to get everyone’s attention, then held up her dry erase board. ‘Not a princess,’ she insisted, then glared again at Buffy. Buffy returned the glare. Just because she wore brighter colors didn’t mean that of the two of them, she was the princess. Buffy was pretty sure she had saved Faith more times than Faith had saved her. And anyway, it was just a fairy tale. Any human voice would probably do—that’s why they stole all of them.

Ignoring Faith’s jibe, Willow had an idea, making adorable faces and gesticulating wildly with both hands. She pulled a CD from her backpack, then held her hands over her ears dramatically before pantomiming dying. While she put on her little performance, which Buffy assumed was cute but somehow knew wasn’t a valid plan, she wrote out her next question.

Giles’ next page told Buffy was she had suspected, which was that only a real human voice could kill the Gentlemen. He pointed at his own throat for emphasis, and Willow slumped into her chair, pouting. Buffy held up a finger as she finished writing, then showed her question to Giles.

‘How do I get my voice back??”

Giles had no answer, throwing his hands out to his sides to indicate that he had no idea. She blew out a frustrated breath, and Giles continued with the presentation.

‘BUFFY AND FAITH WILL PATROL’

Locking eyes with Buffy and then Faith, Giles then picked up the leather-bound book of fairy tales he had brought with him. He pointed at Xander, Anya, Willow, and Oz and then shook the book emphatically, making it clear that he wanted everyone else to continue researching. They had to figure out how to restore at least one of their voices.

Willow held up a finger, then wrote out a message. She held it out and moved it around so that everyone could read. ‘I’ll stick around here. See if Wicca group might have any ideas.’ Giles’ brow furrowed a bit, but then he shrugged and nodded, conceding that they needed any help they could get. Giles looked to see if anyone else had questions, and when there were none, he turned off the projector and the stereo. The silence set in again, heavy and foreboding and broken only by the scattered sounds of everyone standing and collecting their things.
Faith met Willow, Oz, and Buffy by the door, but she had eyes only for Buffy. ‘Joyce wants to see you. She’s freaked and misses you. Stop by on patrol.’ Buffy raised an eyebrow in question, and Faith wiped the board clean and wrote a follow-up thought. ‘I gotta grab something from Willow later anyway, so I’ll patrol around the campus area. You take the other side of town.’

Everything in Buffy wanted to argue. She wanted to spend time with Faith and keep trying to soothe the tensions between them. But the guilt she felt about Riley kissing her in front of Faith last night was overwhelming, and it mixed in with an entirely different load of guilt over her lack of communication with her mom of late. She hadn’t bothered to call or swing by the house in a couple of months—save for Thanksgiving—and in all their patrolling yesterday, it hadn’t even occurred to her to check in on Joyce. I’m such a bad daughter. In addition to being a bad friend. She couldn’t keep the remorse from her features as she met Faith’s gaze again, and so she just nodded.

They would patrol separately, and Buffy would check in on Joyce. She and Faith could try to work out their differences again once their voices were working. Or so she hoped.

Faith was starting to get bored. The sun had finally gone down, meaning she had a better chance at some action, but she hadn’t seen even a glimpse yet of anything remotely Gentlemenly. She was nevertheless a little creeped out to find campus as deserted as she had ever seen it. She guessed word had gotten around about the silence leading to gruesome heart-stealing, and people were afraid to roam around at night now. Which was pretty smart of them, all things considered.

She only found herself back here because she wanted to check in on Willow and Tara. Faith chuckled slightly, appreciating that she was the only member of the Scooby gang who knew that ‘Wicca group’ was code for ‘that one cute witch I have a crush on.’ Faith hadn’t actually left anything with Willow that she needed to pick up—that was an excuse she came up with on the fly, to try and ensure she didn’t get roped into patrolling with Buffy again. She’d had her fill of that yesterday, and besides, they could cover more ground separately.

The rift between the Slayers showed no sign of healing anytime soon, and Faith wasn’t sure what to do about that. Once upon a time, she would’ve just cut bait and run, found herself some new place. But she wasn’t that Faith anymore. She had friends now, a job, and a duty. She had a home, because as stupid as she thought it sounded, that was precisely what Sunnydale had become for her. But a big part of the new Faith was her connection to Buffy—not just the shared circumstance and duty, but the shared experiences and mutual affection. It wasn’t something she could let go of, as much as she wanted to. However, she couldn’t be around Buffy without experiencing that sting of rejection all over again. Just being in the same room as her pissed Faith off.

Because she knew what they had. Knew it was special. Knew it was unlike anything she had ever shared with someone, and even accounting for Angel, she thought that was probably true for Buffy too. The difference was that it scared Buffy enough to send her running in the opposite direction. Fucking coward. Faith was still plenty bitter. Like the idea of more than random make outs doesn’t scare the shit outta me too. But I’m not running from it. What it came down to, Faith couldn’t help but conclude, was that she saw something worthwhile in Buffy, something that made facing her fears and jumping into the great unknown together worth it. And Buffy didn’t see that same thing in her.

And as much progress as she had made, she wasn’t quite in the place where she could convince herself that was a poor decision on Buffy’s part, rather than a valid reading of Faith’s own worth. As a result, she couldn’t quite figure her way out of the dark, angry place she was in when it came to Buffy.
A sound startled Faith from her thoughts. It was a clinking, metallic sound, and it had probably been present on the edges of her mind for several seconds before it became loud enough to bring her back to the moment. Two days of silence was doing a number on her mental state. Faith looked around, and that’s when she saw them. Two of the Gentlemen—way more freaky looking in real life than in Giles’ shitty drawings—were accompanied by several other creatures. The difference between the Gentlemen and their minions couldn’t have been more stark.

The Gentlemen themselves were an odd dichotomy, both disturbing and dignified. Their skin was grey, wrinkled, and seemingly hairless. Heavy-set brows (not quite as twisted as that of a vampire, but close) cast dark shadows over sunken, bloodshot eyes. Their mouths were permanently twisted into too-wide grins, metallic teeth gleaming from between frighteningly thin lips. And yet, they also seemed almost stately—ramrod straight posture combined with perfectly tailored dark suits in a way that made it clear why they were called the Gentlemen. Then Faith noticed the creepiest part, the thing that pushed these demons over the edge from unsettling to nightmarish. They were floating, as if they were literally above it all. As if they knew that without voices, no one could do a single thing to stop them, and this startling, horrifying fact had to be given physical form in their open display of weightlessness.

Their minions, on the other hand, were wild, undignified things, running around at a low crouch so that their long, flailing arms scraped against the ground. The clinking noise came from the chains and buckles that ran along the straight jackets they wore, and Faith couldn’t tell if perhaps these things had once been human—their heads were wrapped in decaying brown bandages.

The sight of these things was enough to temporarily bring Faith to a sudden halt, and she tightened her grip on her ax. Holy fucking shit. Her breath caught in her chest, and for the first time in a very long time, she actually felt afraid of her foes. That fear lasted only a few seconds, though. Her eyes quickly tracked the movement in front of the group of demonic beings, and Faith saw that they were chasing a girl. Her Slayer instincts and protectiveness overtook what fear she was feeling, and she sprang into action.

She shouted at the Gentlemen to distract them from the girl, feeling like a giant fucking idiot when no sound came out. Instead, she sprinted towards them, and taking careful aim, she flung the ax straight into the back of the skull of the minion closest to the girl. She knew she couldn’t kill the Gentlemen, but she hoped their creepy little foot soldiers didn’t share their invulnerability. For a moment, her hope appeared to pan out, and the thing crumpled to the ground just as the girl tripped and fell. Now Faith had the full attention of the Gentlemen and their creatures. The Gentlemen simply pointed, and the two remaining minions charged at her.

Faith used the momentum of her sprint to her advantage, tackling one and swinging her feet around into a harsh kick that sent the other flying. With the snap of a neck, Faith was on her feet again and running to the girl. Unfortunately, as she yanked her ax free of the first thing’s skull, it jerked back to life. Nope. Can’t kill them either. Fuck. Faith’s heart sank, and she mouthed, ‘Run!’ wildly at the girl as she lifted her to her feet. They took off together, and Faith headed straight for Willow and Buffy’s room. She just hoped the witches had figured something out.

Faith slowed herself to keep pace with the girl. She had thin, bright blonde, shoulder-length hair with darker roots and a soft, friendly face with full cheeks and fuller lips. She carried herself with the slightest hunch, as if she were accustomed to deflecting attention away from herself, but Faith could sense a deep current of strength and resilience just under the surface. She dressed overly modestly, with a long skirt down to her feet, a drab top under an oversized collared shirt, and an open hooded jacket, and she had managed to pick up the books she had dropped when she tripped. And yet the most noticeable thing about her was that, despite her obvious fear, she seemed to already trust Faith intrinsically, following her closely and watching her for any additional cues or
instructions.

That’s weird, Faith thought. Between her dark leather pants, her dark makeup, and her very large, very stylish battle ax, Faith didn’t exactly scream trustworthy. But now wasn’t the time to worry about it. The safest place for the both of them at this point was with Willow and Tara. They made their way through a couple of buildings and down another sidewalk before they finally reached the dorm, and the Gentlemen stayed just close enough that they never quite escaped that unnerving clinking sound. Even so, Faith ripped the door open, gestured to the girl to enter, and the two of them rushed up the two flights of stairs to Buffy and Willow’s hallway. If Faith didn’t know any better, she’d have thought the girl knew just as well as she did where they were headed. Odder and odder.

Faith pounded on Willow’s door the minute she reached it, and when it didn’t open immediately she took a step back to kick it open. Fortunately, that was when Willow opened the door, and her brow immediately furrowed as she looked in confusion between Faith and the girl she had rescued. Before Faith could move to try to explain, Willow wrapped her arm around the girl with a level of ease and comfort that made no sense and led her into the dorm room. Faith followed, slamming the door behind them. She could already hear the clinking coming up the stairs.

Her mind flashed to what Buffy had said about the victim from last night. His body was found on his bed in his dorm room, the door ripped off its hinges. Shit. They weren’t safe here, and they didn’t have time to try and muddle through stilted attempts and communication to see if Willow had a solution yet. Faith turned to shout—so to speak—at the others that they had to run, and that was when she noticed it. Willow had her hands on the girl’s cheeks, clearly checking to see if she was okay. The books the girl had been carrying, dropped carelessly on Buffy’s bed, were very obviously magic books. Holy shit, this must be Tara.

But there wasn’t time to dwell on that revelation. She waved her hands at the girls, mouthing, ‘Let’s go!’ repeatedly. Sensing the urgency and again putting their trust in the Slayer, the witches grabbed up some books and followed her out the door. The Gentlemen were already in the hallway, and Faith motioned for them to run in the opposite direction. They took off, Tara placing a protective arm around Willow as they ran together. Faith beat up on a couple of the minions, trying to buy the witches a head start. She wasn’t about to try and fuck around with the Gentlemen though. For whatever reason, they terrified her.

Faith leapt down both flights of stairs easily and caught up with the witches in the hallway at the bottom, just as they turned into what Faith quickly realized was a laundry room. With only one entrance. Fuck. Faith wanted to shout at Willow for running into the room in the first place, but the Gentlemen were coming. They had to figure something out. Faith posted up at the door, pressing against it with all her strength in the hopes of keeping the monsters from busting it down. Tara watched her, but she didn’t seem at all surprised by Faith’s willingness to put herself between them and the danger. She watched her almost knowingly, and Faith wondered how much Willow had told her about the Slayers. It felt strangely as though Tara could see her, see what she was without any explanation necessary.

Meanwhile, Willow took a seat on the floor against the row of washing machines, her attention fixed firmly on the vending machine against the wall between them. Following her logic, Faith nearly jumped forward to push the machine in front of the door. She was, after all, the only one strong enough to move it. Unfortunately, that’s when strong blows began to rain down on the door, and Faith had to shove all her strength back against it to try desperately to keep them out.

Except that Willow’s focus on the vending machine had nothing to do with Faith, she realized, as it began to shake and tremble under the weight of her stare and outstretched arm. Faith’s heart caught
in her throat—she had no idea that Willow had the kind of power to even attempt something like this, and yet here they were. Both Tara and Faith looked back and forth from the machine to Willow, but Tara’s expression was very different from Faith’s. She looked at Willow with nothing but admiration, pride, and unmitigated … well, faith. Up until this moment, Tara had been nothing more than a cute idea to Faith, but now it was very obvious that she was so much more. She was a very real person who clearly cared about Willow, but more than that, she seemed to know Willow in a way Faith wasn’t sure any of Willow’s friends—Faith included—did.

Even with all the danger around them, all the tension from the days of silence, in that moment, Faith was the one to see Tara. And immediately, she understood all of Willow’s conflict the past few weeks. This wasn’t a simple crush; it wasn’t the fun, confusing flutter of the first time you realize girls are adorable and sexy and amazing. This was something real, and Tara made that very clear with her next actions.

Seeing that Willow was struggling to move the vending machine, and both of them wanting to do what they could to help keep out the evil and take the burden off of Faith, Tara reached down and took Willow’s hand—the one that wasn’t rigidly outstretched towards the vending machine—interlacing their fingers. They locked eyes, and even from across the room, Faith could feel the energy build between them, pouring gasoline on the spark that Willow had started. Nodding to each other, they both turned back to the machine, and with Tara’s hand outstretched beside hers, the vending machine practically leapt across the room.

If it wasn’t for Faith’s insane reflexes, she might’ve been crushed, but she dodged out of the way fairly easily. And she wasn’t even mad about it either. The powerful display of magic was one of the coolest things she’d ever experienced, and she couldn’t help but grin at Willow. Then, as the banging against the door lightened and disappeared altogether, she glanced back at Tara, bit her lip very theatrically, and winked lasciviously at Willow. The monsters had gone in search of easier prey, and Faith would have to give chase soon. But for a moment, she allowed herself a quiet moment of joy shared with her friend, silently giving her shit about whatever was going on with Tara.

Willow didn’t shrink from it either, and Faith guessed that the shared power between the witches had opened Willow’s eyes. *Hah. Turned out it was magic that revealed her will to herself after all.* But Faith had a job to do. She put a hand on Willow’s, smiled brightly at Tara, then pointed emphatically at the books of magic they had brought. They looked like they understood her command to figure this fucking shit out, or at least she hoped they did. Because she still had no idea how to beat these fuckers.

Buffy savored the warm hug her mom offered when she walked in. But she knew she couldn’t linger. Her guilt had brought her there, but the entire town was in danger.

‘Are you okay? What’s going on?’

Joyce was writing on a small pad of paper, and Buffy wrote down her answer on the dry erase board she pulled from her bag of weapons.

‘The usual. Creepy demons. We’re working on it.’ Buffy frowned, then erased the message and replaced it with a follow-up. ‘Sorry I didn’t come check on you sooner.’

Joyce’s smile was an attempt at reassurance, but Buffy could see the sadness behind it. ‘It’s okay. Faith was here,’ she wrote back. And now it was Buffy’s turn to feel sadness. Buffy had always felt so much pride at the way Joyce took Faith in, despite everything, and gave her a home and a purpose
outside of slaying. But sometimes it felt like Faith was more of a daughter to Joyce than Buffy was, at least lately. Buffy was the one on the outside, even if it was her own fault for ending up there.

Even so, she could turn it around. Maybe after they took down the Gentlemen, she and her mom could catch up. Buffy could tell her how much she was finding her stride lately, what with the balancing the slaying with all of the getting decent grades in school and dating and stuff. She imagined how brightly Joyce would smile when she told her that she was dating a nice, normal, handsome boy who was very not a centuries-old vampire. Also not another girl, no matter how beautiful and brave she was.

But any thought she had of bringing any of that up was dashed, replaced by a fresh flood of guilt when she read her mom’s next message. ‘Is everything okay with Faith?’ Buffy’s heart sank. But Joyce kept writing. ‘Even before all this silence, she’s been so withdrawn lately. Less like the Faith I’ve gotten to know lately, and more like that girl we first took in a year ago. Did anything happen?’

Buffy didn’t know what to tell her. Sorry Mom, Faith and I have this connection, and it’s more than just a Slayer thing. We were making out, like a lot, but then I chickened out because I don’t wanna accept that I might be a little gay, and now she’s pissed at me. Sorry that she’s acting weird and stuff. Buffy blew out a breath as she turned away, desperate to hide her reaction to the question. Faith had been doing so well, and any deterioration was all Buffy’s fault. I can’t deal with this. Plus the demons aren’t gonna kill themselves.

Buffy scribbled out a quick excuse, blaming Faith’s behavior on Willow’s magical misfire a few weeks ago, but keeping the details vague. Things got weird, everyone was awkward after. Buffy told Joyce that she couldn’t say what had happened, not exactly, just that it had affected Faith.

Joyce frowned, and Buffy could tell that she wasn’t alleviating any of the concern she held for Faith. Buffy made one last attempt. ‘Give her time, and all the support I know you’re so good with. I promise we’re working on this silence thing, but I’ve really gotta go now.’ Buffy didn’t give her mom any further chance to poke and prod and give her more looks that would only exacerbate how bad she felt about Faith. She wrapped her arms around Joyce, holding her tightly for a few seconds, then headed back out the door.

It was dark now, and she took a path straight into town. She walked at a brisk pace, as if literally trying to outrun the flood of emotions she’d experienced with her mom. No demons made themselves readily available for slaying, so instead, Buffy turned all her mental energy onto possibly solutions for the Gentlemen problem. They took our voices so that we can’t scream when they take our hearts. Because screaming kills them. The whole thing was the dumbest fairy tale nonsense Buffy had faced since the Hansel and Gretel demon. This is absurd.

Why would they want hearts? Why seven? What do they do with them? Question after question filtered through her mind without answer, but then it hit her. If these seven hearts were so important, they had to be keeping them somewhere. And hey, maybe their voices were being held there too. So, if Buffy could just figure out where their evil lair was, preferably before they finished murdering seven people, maybe she could free the voices. And kill the Gentlemen.

Still, it was easier said than done. Sunnydale was a small town, but there were far too many places to stow away some hearts and voices. And they’d already had one night of murder and were no doubt readying for another at this very moment. The clock was ticking. Guess Faith’s insistence on splitting up, which was so not subtle, was a good idea after all.

Buffy had been walking for about ten minutes, finding her way into the main part of town, when she saw it. One of the Gentlemen gliding along like something out of her nightmares. Which—was
factually accurate, come to think of it. It had just exited a house across the street, and Buffy’s chest tightened as she saw the deep red of the object it was holding in its hands. She was too late, at least for whomever had lived in that house. But also, this was her opportunity. Heart in hand, it was surely heading back to Gentlemen HQ or whatever. She just had to follow it.

Before she could take more than two steps, however, she was tackled to the ground by something even creepier looking than the Gentlemen. It was inhumanly strong, swinging its arms with wild abandon. It wore a thick, yellowed straight jacket, and its face was completely wrapped up in brown bandages. She did her best to fight it off, getting her feet in place to kick it hard enough to send it flying. As she got to her feat, another tried to grab her from behind, and she elbowed it in the neck then drove her first up and back into its face. She kicked out at the first one, which charged her again, then spun around and tripped up the one behind her. Buffy placed one hand firmly at its chin and the other on the back of its skull and twisted as hard as she could, snapping its neck. Then she was off, running as fast as she could to catch up to the Gentleman. She left her bag behind—it would only slow her down, and she could always go back for it—but she had the long strap of her crossbow swung across her body.

She tried very hard not to think about the clinking sounds of the things that gave chase, just hoping that she reached her destination before they caught up to her again. It didn’t quite work out they way, since she had to stay far enough back that the Gentleman that it didn’t realize she was following it. Meaning she kept having to fight off its goons, which just kept coming despite many of their necks now facing the wrong way. They were apparently as unkillable as their masters, and as a result, Buffy was winded and more than a little beat up by the time she saw where they were headed: the dilapidated old clocktower downtown.

The Gentleman floated in the front door, but Buffy could see shadows moving around in the windows of the third floor. That had to be where the voices were. Buffy sprinted even harder and used her momentum to spring forward and up through a boarded-up window on the second floor. God, I’m going to be so sore in the morning. Immediately, another of the minion creatures were on her. She punched it in the face, then spun a kick into its chest that tossed it across the room. Another leapt at her, and she sidestepped it, grabbing it and using its own momentum to fling it against the nearby wall. Sensing more movement behind her, she slipped the crossbow from her back and into her hands, finger poised on the trigger as she spun to face her third attacker.

Buffy’s body jolted with shock, her heart sinking and her chest tightening. Because she found herself face-to-face, or rather weapon-to-weapon, with none other than Riley Finn.

He was holding what looked very much like some sort of sci-fi movie prop rifle and dressed in army-issue greens and browns. Her eyes were wide and confused. What the hell is going on here? Neither of them had time to process the startling turn of events, because the stupid minions weren’t going anywhere. She ducked under an attack, and Riley shot lightning from his gun at the creature. Okay seriously what the hell? Buffy got hit in the face, and that only pissed her off at this point. I so don’t have time for this shit. She continued fighting them off, hitting one with a bolt between the eyes, kicking another where she hoped it had very sensitive genitals of some sort. The first opening she got, she slipped the crossbow from her back and into her hands, finger poised on the trigger as she spun to face her third attacker.

There were more of them upstairs, and Buffy ducked under one, catching it and flipping it over her head and to the side. Then she grabbed a low hanging rope, hoping it didn’t connect to a painfully loud bell, and swung forward. Her feet connected firmly with another minion and sent it flying a full ten feet across the room and through a boarded-up window. Glancing back, she saw a look of shock on Riley’s face, and for the briefest moment, Buffy indulged in a satisfied feeling of pride in her abilities.
In the center of the room, there was a small wooden table, and on top of it were seven glass jars. Five were already full, and the Gentleman she had been following was delicately placing a heart in a sixth jar. Two of his cohorts were hovering ominously in front of the large, semi-transparent clockface of the tower. When she saw the wooden box in the center of the table, the jars displayed in a semi-circle around it, flashes of her dream sprang into her mind. It was that same box, polished wood with dark patterns carved into it, that the girl had been holding in her dream. That had to be what was holding their voices.

She darted toward it but was immediately tackled by no fewer than five of the minion creatures. They pulled her back, strong arms wrapping around her arms, waist, and neck. That was when the Gentleman turned on her, haunting grin gleaming in the pale light as it lifted a scalpel in its long, spindly fingers. *Oh no. The last jar. No no no.* It advanced on her, bloodshot eyes wide and gleeful. She struggled to break free, but she wasn’t strong enough. Especially not after having fought so many of these things for going on ten minutes straight. *Oh god, this is how I die.*

Just as it began to lean forward, only six inches between them, it was engulfed in a stream of electric blue lighting, the energy coursing through its body and sending it sprawling to the ground several feet away. Riley made to attack the creatures holding her, but she waved him off, frantically gesturing at the table. The other Gentlemen began to advance, suddenly aware that she knew about their weakness. Riley followed her gaze, and shooting off torrents of lightning to keep the Gentlemen at bay, he rushed forward and promptly smashed the empty jar to pieces with the butt of his ray gun.

As he turned back to her, his face a wide, satisfied grin at having saved the day, she couldn’t help but roll her eyes. *How could he be so cute, yet so dumb?* She shook her head wildly, mouthing ‘THE BOX! THE BOX!’ as obviously as she could, and his eyes widened. Just as the Gentlemen surrounded him, he turned back to the table and drove his gun down again, but this time on the box. It broke open, and a heavy wind blew through the room, driving everyone back with enough force that the creatures had to let go of her. She felt her voice return, a sharp chill filling her throat, and she wasted no time. Drawing in a sharp breath, she screamed as loudly as she could, as her voice filled the room, loud and shrill, the Gentlemen began to writhe in pain, clasping at their heads for several seconds before each of their skulls exploding in a disgusting shower of green gore and viscera. The minions fortunately did not explode, but they simply dropped dead. She guessed they must’ve been animated solely by the power of the Gentlemen.

Buffy didn’t want to think about how close she had come to death. How close the Gentlemen had come to accomplishing whatever dark mission they had set about accomplishing. She definitely didn’t want to think about the six people she had failed to save. All she wanted to do was go home and pass out, honestly. But she could tell from the way Riley was eying her warily that she wasn’t going to get to do that any time soon. She guessed they had a lot to talk about.

He raised his rifle as she took a step towards him. “What are you?” he asked, a hint of fear obvious in his tone.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Riley, I’m me. Please don’t point your fancy sci-fi lightning gun at me, okay?” She put just enough pleading in her voice that he immediately lowered the gun, a flash of guilt passing through his pale blue eyes. “Walk me back to my dorm? Then we’ll talk.”

Even though they could finally talk again—and clearly urgently needed to—the walk back to the dorm had been painfully silent. Willow wasn’t there, probably still with her Wicca group. Yet even with the privacy available to them, Buffy and Riley had been sitting there, Buffy on the edge of her
bed and Riley on the edge of Willow’s, for several minutes without a word, just staring at the floor between them.

Eventually, Buffy couldn’t take it anymore. “Somebody should speak before one of us graduates.”

Riley chuckled, but she could tell he was still really uncomfortable. He stood with a sigh and walked slowly past her. After a moment asked the question that had been on his mind: “What are you?”

Buffy bristled at the way he phrased that. The snark was out of her mouth before she could think to stop it. “Capricorn on the cusp of Aquarius. You?”

Riley winced. “Sorry. That came out a little blunter than I intended.” He walked back towards Willow’s bed, then he smiled at her. His eyes were wide in an expression mixed with awe and caution. “It’s just... you are amazing! Your speed, your strength—”

“I’m also passionate, artistic and inquisitive.” She didn’t mean to keep snapping at him, but she really hated being reduced to just the Slayer. He shrank a little, and she bit her lip. She was willing to cut Riley some slack since it was all new to him. Except that she wasn’t the only one with a secret life here. “Who are you?”

“You know who I am. The rest... what I do...” His voice trailed off, then he shook his head. “I can’t tell you.”

Buffy stood, not bothering to hide the cockiness in her body language as she paced slowly, her hands on her hips. “Well, then let me. You’re part of some military monster squad that captures demons, vampires—you probably have some official-sounding euphemisms for them. Like unfriendlies or … non-sapiens—”

“Hostile Sub Terrestrials,” he interjected. She nodded, processing the information. This was real. Riley was really one of the commandos. So much for normal.

“So you deliver these … HSTs to a bunch of lab coats, who perform experiments on them, which, among other things, turn some into harmless little bunnies.” She captured his eyes challengingly. “How am I doing so far?”

Riley looked at her with open suspicion now. “A little too well.”

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Riley looked at her with open suspicion now. “A little too well.”

Buffy ignored his body language. She didn’t have time for super-secret military paranoia. “Meanwhile by day you pretend to be Riley Finn, corn-fed Iowa boy.” She didn’t hide her derision. He had no right to judge her right then. And maybe he got that. Riley looked down, expression shifting from suspicion back to nervous guilt. “Ever been to Iowa, Riley? God, if that’s even your name.”

Riley put a hand on her arm, and she flinched away from it. He bit his lip nervously. “It is,” he assured. “And I’m Iowa, born and raised. But hey! Bulletin: I’m not the only one who’s been a little less than honest here.”

Buffy sat back down, falling back against her mattress in frustration. “I thought a professional demon chaser like yourself would have figured it out by now,” she muttered petulantly, then sat back up and looked him dead in the eyes. “I’m the Slayer.” Riley just looked at her like she was speaking a foreign language. “Slayer? The Chosen One? She who hangs out a lot in cemeteries?” He continued to gape, zero recognition showing on his face. “You’re kidding.” She stood again, pacing. “Ask around. Look it up: Slayer comma the.”
“So, you’re not an HST?” That stopped her in her tracks. *He thought I was a demon?!!*

“I’m not a demon, Riley. I’m the one destined to fight them. I’m still—” she frowned. Buffy had to admit, she didn’t know as much of the Slayer lore as she probably should—definitely not as much as Kendra had known. *But I’m still human, right? Yeah. Gotta be. Spike can’t hurt me, so human, right? “I’m human. Just of the special variety.”*

“It’s just … you kicked our asses without breaking a sweat.” Buffy raised an eyebrow, unsure of what he was saying, but as he paled in realization of what he had admitted, things clicked into place.

“You were one of the commandos who smoke bombed us that time with—” she cut herself off before she said Spike’s name. She wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to reveal that she knew the vampire he was he was after, much less that she was keeping him around as a soldier in her war on evil. Then she remembered Halloween. The commando who had run into her, and she had knocked him over. It had felt so familiar. *Because it was literally déjà vu! He had toppled over just like Riley had when she first ran into him that time in the psych building. “And you were the guy in the mask from Halloween!”*

His eyes widened, and he was clearly caught off guard by how much she seemed to know. Buffy’s mind was racing. “Wait, so you thought I might be a demon, but you didn’t try to bring me in? Instead, you figured you would try to *date* me?!”

“I was intrigued. And yeah, confused too, but you’re just so…” He smiled bashfully. *You. And we made up a story about not seeing who attacked us. For—” he cut himself off, but the cat was out of the bag. His friend Forrest was a commando, too. “We were too embarrassed to admit we got our asses kicked by a couple of girls.”

*Macho nonsense for the win.* Still, Buffy stiffened, a chill pervading her chest. *He saw Faith too.* Buffy took a deep breath, turning to look out the window as she processed this new information. She wanted to trust Riley, but she was damn sure not letting his commandos do anything that might threaten or endanger Faith.

“So then... What do we do?” came the gentle question from behind her.

“I don’t know,” she groaned. “I just … I really thought that you were a nice, normal guy.”

“I *am* a nice, normal guy,” he answered, his voice warm and friendly. She spun to face him, brow furrowed and frustration bubbling.

“Maybe by this town’s standards, but I’m not grading on a curve.” She swallowed, hard, remembering her Slayer dream. Remembering that deep down desire for something normal to hold onto. A boyfriend who wasn’t wrapped up in all the darkness that pervaded her life. “Riley, I just… can’t.”

“Can’t talk?”

Buffy shook her head, gesturing emphatically with her hands. “Can’t *any of it.* *God, I’m so tired.* “I can’t be with you.” His face sank, as if he hadn’t even considered that might be off the table. They hadn’t exactly had a talk about where this thing between them was going, but prior to tonight, she was pretty sure they both imagined they were close to having that talk. But not anymore. “It’s just a huge, black pit of a mistake and I can’t go there again.”

“Again?” He was incredulous. “You’ve dated me before?”
Buffy’s mind flashed from Angel to Faith, and she shook her head again, this time to ward off her mind’s insistence on putting Faith into a category Buffy wanted to pretend she wasn’t in. “No!” she countered. “Look I was involved…” *Nope, definitely not discussing Angel right now.* “You don’t know what my life is like.”

“But I’m dying to find out.”

Buffy shoved him, just a little. She needed to make her point. “*Dying* being the operative word here. Okay? There is too much risk. There is too much... It’s just doomed! And I can’t do doomed again right now. Sorry.” She crossed her arms, refusing to meet his gaze.

“I-I don’t understand where this is coming from. I know you like me. And it’s not like we don’t have anything in common.”

Buffy groaned. “That isn’t the point, and it’s *really* not a point in your favor right now, trust me.”

“But, Buffy, I’m thrown by this, I’m confused...” He looked around for a few seconds, but then looked back to her, his jaw set. “But I can feel my skin humming, my hands, my … every inch of me. I’ve never been this excited about anybody before. I’m not trying to scare you, and I’m not going to force myself on you.” He took a step closer. “But I’m, by God, not going to walk away because I think it might not work. I don’t know what’s happened in your past—”

He reached for her, and Buffy took a step back, away from him, interrupting his little speech. “Pain. Death. Apocalypse. None of it fun.” Her voice was a haunted whisper. *How was he not getting this? Why can’t anything ever just work out for me?* “Do you know what a Hellmouth is? Do you have a fancy term for it? Because I went to high school on it … for three *years!*” She shook her head again. “We do *not* have that much in common. This is a *job* to you.”

“It’s not just a job,” he insisted.

“It’s an adventure, great,” she answered dismissively. “But for me, it’s destiny. It is something that —”

This time, Riley was the one to interrupt, closing the distance between them again. “Buffy, *mean* it. This isn’t just a job. I’m not... I’m a soldier, okay? I didn’t get in it for the demons or the adventure.” His eyes shown with pride and belief in what he was telling her, and she couldn’t look away. “I meant it when I said I’m a nice, normal guy. And like a lot of nice, normal guys, I just wanted to do something good for the world. Serve my country.” He sighed. “I really can’t tell you much. But I can tell you that I didn’t sign up for a secret demon squad. That came later, and I do it because it’s right and good. It gives me a purpose. But it damn sure doesn’t make me any less of the guy I’ve always been.”

Buffy wanted to believe him. She wanted it a lot. It would be so much easier—these commandos were just some secret branch of the US military. That wasn’t something that had occurred to Buffy. And it made things much more complicated if they turned out to be less than friendly to her. Riley was right, though. Joining the military was the kind of normal thing—at least from the part of the country he was from—that she claimed to want. And admirable in its own way, even if Buffy had never imagined herself dating a soldier type. She blew out a long breath she hadn’t realized she had been holding. There was just so much about this—about Riley and his team—that she didn’t know.

He put a soft hand on her cheek, pulling her gaze back up to his eyes. “You have this twisted way of looking at things, … this—this doom and gloom mentality.” He smiled, softly and sadly. “You keep thinking like that, and things are probably gonna turn out just the way you expect.”
Buffy chuckled wryly but didn’t pull away. “You know, there is nothing more dangerous than a psych grad student.” She frowned. “But you don’t know what you’re asking. I’ve tried it, okay?” She was trying really hard not to tear up, but that meant she had no energy left to keep the emotion from her voice. “Being with someone who does what I do. And every time it just fell apart. And then I get sucked right back in to the uber evil.”

Riley watched her curiously as she kept arguing, then his hand moved up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. He smiled, resonating confidence and reassurance. “Welcome to the story of the world. Things fall apart, Buffy. And evil? It comes and goes. But the way people manage is, they don’t do it alone. They pull each other through.”

No one had ever really talked to her like this. Riley was trying his hardest to make her feel, what? Hope? In that moment, she realized something. Something that Riley, normal or not, seemed to have that Angel hadn’t. That Faith… Nope. Don’t go there. Riley was different, not because he didn’t fight the big evil, but because doing so didn’t pull him into the darkness. Positivity. He had somehow managed to hold onto it, to fight in the dark but live in the light. And that was what she really wanted. That was what she meant when she said she wanted normal, wasn’t it?

Before she could question herself any further, she pushed up onto her toes and kissed him. He didn’t hesitate to return the kiss, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close. The kiss was warm, but not overly passionate. She couldn’t help that she still felt cautious. She pulled away, but only to look back into his eyes. “At some point, I need to know everything. Or at least more than nothing.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he promised. “There’s a chain of command, and …”

“I get it.”

His eyes searched hers. “But … you’re up for this. For … us?”

Her teeth tugged just a little at her lower lip, thinking. Then she nodded, slowly. Tentatively. “Yeah, I think I am.”

“That’s all I need to know,” he smiled. “We’ll figure the rest out as we go, I promise.” And he kissed her again, this time with a bit more passion. Buffy melted into the kiss. She wanted this. Maybe she needed it, or at least that’s what she thought. Either way, she was going to give this a chance. Maybe she could find her normal after all.
Who do you trust?

Chapter Notes

Bit of a time jump (about a month and a half) since the last chapter. Based on A New Man, this is gonna be one of the last chapters in this story that follows an episode of the show closely. I’m finally starting to dig into the Initiative, but I have a very different plan for how it will play into the back half of this story. As always, I welcome your comments--just please don't be too hard on Buffy.

“Are you sure you’re ready for that?” Joyce asked, her neutral tone covering over the concern Faith could see in her eyes. Faith didn’t bother to hide the surprise in her own expression. For all the trouble she’d had with Buffy and her new boy toy the last couple of months, Faith had managed to not let herself close off from the other people in her life—namely Joyce and Willow. And part of that meant no longer running away from the first sign of potential judgment.

“Ready for what exactly, Joyce?”

Joyce immediately looked flustered, and Faith took another bite of her dinner, waiting to see how this played out. Joyce breathed in, then exhaled loudly. “Well … I mean. Honey, I know you want to strike out on your own, and I hope you know that I’m beyond proud of you. But…”

Faith again refused to hide the confusion from her expression. She genuinely had no idea what Joyce’s hang up might be at this point. They had talked before, on several occasions, about Faith getting her own place when she was ready. It wasn’t exactly news. “But what?”

“Well, I just …” Joyce’s body language continued to tighten, and now she refused to look Faith in the eye. “Look, I’ll just say it, and please don’t take it the wrong way. But … you’re only eighteen, and it isn’t the gay thing, I promise, but you’re just so young, and wouldn’t it be a good idea to experience living on your own for a bit first?” Joyce’s words poured from her mouth with increasing speed the longer she stammered through her concern, and Faith could only look on with increasing amusement. “I mean, do you have to move in with your girlfriend the first chance you get? Aren’t you rushing just a little?”

She only stopped the word vomit because Faith started laughing, unable to hold back her visceral reaction to the complete and utter absurdity of what Joyce was suggesting. Joyce’s shock at Faith’s laughter only made it worse, and several minutes passed before Faith could speak again.

“Joyce, Anya is not my girlfriend.” The older woman’s eyes widened, a bright red blush flooding her cheeks.

“She isn’t?” Her voice was high and tight, and Faith could tell she was embarrassed. Faith tried to focus on the hilarity of the idea of her and Anya together, rather than how concerning it was that Joyce seemed so uncomfortable with the idea. They’d never really addressed Faith’s sexuality, but she was done pretending she was interested in boys for anything other than a quick fling, even if she was trying her hardest to let go of the deep and unrelenting feelings she still harbored for Buffy. The last thing she wanted to do was lose herself down an anxiety spiral of worry about some unlikely future in which Buffy finally pulled that stick out of her ass, only to have Joyce freak out at the idea
of her daughter and her not-daughter-but-something-similar-in-a-way being romantically involved. Faith pushed that thought deep down to the back of her mind.

Instead, she focused on the conversation she was actually having. “Nah. Anya is with Xander—how did you miss this? Did you always think she was my girlfriend?”

“Well, I didn’t want to pry,” Joyce explained, trying to cover for the ongoing embarrassment she was feeling.

“Anya is, in her own words—” Faith did her best to mimic the ex-demon’s tone and speech patterns, “painfully, frustratingly straight.”

“But you’re not.” It didn’t sound like a question, but Faith wasn’t sure about that. She searched Joyce’s careful expression for some sign of judgment or malice. She didn’t see anything obvious, but it still hurt a little that Joyce had to say it. Faith was gay, and that really wasn’t in question for either of them at this point. It was just weird to have Joyce actually acknowledging it for once.

“No. I’m not,” Faith confirmed quietly, before focusing her attention back down to the few scraps of her meal left. She elected not to dwell on it any further—if Joyce had a problem with her queerness, it wasn’t something Faith wanted to know about. “Anyways. Anya’s lease on the shithole she’s living in is up in about a month, and we’re gonna start looking for a two-bedroom place soon. I just wanted to give ya the heads up.”

Joyce sighed, and Faith glanced up at her. “Sweetie, I didn’t mean to …” Joyce’s eyes darted up to the ceiling, then back to Faith. “I’m not… uh. Good for you, is what I should be saying. I’m sorry if I pried. But I’m very proud of you.”

Faith forced a smile. “Thanks, Joyce. And thanks, ya know, for putting up with my shit.” Joyce started to interrupt, almost certainly to tell Faith it wasn’t a big deal, and Faith cut her off immediately. “No, seriously. You gave me a home, and you didn’t have to. Especially after everything I did to screw things up last year.” Joyce still didn’t know the full extent of it, but she did know that the Mayor had been evil and that Faith had been convinced to help him out with some things before switching back to the good guys. “I ain’t great with words, and I know I’ll never be able to say what it means to me.”

She pushed her plate away, finished eating, and locked eyes with Joyce. “Fact of the matter is, I’m actually something close to a functioning human adult, and no way would I have been able to do that without you. When I came to Sunnydale I was all kinds of fucked up, and I still am in some ways, but I’ve got a job, and I’m about to have my own place, and I’m not lookin’ to steal or get involved in any shady shit just to make ends meet. And I’m not tryin’ to run outta town anytime shit gets tough.” She blew out a long breath, surprised at her own sudden outburst of emotional honesty. “I never really had a mom, not a good one anyway, and I’m not tryin’ to put anything on you—I just … yeah, I guess thanks is the best I got.”

She let that hang in the air between them, feeling very self-conscious at this point. But Joyce wasn’t having any of it. She pushed her chair back and walked straight over to Faith, pulling her to her feet and then into a tight bear hug.

“Sweetie, you did this. It was in you all along, you just needed someone to believe in you. I’m so happy you let me be that person.” Faith felt more than a little overwhelmed, and rather than try to process her feelings, she broke from the hug and grabbed her plate and Joyce’s as she headed to the kitchen. She had the hot water and soap going in no time, and Joyce left her to it. She knew when to give Faith some space, and that was one of the many things for which Faith was truly grateful.
New millennium, new Faith. She still wasn’t quite sure where she was headed down this new and improved life path, but this was the best she had ever felt about herself, in her entire shitty existence. For the first time, she felt like she actually knew what she was doing, even if she hadn’t quite figured out yet what it was she wanted, beyond the thrill of the slay. But 2000 was looking like it was going to be a good year for her, and not even that annoying little soldier boy could get her down.

The phone rang as she finished drying her hands. “Faith!” Joyce shouted from the hallway, “Willow’s on the phone.” Faith hurried past her, heading for the stairs.

“Got it. I’ll answer on the phone in B’s room, thanks!” She wasted no time getting upstairs, making sure she heard Joyce hang up before addressing Willow. “What’s up, Red?”

“Hey Faith!” The redhead sounded as bright and cheerful as ever, and Faith wondered how much of that had to do with a certain blonde witch. “Just wanted to check in and make sure we had everything perfect for tomorrow night.”

“I’m bringing the decorations, cake, and a bit of … uh … sweetener for the punch, yeah?”

“Yup! And I’ve got the big rec room in our dorm reserved for the night. Just get there around seven, and we should have time to put up the decorations and get everything ready. I already talked to Riley, and he’ll distract Buffy up in the dorm room until then.” Willow’s voice trailed off as if she just realized how that sounded, and Faith did her absolute best not to picture it. “Sorry…” Willow whispered.

“Don’t worry about it,” Faith assured her, trying to keep the frustration out of her voice. Faith’s feelings for Buffy, and Willow’s support of a potential Faith-Buffy pairing, was an open secret between the two of them, but not something they really discussed openly anymore. Not since Buffy made things official with tall, bland, and boring.

Faith hadn’t told Willow that she and Buffy had been more than friends already, prior to the major Buffy freak out that eventually led her into the arms of Riley. For all of her bitterness, she wouldn’t betray Buffy’s trust like that, especially not with their mutual best friend. But Willow was perceptive and brilliant, and Faith had no doubt she knew there was more there than either Slayer was letting on. For her part, Faith was still trying to let it go.

The reason she hadn’t pushed for anything more with Buffy was that she wanted to find herself, prove that she could be a mature, non-shitty person on her own. Prove that she was more than the pathetic street trash who was dumb enough to get manipulated by the smarmy charm of a soulless local politician with a friendly smile. Faith felt like she had done that, had proven that at least to herself, but now things were all kinds of weird. Buffy had made it clear she wasn’t ready to deal with her own queerness, and Faith wasn’t looking to force her out of the closet.

The two of them had found their way back to something like friendship over the last month and a half, even thought Faith couldn’t help being an asshole when the boy was around. Buffy didn’t seem to blame her for it, at least. Things weren’t like they were before everything blew up—the ease and comfort shared between the Slayers had been replaced by a slightly more distant familiarity—but they were on good terms now. Enough that Faith had gladly agreed to help Willow plan a surprise birthday party for Buffy. She just wished she didn’t have to suffer the company of her blandsome plus-one.

“Is Giles coming? Would it be weird to invite Joyce?” Faith asked, genuinely curious. Joyce hadn’t met Riley yet, and Faith tried not to think too hard about why Buffy might be wanting to keep her new boyfriend a secret from her mom. It could be that he was a secret demon-fighting commando working for an underground military group none of them completely trusted yet. Or it could be that
her heart wasn’t really in the relationship. Probably not that though. Don’t get your hopes up, idiot. Could be anything.

Willow’s enthusiasm interrupted Faith’s quickly spiraling train of thought. “That’s a great idea, actually! I know Buffy felt bad that she didn’t have much time for her mom lately, and then Giles won’t be the only older person there.”

“Cool, I’ll let her know.” Faith paused, then decided to press her luck. “You know, you could—”

“I’m not ready for that yet,” Willow interjected, as if reading Faith’s thoughts. Hey, she can’t actually read my thoughts can she? Faith’s brow furrowed. Red, if you’re in my head right now, you better fucking say something because if I find out you’ve been poking around in there without—

“Faith? Where’d you go?”

“I’m here,” Faith answered sheepishly. Well good. As much as she thought Willow and Tara were badasses, magic still made Faith feel a little uncomfortable. Mostly because she just didn’t understand how it worked or what limits there were. If any. “And I’m not pushin’, I just feel bad for T-Mac.”

Willow chuckled. “I’m still not sure how I feel about that nickname.”

“Tough stuff, Red. She likes it just fine.”

“I know,” Willow huffed. “And I feel bad, too. I’m just not ready yet. Buffy and I haven’t seen much of each other lately, what with us both having new people in our lives, and after everything that definitely didn’t happen between you and her that I definitely know nothing about, I’m a little worried about how she’s going to react to the idea of me dating a girl.” Faith rolled her eyes but didn’t interrupt. “I mean, I thought she was going to cry when I told her Oz and I broke up.”

Oz and Willow’s break up wasn’t really much of a thing, for how long they had been together. They had just grown apart over the semester, and the ordeal with the Gentlemen had really cleared up where Willow’s heart was. She and Oz split up plenty amicably, even though it came as a pretty big shock to all the Scoobies except for Faith. She had started dating Tara almost immediately thereafter, meaning the two had been together for over a month at this point. So far, Faith was the only one who knew, and she had already developed a soft spot for Willow’s overly shy girlfriend, even though the three of them had only hung out a few times so far. Faith had no doubt she’d come out of her shell eventually, but she didn’t want her to feel left out of the group. Faith knew how that felt, and she wouldn’t wish it upon anyone.

“Okay okay, I get it,” she conceded. “But the three of us are doing something later in the week.”

"Deal," Willow agreed, the smile evident in her voice.

“Just know that when you’re ready to tell everyone, I’ll be there. I can kick any asses that need kickin’.”

Willow laughed, and while Faith knew she was worried about coming out to everyone, the mirth was genuine. Also, Faith wasn’t joking, and Willow probably knew that, too. “I’ll keep that in mind. See ya tomorrow?”

“Sure thing, Red. Don’t keep T-Mac up too late tonight!”

“Shut it, you.” Willow hung up before Faith could tease her any further. Faith wasn’t sure when she had gotten so used to the way smiling felt on her lips, but it was nice. She shrugged, electing not to overthink it, and headed downstairs to invite Joyce to the party.
It was nice, having the dorm room all to themselves. Actually, it was kinda strange how rarely Willow was around, especially considering that she and Oz broke up. Where has she been lately? As if sensing that her mind was elsewhere, Riley broke the kiss.

“We're not expecting anyone, are we?” he asked, his face shadowed by the dim lighting in the room. She honestly couldn’t tell if he was annoyed by her mind wandering, or if he hadn’t even noticed and just wanted to be sure they had some alone time before things got a little more physical. They were laying side-by-side in her tiny dorm room bed, fully clothed, and Buffy still felt less than sure about going any further than making out.

Buffy and Riley had been together for nearly two months, and things with Riley were—secret commando demon stuff aside—exactly as nice and normal as Buffy had imagined. He was beyond sweet, and romantic, and smart, and thoughtful, and … she honestly didn’t know what her issue was. Things had just progressed much slower with the physical side of their relationship, and Buffy felt no particularly strong urge to push it along that path any more quickly.

“Willow said she was going to be at the science library all night.”

“Is that right?” His voice was playful and flirtatious, hinting at his desires. Buffy’s mind lingered on her previous statement, though, even as Riley brought his lips back to hers, hands beginning to wander down her frame. Why would Willow be at the science library all night? The semester had only just started, and Buffy wasn’t even sure Willow was taking a science course. What could possibly keep her there all night? Does she have a new boyfriend? Already? That seemed beyond unlikely to Buffy.

Oz and Willow had been such a good couple, so very in love. He was so good for her. Buffy didn’t quite understand what happened between them, and Willow hadn’t been super forthcoming with the details other than her insistence that they had just grown apart over the semester. It was something that didn’t make any sense to Buffy, because it wasn’t something she had ever experienced. She broke up with Angel because things could never be good between them, not because her feelings for him had ever lessened. And it was the same, in a way, with Faith. Buffy sincerely didn’t understand how two people just fall out of love, and it hurt a little that Willow blew it off as if it didn’t mean anything. As if it was just normal.

Buffy tensed as the door swung open, and there was Willow, as if summoned by Buffy’s own thoughts. That’s not how magic works, is it?

“Uh, apparently not,” she muttered, referring to the prior question as to whether Willow would be out of the room for the rest of the night. Which again raised the question of what Willow had been up to lately. Buffy immediately pulled herself away from Riley and stood, facing Willow with a questioning look.

“We got trouble,” Willow insisted.

“What is it?”

Willow was ever so slightly out of breath as she explained, “I was in the rec room. It came through the window.”

Buffy’s heart leapt into her throat. Willow was a capable witch, but not much with the hand-to-hand combat. But she seemed okay. “Vampire?” Riley inquired.
“Vampires don’t breathe fire,” she replied ominously, and Buffy’s brow furrowed. She didn’t smell anything like smoke or singed clothing on Willow. But she didn’t hesitate either, pulling her knife and crossbow from her weapons trunk and tossing the crossbow to Riley. She smiled down at the knife, which was every bit as gorgeous (or as gorgeous as a sharp implement of violence could be) as the day Faith had given it to her. Then she looked up, her face set in Slayer mode.

“Let’s go,” she ordered, and Riley snapped to attention, following the two Scoobies from the room. She tried not to giggle at how much of a soldier he was, even in civilian clothes.

They made their way downstairs, and as they turned into the hallway, Riley said, “I should call for backup.”

“No time,” Buffy demurred, and she nodded for him to take the other door to the rec room. She turned back to Willow as he moved into position. “We have to make this fast. I have better things to do tonight than kill.” She wasn’t entirely sure how much she believed her own words, since a good slay actually sounded pretty fun, but she knew Riley would appreciate the sentiment. She pushed the door open, walking into the dark room with her knife at the ready.

And then the lights came on, revealing a brightly decorated room and a group of people enthusiastically yelling, “Surprise!” A sign in the far corner read, ‘Happy 19th Birthday Buffy’ and there was cake and punch on the table in the middle of the room. With an amused shake of her head, she tucked her knife into her bag and shot her friends a bright smile. Everyone was there: Joyce, Giles, Xander, Anya, and Faith. Buffy felt the butterflies as the other Slayer smiled sheepishly at her, as if she couldn’t believe she had become the kind of person who threw surprise birthday parties.

Willow faced her with an enthusiastic, shit-eating grin. “Guess you won’t be killing anything tonight, after all.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Buffy teased wryly.

“Hey, Faith helped!” Willow squeaked, and at the sound of her name, Faith wandered closer.

“Don’t pin this on me, Red. Do I look like a throwing people birthday parties kinda gal?” Buffy couldn’t help that her eyes traced down Faith’s body at the question. She was wearing one of her louder outfits, a dark, cleavagey sweater over bright, faux-snakeskin pants.

“Those pants say yes,” Buffy answered playfully, and Faith made a face of faux exasperation. Buffy was legitimately surprised that Faith was behind the party, even if Willow helped. It was so … normal, and on top of that, it was really sweet of her, considering the bad blood that they were only starting to get over. Buffy felt her lips curl into a wide smile of their own accord, and she continued teasing Faith. “It’s okay, we won’t tell anyone. No need to ruin your street cred.”

Faith snorted. “Good. In that case, I’ll admit to spiking the punch. But otherwise, this was all Red.” Faith’s nervous body language said otherwise, but Buffy didn’t push her on it. Then she noticed that Riley was still standing awkwardly in the corner, trying to hide the crossbow behind his back. She grimaced and flashed an apologetic look to Willow and Faith.

“Thank you both. Be right back.” She quickly made her way across the room, meeting the eyes of everyone and smiling but not halting until she reached Riley and plucked the crossbow from his hands, placing it into her bag. He looked more than a little uncomfortable, so she tried to reassure him. “It’s okay. Everyone here knows about me. No one’s gonna freak at the sight of a crossbow.” But that wasn’t what had him unnerved, she realized. He barely registered her comment, and his eyes were fixed firmly on the two adults in the room.
Buffy’s chest tightened a little. She hadn’t even told her mom or Giles that she was dating someone, and now introducing him to them was completely unavoidable. We are so not at the meet the parents stage of this relationship yet. “Okay okay, don’t freak out,” she muttered, and Buffy couldn’t be sure if she was talking to herself or Riley. He looked down at her, completely unsure of how to handle the situation. “That’s my mom, and my … uh, Giles.” There was no easy way to explain the Watcher’s Council or her complicated relationship with Giles, so she didn’t bother. “Come on.” She took his hand and led him towards where they waited, watching her with some amount of amusement.

“Hi Mom! Hi Giles!”

“Happy birthday, sweetie!”

“Buffy. Happy Birthday.” She let go of Riley’s hand long enough to give them both warm hugs, then quickly took it back as she thanked them both for their warm wishes.

Giles smiled at her, glancing from their hands to Buffy’s face and then to Joyce. “Nineteen. It's hard to believe, isn't it?”

Buffy grinned at his slightly stiff British-ness. It was a little weird seeing him in this context, and he apparently felt similarly. She looked back and forth between her parental figures, then swallowed hard. Just get it over with, Buffy. “There's somebody I want you to meet. Uh, this is Riley Finn … my boyfriend.” Riley took a step forward and extended his right hand, shaking first Joyce’s hand and then Giles’.

Both of them looked a little surprised that this was the first they were hearing about her relationship, but they did a pretty good job of recovering as Riley said, “It's very nice to meet you, Ms. Summers. Mr. Giles.” His voice wavered a little, and he added awkwardly, “Uh, did you plan this? It was quite a surprise.” Buffy’s eyes widened, and she realized that she hadn’t even told Riley when her birthday was. Worst girlfriend ever.

“Actually, this was all Willow and Faith’s doing, I believe.” Joyce’s voice was as warm as always, but Buffy could tell she had gone into friendly mom mode to cover up her disappointment in Buffy.

“So um, have you two, uh… been . . . dating long?” Giles inquired.

Buffy redirected the conversation, blurtling the first thing that came into her head. “Giles was the librarian at my high school.”

“Ah, I've seen the library. It's gone downhill since you left,” Riley joked. Buffy smiled, and Giles chuckled.

“Yes. I-I-I'm embarrassed to say that I actually miss it at times.”

“So, you're retired?”

Giles frowned at the question. “I'm sorry?”

Riley blanched. “Or … uh, you're working somewhere else now?”

Giles tensed as he fumbled for an explanation. “Well, not, uh . . . sort of between projects, uh, right now, uh, it's a personal—”

“It’s okay, Giles; he knows,” she interrupted, heading him off. She felt bad that this was all coming out of nowhere for him. She turned to Riley to explain. “Giles is—was—my Watcher. He, uh,
helps me with my slaying, mostly with training and research and stuff. He has all the musty old books on demons and magic and what not.” Sensing a mounting sense of confusion and anxiety, Buffy pivoted again. “Oh look, Mom and Giles don’t have any punch!”

Riley took his cue immediately. “Oh, here. Here, I’ll grab everyone some.” He moved away quickly, and Buffy could already tell she was in for a scolding.

“Buffy—” Giles started, pulling his glasses off to begin wiping them. She interrupted.

“I know, I know. I should’ve told you. It just hadn’t come up yet!” She glanced back at Riley, and then to her mom. “He’s just nervous. But this is so nice. Having everyone together for my birthday.” She hoped Giles wouldn’t push her on her failure to tell him about another person in the circle of Slayer identity trust. She still wasn’t sure how to tell him she was dating one of the commandos. She tried her best to make a joke, to break the tension. “Of course, you could smash in all my toes with a hammer, and it will still be the bestest Buffy Birthday Bash in a big long while.” Her chest tightened again, and she hoped that she hadn’t just jinxed things. She also felt bad, because Giles’ face fell, guilt clouding his features as he no doubt thought back on his betrayal at her birthday last year.

Joyce finally jumped back into the conversation. “Like I said, Willow and Faith did all the planning.” She smiled warmly across the room, where Faith and Willow were chatting it up with Xander and Anya. “I’m not sure I would have gone with the surprise party,” she added playfully, raising an eyebrow. “You know, you have enough things jumping out at you in the dark.” Buffy laughed nervously, eyes darting to where Riley was trying to carry four cups of punch at once. “Riley is very handsome, dear.”

He made his way over. “Here you go, ma’am. Sir.”

“And so polite,” Joyce added enthusiastically, soliciting a groan from Buffy.

“Calm down, Mom.” And please don’t bring up my last boyfriend, who I absolutely haven’t told Riley was a vampire. Fortunately, Joyce kept the conversation on Riley. “So, are you a student too?”

“Grad student, actually. Getting my master’s in psychology.”

Joyce chuckled. “Well, well.” Please don’t say it, Buffy prayed silently. But of course, her prayer went unanswered. “Buffy certainly does have a thing for older men,” she quipped, bumping her shoulder against Buffy’s.

“Mom!”

“You said this demon prince guy was supposed to rise at sunset, right?” Giles nodded, and Faith furrowed her brow. “So aren’t we, like, late?”

Giles made a face as he sighed in frustration, and Faith did her best not to snicker. She hadn’t realized the former Watcher had a petulant side. “Yes, well, if I hadn’t wasted so much time trying to find Buffy and then you…”

“Hey G, I can’t speak to where little miss college girl was, but I got exactly four places I might be: the Gallery, the house, the Bronze, or out on patrol. If it took you till dinner time to think to look at Joyce’s place for me, that’s on you.”
“Yes well … uh, you make a good point.” She could tell he was still annoyed with Buffy for keeping Riley a secret, and probably for telling him about the Slayer stuff without any kind of heads up to Giles. “Um, speaking of Joyce, sh-she did mention that you passed your GED exam. I just wanted to say congratulations.”

Faith blushed ever so slightly, turning so that he wouldn’t see it in the overhead lighting of the lamp they were passing under on their way through the cemetery. “Uh, thanks G. It really isn’t a big thing, though—”

“No, it is. Don’t undermine your accomplishments, Faith.” His voice was serious and bordering on sentimental in a way she’d never heard it before. “I confess, I didn’t think much of you when you breezed into town last year, and especially after everything with the Mayor…” he trailed off, lost in thought, then shot an embarrassed look her direction. “Sorry, um. I just mean that the steps you’ve made since then to build a life for yourself here are remarkable. And you’ve quite proven yourself, both as a Slayer and as a young woman. Have you told Buffy?”

“Nope,” Faith snapped, just a little too harshly. “I mean … sorry. It’s just… why would she care? She’s got her high school diploma, and now she’s got the college thing and is distracted by the boy toy, and …”

“She still cares about you, Faith.” The way he said made her think he suspected more than he usually let on, and that was absolutely not something she was about to discuss with him. So she turned her attention back to the task at hand.

“What is this thing anyway? What if we are too late?”

Giles immediately became irritable again. “Well at this point, it wouldn’t surprise me if we’re entirely too late. Demon on the loose, carnage everywhere.” They reached a large mausoleum, and he pulled open the large wrought iron gate to hold it open for her. “The Demon Prince Barvain was prophesied to arise after the third new moon after the nine hundredth Feast of Delthrox. Which by my calculation, should be tonight.” Except that there was no demon in sight, and the interior of the mausoleum was impressively neat and clean, save for a few cobwebs here and there.

“Yeah well G, if your boy was here, he sure as hell cleaned up after himself. Ya know, the last thing I need is a demon neat freak roaming around Sunny D.”

“I don’t understand.” He continued to search the room, shining his flashlight here and there. “Um, there should be ruptured earth and-and broken stone. Oh, well, apparently it hasn’t happened yet. A bit of luck.” He sat his bag down on the floor and opened it to begin pulling out supplies. Faith continued to eye the room warily, spinning her ax in hand nervously.

“Yeah, I don’t know. Getting’ a weird vibe from this place. It’s too clean, almost like someone wants it to look more normal than it usually wou—” Her eyes widened as her voice trailed off, realizing what was setting off her Slayer intuition. “Fuck. Bet it was the Initiative. We’re runnin’ late here; they probably already got your guy.”

She continued looking around, and from behind her, Giles asked, “Who?”

“Riley and the other soldier boys. Probably all over it.”

She turned back to find Giles standing, staring at her in befuddlement. “What?”

Faith shrugged. “Yeah, I don’t know. They got all that fancy tech, right? They can probably read hot spots of otherworldly energy or whatever. Might’ve picked this place up days ago.”
Giles continued staring at her, brows furrowed as if she was speaking an entirely different language of which he could only understand every third word. “Uh, what, uh ...” he shook his head, “What are you talking about? W-what's the Initiative? What on earth does it have to do with Buffy's new boyfriend?”

Faith froze, her eyes widening in another flash of realization. *Fuck.* “B didn’t tell you.” It wasn’t a question—from the look on his face, there was no doubt about it. “Shit, I’m sorry G. Her boy toy’s one of those commando guys that’ve been buggin’ about campus lately.”

“What?! Well that’s marvelous, isn’t it?” He turned away in a huff. “Here I am, spent weeks trying, uh, t-to get a single scrap of information about our mysterious demon collectors, and no one bothers to tell me that Buffy’s dating one of them?!” He rounded on her, index finger extended scoldingly. “Who else knows?”

“No one.” She shrugged again. “I mean, just the Scoobies, probably. Red, Xander, and Anya. Think Oz was already out of the loop by then, so not even him. I mean … maybe Spike, because he’s always lurkin’ around. I honestly don’t know why I can’t just—”

“Ssspike?!” Giles gasped. “*Spike* knew?”

“Hey, don’t freak out at me. Not like I told him. If it were up to me, he’d be a pile of dust.”

“Oh, forget it. Go on. Clear off. I’ll just stay a little longer just in case.”

Faith shot him a look that made it very clear how stupid an idea that was. “Alright, uh, well in that case, I’ll head out. As long as you’re sure.” He waved her off, and she made no effort to hang around and tend to his shitty mood. *Great job, B.*

However, she didn’t make it far before she heard the scrape of the iron gate again, followed by Giles shout back into the mausoleum, “Did someone--?”

Faith tuned in with her enhanced Slayer hearing to just barely hear him answered by another voice in a less uptight British dialect than Giles’, “Oh, bugger! I thought you'd gone!” It wasn’t Spike, but it sounded familiar. She turned and made her way silently back to the mausoleum, waiting outside in the shadows where she could figure out what was going on without being seen. A mischievous grin played along her lips. If the voice was who she thought it was, she wanted to see how things would play out if the two men thought they were alone.

“Ethan Rayne,” Giles confirmed, as if sensing Faith’s curiosity through the stone walls. “You have no idea how much thrashing you is gonna improve my day.” She stifled a laugh at the use of the word ‘thrashing,’ even though she was sure Giles hadn’t intended it as a double entendre.

Sounds of a brief scuffle ensued, then Ethan gasped out, “No, no, no! Wait! Hang on! You-you
can beat the crap out of me. Go ahead, I can't stop you!” *Yeah G, you should really pound him.*

“Or-or you can listen to what I have to say. Find out what's going on.”

“What are you talking about?” Giles snapped.

“Something bad is happening. Bad for both of us.”

“Bad for you.”

Ethan’s voice went a little higher, and Faith could just picture Giles threatening him with a raised fist. “No, no, no! Listen! You have to listen! You're going to need time to prepare!” There was a pause. “Tell you what, Ripper. Let’s grab a pint. You can judge for yourself whether I have any worthwhile information, and afterwards, you can do whatever you want with me.” Faith thought she was going to die from the effort of stifling her giggle at Ethan’s phrasing.

“Fine. I know a place nearby. But no funny business.” *Oh please, G. Don’t pretend like you don’t wanna grab a beer with your frenemy. Have a few, loosen up a bit, see where the night takes you. Fuck me, this is gonna be fun.* She followed them at a distance, making sure that they had no idea they were being followed. It was a short walk to a pub a few blocks over, and Faith snuck in through the back, finding a seat in a shady corner where she could watch them without much chance of being spotted.

She ordered a Sam Adams and watched as Ethan and Giles sat in a tense silence until their beers were brought to the table. “Brilliant!” Ethan exclaimed, a playful look on his well-worn but still handsome features. “Now isn't this more fun than kicking my ass?”

“No,” Giles muttered, but even from across the room, Faith could tell that his mood had improved a little.

“Ohhh,” Ethan teased in sing-song. “Well, it's more fun for me.”

Giles took a sip of his brew. “Just tell me what you want to tell me.”

Ethan feigned hurt. “Oh, so crass. We used to be friends, Ripper. When did all that fall apart?”

*Hah. Friends. Like me and B are ‘friends,’ I bet.*

“The same time you started to worship chaos,” Giles responded curtly, and Faith wondered about their backstory. It sounded fascinating. Too bad she and Giles weren’t really close enough to go digging into it. Maybe someday.

“Oh, religious intolerance,” Ethan murmured, turning sideways in his booth seat and leaning back against the wall. Nothing about his demeanor indicated a willingness to take anything seriously, and Faith couldn’t help that she kinda liked the guy. “Sad, there. I mean, just look at the Irish troubles.” Giles blew out a frustrated breath and started to stand. “Oh, hang on, I'll tell ya.” Faith found herself a little disappointed that Giles wasn’t willing to play along and just have a little fun with an old friend. Other than the cursed candy bars, which was pretty funny to be honest, Faith didn’t know what Rayne had done that was so bad. The similarities she could see between the two men she was watching and her own relationship with Buffy worried her. She didn’t ever want to get to a point where Buffy couldn’t even be bothered to hear her out.

“Something happening in the dark worlds,” Ethan explained, though Faith had no fucking clue what that meant. She hadn’t really heard him speak much last time around, and Faith couldn’t help but note how dark and sultry his voice sounded, especially for a guy. “It’s always been rumors out there, but . . . only one thing's coming through clear. That something's harming demons, and it's not the
Slayer.” Slayers, she corrected mentally. “Know anything about it?”

Giles took another long swallow. “What are they saying?”

Ethan grinned. “Heh. You know demons. It's all exaggeration and blank verse. ‘Pain as bright as steel,’ things like that. They're scared.” He looked straight at Giles, suddenly serious. “There's something called ‘314’ that's got them scared most of all. The kind of scared that turns to angry. I know we're not particularly fond of each other, Rupert.” Giles chuckled at that. “But we are a couple of old mystics. This new outfit, it's blundering into new places it doesn't belong. It's throwing the worlds out of balance. And that's way beyond chaos, mate. We're headed quite literally for one hell of a fight.” He's talking about the Initiative, Faith realized. What are those fuckers up to in their secret labs?

For whatever reason, that was the point at which Giles finally began to let go of his surly demeanor, finishing off his beer and gesturing at the waitress for another round. Faith nursed hers a little more carefully, enjoying the show but wanting to stay sharp just in case Rayne tried to pull something. But one round followed another, then a round of whiskey shots, then another of beer, along with an order of cheese fries. The whole time, the two old nemeses traded banter and old stories that thrilled and captivated Faith. Dark rituals and street gang shenanigans in London. Barely veiled hints of shared conquests and the constant undertone of almost, but not quite, flirtation. All like a fun little play for Faith to enjoy, save for the one time, between rounds three and four, when Giles got up to go take a piss, and Faith had to frantically face the wall and duck behind her hair and hope he didn’t recognize her. Thankfully, he did not.

After the fourth round, Giles seemed good and drunk. “You know what gets me?” He tilted his head, words slurring. “This is what gets me. Twenty years I've been fighting demons. Then the Slayer’s boyfriend and his nancy ninja boys come in, and six months later, demons are pissing themselves with fear. They never even noticed me.”

Ethan surveyed Giles with a glint in his dark eyes. “You know, you're really very attractive.”

Giles responded with a thoughtful, “Hm?” and Ethan immediately played it off as if he was talking to the waitress who was approaching their booth with more beer. He scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to the waitress.

“Here's my name and number. You give me a call, I'll show you a good time”

“Yeah, thanks.” Her tone made it clear how unimpressed she was, but Ethan had already turned back to Giles. Really smooth, buddy.

Giles continued to pretend he was oblivious to what was going on between himself and Ethan, and Faith snorted again at the similarities between her and Buffy. “We gotta face it, we've changed. We're not—” He paused, and Ethan waggled his eyebrows at Giles., who promptly added, “Well, not you, you're still sadistic and … uh, … self-centered.”

Ethan rolled with it, picking up his fresh glass of beer and raising it. “Here's to me.”

“The world has passed us by. Someone snuck in and left us, a couple of has-beens, in our place.” His cadence was so much slower than usual, pausing every few words as he gestured with one hand. Ethan continued to hang on his every word, though. “This Initiative, I mean, their methods may be causing problems, but they're getting the job done. Where am I? I’m an unemployed librarian with a tendency to get knocked on the head.” Faith stifled a laugh. He did get knocked out a lot. We should probably have him checked out for brain damage one of these days.
“Well, we won’t have to worry about that anymore now, mate,” he teased, but then he suddenly turned serious. “When you went to the loo I slipped a small pellet of poison in your drink. You’ll be dead in an hour.” Faith bristled, pushing to her feet. Ethan’s attention remained on Giles, but before Faith could blow her cover, he broke into a wide grin. “Just kidding!”

They both burst out laughing, and Faith turned back to her table. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a twenty, figuring that was the only way to play off being on her feet. Probably about time to call it a night anyway, clearly G will be fine. She could still hear behind her when Giles muttered, “I’m gonna feel like hell in the morning.”

“Relax. Enjoy the night. We’re just a couple of sorcerers. The night is still our time. Time of magic.” She downed the rest of her beer and turned just in time to see them raise their glasses in a toast.

Giles playfully added, “To magic.” As she strode by, facing away so that Giles couldn’t see her face, Faith made a note to stop by Giles’ place bright and early. Please let me walk in on the aftermath of something gloriously debaucherous.

“Alright, you’re sure you’re ready?” Buffy answered the question with a playful glare, and Riley put up his hands. “Alright, alright. Just wanted to be sure. Now, I’m not authorized to bring you in yet, but my superior officer wants to meet you. Talk things over. Maybe start building a bridge. Just … this might be a bit of a surprise is all.”

Buffy shrugged him off. Very little surprised her these days. Except… “Okay, but why are we in the psychology building?”

“All will be revealed,” he promised, and within a minute, they were at Professor Walsh’s office. No way.

“No way,” she insisted, this time out loud. She turned on Riley, disbelieving. He shrugged, then opened the door for her. As they entered, Professor Walsh stood up behind her desk, a thin smile on her face as she welcomed them.

“Ms. Summers, it’s good to see you again. I imagine you’re going to have quite a few questions, and while I can’t promise anything, I will do my best to answer what I can.”

Buffy’s eyes darted back and forth between Riley and Walsh. “You’re … um, really? Professor Walsh, you’re the one running the Initiative?”

“Indeed,” she confirmed. “While I do enjoy my day job as a professor of psychology, it isn’t my life’s work. I am, first and foremost, a military scientist, and yes, the Director of the Demon Research Initiative.” She looked down at her notes, and suddenly Buffy wondered how much Riley had told her. Enough that she needed notes? “And you, Ms. Summers, are … the Slayer.”

Buffy nodded as she took a seat facing Walsh. “Yeah. That’s me.” Riley remained standing, just behind her.

“We thought you were a myth.”

In her sudden nervousness, Buffy rushed to make a joke, hoping to dissolve some of the tension in the air. “Well, you were myth-taken.” She smiled awkwardly, trying to hide her immediate regret at the unfortunate pun. No one laughed.
“And to think all that time you were sitting in my class.” She smirked. “Well, most of those times. I always knew you could do better than a B minus. Now I understand your energies were directed in the same places as ours, in fact. It’s only our methods that differ. We use the latest in scientific technology and state-of-the-art weaponry and you, if I understand correctly, poke them with a sharp stick.” Walsh kept a straight face, but Buffy had the distinct sense that she was being judged.

“Well, it’s more effective than it sounds.” She hated how defensive she sounded. For whatever fancy tech the Initiative had, Buffy was still the Chosen One. This was her destiny, not some science project for Walsh to poke at on behalf of the government.

Sensing Buffy’s unease, Walsh quickly tried to reassure her. “Oh, I’m quite sure of that. As I’m just as sure that we can learn much from each other. I know it’s been a few weeks now since you and Agent Finn discovered your, um, shared interests, and I’m sure you are dying of curiosity about how we do things. I’m working on getting you clearance to come into the Initiative. I think you’ll find the results of our operation most impressive. Agent Finn here, alone, has killed or captured—how many is it?”

Buffy glanced back at Riley, who practically blossomed with pride as he answered, “Seventeen. Eleven vampires, six demons.”

Buffy waited for him to finish—she wasn’t sure if that was his number for the week or the month or… “Oh… uh, wow.” Clearly that was a total number for, like… always, and Buffy did her best to sound impressed. “I mean, that’s… seventeen.”

“What about you?” Walsh inquired, and Buffy shrank from the question. She didn’t want to make Riley feel bad.

“Me?”

“How many hostiles would you say you’ve slain?” She emphasized the final word, her tone inescapably dismissive of the term.

Rising to the bait, and forgetting Riley for a moment, Buffy responded confidently. “Well, I don’t exactly keep a running tally.” Or at least, she didn’t anymore. It had been quite a while since she and Faith had engaged in one of their weekly contests.

“That’s alright, I understand if you aren’t comfortable sharing—”

Buffy rolled her eyes and couldn’t stop herself from blurting out, “But seventeen sounds about right. I’d say I take down about that many every month or so.” She was underselling it, hoping Riley didn’t take it too hard, but she wasn’t about to let Walsh belittle her or her calling.

To her credit, Walsh immediately clamped down on her shock, leaving Buffy with only a brief glimpse of it before her steely demeanor slid back into place. “My my. Well, Agent Finn, it sounds as though you might have some stiff competition on your hands with Ms. Summers.” Buffy chuckled, but she couldn’t help but notice the look on Riley’s face, equal parts intimidation, awe, and embarrassment. Walsh’s next question caught her completely off guard, and her head snapped back to the professor after she asked, “And there are two Slayers, is that correct?”

How does she know that? She hadn’t really discussed Faith with Riley at all, for obvious reasons. He was aware she existed in her friend group, along with Willow, Xander, and Anya, but Buffy hadn’t ever specifically mentioned her as the other Slayer, nor had she let on how close the two of them had been shortly before she started dating Riley. The last thing she wanted was another round of people being jealous over Buffy—she had gotten enough of that the year before with Angel and
Faith. But clearly Walsh knew about Faith, or at least that there was another Slayer.

Her mind raced, trying to figure out how she knew. Then she remembered fighting off the commandos when they first found out about Spike’s chip. They had seen the two of them, and now that they knew about Buffy, they had put two and two together. But did Riley recognize Faith? Buffy decided to play this close to the vest. She trusted Riley, but she had a weird feeling about Walsh. Moreover, she knew that Faith didn’t have a very high opinion of the Initiative; she wouldn’t want them up in her business.

“Yes,” Buffy conceded. “But she’s not really interested in getting involved with the Initiative. She tends to just do her own thing, to be honest.” That wasn’t really Faith anymore, but it was the best excuse Buffy could think of to keep things vague and hopefully keep Faith out of this. “That’s okay, right?”

Walsh frowned. “Of course. We’re not exactly recruiting Slayers. Agent Finn simply informed us of your existence and suggested that you might be a worthwhile ally. If the other Slayer isn’t interested, that is her prerogative.”

Buffy tried to turn the conversation around again. “So, whose idea was the Initiative anyway? And why Sunnydale? And how long have you guys been around?”

Walsh surveyed her coldly, forcing a stiff smile to her lips that didn’t seem friendly in the least. “Trust me, Ms. Summers. We’ll give you a more thorough debriefing once you have been cleared, along with a full tour. For now, maybe you and Agent Finn would like to head over the fraternity house. There’s a small training gym there, and I’m sure you could learn a few things from each other in terms of fighting technique.”

Buffy frowned, knowing that she was being dismissed. She stood and turned to see if Riley was as unnerved by Walsh’s icy demeanor as she was, but Riley had already moved towards the door, standing outside and holding open for her. Buffy didn’t love the way he did that. She had the sneaking suspicion that if Walsh said jump, Riley’s response might literally be, “How high?”

“Thank you for your time, Ms. Summers. We’ll be in touch.” And with that, Riley was walking her down the hallway. They walked in silence for a few seconds before Riley spoke.

“So, do you wanna head to the gym? Get in a little sparring and show me what that Slayer strength is like.” Buffy did her best to hide the slight wince that formed on her face. It was clear to her already that Riley was in no way prepared for real Slayer strength, no matter how many demons he and his goon squad had faced. But she could use a workout, especially now that she found herself more than a little frustrated with Walsh.

“Sure,” she agreed, and Riley smiled brightly. He clearly didn’t have any issues with how Walsh had treated her, and she wondered again about what exactly was going on with this Initiative. Was that just how the military was? No questions asked, and always follow orders? She didn’t care for it, but Riley seemed to love it. As they walked, he asked for more Slayer stories. She had already told him about the big ones—the Master and the Mayor, at least. She’d left off everything with Angel. Nevertheless, she indulged him, hoping that some of his enthusiasm might wear off on her.

She was finishing off the story of the swim coach who turned the swim team into fish people as they reached the frat house. “Wow.”

“Oh hey, I mean, that’s one of my best stories.” It wasn’t, but Riley was very clearly in danger of being overwhelmed at this point. “And I didn't tell you the ‘Buffy breaks her butt’ stories.”
Riley shook his head. “But you’ve killed a—” he sputtered, mind clearly racing. “You did the thing with that… Uh, you **drowned**. And the snake!” He rubbed his hand against the back of his head sheepishly as he held open the door for her. “Not to mention just the … **daily** … slayage of—” he shook his head again. “Wow.”

“It’s no big, really,” she tried to assure him. He gave her a look that clearly said, ‘please stop pitying me.’

“Buffy. When I saw you stop the world from, you know, ending… I just assumed that was a big week for you.” It had been, for the record, but that was just because of Christmas shopping and Willow telling her that she broke up with Oz. “Turns out I suddenly find myself needing to know the plural of ‘apocalypse.’”

“Turns out it’s just ‘apocalypses,’” Buffy quipped, trying her hardest to lighten the mood. “I know ‘apocalypsi’ sounds all nice and fun, but nope, definitely ‘apocalypses.’” Riley led her into the gym without another word, still looking lost in his own thoughts. “Look.” She took his hand. “If you’d been fighting since you were fifteen, you’d have a hefty resumé too.”

Riley’s eyes widened and his mouth fell open in astonishment. “Fifteen!?”

Buffy winced. **One more thing I failed to mention, I guess.** “I know, I know. ‘Wow.’ You don’t have to say it again. The point is that we have different amounts of experience, you know. And that’s fine!” She pulled him closer and flashed her brightest smile as she looked up into his pale blue eyes. “And plus, I do have that whole preternatural Slayer strength deal.”

Riley nodded, leaning in a little closer. “I’ve seen.” He chuckled. “Don’t get me wrong. The girls I grew up with could hold their own. But … I’m not even sure I could take you.” Buffy tried and failed to hide her amusement at the thought of that. He absolutely couldn’t take her, not even if she was magically rendered deaf, dumb, and blind.

But she was trying really hard not to discourage him, so she immediately turned on the charm, shooting him a beyond flirtatious smirk. “That all depends on your meaning.” Riley’s face lit up in response, and Buffy breathed a sigh of relief. “For now, you wanna test me out? See if I pass Initiative mettle?”

“Let’s do it,” he beamed, already undoing the buttons of his shirt. She gestured for him to turn around, and she pulled a pair of athletic pants out of her bag, quickly changing out of her skirt, removing her sweater and tying her hair back in a ponytail as Riley turned to face her in just his t-shirt and jeans. He eyed her tank-top-clad torso hungrily, and for the briefest moment, everything was too familiar to her sparring sessions with Faith.

But as they got into it, it became very clear this was nothing like her sparring sessions with Faith. They circled each other cautiously, both curious but neither willing to make the first move. For her part, Buffy was terrified of hurting Riley and was equally wary of bruising his ego. She had no idea what his hang up was, though. Maybe he still wasn’t really getting this whole Slayer thing, despite all his previous ‘oohs’ and ‘aws.’

Finally, Buffy got tired of waiting, and she threw a couple of playful jabs. Riley dodged them easily and kept moving, but still refused to attack her. She threw a few more jabs, a little harder this time, and sensing her mounting frustration at his lack of response, Riley blocked first then countered with a one-two combo Buffy easily ducked under. They continued to circle, then Buffy launched a lazy succession of kicks that she fully intended to be easily deflected. If she was sparring Faith, she would’ve been on her ass already, and Faith would’ve had some choice mockery for her, in that sultry tone of voice that always sent a slight shiver down her spine. But she wasn’t sparring with
Faith, and Riley simply blocked the first two kicks without comment, clearly having to work at it. He managed to sidestep the third kick entirely, and she allowed him to slide past her leg and wrap his arms around her from behind.

He smiled at her, already breathing heavily, and she did her best to try and at least outwardly match him. “Are you holding back?” he asked. She smiled back at him.

“Are you?”

“Maybe a little” he answered, and this time he sounded just a little cocky, so she easily tossed him over her shoulder and to the ground.

“Maybe a little, too.” She continued to bounce in her fighting stance, grinning as he leapt up from the mat.

He faced her, his posture not nearly as well-trained as hers. He carried himself all tight and rigid, and she wondered what sort of sparring techniques or hand-to-hand combat they taught in the U.S. military. From what she could see, Riley had very little idea of what he was doing, relying on strength alone rather than technique. “I’ll go all out if you will,” he taunted playfully. Buffy chuckled. Faith would’ve never asked, nor would it have even occurred to her to take it easy on someone, not unless she was playing some deeper game.

“Are you sure?” she asked, more for his benefit than hers. She could never go all out, not against a regular human being. She could punch a hole through his skull fairly easily, after all. Now that’s a disconcerting thought.

“Here we go,” he said before lumbering towards her. They traded a few blows, and then he threw a punch that was way too obvious and way too forceful. She dodged under it easily, as if he was moving in slow motion, and then used his momentum against him, sliding down and taking his legs out from under him. Riley looked disgruntled after that, jumping back to his feet and charging her again. This time she met him with a kick straight to his chest, moving far too fast for him to do anything but run right into it. While she held back plenty, she clearly didn’t have a good handle on how to tone down her own strength. Riley flew all the way across the room, collapsing in a heap against the mat on the far wall.

“Riley!” she shouted, running over to him. Please be okay. He held his chest tenderly, and she immediately fell to her knees beside him. “Are you hurt?”

He winced, and his expression was a mix of confusion and frustration. Buffy wasn’t sure how to feel about those particular emotions, but at least he seemed to be physically okay. “I, uh, I don’t think so.”

She helped him to his feet. “I’m so sorry! I-I didn’t mean to, uh—”

“It’s fine,” he muttered, though it didn’t sound fine. “I’m good.” He offered her a forced smile. “Might need to go take a long, hot shower at this point though. Can you make it back to your dorm okay?”

Buffy frowned. “Um, yeah, sure.” She could tell that she had wounded his pride more than his chest, and as annoying as that was, she should’ve known it might happen. Riley was a big burly military guy. It was going to take him a while to get used to the idea that his pint-sized girlfriend had enough supernatural strength to go toe-to-toe with a rhinoceros. Probably. She let it go, this time. “Take care of yourself, and call me later.” She gave him a quick kiss, then grabbed her stuff and headed out.
It wasn’t until she got back to the dorm and checked her voicemails that she realized she had been distracted by Riley and the Initiative most of the day. Faith’s voicemail was haunting. “B, I need you right now.” Her voice was tight with a potent combination of worry and anger that scared the crap out of Buffy. “It’s Giles. Meet me at his place as soon as you get this.”

Buffy dropped everything and sprinted from her room, not even bothering to lock the door behind her. She had no idea how much time had passed since Faith left the message. What happened? Was Giles okay? Why was Faith there? Her heart pounded in her chest as she sprinted across campus, and she pushed herself as hard as she could. Her mind continued to race in the few minutes it took her to run, at a dead sprint, from her dorm to Giles’ apartment. When she arrived, her worry kicked into overdrive at the sight of his front door ripped off its hinges, resting against the door frame.

“Giles!” she shouted as she hurried inside, only to find that she was the last one to show up. Giles was nowhere to be seen, but Faith, Xander, Anya, and Willow were already there, huddled around a growing pile of books. “Where is Giles? What happened?” The place was a mess. Part of the railing had been torn off the stairs, and books and other items had been knocked off all of the surfaces between the stairway and the door. Then she found a ripped and tattered shirt on the ground, and her eyes began to sting. “Oh god, Giles.”

It was Faith who reached her first, rubbing a soft hand on her back soothingly. “B, it’s okay. We’re gonna find him, I promise.” Their eyes met, and there was nothing but steely confidence in Faith’s gaze. Buffy nodded and followed her into the living room.

“What happened?”

“It’s Ethan Rayne,” Faith answered.

“What?” Buffy was taken aback. “How do you know?”

“Me and G were out patrolling last night, but it was a bust. Except that Rayne showed up as I was leaving. Followed them to a pub, where they had more than a few beers, and I figured everything was fine. G was havin’ fun, and I kinda figured they were gonna hook up or whatever. When I got here this morning, at first I thought maybe things had just gotten a little rough—”

“Faith, are you serious?” Buffy interrupted, and she couldn’t believe Faith was being this cavalier about what was clearly the scene of an attack.

“Hey hey, I’m just sayin’ that was my first reaction, but I realized pretty quick this was something much worse. Then Xander shows up talking about a demon attack, and I put two and two together.”

“There was a big demon,” Xander added, as if that added anything to what Faith said. “It had horns and big tufty ears.”

“Okay. There's a demon, and Giles is gone.” Buffy sucked in a steadying breath, then released it. “But it doesn’t mean that he’s hurt. I mean, there's no blood anywhere so maybe the demon just took him somewhere?”

“That’s the idea, B.”

“Here,” Willow shoved a book into her hands, “We think what attacked Xander was a Fyarl demon. Sort of a foot soldier type, works for other demons lots of the times. Very strong and uh, with this whole hardening mucous stuff.”

“Mucous?” Xander asked. “Gross! No one mentioned mucous.”
“I don’t give a damn about the mucous. How do I kill it?” All eyes in the room snapped to Buffy at the tense sound of her voice.

“Silver,” Willow answered softly. “A weapon made of silver.”

Buffy searched the room until she settled on a small sterling silver letter opener sitting on Giles’ desk. *It’ll have to do.* She picked it up, flipped it in the air and caught it, then tucked it into her jacket pocket. “Faith, where is Ethan?”

“I dunno, but I know how we can find out.” She glanced back at the Scoobies, sharing a look with Willow, then started towards the remains of the front door. “Come on. I’ll explain on the way.” Buffy didn’t have to be told twice.

“Sunnydale Motor Inn, got it.” Fortunately for the Slayers, the waitress who served Giles and Rayne the night before was working again, and she remembered the address he had given her. “Thanks, babe.”

“No problem. You friends with the first guy who came in here asking for that address?”

“What guy?” Buffy demanded. She seemed worryingly close to tackling the woman and threatening her for more information, and Faith wrapped her hand softly around Buffy’s wrist to try and calm her ever so slightly.

“Another English guy. Slicked-black, bleached-blonde hair.”

“Why the fuck is Spike lookin’ for Ethan?” Faith wondered aloud, and Buffy looked every bit as confused as she was. She turned back to the waitress even as she started leading Buffy out of the pub. “Seriously, thank you. Been a big help.”

“You’re welcome, hun.” They were out and back into Faith’s car in less than a minute.

“If Spike is working with Ethan Rayne, then he is gonna be so much dust,” Buffy seethed as she buckled her seatbelt. Faith put the car into gear and took off, but not before flashing a warning glare in Buffy’s general direction.

“I already got dibs, B. Only reason he’s not dust already is cuz you and G wouldn’t let me take him out.”

“Fine,” B muttered petulantly. Faith could tell she was just scared, and she understood why. Giles was like a father to her, much more than her absent father had been the last few years anyway. Faith tried to think of a way to distract her, even if it was only for the few minutes it took to get to the shady motel where Rayne had holed up.

“So, what’s up with you and soldier boy?”

Faith kept her eyes on the road, but she could feel the tension and disbelief radiating off of Buffy. *It’s not a fun topic of conversation, but at least it’ll damn well distract her.* “Faith, you don’t really wanna know that, do you?” That caught her attention, and Faith glanced over to give Buffy a quick, measuring look before focusing on her driving again. For once, Buffy wasn’t even bothering with the pretense. Normally when she talked about Riley around Faith—which wasn’t often, since the topic was the only thing basically guaranteed to drive a wedge in the barely recovered friendship between the Slayers—she was all bright smiles and sunny demeanor, even if Faith strongly suspected it was always partially an act.
Something about Buffy’s happy new relationship energy always rang false with Faith, and right now, she could see that it hadn’t just been wishful thinking on her part. The mention of Riley had Buffy’s eyebrows furrowed, along with the slight crinkle on her forehead that was a sure sign of frustration. Faith couldn’t stop herself from poking the bear. “Uh oh. Trouble in paradise already?”

“Shut up,” Buffy demanded, but Faith could tell that her heart really wasn’t in it. Buffy tried to sound halfway joking, but all that did was stop her from hiding the undertone in her voice that suggested Faith had hit the nail on the head. “No. Things are fine. Good. And seriously, Faith, maybe this just isn’t something you and I should discuss, you know?”

“And why is that, exactly?” The question silenced Buffy immediately, and Faith knew the minute she asked it that the blonde wouldn’t have the courage to answer. Not honestly, anyway. I fuckin’ knew it. The only reason she’s with that guy is that he makes it easier to hide from her feelings for me.

The conversation had started as a way to distract Buffy from her concern for Giles, but it had quickly turned real. Faith thought for a second about telling Buffy about her GED. About how much she loved working at The Gallery. About getting her own place.

But that constant voice of doubt immediately shouted her down. Buffy wouldn’t care. She’s not gonna just magically get over her hang ups because you’ve gotten your life halfway put together. So what if you’ve got a decent job and a GED? The boy toy has a college degree and is workin’ on another one. Bet he has a nice, big loving family too. And he’s a big secret soldier on top of it all. What can you even offer her?

So, instead of allowing herself anything close to vulnerability, Faith lashed out. “Whatever, B. Really seems like you don’t even like the guy, is all I’m sayin’.” She couldn’t have timed the verbal jab any better, because they pulled into the parking lot of the Sunnydale Motor Inn. Rather than respond, Buffy leapt out of the car and slammed the door hard behind her. Yup, she’s pissed. Good thing we’ve got a big, scary demon for her to whale on.

They found a large hole in the door, behind which was an even larger demon tossing a very fearful Ethan Rayne across the room. Giles, unfortunately, was nowhere to be found, and Faith could see Buffy’s shoulders sag a little when she realized it. Fuck. Springing up from the shattered remains of what had previously been a dresser, Rayne shouted, “You’ve gotta stop it! It killed Ripper, and now it’s tryin’ to get me.”

Buffy’s eyes were focused on the demon, which was bulky and shirtless, well over six feet tall, with thick skin, tufted ears, and large, curved horns. “Don’t let him go,” she ordered, her voice so low and threatening that it legitimately concerned Faith. She shoved Rayne against the wall, twisting his arm behind him painfully. Meanwhile, Buffy faced off against the demon, which took a menacing step towards her, muttering guttural threats under its breath in some demon language. She kicked out, catching the Fyarl square in the chest hard enough to toss it across the room. It crashed against the wall hard enough to leave a large, cracked dent, slumping to the floor as it winced in pain. It was a surprisingly human-looking expression for a demon like this.

“What did you do to him?” Buffy screamed. “What did you do?!” As the demon rose to its feet, Faith heard heavy, booted footsteps approaching outside.

“B, we got company comin’,” she shouted, but the Fyarl charged Buffy, shoving her against the wall but then stepping back, as if waiting to see how she would react. That’s when Riley charged in with two other commandos, rifles at the ready. Rayne used the momentary distraction to try and make his escape, but Faith’s reflexes were so much better than his. She clamped down hard on his arm, twisting enough that it threatened to dislocate his shoulder, and Rayne gave up with a loud cry of pain.
“Buffy, what’s going on?” Riley asked tensely. Buffy ignored him as she spun a kick across the demon’s face, again driving it back and onto one of the room’s two beds.

“You’re only going to make him angry,” Ethan warned, and Faith twisted his arm again to shut him up. Buffy charged the Fyarl and started pounding on it, but the thing didn’t fight back. It took the beating, standing back up every time she drove it to the ground. The whole thing was beyond strange, and suddenly, Faith had a very bad feeling about everything.

Finally, Buffy tackled it to the ground, pulling the letter opener from her pocket in one fluid motion. “This is for Giles!” She raised the small instrument high over head and drove it down forcefully with both hands. It lodged into the Fyarl’s chest with a sickening squelch, but after a few seconds, Buffy’s eyes widened in recognition. “Oh god,” she gasped. “Giles!”

I’m sorry, what now? But she was right, apparently. The demon—Giles—nodded his head several times, repeating the same phrase that Faith guessed had to translate to something like, “Yes.” Buffy pulled the letter opener and dropped it to the floor in shock and horror. “Oh god! Giles! Giles, I’m so—I’m so sorry! Please don’t die!”

Fortunately, Giles didn’t seem to be in much pain, and Buffy looked up to meet Faith’s gaze before finally registering Riley’s presence in the room. The expression flashed across Buffy’s face so quickly that Faith wondered if maybe she had imagined it, but it sure looked like disappointment or frustration. But then a smile forced its way to her lips. “I think he’s okay,” she whispered, then picked the letter opener up again. “Hey! Is this thing real silver?”

“Seriously, Buffy, what is going on here?” Riley had dropped his gun arm, but his two buddies were still in fighting stances, one pointing a gun at Buffy and Giles and the other at Faith and Rayne. She was sorely tempted to knock Rayne out and disarm both commandos—Faith didn’t care one bit for having a gun pointed her direction.

“Riley, we’ve got it under control,” Buffy assured him as she climbed off of Giles and helped him to his feet. Riley waved his guys off, and they backed off, though hesitantly. “This is Ethan Rayne,” she explained, gesturing to the lanky man in Faith’s grasp. “He turned Giles into a Fyarl demon.”

“And now he’s gonna fix it, or I’ll rip his arm off,” Faith threatened, twisting a little harder to make her point. Rayne shrieked again, before begging her to stop.

“Fine, fine, fine. I’ll undo it. Just stop mangling my arms, you bitch!”

She twisted until she heard something snap, snarking, “Call me a bitch one more time, see what happens.” He continued to moan and gasp at the pain, but was smart enough not to respond.

“Faith,” Buffy implored, and Faith let go of him, putting her hands up in the air.

“Yeah yeah, got it, B.”

Riley stepped forward, lowering his voice slightly as if he was trying to talk only to Buffy. “Listen, I’ve got orders. I gotta take both the demon and this sorcerer guy in. There’ve been reports all over town—we have to get the situation under control.”

“Absolutely not,” Buffy demurred, staring him down. “What part of ‘the demon is Giles’ didn’t you understand?” She glared at the two soldiers, one of whom actually flinched. “You can take Ethan, but only after he turns Giles back.” He glanced back at Faith, then at his men. She couldn’t see their faces through the ski masks they wore, but it was clear he was the commanding officer here. With their gazes on him, Riley stepped closer to Buffy and did his best to look all broad-shouldered and
imposing. Oh, bad move there, jackass.

“Buffy, I can’t just stand down. I told you, I’ve got orders.” Buffy made an incredulous face.

“Riley, I don’t care about your orders. This is my … Giles… and if Walsh has a problem with how I handle demons in this town, she can lecture me on it later. Back off.” They both stood there for what felt like several minutes, stubbornly glaring at each other. But just as Faith was starting to let herself hope she might get to watch Buffy kick some commando ass, Riley backed down. With a frustrated exhale, he turned and ordered the two soldiers to stand guard outside. Faith contented herself with making mocking faces behind his back, while Buffy oversaw Rayne as he began to pull out some supplies, gingerly nursing his left arm.

Assured that his men weren’t going anywhere, Riley turned back, taking up a position just in front of the door before reaching into his pocket and withdrawing some high tech … holy shit is that a fucking phone? The bulky device flipped open and he pressed some buttons before lifting it to the side of his face. After a few moments, he began talking quietly into the device, glaring at Faith as she watched him curiously.

“Fuck you, too,” she thought, then went and sat by Giles on the bed.

“What’s up, G?” There was a familiarity to his eyes, which must’ve been what tipped Buffy off after she stabbed him. “Wicked chest wound ya got there. Think it’ll scar?” He responded in Fyarl, and she chuckled as if she could understand. “Yeah, I bet Olivia’d think it was pretty sexy, though. I wouldn’t worry about it.” She glanced over to gauge his reaction and burst out laughing at the sight of a demon rolling his eyes at her. She nearly fell off the bed, she was laughing so hard. “Hot damn,” she muttered as she struggled to get back in control over herself. “You’re a hoot, G.”

After a few minutes, Rayne had everything ready to go, and Riley finished up his phone call. A lengthy incantation later, Giles was himself again. And still very shirtless. Faith eyed him with joking lust, and he blushed wildly. “Aw, look who’s suddenly modest,” she quipped, and Giles rushed to put on one of Rayne’s shirts.

“I really got to learn to just do the damage and get out of town,” Rayne whined. “It's the "stay and gloat" that gets me every time.” Riley yanked him roughly up to his feet, but Buffy walked over to Giles.

“You okay?”

Giles’ voice was unusually timid. “Oh, um, uh … embarrassed, mostly.” He glanced down at the shiny, oddly patterned shirt he was wearing. “Ethan's wardrobe's not helping any. Uh, how did you know it was me?”

Buffy smiled softly. “Your eyes. You're the only person in the world that can looked that annoyed with me.” Faith and Giles both chuckled at that, and Giles wrapped Buffy up in a warm, though very quick, hug.

“Is this gonna go on much longer?” Rayne asked, clearly unable to read the room. “I'd rather like to be going.”

Buffy crossed her arms in that smug way that Faith often found both infuriating and incredibly sexy. “And what would make you think that we’re letting you go?”

Ethan smirked. “Well, maybe because you have no choice. I’m human, you can’t kill me. What's a Slayer going to do to me?”

“I could think of a few things,” Faith growled, but Riley leaned out the door and gestured to his two
soldier friends. They entered the room, and one moved to place Rayne in handcuffs.

“By the authority of the US military, you're being taken into custody pending a determination of your status.” Well hey, maybe soldier boy is good for something after all. “Take it from here,” he ordered the two men. Rayne wilted as they dragged him away, all previous bravado completely wiped away. Giles, meanwhile, looked positively delighted at the turn of events. Riley turned to him and explained, “They'll, uh, take Mr. Rayne to a secret detention facility in the Nevada desert. I'm sure he'll be rehabilitated in no time.”

Giles grinned widely. “Uh, if you don't mind, I'm just going to go and watch them manhandle him into a vehicle.”

Faith caught Buffy’s eyes, which looked conflicted for some reason, but then moved to follow Giles. “Yeah, I wouldn’t mind seein’ that myself.” She really didn’t want to be left alone in a room with Buffy and the boy toy. The soldiers wasted no time tossing Rayne in the back of their ominous black Humvee, and Giles was noticeably giddy at their lack of care for his injured arm.

As they drove off, he walked her to her car. “Hey, how’d you even get here?” she asked. “And how was Spike involved in all this?”

“My car!” was Giles’ only response, gasped out as his eyes turned to saucers. “If that vampire did anything to my car, I'm not paying him a cent!”

“Paying him?” Faith frowned. “You mean he was helping you? Dammit! That means I still don’t get to dust him, doesn't it?”

“Let’s not be too hasty,” Giles assured her. “Now, can you help try to track him down?”

“Sure thing, G.”

Faith and Giles disappeared on Buffy, so she got a ride back to campus with Riley. While he wanted to hang around, she was absolutely not feeling it. She was still coming down from the fear she had been avoiding all night, worrying about Giles. And she wanted to go see him first thing in the morning. So, she asked Riley to have the night for herself, and he was nice enough not to look too disappointed by it.

What she didn’t mention was that she was still processing all the Initiative stuff, and especially Walsh’s cool treatment of her earlier in the day. She appreciated that they could handle Rayne where she couldn’t, but she still felt a weird vibe about all of them, save for Riley. And so, she was still in something of a weird mood the next morning when she made her way back to Giles’ apartment.

She didn’t see his car parked out front where it usually was, but at least he had already fixed the hinges on his front door. It was firmly in place again when she knocked, and he welcomed her inside with a warm smile. Buffy headed straight into the living room, slipping off her sandals before curling up on his sofa. She turned to see where he was setting up a brand new wireless telephone on his desk.

“Nice phone.”

“Yes. Fabulous technology,” Giles deadpanned. “See, if anyone has information I need to know, they can, uh, simply tell me about it.” He lifted the phone pointedly from its dock and waved it in the air. She winced, getting the message loud and clear. “Through this ingenious speaking tube. I'm
very excited.”

“I am sorry, Giles. I really thought I told you about Riley and the Initiative. Aaand I know that it doesn't help. Look, I promise it won't happen again.” He made a face and began walking slowly towards the sofa, hands in his pockets. “I will tell you everything.”

“Buffy, I don't want to ask you to betray any confidences.” He removed his glasses and set about cleaning the lenses as he continued to stand. “And I certainly don't want to interfere—”

“Uh-oh,” she interrupted, and he ceased his ministrations to look back at her. “You have but face.” Giles frowned, looking perplexed at her phrasing. “You look like you're gonna say ‘but,’” she explained.

He paused, staring at her, then said, “But ...” He began walking again, slowly making his way into the living room, “This, um, Initiative, I'm-I'm a little concerned.” “Ethan's not exactly a reliable source but, um—” He sat on the coffee table, so he was directly across from her, and he had a stern look as he met her gaze again. His glasses remained in his hand. “I'm not sure that he's wrong about them.”

Buffy bristled a little. While she wasn’t so sure about them either, she didn’t want to give him the wrong idea about Riley. “I'm not dating the Initiative. I'm dating Riley. He's a good guy.”

“And I-I believe that,” he reassured her quickly. “But ... he's part of something we-we don't really understand.”

Buffy sighed loudly. She felt so conflicted. The Initiative could be a huge ally, and she could probably learn a thing or two from them. And she desperately wanted to believe in them, because Riley did. Still, she couldn’t shake the willies she had felt in that meeting with Walsh. She trusted Riley, but she didn’t trust Walsh.

Giles seemed to sense her apprehension, and he moved onto the sofa beside her. “Buffy … I-I want you to have your personal life, but just, um, keep your eyes open. Make sure you know what you're getting into.” She decided to just be honest with him.

“My psychology professor is the one in charge, Professor Walsh.” Again, his brow furrowed, but he placed his glasses back on his nose and waited for Buffy to say more. “The woman is brilliant, and- and I admire her strength, but she’s also mean and cold in a way that rubs me the wrong way.” She bit her lip, then shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s something maybe I had sensed, a little, all semester, but it didn’t come into focus until she met with me yesterday to talk about the Initiative. I didn’t realize she was involved until then, and she was just … like, completely dismissive of my calling and how I do things.”

“Yes, well … I could see how an organization like that could convince itself that it knows better than those of us who have been doing this our entire lives.” She frowned. “Again, n-not that I’m rushing to judgment. But you should trust your instincts, Buffy. You are the Slayer, and that is not something Professor Walsh is likely to understand or appreciate. Just be careful, and keep me in the loop going forward.”

“I will,” she promised. “But I really hope I’m wrong about her.”
What do I want?

Chapter Summary

We begin with a few events from the I in Team, but we are off into the woods after this, friends. Don't be too mad at me, please. There is more to come shortly!

“I implore you, Neisa, blessed goddess of chance and fortune, heed my call. Send to me the heart I desire.” Faith chuckled, fully aware that Willow meant the card suite but thinking of Tara’s shy smiling face anyway. She caught Willow’s eyes for the briefest moment, and the gleam of recognition there confirmed Faith’s suspicions.

Xander grouched at the witch, unintentionally signaling to Faith that he didn’t have a good hand. “You know, magic at the poker table qualifies as cheating.”

From her spot on the other side of the sofa from Faith, Willow made an adorably offended face. “That wasn’t magic!” she insisted plaintively. “I was praying.” She flashed a grin at Faith, then raised two fingers. “Two please.” From his seat across the coffee table, Xander dealt her the requested cards. The four of them had only just begun their game, having met up at the Summers house after three of the four got off work for the day. Xander still smelled faintly of the Double Meat Palace, where he was picking up shifts while he waited to hear back on another construction job.

From the other corner of the table, Anya flatly requested, “Five.” Both Faith and Xander gave her a look, but Faith beat him to the scolding rejoinder. “Babe, you’ve played five-card draw before. You know damn well you can only trade out three, unless you’ve got an ace.”

Anya growled in frustration. “Fine! Four, then.”

“Let’s see the ace,” Xander demanded, and Anya huffed again.

“Three,” she grumbled, dramatically rolling her eyes. “What a stupid game. All these rules just to win little plastic disks.”

“Chips. They're called chips. They represent money. Since none of us has any money it represents money.” He turned and pointed a finger at Faith. “And you.” She finished the swig she was taking from her bottle of beer, then glowered at him. “What did I say about all the pet names for my girlfriend?”

“Easy there, Harris,” Faith chuckled. “If I wanted to steal your girl, I woulda done it already.” She shot a crooked grin towards the girl in question. “Ain’t that right, babe?”

Anya beamed back at her. She enjoyed making Xander jealous, since he tended to me more affectionate when he was jealous. The idiot knew that Anya was straight, and that she and Faith were just good friends, but he was still so easy to rile up. So Faith continued to do so, mercilessly.

Willow and Faith both knocked on the table to signal they would check, and Anya frowned. “Come on, somebody bet already. I got three ‘K’ cards.” She said it matter-of-factly, and Faith couldn’t help
but laugh as Willow and Xander shared a look. All three of them immediately folded, and Anya practically licked her lips as she smiled and took the chips from the center of the table. The group had played together a few times, though usually Buffy joined them, and in all that time, Faith still hadn’t figured out whether Anya was completely guileless or the most incredible actor in the group. More often than not, it worked out for her, so Faith was inclined to believe it was the latter.

Xander gathered the cards and began to shuffle them. “Wish the Buff could’ve made it. Not quite the same without her.”

“Guess she’s out with Riley. You know how it is with a spanking new boyfriend.” Faith groaned at Willow’s phrasing, but she couldn’t stop the cringeworthy follow-up she knew Anya couldn’t resist.

“Yes, we’ve enjoyed spanking,” Anya practically cooed, and Xander immediately turned a bright red as he fumbled the entire deck of cards in his hand, scattering them across the floor. Faith shook her head. How is it that I knew exactly what Anya was gonna say, but it was enough of a surprise to her boyfriend that he lost his shit like that?

Xander gaped for a few moments before stuttering, “Well… uh. The thing is … I think Riley is okay, in an oafish kind of way. But … am I the only one with a big floating question mark over his head about this Initiative thing?” Willow and Faith shared a knowing look. He was absolutely not the only one, but Willow and Faith were both wary about sharing their suspicions with the group. Neither of them trusted the Initiative, but Xander and Anya weren’t exactly good at secrecy or tact. They weren’t looking to make things weird with Buffy.

“Well,” Willow hesitated, “they do seem to fall into the ‘good guy’ camp. I mean they are anti-demon.” Anya immediately scowled, and Willow added, “Probably pro ex-demon,” with a shrug. She still wasn’t a huge Anya fan, but she put up with the ex-demon for Xander and Faith’s sakes.

“And why not?” Xander tapped the rough bundle of cards in his hands against the table, trying to restore order to the deck after picking up its scattered remains from the floor. “There’s still heaps we don’t know about these commandos. What exactly are they up to?”

“B hasn’t exactly been forthcoming about what she’s up to with them. I know she doesn’t trust that Walsh chick though.” Faith took a long drink, and she didn’t have to glance to her side to know Willow was watching her warily. They were on the same page about Riley and his band of merry men, but she was much better at hiding her dislike of the guy than Faith was. Still, she was pleased to see that Xander wasn’t riding on the Riley train either.

Faith was still mad at herself for the things she had said on the way to confront Ethan Rayne the week prior. She had let her insecurities override her compassion and good sense, and Buffy had been just a little bit standoffish with her ever since. The two of them hadn’t discussed Riley again since, but Faith knew from Willow that Buffy was missing poker night in order to run some mission or other with the commandos for the first time. Personally, Faith didn’t trust them much more than the Watchers Council, but at least the Initiative hadn’t actively tried to feed any of them to a vampire. Not yet, at least.

“And what if they turn out to be evil?” Anya asked bluntly. “I mean, are you Slayers not supposed to kill humans?” Willow and Xander both flinched, clearly thinking of the same thing that Faith was. Deputy Mayor Alan Finch’s face flashed to mind as it always did, and probably always would. Faith would never be free of that last image that burned itself into her memory forever, of the last light leaving his eyes. Nor should she be.
“Not normally, no,” Faith answered cautiously. “That was the Watchers’ rule, anyway, and I’m pretty sure B takes it seriously.” Faith considered her words carefully, before meeting the gazes of Xander, then Willow, before turning back to Anya. “I’m less sure. Evil’s evil, ya know. Killing humans is trickier, because of the law. But I think we’ve all seen enough the last coupla years to know that things ain’t as black and white as human good, demon evil.”

“O-okay,” Xander stammered, clearly uncomfortable with Faith’s candor. Willow, on the other hand, seemed to appreciate that Faith didn’t feel like she had to hide everything from the group anymore. “Let’s all hope we don’t have to get into anything so sticky as …” His voice drifted off, unable to finish the thought. He didn’t have the stomach for what might be necessary, which was fine. He was just a dumb boy, not the Slayer. He didn’t have to worry about these things, not beyond the ways they affected his friends. That was the burden that Faith and Buffy carried so that their friends wouldn’t have to.

“Xander, I don’t think it’s something we should dismiss so lightly,” Willow said softly. “I m-mean. Yeah! Let’s not with the killing, but Faith is right that we have to be prepared to make some changes to tactics. The Initiative isn’t like the vampires or the Mayor. If they turn out to be bad news, it won’t be as simple as killing the bad guys and moving on.” She frowned, deep in thought. “N-not that that’s been super simple for us in the past. But you know what I mean.”

“Shit’s complicated,” Faith summarized.

“So, let’s hope they’re the good guys,” Xander muttered.

“Americans like their military, right?” Anya asked sincerely. The question cut through the tension like a hot knife through butter, and Faith and Willow both laughed.

Xander’s answer was a little more exasperated though, as he was still visibly uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had taken. “Yes, Ahn. That’s a gross oversimplification, but sure. We just don’t know that these commandos are the real deal.”

“Even if they are, I never trusted those military types,” Faith jeered. “I don’t trust anyone that ain’t got a mind of their own. You really think B’s boy toy’s gonna be on our side if Walsh turns on us?” She meant what she said about military types, but she couldn’t pretend she was really all that concerned about any more than just the one soldier boy in particular. Faith didn’t understand what Buffy saw in that piece of human cardboard, and based on what little she had seen of the guy, she had little doubt that he would do as he was told, even if meant screwing Buffy over. And she wasn’t about to sit around and let that happen.

“Okay so yeah, what about Professor Walsh?” Xander asked, frowning at Faith before he turned to Willow. “You were in her class—what’s she like?”

“Cold,” she responded without consideration. “Brilliant and commanding, but I … I guess I understand why she rubs Buffy the wrong way. She’s dismissive and kinda arrogant, maybe? And not much with the emoting.”

“What Red’s too nice to say is that this prof is a frigid bitch.” Willow made a face. Faith knew Willow didn’t like it when she was that crass, but the simplification wasn’t wrong either. “And if she decides she doesn’t care much for Slayers and witches and ex-demons, we’re all basically fucked.”

“Well, that just makes me feel so very overcome with the joyousness,” Xander grumbled.

“Whatever. We’ll figure it out when we have to,” Faith said dismissively. “No point in worryin’ now. Let’s play.”
Everything came to a halt as the bright, white floodlights of the Humvee illuminated the forest around Buffy at Walsh’s command. Buffy dropped the now-unconscious commando in her hands as Walsh and Riley approached. She honestly could tell if Walsh was impressed or pissed off. They’d interacted more in the last couple of weeks than in Buffy’s entire semester in her class, but she still couldn’t read the older woman.

“It took the patrol team 42 minutes to track you, and you neutralized them in 28 seconds.” Technically, that wasn’t entirely true. The 42 minutes part sounded right—these guys were surprisingly bad at tracking a target who was trying to be stealthy. To be fair, Buffy knew these woods (and most of Sunnydale, at this point) like the back of her hand, but still, it was dishearteningly underwhelming. And then when they did find her, she took them out with speed and precision. Again, she wasn’t disputing the timing. Except that Walsh had stopped her from taking out one of them. Riley had been the first to try and engage her, and she rewarded him by kicking him hard enough to send him flying twenty feet. She took out the second commando with a kick to the head, then used her momentum to grab the third and swing him around in front of her. Just in time to catch the energy discharged from Riley’s lightning gun, in fact. Buffy still wasn’t sure how she felt about him actually taking a shot at her, but Walsh called it off before she could engage him for the second time.

She glanced at Riley as he pulled off his ski mask, and she could read the disappointment on his face. Buffy tried to cover. “I was just lucky.”

Walsh frowned, nodding slightly. “I see. Well … still. Very impressive,” she muttered, then turned. She exchanged a look with Riley that Buffy couldn’t see, then headed to the Humvee.

Buffy looked up into her boyfriend’s face as he took a few steps closer. “I was just being modest with the whole ‘lucky’ thing. You got that, right?”

The disappointment, which apparently had been directed at himself and his squad mates, melted off his face in favor of a bright smile. “I got it,” he beamed. Behind her, the commandos were coming to and picking themselves up.

Graham muttered a congratulatory, “Awesome, Buffy,” as he walked by, but Forrest wouldn’t even look at her. Which she was beginning to think was typical of Forrest. He didn’t like her, but she had no clue why that was the case.

Riley never seemed to notice, though. “See, you’re a hit,” he said excitedly, completely ignorant of the stunned looks on his comrades’ faces. “Everybody loves you.” Buffy tried to hide her concern as she followed him to the back seat of the Humvee to head back to base. They had only just introduced her to the cavernous underground base that was the Initiative earlier that night. It was a short drive there, but it felt like an eternity, thanks to the tense silence in the vehicle. Buffy gripped Riley’s hand a little harder but was careful not to hurt him.

Buffy was still getting used to how the Initiative did things. It was so much more formal and high-tech than she was used to—not to mention overly stiff and regimented. The forest had been a nice change of pace, and her time evading the Initiative patrol had been the only part of the night in which she wasn’t anxious that Walsh was going to just tell her she was too much of a loose cannon and not worth their time.

But that was apparently the opposite of what Walsh had in mind. Once they were back at the Initiative, she dismissed Riley, who gave Buffy’s hand a brief squeeze before following the order. Then she led Buffy to a side room, which was apparently her office. “Ms. Summers, it is very clear
to me that you could be a valuable asset to our operation. I’d like you to join up, on a trial basis at first, of course.”

Buffy followed Walsh’s lead, sitting down across from the woman as she took the pager Walsh was offering. “I’ll ask that you keep your pager on you at all times. We’re the only ones with the number, and it stays that way.” Buffy nodded, eyeing the pager warily before tucking it into her pocket, where it came to rest against the security pass she had received earlier in the evening. Before the excursion in the woods, they had taken her retinal scan and voice activation for the secret elevator hidden in the wall of the frat house before giving her the full tour. “Lose it, and there’s hell to pay and down here we mean that literally.” Walsh smiled, signaling that she was joking, and Buffy forced a small chuckle. “Welcome to the team.”

The face Buffy made was instinctive and completely out of her control or ability to hide. She couldn’t even pretend that she was comfortable with all this. “Professor Walsh, this is all so impressive. B-but … I’m not sure I’m really cut out to be a soldier. I’m happy to help out and share information. A-and … I don’t know, what’s the word?”

“Consult?” Walsh offered, her voice as tight as the judgmental press of her lips.

“Yes!” Buffy agreed. “That. Consult. But I’m not looking to join the military. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s not ideal,” Walsh answered, clearly trying to keep herself from sounding too scolding but not entirely succeeding. “But we’ll take what we can get. You’re a special girl, Ms. Summers, and I think we can learn a lot from each other.”

“I hope so,” Buffy agreed, fighting to keep the skepticism out of her voice. She liked the idea of working with Riley, and the Initiative had much more advanced weaponry than she did. But Buffy wasn’t so sure that was a huge advantage when it came to demon-fighting, and she still didn’t trust their motives. She didn’t understand what interest the US military would have in demons, and she didn’t love that they were capturing demons for study, rather than ending them. Clearly, there was the potential for good, as could be seen with Spike’s chip. But they were clearly very well-funded, and so much of the Initiative’s facilities, methods, and goals were still restricted. She couldn’t trust them. Not fully. Not yet.

“Do you have time to chat for a while?” Walsh asked. “I’d like to get a better understanding of what a Slayer really is, and where you come from.”

“Umm… y-yeah. Okay. Shoot.” Buff was immediately on guard. Giles said he trusted her judgment and discretion in sharing information with the Initiative, but she hadn’t yet decided how much she actually felt comfortable sharing. She certainly hadn’t expected a major debriefing on her first night as an official … consultant. But Walsh wasted no time in pulling out a legal pad and a pen, and it was clear that she already had a list of questions ready to go.

“Okay. So, according to what you told Agent Finn, you believe that being the Slayer is the result of fate; is that correct?”

Buffy frowned, a little taken aback at the open skepticism in Walsh’s tone. She couldn’t help it if her answer was a little defensive, and it didn’t even occur to her that this might’ve been Walsh’s goal in asking the question the way she did. “Yes. The Slayer is called to her duty by the Powers that Be, to fight the forces of evil.”

“So then, where does the Slayer get her power? Who ‘calls’ the Slayer? And how did you find out that you were the Slayer and what that meant?”
Buffy paused to collect her thoughts. She didn’t want to get emotional and start blurtling out information, both because she didn’t want to contribute to Walsh’s impression of her as a naïve freshman girl and because she didn’t know how much information she wanted to trust with the Initiative. “Honestly … I don’t really know where it comes from. There are higher powers at work, both for good and for evil, and the Slayer’s power comes from the good powers, or at least that’s what I’ve been told.”

“Told by whom?” Walsh was jotting down notes, but she leaned forward a little and caught Buffy’s eye as she asked the question.

“By my Watcher,” she answered without thinking. Crap. Don’t give away too much. “There’s an ancient group whose sole purpose is to identify and train Slayers. When I was called, I was approached by a member of this group, who explained what I was going through and trained me on how to fight and what to expect from vampires and demons.”

“This is the Mr. Giles that Agent Finn mentioned?” Walsh phrased it as a question while making it very clear she already knew the answer was yes. Buffy drew in a sharp breath as it began to dawn on her that nothing she had told Riley had remained in confidence. She hadn’t specifically asked him to keep her secrets, but it still felt a little like a betrayal. But she supposed she should’ve expected it from a soldier. Riley wasn’t the type to hide information from his superiors. “So then, how old is this organization? When was the first Slayer?”

“I don’t know,” Buffy answered truthfully. She hadn’t ever been curious about that, and it had never come up naturally in her many conversations with Giles. “A long time.”

“But you’re not the only Slayer, are you? How many Slayers are active at a time?”

Buffy hated how insightful the professor was. “Usually, there is only one at a time.”

“Usually. But not currently? After all, you and Ms. Lehane are both Slayers, right?” Walsh cocked an eyebrow, almost as if to brag about the fact she knew who Faith was.

“I don’t want to talk about Faith,” Buffy warned. She wished she hadn’t sounded so defensive, but she was caught off guard.

“How did that happen? Walsh pressed. “And why isn’t Ms. Lehane interested in joining our little operation here?” In answer, Buffy stood.

“I’m sorry, Professor, but I think I need to get going for tonight. We can talk more in the future, but Faith’s story isn’t mine to share. I hope you can understand that.”

Walsh stood, her face set in a mask of steely confidence. “Of course I understand,” she intoned. “But I certainly hope we can earn your trust in time. Perhaps Ms. Lehane’s as well. We all want the same things, obviously.” Buffy still wasn’t sure about that, but she smiled and nodded as Walsh led her out of the office. Buffy was surprised to find that Riley had posted himself up outside the door, and he smiled at both women as they exited. “Agent Finn, could you please escort Ms. Summers out of the base?” He nodded once, and Walsh caught Buffy’s gaze. “Thank you, Ms. Summers. Tonight has been most enlightening. And again, welcome to the team.”

“Thanks, Professor Walsh,” Buffy managed to get out, hoping she sounded cheerier than she felt. They shook hands, and then she was following Riley back to the elevator. Why doesn’t any of this feel right? It was a feeling that had been nagging at Buffy ever since that first meeting with Walsh, and despite her hopes to the contrary, it hadn’t gone away, or lessened in the slightest, in the past two weeks. She wasn’t sure what to do with that concern anymore. Or who she could really talk to
“I still think you should’ve invited her, Red.” She flashed a smile at the bartender, Suzi, then mouthed ‘another round.’ Suzi nodded, then waggled her eyebrows at Faith. For a moment, Faith thought about sticking around till Suzi’s shift was over, just to see what might happen. It was starting to look like Buffy was gonna blow them off, and pining after the other Slayer didn’t mean Faith couldn’t have some fun. Suzi had been flirty as hell with Faith the past several times she’d been in the Bronze during one of her shifts, and she was damn cute.

Willow’s anxious voice pulled her out of the thought. “I-I don’t know. The Bronze isn’t really Tara’s scene. It’s all loud and with the crowds of people and stuff. A-and Buffy made it seem like this was strictly a Scooby hang out. Plus—” Willow paused in thought, then raised a hand suddenly, having come up with another excuse. “And she should probably meet Buffy first before we subject her to spending an evening with Anya!”

Faith rolled her eyes as Suzi sidled up with their drinks. “Thanks Suze,” Faith grinned. Willow paid, then grabbed two drinks and turned towards the table where Anya and Xander waited. Behind Willow’s back, Faith leaned back to the bar and added a couple extra dollars tip with a lascivious smile for Suzi. Their fingers brushed momentarily as Suzi took the tip, and she bit her lip as her eyes met Faith’s.

“Thanks, babe.”

“When do you get off?” Faith asked.

Suzi’s face shifted, equal parts thought and amusement, then she cocked an eyebrow and purred, “I suppose that depends on whether you stick around till the end of my shift.”

Faith chuckled. “Cheeky. I like it. What time?”

“I’m done at 10.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Faith answered, intentionally leaving things open-ended. She grabbed the three remaining drinks and sauntered off without looking back, a fresh wave of confidence and energy flowing from the interaction.

As she approached the table, she heard Xander saying, “… Besides, it’s getting late. Maybe we should go.” Willow had been giving Faith a judgmental look, but at Xander’s words, her eyes snapped to his face, widening in surprise.

“Go? You can’t go! Buffy hasn’t gotten here yet.”

Xander frowned. “Face it, Will. She’s almost an hour late. Probably off living the life of Riley. I don’t think she’s coming.”

“She is,” Willow insisted. “She told me she was looking forward to some quality time with just us.” She looked past Anya, and her eyes widened again, this time accompanied by a smile. “See! Here she comes.” Willow’s smile became a frown in an instant. “With Riley,” she added, sulking. “And some … other guys.”

“Hey guys,” Buffy greeted as she came to stand between Xander and Anya. Riley was right behind her, plus another three guys who were clearly commandos. One of them, tall and bald and the only black guy in the group, did not seem happy to be there. “Sorry about the late-itude.”
“Late? Really? Huh, hadn’t noticed,” Xander snarked, and Faith grinned at him. *Not bad, Harris.* However, she was distracted when Anya scooted closer to her, away from the commandos. Faith could feel the tension radiating off the ex-demon.

“Hope you don’t mind us tagging along,” Riley apologized.

“No no, of course not,” Willow insisted, her higher-than-usual voice betraying her exasperation at the turn of events. “The more, the … more.” *It was a good try, Red.*

Riley introduced his friends, though Faith didn’t pay attention past Forrest, the brooding bald guy. They all headed off to get drinks, leaving the Scoobies alone for a moment. And only a moment, since Anya immediately moved away from the table, grabbing Xander by the arm as she huffed, “We’re going away. To dance. Over there.”

He managed to croak out a confused, “We are?” as she led him away, leaving Willow, Faith, and Buffy alone at the table. The energy was uncomfortable, to say the least.

“Anya seems a bit on edge.”

“That’s cuz you brought your commando friends,” Faith shot back, not hiding her frustration at Buffy’s lack of empathy. “She’s antsy around them. Ex-demon issues.”

Buffy eyed her warily but shrugged it off. “Oh. You know, I didn’t think that you would mind.” The excuse was directed at Willow, who was pulling at the sleeve of her shirt rather than looking at Buffy. “Riley and the guys were throwing a little impromptu celebration in my honor. Made it, like, *impossible* not to invite them.” *Yeah, sure it did.*

Willow continued to waffle passive aggressively. “That’s neat about the celebrating. I-I just thought … this was supposed to be, you know, us. Just the Scooby core, ya know? I mean, I could’ve invited somebody else if I knew it was gonna be an open free-for-all.”

Buffy’s demeanor shifted to vaguely apologetic, but it wasn’t quite enough, in Faith’s estimation. She didn’t think the other Slayer understood how much she had misstepped in inviting her new Initiative pals without checking with anyone first. “I’m sorry. I had no idea.” She reached out a hand and placed it on Willow’s. “*My total* bad.” Her lips curved into a curious smile. “So, who did you want to invite?”

Willow looked like a deer caught in Buffy’s very bright headlights, and Faith snorted into her drink. Willow shot her a dirty look, while Buffy just looked bemused. “What?” Willow squeaked.

“No! Not—no one. I mean… I meant a hypothetical someone, which is to say no one.” Willow’s eyes darted around the room rapidly, then snapped back to Buffy. “So, what are we celebrating?” Faith respected the crafty change of subject, and for once, she agreed with Willow that this wasn’t the time to tell Buffy about the new person in her life.

Buffy’s façade broke for a minute, and Faith could tell that she wasn’t necessarily one of the celebrants. Not fully, anyway. Before Buffy’s wall of confidence and pep came back up, Faith saw some major conflict and worry there. It was weird to see Buffy behave like this, almost like the two of them had completely flipped placed from when Faith had first come to town. “I’m in. The Initiative. Professor Walsh gave me the grand tour, and we’re talking Grand as in Canyon. You’d never believe the size of it.”

Faith kept her thoughts to herself, not wanting to start a fight. She knew Willow was just as skeptical about the Initiative as she was, but the witch could pry with much more tact. “That’s really,
again I say, neat,” Willow responded casually. “So, what do you mean, exactly? You’ve joined them?” Faith watched Buffy carefully enough to notice the way her shoulders tensed at the question.

“No. Not exactly,” Buffy equivocated. “It just means when I’m not patrolling with Faith, I’ll be patrolling with a heavily armed team backing me up.” Faith made a face, her chest tightening a little. But Buffy seemed to anticipate her reaction, reaching out a hand to interlace their fingers and give her hand a squeeze. “Faith, it’s okay. I’m keeping you out of this, I promise. I don’t …. Her voice trailed off, but she shook her head. “I think it’s a good idea to work with them, but I totally get that you don’t. I promise that you can trust me.” Faith nodded but pulled her hand away warily. Buffy wasn’t telling her the full story, and until she did, Faith would continue to be cautious when it came to the Initiative.

“I do trust you, B. Even if you’ve got shit taste in men.” Buffy’s face twisted into a scowl, and Willow jumped in to redirect the conversation before Buffy could respond and escalate.

“Buffy, do you really think this is a good idea? I mean, don’t you think you’re rushing things a little?”

“I thought you liked Riley.” Not caring for the defensiveness, which Faith could see was covering a deep well of conflict that Buffy wasn’t ready to discuss yet, she turned her attention elsewhere. She only half listened as the two continued to talk, instead watching Riley and his friends at the bar. They were all laughing, save for Forrest. He stood close to Riley, a hand on his shoulder as he talked into his ear. He still seemed put out, and Riley looked like he was frustrated at whatever Forrest was saying.

“Not with Riley,” Willow explained. “With the Initiative. There’s a bunch of stuff about them we still don’t know.” Suzi seemed less than enthused by the presence of the commandos, and Faith wondered if they had been in there before. They ordered a bunch of crappy beer, but that wasn’t necessarily a reason for Suzi to be sour at them.

“I know that,” Buffy insisted, snapping just a little at Willow’s question. Then she calmed herself, and Faith glanced over to see that concern back in her eyes. “Like, what?”

“Like, what’s their ultimate agenda? I mean, okay, they neuter vampires and demons - then, what? They going to reintegrate them into society? Get them jobs as bagboys at Walmart?”

Buffy laughed. “Does Walmart have bagboys?” At the bar, Forrest glanced back at Buffy, only for a moment. But it was enough for her to see the metaphorical green in his eyes. Suddenly his grumpy demeanor and proximity to Riley started to make sense.

“Wow,” Faith muttered, interrupting what Willow was about to say. She turned a leering grin on Buffy. “Hey B, did you know that Baldy over there has a thing for your boy toy?” The expression Buffy made was perfect. Her eyebrows rose halfway up her forehead as her nose crinkled furiously, her nostrils flaring. Her mouth gaped, wide open, and then formed an ‘O’ as her eyes narrowed and darted to the men at the bar, then back at Faith.

Frowning in adorable indignation, Buffy said, “Faith, not everyone is gay, you know.”

Faith chuckled, but looked pointedly at Willow, who blushed. “I know, B. Doesn’t change the obvious signs I’m seeing. He’s been an ass to you, right? More than the others?”

“Well, yeah, b-but…”

“And he’s always trying to cut into your time with Soldier Boy, making up excuses for why you
“Uhhh …” Buffy thought, and Faith could tell she was starting to see it too. “Yeah, I mean a few times.”

“That’s cuz dude doesn’t like you moving in on his buddy. Probably trying to convince himself he’s straight still.” Faith shrugged, then winked at Willow. “I almost feel bad for the guy, pining after a friend like that. I can sympathize.” Except that Buffy’s not straight, and she’s gonna accept that about herself one of these days. Before Buffy could answer, Faith grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her out of her seat. “Red, you should go call your hypothetical friend, see if she might wanna come hang out still.” Willow blushed again, and Buffy looked at her in confusion and curiosity. But Faith wasn’t giving her time to ask a follow up. “Me and B are gonna hit the dance floor.” Before either of them could protest, she pulled Buffy away from the table.

The other Slayer didn’t resist, and Faith was once again reminded how much Buffy obviously liked it when Faith took charge like this. The dance floor was on the other side of the bar from the table, and Faith was careful not to be seen by the commandos as she led Buffy through the crowd. They reached their destination, and they both responded to the beat of the music, though Buffy’s movements were noticeably less enthusiastic than Faith’s.

“Faith…” She was going along with Faith’s spontaneity, but she was still tense. Faith rolled her eyes.

Gotta get her to relax.

“Geez, lighten up a little, B.” Now Buffy was the one to roll her eyes. “Seriously, when was the last time you just let go and had some fun with me? No demons, no boyfriends, just you, me, and the music. I promise the world won’t end if you just enjoy it for a few minutes.” Buffy fought against the smile that forced itself across her lips, but she couldn’t resist it. Rather than answer, she sighed heavily, then to Faith’s genuine surprise, Buffy did as she was told. Faith could see her whole body begin to loosen up as she stepped into Faith’s personal space and gave herself over to the music.

For the first time that night, Faith let herself really take Buffy in. The blonde was stunning that night, her hair in a messy updo with one bang pinned to the side and the other hanging loosely to frame her face. Her bright orange halter top fit her perfectly, with lipstick to match, and her skin looked so tanned and radiant. Unable to resist touching, Faith draped one of her arms loosely over Buffy’s shoulder. Buffy moved into the touch, and she locked eyes with Faith.

Everything felt so familiar and comfortable in that moment. They hadn’t really been this close since Buffy broke off their makeout sessions, but most of the angst from that situation had faded. For the first time in months, it was just Buffy and Faith, together and in the moment and oblivious to anything else in the world around them. Faith searched Buffy’s eyes, and the blonde refused to shrink away. Her eyes were warm and thoughtful, betraying a mind at work on something. But her body continued to move with Faith’s, loose and free and sensual. Faith couldn’t quite figure out what was going through the other Slayer’s head, but it made her feel a little nervous in the best possible way. It was like they were right back to where they had been a couple months ago. As if nothing—not time, not Buffy’s insecurities, not Riley—could get rid of this magical thing between them. It was still there, and it was every bit as powerful and breathtaking as it had been all summer and into the fall.

The music shifted, and Buffy’s movements followed. She swayed a little more loosely and moved in even closer to Faith, draping both her arms loosely over Faith’s shoulders as Faith’s hands moved down to Buffy’s hips. Closing her eyes, Buffy let her forehead rest against Faith’s, and it was like a single perfect moment. As they continued to move together, a bit more delicately, everything clicked.
into place for Faith. Everything just felt so right, and she knew that she would do anything to make this real.

The moment was broken by an annoyingly familiar male voice. “You two look like you’re having fun.” Faith bristled at the mockery in his tone. Buffy jerked away from Faith as if Riley had burned her, and Faith got the distinct impression that the other Slayer had completely forgotten her boyfriend, even if only for a few seconds. Guilt was painted all over her face as she glanced from Riley to Faith and back again. “Buffy, what’s going on here?”

Buffy had no answer. Her eyes looked watery, but beyond that she just looked back and forth between Faith and Riley like she was completely lost in her own emotions. Faith resisted the urge to comfort her, unsure of what Buffy wanted in the moment. She didn’t know if Buffy had felt what she felt. And Buffy wasn’t giving anything away. The crowd continued to dance around them, making way for the argument, but otherwise continuing along their own paths. But a quick glance revealed Willow, Forrest, and one of the other commandos just beyond the crowd, watching with concern.

Faith didn’t know the guy well enough to get a read on him, and she didn’t know if he was legitimately confused or not. But whatever his reason, he didn’t seem to like what he was seeing. He stepped forward, a deep frown carved across his face and growing resentment in his eyes. Faith figured the best thing to do was to back down—if dude wanted to play the jealous boyfriend routine, Faith already knew how little Buffy would care for that.

Except then Riley stepped up to her with a challenge. “Do we have a problem here?”

Faith didn’t much care for being goaded, and she sure as shit wasn’t going to back down from some testosterone-soaked quarterback type. “Would you like one?” she asked, her tone dripping with fake sweetness. He took a step closer, refusing to blink.

“Why were you touching her like that?”

“Riley, we were just dancing,” Buffy explained, but she didn’t quite sell the ‘just’ part.

“And anyway, Soldier Boy, she ain’t your property, so maybe you oughta take a step back before you get yourself hurt.”

Riley bristled at that. “Are you threatening a member of the US military, girl?” Maybe it was the way he called her ‘girl,’ or maybe it was the way he looked at her so sure of himself. So sure that Buffy was his. It was too much. He was on the floor before Faith even realized she had decided to act, crumpling into a ball of agony the minute her knee connected with his junk.

“Dammit, Faith!” Buffy sounded pissed, but Faith didn’t regret her actions. She knew she shouldn’t have reacted, but it just felt so damn good. Buffy dropped to the floor to tend to Riley.

“Sorry, B. Better get your boy toy outta here, make sure there’s no permanent damage to anything other than his pride.” Buffy glared daggers at her, but the look wasn’t quite as angry as Faith had feared. She almost imagined she could see the slightest hint of amusement in those emerald eyes.

The other commandos looked about ready to tackle her on the dance floor, but before she could warn them off, Suzi took control of the situation. “Hey, fuckers. If there’s gonna be a fight, take it outside. People are just trying to have a good time.” Faith backed up further, hands raised with her palms out.

“No problem, Suze.” She looked pointedly at the commandos, who suddenly realized that everyone
in the club was staring at what had quickly become a scene. They decided proving their manhood against Faith wasn’t worth the further scrutiny and backed off, following Buffy as she helped Riley off the dance floor and out of the club.

Good riddance.

“What is her problem?” Riley grumbled, still holding himself tenderly. It was the first thing he said since they left the Bronze. Graham was driving them back to the frat house, and Buffy’s mind had been racing in the heavy silence. She had let herself get carried away with Faith, again. It was so hard not to. Just being near her was intoxicating, but there on the dance floor, it had all been too much. And she really had just wanted to let go, to stop resisting, to let her body do what it wanted to do. She had just wanted to dance and touch Faith and not worry about any of it.

Faith. There was something different in her smile as she led Buffy to the dance floor. She couldn’t figure out what it was, not yet, but something about Faith’s demeanor had made it so easy for Buffy to let it all go. To just be there with her in that moment. But she should’ve known better. Riley was right there—some part of her knew that. Did I want him to catch us?

The car stopped, and Buffy immediately exited so that she could go around to the other side and help Riley out. He just grimaced and pushed her hand away, refusing her help and groaning as he pulled himself out of the car. Buffy rolled her eyes at his stubborn pride.

That’s what got you hurt in the first place, Riley.

He just stood there, a look of confusion and frustration on his face. “Seriously, Buffy. What was her problem? And why were you all up on her like that?”

Buffy shot Graham an apologetic look before answering Riley. “Let’s go inside, and we can talk, okay?” Riley looked like he was going to argue, but then his face softened. He nodded, and Buffy moved in to wrap an arm around his torso, masking her desire to help him walk as simply being affectionate. They made it to his bedroom, and she helped him lay down on it. “Do I need to grab you some, uh, ice or something?”

“No,” he answered quickly, sounding embarrassed still. “I’ll be fine. Just tell me what I walked in on there.”

“Riley, we were just dancing,” Buffy said softly. She knew it wasn’t true, but Riley didn’t have any reason to doubt her. “Faith is …” Buffy paused. She knew she could trust Riley, but that still wasn’t a good reason to disclose Faith’s secrets. She knew Faith wouldn’t be okay with that, but she needed Riley to understand … something. Enough that he wouldn’t seek any further retaliation and wouldn’t have any reason to be suspicious. “She’s been through a lot, okay? It’s not my story to tell, but she has good reason to be defensive. She shouldn’t have reacted like that, but she was just being protective.”

“Of you?” Riley looked worried and, worse, jealous.

Buffy did her best to deflect. “Not like that. We just … we have a connection. It’s a Slayer thing. And my mom took her in when she came to Sunnydale—I guess, in a way, we’re the only family she’s got at this point.” Buffy used that term to hide the nature of her connection with Faith, but it didn’t feel wrong either. Faith was as much a permanent part of her life as her mom or Willow or Giles. “So, yes. She gets protective of me, and she gets more defensive than she should. It isn’t a good idea to confront her like that.”

“It just … looked like something more.” Riley seemed very unsure of himself at this point, and Buffy wondered what exactly he meant by ‘more.’ She felt pretty confident he couldn’t even fathom
the sort of intimacy she and Faith had shared, couldn’t imagine that Buffy was capable of that. It was getting harder and harder to convince herself of that.

“She’s had a rough life, and she still struggles. There was—” Buffy struggled to think of an explanation. She settled on a version of the truth. “There’s a lot of violence in her past. Sometimes she just needs me to be there for her, to help calm her down.” Buffy was making this excuse up on the spot, completely unsure how else to explain the obvious intimacy she and Faith had been sharing when Riley interrupted them. “I just …” She slid her fingers between his and squeezed. “I need you to trust me, okay?”

“She’s the one I don’t trust,” he warned. “She just rubs me the wrong way, Buffy.”

“I’m sorry about that.” Buffy didn’t know what else to say, so she just curled up into his side. She would sleep in Riley’s bed that night, and hopefully that would help assuage any concerns he might have. She continued to feel uneasy about how messy her life had become. She wasn’t sure how she felt about Riley. Wasn’t sure whether she could trust the Initiative. And she definitely wasn’t sure about how to handle her feelings for Faith, which hadn’t lessened at all despite all her struggling against them the past few months.

As she drifted off to sleep later that night, wrapped up in Riley’s strong arms, it wasn’t her boyfriend she thought of. Her mind was back on that dance floor, where she felt safe, comfortable, and completely herself. What that ultimately meant for her was a question for another day.

Faith’s mind had been in turmoil after Buffy left the Bronze. Suzi kept laying on the charm, but after the moment Faith had shared with Buffy, she couldn’t imagine being with anyone else. Suzi was hot and fun and intriguing … but she wasn’t Buffy. She didn’t know how to explain to Willow and the others why she had gotten into a fight with Soldier Boy either. So, she just left. Went for a walk to clear her head and took out a few vampires on her way home.

When she woke up the next day, she knew what she had to do. Something had shifted in her on that dance floor, and there was no going back. No more hiding. It wasn’t like all her insecurities disappeared, Faith just wasn’t going to let them hold her back from what she wanted anymore. And she couldn’t pretend any longer that she didn’t want Buffy. A relationship with Buffy. A real one.

As she dialed the number, she hoped that the right person answered. She had a feeling that Buffy probably spent the night with the beefcake, and while the thought didn’t exactly give her the warm fuzzies, it meant that, if she was right, only Willow would be around to answer. “Hello?”

“Mornin’, Red.”

“Faith? Since when do you make early morning phone calls?”

“Ain’t exactly early,” Faith retorted, looking at the clock that read ‘9:30 A.M.’ Willow grumbled a bit, then asked, “What’s up?”

“How quickly can you meet me at the Espresso Pump?”

There was a pause, then, “I assume this is important.”

“Very,” Faith answered, a soft smile spread across her lips to accompany the butterflies in her gut.

“Give me an hour.”
“See ya soon, Red.” Faith dressed quickly and headed out with a quick, “Good morning,” to Joyce. She walked at a brisk pace along the streets of Sunnydale and made it to the Espresso Pump about ten minutes before Willow. She grabbed a black coffee, then secured them a table towards the back with some small modicum of privacy and a clear view of the entrances. When Willow arrived, she waived at Faith then bought a drink of her own, no doubt something sugary and sweet.

“Alright, Faith. Why am I here? This wouldn’t happen to have something to do with you picking a fight with Riley and then running off last night?”

Faith made a face. “I didn’t pick shit, Red. I was just minding my own business having a nice night. He stepped up to me.”

“Well, you were getting pretty cozy with his girlfriend,” Willow teased.

“That’s what I wanted to talk about actually.” Willow raised an eyebrow. “Not the ‘putting Soldier Boy in his place’ part,” Faith snarked, chuckling at the face Willow made. “The ‘getting cozy with B’ part.” Willow hummed into her drink but didn’t say anything else. Faith decided to just spit it out. “I’m done pining quietly.”

Willow’s face broke into a wide smile. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

“I wanna tell her how I feel. For real. No more insinuations or settling. I just …” Faith frowned, letting herself feel all the nervousness tingling through her body. “I dunno how she’s gonna take it. But I have to try. I have to see if she’s willing to go for it, ya know?” Willow squealed, and Faith cringed before rolling her eyes dramatically. “Easy there, Red. She’ll probably just reject me again. Let’s not forget that she has a boyfriend.”

“Oh please, you and I both know that she barely even likes him.” Willow smirked. “I am curious, though. What was it about last night? Why the sudden initiative?” She winced a little at her own choice of words, but Faith moved past it.

“I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t. I just realized that I want her. And that all the bullshit I was putting up in my own way was, um, bullshit. I don’t have to prove myself. I don’t gotta be something I’m not. I’m good enough on my own, and either B sees that or not.”

“Faith! Good for you!” Willow’s voice was warm and joyful. “So, what’s the plan?”

“Well, I gotta make a big romantic gesture, don’t I?” Faith made it very clear she wasn’t really asking. If she was gonna give this love nonsense a shot, she wasn’t about to half-ass it. “And you’re gonna help me.”

“Anything!” Willow couldn’t stop grinning, and Faith was tempted to tell her to fuck off and run away. Is this really my life? It was almost too disgusting to imagine that she had a good friend like Willow, with whom she could talk about grand romantic gestures. Or that she’d ever be the kind of person who could contemplate a big romantic gesture, and be excited about it. Faith shuddered at the thought.

“This is stupid.” She let out a long, frustrated breath. “This ain’t me, Red. Forget I said anything.”

“Absolutely not,” Willow scolded. “This is absolutely you, Faith Lehane. You’re not that same loner who rolled into town just to go to a dinner party with the pretty blonde you met in LA.” She put a hand on Faith’s. “You had a giant crush on her even then. Stop trying to play it cool, okay? You can do this.”
Faith looked at Willow’s hand like it was as disgusting as the warm gooey feeling in her chest. She withdrew her hand and grimaced. *Can’t lose all my rep, after all.* “Fine. I guess I’m doing this.”

“Darn tootin’.” Willow grinned brightly, and Faith continued to glower, just to be disagreeable. “Now, how can I help?”

“Well, first of all, I need to know B’s favorite flower.” Willow started to giggle, and Faith glared daggers at her. “Cut it out.”

“Sorry, it’s just that you’re such a girl, Faith.”

“Shut the fuck up, Red. No I’m not. Keep teasing me, and I’ll call the whole thing off.”

“No you won’t,” Willow said confidently. Faith crossed her arms and stared pointedly. “Okay, geez. Her favorite flowers are yellow calla lilies. Now, what’s the second thing?”

Faith grinned wickedly, happy to turn the tables on her friend. “Second, you gotta tell B about Tara. Regardless of how things go between me and her.” Willow’s nose crinkled into a pout.

“B-but—”

“Nope. No buts. I’m bein’ brave, and so are you. No more gay secrets. We’ll all be super gay together. Or you and me and T-Mac will be. Up to B if she wants to join in on the gay old fun.” Faith leaned back in her chair, slouching confidently as she shrugged. Inwardly, she was terrified that Buffy was going to reject her again, but she needed Willow to buy the cocky routine. Needed to inspire the witch to stop hiding.

Willow continued to pout, but it was clear she was fighting a smile again. “That’s too much gay, Faith.”

“B-but—”

“Nope. No buts. I’m bein’ brave, and so are you. No more gay secrets. We’ll all be super gay together. Or you and me and T-Mac will be. Up to B if she wants to join in on the gay old fun.” Faith leaned back in her chair, slouching confidently as she shrugged. Inwardly, she was terrified that Buffy was going to reject her again, but she needed Willow to buy the cocky routine. Needed to inspire the witch to stop hiding.

Willow continued to pout, but it was clear she was fighting a smile again. “That’s too much gay, Faith.”

Faith bit her lip and waggled her eyebrows provocatively. “No such thing, Red. No such thing.”

The knock at the door startled Buffy from the pounding she was giving the punching bag in their shared workout space. The fact that she didn’t hear Faith coming was a sure sign that she was lost in her own thoughts, working off some of the stress of her past few days in her own way. Even in a simple pale green sports bra and sweatpants, Buffy looked stunning, her breathing still heavy and a small bead of sweat working its way down her cheek as she turned to face the girl at the door. Faith did her best not to giggle, focusing instead on maintaining a soft, sultry smile despite the way her heart felt like it would beat out of her chest.

Buffy shot her an amused look of curiosity, and Faith stepped further into the room as she pulled the bouquet of calla lilies into view. “Faith?”

“Hey there, B. Heard these were your favorite.” She held them out, trying and failing not to seem nervous, and Buffy took them with a bemused grin, like she had no idea what was going on.

“You got me flowers?” Faith could see that the gesture had worked at least in part, as Buffy’s whole body relaxed in a wave of happiness as she looked the flowers over. It was remarkably similar to how Buffy had looked out on the dance floor the night before, and the butterflies in Faith’s stomach resumed their torrid fluttering

“Well, if I’ve learned anything from the rom coms you’ve forced me to watch, it’s that the big romantic gesture requires flowers. Even a girl like me can get that part right.” She shot Buffy
another crooked grin, masking her nervous energy as best she could. Buffy’s expression remained warm, but her confusion seemed to grow a bit.


“Yeah. The thing is B, I’m kinda fallin’ for you.” Buffy’s eyes went wide, and she tensed up. “I know you broke things off, and I know you think you’re supposed to be with a nice beefcake like Riley. But this thing between us is special. A-and I can’t pretend anymore.”

Buffy delicately set the flowers down on the table against the wall, conveying in a small gesture how much they meant to her. But before she could say anything, Faith stepped into her space and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “Let me just get this out, okay?” Buffy nodded, albeit warily. “I thought I wasn’t good enough for you. And probably I’m not. Try as I might, I’m still that damaged girl who grew up on the streets, without parents and doing her best just to survive. I’m still the girl who refused to let herself trust people ever again, just to avoid the pain of betrayal or abuse ever again. I’m still the girl who freaked out and turned to the Mayor instead of just telling you how I felt about you.”

Faith smiled again, her own words calming her nerves a bit. She stroked Buffy’s cheek. “But I’m more than that girl, too. I’ve grown a lot. I’ve got a steady job that I actually kinda love. I got my GED.” Buffy’s face erupted into a smile at that, and Faith chuckled joyfully. “Yeah! I’m getting my shit together, best I can. But I’ve still got a long way to go. Thing is, something clicked with me last night, and I realized that the only thing holdin’ me back from what I want is myself.”

“Faith…” Buffy’s tone was more than a little worrisome, and Faith’s heart leapt into her throat. Fearing her impending rejection, she jumped right back into her speech, terrified to let Buffy get a word in edgewise.

“I thought I had to prove myself worthy of you. But you’re the one person who never saw me like that. You always saw something in me, even when I couldn’t see it. You saved me, B, in my darkest moments. You believed in me when no one else did. And I’m guessin’ you know how I feel, but I’ve never been brave enough to just say it. So now I am.”

Testing the waters, she leaned in to kiss Buffy, and the other Slayer didn’t stop her. The kiss was tentative, and while Buffy didn’t pull away, she didn’t press herself into Faith either. Faith pulled away and searched Buffy’s gaze. The other girl seemed frozen in place, as if mystified by Faith’s unexpected emotional vulnerability and openness. “I know you’re scared, but I know you feel it too.” Faith chewed on her lip nervously, then she just spit it out. “I’m falling in love with you, Buffy Summers. And I wanna be with you. For real.”

Buffy looked up at her and lifted a hand to rest on her cheek. “Faith. I am so very proud of you.” She smiled brightly and leaned into place a light kiss on Faith’s lips. “You’re amazing.” But then Buffy’s smile dropped away, and she sighed heavily as she withdrew her hand and turned away. Faith’s heart sank, and she felt for a split second as though the floor had dropped out from beneath her feet. “I can’t… I have feelings for you, too. I… dammit, you see right through me, I can’t even pretend.” She turned back to her but maintained some distance. “I’m attracted to you.” The admission was a big step for Buffy, even if it was the furthest thing from a surprise to either of them. “And… I c-care about you. B-but… nothing has changed for me.”

Faith could feel the tears forming behind her eyes, hot and painful, and she balled her hands into tight fists, fighting back her emotions. She knew this was a real possibility, but the knowledge didn’t make it hurt any less. “B, I’m not gonna beg you to be with me. But don’t throw away the chance at something incredible just because you’re scared.”
Buffy closed her eyes and sucked in a breath, holding it for a few moments, then exhaling loudly. When she opened her eyes again, they were watery and full of emotion. “Faith. I am so so sorry. I just … I c-can’t.”

A tear escaped onto Faith’s cheek, and that was the last straw. She wasn’t going to cry in front of the girl who was rejecting her. She blinked back the tears and nodded angrily. “You’re lying to yourself. Just hope you don’t realize it too late.” And with that, she turned and ran.

Faith ran as fast as she could, without concern for her surroundings or direction. She wasn’t sure how long she ran. Long enough and fast enough for the biting wind to dry out her tears. When she finally slowed and allowed herself to crumple to the ground, she found herself in the forest. Her body had instinctively made its way towards Kingsman’s Bluff, her favorite spot in town. But she didn’t want to go there now. That was where she went to think, and Faith wanted nothing more than to escape her thoughts right then.

But where else was she supposed to go? Nothing was going to take this pain away. Red. She would understand. She would know what to do. Faith turned, fully intending to make her way back to the dorms. Hopefully Willow was at Tara’s. She only made it a few steps, however, when she became very aware that she wasn’t alone. The sound of a twig snapping set off her senses, and as she started paying attention, she guessed there were no fewer than four people in the woods with her, and close.

That was when the bald commando—Forrest—stepped out of the woods to face her. Faith’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “For trained soldiers, your boys aren’t very quiet,” she taunted.

“For quiet enough to get into position surrounding you,” he countered, a victorious smile dancing along his lips.

“Do you know who I am? Trust me, you don’t wanna find out. And I’m so not in the mood for any of your military frat bro bullshit right now.” She took a step forward, and he pulled his gun on her. It wasn’t one of the sci-fi ray guns either—just a simple, black pistol. Faith froze.

“We know exactly who you are, Slayer.” He spat the title out like it was a dirty word, and she had no clue what his deal was. She thought his beef was just with Buffy, on account of the Riley stuff, but it sure seemed like more than that now. “You’re coming with us.”

“Like hell I am,” she growled. Gun or no, she wasn’t going to be intimidated. Rather than answer, he just smiled smugly and then whistled, sharp and loud into the night air. Before she could move again, she felt the sting of several darts hitting her in the back. Faith barely had time to snarl, “Fuck you,” before she collapsed into the darkness.
You think you can break me?

The first thing Faith noticed when she came to wasn’t the sterile white of the surfaces of her cell, nor was it the thin padding of the cot she was splayed out on or the minimalist metal toilet across the room. The first thing she noticed was the extreme sense of wooziness she felt as she opened her eyes to the overly bright light of the room. She tried to push herself up to a seated position, and in doing so, noticed that her left arm felt numb. She looked down at it, and she could see quickly healing cuts up and down her arm, along with a band aid just under the inner crease of her elbow.

What the fuck? Faith tried to stand and immediately crashed back to the ground, somewhat painfully. The room spun, and Faith shut her eyes tightly and prayed for it to stop. She tucked her head between her knees and breathed in and out rapidly, trying her hardest not to throw up. Several minutes passed before the sensation passed. Where the fuck am I? And what did they do to me?

Images flashed through her head as she remembered her heartbreaking conversation with Buffy, followed shortly thereafter by a confrontation in the woods with some of the commandos. They were the ones who knocked her out, but why? She didn’t know how long she had been out or what they had done to her. Clearly someone had sliced into her arm repeatedly, and it still stung a little through the numbness, even though the cuts were healing nicely. And based on the wooziness, she guessed that they had taken a good amount of her blood. She ran her tongue over her dry lips, brows furrowing. “What’s a girl gotta do for a glass of water around here?” she shouted at no one in particular.

Faith had little doubt that she was being monitored somehow, but no immediate response to her question came. With little else to do, and not yet ready to think about Buffy, Faith set about exploring her cell, looking for any sign of weakness. She ran her hands along the walls, all of which were perfectly smooth, meaning that the Initiative had wicked door-hiding technology. The white fluorescent lights were built into the seams where the walls met the ceiling, but otherwise there was nothing in the room except her cot in one corner and the toilet in another.

Without any good indication as to how much time she had wasted feeling out her cell, Faith started to feel the dread seeping in. She had been unconscious long enough to be hungry, she knew that much. Still, there was apparently nothing for her to do but wait. Which sucked, because she really didn’t want to be left alone with her thoughts right then. If Walsh and her commandos wanted to torture Faith, this was a good way of doing it.

Settling back onto her cot, Faith faced the wall in a quasi-fetal position, trying to find a position where she could keep a decent shadow over her closed eyes long enough to fall asleep. But even if she could find a way to shut out the bright fluorescents, she couldn’t stop her racing mind from going over every detail of her conversation with Buffy.

She kissed me.
Said she was proud of me.

But she rejected me. She doesn’t want me.

She’s just scared.

That’s not a good enough excuse anymore. I know she feels it too.

Would things be different if I was a guy?

Why won’t she just try?

On and on, the thoughts continued, and in the white light of the quiet cell with no doors, Faith lost all sense of time. She could’ve been laying there thinking about Buffy for an hour or five. But eventually, after she peed and found herself wondering if the Initiative would really go through the trouble of capturing her and locking her in this fancy ass cell just to starve her to death, her thoughts began to turn. Faith still thought only of Buffy, but she began to wonder if and when the other Slayer would notice that she was missing.

Faith’s heart sank immediately. There’s no way B won’t assume that I ran away again. Faith knew she was beyond that sort of behavior—Sunnydale was her home now, regardless of whether Buffy wanted to be with her—but it didn’t take long for the insecurities at work in her mind to dig their claws in. Faith figured it would be a day or two before Buffy even noticed her absence. Joyce would probably reach out to Buffy after the second night that Faith didn’t come home, since that wasn’t really Faith’s style anymore. She’d had a couple of one-night stands in the time she had been staying at the Summers house, but she never slept overnight with the person.

Once Joyce reached out, Buffy would no doubt try to comfort her by explaining that they had a fight and suggesting that Faith went on another walkabout or whatever Willow had called it. Would Joyce contradict her? Would Willow? Even if they did, who would guess that it was the Initiative that took Faith? Why would they take her?

Buffy had seemed awful buddy buddy with the commandos at the Bronze the other night. Faith wondered if it would ever even occur to her that they might be in the Slayer-napping business. Is the boy toy involved in this? Payback for humiliating him in front of Buffy? Faith trusted that Buffy had kept Faith out of her discussions with Walsh, so she couldn’t imagine what the head of the Initiative would want with her. And the timing was too suspicious—I give Soldier Boy a swift kick to the nads one night, and his butt buddy abducts me the next?—to be a coincidence. She had gotten herself on their radar with her club theatrics, and for whatever reason, they decided they weren’t going to play nice with her like they were with Buffy.

Which again, led her back to, ‘Why?’

When Faith woke up again, the room was exactly the same, save for the small tray of food and a plastic bottle of water near the wall furthest from the toilet. Faith didn’t remember falling asleep, and she immediately assumed that they had drugged her again, somehow. She didn’t move from her cot, only eyeing the food warily. She wouldn’t put it past them to put something in her food, and she didn’t really know what they were capable of.

Except that the ache in her gut was painful at this point. She felt like she hadn’t eaten in over a day, and at this point, she had no way of saying for sure that this wasn’t the case. If she had any chance at escape, she would need her strength to do it. And that meant that she would have to take a risk on
eating the food that she was given.

Faith crossed the room and picked up the tray. She looked around, and while she couldn’t see them, she had no doubts there were cameras watching her. “If you fuckers put something in the food, I swear to god I will murder you all. I’ll find a way.” Feeling a little better having made her threat, Faith leaned back against a wall and slid down to the floor, holding the tray in her lap as she practically inhaled what amounted to little more than prison slop.

She had hardly finished the flavorless gruel when the wall across from her erupted into color so suddenly that her whole body jerked in surprise. Faith hadn’t seen anything but the whites of the walls and the tarnished grey of the toilet for who knew how long, and the image of a woman’s face projected onto the wall was unnerving for the first few moments. The face was harsh, with icy blue eyes and a strong jawline. Her hair was very short, blonde but with slightly darker roots. If Faith had to guess, this was the infamous Professor Walsh.

“Hello there, Ms. Lehane. I am Director Maggie Walsh, and please accept my sincere apology for your current accommodations—”

“And the kidnapping and starvation and sleep deprivation? Yeah, fuck off, bitch.” Faith wasn’t particularly interested in playing nice at this point, and without any other way to fight back, she strongly wanted to do what she could to get under this ice queen’s skin.

“I understand your frustration, of course, but we can’t be too careful. I have such plans for you, Ms. Lehane. We’re going to—”

“My name is Faith.” Walsh’s face hardened, her lips pressed into a tight line and her eyes narrowed as she struggled not to give away her very clear anger at Faith’s insolence. Walsh didn’t seem like someone who was used to being interrupted or talked back to. Well, at least I can have a little fun.

“Very well, Faith. I’m sure you’re wondering why we’ve brought you here.”

“It’s crossed my mind, yeah.” Faith was going to sneak in a snarky comment at every chance she got. She wanted to see if she could get Walsh to snap.

“How much has your friend Ms. Summers told you about the Initiative?”


“Is that so?” A wry grin played at the corners of the woman’s thin lips. “Well then, allow me to explain. You are in the custody of the Demon Research Initiative. We are a covert branch of the United States military, tasked with combating, researching, and—when necessary—eliminating the creatures we refer to as hostile subterrestrials—”

“You mean demons,” Faith interjected, rolling her eyes.

“Yes, you may know them under that outdated and superstitious term. I think you’ll find that here at the Initiative, we prefer to approach the HSTs based on science rather than tradition or mysticism.”

“Cool, I’m sure that’ll work out great for you.” Faith turned her eyes to her nails, picking at them absent-mindedly. “As fascinating as this is, what’s it got to do with me?”

“Now now, Faith. All in good time. For now, I’m going to need some information. As the Slayer, you no doubt have some expertise that will be advantageous for what we’re doing here, even if your knowledge is mired in superstition and myth. And you’re going to tell me everything you know.”
Faith cocked a crooked grin up at her captor’s image. “Yeah, I’m gonna have to pass on that, Mags. But feel free to go fuck yourself.” Faith knew it was a waste of time to ask for her release, and she wasn’t about to show weakness.

“You may want to rethink that position. I hold all the power here. It would be wise to work with me now. If you insist on acting like a rabid bitch, I will be forced to bring you to heel like one. Your time in the Initiative can be tolerable, or it can be a constant hell. The choice is yours.”

“You don’t scare me,” Faith glowered, standing to full height and holding herself in an aggressive stance. Walsh was going to find that she wasn’t so easily broken.

“So be it.” The image faded out, but the voice offered one last taunt. “I hope you enjoyed your meal. We’ll talk again in a few hours, and perhaps by then you’ll want something with a bit more flavor. If not, you can always do without.”

The next few days—Faith believed it had been days, anyway—were every bit the hell that Walsh had promised. Faith offered only epithets and snark when Walsh’s projected image would visit, and her reward was the maddening monotony of the empty white room, broken only by her increasing hunger pangs and a blaring alarm that would force her back to increasingly disoriented wakefulness any time she began to fall asleep. Eventually she found herself waking up from a drug-induced slumber, which she guessed was just long enough for the Initiative goons to force feed her enough to keep her alive, but not nearly enough to assuage the pain in her gut.

It surprised Faith that Walsh elected for the slow torture rather than jumping right to the pain and maiming. Faith wondered what sort of resources this Initiative had. Could Walsh already have a research file on Faith? Her choice of the slow and patient route over the immediate fun of tying Faith up and breaking a few fingers spoke to an insight into Faith’s constitution, her strengths and weaknesses. A direct confrontation would simply have energized Faith, given her something to fight against. And pain was a constant companion in the life of a Slayer—Faith’s threshold for physical torture was incredibly high.

Isolation and starvation, however, were old antagonists that still haunted Faith. After her father was arrested for murder and her mother began disappearing for days on end as she fell further into her drug habit, Faith got used to living on the edge of survival. Abuse, neglect, and abandonment at such a crucial age stays with a person, and even thought Faith had left those concerns behind in Boston, using her newfound powers to actually build a real life for herself in Sunnydale, the scars left by those formative years stayed with her. In the early stages of her captivity at the Initiative, Faith felt as those she was reliving that period all over again.

For the first time since she was a small child, she had let herself trust again. She had let herself be vulnerable, and she grew to depend on Buffy. And just like when she was a kid, this vulnerability led to rejection and neglect, albeit of a different form. Would the abandonment come next?

Left with nothing but her thoughts, Faith revisited every significant moment since she had met Buffy in LA. Standing up for Buffy when her friends and Joyce ganged up on her about leaving town after killing Angel to save the world. Buffy trusting her enough to share that story and the raw emotional torment she was still feeling as a result of her decision to sacrifice the love of her life. The other Slayer had seemed to strong then, so capable of defeating her own demons in a way that Faith could never have imagined herself doing. Not at that time, anyway.

She thought of the support Buffy tried to offer when she found out about Diana’s brutal death. Buffy helping her face and defeat Kakistos and then giving her the space to deal with her own
emotions about Diana. Faith was finally able to let go of her old life in Boston and begin hoping for a better one in Sunnydale. Anything seemed possible, especially when Buffy invited her to Homecoming, and they bonded as they fought their way through the Slayerfest competitors and then danced the night away.

Then Gwendolyn fake-ass Post had blown into town and wrecked everything. Faith had relaxed and allowed herself to be manipulated by a woman she hoped would be like Diana. When everything blew up, she pushed Buffy away and brought her walls up again. It was easy to keep Buffy at a distance with Angel in the picture. But that didn’t stop her from catching feelings, slowly and surely, despite all her efforts to stay aloof.

Any lingering belief in authority figures was shattered resolutely and for all time when she returned to Sunnydale after a few weeks to herself and found out that Giles had helped the Watchers Council betray and nearly sacrifice Buffy—and Joyce, who became collateral in the ordeal—to an insane vampire. The floor dropped out completely on any sense of morality or justice after Faith accidentally killed Alan Finch, but she had been slowly descending to that point with each loss of innocence at the hands of an absent or abusive authority figure.

She remembered how Buffy clung to her after that. Even though she was dating Angel again, Buffy had relied on Faith for emotional support, rebuilding her confidence through a shared sense of brashness and the passion of the slay. Faith remembered how good it felt for that short time when they ignored any larger problems or existential questions of duty and morality and just lived their lives in the moment. Fighting, slaying, dancing…. But it didn’t last.

Faith killed a man, and it nearly broke her. She joined up with the Mayor and acted on all her worst impulses, hurting Buffy in the process. And still Buffy had believed in her. If not for Buffy, Faith wasn’t sure she could’ve found her way back into the light. She might’ve been lost to the darkness forever, and she had no doubt she’d probably be dead by now if she had let it consume her. But it didn’t. And the Slayers defeated the Mayor together.

That night, just a few days before the Ascension, had been a turning point for Faith. She remembered finding her way to Buffy’s bedroom before completely breaking down. She hit rock bottom when she realized that she couldn’t bring herself to become a cold-blooded murderer. She couldn’t allow herself to become her father. And that was the point at which she began building herself back up.

Her life since then almost felt like a dream sometimes. A stable home, a caring parental figure, and a solid friend were never things she could have imagined herself capable of having. Falling in love wasn’t something Faith figured would’ve ever been in the cards for her either, but she could still remember every sparring session, every flirtatious touch and comment and look. She could still remember the first time that the dam finally broke, and Buffy finally kissed her. Let herself want Faith and have her and be with her. Each intimate moment until Buffy’s own inner demons became too powerful to ignore. Because Buffy wasn’t as strong as Faith had imagined early on. Buffy was a flawed person, just like Faith.

Faith replayed her last conversation with Buffy over and over in her mind. She wondered what she could’ve done differently. If there was any universe in which Buffy had faced her own internalized homophobia and said, “Fuck it, I want Faith more.” The longer she rotted away in the pristine white cell deep within the Initiative, the less Faith could convince herself that it would ever have been possible. Slayers weren’t exactly predisposed for emotional maturity or stable mental health. She and Buffy were two sides of the same deeply broken coin. Maybe they were always doomed.

She fought against these insecurities, at least at first. Fought them vehemently. Buffy’s got her
issues, but she cares about me. She fought to help me escape the Mayor; she’ll do the same with Walsh. Through all the hurt she was feeling, Faith knew that if she could just hold on long enough, Buffy would come for her. But as more and more time passed, the hunger and isolation began to eat away at this certainty.

How long have I been here?

Maybe she isn’t coming. Maybe I scared her off for good. But ... what about Joyce? Willow? Even Giles? Someone has to notice that I’m missing. Someone has to believe in me. Someone has to look for me. They will. I know they will.

What if they can’t find me?

They’re being careful with me. I’m probably locked up deep in some dark, restricted section of the underground base. Even if she figures out who took me, there’s a good chance Buffy can’t get to me. Even if she does care, I might be fucked anyway. And there’s nothing any of us can do about it.

Can I get myself out of this?

Not by starving myself. And not by pissing off Walsh. Probably. Why is this happening? What do they want from me? They treated Buffy like a valued member of the team, but they imprison me and starve me and try to drive me crazy. Why? What did I do to deserve this?

Do I really deserve to be saved?

They’re trying to get under my skin. I can’t give in. Gotta keep my wits, somehow. Gotta fight.

But Faith had no way of keeping track of time, and it was getting harder and harder to fight the mounting exhaustion. All she knew was that by the time Walsh appeared to her for the seventh time, Faith no longer had a solid grasp on reality. She felt tense and wild and weak. She wondered if she would die here in this cell. Was a bit of information worth her life?

“How are you feeling today, Faith?” Walsh’s voice was as controlled as ever, and her face gave no indication that Faith’s appearance gave her any pause. Faith’s hair was greasy and disheveled, and she was well aware that she was starting to smell. There were no mirrors in the room, but she had little doubt that there were dark circles under her eyes from sleep deprivation, and her clothes felt looser than when she had first put them on—however long ago that was at this point.

“Peachy,” Faith muttered, not even bothering to look up at the projection of Walsh’s face. When Walsh didn’t answer immediately, Faith finally broke. “What do I have to tell you to get some real food and a few hours of peaceful sleep?” It was only the slightest of concessions. But it still tasted liked defeat. Deep down, some lucid part of Faith hated herself for it, but she couldn’t think straight anymore. Was barely herself anymore.

“I knew you would come around,” Walsh leered. Faith didn’t have the energy to flip the professor off, but she wanted to. She seethed at the barely-there gloating tone in Walsh’s voice. “It’s simple really. I just want to know about the Slayers, Faith. Answer my questions, and I promise, we’ll get you a nice tasty meal and a full night’s sleep.”

“Fine.”

For a day—probably—Faith had a respite. She answered Walsh’s questions, providing all the information she had on the Watchers Council, the history of the Slayers, the Slayer’s abilities, and
what little demon lore she knew. As a reward, she was allowed a ‘night’ of uninterrupted sleep (Faith had no idea if it was actually night in the outside world, but they had dimmed the lights in her cell and allowed her to sleep as long as her body felt it was necessary). She also had three decent meals, before everything ground to a halt again.

With her wits about her again, at least somewhat, Faith was better mentally prepared to resist when Walsh’s questions got more personal. It started the same as always, simple innocuous questions about her weapons training, leading into questions about whether Slayers had any additional powers that beyond superhuman strength and reflexes. Faith hadn’t told her about the prophetic dreams and had no intention of doing so. But she was no longer being difficult, and Walsh had no reason to doubt her when she played dumb.

“You mean like what? Magic?” Walsh’s sneer told Faith that, despite all the older woman had seen as Director, she didn’t put much stock in the concept of magic. What a fucking idiot. Faith decided to play into her biases. “Nah, Mags. I’m the Slayer, not a witch.”

Walsh raised a slight eyebrow at this. ‘You mean to say that witches are real?’ Faith wasn’t sure she caught herself fully as the wince began to form along her face. The last thing she wanted was to put Willow or Tara at risk.

“It’s a religion, ain’t it?” Faith muttered. “Just saying. Fightin’s what I do. Nothin’ more than that.”

“I hope you’re not holding out on me, Faith. Not after we had just begun to build some trust.” Faith didn’t bother hiding her scowl. A few meals and a good nap were not nearly enough to bring them close to trust. Faith was very aware that she was a prisoner here, and while she had broken for a moment, she was now feeling much more herself and much more capable of seeing through Walsh’s bullshit.

Unexpectedly, the small hatch that she always seemed to lose track of along one of the walls opened just long enough for a tray of food and a plastic water bottle to slide through. “Eat up, Faith. We’ll come back to my questions, but I think it’s time to move on for now.”

Faith eyed the food warily. “Yeah, and what exactly’re you plannin’ on moving me to now?”

“Physical tests, of course,” Walsh answered without hesitation. “I need to see what you’re really capable of. In a controlled environment, obviously.” Faith had a feeling that she wasn’t going to like whatever Walsh had in mind for a ‘controlled environment,’ but she didn’t make a stink about it. She would eat first. Not like she’s gonna try to poison me right before she tries to see what the Slayer can really do.

Faith didn’t remember being knocked out after she finished her meal, but she startled awake as she realized what she was seeing as her eyes open. For the first time in however long, she was in a different room. She rose swiftly to her feet, and that’s when she realized that someone had changed her clothes while she was unconscious. She didn’t want to think what else those sick fucks might be doing to her while they kept her out of it, but she was dressed in fairly simple athletic wear. Charcoal sweatpants, plain white tennis shoes, a sports bra, and a black tee shirt. Someone had even tied her hair into a ponytail. She stifled a shudder at the thought of some faceless scientist’s hands on her body and took in her surroundings.

The room was spacious, like a cross between a gym and a bunker. On the wall furthest from her was a rock climbing wall that stretched up beyond the ceiling of the part of the room she was in, suggesting that the other side opened up significantly. The concrete and padded floor before her was littered with obstacles and equipment. There was an intricate course of cones and hurdles, free weights, a heavy duty treadmill, and a punching back, along with other equipment Faith didn’t
“Ready to demonstrate your physical prowess, Slayer?” Faith only jumped slightly at Walsh’s somehow booming voice. Her whole body tensed as her frustration and fury finally began to bubble over. She clenched her fists tightly as her eyes searched the room for cameras and speakers—anything to direct her anger at. There was nothing. So she shouted at everything and nothing all at once.

“So what?! Now you just want me to jump through hoops for ya? Run your little drills like all your little soldier boys?!” Faith paced around the room, sizing up the possible weapons she now had available to her. As she stretched her arms out, her tee rode up a little, reminding her that these weren’t her clothes. A fresh wave of rage flowed through her. “Speaking of, I’m about fucking done getting drugged up by you people. How many of your boys did you let have a go at me while I was all nice and vulnerable, huh?” This was the last straw. Her mind raced with vicious imagination, haunting her with thoughts of disgusting men touching her naked and defenseless body. Scientists, soldiers—whatever—using her without her consent, whether for science or for pleasure. It made her sick. It made her feel helpless, and she hated it. Faith felt almost as if she was no longer human, but rather a human-shaped storm. A maelstrom of pent up wrath shrieked and kicked out at the treadmill, sending it tumbling several feet and no doubt costing Walsh a pretty penny.

“That’s enough!” Walsh’s faceless voice roared, coming from nowhere and everywhere at once.

“Ain’t even started on enough yet, bitch! Who do you sick fucks think you are? What right do you have to kidnap me, drug me, starve me, and fuck with my head?!” Faith grabbed the punching bag with both hands and pulled with all her strength, chunks of concrete and dust falling all around her as she ripped it from the ceiling.

As she dropped it, she heard something across the room, and it was enough of a heads up that she was able to deftly dodge the dart that was fired at her. She immediately turned in the direction the dart had come from and spied the small opening in the wall as the barrel of the gun was pulled back through, she assumed to reload. Acting on impulse and emotion now, Faith took three steps, lifted the bar from the bench press set up, and threw it as hard as she could. Her aim with the makeshift spear wasn’t great, but she put enough force behind it to drive it at least a foot into the plaster and concrete of the wall. “I’m not your trained monkey!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. “And I’ll never be your soldier.” She felt several pricks and as she realized that there were other vantage points in the room from which to tranquilize her, her rage faded again into darkness.

Faith woke to searing pain as electricity surged through her body, snapping her back to consciousness despite the lingering effects of the drugs she could still feel in her system. As the pain ended and her vision began to clear, Faith suffered a more figurative shock at the sight before her. She recoiled immediately from the Frankenstein’s monster-looking thing standing over her, reacting on instinct as she kicked up to deliver a blow to his face before turning into a flip that would propel her back and away from it.

Her foot didn’t make it to the monster’s chin. Its reflexes were every bit as fast as Faith’s, and it was strong enough to catch her foot with one hand and stop the momentum of her kick, seemingly without much effort. It grinned at her before grabbing her leg with its other hand, swinging her around, and tossing her in a heap several feet away. She landed on her back, expelling all the air from her lungs as the nerves along her spine screamed at her.
“Surely the Slayer is capable of more than this,” it intoned in a flat, throaty baritone. “Mother said you would be a challenge.” Faith forced herself to her feet, the pain of being thrown across the room already dulling significantly. She eyed the thing warily. It looked like it had been a man once, another bulky soldier type like Riley. It wore camo pants and combat boots, but its torso was exposed, revealing skin that was a mottled mix of pale, pinkish human skin and rough green demon skin, stitched together haphazardly. Various places were also covered in metal plates of various sizes and shapes, without any real rhyme or reason that Faith could see. There was a sharp, diagonal line of demarcation across its face, the top part human and the bottom part demon. Its demon eye glowed a sickly red. All in all, it was very clear that Walsh—and Faith was sure that Walsh had been the one to create this thing—had no interest in making it look like anything other than what it was: a monster. A horrific science experiment. It continued to smirk at her, and she felt a flutter of anxiety in her gut, disturbed by the sinister twist of its mouth that seemed so out of place under such emotionless eyes. “I am to test your physical capabilities. So far, I am unimpressed.”

Faith glowered at the monster. She wasn’t here to impress Walsh or her science experiment, but she also wasn’t going to just stand there and be insulted. Nor would she back down from a fight, not now that she finally had the option for some real violence. They were still in the massive gym area, and a quick glance revealed that no one had removed the barbell from where she had speared it into the wall. Can’t have been out long. Maybe just long enough for tall, dark, and ugly here to show up.

“Wanna go, dickhead? Come at me.”

As she began to pace in her fighting stance, he mirrored her. They each sized the other up, but Faith was also maneuvering herself towards the barbell. The thing was bigger than her and was probably at least as strong as her, so she wasn’t looking to get into a straight up fist fight. She had little doubt that her biggest advantages were speed, agility, instinct, and (hopefully) experience. But the way it simply watched her, its stare cold and calculating, unnerved her. This thing seemed almost more robot than demon, and Faith wondered if there wasn’t some sort of cyborg machinery holding together the human and demon pieces.

Trying to ignore her own growing sense of dread, she began jeering at the monster, both to try and goad it into revealing more about itself and to psych herself up. “Seen a lot of ugly dudes in my time, but dammit if you don’t take the cake. What the fuck even are you?” It considered, already starting to slowly close the distance between them.

“I am Adam,” was the only response it gave. She wondered if that was the name of the poor sap the thing used to be before Walsh started infusing it—him?—with essence of demon. She doubted it, trying not to shudder at the connotations of the Biblical reference to the first man—first of many.

“A shitty name to match that shitty face.” He did not react to the taunt. “So you’re strong? Part demon? Doesn’t matter. Not gonna catch me off guard again.” She was almost to the barbell. “So you wanna know what a Slayer can do? Well … best get ready for a beat down.”

He realized a few seconds too late what she was doing, and her hands were already on the hefty length of steel as he charged. She pulled with all her strength, and not wanting to waste time or energy, turned the momentum created from the force of yanking the barbell from the wall into a wide arcing swing. The barbell impacted against the demon side of Adam’s head with a loud crack, driving him to the ground.

As Faith backed away to maintain some distance, she could see that the blow had caved in the side of his skull, the green skin bruised purple and seeping nearly black blood. The sight was ghastly, even to Faith. Adam didn’t move for nearly a minute, and she began to move in, holding the barbell at the ready to finish the monster off. She wanted to pound on it a bit, release some of her frustration while confirming that the thing was dead. But she only got in one more blow, raising the bar high
over her head and swinging it down with enough force to completely shatter his shoulder, before she felt the familiar sting of several darts. She grinned with wry satisfaction as the darkness took her again.

After she slayed Adam, Walsh went back to feeding Faith slop and allowing her just enough sleep to keep her on the edge of exhaustion without pushing her over. She also went back to interrogating Faith for information on Buffy and the Scoobies, but Faith was done playing ball. She entertained herself by think of new and more colorful ways to tell Walsh to go fuck herself, all the while goading her about how easily Faith took down her monster.

Her taunting came at a price, though. At least once a day, she would find herself waking up in her cell with no memory of falling asleep. Each time, she woke up woozy from blood loss. Only twice was she able to find any evidence of what they had done to her while she was kept unconscious. Once, she awoke to profound and searing pain on the inside of her left forearm, just below the elbow. There she found a large, gnarly looking burn, the skin a mottled mess of black and bright red burns and gross yellowy blisters that were only beginning to heal. It took a couple days to heal and left her with a visible scar, the fresh skin a pattern of curving pink marks of various shades. The Initiative was testing to see how Slayer healing worked. Well, that answers my question as to whether Slayers can be scarred physically. She was already aware of the lasting mental and emotional scars that came with the calling.

Another time, she found a large puncture mark on the back of her right hip, already healing but surrounded by a large, painful bruise. She had no idea what that was about, but at least it was something visible. Most of the time, she had no idea what they were doing to her without her consent, and with each day that passed, she grew more furious about it. Faith hated how powerless she was to stop any of it—all she could do was scream and rage and kick dents and cracks into the pristine walls of her cell until her feet hurt. Walsh never reacted to Faith’s insults, so that didn’t even bring her satisfaction.

All she had was her victory over Adam, and she was only able to savor that for three days. On the fourth, she again found herself forced to wakefulness by an electric shock and found herself face-to-face with that ugly mug for the second time. It wouldn’t be the last either. Somehow, he had lived through getting his brain bashed in, and they had repaired the damage to his skull and shoulder, each with a bright and shiny new piece of chrome in place. He no longer seemed as smug, though, even in the more controlled setting the Initiative devised for their ongoing sparring sessions.

They were in a plain, concrete room completely empty of anything save for the two combatants and the reinforced steel door. Without a weapon, Faith found herself unable to repeat her previous victory, and Adam seemed determined not to let her catch him off guard again. Every day, he would shock her awake from a drug-induced nap, and they would fight. Every day, the fight would end with Faith too bloodied and broken to fight any more. The only things that varied were Adam’s tactics and fighting style, and the verbal sparring between the two.

Faith wasn’t sure which of them was being tested by this, and she didn’t much care. She knew that fighting Adam was what Walsh wanted, but she couldn’t bring herself to resist. It wasn’t in Faith to run from a fight or sit quietly and take a beating. Especially not with how powerless she felt outside of that room. She never won again, but she got in plenty of good blows. She learned that she couldn’t choke Adam to death. Snapping his neck slowed him down but didn’t kill him. No amount of pounding could stop him. Once she had even managed to break off the long, sharp bone skewer that extended from his left arm and stabbed him with it repeatedly. It definitely hurt him, but he still managed to beat her unconscious with the blunt end of it even as blood oozed out of his wounds in
sickening spurts.

Regular meals and a normalized sleep schedule enabled Faith to get a better sense of the passage of time, but the regular drugging and experimentation was still enough to keep her from establishing a firm conception of how many days she had been there. She felt comfortable saying it had been over a week, but all she knew for sure was that after her sixth fight with Adam, she was back at her breaking point.

Each fight saw Adam provoking her with information on his creation and purpose. He was the first prototype for a super soldier. For whatever else the Initiative might be up to, that was Walsh’s primary goal. Her efforts to capture and understand demons were merely instrumental in working towards the creation of hybrid beings. Combining human, demon, and cybernetics to create stronger, faster, and more resilient soldiers for the US military. Faith wasn’t sure that she believed Walsh actually had much loyalty to the government—if there was one fact about her captor that Faith felt certain of, it was that Walsh was a control freak. She was driven by a powerful scientific curiosity, yes, but more than anything she believed in order and felt that she alone was qualified to wield whatever power was necessary to force the world into the order she believed was best. She didn’t just want to understand demons; she wanted to control them.

And the same was true of Faith. “Mother will make you like me,” Adam had sneered. “She is testing you now, wearing you down and molding you into a better soldier. But eventually, she will begin improving you.”

“I’ll die first,” she had assured him. And she believed that. She’d rather be dead than a twisted monster like Adam, inescapably brought under Walsh’s control. She’d bash her own skull in, if that’s what it took.

“She won’t allow that,” he insisted. “You have no choice in this. Sooner or later, we will be siblings. And we are only the beginning.”

He had also taunted her with the revelation that her own blood and bone marrow had been what healed him. They had turned her own body against her, and she feared that it would only get worse. Faith’s rage and fear built on each other steadily, and she began to seriously consider how she could end her life. Escape felt impossible, and rescue, a dream. She was being watched closely, so it would have to be quick.

She imagined that bashing her head against the wall repeatedly, as hard as she could, would be the best method. She could get in at least several severe blows before someone noticed and ran into her room, and even if she didn’t succeed, she might at least cause herself enough brain damage to render her body unusable for Walsh’s sick experiments. Drowning herself in the toilet was a possibility, but she didn’t trust herself to hold her head underwater long enough, even if she was able to clog it up enough to raise the water level in the bowl. She wasn’t given access to anything sharp, so slitting her wrists wasn’t an option. And she didn’t think she could trick or goad Adam into finishing her off—his orders were clearly to keep her alive, and he didn’t seem willing or able to defy orders.

Faith felt such complete and utter disgust at her thoughts. She had been through so much already, survived such horrors. She had finally been making something of herself, and now she was faced with the worst possible choice. Brutal, self-inflicted death or a slow loss of everything that made her who she was. Her free will, her independence, her stubborn, tenacious bravado—Walsh would take it all. And Faith refused to let her have it. She couldn’t escape. Couldn’t fight back. All she had left was this choice.

But before she could make it, everything changed.
For the first time ever, she was left awake to watch as her cell door opened. She was paralyzed by the face of the person who was shoved into the room, unable to move as the door slammed shut behind him, disappearing again into the wall. It had been years, but his face was still scorched into her memory. He had hardly changed at all.

The man was disoriented, and he was no doubt just coming awake from a sedative. Faith was well accustomed to the Initiative’s procedures at this point. He blinked up at her in confusion, catching his own breath slowly as his eyes adjusted to the brightness of her cell. Then they widened in recognition.

For the first time in seven years, Pat and Faith Lehane were in the same room. Only this time, the power dynamics were completely reversed.

“What the fuck is this, Walsh?!” she screamed up at the lights in the room, where she was sure the cameras were hidden. She kept her back to her father, not trusting herself to refrain from beating him to a bloody pulp, and instead addressed the empty room. “You springing dirtbags from prison now? The fuck kinda military are you people? Get him fucking out of here, right fucking now!”

No disembodied voice or video projection answered her. The only sound in the room was the infuriating wry little chuckle that came from behind her. Even after all this time, it was still so familiar. Pat Lehane had two moods: smug, joking asshole and violent rage monster. “Damn, girlie. What the hell did you get into while I was away?”

Well, that answers the question of whether he recognizes me. Faith turned to face him. I can control myself. At least for a little while. She wouldn’t show weakness, but even so, she kept her distance. She was afraid of what she might do to him if she got close enough to touch him. Faith settled on glaring at him, since she really didn’t have anything to say. Talking to him—screaming at him—would open the floodgates, and who knows what she might do then.

“What, girl, you got nothing to say to dear old Dad?” Pat didn’t look all that different than she remembered him. A little skinnier, a little rougher looking, but that same face that haunted her nightmares. He was leaning against the far wall, a little disoriented but holding himself with the usual casual arrogance that prison had apparently failed to cure him of. There wasn’t a room in the world that Pat Lehane wouldn’t have considered himself the master of, ignorant to the insanity of such unearned smugness.

“Fuck off,” she muttered, continuing to glare daggers at him. He bristled but didn’t rise up from the wall.

“You best watch your mouth, Faithie. You mighta done some growin’ up, but I’m still your pops. You’ll respect me.”

“The fuck I will,” Faith spat, unable to stop herself. “You’re a pathetic piece of shit, and you’re lucky I don’t beat the shit out of you right here and now.”

His face twisted into a scowl, and he slammed a fist against the wall. “Baby girl’s grown into a feisty woman, huh? Good for you.” He brought his hands together and cracked his knuckles. “But you talk to me like that again, there’ll be consequences.”

Faith laughed derisively. “You don’t want that, old man. You can’t touch me anymore. I’m the one with the power here.”
“Oh yeah?” he sneered, then looked around the room pointedly. “I know a prison when I see one. Ain’t ever known a prisoner with much power, girlie.”

Faith took a step forward, then caught herself. She was quickly finding herself on the edge of a white hot rage that terrified her. Don’t do this. You’re not like him. You don’t have to be like him. Resisting the urge to break his nose, she settled on yelling more. “You don’t fuckin’ know me, asshole!” Faith began to pace, years of pent up anger starting to release and fuel a frenetic energy that captivated her as the vitriol began to spew out of her.

“Do you even get how badly you fucked up? You were such a shitty father. An abusive, alcoholic piece of straight up garbage! But you kept fucking with my life even after they took you away.” She stopped for just a second to turn her eyes back to her father pointedly. “For murder,” Faith growled at him. He started to retort, but she turned away to continue pacing, cutting off any answer he could have. She wasn’t done yet.

“I thought Mom woulda been better once she was free of you.” Faith’s voice tightened with emotion. “But she just fucking fell apart. I was fucking 12 and completely on my own most days. I had to clothe and feed myself and try to find my way to school and fit in, even though I was constantly hungry and smelled funny.” She chuckled scornfully. “And that was fuckin’ awful, but hey at least no one was beating on me anymore.”

Finally, Pat refused to hold back any further. “And what? You want an apology? Boo hoo, you had a rough life,” he spat. “Ain’t gonna get anywhere blamin’ your shit on me, darlin’.”

“Shut the fuck up!” she snapped back. “You don’t know shit! And you’re goddamn right it was your fault. I was a fucking child! I got shipped from foster home to foster home. Mom fucking died—did you even fucking know that?!” She continued to push forward, her anger quickly becoming a roaring stream of consciousness. She could feel the heat building behind her eyes, tears threatening to spill. “I ended up homeless and on the street, and it was all your fault! No child should have to experience that! Why did you even have a kid in the first place, if that was how you were going to treat her? Treat me?!”

Faith sensed movement in her periphery and turned just as Pat charged at her with a furious growl. He didn’t bother trying to argue or defend himself verbally; he just attacked. But Faith was ready for it. As Pat swung a wild punch at her, she stood her ground and caught his fist easily, stopping him in his tracks. She twisted her hand and snapped his wrist as though it were a twig. Pat shrieked in pain, and Faith shoved him hard enough to fling him back across the room, landing painfully on his ass.

“I warned you, old man. I’m not that powerless little girl anymore. But you’re clearly as fucking awful as always.” Pat refused to look at her, cradling his broken wrist. Any thought of holding back was gone—Faith was fueled by the rage now pouring out of her. “It’s all your fucking fault!” she screamed. “Your fault that I can’t trust people.” She took a step towards the bitter man cowering on the floor, then another. “Your fault that I never felt safe! Your fault that I don’t know how to love someone!” She towered over him. “I’ve seen vampires and demons,” she said softly. “But the worst monster I’ve ever known is you.”

Pat looked up, sneering derisively through his pain. “You’re just a worthless girl,” he fumed. “Just like your mom, and now you’re crazy on top of that.” He leapt to his feet again, and Faith reacted violently. She slammed him against the wall, pinning his remaining good hand and pressing her forearm forcefully against his throat hard enough to cut off any further hatred he might spout at her.

“You’re done talking,” Faith warned, and she as she blinked rapidly, she realized that her cheeks
were now stained with tears. She growled and pressed a little harder against his throat, and she could see that he was struggling to breathe now. Good. But this was when Walsh finally interrupted.

“I see you’re enjoying your time with your visitor, Faith.” The Director’s voice sounded almost gleeful in its superiority, at least as much as someone as emotionless as Walsh could sound. “I confess, I wasn’t sure what your reaction would be. You certainly haven’t disappointed.”

“What the fuck is this game you’re playing?” Faith snarled at the disembodied voice. She kept her stranglehold on her father, preventing him from making any sound other than strangled gasps.

“I know you, Faith. Nothing has escaped my notice. We’ve made some remarkable discoveries in your time here, but you have yet to fully commit. I can only allow you to fight against me for so long. So, consider this a peace offering. A chance to prove yourself worthy of a place in my Initiative. And my gift to you. Your father is the source of all your trauma. All your pain. Kill him, and maybe you will be able to move forward.”

Only at the words ‘kill him’ did Pat start to realize how precarious his situation was. Legitimate fear began to cloud and swirl in his dull brown eyes. And Faith couldn’t help but revel in it. Good. Cower in fear, you worthless piece of shit. Just like you made me cower all those years. I could crush his skull with my bare hands. But he deserves so much worse. I could break all his fingers first. Would Walsh stop me?

For a moment, Faith was back in Boston. A scared little girl nursing a fresh black eye and hiding under her parents’ bed desperately hoping the angry drunk man who was her father wouldn’t find her. Would give up his search and turn his wrath back on his long-suffering wife. Anything to give her a few hours of peace from the powder keg of violence and fear that was her childhood.

Then she was in another memory. Her feet dangled in the air and she struggled against the rough hands that squeezed at her neck, holding her up against the wall of her tiny bedroom. Dark spots blurred her vision as she struggled to breathe, and she wondered—not for the first time—if this was when her father would go too far. If this was the end. She didn’t understand what she did to provoke him. Why he was so violent? Was she just a bad girl? What had she done that was so bad that she deserved to be choked to death?

As Faith came back to the present moment, she released Pat and stepped away from him. Horror clawed at her chest, and Faith felt like she might vomit. It was her greatest fear coming to life. Maybe she was just like him. Nothing more than a poorly contained rage monster. Repeating the same cycle of violence and fear that had broken her as a child.

“No,” she whispered, clutching her roiling gut in the hopes of staving off the bile she could feel in her throat. She turned away from her father, who had slumped to the floor and was now watching her warily. She found her voice again, facing the lights in the corner of the room and imaging Walsh’s face. “I won’t do it! I’m not like him. I’m not a monster.”

“It’s only human to want revenge,” Walsh countered. “And you can’t really tell me that the world won’t be a better place without Pat Lehane in it, can you?”

Walsh was right, but that wasn’t the point. Faith had no doubt in her mind that killing him would feel good, but she knew better now. She wasn’t that person, or … she didn’t have to be. She didn’t have to indulge herself in each and every dark impulse, and she didn’t think she would ever be able to face Joyce or Buffy or Willow again if she murdered her father in cold blood. Killing him wouldn’t heal her scars—it would only create new ones.

“I said no, goddammit! Now get him out of here!” No response came, and for several tense
minutes, neither Lehane moved. Then the door opened, and Faith finally found herself face-to-face with her tormenter. Before Faith could move, Walsh calmly pulled out a simple black handgun and pointed it at her. Faith froze.

“This man ruined your life, Faith. I’ll give you one last chance to do the right thing. Do not defy me again. Kill him.” In that moment, Faith saw what Walsh was really doing. She wanted Faith to prove to be just like her father. A wild animal without remorse or empathy. Because Walsh wanted to be the one to put her on a leash. To domesticate her and convince her she needed Walsh’s direction to actually find some meaning in her empty, violent life.

Faith took another step back but didn’t break eye contact with Walsh. “Fuck you.”

Walsh sighed, as if she was a wise parent disappointed in the poor choices of her insolent child. “Then I suppose neither of us have any need for him anymore.” She swung the gun around with military precision and emptied two rounds in his skull, killing him instantly. Before Faith could even fully register what Walsh had just done, she holstered her weapon and left the room, locking Faith in a room with the fresh corpse. Blood and viscera—and visible chunks of skull and brain matter—now painted the formerly pristine white floor and wall of her cell.

Faith slumped to the floor, completely in shock. *Fuck. What the fuck?* She couldn’t move, couldn’t tear her eyes away from the ghastly sight of her father’s mangled body. She felt numb.

But Walsh wasn’t finished. Her voice came back, harsh and commanding. “Defy me again, and Pat Lehane will not be the only parental figure in your life who I kill. Do not test me further.”

Time lost its relevance altogether after that. Her father’s corpse was left where it fell for a long time, maybe a day, during which time Faith was denied food. She also couldn’t bring herself to sleep, not with the lifeless body of the monster who haunted her nightmares slowly decomposing a few feet away. At some point, she woke up to find the body gone and the gore cleaned away, but it didn’t change how numb and utterly defeated she felt.

Some part of Faith had the same awareness as before that she wasn’t going to escape and that Walsh would eventually make her into a freakish science experiment like Adam. But she no longer had the energy or willpower to resist, to contemplate anything so bold as suicide or even an escape attempt.

Over the next several days, Walsh put her through her paces, and Faith just went along with it. Everything was a meaningless blur, her mind refusing to engage with the hell she had found herself in any longer. They hooked her up to sensors and ran her until she collapsed. They stuffed her into a tiny, claustrophobic room and tested her ability to withstand exposure to extreme heat and cold. The sparring sessions with Adam ceased—with her heart no longer in it, there was very little left for Walsh to test in that setting.

Walsh had set out to break her, and she had succeeded. It wasn’t just the trauma she had experienced—overcoming her own inner demons and stopping herself from giving into the violent impulse to inflict eleven years’ worth of pain on her abuser, only to have him murdered, with ruthless efficiency, right in front of her. It was Walsh’s words afterwards. It was the thought that this woman, who clearly had the full backing of the US government behind her, could just as easily do the same to Joyce. Or Buffy. Protecting them meant giving up.

Every instinct in Faith’s body screamed at her to fight back, to be defiant until the bitter end. But Faith was no longer a slave to her baser instincts. She had learned to love, and she wouldn’t let her actions provoke retaliation against the people she cared about. So, she had accepted her fate, and it
broke her.

The only thing Faith couldn’t figure out was what Walsh was waiting for, why she hadn’t started grafting demon bits onto her already. What else could she possibly take from me at this point? It didn’t make any sense, and she imagined they were running out of ways to poke and prod her by now. They were still keeping her on the edge of starvation and exhaustion, not allowing her any more than a few hours of sleep at a time.

The sleep deprivation techniques had been going on long enough that she was no longer shocked when she was pulled back to consciousness far too soon by a blinding white light. But this time was different. It wasn’t the full array of lights along the upper seams of her room that pulled her out of her nightmares; it was a shaft of light, and it was accompanied by noise. But Faith was too groggy, too disoriented to understand.

“Faith!” The voice that called out to her with such fear and worry was oddly familiar, stirring something warm and confusing in her chest. A hand settled onto her cheek, then another through her hair and onto the back of her head, pulling her gently up into a seated position. “Faith!” came the strangled cry again, and Faith’s vision began to clear as her eyes came fully awake and adjusted to the light shining in from the now open door.

Faith felt the air eject from her lungs as her eyes finally focused on the person holding her up, emerald eyes searching her with panicked concern. It was impossible. She had woken from a nightmare into a dream. That was the only explanation.

“Faith, please talk to me. Please. Tell me that you’re okay.” The words were frantic, and Faith felt a few tears escape the blonde’s cheeks, impacting against her own in away that told her this was no dream. It felt too real. Faith’s heart pounded in her chest, and she jerked forward, coming into a seated position on her own. Her hands moved of their own accord, trying to verify the reality of the person now sitting beside her.

“B—Buffy?”
How do I get to you?

Chapter Notes

Lifted a bit from Goodbye Iowa and New Moon Rising, but obviously we're moving into a lot more original story here. Sorry it took a while, but it's a long chapter. Hope you enjoy!

“You’re lying to yourself. Just hope you don’t realize it too late.” Those were the last words that Faith uttered before she disappeared into the night. Buffy had no idea that those words would haunt her for weeks afterwards, not yet. In the moment, she could hardly form a rational thought.

Faith caught her completely off guard. Buffy wasn’t ready for the honesty, vulnerability, and—Buffy couldn’t deny it—bravery that Faith confronted her with that night. Buffy had never fully gotten over the possibility that something could eventually develop between the two Slayers. Buffy wasn’t brave enough to think honestly about that possibility, and she never imagined that Faith would just put everything on the table like that.

Buffy felt trapped in a whirlwind of emotions. Her initial reactions were warmth and joy—for all the repressing she had been doing the past several months, she felt overwhelmed by Faith’s smile, the flowers, and the other girl’s naked honesty. It was the good kind of overwhelmed, but that didn’t make it any less confusing.

*She’s falling in love with me.* Buffy couldn’t wrap her head around that. After how terribly she treated Faith, it didn’t seem possible. But it didn’t resolve any of Buffy’s fears and insecurities. Any of her concerns about holding onto something normal. About how differently people might look at her if they thought she was gay. Even just a little gay.

So she’d turned Faith down again, almost on impulse. Even as her heart screamed at her not to. It shouted out the need and longing she felt coursing through her at the romance of the gesture. Before her heart could win out over her fear, Faith was gone.

*Just hope you don’t realize it too late.* Shit.

“Faith!” Buffy shouted, as she ran out the door. But she couldn’t tell which direction the other Slayer had run. Buffy’s heart felt like it might beat out of her chest, and again, she felt paralyzed by indecision. *Stop. Breathe.* Buffy closed her eyes and focused on getting her breathing under control. As her breathing calmed, so did her heart. Then she reached out with her Slayer instincts until she could feel that faint, tell-tale warmth of the bond she shared with Faith. *Where did you go?*

Buffy followed the sensation as best as she could, but after nearly an hour of chasing it in circles, she gave up. She could feel Faith nearby, but never close enough that she could actually find her. It was as frustrating as it was worrisome, and Buffy couldn’t help but feel defeated. Like the universe was telling her that she had been right in her rejection. That this wasn’t meant to be.

*Why can’t I figure out what I want?*
“Okay, Mom. I’m on my way right now. Willow too. We’ll there soon.” She hung up the phone, her heart racing. Buffy hadn’t wanted to talk when she got back to the dorm after her failure to track down Faith and sort things out. The next morning, Buffy hadn’t had to explain to Willow what exactly the subject of their fight—for lack of a better word—had been. She had told Willow that she had hurt Faith, again, and that she had disappeared. Willow caught on immediately and suggested that Faith simply needed to cool off. Which made sense to Buffy, but it didn’t explain how she could feel so close to her but never actually find her. Even so, Buffy let it go, ignoring the worry that nagged at her. Maybe Faith was just avoiding her intentionally.

But that worry remained on the edge of her consciousness all day, and then, shortly after she and Willow had returned to the dorm from dinner, the phone rang. Joyce wanted to know if Buffy had seen Faith, her voice full of concern. Faith hadn’t come home last night, completely missed the full day of work at The Gallery, and now had missed dinner.

“Faith’s missing,” Buffy whispered, grabbing her bag and tossing her crossbow and knife inside. Willow followed her lead, grabbing her own bag and following Buffy out of the room before locking the door. She waited until they had walked down the stairs and exited the building before speaking.

“What did Joyce say?”

Buffy recounted what her mother had told her, then added, “This is all my fault. I shouldn’t have let her go. Or—or I should’ve tried harder to find her last night.”

Willow seemed to sense that it would be a bad idea to try and argue. “Buffy, is it possible that she just needed to get away after whatever happened between you? I mean… you know, like last time?” Buffy didn’t need any clarification on what Willow meant by last time. But she wasn’t buying it. It had been over a year since Faith’s impromptu walkabout, and she had grown so much in that time. Besides, Faith didn’t tell anyone, and Buffy couldn’t imagine her just skipping town without at least telling Willow or Joyce, no matter how much Buffy had hurt her.

They locked eyes for a moment but kept walking. “Will, that isn’t her anymore. You know that she would’ve said something before leaving. Even back then, she went out of her way to tell you before she left. This is something else.” Buffy tried her best not to let her imagination construct various worst-case scenarios.

“Well, we’ll see what Joyce can tell us, and maybe look for clues in Faith’s bedroom?” Willow suddenly stopped and grabbed Buffy’s wrist to get her to turn and face her. Buffy was greeted with a small, sad smile on the witch’s visage. “But first, you need to tell me what happened. What’s going on with you two?”

“Now’s not really—”

“Yes it is. It’s the perfect time.” She released Buffy’s arm, and they started walking again. “May as well make use of our walking time here, and if Faith’s missing, you better believe I’m gonna do whatever it takes to find my friend. But I need to know what is going on. All of it.”

Buffy released a long, heavy exhale. Where to start? She flexed her hands and sped up her pace, struggling with the torrent of thoughts and emotions swirling around almost painfully in the front of her skull. “I don’t know,” she whispered, her chest tightening as if to challenge the obvious lie.

“Buffy, come on. It’s me.” Buffy looked tentatively back at her best friend, whose expression was both supportive and skeptical. “Since when did you start lying to me about your feelings for Faith?”

“Will! I’m not … okay, fine! I am!” Buffy raised her hands to the back of her head, breathing in
and out deeply. Her eyes turned downward to watch her feet move forward towards their destination. “It’s just …. Ugh, it was so thrilling when it was just empty flirting. Just someone else who understood what it was like to be the Slayer, who was fun and a little wild and pushed me to let loose. But … I wasn’t ready for it to be more than that. I freaked… like mega-freaked. All the freakage. Fun and flirty is one thing, but a real, actual gay relationship…” Buffy sighed, unable to look at her friend. “I’m a coward,” she whispered.

She looked up when Willow put a hand on her shoulder. A soft smile played along the redhead’s lips, understanding shining through her hazel eyes. “So first of all, it was never ‘empty flirting,’ and I think you know that. Faith has had feelings for you for as long as I’ve known her. Second…” Willow paused, and Buffy caught her gaze again just in time to see the anxiety flash across her expression. But she swallowed hard and continued. “Second, why is being in a real relationship with a girl so scary for you? What does her gender matter, when you so obviously care about her so much?”

Buffy didn’t have a good answer for that. Willow will understand. It’s okay. She already knows, sorta. But she doesn’t know how far we’ve gone. And it is one thing to admit some vague attraction in the abstract—it’s another to confess that you’re …

“You’re…? But I’m… you’re… but … Is that why you broke up with Oz?” Buffy hated that she was a sputtering mess, but her mind was not processing this new information very well.

Willow pouted slightly. “No! Well… I mean kind of. No. Oz and I grew apart, but I mean. I’m not gay. I’m bisexual. That’s the word for it, by the way,” she proclaimed cheerfully. “And it was Faith who helped me figure that out and accept that side of myself. But I did break up with Oz in part because I realized I was falling for someone else.”

She linked their arms, and Buffy allowed herself to be pulled along. Her eyes were still wide, and her brain was in complete upheaval. “So uh … I mean, who is … s-she?”

A wide, goofy smile broke across Willow’s lips, and the witch radiated happiness. “You remember Tara? She was in my Wicca group and sat behind me in Psych?” The shy blonde’s face sprang to the front of Buffy’s mind, and she gasped.

“And you’re—”

“Girlfriends, yup!” Willow’s smile faded just a little, and she glanced down at her feet, her hand fidgeting nervously at her side. “Sorry I didn’t tell you right away, but … I mean, I’m not stupid. I could tell something was going on with you and Faith, even if neither of you would talk to me about it. And I could tell that whatever it was, it made you uncomfortable. So … I guess I was just afraid you wouldn’t … I mean—”

Buffy’s heart sank, and she realized that her own shame had inadvertently made Willow feel like Buffy would judge her. “Sweetie, no!” Buffy insisted, grabbing both of Willow’s hands and pulling them to a stop again. “Will, I am so sorry. I love you, and I support you, and if you’re happy, I’m so happy for you. A-and I’m just—dammit, I shouldn’t have—”

“Hey, lemme stop you there.” Buffy’s eyes darted back and forth self-consciously, and Willow
squeezed her hands to get her to focus again. “I know, okay? I think I get it now. You’re not judgmental or uncomfortable with, well, any of it really. You’re just … I don’t know, what would you say? Insecure about your own stuff?”

Buffy frowned. She forgot how insightful Willow was, and that was maybe a glaring sign of how she had let herself close off from getting too vulnerable with her friends recently. They resumed their walk. “Yeah, that sounds about right. Guess I’ve been kinda drownin’ in it lately.”

“Why is that?” Buffy froze, completely unsure of how to answer that. “I mean, you just told me that you love and support me and just want me to be happy. Which I am, by the way. Tara’s wonderful, and I can’t wait to introduce you properly. But my point is … why can’t you love and support yourself? Why are you so afraid of your own happiness?”

Buffy’s mind started to race again, and her hands stiffened instinctively. Willow bumped her hip against Buffy’s and interrupted the frantic thoughts. “Hey hey hey. How about you take all those crazy thoughts and just talk them out with me? No filter, just be honest. Unfiltered Buffy is key.”

Buffy’s head bobbed with nervous energy. “Okay. Well let’s just start with what’s going on, and maybe my stupid brain will stop freezing every time I try to think of an explanation for why I’m being so stupid.” She chewed on her lip, then started from the beginning. She explained how the regular sparring sessions and slaying and living together over the summer had slowly rebuilt a trust that was nearly destroyed by everything that went down with Angel and the Mayor. Willow grinned as Buffy awkwardly stammered through the increasingly flirty and physical nature of their sparring, up until that first kiss the night they ran into Spike at a party.

Groaning at her own indecision, she told Willow that she had freaked and run away. After which, Faith had justifiably shut her out, until she had saved Buffy from the fire at the pub. “She wanted to make sure I was okay, and I don’t know what it was, maybe I was still feeling some confidence from the caveman beer, but I just couldn’t settle for only cuddling. One thing led to another, and we talked. We cleared the air, and I definitely still had no idea what I wanted, but even so, we ended up making out.”

Willow squealed loudly. “Don’t get too excited there, this obviously doesn’t have a happy ending.”

“Not yet,” Willow grumbled. Buffy glared, but continued. She and Faith had gone on like that for a while, until the fear monster on Halloween had set off all of Buffy’s fears and insecurities about being with Faith. They continued to eat at her after that, and one night, things went a little too far. Thankfully Willow didn’t push to know what exactly constituted ‘too far.’

“It was too much for me, and I ended it. Some part of me always knew that it was more than just physical with Faith, and I just couldn’t let myself go there. And I knew she was going to get hurt, because she wanted something I couldn’t give her.”

“Why not?”

Buffy still wasn’t sure she had a good answer to that. She knew her answers were cowardly bullshit. But that didn’t change how much hold her insecurities had over her. “I’m weird enough as it is,” she squeaked out, forcing herself to stay honest despite feeling insanely embarrassed. “I’m the Slayer, with all the destiny and burden that comes with that. I guess being the Slayer and being gay felt like too much. Like I needed some aspect of my life to just be normal. The kinda normal you see on TV and stuff, you know?”

Willow furrowed her brow and exclaimed, “Hah! I knew it!” Buffy frowned in confusion. “I knew that Riley was a fluke. I’ve seen you in love, and this isn’t it! You’re just dating him as an
overreaction to your Faith freakout,” she accused.

They were nearing the house, but Buffy wasn’t ready to concede this point yet. “That isn’t what happened. Riley is really nice. And way hot. And we’ve been through a lot together already.”

“Not as much as you’ve been through with Faith, and she is way hotter. Don’t pretend like you don’t agree. You’re just afraid. Little fraidy cat.” Willow gave her a knowing side eye, and this time Buffy didn’t have it in her to argue. “No judgment!” Willow immediately reassured her. “I just want you to be happy, okay? It’s okay to be scared, but please just be honest with yourself. Do you really want to be with Riley?”

No. Her mind pumped out that answer so quickly that Buffy was a little annoyed at how slowly it was processing her feelings and hang-ups about Faith. Traitor, she scolded her subconscious. But even if she knew she didn’t really want to be with Riley, that didn’t give her any answers about what to do with Faith. Or why she was seemingly missing. Fortunately, they had reached the house, and Buffy offered a half-hearted, “I don’t know,” to Willow before heading inside to track down her mom.

Joyce was worried, but not overly so, at least not yet. It had only been a day, and Faith was a powerful, savvy Slayer with a history of taking care of herself. They hugged each other tightly, then she asked Joyce if she knew anything else that might help them figure out what happened to Faith. “Buffy, I told you everything I know. It just isn’t like Faith to miss work without telling me, and she definitely never misses dinner. That girl can eat, as you well know.”

Her heart sank. Shit. “That’s okay, Mom.” Buffy tried to hide her fear, tried to reassure Joyce. “We both know that Faith can hold her own. And we’re gonna figure this out, I promise.” She glanced over at Willow, who nodded emphatically. “We’re just gonna look around Faith’s room okay?”

“Okay honey, I’ll stay out of your way, let you do your Slayer thing.” She wasted no time heading up the stairs and into Faith’s room, eyes immediately searching, analyzing every detail. The room looked lived in, the bed only half made and a decent amount of clutter on most surfaces, including more than a few comics. Buffy’s chest tightened, and for a moment, she felt as though she couldn’t breathe. Everything about the room screamed ‘Faith,’ and she could still smell the faint scent of the other Slayer lingering in the air. As she walked towards the closet, her eyes found what she was looking for, propped up between the edge of Faith’s dresser and the wall.

Buffy felt like she had been punched in the gut. “She didn’t run away again,” she whispered, sure that Willow was close enough to hear her. She held up the battle ax to show Willow, proof that things were so much worse than a scorned Faith skipping town. “She’d never leave without this.” Buffy slumped down against the wall, sinking into a seated position. The ax Buffy stole from a hell dimension and later gave Faith for Christmas was as shiny and polished as ever, Faith’s most prized possession. Buffy traced her finger along the inscription—‘always got your back’—and the tears began to well up under her eyes. “Someone got to her, Will.”

Willow immediately slipped down to sit next to Buffy, intertwining their fingers. “And you’re sure she wouldn’t leave the ax?” Buffy nodded without looking up from the ax, blinking rapidly to keep back the tears. “Then we’ll have to find her.” Buffy’s eyes widened, and she finally met Willow’s gaze.

“But how?”

“We’ll figure something out. We always do. But there are two things you have to do for me, okay?” Willow’s face turned stern. “First, you can’t blame yourself.” Buffy’s brow furrowed, but
Willow cut her off with a raised finger before Buffy could even open her mouth. “No. The timing of this is coincidence, okay? Whatever is going on, it doesn’t have anything to do with whatever conversation the two of you had yesterday. Don’t argue with me on this.”

Buffy rolled her eyes but did as she was told. “Fine. What’s the second thing?”

“You can’t fall apart. I know you’re scared for her. And that you want to blame yourself. But it’s really starting to seem like Faith needs more than just her friends right now. She needs the Slayer. And a couple of witches. We’ve gotta keep it together, be our best. We owe her that.”

She knew Willow was right. She took a centering breath, held it for a few seconds, then released it. “Okay.” She pushed herself to her feet and placed the ax back where she had found it. “Okay. We can do this.” I’m coming for you, Faith. I’ve still got your back. Turning to face Willow, Buffy put together a plan. “I’ll get the Scoobies together first thing in the morning, at Giles’. Tonight, I’m going to go search the area around the gym. Find something—anything—that might give us a clue as to what got her. You go see your girlfriend—and yes, I want to meet her, if not tonight then before the Scooby meeting tomorrow—and figured out what sort of magic the two of you can put together that might help.”

“On it,” Willow assured her, then threw her arms around Buffy and hugged her tightly. Buffy grabbed on and squeezed as much as she could without hurting Willow. “We’re going to find her,” Willow promised, her voice gentle and soothing.

“We have to. I’ll never forgive myself if we don’t.”

As usual, Xander was the last one to arrive at Giles’ apartment. Buffy and Willow had already begun to explain the situation, after introducing Tara to Giles. The three college students had gotten together bright and early for a coffee before heading over to Giles’, mostly so that Buffy could meet her best friend’s new girlfriend and get to know her a little. Buffy’s initial impression was that Tara was good-hearted but incredibly shy and soft-spoken. But maybe Willow just has a thing for the quiet types, Buffy thought, remembering having similar thoughts about Oz when she first met him.

As Xander and Anya walked in, he halted in the foyer, studying the assembled crowd in confusion. “Where’s Faith?” he asked, sending another stab of painful anxiety through Buffy’s heart. His eyes landed on Tara, and he added, “And who’s the new girl?”

“Xander, this is Tara. My g-girlfriend.” Willow slipped her hand into Tara’s, interlacing their fingers loosely. Tara smiled at her girlfriend, then turned a nervous expression back to Xander, who she no doubt knew already was Willow’s oldest friend.

His eyes widened as they darted back and forth between the two witches. He sputtered for a moment, then scoffed, “Geez you guys. Is everyone gay now?!” There was no malice in his voice, just Xander being Xander. “I mean, all the tension between Buffy and Faith is bad enough, what with all the pining and … a-and now Willow’s on team ladies lovin’ ladies too? No but really, I’m happ—uh, Buff? What’s wrong?”

Buffy caught herself grinding her jaw and stopped, but she was just barely holding the tears back after the mention of her confusing relationship with Faith. Sometimes she forgot that everyone in their group basically knew, and she really didn’t need the reminder of how awful she had been to Faith lately. No one cares. No one is looking to judge me. What the hell is wrong with me?

Willow interrupted Buffy’s guilt spiral, and Buffy flashed a grateful smile. She wasn’t sure she
could’ve answered Xander without tearing up. “Faith’s missing,” Willow explained. “That’s why we’re all here.”

Xander and Anya settled in to the remaining seats in the living room. “Oh. Uh, hey there, I’m sure it’ll be alright. She probably just ran off again. You know how Faith is.” Buffy knew he was trying to be reassuring, but she had to fight the urge to cross the room and smack him.

“You’re wrong about her,” she growled. “She’s different now. And anyway, we already ruled out that possibility. She didn’t take any of her stuff, and I found her car last night, parked near to the gym where we train. She didn’t run; someone took her.” She channeled authority as she added the last bit, not wanting to leave any room for anyone questioning her any further.

“She better not have gotten eaten by something. She’s supposed to be my roommate,” Anya interjected bluntly. Despite the shallowness of the statement, the worry in her voice was obvious. Buffy knew that she and Faith had some sort of weird friendship, but she didn’t realize Anya cared much. Much less that she and Faith were planning to get a place together. *Dammit, how much have I missed because I was pushing Faith away?*

“How do you propose we begin investigating her whereabouts?” Giles asked, bringing the conversation back to the primary purpose of the meeting. Buffy simply gestured to Willow.

“Tara and I are going to perform a locator spell!” Buffy’s heart warmed at the way Tara watched Willow explain with such obvious adoration, and again, she wondered why she had so many hang-ups. Tara and Willow seemed so happy, like it was no big deal at all that they just happened to both be women. “We did a lot of research last night, and we’ve got all the necessary ingredients.”

“Tara, you are a witch?” Giles inquired. He seemed a little concerned, giving Buffy the impression that this was maybe some tricky magic they were proposing. But Buffy didn’t care—she trusted Willow, and she would do nearly anything to get Faith back.

“Y-yes,” Tara stammered. “Though not nearly as powerful as Willow.”

“That’s not true!” Willow chided, but Buffy shot her a very pointed look. “And not the point,” she added apologetically. “We’re ready to go on the spell right now, just give us a minute to set up.” Giles watched as the witches began to set out a large, detailed map of Sunnydale on the floor in front of the coffee table, placing four large crystals at each corner. Tara lit three candles and placed them on the coffee table, while Willow began to grind up some ingredients in her mortar.

While they worked on that, Buffy turned to Anya and Xander. “Have either of you heard from or seen Faith since two nights ago?”

Xander shook his head as Anya offered a flat, “Nope.” Buffy blew out the breath she was holding, venting her frustration. She knew it was unlikely they had seen her, but it was the last bit of hope she was holding onto that this wasn’t what she feared it was.

“Hey,” Xander soothed, as he put a soft, reassuring hand on her shoulder. “I don’t know what is going on between you two at this point, and I’m sorry if my joke before brought up something. But we’re going to find her, okay? You’re going to find her. I know it.” Buffy wanted to believe him, and she nodded along, trying to convince herself.

“We’re ready,” Willow announced. She and Tara sat cross-legged on the east and west sides of the map while the rest of the group crowded in on the sofa to watch the spell. Willow took a long brown strand of hair—Faith’s—and lit it over the mortar, the ashes dropping into the existing powder. Willow used her pestle to mix the ashes in and then dumped half of the powder into Tara’s
outstretched palm. Willow took the rest into her own palm.

Tara began the spell. “Thespia, we walk in shadow, walk in blindness. You are the protector of the night.”

“Thespia, goddess, ruler of all darkness, we implore you, open a window to find our friend,” Willow finished. They blew their powder over the surface of the map simultaneously, and it instantly transformed into a fine mist that settled down over the map. “With your knowledge may we go in safety. With your grace may we speak of your benevolence.” The mist swirled over the map, then began to coalesce into one glowing spot. Buffy leapt up to analyze it more closely.

The glowing light had settled over a spot near the southeast edge of the UC Sunnydale campus. “Why is she on campus?” Buffy asked, to no one in particular. Willow pulled out a detailed map of campus to try to better identify the location.

“She’s in this area, between, um, Anocapa Hall and Santa Cruz Hall. Closer to Santa Cruz.”

“Why would she be on campus? And why there?” If Faith was on campus, the only place Buffy could imagine her visiting was Buffy and Willow’s dorm, but that was in Stevenson, on the opposite side of the main housing area. She stood and grabbed her bag, ready to take off for campus.

“Buffy wait,” Tara called out, and Buffy turned back. “Just give it a minute. We need to be sure she isn’t moving, otherwise you’ll probably miss her.” That made sense, so Buffy settled to her knees by the map and watched the unmoving glowing spot. Several minutes passed, and it stayed firmly put.

“Good enough for me. I’m going. Is anyone coming with?”

“Anya and I have to get to work.” Xander and Anya stood, then he added, “But you know how to get ahold of us if you need anything.” He walked over and hugged Buffy. “I’ll check in when I’m off work, okay?”

“Thanks Xan.” They started to head out, but not before Xander gave Tara a big smile and said it was nice to meet her. Willow then explained that she and Tara had to get to class.

“You’re skipping, I assume?”

“Faith’s more important,” Buffy insisted.

“I know,” Willow responded, grabbing Buffy’s forearm in sympathy. “You’ve got my class schedule, but if you can’t find me, leave me a voicemail in the room, and I’ll respond as quickly as possible. Go get our girl.” She packed up most of her supplies but left the map and the crystals. They said their goodbyes and left.

“Guess it’s you and me, old man,” Buffy remarked.

“Forty-four isn’t old, Buffy.” He sounded exasperated, but his eyes were soft. She knew he was worried, not just for Faith but for Buffy as well. He glanced back at the map, where the glowing light was beginning to fade but remained in the same spot it had been. “I’ll drive us.”

She followed him outside, waiting while he locked the front door. They walked around the house to where Giles’ new car was parked on the street. Buffy still wasn’t used to the sight of the flashy little red BMW convertible. He had bought it to replace his old Citroen, which Spike had crashed while trying to evade the Initiative. Buffy still couldn’t believe that Spike had agreed to help Giles while he was magically transformed into a Fyarl demon by Ethan Rayne. But it seemed as though the neutered vampire would do about anything for money these days.
Giles turned the ignition, and the cabin filled with soft classical music as he put the car into drive. They had barely gone ten feet before the engine began to race alarmingly, Giles having put the car into neutral on instinct. “Blast!”

“You put it in neutral again, huh?”

Giles groaned, slipping the car back into drive. “I’m just not used to this automatic transmission. I-I loathe this sitting here, not contributing.”

“Giles, are you saying you want to break up with your car already?”

“Well, it did seduce me, all red and sporty!”

“Little two-door tramp,” Buffy chuckled, earning herself a sour look from her former Watcher.

“I-I don’t know, I just … I was so at loose ends, I-I found myself searching for, uh, some way of feeling more...”

“Shallow?” Buffy supplied.

Giles rolled his eyes, but then an uncomfortable silence sat in. Giles turned onto campus, then asked, “How are you holding up?”

Buffy closed her eyes, resting back against the seat as she drew in a heavy breath and released it. “Not well,” she confessed, not bothering to keep up any pretense of a brave face any longer. “I’m so scared for her, Giles. A-and this is all my fault, and—”

“I hardly see how this could be your fault,” Giles interrupted.

She started to explain but paused to offer some direction. “Turn here and follow this road. First parking lot on the left should be the closest to where we’re going.” Buffy frowned and looked out the side of the car. For a moment, she hesitated to tell Giles the whole story, but only for a moment. Part of making up for how I’ve behaved is getting honest, with myself and others. “We … got into a fight, kinda. Right before she disappeared. She, uh, she confessed her feelings for me. She wants to be in a relationship. A-and I … rejected her. Again. Because I’m a coward. And then she ran off, and—”

“Buffy, I understand the impulse to blame yourself. I do. But you’re wrong about this. If she has been abducted, which you seem rather sure about, then the timing is mere coincidence. Whatever or whomever was powerful to actually capture a Slayer was likely seeking her out intentionally. I cannot imagine why such an entity would be holding her in the middle of the university campus, but regardless, your guilt will not be of any help to Faith. You need to focus.”

“I know you’re right. I’m just so scared.” Giles parked the car, and Buffy leapt out. “Come on,” she demanded, then took off running for the spot indicated by the locator spell. She was so close now, she couldn’t waste any more time. But as she approached Anocapa Hall, her anxiety grew tenfold.

Faith was supposed to be in the wide area between the two dorms. But the open green space, featuring three sidewalks, a couple of trees, several benches, and a sand volleyball court, was nearly deserted. A couple of students were entering or leaving the dorms, but none of them were Faith. She was nowhere to be seen. Buffy continued to run, covering the distance from one dorm to another and looking in every corner and shadow and possible hidden spot. Nothing.

Buffy fell to her knees in front of one of the smaller trees, unable to fight back her tears this time.
Why aren’t you here? Where are you? If magic can’t find you, how can I? Buffy’s heart felt as though it might beat out of her chest as she sucked in air, trying to find a steady breath again. Tears streamed down her face, and she pounded the grass in frustration. Willow and Tara had seemed confident, and Buffy had let herself latch onto that confidence. Some part of her had been sure they would find Faith here, despite all the strange circumstances. The disappointment of being wrong ate at her.

Mere moments passed before she sensed Giles’ presence, standing awkwardly nearby. He never was great with handling tears. “She isn’t here,” Buffy choked out. On instinct, she reached out against across the connection the Slayers shared. Faith was still there, still alive, but faint. “I can feel her still. She can’t be far.” She turned her gaze upward towards Giles, pawing at her face to wipe away tears. “What’s going on, Giles?”

The former Watcher’s face scrunched up, equal parts confusion and contemplation. After a pause, he knelt down beside her. “What precisely do you mean when you say you ‘can feel her still?’” His tone was compassionate but searching, and the inquiry surprised Buffy until she remembered there hadn’t been two Slayers at once until she came along.

“I don’t know how to explain it. I guess it’s because we’re both Slayers, I can just … I don’t know. It’s like if I concentrate, there’s just this … sense or something. It’s like a warm feeling inside that is all Faith, and it can usually guide me to where she is.”

Giles had an odd look on his face that Buffy couldn’t read. He helped her to her feet and walked her over to the nearest bench. “When we’re on the other side of this, we should perhaps discuss this sense in more detail. With both of you. For now, what has happened when you used it, since Faith went missing?”

“I just went in circles,” Buffy answered without hesitation. “Sometimes it would feel like she was close enough that I should’ve been able to see her, but she just … wasn’t there. I kept getting close over and over, but—” Buffy’s voice broke a little, but she blinked back the tears that threatened to spill again. “I couldn’t find her, Giles. Something is wrong, with me… or-or maybe with her, but I’m so s-scared, that we’ll be too late. I don’t know what to do.”

A long silence passed. Giles looked out at the courtyard, his eyes not focusing on anything in particular, a distant look on his weathered features. Finally, he turned and matched her gaze. “Buffy,” he intoned gently, “I, uh, know this might not be the most pleasant suggestion, but I believe it is one we must consider. Is it possible that the Initiative has captured her?”

The suggestion caught Buffy off-guard. The possibility hadn’t occurred to her. Walsh was intimidating, cold, and manipulative, but was she capable of this? And Riley—she couldn’t believe he would ever go along with kidnapping and imprisoning her friend without grounds. And speaking of grounds… Faith was a U.S. citizen, and the Initiative was a part of the U.S. military. Shouldn’t she have rights? There’s no way they could just take her, right? And why would they want her anyway? Buffy couldn’t believe it was possible, but her anxiety and fear for Faith nagged at her, creating doubts that she wouldn’t previously have considered.

“W-Walsh. She kept asking about Faith. She wouldn’t let it go. I just blew it off as Walsh’s controlling and overly nosy bitchiness. But …”

“It may have been more than that. And if they’re holding Faith underground, that could explain why we cannot find her.” Buffy nodded reluctantly. She still didn’t see how or why they would have done this, but it was the only lead she had.

Buffy stood. “I have to go talk to Riley. Go home, in case someone needs to get in touch. I’ll touch
base with you once I have some answers."

“Do be careful,” Giles implored. “I’m not saying you shouldn’t trust Riley, but there is still so much about this organization that we don’t know or understand. We don’t know what they’re capable of, and if they do have Faith, no doubt they won’t be happy to have you poking around.”

“You’re probably right, but I do trust Riley. Even though…” Her voice trailed off, unable to finish the thought out loud. Even though I know now that Faith is who I want, not Riley. She shook her head. “I’ll be careful.”

His hand moved as if to pull of his glasses, but he caught himself. Instead he just focused on Buffy’s eyes and nodded. “I trust that you will do what is best. For Faith.”

Buffy put a hand on his arm and nodded resolutely. Then she turned and headed off for the Initiative frat house.

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She didn’t run, but even at just a brisk walking pace, she was at the frat in no time. Buffy headed straight up to Riley’s room, completely ignoring friendly greetings from Graham and another of the boys whose name she couldn’t remember. She was focused on one thing at this point: finding Faith. She couldn’t be bothered with pleasantries, not with her chest so tight with anxiety.

When she burst into Riley’s room, she found him doing shirtless pushups on the floor at the foot of his bed. His eyes widened in surprise, and he pushed himself back up to his feet with a stuttered, “B-Buffy?”

“We need to talk.” Riley flinched like he had been slapped, and Buffy grimaced. Poor choice of words. But before she could explain what she meant, he was talking.

“I think you’re right. He frowned, looking around for his t-shirt, pulling it on haphazardly as soon as he found it. “What’s the deal, Buffy? Where have you been? I haven’t heard a single word from you in two days, and I know you missed classes today. Did you even bother to listen to my voicemails?”

His tone was petulant and needy in a way that grated on Buffy’s nerves, and she couldn’t bring herself to try and soothe him. “I’ve been dealing with an emergency, okay?” she snapped. “Faith is missing.”

“Why do you care so much?” Buffy glared daggers at him, tired of everyone suggesting that Faith would just disappear like that on her own.

“I’m sure!” she growled, stepping closer to him, deadly serious. “Now. I’m going to ask this once, and if you care about me at all, Riley Finn, you will tell me the truth.” The tension on his face slackened, and a hint of sympathy flashed across his crystal blue eyes, reminding her of the kind boy that she had been so interested in when they started dating. She relaxed a little too, feeling guilty for having snapped at him. “She’s been missing for two days. Her car and stuff are here still, and no one has heard from her. Someone took her, Riley. Please tell me it wasn’t the Initiative.”

Conflict flooded back into his expression, along with a healthy dose of hurt. “Wow, that was so the worst possible thing you could’ve said. “I mean, I know she’s your friend and all, but I’ve never seen anyone get under your skin this way before. And I get bad vibes from that—” She shoved him, hard enough to toss him against the far wall.
“Riley! Answer my question,” she demanded. His shock at her attack quickly twisted into embarrassed anger, but he was smart enough to maintain his distance at this point.

“No. We wouldn’t arrest a U.S. citizen without legal justification.” He’d never spoken to her like this before, with such open defensiveness and condescension. Even though she’d had the same thought herself, his tone made her that much more suspicious. Realizing that she wasn’t getting anywhere by antagonizing Riley, she took a deep, calming breath and switched tactics.

Buffy closed the distance between them—literally, if not figuratively—and slipped her hand into Riley’s. She softened her voice as she explained, “Look, I know you don’t like her very much, but Faith is my friend. I’m worried, and so are Willow and my mom. We all care about her a lot, and besides that, she’s the Slayer. We need her, and she’s missing. Probably in danger.” She squeezed his hand. “I’m not accusing you of anything, and I’m sorry I just barged in here and freaked out on you. I’m just scared. Please, can you help me?”

Riley’s body language softened at that, and he sighed. “I’m the one that’s sorry. Faith rubs me the wrong way, but I shouldn’t take that out on you.” He took her other hand in his. “I meant it though. We don’t have her. And I would know if we did.” This time, Buffy believed him. She believed, at least, that he genuinely believed the Initiative didn’t have Faith. She was less sure about his confidence that he would know it if they did have her. Before she could ask, though, he added, “But I promise, I’ll ask around. See if anyone has heard anything, or if there’s anything we can do to help in the search. I’ll probably get some pushback from Director Walsh, but I’ll try, okay?”

See if anyone has heard anything. That’s it! “Thank you, Riley,” she said as she pulled away. “That’s a great idea. I’ve got some other trees to shake, but leave me a message or come find me if you get any more answers from your people in the Initiative.” She hesitated, then placed a chaste kiss on his lips. Then she left without another word.

It was the middle of the day, so the bar was less populated than she’d seen it in the past. Still, there were enough demon patrons there that Willy cringed when he realized the Slayer had just walked in. The bar’s owner swiftly moved down to the end of the bar, where no one was sitting, and bobbed his head to gesture her over. “Ya killin’ me here,” he whined in that weaselly New Jersey accent of his.

“Oh missed you too,” she snarked in response. “Joint’s jumping.” She looked pointedly at a nearby vampire, and he immediately pushed away from the bar, walking towards the exit. She wondered where he thought he was going, what with the big bright sun being out.

“Yeah, ya know. I’m making some changes with my life. Getting away from my old image.” Her sarcasm had clearly gone over his head.

Buffy decided to continue mocking him. With Willy, you only got information if you acted tough and got him scared. “You mean as a double-dealing snitch?” she asked with fake sweetness.

“Oh huh.” He continued to nervously pretend as though her comments were sincere. “I know you’re going think I’m blowing smoke, but I had a run in with some apocalypse demons that nearly did me in. Had an experience of the spiritual variety.”

Buffy crossed her arms and leaned in. “That’s swell really. But I need to know if you’ve heard anything about Faith the last couple of days.”

Willy stiffened, pulling his hands off the bar and hiding them in his pockets. He puffed out his chest
and forced a neutral expression onto his face. “You see that's the thing. I don't talk behind people's backs no more.” His hands came out again as he relaxed into full-on salesman mode. He gestured to the new neon sign behind the bar. “And I'm bringing some class to the joint, ya know. It's Willy's Place now, see. Brings in a better clientele. I got one of those deep fryers. These demons just go crazy for chicken fingers.”

He frowned sympathetically and leaned in, his voice dropping nearly to a whisper. “Look - if they see me dealing with you then I'm just the same old Willy working both sides of the street.”

“I'm going to have to punch you, aren't I?” Buffy deadpanned, unblinking.

Willy sighed. “Just once.” He jabbed his index finger at her. “And it don't have to hurt, just make it look good.”

Buffy rolled her eyes but slapped the bar and stood up. She cocked her arm, but before she could swing, Willy started shouting dramatically.

“Ohhh. Ow!”

“Oh not yet!” she hissed. “I haven't touched you.”

He winced. “Sorry right, right, g-go ahead.” He braced for the hit, but then held up a finger. “Wait.” He turned his head slightly and projected his voice. “No! I can't talk to you!” Buffy punched him before he could finish the sentence, probably harder than she should've. His antics were driving her nuts, and she didn't have time to play games. Not while Faith was in danger.

Willy grabbed his nose, and this time his cries were genuine. “What have you heard about Faith?” Buffy demanded.

“Buffy, what's going on here?” Riley's voice startled her out of her threatening Slayer routine. She had been so focused on Willy that she hadn't heard him come in behind her. She spun to face him, brow furrowing in confusion and more than a little anger.

“What are you doing here? Following me?” Willy continued to whimper behind her but didn’t interrupt them.

“You seemed off, and I was worried. Just wanted to help.” He looked around the bar, then glared at Buffy. “But now I see how it is. You're so crazy about Faith that you're willing to go socializing with demons just to get a little information. I thought you were supposed to be killing these things, not buying them drinks!”

He was restless, off-kilter somehow. And making a very big scene while endangering her ability to get the information she needed. “Oh, that's smooth, officer Riley,” she scowled. “They teach you those undercover moves in special forces?”

“No, I'm serious Buffy. What are you doing here?” Riley continued to whimper behind her but didn’t interrupt them.

“You seemed off, and I was worried. Just wanted to help.” He looked around the bar, then glared at Buffy. “But now I see how it is. You're so crazy about Faith that you're willing to go socializing with demons just to get a little information. I thought you were supposed to be killing these things, not buying them drinks!”

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“No, I'm serious Buffy. What are you doing here?” He wasn't backing down, and that's when Willy decided to butt in.

“Just cooling her dogs like the rest of us. Why don't you sit down, relax?”

Riley ignored Willy, stepping closer and getting in Buffy’s face. “I want you to tell me,” he sneered. “Who are you?” She was feeling the very strong urge to take a page out of Faith’s book and kick him in the nuts. But she resisted.

As if sensing Buffy’s pent up hostility, Willy tried again to maintain the peace. “No kidding. How
about I get you some chicken fingers on the house?”

This time, Riley answered him, barking, “Hey, think you could shut up?!”

Willy shrank a little. “Look I'm just saying—”

“I said shut up! Or maybe you'd like to go back to the lab with me. I'm sure the coats would love to classify a … whatever you are.”

Buffy was so done with this. She shoved him back, away from Willy. “Leave him alone Riley, he's human.”

He bristled. “So, he's human. He just harbors demons. Which makes him a good guy like you? Or Faith? Here you are, fraternizing with the enemy. That girl is a bad influe—”

“If you don’t want me to punch you, I suggest you shut up and let me finish my business here.” The steely monotone of her threat demanded obedience, and Riley backed down, content to quietly sulk, at least for a little while. Buffy turned back to Willy. “Sorry about that. You were saying?”

The bartender glanced warily from Buffy to Riley and back again. “Y-you sure we should talk about this in front of him? He's one of them army guys, right?”


“Just heard a rumor is all,” he whispered, trying to avoid being overheard by Riley. “Someone said they saw the dark Slayer get ambushed by some of the army guys, tasered and taken away by at least like four of ‘em.” Buffy’s chest tightened, and she struggled to suck in breath. She stalked toward Riley.

“Tell me you didn’t know!”

Riley stood, again playing innocent. “Didn’t know what?” She could see the lie now, clearly. Tears welled up in her eyes, both of fury and sorrow. Buffy had trusted this man, and he betrayed her.

“Liar,” she accused harshly. “You do know, and you lied to me. Were you part of the team, Riley? One of the ones who caught her off guard, electrocuted her, and kidnapped her?”

“Who are you going to believe, your boyfriend or some sleazy bartender?” He seemed so confident that he could sway her that she nearly kicked him in the face.

“Willy’s got no reason to lie about this, especially not with you threatening him in his own bar. And I’m starting to see who you really are now, Riley Finn.”

He flipped from clueless farmboy to defensive soldier in a heartbeat. “Buffy, it isn’t like that.” She continued to glower at him, and he finally broke. “Yes, we’ve got her. But she’s dangerous, and not just to you! Walsh can’t afford to have someone like that roaming free, never knowing whose side she’s going to be on.”

“She’s on my side!” Buffy roared. “Which is more than I can say for you.” She grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. “You’re going to tell me everything you know, or so help me—”

“Hey hey hey,” Willy interrupted. “You gotta take this outside. No violence at Willy’s Place!” She
scowled, then shoved Riley towards the door.

“Outside. Now.” She followed him closely, watching for any sudden movements as they left the bar. Any trust between them was completely broken, and Buffy didn’t know if he might pull a weapon on her or try to escape. As soon as they were outside, she grabbed him again and shoved him against the wall. She got right in his face and demanded, “Where is she?”

“She’s safe. She’s a prisoner of the Initiative. Walsh wanted to study a Slayer, and she’s determined to make a soldier out of Faith.” He glared at her. “And that’s all I will say.”

Buffy punched him in the gut, hard enough to leave a serious bruise. “You’re going to tell me where she is, Riley. Don’t test me.”

He chuckled snidely, though clearly in a lot of pain. “You’re not going to beat me up, now are you Buffy?”

He was still bent over, clutching his gut, and she brought a swift knee up to connect with his chin. His head snapped back, and his body hit the wall again before crumpling down in front of her. “You’d be wrong about that. I’ll take down the entire Initiative myself if that’s what it takes. Now talk!”

Riley groaned and panted from the amount of pain he was feeling, but he refused to back down. “Beat me, torture me, kill me—it doesn’t matter. I’m a good soldier. And I believe in what Director Walsh is trying to accomplish. Some order and discipline will be good for Faith, you’ll see. But I’m not telling you anything else.”

Buffy let out all her pent-up frustration in a wild cry of fury, unable to hold it in any longer. For a split second, she genuinely considered beating Riley up, just to test his loyalty to Walsh. She couldn’t believe she had ever thought she could grow to love the cocky, mindless soldier crumpled at her feet. He had his orders, and they would always come before Buffy.

She gave him one more solid kick, right in the balls. “In case it wasn’t obvious already, we’re done, Riley. I’m going to save Faith. And if you get in my way, it’ll be so much worse for you than this.”

“Willow. You’re here!” Buffy went straight back to Giles’ apartment after her confrontation with Riley. Now that they had confirmation of where Faith was, she needed a plan to get her out. And she wasn’t about to wait around for the whole Scooby Gang either.

“Yeah, I’m done with classes for the day. Figured I’d be most helpful here, ya know, in case you found out anything.”

“I did,” Buffy practically growled, still furious at Riley. Giles and Willow both stood in anticipation. “The Initiative took her. Walsh wants a Slayer to experiment on. Guess they considered her a threat.” She tried to keep her emotions in check, but the urge to destroy something hadn’t gone anywhere.

“So that’s why the locator spell didn’t find her! She was underground.” Willow paused, her brow furrowing. “But how did you find that out?” Willow inquired curiously, her voice tinged with a hint of concern.

“Someone told Willy about a squad of Initiative goons taking Faith out with their taser guns. Riley followed me to the bar, and I beat the rest out of him.”
“He knew?” Willow seethed, outrage and shock practically radiating off of her. In contrast, Giles’ expression was pure sympathy, and Buffy found herself grateful that they had been able to repair their relationship after the events of her eighteenth birthday. “What an ass! I never liked that guy, but this! I can’t believe—”

Buffy cut off Willow’s rambling. “We can talk about my poor taste in men later. Or like … never. First we’ve gotta get Faith out of there. Now.”

“But Buffy,” Giles chided, already rubbing at his glasses with a handkerchief. “It’s a minor point but how do you plan to get in to the Initiative? I sure their, uh, security system’s almost impenetrable.”

“I have my clearance. I’m hoping Walsh didn’t have time to revoke it.”

“So, that gets you in. Then what? How are you going to find Faith without getting caught?” Buffy resisted the urge to snap at Willow. She knew the witch was just being smart about this, and that she cared about Faith too. But Buffy wasn’t thinking clearly. She was pissed at Riley and Walsh and terrified for Faith. She didn’t care what it took—all she knew was that she was getting her … friend … back.

“I’ll go in undercover, as one of the scientists. Since those sexist assholes don’t have any female soldiers. Umm… I’ll find Walsh’s lead scientist guy, Angleman. He seems persuadable.”

Willow winced. “And by ‘persuadable’ you mean?”

“He seems like he’ll talk pretty easily after a few good punches.”

“This plan—if one could even call it that—is reckless to the point of stupidity.” Buffy glared at her mentor. “I’m sorry, but you’re letting your emotions control you, and it could very well get you captured just like Faith. You can’t run in there so half-cocked, without any knowledge about where they’re holding Faith and what sort of security they have around her. And what if someone recognizes you?”

Buffy squeezed her hand into tight fists, beginning to pace. “It’s been nearly three days already!” she snapped. “They could be doing who knows what to her! She needs us, needs me. I won’t let her down again.”

“You’re no good to her if you get captured, Buffy.”

“I’ll go with her,” Willow interjected, drawing disbelieving stares from both Buffy and Giles. “I can work some magic to disguise Buffy, and I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve that could help us escape if necessary.”

“Fine,” Buffy conceded. The days of coddling Willow were over, and Buffy knew she could handle herself. And regardless, her magic increased their chances of getting Faith.

Giles was less convinced. “I cannot condone this. You’re putting yourselves into far too much danger here. We need to approach this carefully, with a fully thought out plan—”

“Giles, I’m sorry, but we don’t need your permission. We’re doing this. I can’t sit around making plans while Faith is in danger, and the more time passes, the more prepared the Initiative will be. If we go now, there’s a chance we’ll get in before Riley can report back to Walsh. It’s the only window I’ve got.”

He sighed heavily, jaw jutting out slightly as he elected to hold his tongue. Accepting that this was
the closest she would get to Giles agreeing with her, she turned back to Willow. “We’ll need two lab coats and any magic supplies you can hide in a small bag.” Willow nodded, grabbing her purse and moving towards the door. “Giles, we’ll take Faith to the house once we get her. We’ll call you as soon as we get there, I promise.”

“All right, Will. Let’s do this. Stay quiet and follow my lead.” She used a little strength to force the window open, then the two of them slipped inside. They made it to the large mirror that hid the elevator without incident, and Buffy gestured silently for Willow to stand clear of the retinal scan. “We’ll know in a few seconds if my clearance is still good.”

The thin green bar of light moved from the top of her head down to her collarbone, then the reedy, robotic voice of the scanner said, “Retinal scan recognized. Summers, Buffy.” The mirror slid open to reveal the interior of the elevator, and no alarms sounded. Buffy breathed a sigh of relief. Riley hadn’t had a chance to report back, she guessed. As the elevator started moving, she told Willow to just act like she belonged there, and if anyone stopped them, let Buffy do the talking. She gave her...
They made it as far as the hallway leading to the labs before the plan completely fell apart. Before they could find the right door, a chilly voice called out from behind them. “Well, well. You certainly don’t waste any time, Ms. Summers.” She turned to find Walsh there, flanked by Riley and Forrest. So much for the element of surprise. She honestly couldn’t tell which frat boy soldier looked more pissed off. Riley had a massive bruise where she had kneed him in the chin. Meanwhile Walsh looked as smug and emotionless as ever. “The hair is an interesting choice.”

“Where is she?” Buffy demanded, taking a threatening step towards Walsh.

“I will not have you interfering in my operations. I tolerated your insolent presence because Agent Finn was so enamored with you. You get one warning. Leave. And if you come back, we will be forced to arrest you.”

Buffy’s anger and frustration grew with each additional sentence, and Walsh’s threat was the boiling point. Her fury bubbled over, and she charged in a blind rage. Riley and Forrest converged on her immediately, trying to protect Walsh while subduing Buffy. Buffy took them out in seconds, snapping Forrest’s leg with a hard kick to his shin and knocking Riley out with an elbow to the temple. She pulled her knife, imagining that Walsh as a hostage would open any doors she needed opened. But just as Buffy reached her, two things happened simultaneously. Willow shouted out a quick warning, but her cries were drowned out by the loud bang of a gunshot. Buffy felt a sharp pain in her thigh, and her leg gave out on her. She glanced down at the blood starting to pool in the fabric of her pants, then over to Forrest and the gun he was still pointing at her.

Walsh hadn’t flinched at any of the violence, and she kept that same controlled yet dismissive look on her face. “Arrest it is, then.” She reached into her lab coat pocket and retrieved a two-way radio. But before she could call for backup, Buffy felt herself yanked backwards until she was beside Willow again. She was chanting now, holding her hands up, palms facing out towards Walsh and the commandos who were running into the hallway behind her. Willow’s eyes briefly turned black, and then there was a flash of light just in front of where Forrest and Riley had fallen.

“Buffy, we have to go.” Willow helped her to her feet, helping to hold Buffy upright. The commandos pounded uselessly against the magic barrier Willow had erected.

“No!” Buffy shrieked through the pain. “She’s still in there! I have to save her!”

“We will,” Willow soothed. “But not now. Not like this. We have to get out while we still can.” Buffy shouted angrily but allowed Willow to help her hobble back the way they came. A few soldiers tried to stop them, and Willow tossed them aside with magic. One of them Buffy had to stab in the gut. But they made it back to the elevator.

After the escape, Willow called Giles to come pick Buffy up and take her to the hospital. None of them had the expertise or skills to remove a bullet and sew up the wound until Buffy’s Slayer healing took care of the rest. Buffy, however, was numb to all of it. All she could think was that she had failed Faith again, and she had no idea how they were going to get her out now.

The next week and a half was hell for Buffy, but nothing in comparison to the hell she imagined Faith was going through. Buffy gave up on classes entirely, and her sleep was restless and filled with anxious nightmares of Faith in various stages of pain and mutilation. When she wasn’t at Giles’ trying to come up with new plans to break into the Initiative or comforting her mom, she was slaying things and beating up Initiative frat bros. None of them gave her any information, and most
legitimately had no idea what she was talking about.

The first plan they came up with was put into action three days after the first failed attempt. Buffy’s leg had fully healed, with only a faint scar from the bullet, and Willow had recovered from the stress of using so much magic. In the dead of the night, she and Willow met up with Giles and Xander at the spot where the locator spell continued to show Faith. Xander drove a bulldozer in from his construction site—while constantly complaining that he was so fired if they got caught—and Willow cast a spell to muffle the noise from the large machine. Buffy, Giles, and Willow put up yellow caution tape and kept watch for any campus security or nosy students up late.

Unfortunately, Xander hit concrete and reinforced steel about twenty feet down, and there was no getting through it. Another plan, another mess, another failure. It was nearly 4 a.m. by the time Xander returned the bulldozer, and Buffy didn’t sleep that night. She stayed in her bedroom at the house, so that her crying didn’t keep Willow up.

After that, they tried a couple of times to sneak in again, this time through the big cargo bay doors in the woods, where the Humvees came in and out. The vehicle storage and cargo bay were well guarded, but Willow, Tara, and Giles tried to lure the commandos out with illusion magic, creating projections of a roving horde of demons just far enough from the doors to allow Buffy to sneak by. Both times, however, a large enough contingent remained behind to guard the doors that Buffy had no chance of getting in unseen, and she knew that picking a fight with them would end the rescue mission before it even had a chance to really get started.

With each passing day, Buffy got more desperate. She was constantly on edge, sleep-deprived, and drowning in her own guilt. And no one could come up with a workable plan. On the twelfth day, Buffy couldn’t take it anymore. She and Willow hatched a plan without consulting Giles. He found out about it only after it had already begun, when Willow and Buffy burst into his apartment, an unconscious Riley hoisted over the Slayer’s shoulder. He protested the blatant kidnapping profusely, but Willow got to quick work on the truth potion while Buffy tied Riley up to a chair.

Giles went along with it once Buffy explained what they were doing, mostly because she focused on the truth potion interrogation and less on the ‘call Walsh to set up a prisoner exchange’ part. When Riley came to, he got in a few insults and threats to have them all arrested as domestic terrorists before Willow forced the potion down his throat. He wasn’t happy about it, but he gave them as much information on Faith as he had. Walsh was testing Faith and experimenting on her, learning about her physiology, powers, and psychology. She was being held in the Initiative’s most secure cell, and he told them exactly where it was and what passwords they would need to get there. The only catch was that Walsh was the only one with keycard access to the cell itself. Beyond that, everything else on Faith was above his clearance level, but he seemed unnervingly sure that there was no way for them to get past all the security and personnel between them and Faith.

As Buffy figured out how to use Riley’s mobile phone to get in touch with Walsh, Willow enlisted Giles’ help in performing a spell to wipe the last ten minutes or so of Riley’s memory. It was a last-minute idea that occurred to Buffy, but it seemed like a good idea to withhold as much information as possible from Walsh. Unfortunately, the prisoner exchange, in addition to drawing a good deal of outrage and scolding from Giles, was a complete non-starter. Walsh refused to so much as admit that she was holding Faith and gave them exactly one hour to release Riley or she would send several squads to arrest them all and throw them in the same off-the-books military prison where they sent Ethan Rayne.

They still hadn’t gotten Faith, but it had been worth it nonetheless. They had all the information they needed, and confirmation that Walsh had no intention of killing Faith. That didn’t reduce the urgency Buffy felt, but it did give her back that glimmer of hope that a week and a half of failed
They hadn’t made any progress since kidnapping Riley. It had now been two full weeks, and Buffy still had no idea how to get back into the Initiative. And for the third straight night, all they had were shitty ideas that were easily shot down or undermined. Buffy was so on edge that she was nearly on the brink of snapping. Tonight, it was Xander who was pushing all her buttons the wrong way, and right around the point at which she threatened to put him on his ass, Willow suggested the two of them get some air. Buffy followed her outside, but not before glaring daggers at Xander again.

“You know that snapping at Xander isn’t helping Faith, right?” Willow sat down on the small ledge surrounding the fountain, but Buffy just started to pace.

“That’s just it, Will. I can’t help her!” Buffy slammed a fist into a nearby wall. “I can’t admit my feelings for her. I can’t be with her. And I can’t save her, clearly.” She sank down to the ground, banging the back of her head against the wall in frustration. “I’m useless. She needs me, and all I ever do is let her down.” Buffy’s voice cracked, and as the tears started flowing, Willow rushed to her side. She pulled her into a side hug and held her while she cried.

“Buffy … how do you feel about Faith?” Willow kept her question simple, but Buffy was sure there would be more. Whatever. She was done lying about this, and deep down, she just needed to talk about it. All of it. It had been building ever since that night Faith showed up at the gym—the night she was taken. Because Buffy pushed her away.

“Buffy … how do you feel about Faith?” Willow kept her question simple, but Buffy was sure there would be more. Whatever. She was done lying about this, and deep down, she just needed to talk about it. All of it. It had been building ever since that night Faith showed up at the gym—the night she was taken. Because Buffy pushed her away. I’m always pushing her away.

Struggling to rein her tears in, Buffy could only just manage to strangle out her confession. “I t-think I’m in love with her.”

“I know you are,” Willow whispered sympathetically. “I’ve known for a while. Are you finally ready to talk about why you’ve been trying to hide from your feelings?”

Buffy chuckled darkly, then blew out a long exhale as she forced herself to stop crying. She didn’t really know where to start, so she just asked the first question that popped into her head. “When you first realized that you had feelings for Tara, didn’t it scare you?”

“Umm, yeah. B-but that’s because I was with Oz. He was my first real relationship, and some part of me will always love him. So, yeah … I was scared because I didn’t know what to do. Stay in something that felt safe and familiar or jump into something that made me feel, you know, like all the feelings. But I’m guessing that’s not exactly what you were getting at.”

“So … you were never worried about what people would think—would say—about you dating another girl? I mean, did your mom freak out?”

Willow laughed softly. “Oh please, you know my mom doesn’t care about anything going on in my life. I haven’t told her, but that’s because her opinion doesn’t matter to me. And no, I wasn’t worried. That’s thanks to Faith, honestly. She and I talked about it a bunch, even before I met Tara, and she—” Willow chewed on her lip, and Buffy could tell she was the one fighting back tears now. “She helped me figure out that I was probably bisexual, a-and that there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Bisexual… that’s like … ?” Buffy hated how hesitant she sounded, but she had repressed all this so long that it felt terrifying to finally be addressing it head on. Fortunately, Willow jumped in to explain.
“For me, it means that I fall for a person, and whether they’re a guy or a girl or whatever doesn’t really make much difference in whether I’m drawn to them. I think it means different things for different people really. Like, I think Faith prefers ‘lesbian’ because while she’s attracted to guys, she has no interest in being in a serious relationship with them.”

“She never trusted men,” Buffy confirmed, suddenly remembering their conversation back around the time Buffy tried dating Scott Hope. “She used to say all men were beasts, so yeah, that lines up.” Buffy had been too naïve back then to realize it, but all the signs were there. Faith was never one for subtlety.

“That’s our Faith,” Willow muttered wistfully, and Buffy’s heart sank again. Faith. This crazy wonderful girl who had come into her life and turned it completely upside down, who understood her better than anyone else, who Buffy had promised she would always have her back… Faith needed Buffy to not fall apart. Needed her to find a way.

“I have to get her out,” Buffy fretted. “I need to tell her how I feel. Apologize for everything. Try, at least, to make it better. But even if I’ve ruined any chance I had, all that really matters is that I rescue her. All that matters is that she is safe.” Buffy turned and rested her forehead on Willow’s chest as the tears began to flow again. “Will, I can’t lose her. I can’t let her down again.”

“Shhh. I know. I know.” Willow stroked her hair gently. “We’ll find a way.” A few moments passed, and then she kissed the top of Buffy’s hair. “I’m proud of you. For finally accepting who you are, and how you feel. I hate that it took this, but I know it was a difficult emotional journey for you. Just trust me—” She pulled Buffy’s head up so that they were looking at each other. “This is such a good thing. You and Faith are so good for each other. And if I know you as well as I think I do, nothing is going to get in your way.”

Willow stood, then helped Buffy up. “Now, let’s get back in there and figure out a way to get your girl, okay?” Buffy smiled at that and wrapped in Willow in a tight hug. They both did their best to wipe away any tears and smudged mascara before heading back inside. As they entered, Willow started talking to Xander without sparing a glance at the rest of the room. But Buffy noticed the additional person immediately.

“Spike, what are you doing here?” she demanded. The platinum blonde vampire was just inside the front door, dressed in all black. He leered at her with thinly veiled amusement.

“Door was unlocked,” he quipped, then turned his gaze to Giles. “You might wanna watch that, Rupert. Someone dangerous could get in.”

“Or someone formerly dangerous and currently annoying,” Buffy snapped, closing the distance quickly and slamming him back against the door threateningly.

Spike just continued to grin. “Now, now. None of that,” he chided. “Or I won’t help you get your angry Slayer friend back.”

Buffy’s eyes widened, and she released him. She could feel her heart start pounding louder and faster. “What do you know?”

He just chuckled, and Buffy resisted the urge to literally rip his head off. “Bad news travels with us demons, even outcasts like me.”

“Short of cash, Spike?” Giles asked derisively.

“I happen to be seeking monetary gratification, yeah. But I also get a kick out of jackin’ up those
army ginks myself. Word on the street is they’ve got your girl, and I can get you in.”

Buffy wanted so desperately to believe him, but she didn’t trust Spike at all. Willow piped in, suspiciously. “And what’s the going rate on a wild goose chase, Spike?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “Fine, if you’re not interested. But I was stuck in that hole, remember? And I’ve heard things from other guys who’ve gotten out. I can get you in. No alarms, no cameras,” he smirked straight at Buffy, “no waiting.”

She traded looks with Giles and Willow, who both gave her a small nod. Anya, Xander, and Tara stayed out of the conversation, which was honestly pretty surprising behavior for Xander and Anya. “Fine,” Buffy answered Spike. “But we do it my way.” He started to say something, no doubt another snide remark, but Buffy cut him off. “And we’re not paying you. You’re a soulless monster, and I’m the person who slays soulless monsters. You’re gonna get me in there, and you’re going to help me get Faith out. In exchange, we’ll both continue to not kill you. That’s the deal, and trust me, you do not want to test me right now, Spike.”

He rolled his eyes but didn’t argue. She nodded at Giles, who understood her silent request. He slipped out of the room, and Buffy slapped the shackles he brought back with him onto Spike before he had a chance to escape. She chained him up in the bathtub again and ordered him to stay, much in the same way one might order a dog. Everyone was looking to her for a plan when she closed the bathroom door behind her and headed back into the living room.

“Well, it’s just after sunset right now. Let’s order some delivery food, put together a plan, and Spike and I will hit the Initiative after midnight. Even mad scientists and brainwashed soldiers have to sleep, and I want as many advantages as we can get. This is it, people. We’re getting Faith out of there. Tonight.”

“I’ve mentioned how much I’m gonna kill you if this is a scam, right?”

Spike rolled his eyes as glanced back at Buffy. “Look, would I wear this if I wasn’t on the up-and-up?”

“You do sorta look like an evil olive,” Buffy jabbed. He was dressed in the greens of an Initiative soldier, and she was back in her lab coat from the previous attempt at infiltration. Buffy’s hair was its natural blonde this time, but Tara had magicked Spike’s into a dull, nondescript brown. There were definitely no soldiers with platinum hair, and Buffy needed Spike not to stick out like a sore thumb.

Spike led her deeper and deeper into the woods until finally they reached a massive, reinforced door cut into the side of a hill and well-hidden by surrounding foliage. “See. Told you I knew about a back door.”

“Now we just have to wait for—” Something shifted in her periphery, and Buffy turned to glance through the trees, seeing that the entire town (hopefully) had gone dark. Good job, Willow. This was the first step of the plan. Willow had hacked the city’s infrastructure mainframe, hoping that a power outage all over town wouldn’t set off nearly as many alarm bells for the Initiative as it would’ve if she took out campus only. With the power out, the Initiative’s surveillance cameras would be out of commission.

Buffy and Spike pried the door open with their combined strength, leaving it slightly ajar in preparation for their exit. As the climbed the steep stairs down into the Initiative, faint purplish lights
came on, signaling that the backup generator had activated. As Buffy had learned during her interrogation of Riley, the backup generator only had enough juice for the bare minimum of lighting and the electronic locks on all the restricted areas.

They made their way through the base silently and stealthily, only straightening up into a normal posture when they passed the few guards posted at key points for the night shift. Buffy had all the passwords she needed to get back into the living quarters, reaching Maggie Walsh’s bedroom in less than five minutes. “Guard the door,” she whispered, and Spike took his place beside the door, tranquilizer rifle held at the ready. Spike couldn’t hurt humans without causing himself pain, but they had proven earlier in the night that he could tranquilize a person with only a light sting. Xander was probably still sleeping it off.

Moreover, Willow and Tara made sure she had a backup plan in case Spike was feeling duplicitous. They had given her a crystal that would allow them to track her movement, and with a simple word, ‘Escape,’ it would teleport her back to them. But it only had enough power to transport the person carrying it, meaning that if she had to bail on the rescue for any reason, Spike would be left on his own to fend for himself against the Initiative. Of course, Buffy knew she would absolutely not be leaving this base without Faith, not this time, but there was no reason for Spike to know that.

Buffy pulled her knife and snuck into Walsh’s room. The heartless older woman was sleeping, and she stirred only when the cold steel of Buffy’s blade pressed to the skin of her neck. She nicked herself on it as she startled awake, but swiftly regained control of her features after a slight wince at the sudden pain. “Summers. This is the last straw. You won’t get away this time.”

She blinked at Walsh incredulously. “I think you’re ignoring which of us has a knife here. And I’m very good with this knife. It was a gift from Faith, actually. Seems fitting that it’s what I use to bust her out of this shithole.” She pulled back just slightly. “Get up and get dressed. And trust that I can throw this knife just as skillfully as I could sever your head right now. So no funny business.”

Buffy let her get dressed, watching her carefully. Then she shoved the older woman against the wall, knife pressed to her throat once more. “You’re going to let Faith out, and I’m taking her home. Let me be very clear that that is what is happening here, with or without you.” There was no one in the room with Buffy and Walsh, no friends to be taken aback by her words. So Buffy got very honest. “If I get the faintest sense that you are going to call for help or set off some sort of alarm, I won’t hesitate to kill you. I’ve got all the passwords I need, and I don’t need you alive to use your keycard. So, don’t test me.”

Walsh allowed herself to be led toward the door, Buffy close enough behind her to keep the knife at her throat. “You won’t get away with this,” Walsh growled, and for the first time, Buffy thought just maybe she had gotten under the ice queen’s skin.

“You’re takin’ hostages now?” Spike joked as they exited the room. “Why not just kill the old bint?” Walsh glared at him but otherwise held herself to a stony silence.

“I’m not going to kill her, Spike.” She pulled the blade just enough to draw blood, making her point. “Not unless I have to.” He followed them down the hall, keeping watch on their surroundings. They only passed one set of guards on their way to the prison block, with Buffy moving the knife to the small of Walsh’s back as she led them past the soldiers. For one tense moment, she thought she saw Walsh’s hand tense as if to reach out to one of them, but the moment passed and Walsh maintained her silence. Buffy figured most of the soldiers were used to Walsh being an arrogant bitch who treated them like scenery rather than people.

They entered the restricted part of the prison block, and the lights there were normal—white, though still not particularly bright. They took several long, sterile white hallways back as far as they would
go, until the finally reached an unmarked, black steel door. Buffy could feel how close Faith was, but there was something off about her presence. She needed to get inside. “Open it!” she demanded.

Walsh did as commanded. Buffy held her breath as the lock released and the door slid open. And there she was, barely visible in the light from the hallway. “Spike, watch her. If she moves, shoot her.” Buffy stepped into the room, and as she moved closer she could see how bad things had gotten. Faith was emaciated, her clothes hanging off of her. She smelled as though she hadn’t had a shower in several days. Buffy’s hands began to shake. “Faith!” Buffy closed the distance in a heartbeat, fear coursing through her veins as she dropped to her knees beside Faith. She didn’t stir at first, and Buffy placed a hand on her cheek, then reached around to the back of her head to lift her up. Faith felt so frail in her arms, and Buffy thought her heart might beat out of her chest. “Faith?” she choked out, praying that she would open her eyes. That she would be okay.

Finally, brown eyes met green, and Buffy felt a small pulse through their connection. Faith inhaled sharply as her eyes began to focus, and she realized who she was looking at. Buffy continued to search her face, the panic not yet subsiding despite how wonderful it felt just to have Faith in her arms again. “Faith, please talk to me. Please. Tell me that you’re okay.” She couldn’t keep the fear out of her plea, and no amount of blinking could keep all of the tears back. Buffy released Faith in surprise as the other Slayer jerked forward, sitting up under her own power. Faith’s hands grabbed at her, feeling her arms, then her shoulders, and then settling on her face. Faith’s eyes widened, and then finally, she spoke.

“B—Buffy?”

Tears streamed down her face as she nodded passionately. “Yes. It’s me. I’m here. And I’m getting you out of here, right now.” But before Faith could respond, she passed out again, slumping back onto her cot. “Faith!” Buffy shrieked. Her grip tightened on her knife, and she rushed back to the door. “Spike, you’re carrying Faith out of here. Be careful with her—I don’t know what they’ve been doing to her, but she’s very weak.” He looked as though he might argue, but at her glare, he sighed and went to retrieve the unconscious Slayer.

Meanwhile, Buffy pinned one of Walsh’s arms behind her back painfully, raising the knife to her throat again. “You’re going to pay for what you’ve done to her, Walsh. Maybe not today. But someday really soon, I’m going to make you feel every bit of pain you’ve put her through, you sadistic bitch.” Walsh simply chuckled at this, as if Buffy’s threats were nothing more than amusing dramatics. Buffy twisted her arm harder, causing her to yelp at the pain, and then led Spike, carrying Faith over his shoulder, back the way they came.

This time, they were stopped multiple times, but each time Buffy threatened to kill Walsh, they backed down. Buffy held her until they were out of base, back through the secret back door and out into the woods. She was sorely tempted to kill Walsh then and there, but she deserved so much worse. And Faith was the priority. Buffy released Walsh, then quickly and efficiently dug a deep gash through the back of her calf. Walsh cried out in agony and collapsed to the ground. That’ll slow her down at least.

She tucked the knife back into her coat. “Spike, give me Faith.” Buffy carried her bridal style, and without another word to the vampire, she took off at a dead sprint. She handled Faith like the precious cargo that she was, but Buffy needed to get distance from the Initiative as quickly as possible. She made it home in under ten minutes.

As Buffy burst into the front door, breaking the lock because she hadn’t brought her keys with her, Joyce shouted in shock at the noise. They had told her about the plan, so she was still awake and
waiting for Buffy to bring Faith home. In moments, she went from terrified to doting, and she followed Buffy closely as she got Faith upstairs. Buffy settled Faith onto the bed, gently resting her head on a pillow, and Joyce knelt down on the other side of the bed.

“What did they do to her?” Joyce gasped. For the first time, Buffy was able to look at Faith under good lighting, and the girl was a shell of her former self. Her face was gaunt, with dark, almost purple circles under her eyes, and her hair was a wild mess. There was a large scar on her right forearm, like from a very bad burn. But Buffy imagined the worst scars would be the psychological ones. “Faith, I’m so sorry. I’m so so sorry.” Buffy was crying again and holding Faith’s hand, not giving a single thought to what her mom might think. “You’ve been through so much already. You don’t deserve this. I’m sorry it took me so long.”

“Buffy, do we need to take her to the hospital?” Joyce hadn’t started crying yet, but she was clearly shaken.

“No! Absolutely not.” Buffy’s chest tightened. “She’d be a sitting duck there, and besides, Slayers heal fast. What she really needs is food and rest. I think they were starving her, and Mom, she just seemed so exhausted.” Buffy’s voice cracked, which was becoming an annoying habit given how emotional she’d been through all of this. “We have to protect her now.”

“Okay. Well I’ll go make her some food, right now. You watch over her.” Buffy nodded, and after squeezing Faith’s hand, Joyce left the room. Moments later, Faith’s eyes shot open, darting around to take in the new setting. Buffy slid onto the bed next to her, without letting go of her hand, and placed her other hand softly on Faith’s cheek.


“Are you real?” Her voice sounded hoarse and weaker than normal. Buffy wondered if maybe she was still in shock.

“Yes. This is real. You’re home. We got you out.” Buffy stroked her cheek, and she felt as Faith’s hand tightened a little in hers. Her eyes welled up with tears again. “I’m sorry that this happened. It’s all my fault, and I’m s-sorry we left you in there so long. We tried so many times to get in, and nothing worked, and there were times when I was terrified that we would never be able to save you, but I couldn’t let that happen, couldn’t let you go, because I hated the way we left things. I mean, not just that, I mean I was also so scared that they were hurting you, and I didn’t really know why Walsh wanted you, and all I could think about was getting you back, because I need you, Faith and —”

Faith cut off her rambling with a wry chuckle that turned immediately to a cough. “Damn, this must be real. Don’t think my broken mind coulda come up with an adorable rambling Buffy at this point.” Buffy blushed immediately, and Faith smiled. Buffy’s heart soared at that sight—despite everything she had been through, Faith still had that bright, sultry smile that was just for Buffy, and suddenly it was all too much. Her body acted on instinct, and this time, Buffy made no effort to resist.

She bent down and pulled Faith into a kiss. It was soft at first, and Faith tensed up in surprise. But just before Buffy could pull away to begin awkwardly apologizing, Faith lifted herself enough to deepen the kiss, bringing her own hand to the back of Buffy’s head. For the first time in months, it felt as though everything was right again, and while Buffy’s insecurities were still in the back of her mind, tugging at her, she pushed them deep down inside, and focused on the glowing warmth in her chest. The feel of Faith pressed against her again, for the first time in so long. Her breathe was awful, and her lips were chapped and damaged, but Buffy couldn’t care less.
Faith was alive. Faith was safe. Faith was home. And Faith was kissing her back.

That was all that mattered.
Did you mean it?

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the big break between updates! I've been trying to finish up another story, and meanwhile life has been crazy. But I trust this chapter will be worth the wait ;)

Faith didn’t open her eyes, not at first. The dim light she could feel on the other side of her eyelids was soft and warm. It felt strange, but she wasn’t awake enough to think of why that would be the case. Her body felt different, too. Her cot had never felt this soft or pillowy, and slowly she realized the strange sensation she was groggily experiencing was comfort.

Her eyes fluttered open sluggishly, and the familiar white walls were gone. Heavy lids closed again, and Faith’s mind couldn’t quite wrap itself around the idea that she was no longer in her cell. Was this a dream? Had Walsh finally pushed an experiment so far that it killed her? Faith could believe the sleepy cocoon of warmth she found herself in was a heaven of sorts, but she couldn’t imagine what she had done to earn any sort of a peaceful afterlife. She had definitely earned herself a little more sleep though.

When she finally woke up for real, the room was darker than before. It wasn’t her cell, but it was familiar. Her head stayed nestled in a pillow, but her eyes began to take in the room around her. There was a nightstand—*my nightstand*?—beside the bed, an unlit lamp resting on it next to a vase of beautiful red roses. There were other objects cluttered there, but nothing that caught her attention. Her gaze continued along the shadowy wall illuminated softly by the last hints sunlight peaking through the curtain over the window. All of it was familiar, as if she had laid in this bed, at just this angle, and opened her eyes to this vantage every day. Except for that chair.

Someone had brought a chair into the room, in the corner beside her dresser. That someone was, no doubt, the person currently seated there cross-legged, eyes scanning the page of a comic book in her lap. “Never thought I’d see Buffy Summers readin’ a comic book.” The comment escaped her lips in a hoarse but playful whisper, and those emerald eyes snapped up from the book in an instant. A flurry of emotions played out along Buffy’s face—relief, concern, guilt, affection, and others—and Faith was content to just lay there and watch. She had missed that face.

After maybe a minute, Buffy just smiled. “Well, look who’s awake.” Faith couldn’t help the smile that blossomed along her own lips in response, and she still hadn’t ruled out the possibility she was dreaming. And just like that, the spell broke. Faith snapped up into a seated position, and her chest tightened as her breathing increased rapidly.

“I’m going to wake up back in that cell. This isn’t real.” Faith’s vision swam, and her hands began to ball into tight fists just as Buffy caught her in a tight hug.

“Promise me,” Buffy whispered, and her breath felt so real against Faith’s ear. She could feel the soothing rhythm of Buffy’s fingertips dragging along her back, urging her to relax. To let go of the anxiety that her now fully awake brain was sending coursing through her body. Buffy continued to whisper in her ear, and ever so slowly, the tension began to diminish. Faith’s hands loosened and found their way around Buffy until Faith was holding onto her as tightly as possible.

Faith buried her face against Buffy’s neck. “Promise me,” she gasped. “Promise me this is real. Promise me that I’m safe.”
Buffy squeezed her a little harder. “I promise.” Her hand stroked through Faith’s loose hair. “I’ve got you. You’re safe. You’re home. This is real.” For a few precious moments, she sank into Buffy and let go of everything. For a few precious moments, she was just a girl, safe and loved in the arms of her … whatever Buffy was to her at this point.

Then her stomach growled lightly, sparking a lovely giggle from Buffy as she pulled out of the embrace. Faith made a face as her body pulled itself into a lengthy stretch, joints popping noisily. It felt great. “How long have I been out?”

Glancing at the alarm clock, Buffy answered, “Um, sixteen or seventeen hours at this point.”

“Well … shit.” Faith felt more lucid than she had since her first couple days in Walsh’s care. She knew she should be hungry, but her appetite still wasn’t there. She tried not to freak out at that—her stomach certainly sounded hungry, even if she didn’t feel it. She couldn’t remember if she had eaten at all, after Buffy saved her. She honestly couldn’t remember much of the rescue at all. The only thing she remembered vividly was the kiss.

Faith felt the soft touch of a finger ghost across her lips and only then realized it was her own. Her brow knitted as her eyes searched Buffy’s and found recognition there as Buffy looked from Faith’s eyes down to her lips and back again. That was when Faith remembered the roses on her nightstand, and she turned to face them.

“A pretty girl once told me that a big romantic gesture requires flowers. I didn’t know what your favorite was—or if you even had one—but I figured, roses are a cliché for a reason, right?”

“Romantic gesture, huh?” Faith muttered, more to herself than Buffy. Her gaze didn’t leave the flowers. She wasn’t sure she wanted to face Buffy yet.

“Yeah, look. I know the timing is …. well. Ugh. Faith, you don’t have to say anything. I can’t imagine what you’ve been through, and you can tell me as much or as little of it as you want to. But I just need you to know.” She felt Buffy’s hand come to rest lightly on her own, and while Faith didn’t turn, she didn’t pull her hand away either. “I was such an idiot.” Her voice hitched ever so slightly, but Buffy kept going. “I like you. I mean, duh. You knew that. Or …” She pulled away, and Faith’s hand felt the sudden loss of the pressure.

Buffy paced a few steps, then turned back to Faith. This time their eyes met, and for whatever reason, that seemed to calm the blonde. “Faith, I have feelings for you. Strong feelings. Romantic feelings. And I’ve been running and running from them, and I’m sorry it took all this—” Buffy’s eyes watered, but she kept it under control, “—for me to stop running. B-but, I won’t run anymore. You were right, about us. I want to try this, for real.” She looked away bashful, a soft smile playing along her lips. “If you want to.” Her eyes widened. “But there’s no rush! You’ve been through so much, and I’m not trying to push you. A-and I get it if you’re mad at me or if you don’t trust me.” Buffy sat back down on the edge of the bed, leaving a foot of space between them. “But I promise, I’m not going anywhere.”

There was a different quality to Buffy’s voice, Faith thought. Her speech was hesitant and more than a little rambling—which was normal, especially if Faith was following Buffy’s train of thought correctly. But there was something new there, underneath it all. Something suspiciously like certainty.

“B …” Faith blew out a long breath, and again, she gazed at the roses. They were absolutely beautiful. “You’re right. I been through a lot. And I really don’t wanna talk about it. Not sure I ever will.” She ran a finger along the mangled skin of her forearm. “She’d have to do something about that, eventually. “Before … this was everything I wanted, ya know?” She frowned. “But I
Buffy didn’t push, and Faith appreciated that. She tested her legs, which seemed to work just fine, and pushed herself up off the bed. After taking a long, pleasant whiff of her roses, she turned to face Buffy. The other Slayer looked so small, perched on the edge of the bed with those big, sad eyes. Faith approached her, stopping just before her knees bumped against Buffy’s.

“I’m not sayin’ no.” Faith offered a sly grin that hid the doubt in her heart. “In fact, I’m sayin’ probably. But … it’ll take a while. To earn my trust back. To convince me you’re not gonna drop me again when things get scary. If you’re serious about this—” Faith pushed a little closer, so she could rest a hand on Buffy’s cheek, “—I need you to be patient with me.”

Buffy leaned into the touch of Faith’s hand, then looked up at her. “I can do that,” she promised. Then she took Faith’s hand and kissed her tenderly on the palm. When she looked back up again, she made a face. “Mom will want to feed you all the food, but I think maybe you should take a nice, hot shower first. You’re a little ripe.”

Faith chuckled at that, then played with her lower lip between her teeth. “Tryin’ to get me naked already, B?”

Buffy had been by Faith’s side for nearly three days. This was only the second time she had left the house, but she need to talk to Giles because this wasn’t sustainable. “You’re not getting it. Faith’s a complete shut-in. She’s terrified that another squad or that thing—”

“Adam,” Giles supplied the name of Walsh’s horrific creature Faith had told them about.

“Yeah. She’s afraid they’re gonna take her again. She’s barely sleeping, and she won’t leave her bedroom without me, and we can’t fight the Initiative with a broken Slayer, Giles.” Buffy’s voice cracked over the last few words, and she immediately felt like a complete asshole for thinking of Faith in that way. “She doesn’t deserve any of this,” she added. “I don’t know what she’s been through, and I’m not going to make her relive it, but we have to figure something out. I need to be able to help her.”

Joyce is with her right now?” Giles asked, the lines on his face creating the impression that he didn’t realize quite how difficult things had continued to be for Faith.

Buffy nodded. “And Anya. I think they’re playing poker, trying to keep her distracted and in good spirits. But it’s hard. Little bits of Faith shine through sometimes, but it’s so hard for her to feel safe enough to just be.” Buffy didn’t mention that she was fairly sure Faith refused to lose contact with her ax any time Buffy was away from her.

Giles’ brow furrowed even further. “Has she said anything about her time with the Initiative? Have
“She doesn’t want to talk about it. And I’m not going to push her.” Buffy glared daggers at both of them. “No one is going to push her.” Willow and Giles knew better than to challenge her, though she knew that both had a soft spot for Faith at this point. They didn’t want to hurt her any more than Buffy did. “I just don’t think a few quiet days from the Initiative isn’t going to help her sleep better at night. She needs more than that.”

“It sounds like PTSD,” Willow offered, and while Buffy only had a passing knowledge of what that term meant, she tended to agree. She just wished she knew how to help. Then Willow brightened. “What if we get her out of town for a few days?”

Buffy gaped, and Giles immediately rushed to protest. “I-I-I hardly think that—”

“No, really!” Willow interrupted. “It’s the presence of the Initiative, or the possibility of the threat or whatever of them, that’s triggering her issues, right? So just like … take her somewhere the Initiative isn’t. Let her work out her issues in a place she can feel safe!” Willow was grinning like she had stumbled upon the perfect solution, but Buffy wasn’t any more sure about this than Giles. The idea of spending some alone time away from everything had a certain amount of appeal, though.

“Will, where would we even go? And how would I be able to help her? I don’t know anything about PTSD or meditation or whatever it is that will help her find a way back to the old Faith again.”

“I mean, I didn’t say it would be just the two of you,” Willow grumbled sarcastically, fighting to control a knowing smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “But that’s probably for the best. I’m not saying it’s a perfect plan, but at least it’s a plan.”

Buffy turned her gaze to Giles, who was rubbing his glasses with his handkerchief as he processed the suggestion. “I have another possible solution, but um, it really couldn’t hurt for you to try what Willow is suggesting.”

“What’s your solution?”

“Yes, well. You remember Olivia?”

“Your hot British girlfriend?” Willow jumped in, and Buffy and Giles both shot her perplexed looks.

“What? I have eyes!”

“Yes well, um. Her relative attractiveness aside, Olivia is a psychologist. And ever since the, uh, Gentlemen, she’s been talking about coming back to Sunnydale. She’s rather curious about the supernatural, and she has brought up the possibility of maybe spending a longer amount of time here.”

“Olivia wants to move to Sunnydale!?” Willow gushed excitedly.

“And you think she could try to help Faith work out her issues?” Buffy followed up, bringing the conversation back to the original point.

“I think so, yes. But I think we both know Faith is going to be much more open to a weekend retreat than working with a psychologist.” He rolled his eyes at Willow. “Even a, uh, hot one.”

Willow just grinned back at him, completely unfazed. “We could probably find an isolated little cabin or something. I know there are a bunch of rental types of places in the national forest area. It’s only like forty minutes north!”
“Okay.” Buffy sighed. “Okay, yeah. Maybe that could work. It’s worth a try at least. But what if there’s an issue while we’re gone? Vampires or the Initiative or something?”

“Buffy, we have survived two separate summers without you, if you’ll recall,” Giles chided. “I’m quite certain we can make it a few days.”

“And I think I saw a spell the other day that might come in handy. Something where Tara and I could send you an instant message if we absolutely needed you.” They both spoke with a tone that made it clear they weren’t interested in giving Buffy a reason to back out. So, she followed her heart and gave in.

“Okay. Now I just have to convince Faith.”

Neither Buffy nor Faith had said anything to each other in the last twenty minutes or so, but the atmosphere of the car was far from tense, Faith realized with the faintest hint of a crooked smile. With the meandering music of Green Day’s *Dookie* animating the air around her, she actually felt more at ease driving north up this highway than she had at any point since she was first abducted by the Initiative. The steady vibration of the car ride, the ambient white noise of the tires moving over the concrete beneath them, and the now dimming orange of the California sunlight all worked to create a tranquility that Faith absolutely had not expected.

Buffy seemed to be content with it as well, not that Faith would ever admit that maybe she had been right about this impromptu travel plan. Faith had been pretty resistant when Buffy first suggested a cabin getaway. It felt like running, and while Faith couldn’t deny that she was living in pretty constant fear, she still hated the idea of showing weakness. On top of that, she wasn’t accustomed to people wanting to take care of her, even after months of living under the same roof as Joyce Summers. Part of her felt like she wasn’t worth it, like she would just owe everyone more if she accepted the offer that more or less amounted to a vacation from slaying.

Then there was Buffy. Faith glanced over at the tiny blonde lounging in the passenger seat, who continued watching the landscape go by despite no doubt feeling Faith’s gaze upon her. Those familiar butterflies fluttered in her gut again as she did so. Buffy had been so different since she rescued Faith, and the dark Slayer was still having trouble believing it was real. The thought of letting herself fall in love was scary, and she felt like she had whiplash from Buffy’s change of heart. Against all her instincts, Faith had made her heart vulnerable that night with Buffy in the gym, and Buffy had rejected her. Then Faith had been tortured in nearly every way possible for two weeks, and suddenly Buffy wanted nothing more than to win her heart. It was disorienting, and she found it beyond difficult to believe that Buffy wasn’t going to get cold feet again.

The idea of spending several days alone with Buffy in some romantic little cabin was equal parts tantalizing and terrifying. She could still vividly picture that brief moment of disappointment and hurt on Buffy’s face when Faith told her she wasn’t ready for some big coupley romcom cabin scenario. It was only there a moment, before Buffy controlled her reaction and shifted back into understanding and support mode. But Faith had no idea what to do about it. She had only agreed to come because Buffy had insisted that she was going with or without Faith. She hated that she didn’t have the strength to call Buffy on the obvious bluff. For all her reservations, the thought of being separated from Buffy by that much distance was unbearable.

“This place better not suck ass,” Faith griped nonchalantly, trying for some measure of her old sauciness. Buffy turned her head towards Faith, dramatically rolling her eyes as she reached across for a light shove to Faith’s shoulder. “Hey! Watch it Blondie; I’m drivin’ here.” Faith couldn’t keep
the crooked grin off her lips. “Speakin’ of which, we almost there yet or what?”

After a couple of wrong turns (thanks to Buffy’s subpar map navigation skills), they were able to find the cabin about fifteen minutes later. They had passed a number of other cabins as they neared their destination, but there was enough distance between them that theirs still felt private and isolated. Safe, Faith couldn’t help but feel, her usual anxiety and paranoia not gone, but significantly dulled by the distance from Sunnydale.

Faith popped the trunk before she stepped out of the car. “How do we get in?”

“Key should be under the mat,” Buffy answered as she pulled her three bags from the trunk. Faith very pointedly pulled her one single bag out, along with the cooler they had packed full of food and drinks, before slamming the trunk shut and following Buffy up the path towards the cabin.

It was every bit as sickeningly idyllic as Faith had worried it would be. The cabin’s exterior featured medium brown wood paneling, with green and red detailing on the windows on either side of the front door. A simple fence extended to the side around a small patio and a wide stone chimney rose from the back of the cabin. A few feet back from the cabin, on the opposite side of the fenced porch, was a shallow creek flowing back into the surrounding trees. Beside it was a two person swing, the whole thing made of warm, thick wood.

Faith’s inner bad girl revolted against how cute it all was, but Buffy didn’t give her time to dwell. “Faith get in here! It’s gorgeous!” That can’t be good, she thought as she carried her bag and the cooler in through the open front door. And it wasn’t. It was every bit as gorgeous as Buffy said. The right two thirds of the cabin were wide open, with dark slats creating triangles against the open, vaulted ceiling. Everything was warm, knotted wood and dark red fabric, with a rich patterned rug covering the majority of the stone floor. To the right of the door was a small glass table with two red upholstered chairs, and to the left was an open doorframe into the tiny kitchenette. The back wall featured a massive stone fireplace, framed on the right by a small armoire and on the left by a door Faith assumed went to the bathroom. Just in front of it, at an angle but facing the fire already burning there, was a plush, comfy-looking loveseat. But the cheesy, amazing fireplace wasn’t the worst part.

“What the fuck, B?”

Buffy was sitting her bags down along the wall between the kitchenette and the bathroom, but she turned rapidly at Faith’s incredulous tone. She didn’t say anything, but her furrowed brow and slight pout conveyed her confusion perfectly. Faith just stared at her with wide eyes as she gestured to the bed. The single, queen-sized bed that took up the majority of the room between the table and the fireplace and looked impossibly inviting with its velvety red comforter and the pile of pillows resting against the cutesy intertwining branches that formed a sort of headboard against the wall.

Buffy looked between Faith and the bed and shook her head as she shrugged. “What?”

Faith glared daggers at her (almost certainly) feigned ignorance. “Did you know there was only one bed?” Realization dawned in Buffy’s emerald eyes, and a guilty look spread along her features.

“No. Sorry I didn’t—I mean, Giles handled the details. I was more concerned with how I would convince you to come. I didn’t … this wasn’t …” Buffy blushed, and Faith knew that the other Slayer understood her concern. Buffy took a few steps towards the bed. “It’s plenty big though!” she stammered, then grimaced as she turned away to face the fireplace. “Look, um, I can sleep on the loveseat if you’re uncomfortable with it. On of the few advantages of being tiny is that I can fit almost anywhere. It doesn’t have to be a thing, and …” She spun on one foot and focused such a compassionate look on Faith that she felt her breath catch in her throat. “I’m sorry, Faith. I promise I wasn’t trying to make this some big romantic thing, and I know you’re still not quite there yet, and I
should’ve paid attention to—"

Faith cut off the babbling. “Hey, it’s cool. We’ll deal.”

Buffy gaped. “Really?”

Faith shrugged, then walked over and set her bag in the corner, between the nightstand and the small table. “I believe you. Not sure what G is playin’ at though.”

“Oh god,” Buffy groaned. “N-no. No way.”

“Honestly, I had no idea he was so dead set on getting us together?” Faith prodded, her tone equal parts sultry and sardonic. “Maybe he even sprang for a two-person hot tub in the bathroom.” Her insides were a tumultuous mix of warring emotions. She couldn’t run away, so she dealt with it the only other way she knew—with humor. “But we can check that situation out later. I’m starving.”

By the time they finished dinner, the sun had set and left the two Slayers in the shadowy yellow light of the side porch’s sole lamp. Faith had already finished off her meal, but Buffy was still picking at her last couple of veggies. Dinner conversation had been easy and reassuring, but a couple of minutes had passed in silence. Part of Faith had been worried that her anxiety would spike being outside at night in a strange place, but she was pleasantly surprised to find that the sounds of nature all around them were soothing in the relative silence. And her ax—that meaningful Christmas present from Buffy—was a foot away, resting against the wall. Just in case.

“This was incredible, Faith.” The compliment was soft and airy, nearly covered up by the sound of Buffy crumpling up the aluminum around the last couple of bits she wasn’t going to finish. But it was still enough to cause Faith to momentarily choke on a sip of beer, coughing and sputtering for several seconds before turning an exasperated and embarrassed glare on the now grinning blonde. “Sorry. I just didn’t know you were such a good cook.”

“It was just grilled chicken and veggies. Really, it comes down to the right spices. No biggie.” Faith felt entirely too awkward, in a way she hadn’t really felt since she was first starting to get to know Buffy over a year ago. Buffy’s praise made her feel all warm and tingly inside, and Faith didn’t know how to handle it.

Buffy didn’t let Faith’s feigned humility get to her. “Where’d you learn to work a grill like that?”

Faith shrugged. “Been livin’ with Joyce for a while now. Guess I picked up a few things.” She took another long swig of her beer and tried not to focus on the adoring look in Buffy’s emerald eyes. If she had, she would’ve seen the mischievous glint that sparkled in them at the explanation.

“Should I be worried that you’re more of a daughter to my mom than I am?”

Faith couldn’t help the crooked grin that formed along her lips. “You jealous, B?” Buffy snorted, then gave Faith’s arm a playful shove.

“Shut up. As if.” As she settled back into her chair, her hand lingered with barely a couple of inches from where Faith’s pinky and ring finger hung loosely off the armrest of her chair. Faith almost felt like the air between them crackled with a faint charge, and she shivered, just a little. She wasn’t sure if it was due to the sensation or just the brisk chill in the air.

“Sure you won’t have a beer?” Faith asked, her eyes searching for anything else to focus on. Buffy met her gaze and somehow looked impossibly comfortable. Faith didn’t get that. I feel like I’m
about to jump out of my skin. What is my deal? Buffy went and made it worse by biting her lower lip softly.

“What if you made me one of those drinks I actually like?” Despite all her annoying nervousness, Faith had enough courage to flash a devilish grin. She downed the rest of her beer in one smooth gulp, then pushed herself up to her feet. As she stood, she couldn’t help but allow her pinky to brush against Buffy’s. She knew it was such a cliché move, but the way the subtle charge blossomed into spark that tingled up her arm was so worth it.

“Wait here, Blondie. I’ll be right back.” Faith slipped back into the cabin without another look at Buffy, not wanting to be caught in a blush. She opened the refrigerator door to grab a can of Diet Coke and another beer for herself, but her hand paused, hovering over the bottle. Ah, what the hell? She grabbed a second can and closed the fridge door with her hip. She grabbed two glasses from the nearby cabinet—whoever stocked this place had good taste in glassware—and set them down by the fridge. She reopened it to grab a few ice cubes and a lime. She made the drinks quickly, the only difference being that Buffy got vodka while Faith chose whiskey for herself, finishing both off with a spritz of lime juice.

Her hands froze again just before picking up the glasses, her mind suddenly remembering her shiver from before. She moved briskly as she tossed on her leather jacket over the hoodie she was wearing, then tucked Buffy’s under her arm before grabbing the two glasses and heading back outside. She felt Buffy’s gaze follow her from the minute she stepped back into the fresh air. Faith didn’t return it at first, focusing on setting down the glasses without spilling. Only then, as she held out Buffy’s jacket so she could slide into it, did brown eyes meet green.

For a split second, Buffy seemed like she was going to say something, but Faith was relieved that she didn’t. She felt insanely self-conscious. Like she couldn’t stop doing all the cliché romantic things, none of which were fully intentional. Fortunately, Buffy seemed to be enjoying it, and Faith didn’t know how she felt about that either. She had been so emphatic about not wanting to go on some romantic weekend away, and yet here she was touching pinkies and helping a girl into her jacket. What am I doing? She didn’t know what she wanted.

And there was that lip bite again. Goddammit, B. It was only a small moment, but the electricity continued to spark along the few moments of contact as Faith helped Buffy into the jacket. “Cheers,” Buffy offered, holding up her glass after they both sat.

Faith held her own glass up, just an inch or so off the table. “What’re we drinkin’ to?”

Buffy’s arm dropped slightly as her face scrunched into a thoughtful expression. Then her eyes sparked as her lips burst into a gorgeous smile. Oh no. Please don’t say something sappy. “To getting away from it all, if only for a little while.” Faith breathed a sigh of relief, then chuckled.

“Sure, B.” She raised her glass. “To getting away.” Faith thought about trying to throw back her entire drink in one go, but she decided against it. Here with Buffy, she didn’t have to run. Didn’t have to hide. That was the point of this trip, after all, but in this moment, it felt real. She could breathe. And she could savor her drink slowly.

She enjoyed the warmth of the liquor right in the center of her chest, slouching back into her chair as she rested one foot into the seat of the chair against her thigh. After a minute or so, Buffy stretched out a hand, but then seemed to think better of it. She left it to rest casually off the arm of her chair, as if hoping maybe Faith’s hand would get closer at some point. Faith found herself feeling comforted by the lack of pressure Buffy was putting on her, even though both of their feelings for each other were more or less out in the open now. “So Faith … tell me about your favorite movie?”
The question caught her off guard, and she snorted into her drink. “Really? That’s what you’re going with?”

Buffy just flashed that smile again, the one that sometimes made Faith feel all weak in the knees. It was crazy that even with all the trepidation, all the terrible history between them, Buffy still had such power over her. “Faith. You don’t have to make it a thing. For as much as we’ve been through together, there’s so much I don’t know about you. I figured … I’ll never know till I ask. And why not start small?” She made a face, and Faith struggled to keep her own expression as neutral as possible. She couldn’t let Buffy know how easily she could disarm her. “Now answer the question.”

Faith blew out a frustrated breath. “I can’t tell you that,” she demurred, immediately regretting the moment of honesty. She felt weak again.

“What? Really?” Buffy wasn’t pushing, but she was curious. Just shy of incredulous. “Why not?”

_Because I’m not ready to be that vulnerable again. Not yet._ It wasn’t like the movie was her favorite because of Buffy. It had been her favorite long before Sunnydale, not that she would’ve admitted it to anyone prior to moving there. She fell in love with it because it made all the things she had never had seem possible. It was a pleasant fantasy that seemed attainable. Like no matter how fucked up she was, it was possible—at least under a silly, contrived set of circumstances—that she could find people to fit in with. People radically different from her who grew to accept her anyway.

Then she moved to Sunnydale, and that almost sort of became her life. It was kind of a miracle. But it wasn’t until she had rewatched it a month or two ago that she realized the other, more subtle reason she loved it so much. She wasn’t sure she was ready to have Buffy have the same realization, even though she knew it was stupid. She knew she didn’t have any good reason to hide it.

“What’s your favorite movie?” Buffy’s eyes narrowed at the deflection, but then they rolled dramatically as she took another sip of her drink.

_10 Things I Hate About You,_ she replied, not a drop of hesitation or shame in her voice. Faith only allowed the barest hint of a grin to play along her lips. She remembered quite well the Saturday afternoon last year when the two of them and Joyce watched the movie together. Buffy and Joyce had forced Faith to pick the movie, and she was still playing the cool girl, completely disinterested in such a wholesome afternoon activity. So, she’d haphazardly grabbed the first movie available, without even looking, and shoved it into Buffy’s hands before rolling her eyes and striding moodily out the door of the Blockbuster.

Faith had only been staying with the Summers a month or two, and she hadn’t yet begun to let her guard down around them. Though she secretly enjoyed the movie, she had blown it off as just another stupid high school fairy tale, insisting that she hated it. She hadn’t been ready to let Buffy see her true self then. Now … now, she was at least open to it. Faith bit her lip and nodded her head playfully at Buffy. “Makes sense, what with how big a sap you are.”

Buffy chuckled, then scooted her chair closer. “Oh please, you don’t really think I bought your whole act, even back then, do you?” Faith shrugged, playing dumb as she wondered what Buffy would say next. The blonde’s eyes sparkled with mirth and mischief. “You can’t hide from me, Faith, as hard as you might try. I know for a fact that you didn’t hate it.” She leaned towards Faith, crooked grin on full display. “Not even close.” Her pinky brushed up against Faith’s, and this time it was very clear that it wasn’t accidental. “Not even a little bit.” Faith wanted to groan at the cheesiness, but the pleasant warmth she felt in her chest betrayed her true feelings. “Not even at all.” Rather than roll her eyes, Faith blushed, her eyes widening as her body acted of its own
accord. She just gaped at Buffy, completely unable to summon her usual swagger to offer a retort.

As if encouraged by Faith’s sudden and uncharacteristic awkwardness, Buffy pushed her luck a little further, moving to intertwine her fingers with Faith’s. Her hand was cool from the night air, but it filled Faith with a warmth that pulled her out of the silence Buffy’s cheesy quote had inflicted. She avoided looking at their hands, sure that if she looked, she would pull away. Instead, she focused on Buffy’s still sparkling eyes and summoned her most derisive grin. “You’re so full of shit, B.”

Buffy’s face brightened at the retort, or maybe it was because Faith didn’t flinch away from her touch. Either way, Buffy knew full well that she was right, and for once, Faith didn’t feel inclined to protest any more than she already had. She adjusted her posture to be a little closer to Buffy, so that she could reach out and grab her drink again without releasing the slowly warming hand in her own. She kept her gaze on the drink in her hand as she asked, “Why that one?”

“I don’t know, exactly. Like on the surface, it really is just a high school rom com, but … it’s so much more than that. I’ve never seen anything like it.” Buffy smiled and squeezed Faith’s hand ever so slightly. “The company was nice too, even if she was kind of a jerk about it at the time.” This time Faith did roll her eyes, but her playful mockery didn’t mean she wasn’t waiting for more explanation. After a charged moment of eye contact, Buffy continued. “On the surface, it’s a nice, easy story about high school drama, sans demons and monsters and the world ending every couple of years. It was an escape … but, like, not an unrealistic one.”

Faith scoffed, and Buffy conceded. “Okay, yes, serenading a girl during soccer practice, with the backing of the marching band, was over the top. But like … the characters felt like real people, especially Kat. She was different from the usual girl in a movie like this. She felt weightier, and I guess I identified with that. But she was so fiercely determined to be who she was, without a care for how anyone else perceived her. I want to be like that.” Buffy looked down at her lap, and Faith thought she saw the faint hints of a blush on her cheeks. “She reminded me of you, in that way.”

Faith’s breath caught in her throat. She felt overwhelmed by Buffy’s unabashed openness, but surprisingly, it didn’t scare her. If anything, she was inspired by Buffy’s continuing willingness to put herself out there. It felt so different from the Buffy who had been jerking her around for the past six months.

“Mine’s The Breakfast Club,” Faith confessed, her voice barely more than a whisper. She found that she couldn’t look at Buffy, so instead she focused on their entwined hands. It struck her how right it looked. But she could also feel Buffy’s hand tense, probably in surprise. Inwardly, Faith liked that she could still surprise Buffy. “Betcha thought it was gonna be some action movie or somethin’, right?”

“No,” Buffy answered immediately, and she squeezed Faith’s hand again. “I mean … I didn’t really know. What kind of movie you would pick. You’re mysterious like that, and I know there’s so much beneath the surface that you never show anyone. That’s why I asked.” Faith’s eyes snapped up to meet Buffy’s again, and there was nothing but affection there. “It’s a little thing—I’m not rushing—but I just want to get to know you. Not Slayer you or bad girl you. Just … you.”

Faith looked away again, reaching back for her drink. She found that she couldn’t handle the intensity of Buffy’s sincerity. Half of her wanted to run away. The other half wanted to tackle Buffy to the ground and show her exactly what sort of effect the blonde was having on her. After a moment’s pause, she split the difference. “I guess it was sort of an escape for me too. A story in which an asshole misfit can find his place with some of the cool kids, plus a couple of weirdos—”

“Holy crap, you’re the bad boy!” Buffy blurted out all of the sudden, realization sparking across her
Faith just chuckled. “That obvious, huh? Yeah, I really felt like I could see myself in Bender. Outcast, angry at the world, daddy issues. But he found a way to open up, just a little, and the others eventually accepted him. And hey, he got the popular girl in the end.” She looked up just enough to see what Buffy’s reaction would be, worried that she had said too much. But Buffy was grinning like an idiot.

“You know …” Buffy waggled her eyebrows in a way that Faith had only ever seen a couple times, and then raised their entwined hands in the air. It was the first time either had openly acknowledged the hand-holding. “You got the popular girl in the end, too.”

Faith’s brow furrowed. “You sayin’ this is the end?” Buffy frowned, then huffed in the most adorable way.

“Well … no. Obviously not. But it’s like … an end to me being a massive idiot or whatever. Mostly, I’m just saying that you have me, Faith.” Her eyes widened. “Not that you have to … have me, that is. I just mean, if you want me … but uh not like want me, like … I mean yeah, eventually, but …” Buffy glared at her. “Feel free to cut off my awkward rambling anytime, jerk.”

“But you’re cute when you ramble.” That did it. Now Buffy was the one staring with her mouth open, her cheeks turning a bright pink. Her eyes darted around self-consciously.

“Y-you think I’m cute?” Faith couldn’t help the laughter that overtook her at that. She stopped when Buffy let go of her hand, but only to smack her in the arm.

“Don’t laugh at me!” she protested grumpily, but she slid her hand back in Faith’s anyway. Faith tried not to think too hard about how little she cared for that brief moment when Buffy’s hand wasn’t touching her own.

“Fine, but don’t be an idiot,” Faith mocked playfully. “It’s been obvious for a while, hasn’t it?”

“That you think I’m cute? No it hasn’t! I mean … yeah, clearly you think I’m hot and sexy and stuff—”

“Hot and sexy and stuff? Really B?” Buffy just glared at her and continued on.

“But I didn’t … I mean… cute is a different thing, you know?” Buffy turned bashful all of the sudden, and now Faith was curious. Does she really not know?

“Suppose it’s a little different. You really don’t think you’re cute?”

Buffy’s eyes narrowed. “Yes,” she murmured thoughtfully, then shook her head as she realized what she said. “I mean … I’m not like, bragging or … ugh, why do you do this to me?” Faith raised an eyebrow teasingly but didn’t say anything. “I just mean that like … until you showed up with flowers and told me you were falling in love with me, I didn’t realize…”

Faith frowned. How could she not have realized? When she broke things off, she said she was doing it because it wasn’t fair to Faith. She didn’t say it explicitly, but it sure as shit felt like she knew Faith was falling for her back then. So, why the feigned ignorance now?

Sensing Faith’s confusion, Buffy rushed to clarify. “Okay fine, I had some idea. But everything felt so confusing and scary then, and I ran away from those thoughts. I did my best to pretend it was just … attraction. Plus, I was awful to you.” Guilt flooded her features for a moment before she shook it off. “I just mean … you thinking that I’m cute wasn’t something that really occurred to me.”
A thousand different responses flashed through Faith’s mind at once. Whatever she had expected Buffy to say, it wasn’t this. Not from something as simple as “hey B, I think you’re cute.” Completely unsure of herself, Faith rushed to fall back on what she knew best. “Whatever. You’re cute. Deal with it.” She started to pull her hand away, but Buffy just held it that much tighter.

Their eyes met again. “Please don’t run away.” That hit Faith right in the gut, and she settled back down. The butterflies were back, and her chest started to tighten. Buffy didn’t move though, she just held her hand tight. “I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to get all heavy on you.”

“B, I just——”

“I know. You told me. And I get it, okay?” Buffy rubbed her thumb soothingly over Faith’s knuckles. “I don’t wanna push. A-and I don’t wanna rush you.” She grinned. “And just for the record, you’ve got definite cuteness too—it’s just hidden deep down under all that bravado. But I see it.”

Faith rolled her eyes at the cheesiness, but she knew Buffy was right. And she felt more comfortable than she had just a few moments ago. Even so, it was a lot. A lot to process. A lot to consider. A lot to sort out before she could let herself go there. She squeezed Buffy’s hand, then let it go. “I believe you. But I’m beat. Think I’m gonna take a shower then hit the hay.” Faith stood and threw back the remnants of her drink. Before she headed back inside, however, she forced herself to look Buffy in the eyes, even though she knew the disappointment she would find there. To Buffy’s credit, she clearly tried to hide it.

Still, it was enough to pull Faith’s heartstrings a little, and she acted on impulse before she could stop herself. Faith didn’t realize what she was doing until her lips were already against Buffy’s. She didn’t linger, but she didn’t regret the kiss. Hopefully it at least reassured Buffy that she hadn’t done anything wrong.

Faith set her glass gently into the sink and dropped by her bag to grab her toiletries and a change of clothes. The steam and the heat of the water felt comforting. But that didn’t stop her eyes from fixating on the still mangled skin of her arm, remembering the pain of the heat on her arm becoming so much that she passed out. She could hear her own shrieking in her head, but distant, as if dissociated from the person who felt that pain.

These sweet moments with Buffy almost felt magical—dreamlike—in the way they kept Faith centered in the moment. Herself again, and not the mindless, broken thing she had become in that cell. But the trauma was always there, just beneath the surface.

As she slumped to the floor, the tears came, mingling with the water falling all around her. Faith was vaguely aware of the sounds her body made as she gasped through the sobs that overtook her. She hoped the shower was loud enough to mask the sounds, and if not, that Buffy would have the sense to leave her alone. What would she think of me then? Faith knew that Buffy would want to save her, to protect her. But that was the scariest part.

Faith was starting to believe Buffy. She could see the change in her demeanor, the ease with which she showed Faith that she cared. Even with all the nervous rambling, Buffy’s quiet confidence in how she felt about Faith shone through. But what if there wasn’t any Faith left to love? What if she was beyond saving? For all she had been through in her entire life, Faith felt more broken now than ever before.

When Faith ran out of tears, the water was still plenty hot. Cabin must have one hell of a water heater. She chuckled at the random thought. It was a nice retreat from wallowing in her pain. Perhaps it was also a turning point. Faith sat there under the stream of hot water for a while more,
and eventually, she made her decision.

She either had to accept that she was broken permanently, and leave everything she had built behind forever, maybe find somewhere she could fight the good fight for however long it took for some big bad to finally kill her. Or she could choose the more difficult path. Accept that she had the potential to heal, and let Buffy try to help her. Let Joyce and Willow and the rest try to help her.

Faith didn’t know if she had it in her. Maybe the progress she had made since Buffy’s graduation had been a fluke, and deep down, Faith was too broken to ever make something of herself. But how could someone like Buffy Summers care about her this much if that was true? No. I have to try. I have to.

It only took a few minutes to towel off, drying her hair just enough to tie it up in a messy bun without a care for what it would look like in the morning. Then she brushed her teeth and slid on the underwear, shorts, and tank top she planned to sleep in. When she finally walked back out of the bathroom, she found Buffy dozing on the love seat, still in her clothes from the day. For a split second, Faith considered just slipping the quilt from the back of the love seat over Buffy’s body and letting her sleep. But that wasn’t what she wanted.

Kneeling down in front of Buffy’s face, Faith made an exaggerated coughing noise. Buffy’s eyes slipped open blearily, and she blinked several times. “Hey there, Blondie. Whatcha doin’?” Buffy’s body tensed as she stretched a little and then sat up.

“You were in there for a while, and I was worried. Didn’t wanna intrude, but I wanted to be nearby just in case.” She blushed, and her eyes darted over to her luggage. “I can shower in the morning, I’ll just change really quick and grab a pillow from the bed. You go to sl—”

“B, I’m not letting you sleep on the fucking love seat.” Buffy’s nose crinkled, and she continued to blink owlishly. “We can share. Honestly, I think I’ll sleep better that way.” She smirked as she stood, fully aware of Buffy’s gaze tracing the length of her bare legs. “Just don’t think about gettin’ too handsy. I ain’t that kinda girl.”

Buffy feigned a mocking “ha ha,” then grabbed her stuff and headed into the bathroom. Faith finished turning off the lights and making sure both doors were locked and all the curtains were drawn. As she drew back the covers and settled in, she couldn’t help but moan just a little at how comfortable the bed was. She felt her eyes drooping the moment she laid down.

Faith was vaguely aware of the sound of the water turning off, and a few seconds later, the light in the bathroom switched off and the door opened. She heard rustling as Buffy put something down in one of her bags, and the barely audible padding of her feet as she quietly approached the bed. Her voice was tentative as she asked, “You’re sure that you’re okay with this?”

“Get in bed, dummy.” Buffy did as she was told, but she was careful to leave space between them. Faith was okay with that for now, even though part of her just wanted Buffy to move in close and hold her tightly until she fell asleep. It had been an emotional day, and they hadn’t even really talked about anything huge. For now, knowing Buffy was near was enough, and Faith was done being vulnerable. So instead of asking for what she really wanted, Faith simply offered a soft, “Good night, Buffy.” Before turning onto her side, facing away from the other Slayer, and closing her eyes.

“Good night, Faith.”

Buffy woke up as peacefully as she had in a long time. She didn’t open her eyes, but she could hear
the faint chirping of birds in the distance. While she didn’t immediately have a sense of where she was, it didn’t feel like her own bed. If anything, it was comfier than her bed, even with the quilt feeling heavier on her stomach and legs for some reason. She felt just the right amount of warm and safe.

The other thing she noticed was the pleasant scent under her nose, earthy with the vaguest hint of oranges that Buffy had come to associate with … oh. The night before came flooding back to her consciousness all at once, and she did her best not to stiffen as she opened her eyes to the tangle of brown hair next to her face. Faith’s body continued to rise and fall ever so slightly, and Buffy wasn’t ready to wake her just yet.

When Buffy fell asleep, Faith was facing away from her, with a good six inches of space between them. At some point, Faith had closed that distance. Buffy was on her back, and Faith had latched onto her like a koala. Faith’s breasts grazed gently against Buffy’s arm to the steady pace of Faith’s breathing. One arm crossed Buffy’s midriff, a hand loosely bunching up the fabric of her t-shirt, and a leg draped over both of Buffy’s. The feel of Faith’s skin against hers was electric, even half-awake, and Buffy struggled to keep her breathing steady.

Oh god, what if I have morning breath? What if Faith freaks out about waking up to cuddles? Am I a terrible person for enjoying this? Am I even enjoying it, if I’m just freaking out about it??

“I can hear you thinking,” Faith groaned softly, not moving her head from where it was resting comfortably against Buffy’s shoulder. Buffy stiffened.

“Faith! I, um, I didn’t … I just woke up like... I mean, I didn’t like, make a move or—”

“Shhh,” Faith cut her off. “Stop freaking out. You’re less comfy when you’re all stiff.” Buffy breathed out a nervous giggle, but she could feel her whole body relax a little at Faith’s snarky reassurance.

“Sorry,” she offered, more quietly this time. “I just wasn’t sure if you were ready for the whole cuddling thing yet.”

“You worry too much,” Faith muttered, still unwilling to accept that she was awake. Buffy was very aware of the soft warmth of Faith’s breath against her skin as she spoke.

“Probably,” Buffy admitted, and then finally she let herself get comfortable. With only a slight protest from Faith, Buffy pulled her arm out and wrapped it around the other Slayer. “My arm was going numb, don’t be a baby.” Faith chuckled, but tucked her head back into Buffy, and Buffy’s breath caught for just a second as she became so very aware of how close Faith’s face was to Buffy’s boob. She tried to distract herself with more small talk. “How did you sleep?”

Faith curled into Buffy the tiniest bit more, then answered, “Really good.” Buffy suddenly realized that she hadn’t woken up to Faith’s screams or the tell-tale grunts and moans that usually signaled one of her nightmares. It was the first time that had happened since Buffy got her out of that place. Buffy could feel her heart soar at the thought of that. Maybe the retreat idea really was going to work out. She knew it was too much to think that a few days in the woods would completely heal Faith, but this was something. A tangible sign of process. A wide smile broke out over Buffy’s face, and she hugged Faith closer.

“Damn, someone’s clingy.” Faith’s joking and overall cuddliness gave Buffy a little more confidence, and she decided it was time to fire a quip back.

“Are you actually going to wake up and look at me, or are you just gonna talk to my boob all day?”
Faith’s head rose just enough that she could open one eye and look at Buffy. “You complainin’, B?” Buffy blushed furiously, and Faith just snickered before lowering her head back into place against Buffy. “That’s what I thought.” Buffy wondered if Faith could hear her heart racing. Surely she wouldn’t look so comfy there if she could hear it pounding away, right? Waking up to this much closeness was a lot, and now with Faith being so sleepy and adorable and playful … Buffy felt a little overwhelmed. But in the best possible way. She kinda wanted to wake up feeling this overwhelmed, like, every day, forever.

And so, she wiggled down into her cozy spot just a little more and closed her eyes again. She didn’t think she could fall back asleep, but she more than content to just lay here with Faith wrapped around her. For as long as Faith would allow it. Time passed in silence, giving Buffy time to appreciate all the little things. The smell of Faith’s hair. The gentle, not quite tickle of her breath going in and out just over the surface of Buffy’s skin. The fabric of Buffy’s shirt against her stomach, bunched loosely in Faith’s hand. The pleasant warmth of Faith’s body pressed into her side.

Buffy had no idea how much time passed with them just laying there, half awake. But eventually, Faith spoke up again. Her eyes stayed closed, and her voice was so soft that Buffy almost didn’t catch what she asked. “What you said last night—did you mean it?”

“Which part?”

“The part where you said that I have you.” Buffy’s nerves rushed back all at once. Did I say too much? Too soon? Did I freak her out? After everything, Buffy wanted to be fully honest with Faith, but she didn’t want to pressure her at all. She opened her eyes, searching Faith for any sign of what she was feeling or why she had asked about that. But Faith was in the same position, eyes firmly shut. The truth it is then.

“Of course I meant it, Faith. I’m yours, in whatever way you’ll have me. But you don’t have to—”

“And what if I want to?” Buffy continued watching her curiously. Faith’s eyes stayed closed, but her hand let go of Buffy’s shirt. Instead, it began to trace soft patterns in the fabric, and Buffy could feel her abs instinctively tense to avoid being tickled. “What if I want you to be mine? For real this time?” Faith’s voice sounded as delicate and unguarded as Buffy had ever heard it, and Buffy could swear she felt her heart grow as she hugged Faith a little tighter.

“I meant what I said. I’m already yours. I’m sor—”

“No, don’t say it again. I know.” Faith breathed in deeply and then let it all out in a long exhale. Then she pulled herself away from Buffy, just enough that she could sit up and look her in the eyes. “But I need you to know.”

“Anything,” Buffy reassured her. “Tell me anything you need me to know. I promise I won’t run again.”

Faith looked away for a moment, then back at Buffy. Her left hand played at the quilt nervously. “I want to believe that. That you won’t run again. But it’s hard for me. I had trust issues before, and then …”

“No, don’t say it again. I know.” Faith breathed in deeply and then let it all out in a long exhale. “I need you to know.”

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“Then I sent mixed signals and rejected you twice and then you got abducted by the Evil Bitch Monster of Death and tortured for two weeks.” Faith’s eyes narrowed dangerously and Buffy looked down at the bed guiltily. “Sorry, I shouldn’t interrupt.” She tentatively slid her hand forward, hoping that Faith might take it. Faith stared at the appendage for a good thirty seconds before breathing out another heavy exhale and reaching out to take Buffy’s fingers in her own.
“I want to trust you, but it’s gonna take time. I can see that you’re different. I can feel it. But that doesn’t make it any easier. You’re gonna have to be okay with that if …” Buffy wanted to jump in, to insist that Faith could take all the time she needed, to reiterate that she wasn’t going anyway. But she had promised not to interrupt, so she just squeezed Faith’s hand and waited for her to continue.

“I thought about it a lot in the shower last night.” Brown eyes met green, and Buffy could see all the pain and fear that was weighing Faith down. “I’m holdin’ on by a thread, B. I feel more broken than I’ve ever felt. But … I want to heal. I want to get past this. And I want you by my side while I do. I just …” She teared up, and Buffy was a heartbeat away from just wrapping her up in a tight hug and telling her everything was going to be okay. “I want to give this a try, but I don’t even feel like a whole person again yet. I can’t promise that I’ll be any good at it, not for a long time.”

The tears started falling, and it was more than Buffy could stand. She moved forward in an instant, and then Faith was holding onto her so fiercely. Buffy’s hand rubbed soothing patterns into her neck and upper back. “Shhh. It’s okay. I’ve got you. I’ve got you.” Faith cried into Buffy’s chest, but her breathing was still fairly steady. Buffy swore to the Powers That Be and whatever else was out there that she would never let anyone hurt this girl ever again. “You have me. I’m here for you, and I’m not leaving. I promise you, I’m not running away again. You don’t owe me anything. You don’t have to be the best girlfriend on Earth day one. You just focus on being you. On getting better.”

Buffy pulled away and gently wiped the years from Faith’s cheeks. “And I’ll be here by your side the whole time. No matter what.”

Faith chuckled, and that beautiful crooked smile of hers began to play along her lips again. “I’m a definite fixer upper, I just needed you to know what you were getting yourself into.” Buffy beamed right back at her before leaning forward to kiss her on the forehead.

“I’m aware. You’re not as scary as you seem to think you are. I want you, Faith. I’ll help you however I can, but you’re more than what was done to you. You’re more than just your trauma. And I want you.” Faith’s hand came to rest on Buffy’s hip, her other already resting on Buffy’s knee. She searched Faith’s eyes for a second before deciding it was time to be bold. She wrapped her arms around Faith’s neck, clasping her hands together loosely behind her head. “I want to be your girlfriend.”

Now the smile was in full effect. “Okay.” Faith blew out a breath she had apparently been holding, and Buffy’s heart continued to pound in her chest. “I think I want that too.” And as they leaned in for a kiss, both smiling like idiots, any earlier concerns Buffy had about morning breath were completely forgotten.
“So, why now?” The question caught Buffy completely off guard, and she released Faith’s hand without thinking. There was a hint of something in Faith’s voice that shot a pang of instinctive worry up Buffy’s spine. They had taken their sweet time getting out of bed, enjoying the warm cuddles and simple intimacy after they had cleared the air a bit. The conversation hadn’t turned serious again, but it flowed easily between them as they prepared a simple breakfast and put on some clothes for hiking.

And so, after about an hour of hiking the hilly trails, the question felt a bit jarring. Especially considering that the last thing they had been talking about was whether it would be too over the top to kill an animal with their bare hands and eat it for dinner. Buffy had only to search Faith’s expressive brown eyes to catch the tiny glint of fear she was trying to hide.

“Why now, what?” she asked nonchalantly as she retook Faith’s hand with a reassuring squeeze. A faint smile ghosted over the other Slayer’s lips at Buffy’s touch. Buffy had a feeling she knew what Faith was asking, but she wanted to ease into it as cautiously as possible. Easier to avoid her guilt that way.

Faith blew out a loud breath, then lifted their entwined hands. “Why this? Why now?” Left unsaid was the real question, why not before?

It wasn’t unexpected, despite the sudden change in mood. Buffy knew all along that she would have to account for her transition from “I’m terrified of being in a gay relationship” Buffy to “I will do anything to be Faith’s girlfriend” Buffy. But she felt awkward chatting about it as they continued to hike steadily up the path. “Okay well that’s a long story.” Faith’s grip on her hand loosened, and Buffy tightened her own as she pulled them to a stop so she could face Faith. “That I will tell you all of, I promise. I mean it, Faith. I’m not hiding anything from you anymore.” She glanced up the path. “But let’s get to the top and find a nice seat with a view, yeah?”

Faith rolled her eyes, but that look of fear was gone, at least for the moment. “You’re such a sap,” she teased.

“Yes, but that’s a you and me secret, okay?” Buffy fought to keep the smirk off her face, but it was hard. Ever since their conversation in bed, Buffy felt like she might explode into sparkling bits of pure joy at any moment. She felt like she had been transported to an alternate universe where all she had to worry about was making her girlfriend — I have a girlfriend! — happy, and enjoying the nature all around them. No demons, no Initiative, no nagging insecurities about being gay or bisexual or whatever. Buffy wasn’t sure she had ever felt this light, at least not since she took on the burden of being the Slayer.

Buffy wasn’t sure whether this was a very large hill or a very small mountain, but either way, the view at the top was as stunning as she had hoped. Even Faith was taken aback by it. They were
surrounded on all sides by varying shades of green, brown, and grey. Thick evergreens mixed in with the lighter shades of slowly awakening foliage, with outcroppings of stone dotting and at times completely overtaking the hills standing stark against the clear blue sky.

After a couple of minutes of gaping in silence, Buffy realized that they were no longer holding hands. Feeling bold, she moved back a step and then wrapped her arms around Faith’s waist. The brunette stiffened but then immediately relaxed into the contact, leaning back against Buffy. “It’s beautiful up here,” Buffy whispered as she rested her chin on Faith’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” Faith agreed, and Buffy didn’t know that she’d ever heard Faith’s voice sound so astonished. So, she pulled her in closer and contended herself with the feel of Faith in her arms and the sights and sounds of nature all around them. It was a perfect, picturesque moment, in which time seemingly stood still, and Buffy had no idea how long they stayed that way until Faith was finally able to pull herself from the trance in which she found herself.

Faith’s hands closed on Buffy’s and pulled them apart, so that Faith could turn and face her. Rather than release her hands, Faith lifted them into the air as she spun around, stretching their arms out playfully. “Think you owe me a story, B.” Buffy couldn’t draw her eyes away from Faith’s lips, her bottom lip nervously drawn in between her teeth. On impulse, Buffy leaned forward and pressed her lips softly to Faith’s. She paused only a moment to savor the sensation, reveling in the way Faith’s body responded so immediately to her touch.

“Yeah, I do.” There was a large, smooth stone a few paces behind them, and it was shaped so perfectly for sitting that Buffy had to wonder if someone had put it there purposefully. She pulled her small backpack off and dropped it to the ground, eyeing the rock thoughtfully. Rather than climb up on top of it, Buffy sat down on the ground, leaning back against it. When Faith gave her a skeptical look, Buffy spread her legs open and patting the ground in front of her. “Sit with me.” Faith’s incredulity only grew, and Buffy shot her a playful scowl. “I know I promised this wasn’t a big romantic whatever, but please just humor me.”

Faith rolled her eyes before giving into Buffy’s pleas, but she could tell from Faith’s silence that she was nervous. Buffy’s hands acted of their own accord, moving to stroke Faith’s hair reassuringly. For a moment, Faith stiffened, but once again, she relaxed back into Buffy’s touch. Buffy smiled as her ministrations drew a warm hum from deep in Faith’s chest, even as she felt her heart beating far too quickly in her own. “I just … it’s a long story, and I don’t come out of it looking that great, and it’s easier for me to have you close but not have to …” Buffy’s admission dropped off guiltily, as she realized how it must sound that Buffy didn’t want to have to look Faith in the eyes as she bared her soul. Fortunately, Faith didn’t pull away, and that was all Buffy could really ask for.

Even so, Buffy wasn’t exactly sure where to begin. “C-can I just point out that I know now how stupid I was? I mean, you’ll see how stupid I was--you probably already know, you were there--but like … A-and you can call me stupid, that’s fine. I get it--”

“Buffy.” Faith’s voice was soft but firm. Buffy shuddered as she noticed a ticklish but pleasant sensation of slender fingers tracing patterns along the top of her shin. When did she start doing that?

“Sorry. Nervous I guess.” Buffy gulped, but never once did her fingers stop playing with the wavy strands of honeyed brown. “I just … it comes back to wishing I was normal. Deep down.” Faith chuckled, though she kindly tried to stifle it. Buffy just smirked. “I know. It’s always been my thing. A-and after everything we went through last year, I thought I was over it. Clearly, I was not.”

She took a breath and launched into it. “When I first learned I was the Slayer, I refused to give up anything. Tried my damnedest to reject the calling altogether. But you know how it is—the vampires found me anyway. I got my Watcher killed. Got a bunch of people killed. Got myself expelled. Got
my parents divorced. Got myself stuck in some podunk town.” Faith snorted at that.

“Oh please, I’ve grown to love Sunnydale—I’m feelin’ you have too at this point—but you and I are both big city girls at heart. Or … we used to be. I’m not so sure about that anymore.”

“Me either,” Faith admitted, then paused her fingers’ movement just long enough to squeeze Buffy’s leg. “But I think you’re gettin’ a little off track.”

“Right! So! I didn’t want to let go of my normal life as LA’s version of Cordelia Chase, and people died. I had to accept that I was the Slayer. But I refused to do it alone. The Slayer was supposed to renounce all ties to the world, but I wouldn’t do it. I was going to have my cake and eat it too, even if that meant I had to have a smaller cake. So I told Will and Xander, got them mixed up in everything. And even then, accepting that I was the Slayer meant that I had to accept that I was going to die. At sixteen.”

Buffy took a deep breath. For the briefest moment, Buffy let herself relive how terrified she had felt when she found out about the prophecy. How weak and hopeless and completely out of control. She released those feelings with her breath, coming back to the current moment.

“And so I died. But just for a few seconds. It’s cheesy, but I felt different when I came back. For the first time, I really felt like I could handle being the Slayer. Like it was mine. I killed the Master. And for like a few months, I really felt comfortable with all of it. Like I could be the weird, powerful Slayer girlfriend with the older vampire boyfriend and the collection of ancient weapons without letting go of family and friends and fun.”

Faith’s head turned, and Buffy released her hair. Their eyes met briefly, and Buffy refused to hide her anguish from Faith. The other Slayer only had to say one word; one word that showed how much she understood Buffy. “Angel?” Buffy nodded, closing her eyes long enough to center herself.

“I knew nothing would ever be normal after my seventeenth birthday. After h-he…”

“You don’t have to relive it for me, B. I know what happened.” Buffy smiled softly, appreciating the small kindness. “I think the old Buffy disappeared with Angel’s soul that night. I was forced to become the Slayer fully, to let go of everything for real. I gave up everything to save the world, or at least … that’s how it felt at the time.” Buffy wrapped her arms around Faith and kissed her lightly on the cheek. “And then I met you.”

“The whole Anne thing makes sense to me now.” That piqued Buffy’s curiosity, and she waited for Faith to elaborate. “I mean … you were a shell, but you were about as normal as you could get. Just a high school dropout workin’ a shitty job in the shit part of the big city. You were runnin’, I could see that then. Just couldn’t figure out what you were runnin’ from.”

Buffy leaned her head back against the stone, closing her eyes. “And you brought me back to myself. You always do, eventually.” In the stillness between them, Buffy could hear Faith’s tiny gasp, and it made her grin proudly. “But yeah … after I killed Angel, I kept trying to get back to some concept of normal. I fought so hard against the terrifying truth that I had learned, but that didn’t make it any more escapable.”

Her hands resumed their patterns in Faith’s hair, and Faith’s hand followed suit against Buffy’s leg. “So, I got fixated on a normal boyfriend, even if it was stupid. E-even if it was so I didn’t have to think about how weird I felt around you. Then I fell back into things with Angel, because like … no, that wasn’t normal, but at least it was comfortable, you know? It was my normal, because … because it was almost like I could pretend all the shit from junior year didn’t happen. Then
everything happened with you and him and the Mayor, and it was just so confusing."

“I loved him. I should have hated you for what you tried to do. For the way you betrayed me.” Faith’s hand went still, but to Buffy’s relief she didn’t pull it away. “But I couldn’t. I couldn’t hate you. But I also couldn’t let myself deal with the fact that deep down, some part of me knew even then that what I was feeling for you was the opposite of hate. Nothing felt right. Nothing felt sure. I felt like I was betraying Angel. Betraying myself. I felt like I was being stupid, that it would cost me everything just like before … but I just couldn’t give up on you.”

She felt Faith move, and she wrapped her arms around her again, this time locking a firm bear hug around Faith’s arms and chest that kept her seated and close. “And I was right not to,” she whispered in Faith’s ear, and Buffy could feel her shiver at the words. “But it didn’t fix any of my own inner turmoil.”

Once she was sure Faith wasn’t going to bolt, Buffy released her. “We lived in a confusing bubble, you and me. That summer was … I mean, I know that we both knew what was going on between us, but I wasn’t ready for it. I told myself it was just Slayer stuff. Nothing unusual. Definitely nothing gay. And then college started, and I convinced myself it was a new start. I was older and wiser and maybe this was my chance for a new normal.”

“B… why were you so sure that liking girls was something other than normal?” Faith didn’t move, didn’t face her, and that felt almost wrong. Like she should’ve looked at Buffy when she dropped a bomb like that. All of Faith’s most insightful questions always seemed to catch Buffy off guard. She wondered when she would start to get used to it.

For a few seconds she just spluttered, trying to find words. “Because … because no one is gay! No one I knew anyway! Or … that’s what I thought. Lesbian was an insult you’d hear thrown at the awkward tomboy girl like she was something gross, something weak and pitiable. That wasn’t me.”

“You knew me,” Faith countered quietly.

“But you were just … ugh.” Buffy made a face, blushing at her lack of ability to turn her old feelings into any semblance of a passable argument. “You were you. I didn’t think of you as gay or straight or normal or … you were just Faith. You were like no one I had ever known. For all your struggles, you were just like this magical creature. Someone who seemed so above all the normal petty insecurities I was dealing with.”

Faith didn’t say anything else, but Buffy guessed that her answer was satisfying enough since Faith went back to stroking Buffy’s shin. “I don’t know. Like I said, I know that it was stupid. I know I was just running away again. And I hate that I hurt you because I was too scared to accept who I am, and how I feel about you.”

“You still haven’t explained what changed. I … I need to know, B. Need to know that it wasn’t just …”

“It wasn’t,” Buffy insisted. “Yes, knowing that you had been taken, that you were in danger, opened my eyes. It forced me to confront my feelings, to name them. I was so scared I would lose you. So scared that my bullshit had gotten you killed. If I hadn’t—” Buffy bit back a sob. The tears had crept up on her, and she leaned forward to rest her forehead against the back of Faith’s head. She breathed in the familiar, reassuring scent of Faith’s shampoo, letting it anchor her. She’s alive. You saved her.

“But I don’t want to be with you because I’m scared to lose you. This isn’t some impulsive reaction.
The wake up call was just the first step.” This time, Buffy didn’t stop Faith when she felt her move, and this time, Faith wasn’t trying to put distance between them. Faith faced her, one leg stretching out to rest over Buffy’s, while her other tucked underneath it. Buffy’s breath caught in her throat.

She’d only seen this kind of open vulnerability on Faith’s features maybe twice in the entire time she’d known her. Buffy knew that this was what Faith had been afraid of before. That she was terrified Buffy was letting her emotions run away with her. That once things settled down and went back to normal—once the terror of losing Faith faded into a dull memory—Buffy would remember that she didn’t want any of this. That she wanted to hold onto whatever shitty illusion of normal she would convince herself was best for her. Buffy reached out a hand and gently stroked Faith’s cheek.

“This is real. What I feel for you. What we feel for each other. Maybe I wasn’t trying to hold onto some vague sense of normality after all,” Buffy confessed, her inner fears and insecurities suddenly coalescing into a shape that she could finally understand. “I … I’ve only been in love once. Really and… it ended with me stabbing him through the chest and pushing him into hell. It completely broke me.”

Buffy frowned, suddenly feeling naked before Faith. It was both terrifying and exhilarating, being so openly bold with her truth. “I picked Riley because there was no danger there,” she whispered. “He was nice, but I was never going to love him. He couldn’t really hurt me, and I didn’t really care if I hurt him. B-but you…”

She pushed forward and kissed Faith, and without any hesitation, Faith kissed her right back. Buffy wasn’t sure whether the warm tears she could feel pressed between their cheeks were hers or Faith’s. The kiss was simple, yet surprisingly powerful, as if it carried all the weight of what Buffy was trying to admit to Faith. After a few seconds, their lips parted, and Buffy rested her forehead against Faith’s.

“I was terrified to give you the power to hurt me, and in the process, all I did was hurt you.” More tears leaked out. “I’m so sorry, Faith. I was selfish. I was stupid. But most of all, I was terrified because I knew that if I let myself it would be so easy to fall in love with you.”

In hindsight, it felt so obvious. And she felt so ashamed of herself. Faith pulled her closer as she sobbed, all of her pent up emotions and fears and guilt flowing out of her and crashing against Faith’s suddenly solid self. “I’m so sorry,” she choked out, and Faith just pulled her in closer, holding Buffy’s had against her chest.

“I know,” she whispered. “It’ll be okay. Eventually.” And with Faith’s warmth wrapped so tightly around her, Buffy finally believed that it might be. Not only that Faith would find her way back to herself, but that maybe Buffy hadn’t completely screwed up her chance at happiness. Together, they might just have a shot at surviving all this and coming out of it stronger than ever.

Too emotionally drained to test their skills against the local wildlife, the Slayers decided to make lasagna together back at the cabin. After some back and forth, Faith even gave into Buffy’s insistence that they go for meatless lasagna. She didn’t bother letting her know that after living with Joyce for over a year now, Faith no longer had the eating habits of a five-year-old boy. It was always more fun to pick just a little bit of a fight with Buffy than to just agree with her from the start.

And if Faith also didn’t disclose how nice it felt to make dinner with her girlfriend, that was okay. It was new, and Faith had never imagined herself as the domestic type. It was all going to take a lot of getting use to. But for the moment, it filled her with a warmth that was a pleasant distraction from her pain. Much like Buffy, she felt safe in this bubble they had created together, even if she knew it
was little more than a fleeting illusion.

After dinner, they grabbed drinks and cuddled up together on the loveseat in front of the pleasant warmth of the fire. Faith was careful to leave the liquor, a few sodas, and some ice for them in the cooler, placing it within reach of their perch. They settled into a game of truth and dare that was really just an excuse to continue getting to know each other as they got drunk, especially once they realized they were too lazy to make any dares that might take them away from the cuddles.

A couple of hours passed that way, and it was shockingly delightful. Especially once Buffy started to get well and truly tipsy. Trying desperately to catch her breath at the tail end of a long peal of laughter, Faith gasped, “You fucking serious, B?”

Buffy scowled, her free hand pushing against Faith’s knee as if to break the contact between their bare legs. But they both knew she wasn’t pushing nearly hard enough to actually push Faith away. “You asked me what the most embarrassing thing was!” she pouted.

Faith laughed again, trying not to spill any more of her drink. She shook her head. “You don’t get it. It’s not like it’s even that ridiculous. It’s that I asked you what was the most embarrassing thing you believed as a child, and you come up with something as impossibly adorable as, ‘the moon was ice and only came out at night so the sun wouldn’t melt it.’”

Buffy fought it, but she couldn’t stop the grin that spread across her lips. Now that Faith knew the kind of reaction she could get out of Buffy just by telling her that she was cute, she was finding as many varied ways as possible of doing so. Buffy allowed herself to lean into the grin, then after taking a sip from her glass, asked, “Truth or dare?”

Still fighting off a lingering chuckle, Faith blurted out, “Truth,” without much thought. She kept meaning to get a little spicier with the game, but Buffy kept distracting her with cuteness.

“When did you first realize you were into me?” Buffy’s eyes were focused on her hands, and Faith could tell she was nervous. Gotta lighten the mood a bit.

“You mean when did I realize I wanted to get in your pants, or when did I start feeling all the big sappy romantic stuff?” Buffy giggled at that.

“Now that you mention it, give me both.” Faith took a drink and waited for Buffy to look up at her. Buffy wouldn’t give her more than a quick glance, though, and with a sigh, Faith scooted closer and wrapped an arm around Buffy’s shoulders.

“This is just an excuse to get me to tell you how hot you are, isn’t it?” Buffy’s eyes snapped up, brow furrowed incredulously.

“No it’s not!” she insisted petulantly, forcing a wide grin to Faith’s lips.

“Alright, alright. Keep your pants on, I’m just messin’ with ya.”

“Har har, Faith. Very funny.” But now Buffy was grinning too. “Do you really want me to keep my pants on?”

Faith stifled her uncensored comeback. She didn’t want to rush anything with Buffy, and for whatever reason, that included jumping straight back into the hot and heavy activities they had engaged in so frequently before Riley came around. So instead, she just held Buffy a little closer and launched into her answer.

“I thought you were hot from the moment I laid eyes on you, obviously. I mean, I thought you were
a demon or something, but still—"

"You thought I was a what now?"

"Oh yeah, so the first time I saw you was when you got hit by that truck in L.A." Buffy’s eyes widened adorably. “Yeah. I had just finished staking a vamp in the back alley behind the nightclub, I hear screeching brakes and then see a hot blonde in pigtails push a kid outta the street. The way you bounced back up with barely a scratch set my Slayer senses all tinglin’.

“But you thought I was a demon?"

“Don’t get me wrong, it was confusin’ as hell. Didn’t know if you were a vamp or what, and I’d never seen a vamp with a hero complex, so I didn’t know what to make of it. That’s why I followed you.”

“But you knew that I—that the other Slayer—existed, right?”

“Yeah yeah, but I thought you were supposed to be kickin’ it the ‘burbs with the family and friends and what not. I didn’t put it all together until I followed you to Nurse Ratchet’s place.” Buffy started to ask more questions, but Faith cut her off. “Anyway, you were hot. Obviously I tried to flirt with you at the diner. But you were just so sad, and it was the weirdest thing. I wanted to help you, not fuck you. I mean, hey, wouldn’t’a turned you down, but … the real attraction started a bit later.”

“Oh?”

“Not much later, really. You remember one of our first patrols, right before we got jumped by Kakistos’ boys, when you stepped up to me?”

“That what we’re calling it now?” Faith chuckled at that.

“Yeah, let’s. You were all hot and bothered and daring me to pick a fight. That was when I realized that I wanted you. Who knows, if the vamps hadn’t shown up, maybe I woulda tried somethin’.”

“Really?” The shock in her voice was genuine, and Faith wondered what would’ve happened in that alternate universe where she kissed Buffy that early on. Probably wouldn’t have gone very well for me, lez be honest.

“Nah, I probably woulda chickened out and picked an actual fight instead.”

“So then … when did you…?”

“When did I realize it was more than just that good down low tickle?” Buffy snorted mid-sip and choked a little.

“Ow ow ow, that stuff is not fun going down the wrong way!” Buffy whined. “Don’t do that to me!”

“Sorry. It was pretty cute though.” No blush this time, and Buffy just rolled her eyes at Faith. She made a face in return and went back to her answer. “Anyway. I don’t know when I first caught feelings, but the moment I couldn’t ignore them anymore was in the hallway before Homecoming. The way you looked at me in my dress. You called me gorgeous. You moved my hair out of my face, and for a split second, I thought you might try to kiss me.”

“That’s why you got all pissed off at me?!”
“You’re damn right it was! It was fuckin’ confusing!” Faith shrugged. “I knew I wanted you to kiss me. And I knew that wasn’t gonna happen. I was more pissed at myself than you, for indulging in a hope that seemed impossible back then. But yeah, that’s when I realized that I had serious feelin’s for you. Hadn’t ever felt like that about anyone, so it freaked me out.”


“What about you?”

“And who said I was going to pick truth?” Buffy challenged. Faith just stared at her. “Okay fine, I was, but it isn’t nice to assume. For me—”

“Nope,” Faith interjected. “You missed your chance at that question. Now you gotta tell me what your major is.”

“You don’t already know what my major is?” Shit. This was exactly the sort of bullshit relationship stuff that Faith had always thought was stupid.

“If this is a trap, then I dunno what to tell you. I already told you I would be a bad girlfriend.” Buffy’s face shifted immediately, and she surprised Faith by cupping her hand to Faith’s cheek.

“Hey. No, you’re not.” She leaned in slowly, searching Faith’s eyes for consent to kiss her. Faith leaned into it, and their lips met for the third time that day. It was short and sweet. “It was a trap. I haven’t told you my major because I don’t have one yet.”

“They let you do that?” Faith’s incredulity pulled a short giggle from Buffy, and Faith loved that she could just make Buffy giggle like that.

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t know how long I can get away with it, though. I might’ve tuned out the counselor when he was explaining it.” Even Buffy’s little guilty face was impossibly cute. Shit, I’ve got it bad.

“Honestly, I’m still not sure college is even worth it. I’m the Slayer--”

“A Slayer.”

“A Slayer,” Buffy repeated in a mocking tone. “Which means that my odds at having a career or whatever are pretty low. Even if I don’t die in the near future, I can’t take a job that involves working after sunset. Even if I get a decent job, I also have to find time to sleep and you know, have a life. I don’t even know what kind of career fits that bill.”

“Librarian seemed to work out for G. You could be the sexy librarian if Sunnydale ever builds a new high school.” Buffy glared at her.

“You know me better than that.”

“Yeah, but a girl can have an active fantasy life.” Buffy’s cheeks turned bright red, and before she could splutter out a retort, Faith asked a follow up question. “What if we weren’t the Slayers? What if there were no demons or vamps or big bads? What if you really were normal? What would you see yourself doing then?”

Buffy’s face turned pensive. “Honestly, Faith, I have no idea. Any chance I might’ve had at being a professional figure skater is long gone, and—”

“Wait wait wait, you can’t just skim over that. Ice skating?” Buffy’s head tilted curiously.

“I never told you about my love of ice skating?
“You definitely have not, California girl. Have you even seen ice?”

Buffy scoffed. “They have indoor rinks, dummy. Maybe if you stop making fun of me, I’ll take you sometime.”

“Oooooo, is Buffy Summers asking me on a date?”

“Only if you’re good.” She twisted in her seat, leaning back on the armrest and stretching her legs across Faith’s lap. “What about you? What would you do if you weren’t the Slayer?”

Faith figured she would get the question turned back on her, and unlike Buffy, she actually had an answer. “Honestly, I’d probably keep doing what I’m doing.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah. Turns out I really like this art stuff. Not like I could paint or draw or anything myself … but finding it, selling it, appreciating it? Chatting up artists about what they’re working on and what their art means to them? I’m into it. I’ve already learned so much from Joyce, and it’s like some part of me I never knew was there just woke up. Who knew I had an artsy fartsy side?”

Buffy just eyed her thoughtfully. “It actually makes a lot of sense.”

“Wait, really?” Buffy seemed to appreciate the quick turnaround, with Faith repeating her own startled words from just before.

“Yup! You feel things like no one else I know, even if you hide it from most people. You’ve been through so much struggle and pain and darkness, and that changes how you see the world. But it’s never dampened that inner passion of yours. Makes sense that you would be able to recognize that same sort of passion in someone’s artwork. It actually makes a ton of sense to me, even if I’m not explaining it very well.” Buffy said it all so nonchalantly, and Faith wasn’t sure how to respond. It felt incredible to feel so seen like this. All she could do was smile back at her girlfriend. “Now, truth or dare.”

“But you just asked—”

“I love it when you boss me around,” Faith teased. A small fire glimmered in Buffy’s eyes, but Faith could tell she kinda loved it too. Letting herself trust that Buffy wouldn’t make her move away from their little nest in front of the fire, Faith bit her lip (just because she knew Buffy would get a small thrill from it of course) and shot Buffy a mischievous look. “Dare.”

Buffy narrowed her eyes, as if Faith was challenging her. And maybe she was. Faith was curious how creative Buffy was willing to be. The blonde sat there for several long moments, clearly pondering her options, and then her eyes lit up. Without a word, she set her glass down and stood, moving over to the small purse she had brought to the cabin. “Ah hah!” When she sat back down, she had a permanent marker in hand. Faith raised an eyebrow in question. “Do you trust me?” Buffy asked, her slightly slurred voice a pleasant mix of genuine and teasing.

Faith’s brow furrowed as her chin lifted in a playful pose of faux contemplation. “I dunno, B. You know I got trust issues. Guess that depends on whatcha got in mind.”

Buffy’s hand rested lightly on her knee. “Faith. Please?”

Faith rolled her eyes exaggeratedly, trying to hide the fact that trusting Buffy actually did still make
her uncomfortable. Tamping down on her insecurities, she placed her own hand on top of Buffy’s. “Lay it on me, Blondie.”

Buffy’s eyes flashed with concern for a moment longer, then she nodded. “Okay. I dare you to close your eyes, and let me draw something on any part of your body I choose.”

“Kinky,” Faith quipped without thinking, and Buffy immediately blushed furiously.

“I’m not … I won’t … dammit, Faith!” Faith grinned as Buffy floundered. “I won’t take any of your clothes off, I promise.” That really wasn’t saying much, since Faith was in a tank top and a skimpy pair of plaid shorts, but the assurance made her feel surprisingly good. It was weird. Faith had always imagined that if she ever really had a girlfriend, she would want to feel chased. Like she was a piece of meat her girlfriend couldn’t wait to gobble up. But it turned out feeling cared for was way better. She knew from experience that things could very easily turn very hot and heavy between them, but it was nice to have Buffy being all chivalrous. Faith thought maybe she really could take her time with this whole relationship thing, and the thought took a bit of the weight off her shoulders.

So Faith closed her eyes and waited. Buffy’s fingers traced over Faith’s hand and up her wrist. “You sure?” Faith smiled and nodded, keeping her eyes firmly closed. “Ok.” Faith her the faint sound of Buffy pulling the cap off the marker. Her hand hadn’t moved from Faith’s arm, so she must’ve done it with her teeth. Which was entirely too hot.

What is wrong with me? I really shouldn't be turned on by that.

What happened next threw Faith off entirely. Buffy lifted Faith’s forearm and twisted it so that her inner arm faced upward, then she leaned down and kissed Faith’s burn scars softly. Faith’s whole body tensed uncomfortable as she gasped at the sensation. “Does that hurt?” Buffy whispered, her voice tentative and worried and oh so close by.

“No… I just ...” Faith drew in a deep breath through her nose and blew it out, surprised at how emotional she felt. “Just self-conscious I guess.”

Buffy kissed the scars again, just as softly. “Do you still trust me?”

“I do.” Maybe she was imagining it, but Faith thought she could feel Buffy smile at that. The cool tip of marker felt strange against her skin, at times a soft tickle and at others a firm press. Buffy took her time, or at least, it seemed that way to Faith. But she enjoyed Buffy’s firm grip as she moved Faith’s arm this way and that, seemingly so confident in her angles as she hummed in concentration.

The silence between them was genuinely wonderful, and Faith couldn’t believe how easy it was to allow herself to relax into the moment. Maybe I do trust B. At least in this cute little way.

Again, it occurred to her how different Buffy had become in only a couple of weeks. This Buffy made Faith feel safe and grounded. Which was insane, since Faith’s deepest fear was that Buffy would run from her again. It wasn’t that the fear was gone. All her long-held abandonment issues were still right there under the surface, along with all the recent memories of Buffy pushing her away and rejecting her. But in this moment, none of it had any control over her.

“I think I’m done,” Buffy murmured thoughtfully.

“Hmmm? That mean I can open my eyes?” Buffy lifted Faith’s forearm and moved it around some, probably to get one last good look at her masterpiece.

“Yeah, take a look.” Faith turned her arm as she opened her eyes, and time froze as her gaze took in the design. She couldn’t breathe, and she felt herself blinking rapidly. There was a simple but delicate heart drawn over her scars, pointed down towards her elbow. Two wooden stakes crossed behind it, similar but each subtly unique. And over it all, in a slightly more embellished version of
Buffy’s usual half-cursive, half-print handwriting, was one single word: “Chosen.”

It wasn’t until a warm, salty droplet impacted against her skin just under the design that Faith realized she was crying. *Goddammit. “B-uffy … it’s … so beautiful.”* She continued to stare at it, completely unaware of how fragile her voice sounded or the way Buffy inched a little closer. Faith couldn’t pull her eyes away from it. The wrinkled skin no longer looked so ugly and marred behind the design, and Faith could almost imagine that it was like a soft, wavy sea in the background of the heart.

Her eyes tracked movement in the periphery, and then Buffy had a hand on Faith’s elbow. Brown eyes shot upwards to me green, and several more tears tracked down Faith’s cheeks. “I love it,” she confessed. “I never want it to go away.”

Buffy’s wide, proud smile faltered for a second as her eyes widened. “What?”

Faith smirked. “A tattoo, obviously.”

“B-but I’m not like an artist or anything,” Buffy stammered.

“My arm says otherwise.” She waved it around demonstratively. “Seriously, can we run into town tomorrow and find a tattoo shop?”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life, B.”

“Then sure, let’s do it.”

Chapter End Notes

PS I’ve never really asked for it, but fan art is always so lovely. If anyone feels inspired to do their own interpretation of Faith’s new tattoo, please feel free to share in the comments!
How do I find my way back?

Chapter Notes

Sorry sorry sorry! I know it's been forever since I updated, but my muse has been annoyingly quiet lately. But good news! I've got the final chapters of this fic planned out, and yes, I am saying we're nearing the end now. As always, comments are appreciated (especially nice ones), and I hope you enjoy!

Buffy’s fingers played along the pale skin of Faith’s wrist and palm, despite Faith’s half-hearted admonishment that she wasn’t into all that sappy, affectionate stuff. Faith’s hand had been resting casually on Buffy’s thigh while she drove, but somewhere along the way, Buffy had flipped it over.

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” Buffy kept her eyes firmly down on Faith’s hand while she asked. She didn’t want Faith to think she didn’t believe in her. She was just worried.

“Can’t hide out in the woods forever, as fun as that sounds. Besides, we ran outta booze, remember?”

“Yes, because there’s a definite correlation between the status of our booze supply and the improvement of your mental health.” Buffy’s eyes widened. “Wait, Faith—”

“No, B. I’m not self-medicating or anything like that. Thanks for the vote of confidence.” She tried to pull her hand away, but Buffy held on tightly. The black ink of her new tattoo had faded ever so slightly, but it still popped against the subtle pinks and reds of Faith’s scar tissue. The tattoo artist had offered a number of suggestions about covering the scars up further, if that’s what Faith wanted, and she had seemed receptive. Buffy was worried about the scabbing that was currently going on, but Faith assured her that was normal.

“I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean it like that. I just meant that you don’t have to rush back. It’s barely been a week since we got you out of there.”

Faith blew out a frustrated breath. “Look.” She glanced sideways just long enough to catch Buffy’s eye, before looking back at the road. “This was good for me. I mean … fuck. I can’t pretend like I wasn’t a goddamn mess. Getting away from it all … I feel more like me again. And obviously—” she slid her fingers between Buffy and squeezed. “This happened, and I guess it doesn’t suck.”

Buffy glared daggers at her, but Faith just rolled her eyes. In her periphery, the ‘Welcome to Sunnydale’ sign passed by. “Point is, you had the right idea. But I ain’t gonna get better by running from my problems. Besides, the creepy crawlies aren’t gonna stop being evil just because the Chosen Two are outta town.”

“I just … sorry, I know this isn’t your style, but I’m just worried about you. I wanna help make sure you’re okay.”

“Jesus, you’re gonna be the overprotective type, aren’t you? Maybe I should rethink this whole girlfriend thing.”

“Don’t even joke!” Buffy pouted, and Faith flashed her a grin. It didn’t quite reach her eyes though,
and Buffy had to remind herself that nothing about dating Faith was going to be easy. *Take it slow. Just be what she needs you to be.*

“I am joking. But also, you knew how fucked I was when you signed up for the gig. I’ve got no clue how to handle this girlfriend thing, and yeah, I got all this shit to deal with on top of it. Just …”

“I know. Not pushing you. I promise.” Buffy released Faith’s hand, and she quickly pulled it back to rest on the steering wheel. “I’m gonna worry, and yes, I am going to be protective, but I promise I’ll try to rein it in as much as possible. If that’s what you want.”

“It is. For now. But thanks for getting it.” Faith pulled onto Revello. “And to answer your original question… only way we’ll know if I can deal is to try. I’m definitely not okay, not even close, but hey, it’s only been a week.” She pulled the car to a stop in front of the house. “Not like the ice queen is gonna get to me with my overprotective girlfriend around.”

Buffy registered the tiniest quaver in Faith’s voice, but she let it go. Walsh was a boogeyman Faith would have to face eventually, but hopefully not any time soon. Buffy popped out of the car, but Faith had already beaten her to the bags, picking up all but one. Rather than protest, Buffy closed the trunk and indulged in a brief moment of ogling. Even weighed down by three bags, Faith’s hips kept that distinctive sway to them. A small smile ghosted along her lips, and Buffy followed.

Joyce exited the house just as Faith’s boot hit the second step up to the porch. *Oh right, guess it’s Sunday.* “Gimme a sec to set these bags down, Joyce,” Faith quipped at the outstretched arms facing her from the open door. Joyce blushed slightly before moving aside for Faith to enter the house.

“Hey Mom.” Buffy accepted the tight hug from her mother, then they both followed Faith into the house. This time Faith was the one waiting with open arms for Joyce, who gladly accepted it.

“You look really great, sweetie.”

“Thanks, Joyce. Guess the fresh air agrees with me, huh?” Buffy could see Joyce’s expression brighten at the comment, and she wondered at the fact that her mother couldn’t see the uncertainty hidden behind the glib words.

“I’m gonna take the bags upstairs,” Buffy offered, grabbing all four bags with a playfully pointed look at Faith and then heading up the steps. It was only once she had dropped Faith’s single bag off on her now perfectly made bed that Buffy realized she had made a silly mistake. *I’m gonna have to take this stuff back to my dorm eventually. Assuming they haven’t kicked me out already.* She had missed nearly a month of school at this point, and while she knew Willow had reached out to acquaintances in some of Buffy’s classes to get notes, she couldn’t keep this up much longer. She hoped she didn’t have to.

Regardless, she took her time. Buffy still wasn’t quite sure she understood the relationship between her girlfriend and her mother, but she knew it was important to both of them. They deserved a little time alone to catch up, now that Faith was in a slightly better headspace.

She tensed. There, resting against the far wall of Faith’s bedroom, was the battle ax Buffy had given her the Christmas before last. *How did I not notice?* The ax had been Faith’s security blanket. Faith hadn’t let herself venture more than a step from it in the days following her rescue. But she left it behind when they left town together.

Buffy wasn’t sure what to think about that. She approached the ax, reaching out a hand to trace along its perfectly weighted grip of its haft. The ax was the only thing that made Faith feel safe. *Except that clearly it isn’t.* She chose not to read too much into it. She knew she needed to
take things slowly. Buffy turned on the spot and headed back downstairs.

Unsurprisingly, Joyce and Faith were in the kitchen, where Joyce had just slid something into the oven. “It’s already prepared, it just needs to bake for thirty minutes.”

“She was already prepared with food for us?” Buffy traded a look with Faith as she entered the room.

“You know it,” Faith confirmed. Buffy sat next to her at the kitchen island. She tried to rest a hand on Faith’s knee, but she was immediately rebuffed as Faith leapt to her feet. Buffy tried her best to hide her shock, but the rejection—and there was no doubt in her mind that’s what it was—stung. “You got anything I could snack on while we wait?”

Seeming to miss the tense moment between the Slayers, Joyce simply watched with exasperation as Faith searched the cabinets. She only waggled her eyebrows at Joyce as she withdrew a small bag of goldfish. “This should do it.”

Joyce just shook her head. “Come on, Mom. You know how our Slayer metabolism is.” She tried to catch Faith’s gaze to check in, but Faith kept her eyes on her snack. The two of them continued to trade small talk with Joyce as she asked them about their time at the cabin. Not once did Faith give an indication of what her issue was. Buffy’s questioning glances were met only with a subtle shake of the head or a mouthed ‘not now’ while Joyce wasn’t looking.

Faith continued to keep her distance from Buffy well into the meal. The conversation remained focused on the present and the future, right up until it wasn’t. “Well, Faith, I just want you to know that you’re welcome back at the Gallery whenever you’re ready.”

Dark eyes widened, then blinked rapidly. “I can’t… I’m not ready.” Faith’s face was a mask, but Buffy knew how to read her eyes now. She saw the fear there, even if Joyce couldn’t.

“Of course, honey, I wasn’t trying to rush you. I understand if—”

“No, you don’t!” Faith’s voice was just barely under control. “You can’t. I …”

Buffy put a hand on Faith’s forearm, and this time she didn’t pull away. If anything, she leaned into the touch. “Hey. You don’t have to talk about it.” Faith turned her head, and their eyes met. Buffy could tell she was holding back tears. It was remarkable how strong this girl was.

“I need to,” Faith answered, and it almost sounded like a plea. All Buffy could do was squeeze Faith’s arm and nod.

“She kept me isolated. Alone in a blank white room. For the first few days—” Faith broke off, and chuckled wryly, her voice rough with the effort of containing her emotions. “I think they were days. Hard to tell. She barely let me sleep. Kept me on the edge of starvation.”

Joyce gasped, and Buffy struggled not to glare at her. Fortunately, Faith wasn’t shaken by the interruption. She took a steadying breath and continued. “I … people freak me out. I can’t do it.”

“I underst—nope. Sorry.” Joyce sighed. “Take all the time you need, Faith. But I’m here for you, whatever you need. And your job will be waiting whenever you’re ready.”

“Thanks,” she whispered, then stood. “Alright, well this was great, but I think I’m gonna head to bed.”

“Faith, it’s three in the afternoon.”
“Damn, B, I didn’t realize you had added timekeeping to your set of skills.” Buffy felt like she had been slapped, and Faith’s expression immediately softened. Then she turned and stormed out, heading straight upstairs with a muttered, “I’m sorry,” left in her wake.

“Don’t take it personally, honey.” Buffy almost didn’t register the words. But Joyce was right. It wasn’t personal, not really. It was a reminder.

“She’s still hanging by a thread, Mom. She’s made progress, but she’s got a long way to go.” She stood, staring towards where Faith had disappeared. “Is it okay if I…?”

“Go. I’ll take care of the dishes.” Buffy shot her an appreciative look, then followed after her girlfriend. She made sure that her steps up the stairs were loud, so that Faith would know she was coming. The door was open, warm sunlight spilling out into the hall. The bed creaked just as Buffy turned and knocked lightly on the inside of the door.

“Hey.” The ax was on the bed with Faith, who was sitting with her arms wrapped tightly around her knees. “Can I come in?”

Faith didn’t move other than to give her a faint nod. Buffy stepped into the room, and after a moment of thought, closed the door behind her and locked it. She settled down on the corner of the bed, a good two feet of space between herself and Faith.

“Are you okay?” Faith gaped at her, then broke into a fit of laughter. Buffy fought the urge to move closer, but instead waited for Faith to explain the jarring change in mood.

After a minute or so, Faith got control over herself. She released her legs and slid over, pushing the ax aside before holding out a hand. Though she was still puzzled, Buffy couldn’t help but smile as she caught Faith’s hand and moved closer.

“Are you going to be this nice every time I’m a dick to you?”

Buffy curled into Faith’s side before answering, “Guess that depends on how often you’re gonna be a dick to me.” Again, Faith chuckled, then put her arm around Buffy. In an instant, she had become more relaxed than she had since they had entered the house. “You weren’t really a dick, though. Also, can we please call a moratorium on the use of that word for at least a few days?”

“Done. But I was—”

Buffy cut her off. “Yes, you snapped at me. And yes, it hurt. I get it, though. You didn’t mean to hurt me; you just reacted. It was a charged moment. Don’t beat yourself up about it.”

“Joyce mad that I skipped out on doing dishes?”

“Oh please. You know you’ve got her wrapped around your finger.”

“Well, I do have a way with Summers women, I suppose.” Buffy elbowed her playfully.

“So what was the deal with you getting all distant from me in the kitchen?” Faith tensed immediately. “Hey hey, no judgment. I just wanna understand.”

“It’s just a lot,” Faith confessed. “I’m barely keepin’ my shit together right now, just being back in this town. I can’t just—” She shook her head emphatically. “Just being able to sit there and talk like I don’t wanna run and grab my ax and hide out in my room forever is all I can manage right now. I ain’t gonna be able to be all affectionate and vulnerable and shit too, okay?”
Faith’s voice was cutting, like she was anticipating that this would be a deal breaker for Buffy. Like she was preparing herself to be rejected again. So Buffy leaned in and planted a firm kiss on Faith’s cheek. As Buffy pulled back, Faith’s head turned, and their lips met. Neither of them moved to deepen the kiss. Buffy stroked Faith’s cheek, and their eyes met as their lips parted. Buffy could sense how fragile Faith was feeling.

“That’s okay, Faith. I already told you, we can take things as slowly as you want.” Buffy paused, thinking. She tried to keep the disappointment out of her voice. “Do you … I mean if a relationship is too much right now, we don’t have to—”

“That’s not it, Blondie.”

“Okay. Well … do you wanna keep it just between us, for now.” Buffy shrugged, biting her lip as she considered the possibilities. “Willow will know immediately, but I think—”

Again, Faith interrupted her. “No, that’s fine too. I doubt we’d be able to hide it from the Scoobies even if I wanted to. Which I don’t.” She locked eyes with Buffy. “I don’t regret this. Us. I just can’t do the vulnerable thing with other people, okay?” Buffy nodded, though she suspected she only half understood. “Besides, are you really ready to have that whole conversation with your mom?”

Buffy felt her heart sink. She hadn’t considered that, not really. “Oh shit,” she whispered.”

“Exactly.”

“It’s not …” Buffy paused. What was her hesitation really? “I don’t think I’m afraid of coming out to her. Wow. ‘Coming out.’ Is this my life now?” Buffy giggled, and she honestly wasn’t sure if it was out of amusement or nervousness. “I mean, when I told her I was the Slayer, she kicked me out and told me not to come back.”

“As I recall, she got over it.”

“Three months later,” Buffy griped. “But yeah, she’s different now. Does she already know that you’re into girls?”

Faith grinned mischievously. “She thought Anya was my girlfriend.” Buffy’s face soured as something fierce roiled in her gut. Faith just laughed. “You’re cute when you’re jealous, B.”

“I’m not!” Buffy glanced away for a second, then back to Faith. “But I mean, you’re not like…”

“Only got eyes for you, idiot. She just assumed when I told her about maybe moving in with Anya.”

“Oh. Oh. Uh, is that still happening?”

Faith’s voice turned a little distant. “Hard to say.”

“No need to make that decision now, okay?”

“Yeah, guess not.” Faith exhaled heavily. “All I can say is that Joyce hasn’t given me any grief about bein’ gay. But I’m not her daughter.”

“You sure about that?” Buffy retorted. Faith rolled her eyes but pulled Buffy in closer. “No rush to tell her then. We’ll deal with that later, when we’re both ready for it.” She ran a finger along Faith’s thigh. “I just want you to know it’s not because I’m ashamed of how I feel about you.”
“I believe you.” She turned her head and Buffy leaned up to catch her lips again.

After a fairly decent night’s sleep—alone in a bed for the first time in days—Faith was feeling confident. Not confident enough to leave home without her ax, but confident enough to at least leave. She figured if she carried the ax with enough cockiness, no one would question why a teenager was walking around Sunnydale with a battle ax.

Buffy was back at school but promised to return to her room and check her voice mail as often as she could. While Faith had little doubt she would come running if Faith needed her, there was no way she would show that kind of weakness again anytime soon. The days spent together in the cabin had been healing, but with that recovery came a return of Faith’s sense of self. She had never allowed herself to be that vulnerable before, and while she didn’t regret it, she sure as shit wasn’t about to let it become a habit.

By the time she reached Anya’s shithole apartment, Faith was carrying the ax at her side, grip tight and arm tensed for action. Nothing on her walk had seemed out of the ordinary, but that didn’t mean anything on the Hellmouth. The longer she was outside, the more she felt like she was being watched. More than once, she had bristled at a guy whose gaze lingered on her for more than a second, solely because he looked a little too clean cut to be trusted. Anyone in this town could be Initiative, and her mind would not let her forget it.

Faith only faced the door long enough to knock aggressively, refusing to leave her back unguarded until she was inside. The second she heard the door open, she darted inside as quickly as possible, not caring that she had to shove Anya against the door to do so. Once inside, she surveyed the tiny studio for any sign of a microphone, camera, or other bugging device. Like those devious bastards would make it that obvious.

“Calm down.”

Faith nearly jumped at the hand on her shoulder, and if not for some part of her lizard brain registering Anya’s approach, she might have swung the ax on instinct. Anya eyed her warily, then reached for the weapon.

“I’m taking this until you stop looking all murdery.” It took a few moments for Faith to loosen her death grip on the haft and allow Anya to take the ax and set it on her bed. “Christ, I thought you were supposed to be better.”

“I’m fine,” Faith snapped. She wasn’t sure why she did that. Anya was right to be worried about how jumpy she was, but Faith didn’t like being called on it. She wanted the time away with Buffy to have fixed everything.

“Right, and I’m an immortal goddess.” Anya sighed loudly, then gestured for Faith to sit at the tiny table between the bed and the kitchenette. “Though I suppose you getting all the way here by yourself constitutes progress, even if you look ready to murder me.”

Faith shot her a snarky fake laugh before rolling her eyes and settling down in a huff. “You’re lucky I like you enough to put up with your bullshit.”

“You know what? Why don’t you have a beer?” She gestured towards the refrigerator behind Faith, and that was all the permission the dark Slayer needed. She grabbed a beer, snapped off the top against the edge of the table, and took a long swig.
“Better?”

“Gettin’ there,” Faith conceded.

“So, do you still want to find a place together?” Anya blurted out. “I mean, that’s why you came over here, right? Why’d you bring an ax, by the way? Who brings an ax to discuss housing plans?”

“Don’t worry about the ax. And yeah, I’m still down if you are. Just wanted to make sure you hadn’t gotten cold feet on the whole rooming with a violent nutjob thing.”

Anya’s eyes narrowed. “Have you seen where I live currently?”

“Fair, but I should warn you. I’m not sure I’m ready. The Initiative really fucked me up.”

Anya scoffed. “I can tell. And don’t think I’m not seriously concerned by all this.” She gestured first to the ax and then waved her hand in Faith’s general direction. “Still … I figure we’re better off together at this point.”

“And how exactly do you figure that?” Faith didn’t bother hiding her skepticism.

“You and Buffy are bumping uglies now, right?”

The question caught Faith off guard, and she couldn’t help it as a bark of wry laughter overtook her. Anya just watched her with an expression of faint derision.

“Sorry, uh, damn Ahn. Just all up in my business, huh?”

“Oh, I just meant that it was pretty obvious, with the several days of romantic getaway that you somehow convinced Giles to pay for. Seems pretty obvious you two were looking to make with the sex.” Faith continued to chuckle at Anya’s usual blunt intonation.

“We’re together, yeah. But getting away wasn’t for sex. Hell, when we left I wasn’t even sure if I’d be down for anything like that.” She took another sip, then eyed Anya warily. “Anyway, what does it matter if me and B are hookin’ up?”

“No, it’s great,” Anya reassured. “Probably. Whatever, I just mean that if we get a place, Buffy will probably be around a bunch, right?”

Faith shrugged. She hadn’t really thought much about it, but Buffy as her girlfriend was still a new concept that her mind was adapting to. It made sense that she would be around, maybe spend some nights there. Maybe they should look at places closer to campus to make that easier.

“I guess that’s pretty likely.”

“Right, so that should help? With the whole edgy ax girl thing? Plus, I don’t want those freaky soldier assholes here any more than you do. Hello, ex-demon. Buffy being around should help with that.” She frowned. “Hey, maybe we should find a place near campus?”

Even though Faith had been thinking that just seconds earlier, she immediately tensed at the idea. Buffy wasn’t the only one operating out of campus. Living closer to her meant living closer to them, and Faith wasn’t at all confident in that tradeoff.

“Yeah, I’m not sure about that.”

Anya looked as though she was about to argue, but then paused, her mouth still gaping open as her
brain shifted directions. “Wait, so you’re saying that you and Buffy are like a real thing now?”

“We’re girlfriends, if that’s what you’re asking.” It still felt weird to say, but Faith couldn’t deny that she liked the way the title rolled off her tongue.

“That is what I meant, yes. Well, good. That’s what you wanted, right?” It wasn’t quite that simple, but Faith didn’t have any intention of interrupting the ramble she could see coming as Anya continued. “She just better be good to you. … Not that I’ll do anything if she isn’t. I mean she’s the Slayer and I’m, well, you know. Crazy how everyone has girlfriends now. First Xander got me, then Willow with whatsherface—”

“Tara,” Faith interrupted, but Anya kept going as if she hadn’t heard her.

“—you and Buffy … hell, even Giles has that chick moving here from London to be his girlfriend. Which is so weird if you ask me. Not that anyone ever does—”

“I’m sorry, Giles has what now?”

“You met her, right? Black woman, really attractive, way too young for Giles?”

“Olivia’s moving to Sunnydale?”

“Apparently. Buffy didn’t tell you?”

“Didn’t come up.”

“Oh, probably because you were too busy sucking face.” Faith glared, but Anya had long since stopped being intimidated by her. That fact irritated Faith tremendously. “But yeah, she apparently thinks all the demon Hellmouth stuff is really cool, and she wants to come study regular people’s brains who are too dumb to realize that nightmare horror stuff is happening all around them. Or something like that, I kinda tuned out.”

“Course you did,” Faith snarked. “I better go see G while I’m out. You wanna go look at apartments together after you get off work tomorrow?”

“Sure. I had plans with Xander, but he can handle his own sexual pleasure if he’s too impatient to wait for me.”

“Thanks, I really wanted to know that.”

Faith couldn’t help but pace as she waited for Giles to answer her knock. She had stuck around at Anya’s long enough to polish off a second beer and talk a little about what they could afford together and what part of town they wanted to live in. It had also given her enough to time to level herself out and prepare to face the outside world again.

Yet, here she was, every bit as anxious and wound up as she had been when she reached Anya’s. This was a little different. Less paranoia and more actual nerves. Probably. Faith wasn’t exactly the sort of person who was in touch with her emotions—she just knew it felt different.

Giles looked wary when he opened the door a crack to check out the identity of his visitor, but his visage softened as he opened the door. “Faith. How are you?”

He looked worryingly close to hugging her, so she stepped past him and into the townhouse with a
dry, “I’m fine.” Giles closed the door behind them, and Faith walked straight in and to his liquor cabinet, pouring herself a glass of his scotch without asking for permission.

“Pour me one as well, I suppose,” Giles muttered, more concerned than annoyed. She did so, and handed him the glass. He eyed the ax she had set against the wall for the briefest of seconds, then gestured for her to sit. She leaned down sideways on one of his sitting chairs, propping her legs up over the arm.

“I must say, I am proud of you for pushing yourself to leave the house.” Faith ignored the comment. She wasn’t looking to get praise for stupid bullshit like opening a door and walking around town. She took a sip of Giles’ excellent liquor and waited for Buffy’s father figure to move on.

Sensing her tension, Giles awkwardly inquired, “Well then, what brings you here?”

Not yet ready for that topic, Faith answered with a question of her own. “What’s going on with the Initiative?”

Settling back in his chair, Giles looked down at his glass, from which he drew a long drink. After a long exhale, he offered a weak explanation. “They’ve been, um, entirely, well … quiet since we freed you from their grasp.”

“Seriously?” Faith’s back tensed despite her casual pose, draped across the chair. Through her weeks of torment, Walsh never struck her as a person to be cowed by a defeat. It had been nearly a week, and if anything, the Initiative’s silence terrified Faith. Walsh wasn’t easily frightened, but she was scarily patient. Silence implied a quiet plan being put into action, somewhere out of sight.

“Quite. Given Buffy’s falling out with Riley, it is difficult for us to really monitor their activities effectively, but Tara and Willow have been keeping their eyes out for any tell-tale signs. I’ve also been in touch with my few contacts in town—I’ve even spoken to the Watchers’ Council—and no one has heard anything. Whatever Walsh might be planning, she is no longer willing to risk us finding out about it. Not at the moment, anyway.”

“That’s not good.”

“I don’t imagine it is, no, but perhaps it is something of a blessing in disguise. It has, at least, uh, allowed you your time to heal.”

“There’ll never be enough time for that,” Faith muttered, spitting it out on pure instinct. Frustrated with herself, Faith tossed back the remaining scotch and flipped up onto her feet to pour herself more. She could feel Giles’ worried eyes following her, but she ignored the sensation. Instead, she shifted the focus of the conversation again, before she had to turn back and face Giles. “So, I hear Miss Livy is comin’ back to town.”

Faith could see Giles blush ever so slightly as she returned to her seat. “Um, well, uh … yes. Olivia has made a decision to, uh, relocate, as it were. She’ll be here quite soon, in fact.”

“Congrats, G.” She flashed him a devious grin. “Liv’s a wicked hottie.”

That flustered the Brit even further, and he finished off his own glass in one long gulp. “Yes, well, her relative attractiveness isn’t entirely the point, though I appreciate the sentiment.” He cleared his throat, setting his empty glass on the coffee table as his eyes stayed fixed on his hands. “Actually, I was going to suggest that you might like to get to know her.”

Somehow, Faith didn’t think he meant that the way her mind first interpreted it. In fact, the only thing she was sure of was that she didn’t care for the faint note of pity in his tone. There was only
one person whose concern for her Faith could stomach, and she was a hell of a lot prettier than Giles.

“Yeah, well, if she’s moving to town, guess she’ll end up being one of the Scoobies, right? Sure I’ll get to know her just fine, eventually.” She tried to make it clear that she didn’t want to discuss it any further, without being overtly hostile. Giles didn’t take the hint.

“Yes, uh, I’m quite sure that is the case, of course, but I … I meant it a little differently.”

“Yeah, and what exactly do you mean, cuz I’m thinkin’ I’m not gonna be a big fan,” spat Faith.

“Perhaps not, but I do hope that you will hear me out.” Faith rolled her eyes and took another long sip of scotch. Then she gestured for him to continue. “I don’t suppose Buffy told you—”

“Anya,” Faith corrected. “Anya told me Liv was moving here.”

Giles frowned. “Yes well… um, okay. Well I don’t suppose Anya mentioned what Olivia does for a living?”

“Didn’t really come up. Just said something about studying brains—” Suddenly everything clicked, and she shot out of the chair. She threw back the rest of the liquor, grabbed her ax, and headed towards the front door. “Fuck that, G. I ain’t your shrink girlfriend’s little pity project. Don’t care how hot she is, my head is off limits!” She deposited the glass on the counter, barely controlling herself enough to not shatter it.

“Faith!” She didn’t turn around to face him. She couldn’t deal with this right now. Just the thought of seeing a shrink gave her the wiggins something fierce.

“I’m fine, G! But it’d be smart of you not to come chasin’ after me right now.” This time she allowed her hostility to saturate her voice, and she heard Giles come to an immediate stop behind her.

“We just want to help you,” he offered weakly, but Faith Lehane wasn’t looking for that sort of help. She’d had her fill of someone messing with her mind, and she swore to herself it would never happen again.

Faith grinned at the faint sound of the knock on the front door, which she could only hear over the noise of her hair dryer thanks to the power of Slayer senses. Not that she need to hear it to know Buffy had arrived—she could feel the other Slayer practically buzzing through their bond. Faith turned off the dryer, not caring much that her hair was only half dry and padded out of the bathroom. Anya’s door was already closed for the night, and Faith wasted no time darting across the kitchen and around the corner to open up the front door.

Buffy’s eyes immediately widened and traced the curves of Faith’s body, covered in nothing but a skimpy pair of underwear and a loose tee. Once her gaze finally made it up to Faith’s eyes, she waggled her eyebrows suggestively. Buffy blushed furiously, and Faith pulled her inside. Before Buffy could speak, Faith pressed her against the wall and kissed her. A tiny, startled squeak passed into Faith’s mouth, but Buffy immediately relaxed into the kiss. Buffy’s lips opened wider, and Faith licked inside with her tongue, loving the little shudder that worked it’s way down Buffy’s body as Faith’s hand tangled in her hair.

“Hey girlfriend,” Faith breathed, her voice husky.

“H-hey,” Buffy spluttered, trying to catch her breath. Faith could feel the pulse of Buffy’s racing
heartbeat. She loved how simple it was to have this kind of effect on the blonde. Green eyes met brown, and Faith pulled back the tiniest bit. Buffy’s arms were wrapped firmly around her hips. “Sorry I couldn’t help you move in today.”

“S’cool.” Faith locked the front door. “My fault that you’ve gotta do all this catchup work at school.” She kissed Buffy again, just a warm peck, and then turned away from the door. “How about a tour?”

Buffy took Faith’s hand. “I would love one.” Faith led her forward into the living room, just beyond the short wall separating the entryway from the kitchen. Just in front of them was the shitty little table from Anya’s old place, its two matching chairs looking halfway decent in the shadowy light from the hallway. The four panes of the large window took up most of the wall in front of them, illuminated by soft moonlight mingling with the street lamps outside. A ratty old couch she and Anya had salvaged ran perpendicular to the windows, dividing the long room. On the far wall was a cheap little entertainment center with a smallish TV resting on top.

“I see you kept the Playstation,” Buffy teased.

“Don’t judge it till you’ve tried it, Blondie.”

“Maybe someday.” Buffy turned and checked out the small kitchen, complete with a sink, refrigerator, and oven. No dishwasher, but Anya and Faith weren’t really in a position to be choosy. “Faith, it’s adorable.”

“Thanks, B. Ain’t much, but it’s more than I ever imagined I could make for myself.”

Buffy pulled her closer, her eyes all soft and caring. “If you only you could see you the way I see you.” She smirked. “Might realize you should be aiming a bit higher.” Then she winced. “N-not that this isn’t very nice! I love it! And y-uh, your windows!” Buffy’s voice raised with each additional sentence, and each time Faith’s grin got a little wider. “I just meant, uh, that you should be really proud of yourself, but also that you’re capable of so many extraordinary things that maybe you never thought about.”

She didn’t know how to feel about Buffy’s sentiment. Faith believed that Buffy believed what she was saying. Most of her fears about Buffy abandoning her again had ben quelled in the two plus weeks since she had pulled her out of the Initiative. But that didn’t change what Faith knew about herself. She wasn’t exactly sure why Buffy had decided that slumming it with Faith was what she wanted now, but she wasn’t about to go looking a gift horse in the mouth or whatever. It was enough that Buffy wanted her.

As for the rest … Faith didn’t know what to do about it. Mostly, she just really didn’t want to have to go thinking about anything else heavy for a while. Fortunately, Giles hadn’t brought up the whole shrink thing again. She had just finally started making her peace with him after the shit he pulled on Buffy’s eighteenth birthday; it would’ve been a shame to have to kick his ass. Over a week had passed, and Olivia was coming to town at the end of the month. But Faith wasn’t ready for anything like that. She wasn’t sure she’d ever be ready.

Which is why she was firmly focused on living in the moment. And on the gorgeous blonde right in front of her. Faith leaned in as she asked, “That so?”

Buffy hummed her affirmation as she leaned in and kissed Faith softly. “This place got any other rooms?”

“Someone’s getting ahead of herself.”
“What? Me?” Buffy answered innocently. “I seem to remember being promised a tour. I’m fairly certain this place is more than just a living room and kitchen.”

Faith rolled her eyes, even though inside she was practically bursting with the warm gooey nonsense that she always made fun of other people for. She pointed. “Back there is a bathroom. Then there’s Anya’s bedroom—”

“Hi Anya!” Buffy shouted, watching the closed door to see if she would get a reaction.

“I’ve been assured that she sleeps like a log.”

“So I’ve heard.” At Faith’s curious gaze, Buffy added, “Xander likes to make sure everyone knows just how much he definitely has a girlfriend.”

Faith chortled. “What a dork.”

Buffy wrapped her arms around Faith’s waist again. “Thing is, I think maybe I’m starting to get where he’s comin’ from.”

“See now, B, you know I don’t believe in all the mushy romance nonsense.”

“Pretty sure I remember you showing up to woo me with a bouquet of my favorite flowers.” Buffy pressed her lips softly to Faith’s.

“Damn, you got me there. Guess you’ve seen through my … what’s the fancy word I’m lookin’ for here”

Buffy chuckled. “I think ‘façade’ is what you were aiming for. And yes, I started seeing through that a long time ago, dummy. I was just too stupid and scared to let myself think about what it meant for me. For us.”

Faith pulled away and started walking towards the hallway, but she grabbed Buffy’s hand as she moved. “I was just gettin’ ready for bed. Was kinda hopin’ I wouldn’t be alone tonight.”

“Well then, I sure hope you have a serviceable face wash I can use.”

“Damn, knew you were gonna be one of those high maintenance chicks.”

“Whatever, you’re into it.”

“Goddamn right, I am.”

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