Under the Sun

by enigmaticblue

Summary

Set after Avocation in an alternate S4 where many events of canon get thrown out the window. This one won’t make any sense if you haven’t read the previous story.

Notes

Warnings: there are descriptions of torture and violence, and a major character death, although it's not Spike, Buffy, or any of the Scoobies.
“What does a man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises... What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun... There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die... a time to kill and a time to heal... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance...” ~Ecclesiastes 1:3-5, 9; 3:1-4

“I really am sorry.”

Spike bit back an impatient sigh. “Apologize one more time, and I will fire you,” he warned.

Wesley gulped back his next attempt at apologizing. “Spike—”

The vampire rolled his eyes. “Look. Go home, get some sleep. Come over to my place tomorrow, and we’ll talk, alright?”

A very subdued Wesley nodded, hesitating before he got out of the car. Spike drove back to his place, shaking his head. The whole fiasco wasn’t technically Wesley’s fault. Spike had had a few mishaps on the job, and he knew that accidents happen. The difference was that if he screwed up in the past, he was the one who paid the price. Well, that and he typically made sure he didn’t leave any witnesses alive.

There was something to be said for being the boss, and a vampire mercenary. He could take steps to ensure his reputation remained intact.

Wesley had improved immensely over the summer, but he still had his occasional lapses, and this had been one of them. They’d both been lucky to get out unscathed and with the book they’d been hired to steal.

Actually, the book they’d been hired to “recover,” considering that their client had purchased the volume at auction, and then it had gone missing. Not that Spike was against a little larceny now and then.
What with Wesley tripping over his own feet and sending a very expensive vase crashing to the floor, combined with the alarms going off immediately thereafter, the job had become a lot more complicated than Spike had anticipated.

Wesley had wound up getting shot—just a graze, not a serious wound—but Spike had bawled him out for his carelessness. It had been more fear than anything else, though. Spike was growing fond of the git, and he didn’t want to see him killed.

Spike froze in the doorway of his house, sensing the beating heart. “H’lo?"

“Hey, there,”

His lips curved in a smile when he saw Buffy coming to greet him. “How’d you know when I was getting back?”

“I’m a good guesser,” Buffy replied. “How did things go?”

“Wesley nearly got himself killed,” Spike said, tilting his head to kiss her.

Buffy snickered. “Told you so.”

“He’s improving,” Spike said in defense of his assistant. “Could have happened to anybody. It’s not like you haven’t tripped out on patrol before.”

“Mmm,” Buffy replied, not giving him an answer one way or another. “But no one’s lived to tell the tale.”

“I could say the same,” Spike murmured.

For a long, comfortable moment, there was nothing except the feel of her lips, and Spike lost himself in her embrace. Four days was too damn long.

“Mom wants you to come for dinner tonight if you’re up for it,” Buffy said. “I think she’s
beginning to feel like you’ve abandoned us.”

“Bite your tongue.” Spike gave her one last kiss, heading into the kitchen for the fridge and his blood supply. He hadn’t eaten in the last couple of days, and he was starving. “That’ll never happen, and you know it.”

“Oh, I think we’re both well aware of the fact that we’re never going to get rid of you,” Buffy teased. “You’ve been really busy this summer, though.”

“I have been. Should slow down a bit now, though. I don’t have anything on the line for the next week or two.”

Buffy mock-sighed. “I suppose I can put up with you being around for that long.”

Spike drew back, raising an eyebrow. “If that’s going to be too difficult for you, I can always leave town for a bit.”

“Don’t you dare,” Buffy replied sharply, tugging him towards her by his jacket. “I want you right here, where you belong.”

All pretenses gone, they moved together again, hanging on to one another tightly. “You sure we have to see your mum tonight?” Spike murmured in her ear.

“Probably better,” Buffy said. “We can tell her we have to patrol later, though. Just think, when I’m in college, no one will know how often I’m staying here.”

Spike groaned. He had absolutely no desire to leave his cozy little place. What he wanted was something best done in the bedroom.

Well, in his house, anyway. He wasn’t picky about the choice of room.

On the other hand, Spike knew that it was in his best interests to keep Joyce happy.
“How long?”

“How long until I move in,” she replied. Buffy ran a hand over his cheek. “Although, I’m not sure it’s going to get much better. I have no idea how busy college is going to keep me.”

“You and Willow take my advice and get a room together?” Spike asked.

Buffy rolled her eyes, but finally nodded reluctantly. “Yes. You were right. It would be easier not having to explain the fact that my boyfriend can’t go out in the daylight. And, since Willow has a boyfriend of her own, she can’t look disapproving when I don’t come home.”

Spike smirked. “I’ll never get tired of hearing those words come out of your mouth.”

Buffy frowned in confusion. “What?”

“That I’m right.” He laughed as she smacked him, although not hard enough to hurt. “Now, how long do we have before we have to be at your mum’s?”

Buffy sighed. “Not long enough to do what you’re thinking about doing. That, I’m afraid, will have to wait for tonight.”

“Let’s get going, then,” Spike said. “Wouldn’t do to keep your mum waiting.”

Buffy gave him a wry grin. “I doubt she’s getting too anxious, since Giles is there to keep her company.”

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“How much longer before they get here?” Giles asked.

Joyce peeked over his bare chest at the clock next to the bed, grimacing. “It depends on how distracted they get, but I don’t want to leave that to chance.”
“Probably better not,” Giles agreed, pushing himself up and reaching for his clothing. “How are you feeling about Buffy moving out in a few days?”

Joyce just smiled. It was an expression only worn by the most satisfied of women. “You can ask me that when I don’t have to worry about Buffy walking in at an inopportune time?”

Giles chuckled, a rich sound that didn’t fail to make Joyce tingle in the best of ways. “Forget I asked. I will assume that the empty nest will agree with you and leave it at that.”

“And you?” Joyce asked. “What about your empty nest?”

Giles grimaced. “I’ve been thinking about remedying that. The life of a man of leisure turns out to be a bit more boring than I would have thought.”

Joyce raised an eyebrow. “I could have told you that.”

Giles gave her a dirty look that was only briefly obscured as he pulled his shirt over his head. “I thought it would be a good idea to consider my options before jumping into something new. I’m still Buffy’s Watcher, and there are other reasons to stay in Sunnydale, of course.”

Joyce made a pleased sound, and then continued, “You’re an active man, Rupert. I didn’t think that sitting around and cataloguing your books would occupy you for long.”

“Yes, well…”

“What are you thinking about?” Joyce asked. “Anything I can help with?”

“Perhaps,” Giles replied. “You know, when I was a boy I wanted to be a grocer, or a fighter pilot. I think I’ve passed the age to join the RAF, however, so…”

Joyce’s eyebrows went up, trying to determine whether he was serious or not. “You want to open a grocery store?”
“Actually, most likely not,” Giles replied. “I was thinking something more along the lines of a bookstore.”

Joyce thought that over, trying out the idea in her mind. “I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

“It’s still in the planning stages,” Giles said dismissively. “We’ll have to see whether or not it comes about. It would give me a certain amount of freedom that other positions would not.”

“Being your own boss does have its advantages,” she agreed, checking her makeup and hair in the mirror. She could see Giles coming up behind her, resting his strong, capable hands on her shoulders. Joyce leaned back against him, enjoying the picture that they made together.

She felt more alive now than she had in years.

The moment was interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. “Mom!”

Giles exchanged an amused look with her. “A mother’s job is never done,” he murmured.

“Neither is a Watcher’s,” she replied, turning to give him a quick kiss. “I should get dinner started.”

He watched her leave the bedroom, then made certain his appearance didn’t give away the afternoon’s activities. Not that it wouldn’t be fairly obvious to a casual observer, but Buffy had proven herself capable of ignoring a great many things about his relationship with Joyce.

It seemed that the Slayer was just as good at using her selective memory as Joyce had been at one time.

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Wesley stood in front of Spike’s door with a feeling of trepidation. He had no doubt that Spike was going to tell him that it wasn’t working out, and Wesley honestly had no idea what his next move
would be if he was let go—again.

The summer had been a revelation. Spike had been—well, “kind” was probably an exaggeration, but he’d exhibited a sort of rough care that the best of Wesley’s teachers had shown back in school. He’d learned so much…

And he’d failed again.

The door swung open before he could knock. “Are you going to stand on the porch all day, or are you coming in?” Spike asked, the amusement in his voice obvious.

Wesley stepped inside, shutting the door behind him. “I, uh—”

“Tea?”

“Please.” Wesley realized that Spike wasn’t going to start the conversation before he was good and ready.

“First off, I’m not going to fire you,” Spike said in a conversational tone. “I’m enjoying not having to do all the research myself. It’s a nice change.”

Wesley nodded, feeling an overwhelming sense of relief. It shouldn’t have been that big of a deal, but it was, somehow. He wanted to succeed badly. “I—thank you.”

“Oh, bugger that,” Spike replied rudely. “Even the Slayer trips up on occasion, Wes. You’re not perfect. Get over it.”

“I am perhaps rather more of a klutz than you would want with you, though,” Wesley replied.

Spike resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Barely. “You’ll get over that. Get a few more jobs under your belt, and you won’t be so nervous. You want a little confidence, that’s all.”

Wesley wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. “Is there another job coming up that you’ll need my
“A couple actually,” Spike replied. “But nothing immediate. Until then, I suggest you take a break, have some fun.”

Wesley winced. “Fun?”

“You do know what that is?”

“I may have forgotten,” Wesley replied dryly.

Spike chuckled appreciatively. “Then you’ve got some time to figure it out. Meanwhile, I expect you back here tomorrow afternoon, four sharp.”

“What happens tomorrow?”

“You start your training,” Spike replied. “If you’re going to be going out on your own at all, you’re going to be prepared for it.”

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Spike stood at the door of Buffy’s dorm room, his fingers just brushing the invisible barrier. The Slayer seemed fairly intent on unpacking her things, and Spike was content to watch, even though he hated the thought of walls between them.

“Come in, Spike.”

Just like that, it was gone, and he crossed the threshold. “How long did you know I was there?”

“Long enough,” Buffy replied. She turned to smile at him. “I can feel you.”
“Your mom said you were moving in today. You should have waited. I could have helped.”

She shrugged. “It wasn’t that big of a deal. Mom roped Giles into helping Willow and me, and it didn’t take very long.”

“Where’s Harris?”

“Still doing his tour of the fifty states, as far as we know.” Buffy came to sit down next to him on the bed. “We haven’t heard from him in a while.”

“And that doesn’t worry you?”

“We figure he’s too busy having fun.” She leaned her head against his shoulder. “I don’t want classes to start tomorrow.”

“You’ll be fine,” he encouraged.

Buffy pouted. “That’s not the problem. The summer wasn’t long enough. I’m not ready for school to start up again, and I have to spend the night here.”

“Wouldn’t have to spend the whole night here,” Spike replied.

“Early morning with orientation and getting the student ID and all of that,” Buffy said apologetically. “That means I actually have to get out of bed.”

“So we patrol, make a quick stop at my place, and then I drop you back here,” Spike replied. “Piece of cake.”

“Or I come over tomorrow after classes are over, and join you in bed,” Buffy suggested.

Spike winced. “Sorry, luv. I’ve got a standing date with Wesley.”
“I hope you don’t mean date in any other sense than you have to meet him.” Buffy’s eyes had a teasing light in them. “Because I’m going to get very suspicious of those business trips otherwise.”

Spike raised an eyebrow, obviously not amused. “Ha, bloody ha, Summers. You know I am, and always will be, yours. No, I’m giving Wesley some training so I can trust him on his own for small jobs. It might actually free up some time for you.”

“I can’t argue with that, but what happened to the ‘hand-to-hand’ techniques that he likes to boast about?”

“Lots of training, and virtually no practice means the git doesn’t have a chance if he’s faced with a real opponent,” Spike said. “Well, maybe a small chance.”

Buffy shook her head. “I still don’t see why you even hired him in the first place. He’s gotten better, but he’s still…” She searched for the word. “Wesley.”

“He’s not so bad,” was all Spike said. It was, in fact, pretty much all he would ever say about Wesley. Buffy hardly viewed it as a reasonable explanation, but she didn’t push. From the hints that Spike would occasionally drop, she thought it might have something to do with his human past, and that was a topic that Spike still regarded as off-limits.

As well as Buffy had come to know him, Spike was still largely a mystery to her in certain areas. He would occasionally share anecdotes about his clients that had her laughing, and yet she got the feeling that he wasn’t telling her everything. She didn’t think he was doing it to protect her. It was more that he’d never been in the habit of telling anyone anything, and so to have someone to talk to was still very new.

Buffy was also well aware that Spike was a better listener than she was, which meant that she was the one who ended up doing a lot of the talking.

“What is it that you see in him?”

Spike raised his eyebrows at the question, obviously trying to decide how to answer it. “Don’t know what you mean,” he said carefully.

“Yes, you do,” Buffy argued. “You know exactly what I mean. When everybody else had no
problem with the idea of Wesley dropping off the face of the planet, you asked him to work with you. It’s like you saw something that no one else did.”

Spike stood in one liquid motion, and Buffy could feel him distancing himself from her. It worried her, but at the same time, she wondered if he didn’t need the space to say what he needed to say. “Someone once saw potential in me,” Spike said quietly. “Suppose that’s all it was.”

She snorted. “I doubt you were ever as bad as Wesley.”

“Seems I remember you telling me you were once as bad as Cordelia,” Spike pointed out.

“Yeah, but...” Buffy trailed off. “You’re serious.”

Spike winced. “Maybe not quite as bad, but I had my moments.”

“You never talk about what it was like to be human,” Buffy said. “Is that why?”

“One reason,” Spike admitted. “It’s like a dream, you know? A dream of a different life, a different man. Doesn’t have anything to do with where I am now. At least, not much of anything.”

Buffy leaned back on her bed. “So what were you like?” At his closed-off expression, she changed tactics. “Okay, so what did you want to be when you grew up? I’ve got to choose a major at some point, and I’m looking for ideas.”

The barest hint of a smile pulled at Spike’s lips. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” He shrugged. “Besides, you’ve got time yet, right?”

“Willow already knows,” Buffy pouted. “She’s known since kindergarten, and I have no idea what I want to do.”

Spike flopped down on the bed beside her. “Buffy, luv, Willow isn’t you, and as much as I like her, I’m grateful for it. Don’t be thinking you have to compare yourself to her.”
“Did I hear my name?” Willow asked, poking her head in the door. “Oh, hey, Spike!”

“Red,” he replied, greeting her fondly. “Where’s your boy?”

She waved a hand. “Out doing boy-things. We’ll meet up tomorrow.” Willow sat down on her own twin bed, looking at Buffy and Spike dubiously. “You guys weren’t both planning on staying here tonight, were you? I mean, if you were, that’s okay. I can find another place, if you want to be alone, but—”

“Relax, Will,” Buffy said with a smile. “We aren’t going to kick you out. One of the benefits to dating an older guy is that he has his own place.”

Willow frowned. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” At their twin expressions of surprise, she quickly added, “Oh! I didn’t mean dating an older guy, I just meant sleeping over tonight. We’ve got an early day tomorrow.”

Spike smirked. “It’s already been discussed. I’ll have Buffy back here before eleven. How does that work for you?”


“Well, be careful,” Willow said. “It wouldn’t do to miss your first day.”

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Everything was changing.

Buffy lay in the darkness of her room, staring up at the ceiling. She knew that Willow was looking forward to classes starting, to the challenges that it presented. Buffy wasn’t so sure. She had always known that she would go to college, but she couldn’t picture herself as anything but the Slayer. How could she? It sometimes seemed as though that one word defined her entire being.

Her last summer at home had mostly been spent slaying, with little time for Spike. Even when he was in town, they were usually patrolling together. Xander had been gone. Willow and Oz spent
every minute they could together. Cordelia was off in L.A., even if Buffy would have wanted to hang out with her, which she wouldn’t have.

The real trouble was that she couldn’t see herself as a grown up. She’d died once. Making plans for the future seemed a little silly when your chances of having a future were slim to none. Not to mention the fact that, if Buffy had her way, she would probably want to do what Spike did—travel the world, kill demons, and get paid to do it. She had her sacred duty, though, and that didn’t include leaving the Hellmouth anytime soon.

Even Spike, whom she had considered her one constant, was changing. He had his own life, his own job, and—if you counted Wesley—even his own friends. Not that he wasn’t there for her, not that he wasn’t attentive when he was in town, but it was different.

Not for the first time, Buffy wondered if it wouldn’t be possible to slow time down a bit, to have a day to savor, to cherish. She wished she had taken more time over the summer to—do something. To mark it out as a turning point. To create a milestone.

Buffy wanted more time.

She listened to Willow’s even breathing across the room, and sighed into the darkness, wondering why, when her friends all seemed certain that this was the right thing to do, she felt so unsure.
Chapter 2

“The trick of finding what you didn’t lose/(existing’s tricky: but to live’s a gift)/the teachable imposture of always/arriving at the place you never left/(and i refer to thinking)rests upon/a dismal misconception; namely that/some neither ape nor angel called a man/is measured by his quote eye cue unquote./Much better than which, every woman who’s/(despite the ultramachinations of/some loveless infraworld)a woman knows;/and certain men quite possibly may have/shall we say guessed?"/ “we shall” quoth gifted she:/and played the hostess to my more than me” e. e. cummings, “the trick of finding what you didn’t lose”

If Buffy had been concerned about the first day of college beforehand, the day itself did nothing to alleviate her anxiety. Nothing felt right. Willow seemed to slip right into the flow, as did Oz, but Buffy found herself floundering.

Everything was bigger, and there were so many people, all wanting to tell her something or get her to join them. Buffy wasn’t really a joiner. After all, when you were the Chosen One it made being part of a group a little difficult.

Willow was the one that fit in and made friends and influenced people, not Buffy.

And even the very nice evening with Spike wasn’t enough to take the sting off the events of the first day of classes. If her professors weren’t busy being scary, they were kicking her out of their classrooms. Buffy didn’t remember the last time she’d been that humiliated.

She had to wonder if that was who she was now. Just “blonde girl.” No other identity but that.

“Do you want me to eat him?” Spike asked as she told him about the mean professor. “I’ll bet he’s evil enough.”

Buffy laughed, in spite of herself. Spike talking about eating someone probably shouldn’t have made her giggle, but it was funny. Maybe it was stupid, but when they were walking through campus, his arm slung over her shoulders, she felt okay again.

Well, mostly okay.
“No, that’s okay. I just won’t take the class.” She sighed. “I don’t know if I’m supposed to be here, Spike.”

“College, here, or with me, here?” he asked, although he already knew the answer to that. He thought he did, anyway.

“College, and you know it. You’re the best thing that’s happened to me today.”

Spike was silent for a moment. “Do you want to be here?”

“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “I mean, I was always supposed to go to college, but school isn’t my thing. It’s Willow’s, and…”

“Doesn’t have to be your thing,” Spike replied. When she gave him a look, he clarified, “Look, college is just something to get through for some people. You don’t go because you want to, you go because it’ll help you out in the long run, and it’ll make your mum happy. It’s four years. That’s not so long.”

“So says the vampire,” Buffy responded. “Four years is an eternity if that’s all the time you’ve got left.”

Spike pulled her to a stop, lifting an eyebrow. “You know something that you’re not telling me, luv?”

Buffy shook her head. “No, I—ignore me, Spike. It’s just been a really long, lousy day.”

“Think I know how to make it better,” he suggested, pulling her in for a kiss.

Buffy relaxed, gripping the back of his head. If nothing else in her life was going right, at least her love life was running fairly smoothly.

She pulled back abruptly. “Did you hear that?”
Spike raised his head. “Yeah. Sounded like a scuffle to me.”

They exchanged twin grimaces and took off in pursuit of the trouble. Buffy had to wonder if they were ever going to get a chance just to be a couple. The scene of the incident wasn’t hard to find with Spike’s presence. Not only were there marks in the grass, but also the faint scent of blood on the air.

“Can you track it?” Buffy asked.

Spike looked around, taking a deep breath to see if he could catch the trail, finally shaking his head. “Sorry, luv. There’s blood, but whoever they are, they’re careful.”

“Great,” she muttered. “Now I have a vampire gang to worry about.”

Spike frowned. “You want me to take Wes and track it down?” he asked. “I’ll have to wait ‘til tomorrow, but we can look into it.”

“No, that’s okay,” Buffy said. “I’m on campus. I’ll check it out tomorrow after classes are over. I doubt it’s a big deal.”

“You sure?”

“I’m the Slayer, Spike. It’s my job.”

His eyebrows went up at her rather snappy response. “Right. Okay.”

Buffy knew she should probably apologize, but she didn’t want to. She wanted to be bitchy and upset, and if Spike had a problem with that, too bad. “I should get back. It’s late, and I’ve got an early class tomorrow.”

“You want me to walk you back?”

She knew she’d probably angered him a bit by his slightly cool tone, but Buffy decided to ignore
it. If she let it go, it would be forgotten soon enough. “No, that’s okay. I’ll be fine.”

Spike hesitated, and then finally nodded. “Sure thing. I’ll see you later, then.”

Buffy regretted the whole thing immediately after he’d left, of course. She’d wanted to spend time with Spike, and now she’d gone and chased him off. Buffy sighed. Maybe she’d call him after she got back to the dorm room, apologize, and ask him to come along the next night.

Once she got back to her room, Willow immediately wanted to talk about her first day of classes and the potential of going to see Oz when he played at the Alpha Delta party. By the time they had finished up their gossip session, Buffy had forgotten all about calling Spike, and she dropped into a restless slumber.

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Spike was a little disgruntled at how his evening with Buffy had ended. He’d had other plans completely, and instead they’d parted on less than positive terms. Spike told himself that Buffy just needed some time to adjust. She always got a little cranky when she was upset about something. If he gave her a little time, she’d be fine.

He couldn’t help but wonder if their relationship was going to survive her college years, though. Not that he had any plans for breaking up with her, but he knew that they were in a very different place than they had been last year when his entire focus had been on the Slayer and keeping her safe—whether she wanted him there or not.

Things were different now. Buffy was in college, and still very young. She might get tired of having an older boyfriend, or decide she wanted to play the field a bit. It was hard to know.

Spike hadn’t said anything about it, but the incident from the previous spring still bothered him. He had chosen to bite her, to take her blood rather than lose his own life. That had never been a decision that he’d wanted to make again, and Spike had told himself that it wouldn’t happen. He would never again choose to save himself at the cost of someone else’s life.

While Buffy hadn’t been seriously injured, the image of her pale face and bleeding neck still haunted him. The question was whether or not he’d make the same decision again. Would he kill an innocent to save his own life?
With a sigh, Spike shoved the thoughts to the back of his mind. There was no way of knowing; that much he had learned. No one really knew how they’d act until they were in the heat of the moment.

Speaking of moments…

“What are you doing here?” Spike asked Wesley as he approached the house.

Wesley startled. He’d been facing Spike’s door, and had apparently not been terribly aware of his surroundings. “Oh! I, uh, I ran across this passage that might be helpful, and…” He trailed off. “Anyway, I thought you might be interested.”

“I doubt it,” Spike replied. “But you can try me.”

Wesley hesitated. “It has to do with the Gem of Amara.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “That’s something that might be better left buried, mate. Not that it wouldn’t be nice to have, but if it falls into the wrong hands, we’d have a bit of a problem.” He unlocked the door and allowed Wesley to precede him inside.

“You could make certain that it didn’t fall into the wrongs hands,” Wesley pointed out. “You could also take on a wider range of jobs that way.”

“While alerting the entire demon world that I have it.” Spike paused. “Although, you’ve got a point. No one would have to know necessarily. How much have you found out?”

Wesley shook his head. “Just a vague reference to the fact that it might actually be in the area. I was doing some research into Sunnydale history, and—”

Spike held up a hand to silence him. “What happened to having some fun while you had a chance?”

Wesley looked sheepish. “Yes, well, history is interesting, and—”
“You need to find yourself a girlfriend,” Spike opined.

Wesley tried not to flush, and couldn’t quite manage it. He did attempt to get a little of his own back, however. “Oh? Where’s your girlfriend this evening?”

“Back at her room,” Spike replied. “She had an early class.”

“She gave you the brush off?”

Spike gave him a sour look. “If you must know, she was acting a bit bitchy.”

“Ah.” Wesley was silent, shuffling his feet a bit.

Spike finally shook his head. “Do you want to watch a vid, or—” He glanced at the clock. “Should be a football game on somewhere.”

Wesley brightened. “Do you get football?”

Spike grinned. “Sure, got a whole channel with just football. There’s one in Spanish, too, but…”

“I speak Spanish fluently,” Wesley replied, sounding slightly offended.

Spike just smirked. “Why doesn’t that surprise me? We’ll have our choice of channels, then.”

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“Thank you so much for coming, Spike,” Joyce said, ushering him through the door. “I just couldn’t get the bolts loosened, and I didn’t know who else to ask.”
Spike didn’t mind helping out in the least. He’d changed more than a few tires in his time, and he enjoyed spending time with Joyce. At the same time, he couldn’t resist teasing her a little. “You couldn’t have called Rupert?”

She flushed slightly. “I could have,” she agreed. “And then when he couldn’t get the bolts off…”

“Don’t have much faith in your beau, do you?”

Joyce shrugged. “I got you on the phone first. I’m assuming Rupert is out running an errand or something.”

“It’s no trouble,” he assured her with an easy smile. “Didn’t have any other plans for the evening anyway.”

“You weren’t planning on seeing Buffy tonight?” Joyce asked innocently. “I was sure—”

Spike dismissed her concerns with a nonchalance he didn’t feel. “She’s got enough on her hands, settling in and all. We’ll catch up when she’s ready for it.”

Joyce had a mother’s nose for trouble. “Is everything okay?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, sure. She was a bit short last night, but it had been a long day for her. Like I said, once she gets settled in, everything will be fine.”

“Of course.” Joyce didn’t want to push, and so she said nothing more. She honestly wasn’t expecting to hear from Buffy for a couple of weeks at least. Her daughter had seemed more than ready to get out of the house, excited about being out from under Joyce’s roof. It was only natural, and so Joyce couldn’t completely regret that she’d raised such a capable, independent young woman.

There was still the pang of release, however.

“The car is around the side of the building,” she explained. “I don’t know what happened. I just came outside and the tire was flat.”
“Probably just had a slow leak you didn’t notice right off,” Spike said. “I’ll get the spare on, and you can take the other in for repairs.” He glanced around the darkened parking lot. “If you don’t mind, though, I think I’ll drive you home. Hate for something to happen on the way.”

“I’ll be fine,” Joyce protested, and then sighed. “But I’ll be glad for your company.” She knew better than to think that Spike would actually let her head out on her own if he was concerned.

With his enhanced strength, Spike had her Jeep jacked up and the tire off in just a few minutes, and only a couple of minutes after that, he had the spare out of the back and in place.

“Thank you very much,” Joyce said, handing him a towel from inside the gallery to wipe his hands on. “I really appreciate it.”

“I don’t mind,” he said mildly, but the warmth in his eyes told Joyce that he was happy to help. Spike frowned as he started up the car, once Joyce had gotten her things from the gallery. “Has it been running like this for a while?” he asked, referring to the subtle knocking sound only he could pick up.

Joyce frowned, not hearing the noise he was apparently referring to. “Running like what?”

Spike shook his head. “ Doesn’t sound right,” he explained briefly. “When we get back to your place, I’ll check under the hood.”

The ringing of Spike’s cell phone interrupted the pleasant silence that had fallen, and Spike patted his pockets, trying to find it before it stopped ringing. “H’lo,” he said, once he’d managed to locate it inside an inner pocket.

“Spike?”

“Hey, luv,” he said, turning the steering wheel one-handed. “What’s up?”

“I just wondered if maybe you still wanted to go hunting with me tonight,” Buffy said. “I thought I’d see if I could find that vampire gang.”
Spike glanced at the car’s clock. “Can you give me a bit? I was just helping your mum out with a flat tire, and I’ll go to check the car engine. Thought I heard a sound that shouldn’t be there, and I don’t want her caught out after dark.”

“Oh.” There was a short pause. “No, that’s okay. Don’t worry about it. I’ll catch you tomorrow night.”

“You sure?” Spike asked. “This won’t take me too long.”

“No, I’ll go do a patrol, and then I probably should do some reading or something.”

“If you’re sure.” Spike frowned. He thought he caught a wistful note in Buffy’s voice, as though all was not right. “You know, I could meet you now, then come back later to check the car. I’m sure your mum wouldn’t mind if I worked on it a bit later.”

Buffy’s voice turned cheerfully brisk. “Really, Spike that’s okay. You’re there now, and it’s not like we made plans. I’ll just see you tomorrow.”

“It’s a date,” he said warmly, sighing when she hung up the phone.

Joyce raised an eyebrow, glancing over at him. “Are you certain everything is okay?”

Spike shook his head, frowning thoughtfully. “Don’t know. I hope so.”

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Buffy was beginning to wonder where she’d gone wrong. College was supposed to be fun, right? She already had a hot, older boyfriend, so it wasn’t like she had to worry about entering the scary waters of dating. She thought she was reasonably intelligent, and UC Sunnydale was billed as a party school, so classes should be doable.

She nursed her hurt wrist, sitting on the edge of her bed. Willow was asleep across from her, and
Buffy didn’t want to wake her up. It was just that she felt so…alone.

In truth, she wanted Spike, but she didn’t want to be so weak as to have to run to him over the big, bad vampire. That was so pathetic. Buffy wasn’t that kind of girl, but she sorely wanted the comfort of the familiar, and Spike was nothing if not familiar.

The soft tapping at the door had her frowning. She opened the door quietly, seeing Spike framed in the doorway. “What are you doing here?” Buffy hissed, knowing that she sounded pissed off, although she didn’t mean to.

Spike sighed and shook his head. “I’m here because you wanted my help, and I figured even if you were done, you might want the company.”

“I’m fine,” she said. Buffy knew that she was whining, but she really didn’t want Spike to think that she couldn’t cut it. She was the Slayer.

He rolled his eyes. “What time is your first class tomorrow?”

“What?”

“First class? What time?”

Buffy frowned. “Not until ten, but—”

“Good. You’ve still got some stuff at my house. Let’s go.” Spike held out an arm, and Buffy immediately drew back.

“No, Spike! I’ve got things, and—”

“You’re hurt,” he said flatly, looking at her wrist.

Buffy put it down at her side as though it wasn’t really hurt and immediately winced. “I appreciate your concern, but really I’m fine.”
“You’ve had a rough couple of days,” Spike argued. “And now you’re going to go back in your room and feel sorry for yourself because you don’t want anybody to think that you can’t hack it. How am I doing?”

Buffy pouted. “Pretty good,” she finally admitted, knowing that there was no arguing with him when he was in this sort of mood.

“So now I’m going to leave Red a note to keep her from worrying over you, and I’m going to make sure that whatever the last couple of days have been like, you have a good night.” Spike’s face softened, and he touched a gentle hand to her cheek. “I just want to spend a little time with my girl.”

Buffy melted instantly. “How the hell am I supposed to argue with you when you say things like that?” she demanded.

Spike just smirked. “That’s the point. You aren’t. Are you going to come quietly?”

“Yes, but only because you wouldn’t let me say no.” Buffy leaned against his chest briefly. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, luv. You know that.”

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Buffy woke the next morning feeling more comfortable than she had since school had started. If that made her weak, then she could live with that.

The really scary part, though, the part she didn’t let herself think about, was what would it do to her to lose Spike.

“Hey.”

His soft voice roused her further, and she stretched. “Morning.”
“How’s the arm?”

“Better. Thanks for wrapping it.” Buffy sat up, looking around for her clothing. “I should probably get going soon.”

“Let me make you breakfast first,” he urged. “Won’t do to start the day off hungry, yeah?”

Buffy turned to him, and he could see a tinge of fear in her gaze. “You’re too good to me.”

“No such thing,” Spike countered. Side by side against his black sheets, the contrast in their skin tones was obvious—Buffy’s sun-kissed gold and his alabaster. The thought flitted through his mind that if he had the Gem of Amara, that could change. He could join Buffy in her sunlit world, bridging one more gap that separated them.

“What would I do without you?” she asked.

Spike pressed his lips to her bare shoulder. “You’d get by, luv.” He raised his eyes and saw the scar on her neck, the one he’d put there.

She sighed. “Maybe.”

“Do you want my help with this vamp?” Spike asked. “You know I’ll be there if you want me, but if you’d rather kick her arse yourself I’d understand.”

“Tell you what,” Buffy said brightly, basking in the confidence he had in her. “I’ll call you if I need backup.”

Spike smirked. “Or a cheering section.”

“You got it.” Buffy batted her eyelashes at him. “You said something about breakfast?”
Spike chuckled. “Yeah, I did.”


Buffy absolutely couldn’t believe what she was seeing. That ho-bag of a vampire had stolen her stuff, and now she was making fun of it? And she had Mr. Gordo? And her diary?

“Go check my room for the weapons chest. It’s at the foot of my bed. If Willow’s there, she can tell you where it is,” Buffy ordered Xander.

He’d stopped by campus after he’d called her house to find out where she and Willow were and had arrived just as Buffy was discovering her empty dorm room. Buffy had gone into immediate Slayer mode, and Xander had been happy to pitch in.

It had been a long and lonely summer washing dishes in The Fabulous Ladies’ Night Club for Xander. Although he probably could have called someone—even Spike—the last thing he’d wanted was to come back to Sunnydale with his tail between his legs. Of course, if it hadn’t been for the one night where he’d had to fill in for one of the regular strippers when he was sick, he probably would still be washing dishes.

Honestly, it had taken him a lot longer to earn the money to fix his car than he’d thought it would.

Still, he had a new car out of the deal, and he’d gotten through with minimum embarrassment, even if that was only because no one he knew was a witness to his stage debut.

They had researched disappearances on the Sunnydale campus, located the potential vampires’ nest in the basement of one of the old fraternity houses. It was just like old times.

“Do you want me to get anything else?” Xander asked.

Buffy frowned. “Can you call Spike and tell him where I’m at? He always likes it when he can watch me fight.”

Xander winced at the mental image that brought up, even though he couldn’t really disagree with
Spike. “Sure. Call Spike first?”

Buffy dug in her pocket for some change. “Please.” She watched as Xander hurried off, turning back to watch the vampires dig through the things they’d stolen from her room. They thought they could mess with her? “I’ll show them,” she muttered. “If there’s one thing I still can do it’s—”

She over-balanced somehow, tumbling through the skylight, landing in the midst of the vampires.

Sunday smirked down at her. “Oh, look. The Slayer brought delivery.”

“Just thought I’d drop in,” Buffy replied, standing slowing and brushing herself off. When no one seemed to appreciate her pun, she sighed. “Tough room.”

“I appreciate the thought,” Sunday said. “I’ll appreciate it even more when I kill you.”

Buffy gave her a tight smile. “You get to try.” She ducked the punch that Sunday sent her way. “Oh, please. I hope you can do better than that.”

The fight was a little more challenging than it would have been if Buffy had two good arms. As it was, there were definitely moments where it could easily have gone either way. A lucky hit on her bad arm sent Buffy stumbling, gasping with pain.

“You want some help?”

Spike’s voice came from behind her, but Buffy couldn’t afford the distraction to turn to look at him. “No, I think I’ve got it.” She struggled to stay upright, holding her injured arm to her chest and executing a roundhouse kick that caught Sunday in the chin.

“What’s with the hair?” Spike mused, moving around the perimeter of the room, easily staking the one vampire brave enough to attack him. “Looks like she’s got a rats’ nest on top of her head.”

Sunday snarled, turning to face him. “You’re next.”
Buffy sent a knee into Sunday’s unprotected side. “You know, Spike’s right,” she said conversationally. “You were giving me fashion advice, and you’re stuck in—some decade that probably never existed.”

Sunday attacked furiously pushing Buffy back. “Oh, yeah? At least I’m not wearing last year’s clothes.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Buffy replied. “I think I’d prefer my clothes not to scream, ‘I’m a great big slut.’”

“Speaking for the male sex, I quite like your clothes, pet,” Spike said.

Buffy smiled smugly, feinting with a right punch and ending with a left spin-kick, sending Sunday flying. She barely noticed that the other vampires were trying to flee. Spike was standing in the door now anyway, so it wasn’t like they were going to get past him. “I’m pretty sure that Sunday is too big of a skank to keep a boyfriend,” she informed Spike. “But we shouldn’t rub her nose in it.”

Buffy caught the stake Spike threw to her, spinning and ramming it through Sunday’s heart without breaking stride. She looked around for more vampires, but they were all dust or had managed to escape. “Too bad,” she observed. “I was just getting started.” She turned to look at Spike. “Good job on the cheering section, by the way.”

“Watching you in action gives a bloke plenty to cheer about,” Spike replied. He leaned in when Buffy wrapped her good arm around his neck, obliging her silent demand for a kiss.

It really worked out nicely. Buffy got revved up from the fight, and Spike got revved up watching her.

If only every aspect of their relationship were that easy. And if only Sunday was the only resident threat on the UC Sunnydale campus.
Willow was in her element—sitting outside, eating her lunch at one of the picnic tables, Oz sitting across from her. It was a beautiful fall day, and she was a college student. Life didn’t get much better than this.

“Are you playing at the Bronze again tonight?” she asked idly, wanting to make conversation, even though there was no pressure to do so. Willow just liked hearing Oz’s voice sometimes.

“Yeah,” he replied briefly. “Are you coming?”

Willow smiled. “I think so. Maybe Buffy will come with me. I don’t think she’s doing anything.” As much as she liked college, there was something to be said for the comfort of the familiar. “I don’t know if Spike is in town, though.”

“If he isn’t, Buffy could probably use the company,” Oz observed.

Willow nodded. “Probably.”

Her thoughtful expression prompted Oz to ask, “What’s the face for?”

“What face?” Oz just raised an eyebrow. “It’s just that I’m wondering if Buffy and Spike are going to be okay.”

Oz frowned. “Are they fighting?”

“No, not really,” Willow said slowly. “It’s just that Spike’s been out of town so much recently, he and Buffy don’t get to spend much time together.”
“That doesn’t have to mean anything,” Oz replied.

Willow took a bite of her sandwich, chewing slowly as she thought about it. “No, but you know how last year we were all together, pretty much all the time? This year it’s like we’re always going different directions. Not that it’s a bad thing, it’s just…”

“Different?”

“Something like that.”

Oz thought for a minute. “It’s not like Buffy’s dating a student. It’s going to take some adjustments.”

“I know. I just worry about her sometimes, you know?” Willow gave him a big grin. “You’re not planning on going anywhere, right?”

Oz returned her smile. “I didn’t have any plans to.”

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Spike leaned back in his chair, sighing. “This is going to take some serious digging, Wesley. I don’t think we’ve got the time for it now.”

Wesley finished making his notation, nodding. “I realize that, but it’s something for a rainy day, anyway. Just knowing the gem’s location may come in useful at some point.”

Spike appeared uncertain. “Something like this, though…I’ll have to think on it a bit more. The risk might not be worth it.”

“I understand that, but—”
“It was good of you to do the research,” Spike said, cutting him off. “Appreciate that, Wes.”

Wesley shifted uncomfortably in his chair, unused to praise. “Yes, well, you did tell me to have some fun.”

Spike glanced around the table at the scattered tomes and maps. “If this is your idea of fun, I may have to help you out there.” He raised an eyebrow. “You up for coming to the Bronze tonight? I’m meeting the Slayer and Willow there later.”

Wesley shook his head. “I hardly believe that I’d be welcome,” he demurred.

Spike didn’t press the issue. “Heard from Cordelia recently?”

Now Wesley’s expression turned sour. “You know as well as I do that we haven’t kept in touch. After—the Mayor, you know. I don’t even have her address.”

“Then you probably don’t want to know she’s in L.A., and according to all reports enjoying herself.” Spike smiled thoughtfully. “Of course, knowing that girl, even if all isn’t well she’d be lying through her teeth. We may have to try looking her up next time we’re in town. Think Red has her address.”

Wesley’s eyes widened. “Spike, I—”

“Just as a couple of travelers passing through,” Spike assured him. “If she’s doing as well as she says, we’ll let her take us out to dinner. Otherwise, I’ll take the both of you out. It’s the friendly thing to do, and you never know when you need a connection.”

Wesley fiddled with his pencil. “Well, perhaps that might be alright.”

Spike pushed back from the table. “I’ve got to go if I’m going to be on time. You mind clearing up here?”

Wesley shook his head. “No, of course not.”
Spike smirked, having caught Wesley’s earlier, longing glance towards the television. “Beer’s in the fridge, and you know what channel the match is on.”

The ex-Watcher looked slightly abashed. “I really should finish up some of these calculations. We leave in a couple of days, and—”

“Suit yourself,” Spike replied, knowing that as soon as he left Wesley would turn on the television and might even unbend enough to get a beer from the fridge. Really, it was sad how much encouragement the man needed to simply relax.

Of course, he was talking about the man who thought a good game of Word Puzzle 3-D was the perfect way to spend an evening.

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It was old habit for Spike to stop past one of the demon bars on his way to the Bronze, just to see if any of his contacts were in. He had a reputation in the demon world, and it was common knowledge that he was with the Slayer. Everyone in Willy’s also knew that Spike wasn’t a man to cross and he paid well for information.

Two of the regulars were missing, but Spike spotted one of his informants immediately and made his way through the dim interior to the far end of the bar. “Buy you a drink?”

Anyone else would have heard an unintelligible string of syllables, but Spike readily interpreted it as, “Sure. You haven’t been around lately.”


The demon Spike called Rof—because the rest of his name was impossible to pronounce—made a thoughtful sound. “Probably a good thing for you. Sunnydale isn’t a good place to be these days. There is talk.”

Spike frowned, paying Willy as he brought Rof’s bile. “Want anything, Spike?” Willy asked.
“Not tonight,” he replied absently, waiting for the man to leave before he asked, “About what?”

Rof made a movement with what passed as his shoulders. Spike wasn’t too clear on the anatomy of his kind. Hell, he couldn’t even pronounce the name of Rof’s kind. “Demons disappearing. Some of them are the roughnecks, but some seek peace. Word is, you do not approach—”

The word Rof used for the location was roughly translated, “the place where young things are taught before they mate or are eaten.” Spike assumed he was referring to a school, but since the high school had been blown up, he wondered if Rof didn’t mean the university.

Spike described the area near the campus, the woods and the swamp, and Rof gave his assent. “That is where. Your Slayer is there now.”

Spike nodded. “Yeah, she is.”

Rof gave him a serious look, his orange eyes reflecting concern. “Go carefully. It becomes a deathtrap.”


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“Are you two lovely ladies sitting all by yourselves?”

Buffy and Willow glanced at each other and then back at the rather cute boy who was standing next to one of the empty chairs. They had saved two—one for Spike and one for Xander. Xander had mentioned possibly having plans, and Spike hadn’t arrived yet, however. “We’re waiting for some friends,” Willow replied firmly.

He gave them a lop-sided smile. “So they’re late?”

“Not really,” Buffy hedged. “I’m sure my boyfriend is on his way.” Buffy never denied that she could be a bit of a flirt, but when she was with a guy, she was with a guy. Even when he never seemed to be around.
“You don’t mind if I keep his seat warm for him, do you?” he asked, holding out a hand. “I’m Parker Abrams. I think I’ve seen you around campus before.”

Buffy shook his hand, unbending just a little. “Buffy Summers. I’m a freshman…but you probably already knew that.”

Parker’s smile grew wider as he turned on the charm. “I never miss it when a pretty girl comes to campus.”

In spite of herself, Buffy blushed slightly. Spike was pretty free with the compliments as well, but she liked hearing that sort of thing, and from a complete stranger, too. Somehow she didn’t even notice that Parker still had her hand in his until a very dry voice asked, “Mind if I join you, or is there not room for one more?”

At Spike’s question, Buffy snatched her hand back from Parker, and turned to look at him. Spike had a pleasant enough smile on his face, but his eyes were glittering dangerously. “Spike! Hey, um, this is Parker. He goes to school with us.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “Pleasure.”

Parker could recognize a jealous boyfriend when he saw one, and he knew when to make a strategic retreat. Of course, since he went to school with Buffy, and he was certain that Spike had never seen the inside of a school, Parker knew the retreat was just that. Strategic. He’d be back.

“I’ll see you guys later,” he said, drifting off to find his friends again.

Willow had taken in the entire scene with a growing sense of discomfort. “Hey, Spike,” she said in an attempt to get his focus off the scene with Parker and Buffy he’d walked in on.

“Red.” Spike seemed to hesitate for a moment before he decided not to say anything about what he’d just seen. “You two doing alright? Do you want a drink or something?”

“I’m okay,” Willow assured him.
Buffy nodded vigorously. “I’m okay, too.”

The uncomfortable silence seemed to hang over them like an executioner’s axe, just waiting to fall on the one who made the first wrong move. “Spike—” Buffy began, touching him on the arm.

Spike shrugged his shoulders. “How was your day?” he asked, interrupting her.

“Good,” she replied quietly. “There hasn’t been a lot of excitement, for which I am grateful.” Buffy watched as he sat down, wondering what it was he was thinking about. What had he seen when he witnessed her with Parker? Nothing had happened, but perception is everything at times. Buffy had her own experiences with that. “When do you leave again?”

“Monday,” he replied. “I shouldn’t be gone too long, though.”

Buffy nodded. “I wouldn’t mind getting out of the dorms. If you—”

“Glad to have the company, luv,” Spike replied. “And you’ve got a key. If you want an escape, you’re welcome at my place.”

The last of the tension seemed to dissipate, giving Willow the freedom to say, “We could all go out this weekend. You know, like on a double date?”

Neither Buffy nor Spike seemed to know quite what to think of the suggestion. While it didn’t sound like a bad way to spend an evening, their time together—alone—was very limited at the moment. “Sure, why not?” Buffy said. “Spike?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Another silence fell, this time more comfortable, although Spike seemed lost in thought. “Earth to Spike,” Willow finally said. “Is everything okay?”

Spike nodded slowly. “Yeah. Just got a bit of information tonight that worries me. Had to stop in
and see an informant on the way over, which was why I was late.”

“What kind of information?” Buffy asked, giving him a keen look. Slayer stuff she could do.

Spike shook his head. “Rumors about what’s going on at the campus. Demons disappearing for no good reason.”

Buffy frowned. “Demons disappearing?” Normally she wouldn’t have been terribly concerned about that, but she hadn’t been doing much patrolling. The occasional nightly stroll and stake, but no real slaying. While there was a part of her that rejoiced at the thought of help, not all demon-hunters were like Spike. Some of them were like that guy Cain, who had intended to hunt Oz down and kill him for the pelt.

“Got a warning to be careful when I’m there,” Spike said.

Buffy frowned. “Maybe we should nose around, then.” Then she grimaced. “But can we do it after you get back from your trip? I want a weekend with my boyfriend, not a weekend hunting demon bogeymen.”

“Anything you want,” Spike agreed readily. “It’s not like I mind the break.”

Buffy wished that Xander would show up. She wanted to dance with Spike, but she felt bad about leaving Willow by herself while Oz was up on stage. “Where are you going this week, Spike?”

“Seattle,” he replied. “I’ve got a pick-up to make, and then Wesley and I will fly out to Cleveland to make the delivery.”

Buffy frowned. “You’re taking Wesley? How come?”

“This bloke’s one I do regular work for,” Spike explained. “I want him to get to know Wes so I can fob off some of the more routine bits of work to him. It’s an easy job, but this sort of thing is my bread and butter, so to speak.”

“Fobbing can be good,” Buffy agreed. “Especially if it means you’re going to be in town more.”
“Think you can live with me underfoot?” Spike asked. “Cramping your style?”

Buffy couldn’t quite tell if he was joking or not, but she decided to react to his question as if it weren’t a serious one. “You are my style.”

“What are you going to be delivering?” Willow asked, trying to dispel a bit of the tension that had once again crept into the conversation.

“Bits and pieces,” Spike replied vaguely. “The sort of things that can’t be posted.”

Buffy felt a flicker of irritation. Spike was so secretive about his work sometimes. It was almost like he didn’t trust her.

Oz came up to the table and sat. The band was taking a break, and the piped in music had started up. “Hey all.”

“Hey, Oz,” Buffy said, then turned to Spike. “You want to dance?”

“Sure.”

They moved out to the middle of the dance floor. The club was pretty crowded, and so there wasn’t a lot of room to maneuver, but they were both content mostly staying in one place. Buffy felt a flash of fear, wondering how she was supposed to hang onto this relationship. She wanted this—she wanted Spike in her life, but they seemed to be drifting apart.

“What’s got you worried?” Spike asked, seeing the crease between her brows.

“Just thinking.”

“About what?”
“About us.”

Spike’s jaw tightened. “Yeah.” There was a long pause. “Buffy, I know you’re young, you’re going to school, and I’ve been gone. If you—if you need to take a break, or—”

“No!” Buffy said quickly. “No, Spike. That’s not what I want. I just—it’s going to take some adjusting, that’s all.”

Spike nodded slowly. “Right. That’s all.”

Buffy leaned her forehead against his shoulder. “We just have to make the most of the time we do have together. Not having you around all the time will probably make it easier for me to concentrate on my classes, anyway.”

Spike smiled. “Wouldn’t want to cause too much of a distraction.”

“I like your distractions.” She met his lips for a gentle kiss, knowing that it held the promise of more later on that night.

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Xander really had planned on making it to the Bronze to hang out with his friends. Since the end of high school, they hadn’t had much time to hang out as a group. He’d been busy looking for work, and he really hadn’t found much.

There was a part of him that wished he were going to college. Xander knew that he wasn’t really cut out for it, but he hated the feeling of being left behind. Everyone else was at UC Sunnydale, and he was in his parents’ basement. He didn’t want to be there, but he couldn’t afford anything else. Sometimes he wondered if he was going to be one of those guys—one of the guys that lived in a basement and never came out. A loser.

Apparently he wasn’t such a loser that he couldn’t get a girl, however.

He wasn’t quite sure how to feel about this thing with Anya. Xander hesitated to call it a
relationship, because that wasn’t what it felt like. Anya was blunt, and she frequently talked about what she’d done to various men throughout her career as a vengeance demon. Put all that together, and you got a girl who was pleasant to look at and not so pleasant to be with.

At the same time, Anya presented his best chance for a girlfriend—or something like it. Which was the only reason he hadn’t tossed her out when she came over so he could meet up with the gang at the Bronze.

“I’d like to know what kind of a relationship we have,” she had begun with her characteristic directness.

“Relationship?” Xander asked. “What relationship?”

Anya looked determined. “We went to prom together. I thought that indicated some kind of relationship.”

Xander was about to reply that he’d gone to prom with her because she was the only girl who would have him, but that was a little cruel. Not that she didn’t deserve it on some level, considering all the men she’d cursed over the centuries, but he kept his mouth shut anyway. “I think that was just a date. It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

“But going to prom is a big deal!” Anya insisted. “That’s what everyone says.”

Xander sighed. “It’s a big deal if you want it to be.”

“Do you want it to be?”

He shrugged. “I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“Well, I can’t stop thinking about it,” Anya shot back. “I can’t stop thinking about you, even though I want to. So I think we should do something.”

“Do what?” Xander asked.
Anya frowned. “I don’t know. I just know that I don’t want to be the only one thinking about this. I’ve seen this happen before, you know. I didn’t want this.”

Xander was afraid to ask what she meant. There were probably curses involved. “So what do you want?”

“I think we should have sexual intercourse,” Anya declared. “That way, I can get you out of my system.”

Xander’s brain stuttered to a halt. “What?”

“I think we should have sexual intercourse,” Anya declared. “You’re funny, and you’re nicely shaped, and quite frankly I think it’s ridiculous to have interlocking bodies and not interlock.”

The funny thing was, that was the nicest thing that anybody had said to him in—pretty much ever. How could he turn down an invitation like that?

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Willow watched Oz and Devon head back inside the Bronze, shaking her head. She still had no idea how they’d managed to become band mates. Well, she did, since Oz played guitar and Devon sang, but still. They were so different.

“Willow, hey.”

She turned to see Harmony looking at her. “Hi, Harmony. It’s been a while.”

“Yeah, it has,” the other girl replied. “I haven’t seen you since graduation, with the big snake.”

Willow nodded. “Right. So, how was your summer?” She didn’t really like Harmony—never had—but high school was in the past, and it was only polite to make small talk.
“Oh, you know,” Harmony replied vaguely. “I was going to go to France, but I didn’t.”

“France, huh?”

“I was dying to see the shops,” Harmony said, moving a little closer.

Willow nodded, wondering when Oz was going to come out and rescue her. “And the museums.”

“Museums?”

“Yeah. You know, I heard they had them. Just a rumor you pick up on the streets.”

Harmony laughed politely. “You’re so funny Willow. You haven’t changed a bit.”

Willow barely refrained from rolling her eyes. “Neither have you.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Harmony replied, her face shifting into that of a demon’s.

Willow didn’t even have time to fumble for her cross before Harmony’s teeth were buried in her neck.
“It is enough for me by day/To walk the same bright earth with him;/Enough that over us by
night/The same great roof of stars is dim./I do not hope to bind the wind/Or set a fetter on the
sea—/It is enough to feel his love/Blow by like music over me.” ~Sara Teasdale, “Enough”

“Get back,” Oz said, thrusting the music stand between Harmony and Willow, pushing the vampire
back.

Willow managed to find her cross, brandishing it with one hand, keeping her other hand over the
wound in her neck. “Get out of here, Harmony.”

“Fine. Hide behind your boyfriend,” Harmony replied. “But you just wait. I have a boyfriend, too,
and he’s going to be mad that you were mean to me.” She ran off down the alley.

Oz came up beside Willow, pulling her hand away gently to see the damage. “Are you okay?”

“I think so.” Willow was quiet for a moment. “You know, I never really liked Harmony, but…”

“I know.” Oz put a tender hand to her cheek. “We should get you cleaned up, and then we should
probably find Buffy.”

Willow made a face. “She was going over to Spike’s, and they’re not going to be happy about
being interrupted.”

“I think they’ll understand,” Oz said. “Harmony said she had a boyfriend. It might be a concern.”

Willow rolled her eyes and made a face. “Harmony lied about having a boyfriend all the time back
in high school. She was probably lying now.”

“Still,” Oz said.
She sighed. “Okay, but I’m making you ring Spike’s doorbell.”

“Don’t answer it,” Buffy ordered as the doorbell sounded. Spike’s shirt was off, as was hers, although neither one of them was in a hurry to get to the main event. “They can take care of their own damn problems for once.”

Spike groaned. “Luv, the only people who know we’re here and would just drop in are Willow and Oz. Anybody else would have called first. And since they know bloody well not to disturb us…”

“Damn.” Buffy rested her head on Spike’s bare shoulder. “Double damn.”

When the doorbell sounded again, she pulled back, reaching for her shirt. “If this isn’t end of the world, I’m going to kill them.”

“You’ll have to stand in line,” Spike remarked, heading for the front door, without bothering to put his shirt back on. His tune changed as soon as he smelled the blood on Willow. “What happened?” he asked immediately, ushering both of them inside.

“Harmony attacked Willow,” Oz said. “She threatened to come back with a boyfriend.”

“Wait. Harmony’s a vampire?” Buffy asked, coming out of the bedroom. “When did that happen?”

“She was there at graduation,” Oz commented. “I remember seeing her.”

Buffy grimaced. “So she got turned sometime during the fight? Crap. I hate having to stake people I used to know.”

“Why don’t you let me do it?” Spike asked. “I’ll take Wes, and we’ll track her down. If she’s still in town, we’ll find her.”

“Do you really have to?” Willow protested. “I mean, not that I’m for getting eaten, but she didn’t
put up much of a fight. It’s Harmony. It’s not like she’s going to be that much of a threat. I’ll bet she doesn’t even have a boyfriend!”

Buffy sank down on the couch. “I don’t know, Will. Harmony might not be much of a threat, but she’s still a vampire. If she’s attacking people, it’s my job to stop her.”

“I doubt you’d have to do it tonight,” Oz said.

Buffy sighed, then nodded. “Okay, we’ll wait and see what happens. I don’t think it’ll take much to track her down either way.”

“You sure you don’t want me to handle it?” Spike asked. “I don’t mind.”

“I know you don’t,” Buffy replied. “But I want you to myself tonight.”

“Which is our cue to leave,” Willow announced, standing. “Sorry for interrupting.”

Buffy shrugged. “It’s part of the job. I’ll see you sometime tomorrow probably, Willow.”

Spike saw them to the door, and then came back into the living room. “A hero’s work is never done.”

“I’m tired of being a hero,” Buffy said. “I want to be a normal college student for a change.”

“You’d get bored.”

“Probably.” Buffy flopped down onto her back on the couch. “Sometimes I really do hate this job, though. I don’t like having to stake people I know.”

Spike prodded Buffy to lift her head a bit so he could sit down, and then he pulled her down to lay with her head in his lap. “No one does.”
“Did you ever have to stake someone you knew before?”

“Yes.”

That one word was laden with so much emotion, Buffy had no idea how to respond. “Will you tell me about it?”

“It’s not a topic conducive to what we were planning.”

She grabbed onto his hand. “Plans change.” Feeling his tension, she placed a kiss on his palm. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“It was my mum.” Spike waited to see how Buffy would react, if she would pull away from him. It was one of the many things he had never told her, although to be fair, he’d never told anyone what had transpired between him and his mother.

She frowned. “Your mom got turned?” Her green eyes widened in understanding. “You turned her.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

He tried to pull away, but Buffy kept a tight grip on him. “You never told me about your mom before.”

Spike relaxed ever so slightly as he realized that she wasn’t angry. “No, I suppose not.” He was silent for a moment, remembering. “She was sick, yeah? And she wasn’t going to get better. When I was turned, it was—it was the biggest rush. I was powerful for the first time in my life.”

“You wanted to save her.” Buffy thought she could understand. It made a perverted kind of sense. “Then what?”

“She wasn’t my mum,” Spike said simply. “She just looked like her.”
Buffy closed her eyes. “Oh, Spike.”

“Didn’t tell you that to get your pity,” he said, sounding almost angry. “It was over and done with a long time ago.”

Buffy reached up to caress his face. “It doesn’t mean that the hurt is gone.”

“No, it doesn’t,” he agreed.

Buffy shifted so that kissing him wasn’t so awkward. They weren’t exactly picking up where they’d left off. Everything this time was slower, a little gentler, with an edge of wistfulness to it.

Everything slipped away so quickly. No matter what she’d told Spike about savoring their time together, all she really wanted was more of it. They had so little as it was.

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Giles looked around the interior of the small shop with a feeling of satisfaction. There was work to be done, including quite a bit of cleaning before he was ready to do business, but it was serviceable. In time, it might even be profitable.

“You moved on this quickly,” Joyce said from behind him.

He turned. “You came. I didn’t think you’d be able to get away.”

“That’s what assistants are for,” she replied. “I take it you got a good deal on this place.”

Giles shrugged. “There seems to be a rather high turnover of shopkeepers in the area. Something about owners going missing or being killed rather frequently.” His smile was ironic. “I think I might be able to prevent the same from happening to me.”

“I sincerely hope so,” Joyce replied fervently, although with plenty of humor in her voice. “I really don’t think I can do without you.”
Giles bent to steal a quick, heartfelt kiss. “We’ll have to see what we can do about that.”

“What exactly are you planning on selling?” Joyce asked.

“Books, mainly,” Giles replied. “I do have a number of contacts who will most likely pay me to locate and acquire rare volumes, and the more sensitive material I can no doubt entrust to Spike. Otherwise, I plan on selling your typical kinds of stock, possibly some other odds and ends.”

Joyce hesitated, and then asked, “Have you spoken to the bank about a loan, or…” She trailed off, wondering if she was crossing some unspoken boundary. They had never really spoken about finances. Joyce didn’t think that Giles was hurting for money, but the issue had never come up before.

Giles chuckled. “I have enough capital to set myself up.”

Joyce’s eyes widened. She’d been in business long enough to know what kind of money that required. “Oh.”

“I probably haven’t been as forthcoming about that as I should have been,” Giles admitted slowly. “While I am not rich, my family has a certain amount of money. It’s not an inexhaustible source, but I don’t have expensive tastes.”

“So what you’re telling me is that you wouldn’t have to work again,” Joyce commented.

Giles shrugged. “Perhaps, but I’ve found myself rather bored with that prospect.” He looked over at her sheepishly. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything sooner, but I believe you’ll find that most of the old Council families have a great deal of money, and also a great deal of snobbery. I’ve managed to distance myself from both.”

Joyce laughed. “You surprise me,” she admitted. “I was wondering how you were going to manage to take a year off, but I suppose I shouldn’t have worried.”

“Were you really worried?” Giles asked.
“Mildly concerned,” she admitted. Then, softly, “You’re on my mind a lot, Rupert.”

“Not all worry, I hope,” he replied, brushing her hair back from her face with a gentle hand.

“Not all.”

The corners of his lips lifted. “You did realize that the gallery is only a couple of blocks away?”

Joyce returned the smile. “I did notice that as I was walking over.”

“You know, I was thinking,” he said quietly.

“What were you thinking?”

“Thinking about what?”

“About spending more time with you,” Giles replied.

Joyce pulled back slightly. “What were you thinking?”

Seeing her sudden distancing, he shook his head. “Never mind. It’s nothing important.”

She frowned. “Were you thinking about moving in together?”

“I would still keep my apartment,” Giles said quickly. “But I was just thinking…” He stopped. “It was a bad idea.”

“It wasn’t a bad idea,” Joyce said. “It just surprised me, that’s all. I haven’t lived with a man in a very long time, and I hadn’t really given it much thought.”

“Will you think about it?” Giles asked softly. “There’s no rush, of course, but I find myself
unwilling to spend any more time apart from you than I have to.”

When he put it that way, Joyce had a hard time saying no. In truth, she wasn’t even sure why she was hesitating. If Giles kept his apartment, it wouldn’t be like they couldn’t get some time away from each other. Besides, this relationship was very nearly everything she could have ever wanted.

Giles made her feel alive again—like a sexy, desirable woman—in a way she hadn’t experienced since early in her marriage, perhaps since before Buffy was born. Not that her relationship with Hank had been horrible, except for those last couple of years, but before that they had simply been drifting apart. There had been no fire.

If Joyce was to be perfectly honest with herself, she knew that part of her hesitation to take the next step was fear that she would lose that spark. That things would become stale. It was an unjustified concern, but it was there all the same.

“I don’t have to think about it,” she replied. At the disappointment that flashed across his face, she added, “Because I don’t want to spend anymore time away from you than I have to.”

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“So what do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Buffy admitted.

Spike sighed. “I haven’t decided what I’m going to do about it yet. Wesley thinks it might take a weekend or so to get to it. I’m inclined to say that it’s probably going to take a week or more.”

She looked out into the night. They had taken a break from patrolling, stopping to sit in a deserted park. Buffy had her head on Spike’s shoulder, his voice hardly more than a whisper as he told her what he knew about the Gem of Amara. “Part of me would love to walk in the sunlight with you,” she said quietly. “The thought of going to the beach, or…anything really. But what happens when the other vampires figure it out and come after you, Spike?”

“That’s what I said to Wesley,” Spike said. “It’s hard to say. Long as I don’t start spreading it around, I think I might pull it off. Don’t think I’d use it for business much. It would be more for here. For you.”
“I don’t need you to do that for me,” Buffy said. “If you did, if you could be with me all times of the day and night, I would love it. I won’t lie to you. But I fell in love with you knowing that I would never walk in the sunlight with you, Spike. I made my peace with that a long time ago.”

Spike was quiet. “Sometimes I wonder, Buffy. Not that I doubt your word, but you’ve got a life at school that I can’t touch. Boys that’ll see you as I do.”

“Boys,” Buffy said, her tone taking on a scoffing tone. “What do I want with them? What we’ve been through...How could I ever be with anyone else, Spike?”

He kissed her then, tasting her. Spike thought that she tasted of sunlight and hope. If he was to lose her, Spike didn’t know what it would do to him. He wasn’t sure he could live without her at this point—losing Buffy would likely destroy him completely.

Losing Buffy would be like losing hope.

Buffy could sense his desperation, and she wondered why Spike seemed so worried about her affections lately. Possibly for the same reason that she worried about losing him. She loved him so much, and although she thought she might be able to survive it, there was a piece of her that would die.

What Spike was talking about, the Gem of Amara, it could keep him that much safer, even as it put him in more danger.

But it might be worth it.

“I think you should go for it if you want it,” she said when they’d both broken off the kiss.

Spike nodded. “It won’t be today, or even tomorrow, but probably soon.” He raised an eyebrow. “How’s the hunt for Harmony coming?”

Buffy sighed. “I haven’t seen her anywhere. I have no idea where she is, and I don’t know if I even care. I don’t think she’s public enemy number one.”
“From what you’ve told me, I doubt it.” Spike stood, holding out a hand to help her up.

Buffy took it, even though she didn’t need his help. She appreciated the gesture. “When do you leave again?”

“Tomorrow evening,” Spike replied. “We’ve got a short trip to L.A. I’ve got a client there who needs my expert opinion on his security system. I want to introduce him to Wesley.”

“More of the fobbing?” Buffy asked with a smile.

Spike smirked. “Yeah, more of that. We should be back after that for a while, though. Don’t have anything else set up until later in November.”

“Oh! Then you can be my date for Halloween!” Buffy said. “You will, won’t you?”

He gave her a skeptical look. “You do know that vampires don’t celebrate Halloween, don’t you? It’s tacky.”

“It’s a night out with your girlfriend,” Buffy responded. “In costume.”

“I don’t do costumes.”

“Come on, Spike,” Buffy pleaded. “You can protect me from all those big, bad college boys.”

“I’m bigger and badder,” he said, but a smile was beginning to break out on his face. “Right. What should I dress up as?”

Buffy frowned. “We should probably match.” At his horrified expression, she quickly added, “I just meant that we should probably go together. Not like we have to wear the same clothes or anything.”
“I know I’m going to regret this, but why don’t you come up with an idea, and I promise that I’ll go along with it,” Spike offered. “As long as you don’t make me look like a complete prat.”

“I promise to pick something appropriately macho,” Buffy said.

Spike hesitated, then asked, “You mind if I ask Wesley to come along?”

Her eyebrows shot up. “You’re serious?”

“Buffy, I told Wesley to have some fun, and he went off and researched the history of Sunnydale. That’s how we figured out the Gem of Amara was here, so I can’t be disappointed, but he needs some serious help.”

“I’ll say,” Buffy muttered. “I don’t know, Spike. This is supposed to be a fun night out.”

Spike gave her a look. “Let me guess. Willow and Oz are going to be there, and I’ll bet Harris will make an appearance as well.”

Buffy knew exactly what he was referring to. “Yes, if I can ask my friends, you can ask yours,” she conceded. “But you’re going to have to figure out Wesley’s costume on your own.”

“Wes’ll have to figure out his own costume,” Spike shot back.

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“Anya.” Xander waved her into his basement. “Nice to see you again.”

It wasn’t nice, not really. Well, the sex had been good. Anya smelled nice, and she seemed to have a good time, and he certainly had. All in all, it was a hundred times better than his first time. What she’d said though, about being over him—Xander hadn’t appreciated that much.

Not that he had much of an interest in Anya as a girlfriend. She was pretty, but he wasn’t sure he could put up with her for long periods of time.
Then again, that didn’t explain why she’d been on his mind the last few days.

“I wanted to talk to you,” she said. “About what I said.”

Xander frowned. “What you said about what?”

“About being over you,” Anya replied. “I keep thinking about you, and I don’t know why.”

“Then we’re in the same boat,” Xander replied. “Because you’ve kinda been on my mind, too.”

Her whole face lit up at that. “Really?”

“Yeah, really,” Xander replied. “I have no idea why, but I can’t seem to stop thinking about you.”

“Then maybe we could go out sometime,” Anya suggested.

Xander gave her a lop-sided grin. “I think I could be persuaded.” An idea occurred to him. “Hey, you want to go to a party with me?”

“A party?” Anya asked. “Like a date?”

“Yeah, you’ll need a costume, but I think it’ll be fun.”

“What kind of costume?” Anya asked. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Xander shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. Something scary.” He didn’t give her a chance to reply, instead kissing her tentatively, encouraged when she returned the embrace. “I’m glad you came by.”
Anya didn’t reply. She was too busy kissing Xander, while a tiny corner of her brain worked on what she was going to wear for their date.
Chapter 5

“I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud/About thee, as wild vines, about a tree./Put out broad leaves, and soon there’s naught to see/Except the straggling green which hides the wood./Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood/I will not have my thoughts instead of thee/Who are dearer, better! Rather, instantly/Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should…Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee/And breathe within thy shadow a new air,/I do not think of thee—I am too near thee.” ~Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Sonnet XXIX”

Wesley was panting heavily, his shirt soaked through with sweat. He watched Spike warily, knowing that the vampire had no qualms about giving him a few bruises in the name of teaching him a lesson. He gripped the rubber stake tighter, then feinted right, moving to strike from the left at the last moment. He’d thought it was a rather sneaky mode of attack, but Spike recognized the feint for what it was and blocked his movement, putting him on the floor, facedown. “Not bad.”

“Not bad?” Wesley asked, staying on the floor even after Spike released him. “I haven’t managed a hit on you yet tonight.”

“You’re improving, though,” Spike pointed out. “Quite a bit actually. You have to remember that I’ve been doing this for a lot longer than you’ve been alive.”

Wesley pushed himself up off the floor, taking up his defensive posture again wearily. “I’ll just have to take your word for it.”

Spike shook his head. “That’s enough for today. Better get cleaned up. We’ve got to leave for L.A. shortly.”

“You called Cordelia?” Wesley asked, dropping the rubber stake to the floor.

Spike picked up the stake, giving Wesley a stern look. “Never drop your weapons,” he admonished. “Not unless you have to. And, yes, I did call her. We’re picking her up for a late dinner.” He smirked. “Apparently, she could manage to find time for us in her busy social calendar.”

“It will be good to see her again,” Wesley said softly. “I’d like to know that she’s doing well.”
“Sounds like she was.” Spike didn’t say that he knew quite well that Cordelia wouldn’t hesitate to lie in order to keep up appearances. It wasn’t any of his business.

Wesley nodded. “That’s good.”

“You still carrying a torch for her?” Spike asked.

Wesley shrugged uncomfortably. “No, not really. It’s just that…”

“Sure,” Spike said. “Let’s get a move on. We’ll be late otherwise.”

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“Hey, Buffy.”

She looked up to see Parker standing next to her table in the cafeteria. “Hi.”

“Do you mind if I sit down?” he asked.

Buffy actually did mind a little. His attention was flattering, but she knew a guy on the prowl when she saw one, and Parker knew she had a boyfriend. There really wasn’t any way she could politely refuse him a seat, though. “It’s a free country.”

Parker sat down next to her. “So, how’s college life treating you?”

“It’s treating me just great,” Buffy replied. She hadn’t eaten more than half her meal, and there was no way she was going to let Parker chase her off.

“That’s good.” He gave her a charming grin. “I hate to see someone eating alone, so I thought I’d come over and keep you company.”
“That was nice of you,” Buffy replied, thinking that it was nothing of the sort. He was flirting with her full out. If she’d been single, it might have been fun. As it was, it just meant that he was being slimy.

He took a bite of his sandwich. “Where’s your boyfriend tonight? He’s not a student here, is he?”

“He’s already out of school,” Buffy replied. “Spike has his own business.”

“That must be really hard,” Parker observed sympathetically. “With you being on campus all the time, and him not being around. I know I’d hate it.”

Buffy unbent slightly. “It’s no picnic sometimes.”

“Are you doing anything for Halloween?” Parker asked. “I mean, if your boyfriend is going to be out of town, we could do something. Just as friends,” he was quick to assure her.

Buffy was glad she had an excuse—a real one. “We’re going to a party with some friends,” she replied.

“Oh, of course. That’s good,” Parker was quick to say.

“It is.” Buffy gave him a tight smile. “Look, Parker, I’m sure you’re a really nice guy, but Spike’s the jealous kind.”

Parker held up his hands. “Buffy, I wasn’t trying—”

“Yes, you were.” She sighed. “I might be a blonde, but I’m not dumb. Excuse me. I think I’ve got some homework to do.”

Buffy walked away, wondering if she was going to have to put up with Parker’s advances every time he came upon her alone. She really wouldn’t have minded if he weren’t so obvious about flirting. It seemed friendly, but Buffy got the feeling that he was after something other than her company.
In truth, it kind of pissed her off.

Willow was gone when Buffy got back to the room. Buffy was fairly certain that her best friend was off with Oz.

Buffy looked at the phone, wondering if it would make her a clingy girlfriend to call Spike. She knew he was probably on his way to L.A. if he wasn’t there already. Spike turned off his phone when he was in a meeting, so she didn’t have to worry about interrupting him.

Hesitating only a moment more, Buffy picked up the phone, quickly dialing Spike’s number. He picked up on the second ring. “You all right, luv?” he asked immediately.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Buffy asked brightly, when in truth she was missing him with an ache she couldn’t deny.

“The fact that you’re calling me seems to indicate otherwise,” Spike pointed out. “You rarely call when I’m out on a trip.”

“Is this a bad time?” Buffy asked. “I mean, if you can’t talk that’s fine.”

Spike chuckled. “We’ve got a half hour before we hit L.A., so as long as you don’t mind Wes listening in on my half of the conversation, it’s a perfect time.”

Buffy didn’t know what to say. “Maybe I should call back some other time. I don’t want you to be too distracted when you’re driving.”

“If you don’t talk to me, I’m going to be distracted with worrying,” Spike replied. “What’s wrong, luv?”

“Nothing. Really.” She sighed. “I just wanted to hear your voice.”

There was a long silence. “You know, if I didn’t have to take this meeting, I’d turn the car around
right now,” Spike finally said.

“I know.” Buffy held onto the phone, not wanting to break the connection, and yet not wanting to admit to just how deep her need for him went.

“What happened, Buffy?”

“Nothing big,” Buffy assured him. She wouldn’t put it past Spike to do something rash to warn Parker off. “Nothing I can’t handle on my own. In fact, I think I’m going to patrol tonight. Maybe see what I can dig up on Harmony and those disappearances you were talking about.”

“Be careful,” Spike warned her. “They did say demon disappearances, but there’s no guarantee that humans aren’t a target. The student population is big enough so you probably wouldn’t hear about kids going missing, judging on how long that Sunday bitch had been operating.”

“I’ll be careful,” Buffy assured him. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow sometime?”

“We’re coming back tomorrow evening,” he replied. “Meet you then?”

“You’d better,” Buffy replied. “I’ll see you.”

“Love you, Buffy.”

“I love you, too.”

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The meeting with the client went as well as Spike had expected it to. He’d had a feeling that Robert and Wesley would get along swimmingly, and he’d been right. Within a few minutes of the first introductions, they were debating the best way to authenticate ancient artifacts, leaving Spike to look on in amusement.

Robert gave them both a firm handshake on their way out, clapping Spike on the shoulder
approvingly. “You made a good choice in Wesley here, Spike,” he said, his odd silver eyes shining. “If I hear you’re not treating him right, I’ll snatch him up.”

“You know better than that, Robbie,” Spike replied. “I know a good man when I see one.”

“That you do,” he said jovially, waving them out the door.

“Is he completely human?” Wesley asked as Spike drove away. “His eyes...”

“No, he’s not, but I’ve never asked which family member he takes after,” Spike replied. “It’s my understanding that he can pass well enough when he wants to. Doesn’t matter around me, though.”

“No, I suppose not,” Wesley replied, falling silent.

Spike glanced over at him. “Something wrong, mate?”

“No.” The man frowned. “Most of your clients aren’t human,” he pointed out.

“That’s right.” Spike didn’t take his eyes off the road. “You got a problem with that?”

“No, it’s just...” Wesley searched for the words. “They’ve all been remarkably kind to me.”

Spike shrugged. “You’re with me, which will buy you a certain amount of leeway.” He sighed. “You’re not going to give me the Council’s ‘all demons are evil’ rhetoric, are you?”

“How can I?” Wesley asked. “The evidence doesn’t support the Council’s conclusions. I’ve seen that with my own eyes. I just don’t understand how they could have been so wrong.”

Spike was silent for a long moment. “It’s easier living in a world that’s black and white, where you can distinguish your enemies on sight. You start looking into the shades of gray, and you’ve got to ask yourself some hard questions, and when you’re in the middle of a war, you might not feel like you can do that.”
“How can you not do that?” Wesley demanded. “You end up destroying innocents, or good people, for lack of a better word. You lose your chance at recruiting allies that may make a difference to the final outcome. It’s short sighted and—” He broke off.

Spike smiled. “I’m glad you see that.”

“You didn’t think that I would.”

“I had my hopes.” Spike took a sharp corner with ease. “Figured if you’d go to bat for me with the Council there’d be hope for you.” He considered his next words carefully. “When we get back to Sunnydale, I want to start taking you around to some of my contacts there. They’re nervous around the Slayer, but they might talk to you, and it might become necessary to have a second contact person.”

“Are you expecting trouble?” Wesley asked.

Spike shook his head. “I don’t know what I’m expecting, but I don’t like the rumors I’m hearing.”

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The campus was curiously demon-free, so Buffy headed to one of the nearby cemeteries. She’d been keeping an eye out for Harmony, but the vampire had been a no-show so far. As was the rest of the demon population, apparently.

Buffy wondered what it was exactly that was causing the dearth of the undead around the campus. Spike had been concerned, which worried her. Spike rarely got freaked out, so if his spider-sense was going haywire, there was a damn good reason for it.

She was walking back towards campus when she heard a commotion. There was a brief shout—quickly cut off—and then scuffling sounds that signaled some kind of fight. Buffy approached the source of the noise carefully, keeping in mind Spike’s warning and the fact that she didn’t have backup.

By the time she reached the area where she judged the cry to have come from there was no one
there, although she could detect signs of a struggle. Buffy frowned, putting her stake away and looking around. She turned from the spot, heading back towards her dorm—and ran straight into a very solid chest.

“Buffy!”

She looked up, startled to see Riley standing there. “Oh, hey, Riley. What are you doing out here?”

“I could ask you the same thing.” He had grabbed her upper arms to steady her, and now he gave her a look of concern. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?” Buffy asked, taking a step back. She was a little surprised to see the TA from her psychology class wandering around campus in the middle of the night. He didn’t seem like the partying sort, and she couldn’t smell any alcohol on him. Buffy knew she couldn’t press him for information without risking him doing the same, however. “I just wanted to get a breath of fresh air.”

“Right,” he replied. “Can I walk you back to your dorm?”

Buffy was going to tell him that she would be fine, but she had the feeling that he would insist on it. “Sure. Thanks.”

They walked side by side in silence for a few minutes before Riley asked, “Are you enjoying Professor Walsh’s class?”

“Oh, yeah,” Buffy replied. “It’s great. I’m all about the psychology.”

Riley nodded enthusiastically. “It’s a fascinating subject. I feel as though I’ve learned so much from her.”

“I know what you mean,” Buffy agreed. “Knowing how people tick is fun. Willow’s the brainy one, though. She’s a little more into that sort of thing. You know, school and all.”

“Where is she tonight?” Riley asked. When Buffy gave him a sharp look, he quickly said, “Not that
Buffy shrugged. “Willow’s out with her boyfriend, and my boyfriend is out of town. I just thought I’d take a walk, maybe it would help me sleep.”

“Does your boyfriend go to school here?” Riley asked.

Buffy shook her head. “No, he’s out of school, although sometimes I wish he did go here. It would be easier.”

Riley gave her a sympathetic look. “You missing him?”

“Kind of,” Buffy admitted. “Plus, it might prevent some of the more pushy sorts from pushing their luck.” Riley looked alarmed, and she hastened to assure him, “Not you. There’s another guy. Parker. He’s been persistently flirty.”

Riley hesitated, then said, “I know I’m probably out of line, but you need to watch out for Parker. He’s not a great guy.”

“That was the impression I was beginning to get,” Buffy replied. She pointed to the brick building rising in front of them. “This is me.”

Riley smiled at her. “Okay. Hey, Buffy? Be careful out after dark. I know it seems like a pretty safe campus, but a lot of strange folks come out at night.”

“Will do,” she replied. Buffy went into her dorm feeling pretty good about her evening. Riley’s platonic concern was rather soothing.

He really was a nice guy.
Spike couldn’t deny that Cordelia looked good. He’d asked if she’d lost weight and watched as she preened a bit. Wesley had seemed gratified at her excitement upon seeing him, flushing slightly when she’d hugged him hard.

He had chosen a fairly nice restaurant, having a feeling that it had been a long time since Cordelia had been able to dine out in a nice place, even though she kept insisting that her life was wonderful.

“My agent tells me that I’ll get my big break any day now,” Cordelia said.

“Have you had many auditions?” Wesley asked.

She nodded. “Tons, but that’s the way it is, you know. They almost chose me—well, my hands—for a lotion commercial. I’m taking some acting classes, and doing auditions, and life is really great. Coming to L.A. was the best thing for me.”

Spike could hear the brittleness in her voice that said she was lying. Things weren’t nearly as peachy as she insisted they were, so he made a note to keep a closer eye on the chit. She had brass, which he admired in a girl. He’d just have to make sure that he and Wesley made runs up to L.A. a little more frequently.

“I’m glad you’re doing well, pet,” he said. “This is a tough town.”

She waved a hand breezily. “I’m tougher.”

“Sure you are,” he replied.

Spike listened as Wesley questioned her about the other aspects of life in the big city, and Cordelia discussed the clubs and restaurants as if she regularly saw the inside of them. He found that hard to believe, but he didn’t say anything about it.

Not until Wesley had left the table to use the facilities, anyway. “You really doing okay?”

“Sure, I’m fine,” Cordelia replied, but she wouldn’t meet his eyes.
Spike nodded, then scribbled down an address on a piece of paper. "Look, if that agent doesn’t start getting you some work, check out this guy. It’s a bit of a different angle, but he might be able to help."

"Is he a demon?" Cordelia asked.

Spike shrugged. "Yeah, but this guy’s a different sort of demon. He runs a club. I’ve been there a few times, and we’ve talked. He’s a decent bloke, and he’ll be able to point you in the right direction."

Cordelia stared at the address, feeling as though someone had just tossed her a lifeline. Her parents were basically out of the picture, and no one in Sunnydale seemed to care whether she lived or died. She barely knew Spike, but here he was helping her out.

And taking her out to dinner. Cordelia couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a meal this good.

"Thanks," she said, meeting his eyes, all pretense gone.

Spike nodded. "Anytime."

Wesley came back to the table, and the conversation turned once again to other matters, but Spike felt satisfied that he’d done what he could.

He just hoped that it was enough.
“My cup is empty to-night./Cold and dry are its sides,/Chilled by the wind from the open window./Empty and void, it sparkles white in the moonlight./The room is filled with the strange scent of the wisteria blossoms./They sway in the moon’s radiance/And tap against the wall./But the cup of my heart is still./And cold, and empty./When you come, it brims/Red and trembling with blood./Heart’s blood for your drinking;/To fill your mouth with love/And the bitter-sweet taste of a soul.” ~Amy Lowell, “Absence”

Spike didn’t broach the topic of the party until they were settling into their hotel room for the night. Wesley turned to stare at him. “You what?”

“I’m going to a Halloween party with Buffy, and you’re invited,” Spike replied. “Costume required.”

Wesley snorted. “Very funny, Spike.”

“I’m serious,” Spike said. “Look, the last time I told you to go out and have fun, you spent your time researching the history of Sunnydale.”

Wesley shrugged uncomfortably. “I found out where the gem was, didn’t I?”

“That’s not the point,” Spike replied. “The point is that you wouldn’t know a good time if it bit you in the arse.”

Wesley sighed. “Spike, I hardly think that spending an evening at a Halloween party with people who despise me constitutes fun. I am not a glutton for punishment, whatever you might believe.”

“They don’t despise you.”

“Please.” Wesley looked over at him. “They think I’m useless.”

“You were useless,” Spike retorted. “You’re not anymore. You want them to think differently of you? You’ll have to do something about that.”
“What’s the point?” Wesley demanded.

“Remember what I said about introducing you to my sources?” Spike asked. “It’s the same principle.”

Wesley didn’t like what he was hearing. “You’re speaking as though something is going to happen to you.”

“Better safe than sorry,” was all Spike would say.

Wesley sighed. “I’ll go to the party if you insist.”

“I do,” Spike said. “It’ll be good for you.”

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Buffy took Spike at his word, slipping into the empty townhouse in the early afternoon. Willow was with a study group, getting ready for the last of her midterms, and Buffy had just wanted to get away from the campus.

She wondered how much trouble she’d have convincing Spike to wear the costume she’d gotten for him. From the little he’d told her of his past, and the scant bits of information Giles had been able to give her, Buffy had managed to figure out when Spike had been turned.

One of the costume shops in town had had what she wanted, so she’d paid the rental fee, hoping that Spike wouldn’t turn her down cold. Buffy just thought that it would be kind of fun to dress up as a Victorian couple for the evening.

Minus the corset, anyway. It might be Halloween, and therefore unlikely to require much slaying on her part, but she wanted to be able to breathe.

Briefly, Buffy wondered if Spike had asked Wesley to come, and what he would wear if he did tag
along. It seemed strange for the ex-Watcher to be accompanying them to a party with a bunch of people years younger, but then again, Spike probably felt the same way.

Not for the first time did Buffy wonder about the difference in age, and what it was going to mean for the future. If she stuck college out, she had another three and a half years to look forward to, although she probably wouldn’t live on campus the entire time. In fact, after this year, she would see if Spike minded her moving in with him.

When she’d been with Angel, Buffy hadn’t thought about that sort of thing. It had been enough that they were in love, because love conquers all.

Then he’d lost his soul, and Buffy had learned what a lie that was.

Now, Buffy knew that she and Spike loved each other, and that they had a good shot at making things work, but there were times when the doubt ate at her. When she wondered how all of this was going to work out in the long run.

The thought of losing him, though…

She turned at the sound of the garage door opening. “Buffy?”

“I’m in here,” she replied, coming out of the living room.

Spike wrapped her in his arms, and Buffy could smell cigarette smoke and leather. “Hey.”

“Hey there.” Their chaste embrace turned heated when he met her lips with his own.

“Tell me we don’t have to be anywhere,” Spike said.

Buffy pushed his jacket off of his shoulders, feeling suddenly desperate for him, to feel him. “We don’t have to be anywhere. Party’s tomorrow night. We’ve got twenty-four hours.”

“Good. It might take that long,” Spike replied.
Harmony knew she hadn’t had a prayer against the guys who grabbed her. They had all been bigger, and they’d shot her with a taser before she’d had a chance to run.

She had no idea where she was, but the blood that kept dropping from the ceiling tasted kind of funny, and she was beginning to feel really claustrophobic. There weren’t any personal grooming tools available, and she wanted her makeup bag and a chance to get cleaned up like nobody’s business.

Her favorite stuffed unicorn would have been nice to have, too.

There was a demon in another cell across the way from her, and Harmony had spoken to the vampire on one side a couple of times. She’d noticed that the soldiers would sometimes pass with a demon or a vampire on a gurney, unconscious.

Harmony hadn’t seen them bring anyone back yet.

The first day she’d yelled plenty, trying to tell them that they’d made a mistake; that she hadn’t done whatever it was they thought she’d done. The vampire next to her had laughed, telling her that the only thing she’d done was to be a vampire.

So then she’d started yelling about how it was discrimination, and they’d better let her out or she would sue them. Harmony knew that it was an idle threat, but people usually listened to her dad when he said the same thing. It wouldn’t hurt to try the technique herself.

Harmony had no idea how long she’d been in this strange prison. She’d lost track of the days, after the first couple. It was kind of disturbing not knowing what time it was, or what day it was. She wanted nothing more than to be able to go home.

Harmony had never felt so helpless in her life.
“You have got to be kidding me,” Spike said flatly when he saw the costume. “I’m not wearing that.”

Buffy frowned. “Why not? I thought it would be fun.” She held up her dress. “See? It’s not any worse than what I’m wearing.” The stubborn expression on his face remained. “What’s the real problem, Spike?”

“Nothing,” he replied, knowing that if he kept making a fuss, Buffy would insist on knowing what had put his back up. “It’s fine. I’ll wear it.”

“Oh, no, you don’t, mister,” Buffy said. “You freaked when you saw that costume. What’s up?”

“It’s nothing,” he repeated, stripping off his jeans and heading for the shower.

Spike heard the door open a few minutes later. “That exit would have been a lot more effective if you’d locked the door, you know.”

“Buffy—”

She slipped in behind him, putting her arms around his waist. “You know as well as I do that this shower isn’t big enough for two people, but here I am anyway. Will you at least tell me what it is you won’t tell me?”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Spike muttered.

“Ballpark idea?”

“Figured you already knew that I wasn’t much as a human, Buffy.” Spike sighed, twisting in her embrace. “It’s not a time I like to remember.”

She winced. “I’m sorry, Spike. I just thought it would be fun. I thought it might be cool to dress up like the girls you liked back then.”
“If you were a girl I liked back then, you wouldn’t have given me a second’s notice,” Spike replied dryly.

Buffy stared at him in disbelief. “Spike, I know you can’t see yourself in a mirror, but you’re gorgeous. You can’t have changed that much.”

“More than you know,” he murmured.

She set her jaw. “Just because those other girls were too stupid to know a good thing when they saw it doesn’t mean I would be. I’ll bet I’d have been head over heels.”

Spike’s face softened, even as he raised a skeptical eyebrow. “That right? Took you long enough to fall for me in the first place.”

“Grief has a tendency to short circuit a person’s brain,” she replied.

“Know how that can be,” he acknowledged.

Their shower turned into a game to see who could get clean the fastest, and who could hog the most hot water, considering that it would only hit one of them at a time.

Spike felt strange as he put on the Victorian garb. It was like putting on the skin of a man he’d long since outgrown. He fumbled with the neck cloth, trying to remember how to tie it properly without the benefit of having a mirror. “Buffy, I—” He stopped, his memories assaulting him as he saw her in the Victorian dress, reminiscent of another time. Of another girl, who had turned him down so cruelly.

“You look really good,” she commented softly, reaching up to straighten out his cravat. “Very handsome.”

“You look amazing, luv.” There she was, checking him over. In another time, another place, they might have been married. It did something to him, to be in this clothing, to see Buffy dressed as she was.
She touched his cheek. “So you’re not mad at me for picking out these costumes?”

“No, I’m not.” Spike took a deep, unnecessary breath. “We’d better go. Wes is going to be waiting for us.”

“Let’s go, then.” Buffy smiled at him. “They might have been blind, Spike, but I’m not.”

Spike didn’t have to ask who she was referring to.

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Wesley shifted uncomfortably. “Whom are we meeting?” he asked, resisting the urge to tug at his collar. The fact that neither Spike nor Buffy had laughed at his costume should have been reassuring, but Wesley was still unsure about this whole thing. He wasn’t the party-going sort.

“Relax, Sherlock,” Spike said. “We’ve got two more couples on the way. They’ll meet us at the frat house.”

Spike and Buffy were walking ahead, Wesley trailing them like a disconsolate third wheel. The tweed he was wearing, along with the cape and hat he’d been able to locate on such short notice, were hot and itchy. Late October in California bore no resemblance to the cooler temperatures of his native England. What he wouldn’t give for a gloomy day.

Wesley heard a noise behind them, and he turned to look. Four men were crossing the path, all of them dressed in black and wearing masks. Even though it was Halloween, and it was entirely conceivable that they were planning on attending the very same party—or another just like it—the sight triggered his suspicions. They didn’t move like college students on their way to a party, and Wesley opened his mouth to say something to Spike.

He stopped, seeing Spike lean in and whisper something into Buffy’s ear, causing the Slayer to giggle. Wesley’s stomach twisted as he wondered if Spike was talking about him, and all thoughts of the strange men were blocked by his own insecurity.

“Wes!” Spike looked over his shoulder. “You coming or not?”
Wesley quickened his pace, although it was more because he didn’t want to broadcast his concerns across the entire campus. “I don’t know that this is a good idea,” he said. “What if there’s an emergency? One of us ought to be on duty, and really, I don’t mind.”

Buffy raised an eyebrow. “You know, Wesley, as much as I appreciate the offer, it’s Halloween. Do yourself a favor and loosen up.” He appeared so affronted by her suggestion that she rolled her eyes. “And I would be saying that to Willow in this situation, too. In fact, I think I have said the same thing to Willow.”

“What exactly are we doing?” Wesley asked, wanting to get the focus off of his inability to have a good time.

“Haunted house,” Buffy replied. “Oz said it’s pretty decent, although I’m expecting to be more amused than scared. It’s kind of hard to take a haunted house seriously after you’ve watched the Mayor turn into a big snake.”

Wesley fervently hoped that he wouldn’t do anything to embarrass himself. “Right.”

“The party upstairs is what’s worth seeing, according to Oz,” Buffy continued. She glanced over at Spike. “We don’t have to stay for long if you don’t want to. I know it’s a college scene.”

“Let’s just see how it goes,” Spike suggested. “We’ll play things by ear.”

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Joyce bit her lip to stifle the laughter that was bubbling up. Giles looked so pleased with himself that she didn’t want to break it to him that he looked absolutely ridiculous. “You look festive.”

Giles hesitated and then removed the big sombrero. “It’s too much, isn’t it?”

“Well, I don’t know about too much,” she replied.
Giles knew when she was hiding something from him. “I thought it would be fun. You’re bound to have children come by tonight.”

She didn’t say that she’d had every intention of leaving the porch light off, but Giles had the costume, and Joyce had bought candy, which meant that she really didn’t have a good excuse for avoiding the trick-or-treaters, even if she wanted to. “I’m sure they’ll appreciate it.” Joyce headed into the kitchen, sensing Giles right behind her.

It was still strange. Giles still had his apartment, as he’d said, but he spent nearly every night with her now. There was a part of Joyce—a very small part—that missed the silence of an empty house. She’d only just begun getting used to Buffy being gone. A part of her wanted to see what it would have been like to live completely alone for longer than a couple of months.

At the same time, it was so nice to wake up next to someone in the morning, to be able to watch television at night and look up to see another person there. It felt right to bicker over groceries, and what they should have, to feel lips and hands at unexpected and not pre-arranged times.

In many ways, it was better than anything Joyce had ever experienced with Hank. She felt bad thinking that, in a way. While her first husband hadn’t been perfect, he hadn’t been a villain either. Looking back now, though, Joyce had to look through the fights, the attempts to stay civil during the divorce, the look of disappointment on Buffy’s face when her father let her down.

Joyce had loved Hank, and she couldn’t regret that, not when she’d gotten Buffy out of the deal. Now, however, with Giles, there was a mutuality to their relationship, brought about by time, and age, and possibly a little wisdom.

Oddly enough, when Giles put on that silly sombrero, it only made her love him more.

“You know, we could turn the porch light off,” Giles offered.

She laughed. “After you went to all that trouble to dress up? I don’t think so.”

Giles sighed. “A man can try, I suppose.”

“It was a very good try.” Joyce smiled at him. “Are you hungry? I could make us something.”
“Why don’t you let me cook tonight?” he suggested. “You’ve been on your feet all day.”

She sat down gratefully, watching as Giles started pulling foodstuffs out of the fridge. There were actually quite a few reasons that she loved him.

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They weren’t waiting long. Willow and Oz were the first to join them, and the redhead beamed at Buffy and Spike. “You guys look great!” Then, glancing at Wesley, she added, “Oh, so do you, Wesley.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled, beginning to think that he had made a huge mistake.

Spike shrugged. “It was Buffy’s idea, so she gets all the credit—or the blame.”

Buffy gave him a dirty look and swatted him on the chest. “Thanks so much.” She grinned at Willow. “You look good, too, Will. Who are you again?”

“Joan of Arc,” Willow said proudly.

Spike raised an eyebrow, looking over at Oz, who didn’t appear to be in costume at all. “And you, mate?”

Oz pulled aside his flannel shirt to reveal a nametag that read: “Hello, my name is: God.”

“Joan of Arc had a very close relationship with God,” Willow supplied.

Spike snickered. “Where’s Harris?”

“Right behind you, actually,” Xander said. “Any’s coming. She said she was going to be a little late.”
“Do you think we should go ahead?” Willow asked. “I’m in the party mood.”

Xander shrugged. “I don’t know. You guys can go ahead. I can wait here for her.”

“By the way, what are you supposed to be?” Buffy asked. Xander was wearing a tux, but that didn’t give her a lot to go on.

“Bond. James Bond,” Xander replied, trying to sound suave and not quite making it. “I figured if we got caught in some freaky Halloween spell again, I’d at least end up somebody cool.”

“Either that or you’ll end up being head waiter-guy,” Buffy pointed out, amused.

Xander sighed. “Yeah, that would be just my luck.” He glanced around, looking for Anya. “Why don’t you guys go on ahead? We’ll catch up.”

Spike leaned in towards Buffy as they walked away. “What did he mean by the ‘freaky Halloween spell?’” he asked. His imitation of Xander wasn’t too bad.

“Where did you learn how to do an American accent?” Buffy asked.

Spike shrugged. “There are times when the accent makes you stand out when you want to blend in. You’re not answering me.”

“Oh, this guy, Ethan Rayne did a spell.” Buffy shrugged. “Remember the band candy?”

“Yeah,” Spike replied with a grin.

“It was like that, only worse.”

“Worse?”
Willow, who had been following the conversation with amusement, added in, “Buffy means it was worse because she was affected.”

“Affected how?” Spike asked, his grin growing.

Willow shrugged. “She dressed up like an 18th century woman, and that’s pretty much how she acted. It was very un-Slayer-like. Oh, and I was a ghost. That was weird.”

“You were a gorgeous ghost,” Oz murmured.

Willow looked puzzled. “I don’t remember seeing you.”

“I was driving the van, and you were walking across the street,” Oz replied. “I wanted to get to know you.”

Willow flushed, beaming at him. “I have the best boyfriend in the world.”

“I think I’d have to argue with you over that one,” Buffy said.

And Wesley trailed them inside the frat house, now feeling like a fifth wheel.
“If only love would spread its savor through me!—not to go one moment more without spring!/What I sold into sorrow was only my hands/dearest: now leave me with your kisses./Shut out the month’s light with your fragrance;/close all the doors with your hair./Only do not forget, if I wake up crying/it’s only because in my dream I’m a lost child/hunting through the leaves of the night for your hands,/for your caresses like the wheat,/the flashing rapture of shadow and energy./O my dearest, nothing but shadow there/where you walk with me through your dream:/you tell me when the light returns.”
~Pablo Neruda, “Sonnet XXI”

Xander scuffed the bottom of his shoe on the pavement, wondering when Anya was going to arrive. He just hoped that this evening wouldn’t be as big of a fiasco as prom had been. He glanced up, and his eyes widened as he caught sight of her.

He’d suggested she dress as something scary, and she decided on a fuzzy, pink bunny costume?

“Hi,” she said.

Xander had no idea what to say other than, “What are you wearing?”

“You said to dress as something scary.” Anya glanced down at her costume and back up at Xander. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head, trying to figure out how to put it. “You’re wearing a bunny costume.”

“Yes.” Anya’s voice was impatient. “Bunnies are scary.”

There were some things in the world that it was better not to question, so Xander just shrugged. If Anya got scared by bunnies, it wasn’t as strange as some of the other things he’d seen.

“Let’s go,” Xander said. “I told the others that we’d meet them there.”
Anya fell into step beside him, moving rather slowly in her bulky costume. Xander couldn’t help wishing she’d worn something a little more exciting. For instance, a *Playboy* bunny costume. That was something he could get behind. “Why exactly are we going to this party?”

Xander frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s not like you’re a student,” Anya pointed out. “Isn’t this a party for students? I don’t even know why you hang out with these people.”

“They’re my friends,” he replied defensively. “It’s a Halloween party, and it’s Halloween. If you have a problem with that, you didn’t have to come.”

“I didn’t say that,” Anya muttered, sounding disgruntled. “I just don’t know what you have in common.”

Xander wasn’t sure how to answer that, so he settled for avoiding the question. “We’ve saved the world together. That’s all we need to have in common.” They arrived in front of the frat house. “Here it is.”

Anya blinked. “Okay. Where’s the door?”

Xander frowned, realizing that they were in the front of the building, but the door was nowhere to be seen. He looked down at the welcome mat. Knocking on the wall, he called out, “Buffy? Willow? You guys in there?”

Anya backed up, looking at the front of the building. “Xander!” she called, pointing above her.

Xander moved to see what she was looking at, and he could see a girl pounding on the glass of one of the windows. “Help me! Please, help!” Then, impossibly, the stone around the window moved, so that all that was left was a blank wall.

Xander swallowed. “Okay, this isn’t good.”

“No, it really isn’t,” Anya agreed.
“I think we should find Giles.” Xander grabbed Anya’s hand, leading her away from the frat house. “He’ll know what to do.”

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“This is the big party?” Spike asked, glancing around. He wasn’t terribly impressed.

Oz frowned. “Yeah. I thought there would be more people.”

“You know, this might actually be scary if I wasn’t dating a vampire,” Buffy remarked dryly.

Willow giggled. “I’m sure it’s exciting for normal people, Buffy.”

Wesley was getting the creeps, although he wasn’t going to say anything about it. He didn’t want to appear to be a coward in front of the others. Instead, he took a step closer to the cobweb covered doorway and put out a tentative hand. “These feel real,” he murmured.

“Frat boys aren’t known for their cleaning,” Oz remarked.

There was a crash, and they all turned to see a mangled skeleton with a plastic knife on the floor. Spike shrugged sheepishly. “Jumped out at me. I don’t react well to surprises.” He raised an eyebrow. “You’ve got something on your shoulder, Wes.”

Wesley glanced over, his eyes widening as he saw the tarantula. “Bloody hell,” he muttered, not wanting to touch it. “Spike?”

Spike raised his hands. “Don’t think so, mate. I’m not a fan of the eight-legged buggers.”

“Spike,” Buffy said, drawing out his name in exasperation. She reached up and brushed the creature off of Wesley’s shoulder. “There. It’s all gone.”
“You sure?” he asked, taking a deep breath.

“Absolutely,” Buffy said, giving him a reassuring smile.

Willow had a freaked-out expression on her face. “Okay, that’s not sanitary.”

Buffy frowned. “Did you guys hear that?”

Oz cocked his head. “I don’t hear anything.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “Yeah. Some kind of squeaking noise.” He glanced up. “Oh, bugger.”

The bats came swooping down from the ceiling, and all of them hit the floor, covering their heads with their arms instinctively. Once the flurry of bat-wings had stopped, they all stood. Oz bent over to pick up one of the bats that lay on the floor.

“Oh, Oz, don’t,” Willow warned him. “I don’t think—”

Oz picked it up, where it flopped lifelessly in his hand. “It’s rubber.”

“Those weren’t rubber,” Wesley insisted, the edge of hysteria in his voice. “They flew.”

“I have to agree with Wes,” Willow said. “That was definitely real.”

“Release me!”

Spike looked around, hearing the sound. “That wasn’t manufactured. Something’s wrong.” He and Buffy took the lead, moving into the next room. “I smell blood.”

Buffy knelt down, pressing her fingers to a spot on the carpet and then examining the smear on them. “This isn’t good.”
“I think maybe we need to get out of here,” Willow said. “Come back with reinforcements. And weapons.”

“Think you lot ought to get out anyway,” Spike agreed. “Buffy and I can make sure there isn’t anyone else here.”

They went back in the direction of the main entrance, but the door had disappeared along with the stairs. “Okay, where did the door go?” Willow asked.

“And the stairs?” Oz glanced around. “Does anybody else hear that?”

Spike nodded absently. “Yeah. Somewhere around here.”

“Closet,” Buffy said, pointing at the door. She opened it, revealing a dark-skinned boy rocking back and forth, muttering under his breath.

Oz rushed up to the door. “Chaz.”

“I didn’t know,” Chaz said desperately.

“What’s going on?” Oz asked gently.

“It’s, ah, it’s alive.” He rocked himself. “I didn’t know.”

“What’s going on?” Buffy asked, her tone insistent.

“Buffy…” Spike warned her. The boy was obviously in shock. They weren’t going to get any sense out of him. Wesley’s wordless cry of warning had him turning in time to deflect the knife. The blade cut through his coat sleeve and shirt, leaving a shallow cut that stained the fabric.

Buffy kicked back, and the skeleton collapsed. Wesley squatted down next to the plastic skeleton.
It still held the knife in bony fingers. “It’s plastic.”

“Okay,” Buffy said. “Willow, Oz, Wesley, I want you guys to find the exit and use it. Spike and I will look around for anyone else who might be trapped.”

“What about Chaz?” Oz asked.

They all looked at the wall where the closet had been located. Chaz, and the door, had disappeared. “Let him be,” Spike said. “Figure he’ll be safe enough tucked away.”

“Hiding in a closet doesn’t seem like such a bad idea,” Oz murmured.

“You’re telling me,” Wesley muttered in response.

Willow shook her head. “Buffy, it isn’t safe. We’re not going to leave you here.”

“I’ll have Spike to watch my back,” Buffy disagreed. “I don’t want to have to worry about you guys, too.”

Willow glared at her. “What about magic? I might be able to do a conjuring spell to lead us out.”

“Willow, your spells are fifty-fifty at best,” Buffy replied.

“But—”

“Enough.” Spike’s voice cut through the argument. “Something’s going on here. Splitting up seems like our best option. You lot can go, find Giles, see if you can’t figure out a way to reverse whatever’s going on. Buffy and I can take care of ourselves.”

“Are you certain?” Wesley ventured. He wanted to leave very badly, but he thought that he would at least make the offer to stay. “Perhaps it would be better to stay together.”
Spike shook his head. “No. You get out. Find Rupert and see if he can’t work his magic on the books to figure out what’s going on.” Spike headed out after Buffy, who had already marched off into the interior of the house.

Wesley was hurt that Spike wouldn’t think him capable of figuring out what was going on and fixing it. It made him feel like a burden, like he was useless.

Willow stomped off out of the room. “It’s just a little conjuring spell. It’s like Buffy doesn’t think I can contribute. I contribute! I’ve made plenty of contributions!”

“Perhaps it would be best not to add magic to magic,” Wesley suggested tentatively. “If there is something magical going on, doing another spell while under its influence—”

Willow scoffed. “Like you know what you’re talking about. You can’t even defend yourself from a vampire.”

Wesley drew himself up. “Excuse me? Who was the one who did the truth spell on Faith?”

“There used to be windows on this floor,” Oz said, breaking into their imminent fight.

“Well, there are stairs,” Willow commented. “I’ll bet Buffy doesn’t find stairs.”

“Easy, Will,” Oz cautioned her.

Wesley hesitated before following them up. “Perhaps we should be finding a way to go out rather than up.”

“Scaredy-cat,” Willow accused.

“We’re in an actual haunted house,” Wesley shot back. “Only a complete imbecile wouldn’t feel some fear.”

Willow rolled his eyes. “So says the guy that’s scared of every little thing.”
“I am not! I—”

“Uh, guys?” Oz said. “I hate to interrupt, but I’ve got bad news.”

Wesley and Willow both turned to look at him. Oz was obviously in the middle of changing. Willow shook her head frantically. “You can’t change! It’s not the full moon!”

“I can’t stop it,” Oz said, his voice slightly distorted from the beginnings of the changes in his facial features. “You have to get out of here.” He gave Wesley a desperate look. “You have to keep her safe from me.”

Wesley swallowed hard, nodding. He took Willow’s arm, tugging her back. “Willow—”

“No! We have to find chains or ropes or something to restrain you. Oz…”

“Get out of here!” he shouted, then turned and ran, stumbling down the hall.

Willow twisted free of Wesley’s hold. “Oz! Wait!”

She took off running after Oz, and Wesley stared after her uncertainly. He finally decided that his best bet was to stay as close to her as possible. He just hoped that Oz didn’t bite either one of them. The last thing Wesley needed was to become a werewolf.

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“Crap,” Xander muttered, as he realized their mistake. They should have checked the Summers’ residence first. Or called first. They didn’t seem to be able to rely on Giles being home anymore just as a matter of course. “Let’s go.”

Anyahad pulled off the headpiece, and she hurried to keep up with Xander. “Where are we going now?” she asked wearily. “And why?”
“Why?” Xander repeated. “We need to help Buffy and the others. They’re stuck inside that house. We’re going to Buffy’s house, because I’m betting that’s where Giles is.”

“Why would Giles be at Buffy’s house?” Anya asked, a little confused.

“Because he’s dating Buffy’s mom, and they’re joined at the hip,” Xander replied, a little impatiently. “Come on, An. We need to hurry.”

Anya sighed. “This costume isn’t the easiest to move in, Xander. I’m going as fast as I can.”

Xander slowed his pace a bit to accommodate her. “Sorry, An. It’s just that my friends are in danger.”

Having already asked why Xander was friends with people with whom he had nothing in common, Anya didn’t feel like repeating herself. “Fine.”

They hurried on in silence, both of them stealing occasional glances at each other. As far as dates went, it wasn’t turning out to be much of a success. When they finally reached 1630 Revello, Xander rushed up the front walk, leaving Anya behind, punching the doorbell repeatedly.

Giles answered the door, still in his poncho, although it was slightly awry at this point. “Happy Hall—Xander.” He frowned. “I thought you all were going to a party tonight.”

“We were,” Xander replied. “I stayed behind to wait for Anya.” He gestured behind him, and Giles looked past his shoulder to see the young woman in a bunny costume. “When we finally got to the house, the door was gone. Then there was a girl in a window upstairs, and the window disappeared. I’m thinking we need a rescue party.”

“Rupert?” Joyce came out of the living room. She’d re-buttoned her blouse, and was glad she had when she saw Xander there. “Xander, what are you doing here? Where’s Buffy?”

“Stuck inside some frat house,” Xander replied. “We need to help her.”

Giles grimaced, thinking of the very nice night he’d had planned. He threw an apologetic look
Joyce’s way, and she sighed and shrugged. “Well, if you have to go, you have to go,” she said philosophically. “I’ll wait up, though.”

“Thank you, love,” Giles said, giving her a kiss, and then following Xander and Anya out the door. “We’ll have to stop by my place for supplies. There’s a book I want to check as well.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” Xander muttered. Something occurred to him. “Uh, Giles? Are you living with Buffy’s mother?”

Giles gave him a quelling look. “That’s none of your business.”

Anya raised her eyebrows, looking interested. “Doesn’t that usually mean yes?”

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Spike hurried to catch up with Buffy. “Got any ideas, luv?”

“Find what’s wrong and kill it,” she replied without even blinking an eye. A grin split her face. “Sorry. That’s my gut instinct.”

“Not a bad instinct, really,” Spike said, glancing around.

“Do you think we ought to split up?” Buffy asked. “It might be faster.”

He hesitated, not liking the idea, but seeing the logic. “Dunno, luv. What if that’s what this thing wants?”

“You’re probably right,” she agreed. “We’ll stick together.”

Spike followed her down the hallway as Buffy continued her investigation, keeping an eye open for any surprises that might pop out of the walls at them. The house seemed to be taking the fake Halloween decorations and turning them into something to worry about.
A noise caught his ears, and Spike called out to Buffy, “Hold up a mo’, Buffy.”

He tried the door that the noise seemed to be coming from. It was a moaning sound, like that of someone who was seriously hurt. “Someone in here?” he called out.

There was no answer, and so Spike slid inside the room to look around. It looked like a rec room of some sort, with a TV and game tables. There weren’t any decorations up that he could see, and he figured that it hadn’t been on the tour. Spike backed out of the room and looked around for Buffy, not seeing her anywhere. “Buffy? Luv? Where’d you go?” He stalked down the hall in the general direction they’d been heading. “Bloody hell. Can’t she ever wait?” he muttered.

Buffy was nowhere to be seen, and Spike was beginning to get concerned, picking up his pace as he hurried down the hall. “Buffy?”

He rounded a corner, and then stopped abruptly. “Buffy?” he murmured. Her body lay sprawled in the hallway, and Spike rushed to her side. Turning her gently over, he stared in dismay at the puncture wounds in her neck, the raw teeth marks a heavy indictment.

A scream had him looking up into the eyes of a young woman about Buffy’s age. Her eyes were wide and horrified, and Spike started to speak, to tell her that everything was okay, belatedly realizing that his features had shifted.

There was blood in his mouth.

Spike didn’t lose it very often, but the very real sight of Buffy’s lifeless form, the screaming girl, and the inexplicable taste of blood in his mouth, sent him running from the scene of the crime.

He’d never been so scared in his unlife.

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“I don’t think this is a good idea,” Wesley insisted, trying to sound firm, rather than frightened. Oz was nowhere to be found, and Willow wanted to conjure a guide to lead them out. At the moment, more magic seemed to be the worst thing to do, especially since they didn’t know what kind of
spell was being used to prevent them from leaving.

Willow scowled. “Stop being such a wuss, Wesley,” she ordered. “It’s just a little spell, and it should take us right out of here.”

“Have you ever done this spell before?”

“No, but I understand the theory,” Willow shot back. “Now back off. I need to be able to concentrate, and I can’t do that with you hovering.”

Wesley hesitated, not wanting to leave her, and yet not really wanting to be around to suffer the results of her spell casting. He finally decided that she wasn’t going to give in, so he moved away, down the hall and around the corner, just out of sight.

Tugging at the strings that held his cape in place, Wesley sank down onto the floor. “Some Sherlock Holmes you’ve turned out to be,” he muttered. “You can’t find a way out of this house, or even prevent a girl from doing something particularly stupid.”

A whisper of sound caught his attention, and Wesley stumbled to his feet, following the noise. It sounded like someone was calling for help, but he didn’t see anyone. “Hello?” he called out cautiously. “Is anyone there?”

The voice called again, and he strode down the hallway, picking up the pace. Wesley stopped in front of a door; the sound seemed to be coming from inside, and he opened it to see a small closet. Frowning, still hearing the whimpering noises, Wesley stepped inside, fumbling against the wall for a light switch.

He let out a squeak as the door slammed shut behind him, shutting him inside. “No,” he said, rattling the doorknob desperately. It wouldn’t budge, and he backed up against the back wall of the closet, taking deep breaths to keep himself calm. He was trapped, unable to help anyone else, unable even to help himself.

Wesley had failed again.
“…hide, poor dishonoured mind/who thought yourself so wise;/and much could understand/concerning no and yes:/if they’ve become the same/it’s time you unbecame/where climbing was and bright/is darkness and to fall/(now wrong’s the only right/since brave are cowards all)/therefore despair, my heart/and die into the dirt/but from this endless end/of briefer each our bliss—/where seeing eyes go blind/(where lips forget to kiss)/where everything’s nothing/—arise, my soul; and sing” ~e. e. cummings, “now does our world descend”

Buffy found herself tumbling, head over feet, landing hard. She’d heard Willow calling for help, and had tried to reach her, but the door she’d burst through had led to a room with no floor. “Basement,” she muttered. “I must be in the basement.”

Buffy struggled to her feet, shaking out her skirt. She glanced around, sighing. “Where did Spike get to?” she muttered. “What the hell happened to sticking together?”

“He left you.” The young man who spoke was obviously dead, his head cocked unnaturally to one side as though it had been broken. “Did you really think he’d stick around?”

Buffy raised her eyebrows. “Excuse me? Do you even know Spike?”

“He’s a vampire,” the young man replied. “What else is there to know? He’s been around for over a century. Not even the Slayer could hold him for long.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” He advanced on her. “He could have anyone he wanted. Anywhere he wanted. One of these days, you’ll wake up and he’ll be gone. Isn’t that the way it always is?”

“Not with Spike.” She sounded like she meant it. Really, Buffy did mean it. This was Spike they were talking about, and if there was one thing Buffy knew about Spike, it was that he always kept his promises. He’d be sticking around.

Still, there was the fear, not centered on her boyfriend, but generalized to everyone she knew.
People who loved you sometimes screwed up. Her father being a prime example.

The Slayer was always alone.

As dead people began to come up from the dirt floor, locking their hands around her ankles and skirts, Buffy kicked at them determinedly. She wondered if the zombie-like creatures were real, or if the house had somehow cooked it up. This whole haunted house thing was really beginning to piss her off. She struggled to reach the door in the wall on the other side of the room, finally bursting through, and finding herself in an attic of some kind. It was obviously the room where the party was supposed to be.

Buffy quickly glanced around the room, noting the scattering of people, all of whom appeared to be lost in their own worlds. She spotted Oz first. “Oz? Are you okay?”

Oz shook his head, dispelling some of the fear. He looked at his hands, now completely human, and up at Buffy. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Have you seen the others?” she asked urgently, looking for Spike in particular.

Willow came tearing into the room, brushing at her clothing. “Get them off! Get them off!”

Oz quickly intercepted her. “Willow, it’s okay. You’re okay.”

His calm voice and soothing hands quickly dispelled her fear. “Oz. What happened?”

“I’m thinking a spell,” Buffy replied. “I couldn’t find a way out. The house—or whatever it is—seems pretty intent on keeping us here.”

“And getting us to this room,” Oz observed, looking around at the dazed college students.

They all looked down to see the painted symbol on the floor. As the floorboards rattled and a voice roared, “Release me!” Willow spoke for the entire group.
“Uh, oh.”

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Spike went around the corner of the hallway and stopped. Cursing himself for a fool, he turned around, knowing that there was a good chance that what he’d seen was merely a trick, another side effect of whatever spell was on the fraternity.

Besides, he’d never fled from the consequences of his actions in the past.

Closing his eyes as he approached the body, Spike focused on what his sense of smell was telling him, rather than what he seemed to be seeing. He knew Buffy’s smell by heart, and once he focused, he could catch only a faint trace, enough to tell that the body wasn’t the Slayer’s.

Spike’s eyes flashed open, and he knelt by the body. The illusion was gone, as were the marks in the girl’s neck. It appeared that she’d tripped and hit her head, since there was blood on one temple, matting the dark blonde hair. “Bloody hell,” he muttered, disgusted with himself for having been tricked.

He glanced up, seeing the girl who had screamed crouched on the floor, rocking herself slowly. “I’m not going to hurt you,” he said softly. “Your friend’s going to be fine. She just knocked her head.” When the girl didn’t respond, Spike sighed. “Do you want to stay here?” She still didn’t respond, and Spike rose to his feet, taking a deep breath, testing the air for Buffy’s scent. Both girls would probably be safe enough where they were; he wanted to find Buffy.

Her scent was faint, but clear enough for Spike to catch the trail. It didn’t take him long to get to the party, where Buffy, Oz, and Willow were regarding the symbol on the floor with some trepidation. “Where’s Wesley?”

Relief washed over Buffy’s face, and then her expression turned sheepish. “I’m sorry, Spike. I completely forgot about him. He’s probably in here somewhere, since this seems to be where the house was sending us.”

Spike was about to reply when the roar of a motor sounded. They all turned to see Giles coming through the door with a running chainsaw, Xander and Anya right behind him.
“Giles?” Buffy asked incredulously.

“The walls closed up behind us,” Giles explained, cutting the motor.

Xander looked at the symbol on the floor. “Hey, they were painting that earlier, from that book.” He pointed at an old, leather-bound volume lying on the table. Giles and Willow were soon attempting to decipher the Gaelic describing the symbol and what it was supposed to call up, while Spike scanned the room for any sign of Wesley.

He spotted the man huddled in the farthest corner of the room, his eyes tightly closed, and Spike quickly headed that direction. Giles seemed to have the spell portion under control, and his concern was for his assistant.


Wesley’s eyes fluttered open, and he looked at Spike in confusion. “Spike? What—” He looked around the room, realizing that the closet he’d believed himself to be trapped in had been nothing but an illusion. Flushing with shame, he swallowed hard. “Spike, I—”

Reading the man’s expression easily, Spike shrugged. “Fooled me, too. Had me running scared for a bit, and the same goes for the rest of them.”

Wesley nodded, unfolding himself stiffly. “Of course, I—” He looked over in time to see Buffy put her fist right through the painted symbol on the floor. “What is she doing?” he asked. “Doesn’t she know that destroying the Mark of Gachnar will cause the demon to manifest itself?”

Spike’s lips twitched as the demon appeared a moment later, only to be squashed by Buffy’s dainty shoe. “I guess she didn’t get that memo.” He gave Wesley a sympathetic look. “You going to be alright?”

“Of course,” Wesley replied. “It was just an illusion, after all.”

Spike looked over at Buffy, who was laughing at something Xander had just said. “Yeah. Right. Just a trick of the mind.”
Buffy waited until they were back at Spike’s townhouse to ask him what his fear had been. They had all trooped back to her mother’s house after Gachnar had been stomped, and Joyce had made hot chocolate for the whole gang. It had turned into a fun evening, a chance for all of them to hang out together once again. Since college had started, gatherings like that had become few and far between.

Even the presence of Wesley and Anya hadn’t put a damper on things, at least in Buffy’s estimation. While Buffy didn’t think she’d ever understand what Xander saw in Anya, she was beginning to get a glimmer of an idea of why Spike insisted on keeping Wesley around.

After a while, everyone began to disperse. She and Spike dropped Wesley off, and then went back to his place. Although dressing up for the evening had been fun, Buffy was just as happy to get out of the dress and into something a little more comfortable, and Spike appeared just as relieved to be back in his jeans and t-shirt.

“So what was your fear?”

“You being dead,” Spike admitted quietly.

Buffy raised an eyebrow. “Wow. That’s…I guess that makes sense.” She frowned as she realized that Spike had probably seen the illusion of her death at least. “How—how did it happen?”

“I killed you. Or I thought I had. Turned out to be a girl who’d banged her head, but that’s what the spell showed me,” Spike said. “If you hadn’t stomped the bastard, I’d have done it.”

She took his hand, lacing her fingers with his. “Spike, that’s never going to happen, and you know it. You would never hurt me.”

“I know.” He sighed. “I’m a vampire, luv. There are things—the hunger doesn’t ever go away, you know. You control it, but you don’t get rid of it.”

Buffy moved to straddle his lap. They had settled on the couch, knowing that they would
eventually end up in the bedroom, but in no hurry to get there. “I trust your control.”

“At least one of us does,” he responded.

Buffy didn’t reply, knowing that there was nothing she could say to convince Spike that everything was okay, that he would never harm her. After Faith’s poison arrow, they both knew that there might come a day when a difficult decision would have to be made.

It wasn’t something she liked to think about.

She pulled his head to hers, wanting to reassure the both of them at once with the contact.

“What about you?” Spike asked when she broke off the kiss. “What did you see?”

“You were gone,” Buffy said simply.

His brow furrowed, and his eyes searched her face. “Never gonna happen. I wouldn’t leave you.”

“I know.” Her lips quirked in a half-smile. “Stupid fears.”

They didn’t speak again, wanting to reassure one another with act and sensation, knowing that words were not enough.

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“Hey, Buffy.”

She bit back an impatient sigh. Why was it that whenever she ended up somewhere alone, Parker seemed to be right there? It was like he had some sort of sixth sense. “Hi, Parker.”

“You drinking alone tonight?” he asked.
Buffy shook her head. “No. I’m meeting my boyfriend.”

“He hasn’t shown up yet, huh?” Parker asked, sitting down next to her at the table. “Is he always late?”

Buffy stifled the urge to smack him. “No, actually I was early tonight.”

She should have gone to the Bronze, but Xander had been starting his new job at the on-campus pub, and Buffy had wanted to show her support. Spike had promised to meet her as soon as he could get away from the planning meeting he’d been in with Wesley and a client, and Willow had a date with Oz at the Bronze. Leaving her to deal with Parker.

“Buffy.”

She looked up to see Riley standing next to the table. “Hey, Riley. What’s up?”

“I wanted to talk to you about the assignment that’s due on Monday,” he replied, glancing at Parker. “Do you have a minute? I know I had to cut office hours short today, and I’m really sorry I didn’t get a chance to answer your questions.”

Buffy gave him grateful smile. “Yeah.” Turning to Parker, she asked, “Do you mind? I really need to talk to my TA about this class if I don’t want to fail.”

There really wasn’t much else Parker could do besides leave, and Riley quickly sat down to discourage him from coming back. “That was the best I could do on short notice,” he apologized.

“It was great,” Buffy quickly assured him. “I don’t know what it is, but he’s always around.”

Riley shrugged. “Parker’s around wherever the prowling is good.”

She sighed. “I think I need to wear a sign. ‘Taken. Please do not approach.’”
Riley chuckled appreciatively. “Yeah, it takes some guys a while to get the picture.”

“It really, really does,” Buffy agreed. Her face lit up as she saw Spike coming through the door, Wesley behind him. “There’s my boyfriend.”

“I’ll take off then.” Riley stood. “Let me know if you ever do need any help, Buffy.”

“Thanks.” She smiled at Spike as he sat down. “It’s about time you got here.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “You looked like you had company.”

“Riley? He’s one of the teaching assistants for my psych class,” Buffy said, waving a hand dismissively. “He was chasing Parker off earlier.”

Spike’s eyes narrowed. “Maybe I ought to have a chat with Parker.”

Buffy shook her head. “If he gets too persistent, I’ll smack him,” she replied. “I can take care of myself.” She glanced over at Wesley. “What’s up, Wes?”

He shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “Spike suggested I have a drink.” Wesley stood. “In fact, I think I’ll go grab a couple of beers.”

“Make sure you tip the barkeep,” Spike said, watching as Wesley wove through the crowd.

Buffy raised an eyebrow. “Okay, what’s up, Spike? Not that I mind him being around that much, but…”

“Figured we could both use the break, and a chance to get out. Wes wouldn’t go anywhere if it wasn’t for me.”

“Good thing he has you,” Buffy teased. She looked towards the bar, watching as Xander scurried around trying to fill drink orders. Wesley waited patiently, hands in his pockets.
“How are classes?” Spike asked, reaching across the table for her hand.

Buffy shrugged. “You know, the usual. It's easier to keep up now. When is the next big assignment?”

“We leave in two weeks,” Spike replied. “There are two of them, actually. Figure I'll get Wesley started on the first, and then finish up the second one on my own.”

“Anything fun and exciting?”

“The first is an appraisal,” Spike said. “Wesley’s actually better cut out for that sort of thing. Having him around lets me take a few jobs I would have passed on otherwise. Second is a security gig, making sure no one interrupts a client’s big night.”

Buffy frowned. “What kind of big night?”

“Anniversary. It’s his centennial with the missus.”

She blinked. “One hundred years of being married?”

“Long time, innit?” Spike asked. “Course, I’ve known both of them that long, so it doesn’t seem so strange. They’re made for each other.”

Buffy appeared thoughtful. “You don’t think of people staying together for that long. I mean, so many people split up, it’s weird to think about staying with someone forever.”

“Forever’s not always a possibility anyway.” Spike’s eyes met hers, and he could feel Buffy’s grip tighten.

The moment was broken when Wesley returned to their table with two pints and another soda. “Sorry it took so long. Xander seems to be having trouble tonight.”

Buffy shrugged. “It’s his first night on the job.”
There was the sound of breaking glass as Xander dropped a tray, and all three of them winced in unison. Spike observed, “It’s probably going to be his last.”

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Oz wrapped the mic cord carefully, wanting to avoid tangles for their Friday night gig. The next band to practice was Shy, and he watched as Veruca took the stage to direct her band to their places. The group was playing at the Bronze every Wednesday now, and he and Willow had a double date with Buffy and Spike that night. Oz thought Spike might appreciate the band, and he always enjoyed hearing Veruca sing. Their band had a tight sound that the Dingoes didn't stand a chance of emulating.

Not that the Dingoes weren't good, and they were improving. But Veruca’s presence on stage held an animal magnetism that Devon just didn't have.

Oz sometimes wondered what he was still doing in Sunnydale. He liked the town; it was where he'd grown up, but there was a part of him that wanted to travel, to see the world.

A part of him that knew Sunnydale couldn't hold the wolf.

When you got right down to it, Willow was what kept him here. Halloween had reminded him that Willow was in danger as long as the wolf was there, however. Oz could control it. He could cage the beast on nights when it came out to play, but there was always an edge of danger, and there always would be.

It was that part of him that Veruca’s voice called to. Something primal, something wild.

"That was a good practice tonight."

Willow’s voice called him out of his thoughts, and Oz met her eyes absently, his gaze sharpening as she brought him back to the moment. "Thanks. It was okay."

"I thought it was good." Willow appeared concerned. "You okay?"
"Oh, yeah, I'm good. You want to get something to eat?" Oz offered, realizing suddenly that he was hungry.

"Sure." Her worried face didn't go away. A little niggling fear had taken up residence in the back of her mind for no good reason. Willow had sensed that something was off, ever since Halloween, and she worried about him. Oz was her anchor. She didn't want to think about what her fear might mean. "Let's get something on the way back to your place."

Willow couldn't imagine anything between them changing for anything but the better.
"...I have given no man of my fruit to eat;/I trod the grapes, I have drunken the wine./Had you eaten and drunken and found it sweet,/This wild new growth of the corn and vine,/This wine and bread without lees or leaven,/We had grown as gods, as the gods in heaven,/Souls fair to look upon, goodly to greet,/One splendid spirit, your soul and mine./In the change of years, in the coil of things,/In the clamour and rumour of life to be,/We, drinking love at the furthest springs,/Covered with love as a covering tree,/We had grown as gods, as the gods above,/Filled from the heart to the lips with love,/Held fast in his hands, clothed warm with his wings,/O love, my love, had you loved but me!..." ~ Algernon Charles Swinburne, “The Triumph of Time”

The restaurant was a nice change, not least because they didn't have to worry about being interrupted. The days when Joyce left the number of the evening's destination with a babysitter, or Buffy, had long since passed.

In theory, anyway.

"So have you spoken to Buffy about it?" Giles asked.

Joyce laughed. "It hasn't come up. Besides, I haven't seen Buffy since Halloween. If she's not on campus, she's with Spike, with no time to spare for her mother."

"It is rather a nice change," Giles agreed, thinking that he hadn't seen much of Buffy recently either.

"How is the planning coming?" Joyce asked.

Giles shrugged. "It's coming along quite nicely. I've got the rent paid up through the next few months, and stock ordered. I was thinking about hiring Xander to help me set things up since he seems to be between jobs at the moment."

Joyce felt sympathetic. She'd heard through the grapevine that Xander had quit working at the campus pub and was now trying to find another job. She'd always had a soft spot for Buffy's friends. They'd usually wound up at her house, if they weren't at the library or out saving the world, and she'd gotten a pretty good understanding of their home situations. The more she
discover, the more sense it made that it was her house where everyone congregated.

While Joyce didn't mind, there were times when she was just as grateful to have her home to herself these days. Well, mostly to herself.

"Have you told Buffy about the bookstore?" Joyce asked.

Giles shook his head. "No, there hasn't been an opportunity. Although, I did think of letting Spike know, simply because he would most likely make himself useful."

"He really is good at that," Joyce replied. "I had to call him over last week to look at my car again." She gave Giles an amused look. "It always breaks down when you're not available."

He frowned, trying to remember when that would have been, and finally recalled that he'd had a meeting with the bank. "Did he get it fixed?"

"He did," Joyce said. "He said it was a benefit to being around since before cars were invented."

"I imagine he was more help than I would have been," Giles said. "I'm afraid that I am not what you'd call handy."

"Then I suppose it's a good thing Spike is around." Joyce smiled. "I never thought I'd be grateful that my daughter is dating a vampire."

Giles shook his head. "I suppose we ought to be grateful that Spike isn't your typical vampire." He rose from the table, assisting Joyce with her chair smoothly. "I think we have another appointment yet tonight."

Joyce smiled. "Just as long as we don't get interrupted."

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Wesley entered the garage, hearing Spike cursing. "Is everything alright?"
"Bloody stupid vehicle," Spike muttered. "Hand me the spanner, Wes."

Wesley handed him the tool. "You said you needed me."

"Need you to give Rupert a hand," Spike replied. "He's got his first shipment coming in, and I've got a date tonight." He straightened, glaring at his car. "Or I will if I can get this hunk of junk working."

Wesley's eyebrows went up. "I thought you loved your car."

"I do." Spike grinned at him. "Just like a woman. Love her, but she annoys the hell out of me sometimes."

Wesley found himself grinning in response. He caught the keys Spike threw in his direction. "Start her up, and let's see if I'm going anywhere tonight."

Wesley slid behind the wheel, stifling his envy as the big engine roared to life. He cut the engine on Spike's signal and got out of the car. "It appears that you'll make your date after all."

"You don't mind helping Rupert out, do you?" Spike asked. "Told him to give me a call when he needed me, and I'd already made plans with Buffy."

"Not to mention the fact that we're leaving in a few days, and you want to spend as much time with her as you can," Wesley said, knowing how Spike worked at this point.

Spike shrugged. "Yeah, but it's not like Rupert doesn't do the same with Joyce."

Wesley felt a pang. It appeared that everyone around him had paired up, and he was alone. He supposed that he should just be grateful that they all tried to include him as often as possible. "To answer your question, I don't mind giving Giles a hand. I certainly didn't have any other plans for the evening."
Spike shot him a look, his blue eyes sympathetic. "You ought to get yourself a girl, mate. Go out more."

"With whom?" Wesley asked quietly.

Spike winced. "Yeah, there is that. Tell you what, Wesley. We'll go out some night. See if we find you a nice girl."

"I appreciate the thought, but I think I'll look on my own," Wesley said dryly. "Given our usual haunts, I'm not sure how successful we would be."

Spike shrugged. "I suppose that's what you get for hanging around with the undead. You could always strike out on your own, take your chances somewhere else."

"I think I'll survive," Wesley replied.

"I'm sure you will," Spike replied. "After all, I went over fifty years without a date, and it didn't kill me."

Wesley gave him a dirty look. "Why doesn't that make me feel better?"

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The band on stage had a nice sound, which was a pleasant surprise. Not that Spike didn't appreciate Oz's choices in music, but there were times when he was less than thrilled. The lead singer had a presence about her that triggered a warning signal for Spike, however. There was something there, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"I don't think I've ever seen you this caught up in the music before," Buffy said, leaning over to speak directly into his ear.

Spike shook his head. "Don't think I've ever heard anyone like this bint before," he replied. He glanced over at Oz, who was staring at the girl. "Looks like Red's boy hasn't either."
Oz seemed to break out of his trance when he heard Spike referring to him. "Yeah. Veruca's band plays every Wednesday night."

"They're really good," Willow said, trying to be generous, rather than jealous. She'd never seen Oz like this before. He wasn't the kind of guy to stare at other girls. He never had been.

"Yeah. They've got a nice sound," Oz replied, his words disinterested, but his intense stare indicating something else altogether.

"When are the Dingoes playing again, Oz?" Buffy asked, sensing Willow's growing alarm.

Oz shook his head. "We're up on Friday."

"That'll be good," Willow said. "I always like hearing you guys."

"Yeah." Oz was soon caught up in the music again.

Buffy glanced over at Spike, who appeared to be watching the girl on stage with the same intensity, but with a frown of concern on his face. "Penny for your thoughts."

Spike looked back over at her, shaking his head. "Probably not worth even that much, luv. Just feel that there's more to the girl than meets the eye."

Buffy glanced at Oz, and then over at Spike. "Should I be worried?"

Spike snorted, obviously incredulous. "You're the bloody Slayer, pet. Whatever presence that chit has, you've got it ten times as strong."

She flushed slightly, giving him a quick kiss in reward for his flattery. "You say the sweetest things sometimes."
"Only sometimes?" he teased.

"When you're not being a pig," Buffy replied.

He smirked. "Keeps things interesting, though, doesn't it?"

She rolled her eyes, not bothering to acknowledge that Spike always kept things interesting. She caught Willow's worried expression again, and wondered what was up with Oz tonight. He was usually as focused on Willow as Spike was on her.

“Maybe we should get out of here,” Buffy suggested, catching Willow’s eye. “We could go to a movie. I’m kind of jonesing for popcorn.”

Spike frowned. “Dunno, luv. I didn’t think there was anything playing you wanted to see when we looked earlier.” He felt the toe of Buffy’s boot give him a sharp kick under the table. “Of course, if you want to go see a movie, that’s fine.”

Willow looked over at Oz. “What about you? Would you mind if we went to a movie?”

Oz looked away from the stage, blinking absently. “Huh? Oh, sure, but I thought you enjoyed the band.”

Willow and Buffy exchanged a look that spoke louder than words. Spike, who wasn’t completely oblivious, quickly said, “It’s getting a bit old. Not bad music, but in small doses.”

Oz shrugged. “Sure. We can split.”

They began to gather up their things to prepare to leave, and Spike cast one last look back at the stage. There was still something strange about that girl. He’d bet his next paycheck that she was going to be trouble.

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“I appreciate your assistance, Wesley. I had thought Spike would be able to make it.” Giles handed Wesley another box of books he’d stored in his mostly-unused apartment.

Wesley shrugged. “As I explained to Spike, I didn’t have any other plans.”

“I believe Joyce was going to make dinner this evening. You’re welcome to join us,” he invited.

Wesley was rather touched by the invitation. “I might just do that.”

“How has working for Spike been?”

Wesley hesitated, not knowing quite how to reply to Giles’ question. Although he knew that Giles liked Spike, and that he wasn’t with the Council anymore, Wesley was wary of such inquiries, being too used to his father’s reaction to such matters.

His father’s reaction to hearing that he was working for Spike had been less than enthusiastic.

“I’ve enjoyed it,” Wesley replied cautiously.

Giles slammed the back of the truck closed. He’d rented it to transport the boxes of books from his apartment to the new store. Only a few shipments of rare books had come in so far. Giles had wanted to store them at his apartment until he was closer to opening. He’d decided to stock a mix of new and used volumes, as well as some magic tomes. The magic store in town had spell supplies, but few books, and Giles hoped to draw from that crowd.

“I just thought that it might be hard working for a vampire,” Giles pointed out. “Your background with the Council would seem to suggest that it would be a difficult transition.”

Wesley was quiet for a long moment. “It’s Spike,” he finally explained.

“And that makes it different?”

“I don’t know.” Wesley looked off into the distance. “He’s been nothing but kind to me, Giles. He
—I don’t know how to explain it.”

“I think I understand.” Giles shook his head. “You are in a unique position to experience a side of the world that Watchers rarely see. In a way, you have an opportunity to see how the other side works.”

Wesley was already shaking his head. “I won’t betray his confidence. I’m not a Watcher any longer, and I—”

“I’m not talking about now, Wesley.” Giles cut him off, his tone acerbic. “For the future. For the Slayer, and any who might come after her. For when the Council is under different, perhaps more liberal, leadership.”

Wesley laughed. “You know as well as I do how likely that is to happen. Men like Quentin Travers do not suffer rebels to remain on the Council payroll for long.”

“Men like Travers do not live forever,” Giles responded. “I’m just asking you to think about what it is you’re learning.”

Wesley raised an eyebrow. “Do try to remember that I was trained as a Watcher. I may no longer work for them, but as you well know, it doesn’t just go away.”

Giles nodded, his lips twitching at Wesley’s sarcasm. The younger man really had matured considerably under Spike’s tutelage. He was beginning to wonder if all Watchers shouldn’t spend some time demon-fighting on the front lines. “No, it never does go away.”

“Giles?”

“Yes?”

“If Spike had offered you this position, would you have taken it?”

Giles frowned, considering the question. “No, not now. But ten years ago? I wouldn’t have passed it up for the world.”
Willow had no idea what to do. Everything had become so strange between her and Oz, just over the last few days. Their relationship—other than the mistake she’d made with Xander—had run amazingly smoothly. They didn’t really fight, or even disagree. Sex was good, and Oz was sweet and supportive and everything that a girl could want in a guy.

And then there was Veruca.

She’d seemed to come out of nowhere, and Oz paid more attention to her than he had to any other girl but Willow. Veruca was a musician, and she had some indefinable *something* that Willow lacked.

She made a face. No, not quite indefinable. Veruca was a big ‘ho.

Willow had even gone over to Oz’s place, hoping to seduce him with her new look, and he’d turned her down cold. She needed some male advice, and she had no idea who to go to. There was Xander, but he didn’t know Veruca, so he couldn’t really judge.

Which left Spike.

“Red.” He ushered her inside, always the gentleman. Willow had come to him a few times before, but this was the first time she’d ever come to him for advice about boys. It seemed logical, though. Spike knew her, and Oz, and he’d seen Veruca. If anyone could explain the mystery that was the male mind, it would have to be Spike.

Maybe. Or maybe this was a mistake.

“You want to spit it out before you drive yourself into a frenzy?” Spike asked, amusement coloring his tone.

Willow shook her head. “I shouldn’t have bothered you. I’m sorry, I’ll just—”
Spike took her by the elbow, leading her into the kitchen and sitting her down. “You’re upset about something, and you didn’t go to Buffy, which means you think I can help you for some reason. You know I’d do whatever I can for you, Willow.”

“It’s Oz,” Willow blurted out. “It’s just—I think he likes Veruca.”

“The girl that was singing the other night?”

“Yeah.”

Spike watching as she twisted her hands nervously. “Okay. What makes you think that?”

“The way he was staring at her that night,” Willow replied. “Plus, he was eating lunch with her the other day, and when I got there, they both got up and left.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “Hardly evidence you can build a good case on, pet.”

“Well, I thought…I thought I could…” Willow trailed off, suddenly realizing the impossibility of explaining the entire situation to Spike. It just felt weird.

“You thought you’d shag him to remind him why he’s with you?” Spike suggested, his gentle tone belying the coarse wording.

Willow nodded miserably. “He didn’t want to.”

“Even the most insatiable guy has an off day, Red,” Spike said quietly. “Don’t think that proves he doesn’t want you.”

Willow sighed. “It’s just—Veruca. I mean, you saw her.”

“I did.” Spike shook his head. “Girl’s got a feeling to her, I won’t deny that. Almost like…”
He trailed off, and Willow leaned forward. “What?”

“Dunno, but I don’t know that she’s all human. Let’s leave it at that.”

“You think she’s a demon?” Willow asked.

Spike shook his head. “No, she’s not a demon. That I know for sure. If I got close to her, I could probably tell you what it was, but I don’t think I’ll have an opportunity to do that.”

“But if you did?”

“Then I might be able to tell you more, but I don’t know that it’s a good idea. It’d have to be at night,” Spike reminded her.

Willow was excited. If Spike could tell that Veruca was evil, and she could present the evidence to Oz, then he’d have to stay away from her. “The next time they practice at the Bronze?”

“If I’m in town,” Spike hedged. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks, Spike!” Willow said. “I really appreciate it.”

His face softened. He’d always had a soft spot for the girl. “Told you, luv. You need me, I’m there if it’s within my power.”

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Buffy slid into the backseat behind Wesley, his longer legs giving him the better rights to the front seat. “What are you thinking?”

“We patrol, make sure no one gets hurt tonight,” Spike replied. “Talked to a few people after you called, and they said there were two werewolves out last night. Male and female.”
Buffy squeezed her eyes tightly closed. She had heard about the “wild dogs” attacking Professor Walsh and had immediately known from the description that the dogs were werewolves. The fact that Oz had been reinforcing his cage when she’d found him after the attack only underscored the idea that he had been one of them. The only question was the identity of the second, and if Oz didn’t know—as he’d said he didn’t—Buffy wasn’t sure what to do. Her fear was that it was another innocent, someone like Oz, who didn’t have a clue as to what was going on.

Her fear was that someone else would find the second werewolf before they did.

Buffy didn’t think that Wesley would have been her first choice of backup, but she trusted Spike’s judgment. If her boyfriend said that Wesley was ready for this kind of assignment, then he must be.

In theory, anyway.

“Do you have any idea where she would head?”

“Depends,” Spike said. “She might head for a populated location if she’s hungry.”

“What about areas with a high concentration of adolescents?” Wesley suggested. “Werewolves are typically drawn to large crowds of people, especially where there are more pheromones.”

“That’s where Oz went,” Buffy said. “Before he knew he was a werewolf, I mean. He turned up at the Bronze.”

“We’ll go there first, then,” Spike decided. “Maybe I’ll catch the scent.”

None of them knew how to feel when the sun rose with no sign of the werewolf.

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Willow was feeling pretty cheerful on the whole. The Wicca group orientation was going well, and it looked like it might be kind of fun, even if no one had talked about real magic yet. Spike was going to help her prove that Veruca was evil, so she had a plan to deal with the other girl, too. It was going to be okay. She was just going to bring Oz breakfast to prove what a good girlfriend she
The thermos and paper sack hit the stone floor of the cave as she caught sight of Oz—and Veruca—naked. Wrapped around each other. There was no mistaking it for anything other than what it was.

“Oh, my God,” Willow said, backing up.

Oz reached for his pants. “Willow, wait. It’s not what you think.”

“What I think?” she asked, looking between them in horror.

“She’s a wolf, like me,” Oz said. “I had to lock her in here with me.”

“Oh, I’ll bet!” Willow exclaimed. “You couldn’t have told someone? Buffy and Spike were out all night, making sure no one got hurt, and you couldn’t have told them?”

Veruca had been watching the show with a smug expression. “She’s got a point.”

Oz turned furious eyes on her. “Leave!”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I—”

“Now!”

Something in his expression warned Veruca that now was not a good time to push her luck. She left.

“I’m sorry,” Oz said.

“I knew!” Willow replied. “I knew, and you said everything was fine. You, you lied to me, you
jerk! That’s as bad as—as—”

“I know. I remember how it feels.”

“So that’s what this is?” Willow asked, beginning to choke back sobs. “This is payback?”

“No, Willow—”

“Because I thought we were past that,” she continued relentlessly. “What we did can’t even compare to what you did with her. Did you know? Do you love her?”

“No, I didn’t know. I didn’t mean for this to happen. When I’m the wolf, it’s like I’m gone.”

“But you wanted her before, didn’t you?” Willow asked, her tone begging him to tell her otherwise, even though she knew better.

Oz shook his head helplessly. His hands hung uselessly. There was nothing he could do to soothe this hurt—he was the one who had caused it. “I sensed something.”

“So you wanted her in an animal way?” Willow asked. “You wanted her…more than me?”

She couldn’t take it anymore. Willow turned and ran, not even thinking about where she was headed. For an ache this big, it was Oz she would have turned to, and now he was out of her reach.

Maybe he’d always been out of her reach.
Chapter 10

“To think that this meaningless thing was ever a rose,/Scentless, colourless, this!/Will it ever be thus (who knows?) /Thus with our bliss,/If we wait till the close?/Though we care not to wait for the end, there comes the end/Sooner, later, at last,/Which nothing can mar, nothing mend:/An end locked fast/Bent we cannot re-bend.” —Christina Rossetti, “‘Summer Is Ended’”

Wesley wasn’t paying much attention to where he was going. He’d spent all night out with Spike and Buffy, hunting for the second werewolf and finding nothing. The evening had been more enjoyable than he’d expected, mostly because Buffy didn’t seem to be going out of her way to treat him like an unwanted guest. In fact, she’d almost been—kind.

He had managed to sleep for a few hours, but had woken around noon with a need for coffee. Unfortunately, he didn’t seem to have any. Since it was a nice enough day, Wesley had decided a walk wouldn’t be amiss, and he still had hours yet before his training session with Spike.

He had barely perceived that the young woman he was ambling behind was Willow when she proceeded to walk out into the street. With a sense of horror, Wesley realized that she was going to walk right in front of a car. He lunged, grabbing her by the arm and yanking her back onto the sidewalk.

The car zoomed by, but Willow barely seemed to notice. Wesley put his hands on her shoulders, searching her face, trying to figure out if she was hurt—or possibly on something. “Willow? Are you alright?”

“Wes!” Buffy’s voice called out to him, and she hurried over to his side. “Thank you. I saw her, but I was too far away.”

“It was my pleasure,” he replied, turning back to Willow. “Are you quite alright? Are you hurt?”

She seemed to focus on his face with difficulty, then looked over at Buffy. “I know who the second werewolf is.”

Buffy glanced at Wesley, then put an arm over Willow’s shoulders. “Did she come after you?”
“You knew it was a she?” Willow asked, her bottom lip beginning to tremble as tears threatened to fall.

“Just last night,” Buffy assured her. “I went to Oz, and he said he didn’t know what had happened. Spike said he’d heard that…” She trailed off as she saw the expression on Willow’s face. “Oh, God, Willow. What happened?”

“Oz said he had to lock her in with him.”

It took only a moment for the meaning to sink in, and Buffy stiffened. “Oz and…”

“Veruca. I found them. Together.”

Wesley was feeling very uncomfortable. This wasn’t the place for him. He wasn’t equipped for dealing with emergencies of this sort. A demon possibly, or if Buffy needed help hunting down the other werewolf—or Oz, as seemed likely—Wesley thought he might be of assistance in that kind of situation.

“Perhaps you had better take her home,” Wesley suggested gently. “I can let Spike know that we know who it is we’re looking for.”

Buffy hesitated, and then nodded. “That sounds fine, but Spike’s not going to be much help finding Veruca before the sun goes down.”

“Shall I meet you with the tranquilizer gun?”

Wesley watched as she weighed his offer, obviously trying to decide whether he would be a help or a hindrance. “Four-ish? My place? That should give us enough time.”

He wasn’t sure whether Buffy was referring to comforting Willow or finding Veruca, but he nodded. “I’ll talk to Spike.”

“Thanks, Wes,” Buffy said, beginning to lead Willow away.
Wesley turned, setting off for Spike’s townhouse, all thoughts of coffee forgotten. He wondered if he shouldn’t stop by Joyce’s gallery on the way, since Giles was almost certain to be there. While Wesley knew that Buffy had filled her Watcher in on the situation, at least as much as she’d known the day before, Giles might like to have word of current developments.

Wesley dismissed that thought in the next moment, deciding that there was no sense in wasting time. If he wanted to make it to Spike’s and back in time to meet the Slayer, he didn’t have time to make any other stops along the way.

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Buffy really couldn’t believe it. This was Oz they were talking about. Buffy would have pegged him as one of the most loyal guys in the world, but now she was listening to Willow tell her how Oz had been expressing an interest in Veruca for a while now: making sure he was in attendance at the Bronze when her band was playing, sitting with her at lunch, turning Willow down when she’d tried to come onto him.

What kept getting to Buffy was the conclusion that Oz had known. He’d known that Veruca was a werewolf, even when she’d asked him if he knew anything about the other “wild dog” that had been seen on campus. Instead of telling her the truth about Veruca, Oz had let them go off on a wild goose chase, and had locked Veruca inside the cage with him.

Even knowing what was likely to happen, Oz had chosen to keep Veruca with him. That was the part that Buffy just didn’t get. His choice didn’t seem to mesh with the guy Buffy knew.

Which led her to wonder if she’d ever known him. If you could ever really know anybody.

Buffy comforted Willow as best as she could, not knowing the right words to say. “I’m going to get her. She’s bad news, and when I catch up with her…” She trailed off.

Willow’s tear-drenched eyes turned imploringly at Buffy. “I don’t understand what I did wrong, Buffy. I don’t know why Oz wouldn’t want me anymore.”

“No, Willow,” Buffy replied fiercely. “This wasn’t your fault. Any of it. If anyone’s to blame here, it’s Oz and Veruca. They both knew better, and Oz is an idiot.” The knock at the door warned Buffy that she needed to get going. The sooner she hunted Veruca down, the sooner they could
start fixing this mess.

If it was even something that could be fixed.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Buffy promised. She opened to door to reveal Wesley waiting for her. “Let’s get going.”

He followed her down the hall. “How is she?”

“How hanging in there,” Buffy replied. “That’s about it right now, though. Where are the tranq guns?”

“Locked in the car,” Wesley replied. “Spike let me borrow his vehicle.”

Buffy pouted. “Spike let you borrow his car? He never lets me drive it.”

“He’s seen both of us drive,” Wesley said dryly. “I think that speaks for itself.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. Wesley had parked close, so it took only a few minutes to retrieve the guns, and then they went off to find Oz. “Not that I don’t trust your tracking skills,” Buffy said. “But Oz has the nose.”

“And I don’t,” Wesley agreed. “It’s fine, Buffy. I’m just grateful to be allowed to help.”

She glanced over at him, gauging his sincerity, realizing that he meant it. “I have to say that I like the attitude change.”

He shifted uncomfortably. “It’s more of a shift of perspective.”

Buffy smiled. “Okay, I’ll give you that one.” She looked up at Oz’s residence hall. “Why don’t you wait out here? I’ll get Oz.” Buffy squared her shoulders as she walked through the door, reminding herself that as much as she might like to beat Oz up right now, she couldn’t. He was her friend, too.
Even if she really didn’t like him at the moment.

Willow thought about what Buffy had said, about it not being her fault. She still felt as though there was something she ought to have done differently, that she could have prevented all this from happening if only she had…

Well, she didn’t know what it was she ought to have done, but that didn’t make the feeling go away.

There was something she could do now, though. Willow could make sure Oz and Veruca were hurting just as badly as she was.

It wasn’t right. She knew that, of course. The best thing to do would be to stay in her room, maybe try to sleep, try to forget what had happened. Willow couldn’t forget, however, and she couldn’t rest until she had done something.

If Willow had thought about it, she probably would have realized that she understood Anya a lot better than she had before. She’d never quite understood the whole “thirst for vengeance” thing in the past, not like she did today.

It took less time than she’d expected to find the right spell, the one that would make Oz hurt. The curse that would prevent him from ever knowing happiness again—because that’s how Willow felt—as though she’d never be happy again.

She gathered the supplies she needed from the components she kept on hand and headed towards the science labs. That would probably be the safest place to work the spell. There would certainly be less chance of setting anything on fire there.

Oz could feel Buffy’s eyes on the back of his head as they walked, following Veruca’s scent. He knew she was close to hurting him, the way he’d hurt Willow. What she didn’t understand was that
he already hurt. He had—in one impulsive act—nearly destroyed the relationship he’d built with Willow.

He knew Willow was confused, but so was he. Oz hadn’t thought himself to be that kind of man.

There was nothing else to do but to try to find Veruca before the sun went down, try to contain the damage. After the danger was over, Oz would have to decide what he wanted to do next, what he could do next.

He found it hard to believe that Willow would ever forgive him.

“I can smell her,” he stated, following the trail through the woods.

Right to the pile of clothing on the forest floor.

“Or the pile of dirty clothes she left for you to find,” Buffy suggested, scowling.

Wesley spoke up. “Would she have reason to leave them here?”

“They could be from the other night when she—turned into a werewolf,” Oz replied with some hesitation, knowing that Buffy would recognize his deception.

“Unless she wanted to throw you off the scent,” Buffy said.

Oz stiffened. “Willow.” He took off running, not even bothering to see if the other two were behind him.

Buffy and Wesley both began running, moving as swiftly as the rough terrain allowed. “Buffy! Look out!” Wesley called.

She twisted just in time to miss the commando that came charging out from the underbrush. Buffy realized that Wesley actually had the tranq gun at the ready, but the man didn’t seem to be interested in either of them, disappearing back into the bushes.
“Thanks,” she said.

“Not a problem,” he gasped, slightly out of breath, gripping his rifle tighter.

They pushed forward, following the trail that Oz had forged.

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Willow spoke the final words of the incantation, “Let this image seal his fate, not to love, only to hate.” She stared at the picture of her boyfriend and the flame, and dropped the photo onto the floor. She could hear the beakers crash against the workbenches, and she swallowed a sob.

Willow wondered if it was pathetic—loving him too much to hurt him.

“Wow. For a minute there I really thought you were going to go through with it.” She whirled to face Veruca, who was stalking into the lab, hips swinging. “Sometimes you have to kill, to keep what’s yours.” The other girl smirked. “Look at that. The sun’s almost down.”

Willow backed up, knowing that she wouldn’t have a prayer against an angry werewolf once Veruca changed. “Don’t mess with me,” she warned.

Veruca ignored the challenge. “I’m not surprised you couldn’t go through with your little hex. You don’t have the teeth.”

“You don’t know what I have,” Willow replied, her mind racing, trying to think of a spell, anything, to force Veruca back. “You haven’t seen what I have.”

“I know what you love. I have his scent on me right now.” Veruca smiled cruelly, shoving Willow back against the worktable.

“Don’t touch her again,” Oz said, his voice ringing out angrily.
Veruca turned, forgetting Willow in favor of facing Oz. “She’s what’s holding you back. She’s the reason you’re living in cages. Once she’s gone, you’ll see. You’ll know what you are.”

“You don’t want to see what I am,” Oz warned.


Oz’s face was grim and set, as though carved from stone. “That’s right. We kill.”

Willow scrambled backwards, away from the fight, watching as they both began to change, their faces shifting grotesquely. They fought, snarling, and for a moment she thought either of them could win, neither stronger than the other.

Two twin pops broke through the snarls, and the two werewolves collapsed to the floor, unconscious, one wolf’s teeth sunk in the other’s throat.

Willow looked up with wide eyes to see Buffy and Wesley in the doorway, lowering the tranq guns from their shoulders. “Buffy?”

The Slayer was at her side in a moment, leaving Wesley to check on the werewolves. “Willow. Are you okay?”

Willow nodded, her face crumpling. She felt Buffy pull her into an embrace, and she sobbed out her pain and fear on Buffy’s shoulder, unable to do anything else.

Buffy glanced back at Wesley, who had pulled the two bodies apart. He nudged the one with the reddish fur with his toe and then shook his head when he saw Buffy looking at him. Buffy just gripped Willow tighter, knowing how close it had been.

Way too close.
Buffy didn’t want to leave Willow, but the other girl had said she was fine, and Buffy needed to get to the meeting she’d called. The incident with the commando in the woods was bothering her, and she wanted to discuss the matter with Giles, as well as Spike. If Wesley hadn’t been there, rifle at the ready, she wasn’t sure she would have made it in time to save her friend.

“I have to see Oz today anyway,” Willow said, looking as though she was ready to burst into tears at any moment. “You should go. You didn’t even get a chance to see Spike last night, and he’s leaving in a couple of days.”

Buffy sighed. “I’ll be back soon,” she promised. “You’re my first priority right now. Spike will understand.”

Willow waved her hand. “Go. I’m okay. Really.”

Buffy left, feeling terribly guilty about the fact that she was going to meet her boyfriend, when it looked like Willow was losing hers.

At the same time, when Spike met her at his door with a long embrace, Buffy couldn’t help but be thankful that she had him. And, unlike Oz, Spike had his demon well under control.

She clung to him for a long time, feeling Spike’s hands run soothing circles on her back. “How’s she holding up?” he murmured.

“Not great.” Buffy pulled back, not wanting to let go of him. “I’ve never seen her like this, Spike.”

“Oz was her first, wasn’t he?” Spike asked in reply. “Losing your first isn’t something you get over in a hurry.”

“No,” she agreed. “Is anyone else here yet?”

“Giles and Wes are in the kitchen,” Spike replied. “We were just waiting for you.”

Buffy grimaced. “Sorry I’m late. I didn’t want to leave her, but—”
“Don’t worry about it,” Spike soothed. “We’re fully capable of keeping ourselves occupied.”

Buffy might have made a crack about that comment, but she wasn’t in the mood. She was too worried about Willow. “Hey, guys.”

Wesley and Giles both echoed her greeting. Giles asked, “How is she?”

“Not great.” Buffy shook her head. “It’s like it hurts too much to form words.”

Giles sighed. “You’ll let us know if we can do anything?”

“I’ll let you know,” Buffy promised.

“You wanted to talk about something else, though,” Giles stated.

Buffy told them about the commando in the woods, describing as best she could with the short glimpse she’d gotten of him. “Wesley might have seen more than I did.”

“I don’t think so,” he said regretfully. “His weaponry was military-issue, however. You won’t find an ordinary hunter carrying that sort of armament. Much like the ones I saw on Halloween.”

Buffy frowned. “So this isn’t an isolated incident?”

“Doesn’t sound that way,” Spike said quietly. “My informants told me that there’ve been a lot of disappearances around the campus area. Mostly demons, but I figured it could be more than that.”

Giles frowned. “You’re suggesting some sort of military force bent on taking out demons?”

Spike shook his head. “Could be paramilitary,” he replied. “I’ve run into a few independent demon-hunters in my time.”
Buffy hesitated. “If they’re taking out demons, is that a bad thing?” she asked. “I mean, I know the commando we almost ran into could have prevented us from getting to Willow in time, but—”

Spike shook his head. “Not that simple, I’m afraid. There are plenty of demons around Sunnydale that are harmless. They wouldn’t hurt anybody. It’s not just the dangerous ones who are disappearing, and that’s what makes me nervous. Someone who isn’t discriminating might decide that a Slayer isn’t human enough for their tastes.”

“Or that a vampire who isn’t hurting anybody isn’t safe,” Wesley added. “Spike has a good point.”

Buffy looked over at Giles, who appeared doubtful. “There’s no real evidence either way,” he pointed out. “We would have to know a great deal more before we can decide whether they’re friend or foe.”

The Slayer nodded. “But I think you need to be especially careful if you’re coming around campus,” she said, looking at Spike. “I don’t want them thinking they can come after you.”

“I would rather avoid the attention myself.” Spike grimaced. “I’ll be careful.”

Giles stood. “I don’t think there’s much more we can do right now.”

“I’ll check my contacts before we leave town,” Spike said. “They might have heard something else. Wes? You want to meet me here tomorrow night?”

“Of course,” Wesley replied. He looked at Spike and Buffy. “Call if you need me before then.”

Giles and Wesley quickly left, leaving them alone. Buffy sighed regretfully. “I should leave soon, get back to Willow. She’s going to need me.”

“I understand,” Spike replied. “You’ll let me know if there’s anything I can do?”

Buffy nodded, leaning her forehead against his shoulder. “You know, I think I’ve got some time
before I have to leave."

Spike met her eyes before he gave her a hungry kiss. “You know I’d never leave you, right?” he asked, pulling back to allow Buffy to breathe.

“I know,” Buffy replied. “Show me.”

“My pleasure, luv.”

She hugged her pillow, her sobs tearing through her until she felt as if she was going to fall to pieces. It wasn’t as if Willow had known that she would be able to forgive Oz, or that they would be able to work things out, but she had been willing to give it a chance.

Willow had wanted to give them a chance.

Instead, Oz had left, taking the decision out of her hands. He’d gone, saying that it was the best decision for him—for her. How could he know what she needed? Didn’t Oz know that she needed him? Didn’t he want to figure it out together?

Couldn’t they have figured it out together?

She understood what a broken heart felt like now, understood why Buffy had grieved so after Angel was gone. Understood why it had taken Buffy so long to fall in love again.

Willow felt as though she would never be able to love again. How could she entrust her heart to anyone, knowing what it felt to have it broken?

As the sun set, she cried, wishing that Buffy hadn’t been in time to save her.
Chapter 11

“Those who wanted to wound me wounded you,/and the dose of secret poison meant for me/like a net passes through my work—but leaves/its smear of rust and sleeplessness on you…Bitter footsteps follow me;/a hideous grimace mocks my smile; envy spits/a curse, guffaws, gnashes its teeth where I sing./And that, Love, is the shadow life has given me:/an empty suit of clothes that chases me;/limping, like a scarecrow with a bloody grin.” ~Pablo Neruda, “Sonnet LX”

Spike hid a smirk, sensing Wesley’s nerves as they walked into Willy’s bar. “No one’s going to mess with you,” he said in a low voice.

Wesley simply shrugged, not bothering to respond. How was he supposed to tell Spike that it wasn’t this trip that worried him, but the next? The entire reason that the vampire had asked Wesley to accompany him to the demon bar was so that he could meet Spike’s contacts. The idea being that Wesley could take over some of the information gathering duties.

Or, if the worst were to happen, Wesley knew where to go for information.

Spike spotted Rof at a table with several other demons and quickly made his way over. He could sense Wesley close on his heels, which was probably a good place for the man. There were a few vampires in the crowd tonight who would be more than happy to make Wesley into a meal.

“Rof,” Spike greeted. “How are the spawn?”

“Well,” Rof replied.

One of the others demons at the table snarled. “You talk to this traitor? This vampire scum?”

Rof turned cold eyes on the other demon. “If you like it not, you may leave.”

Three of the demons got up, muttering imprecations as they went. Wesley thought it was interesting that they didn’t try to harm Spike, seemingly content with threats. Spike took a seat at the table with Rof and two other demons he seemed familiar with since he greeted them by name. “This is my associate, Wesley. He can be trusted.”
Rof turned his searching gaze on Wesley. “May you have many offspring.”

“And may your offspring be strong,” Wesley replied with the formulaic greeting.

Rof made a sound that could probably have passed for a chuckle. “Most humans do not learn our language.”

“Most humans aren’t Wesley,” Spike replied. “You think I would work with someone who had no skills?”

“Assuredly not,” Rof said. “You come for information?”

“About the soldiers running around the campus,” Spike replied. “You warned me that demons are going missing over there. The Slayer is wondering if they’re going to be a threat to her.”

One of the other demons, a black-skinned Krell demon, clucked his tongue. “They don’t trouble humans. Just demons, and only the unwary.”

“Only those who cross their paths,” Rof was quick to correct him. “There have been many.”

“How many?” Spike asked.

Rof waved a three-fingered hand. “It is unknown. When it began, those who knew passed the word, and we avoided the place. We found new dens, new places to lay our young.”

“Some thought they could avoid trouble,” the Krell said.

Wesley leaned forward. “You haven’t been able to?”

The Krell shrugged, a curiously human gesture. “Those of us who don’t want trouble know to avoid the Slayer,” he replied. “You don’t bother her or start eating anybody, she doesn’t mess with
you. Same way with Spike here. It’s only the jokers like Freddie who have a problem with that.” He motioned in the direction the departing demons had gone.

“There is balance,” Rof added. “Most prefer it so. Some do not.”

“And these soldiers are disturbing the balance,” Spike commented.

“The Slayer is human,” the third demon said, his accent so thick Wesley could barely make out the words. “They will not bother her.”

Spike caught the bitterness in the demon’s tone. “You don’t know that,” he replied. “They might decide she’s not human enough for them.”

“It is a concern,” Rof stated. “Here is our home, though. Where else do we go?”

Spike nodded. “Look, we’re going out of town, but I’ll check into things when I get back. It might be that I can dig something up. The Slayer’s not real happy with them, that’s for sure. One of them nearly got in her way the other day, and you know what a cranky female is like.”

All three demons made various sounds of assent, and Wesley figured that was one thing that all males in every species could probably agree about. None of them would ever understand women.

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“You sure you can stay tonight?” Spike asked. “Willow doesn’t need you?”

Buffy raised an eyebrow. “You know, I’d almost think you didn’t want me here,” she teased. “That’s only the third time you’ve asked me that.”

Spike gave her a sour look. “I saw her the other night, Buffy. I know what kind of state that wanker left her in.”

“Wanker, huh?” she asked. “I thought you liked Oz.”
“I did like Oz,” Spike replied. “Suppose I still do. That doesn’t mean he’s not a wanker for leaving her like he did.”

“Can’t argue with you there.” Buffy leaned back against his chest contentedly. They had spent the earlier part of the evening patrolling and working up an appetite, then had returned to Spike’s place with takeout. Now they were sprawled out on the couch, just talking, enjoying the other’s presence.

The Slayer almost felt guilty for spending time with Spike, even though she had asked Xander to stay with Willow for the evening. It somehow felt wrong to be so content when her best friend was so miserable.

“Xander’s with her tonight,” Buffy said. “Besides, she was the one who told me to stay. She said there was no point in both of us being miserable.”

Spike placed a kiss on her neck. “She’s got a point there.”

“How long is this trip?”

“A week, give or take,” Spike replied. “I’m going to try to get back early, but no promises.”

“And after that?” Buffy asked, her tone plaintive.

Spike nibbled on her shoulder, making her gasp. “No trips planned after that. Not with the holidays coming up, and the rumors that are flying around. Told some of the demons in town that I’d look into things.”

Buffy twisted around to face him, frowning. “You’re helping demons? Isn’t that sort of counter productive?”

“These aren’t the demons you’re out there saving the world from,” Spike replied patiently. “These are the blokes that deliver your pizza after dark and work sewer maintenance. Most of them are harmless unless you threaten them, and they’re going to stay out of your way.”
She grimaced, going over the idea in her mind. It still didn’t seem quite right, but she couldn’t disagree with Spike’s point of view. It wasn’t like she believed that all demons were bad per se, it was just that she hadn’t run into any nice ones in her line of work.

Spike sighed. “Look, Buffy. I know you don’t like it, but—”

“I didn’t say that,” Buffy said, cutting him off. “It’s just a weird idea to get used to. It’s not like I think that human equals good or anything, but…”

“It’s probably better that you don’t see the shades of gray most of the time,” Spike said. “You can’t afford to hesitate, and I’ve been around a long time. I know who’s going to pose a threat before they offer one.”

Buffy sighed. “I guess so. Just promise me that you’ll be careful. I mean, if they’re taking out random vampires, I can’t really be sorry about that, but I have a strong interest in keeping you in one piece.”

“Do my best,” Spike promised.

Buffy twisted to face him fully, running a hand down his face. “Because I think I’d be in worse shape than Willow’s in right now if something happened to you.”

“Then we’ll just have to make sure nothing happens to me.” Spike’s mouth met hers, and they tumbled together on the couch, each trying to outdo the other with their hands and mouths.

Not all their desperation was due to the upcoming separation, though. They could both sense the danger building.

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“I’m here to help.”

Giles turned to see Joyce standing in the doorway. She’d obviously changed out of her work clothes already, since she was dressed in jeans and an oversized t-shirt, her hair pulled back with a
bandana. “You don’t have to do that,” he replied. “You’ve been on your feet all day.”

“You’re scheduled to open in a week,” Joyce pointed out. “You’re going to need a hand with everything if you want to be ready in time.”

Giles sighed, looking around at the half-built shelves. His stock was coming in, and it all needed to be inventoried and shelved. Of course, the shelves needed to be finished before the books could fill them, and the sign on the door needed to be painted. Then he would have cleaning to do, and there were still fliers to pick up at the printer’s, although the advertisement in the phone book and newspaper had been scheduled and paid for.

In short, there was too much work for one man, and Giles hadn’t felt comfortable asking either Buffy or Willow to assist him. Willow was still grieving over Oz’s departure, and Buffy was trying to be there for her. Xander was working full time at one of his many jobs—Giles could no longer keep straight what exactly he was doing—and Spike and Wesley were out of town.

Joyce really seemed to be the only person available for the moment, but Giles hated asking for her assistance after she’d put in a full day at the gallery. “If you’re certain you don’t mind,” he finally said. “I don’t want you overdoing it.”

“Rupert, I want to help you. I know you’d do the same for me if I needed help at the gallery.” She raised an eyebrow, looking at him much like Buffy did when she felt that he was being obtuse. “In fact, I remember you helping to unpack a shipment last week.”

Giles knew when to give up. “Very well. As long as you tell me when you get tired.”

“When I get tired, we can both go home,” Joyce replied. “This weekend, I’ll make some phone calls if it looks like we’re not going to get done. I know Spike comes back this week, and I’m sure he and Wesley would be happy to help. They’re both such good boys.”

Giles coughed to hide a laugh, partly because to hear Joyce call a century-old vampire “a good boy” was rather amusing, and partly because she and Wesley had hit it off better than he’d expected when he invited the other man over for dinner.

Of course, Wesley had complimented her cooking profusely and had taken two helpings of everything, so that might have had something to do with it.
“I can call Buffy and Willow, too,” Giles said. “Perhaps it would help Willow get her mind off Oz leaving, although I don’t want to push her just yet.”

Joyce shook her head. “Poor girl,” she murmured, a wealth of knowledge in her voice that only experience could bring.

It drew Giles over to her, and he brushed a hand along the side of her neck before gripping her shoulder in what he hoped was a comforting gesture. “If I haven’t mentioned it before, let me say that he was a stupid sod to leave you. Although, selfishly, I can’t be sorry that he did so.”

Joyce smiled, turning to brush a kiss across his lips. “With you here, I can’t say that I’m sorry either.”

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It had only been a little over a week since Oz left, but it felt like a lifetime. Willow wondered when things were going to start to get better. The pain might be a little easier to deal with if she had some kind of a time frame.

Everyone had been great. Buffy had stuck by her side, trying to cheer her up as best as she could. Since Spike was out of town, it definitely made things easier on Buffy. They could be single together, although Willow knew that was only going to last as long as the vampire was gone. Not that Willow begrudged Buffy her boyfriend. Spike had been really sweet, too. The night after Oz had left town, he’d shown up at the dorm with three pints of Ben and Jerry’s and had spent the entire evening telling tall tales.

It was hard to be sorry that your best friend was dating a guy who cared about her friends so much.

Willow hugged her pillow closer to her chest. Buffy was out patrolling, and Xander was working, and so she found herself alone. A couple of weeks ago, she would have been with Oz on a date, probably at the Bronze or the movies. How could things change so quickly?

The knock that came at the door was rapid, and Willow frowned as she sat up. She really didn’t feel like talking to anybody right now. On the other hand, if it were an emergency of some kind, it wouldn’t do to pretend to be gone.
When the knocking resumed, Willow definitely could hear the urgency, and she moved to open the door quickly, seeing Wesley standing there, his fist upraised to knock again. “Wesley?”

“Have you seen Spike?” he asked quickly.

Willow shook her head. “No, I thought he was with you on a trip. Buffy said something about Spike getting back today or tomorrow, but he hasn’t been by.”

Wesley cursed, the heat and the creativity causing Willow’s eyebrows to go straight up. She noticed for the first time that Wesley looked disheveled, his oxford shirt rumpled, his face covered with several days’ worth of stubble.

“Why don’t you come in?” Willow invited, standing to one side. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Wesley admitted. He took a deep breath. “Spike left me in Portland to finish up our first job, and he was going to fly to Dallas to meet with the other client. He called a few days ago to let me know that he was finishing early and would be heading here. I was supposed to check in when I got back into town, but he’s not here.”

Willow sat down on her bed. “What do you mean he isn’t here?”

“He isn’t here,” Wesley repeated irritably. “I went by his townhouse today, and Spike wasn’t at home. His car wasn’t in the garage, and when I checked the fridge, there wasn’t any fresh blood. I don’t think he ever made it home.”

Willow thought about that. “Spike hasn’t been by, Wes, and that isn’t like him. The first thing he does when he gets back into town is to call or come by. He hasn’t done either.”

Wesley ran a hand through his hair. “Bloody hell. What do we do?”

“I don’t know,” Willow said. “You’re the ex-Watcher.”

“Perhaps a locator spell?” Wesley asked. “Or should we wait for Buffy?”
Willow shook her head decidedly. “Big no on that. There’s no sense in making Buffy worry if she
doesn’t have to. I mean, what if Spike just got caught up in a new job and forgot to call?”

“I called his cell phone, and there was no answer,” Wesley said. “I don’t think that’s the problem.”

“It could happen,” Willow insisted. “The point is, there’s no reason for Buffy to worry until we
know there’s a reason.”

Wesley sighed. “Very well. Where do you suggest we do this spell?”

“Spike’s place,” Willow said. “I’ll need something of his, and I think that’ll be the easiest place.
We shouldn’t be interrupted there, unless, you know, it’s by Spike.”

“Let’s hope for that, then,” Wesley replied. “From what I’ve been hearing, I don’t think we want to
find out that Spike has disappeared in Sunnydale.”

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Buffy still couldn’t quite get over the sight she’d walked in on while stopping by her mother’s
house to pick up her mail. Her mom and Giles had just been sitting down to eat dinner.

What had made it so strange was Joyce insisting that she stay and eat with them. Not that eating
dinner at home was weird, but eating dinner at home with Joyce and Giles together—and them
acting like a couple—was.

It had been a good weird, though, not like it had been when Ted was there, trying to act like they
were a family. That had been uncomfortable and wrong, and not just because the very thought of
her mom dating anybody had squicked her out. Most of the discomfort had come from Ted.

Honestly, Buffy was trying very hard not to think about her mom and Giles together. The idea of
them as a couple was okay, but she didn’t like thinking about what it meant for Giles to obviously
be living there pretty much full time at this point.
Other than the weirdness, though, Buffy had noticed that it was good to be with them. It was like having a family again, like having a mother and a father who asked her about college and Spike and how Willow was doing.

She made a mental note to go over there more often.

When she got to her dorm room, Buffy was a little surprised not to see Willow there. She’d expected her friend to stick around, since Willow was still in full-out mope-mode. Not that Buffy could blame her, but it tended to make the other girl hesitant to leave the room for anything other than class and mandatory Scooby meetings.

Buffy checked her messages to make sure Spike hadn’t called. It had been a few days since she’d heard from him, which was odd. Typically he called every day, but there had been a couple of days when he had been working on a sensitive project that had precluded contact with her.

Spike hadn’t left a message, but Willow had. “Buffy, I’m with Wesley over at Spike’s place. We think you should get over here right away. Something bad has happened.”

Buffy grabbed her keys and took off as fast as her feet would take her.

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Harmony watched the soldiers dump the still body in the cell across the way with little interest. They were always bringing new demons and vampires in, and then they would take them out again. She was just waiting for the day when they decided to take her. It would almost be a relief at this point.

She was just so hungry…

Harmony sat up a little straighter when she saw just who the soldiers had brought in, however. The blond head was familiar; she remembered seeing Spike with Buffy last year, and he’d been there during the fight with the Mayor. She knew that he was supposed to be a really good fighter, and she wondered how the soldiers had managed to capture him.

More than that, she wondered why they had taken his shirt. Not that she minded the scenery, of course, because it was a lot better than unbroken white.
Harmony moved forward, closer to the electrified barrier. “Spike!” she called softly. Then, raising her voice, she called again. “Spike!”

He rolled over with a moan, and she could see his chest. Harmony drew back with a gasp when she saw the Y-incision that marred the skin, deep crimson against alabaster, held closed with dark, uneven stitches.

Harmony retreated to the back wall of her cell, suddenly grateful that the soldiers hadn’t shown any interest in her.
“How like a winter hath my absence been/From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!/What
freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!/What old December’s bareness everywhere!/And
yet this time removed was summer’s time,/The teeming autumn, bit with rich
increase,/Bearing the wonton burthen of the prime,/Like widowed wombs after their lords’
decease;/Yet this abundant issue seemed to me/But hope of orphans and unfathered
fruit;/For summer and his pleasures wait on thee,/And, thou away, the very birds are
mute;/Or, if they sing, ‘tis with so dull a cheer/That leaves look pale, dreading the winter’s
near.” ~William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 97”

The locator spell had been a bust. Willow had tried it, and it seemed to indicate that Spike was on
campus somewhere. Wesley had tried it with the same result, but when they’d used the campus
map Willow carried in her purse, the spell indicated that Spike was in one of the residence halls on
campus.

“It’s not possible,” Willow said flatly. “Spike wouldn’t be on campus and not come see Buffy.”

Wesley shook his head. “I would tend to agree, but the spell seems to be clear. Spike is in
Sunnydale, somewhere on campus. The fact that he hasn’t contacted Buffy and isn’t answering his
phone would suggest that he’s in some sort of trouble.” He frowned. “There have been rumors
about…”

“Rumors about what?” Willow asked quickly.

“About demons disappearing near campus. Both Spike and I thought perhaps the soldiers Buffy
and I have seen were hunting and killing them, but it may be more than that.”

Willow’s eyes widened. “You think they’re keeping them somewhere on campus? I think we’d
know if there were a bunch of demons locked up somewhere. Besides, there was a party at Lowell
House last week. No way did they have a bunch of demons there too.”

“Unless they aren’t in the house,” Wesley pointed out. “They could be under it.”

Willow opened her mouth to argue with him, but then stopped, knowing that it was as good an
explanation as any other they had at the moment. “Is there any way the spell could be wrong?”
“It could be,” Wesley agreed. “But it’s doubtful, not when we both get the same result.”

Willow grimaced. “Does that mean that everyone in Lowell House is a soldier or something? Because the TA for our psychology class lives there, and he seems really nice.”

“I’m sure he is nice,” Wesley replied. “That wouldn’t prevent him from capturing and holding demons.”

Willow sighed, looking at the spell components scattered on Spike’s floor. “So how do we know for sure? And how are we going to get him out?”

“Find another way to locate Spike,” Wesley replied. “Perhaps if we had something that was tied more closely to him, a tie that couldn’t be broken. Preferably something magical.”

“Oh!” Willow sat up straight. “Buffy’s bracelet. Spike gave it to her for her birthday last year. It’s charmed, so he can always find her with a compass he carries around.”

Wesley nodded. “I’ve seen the compass. That might work. Perhaps you should call Buffy.”

Willow shook her head. “Spike only has a cell phone, and it’s not here.” Wesley silently handed her his phone. “I didn’t know you had one of these.”

“Spike said it was a business expense,” Wesley replied.

Willow nodded, dialing the number for their dorm room and leaving a message when Buffy didn’t answer. Once she’d hung up, she gave Wesley a concerned look. “Do you want to take a nap or something until she gets here? You look kinda worn out.”

Wesley shrugged. “I’m tired, but if I go to sleep now, I don’t think I’d wake up for a day or two.”

“Rough few days?”
“Checking the provenance on the artifact turned out to be more time-consuming than I had expected,” Wesley replied. “Since I was on a budget, I was working under pressure.”

Willow frowned. “What do you mean a budget?”

“This particular client wanted the background substantiated in time to give it to her husband as a gift. Of course, she didn’t bother telling Spike this until we showed up, and his birthday was less than a week away. Spike promised that I’d get it done in time for a bonus. Since Spike said the bonus was going to be mine, I had plenty of incentive.”

Willow’s eyebrows went up. “What kind of bonus?”

“Ten thousand,” Wesley replied. “I’m thinking I may use it to buy a better vehicle.”

“What kind of vehicle?” Willow asked.

Wesley shook his head, not wanting to confess that he had his eye on a motorcycle. He’d always wanted a motorcycle, but it hadn’t seemed appropriate transportation for a Watcher. For a man in the employ in one of the world’s most notorious vampires, however, it fit the image. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Oz had a van,” Willow offered.

Wesley tried to hide a wince. “It won’t be a van. I’m certain of that much.” He hesitated. “How are you?”

Willow shrugged. “I have good days and bad days. Right now, they’re mostly just bad ones. It helps to stay busy, keep my mind off things.”

“I understand,” Wesley said. “Staying busy, I mean. It does help. If Spike hadn’t offered me a job…” He trailed off, realizing that Willow may not want to hear about his troubles when she was absorbed with her own. “Anyway, I’m sorry you couldn’t work it out.”

She heaved a deep sigh. “He’s coming back,” she said bravely. “Oz left all his stuff here, and he
told me that he was leaving so he could get the wolf under control. Once he does that, he’ll be back.”

“I’m sure he will,” Wesley said gently. “You’ll just have to keep your chin up until then.” She managed a tremulous smile, and Wesley wondered why he’d never noticed how green her eyes were before.

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“Willow?” Buffy called as she entered Spike’s townhouse using the key he’d given her.

“We’re in the kitchen,” Willow called back.

Buffy came in, seeing Wesley and Willow sitting cross-legged on the floor, spell components spread out between them. “What’s going on? Where’s Spike?”

“That’s the trouble,” Wesley said, rising to his feet and stumbling a little as he fought for his balance. “We’ve been trying to find Spike. We were hoping that using your bracelet might help.”

“My bracelet?” Buffy asked, pulling her right wrist to her chest, as though to shield it. “Wait. Why do you think Spike is missing? He was only supposed to get into town today.”

“Perhaps you should sit down,” Wesley suggested gently.

Buffy shook her head. “No. Tell me, Wesley.”

“He called me a few days ago,” Wesley said. “Spike said that he’d finished up early and would be coming back to Sunnydale immediately. I was to contact him when I got back into town, which I tried to do. He wasn’t here when I arrived today, his car isn’t in the garage, and there is no fresh blood in the fridge. When I tried to call his phone, there was no answer. I went to your room to see you and found Willow. We tried to do a locator spell.”

“So you couldn’t locate him?” Buffy asked, feeling panic begin to set in. Spike did not go missing, and he didn’t miss a rendezvous with her. “What does that mean?”
“We found him, Buffy,” Willow explained quickly. “But the spell says he’s on campus, somewhere around Lowell House.”

Buffy did sit down. “Why would he be in Lowell House? Isn’t that where Riley lives?”

“That’s what we were wondering,” Willow said. “Wesley thinks that maybe the soldiers you’ve been seeing have something to do with it. That maybe Spike’s under Lowell House.”

Buffy laughed incredulously. “You’re suggesting that there’s a secret government installation under the campus? That’s a little far-fetched even for the Hellmouth.”

“Perhaps,” Wesley agreed. “But do you have a better reason for why both Willow and I cast a spell that would put Spike in the same place?”

Buffy didn’t look very happy about that. “What are you thinking?”

“We use the connection between your bracelet and Spike’s compass to find him. With any luck, it will lead us straight to where he is.” Wesley grimaced. “With better luck, it won’t be what I fear.”

“What do you mean?” Willow asked.

Wesley raised an eyebrow. “If it is a secret government installation under the campus, how would you suggest we get Spike out of there?”

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He hurt all over. Spike hadn’t been worked over this good for years, and even now he wasn’t sure what they had been after.

Well, besides the obvious. They were very interested in demons and vampires, and they were doubly interested in him. Apparently their routine tests indicated that he hadn’t been feeding from humans, and they wanted to know who else had a chip that worked.
Spike hadn’t the foggiest as to what sort of chip they thought he had, but that’s what he’d overheard while pretending to be unconscious. He’d been rather securely strapped down to a metal table at the time, so it wasn’t like he had a prayer of escaping.

Once they’d begun their “investigation,” Spike rather wished he were unconscious. It hadn’t taken him long to pass out from the pain. Even Angelus had never cut him completely open and fiddled around with his insides.

Now he found himself in a cold cell, locked in with some sort of clear, electrified barrier, and with no idea how he was going to get out.

Spike heard a noise and whirled to face the new threat, only to see a bag of blood dropping down from the ceiling. He picked it up cautiously, figuring that there was probably some catch there, unless they just wanted to keep their lab rat in one piece until they pulled him out again.

“Don’t drink it.”

The voice came from his left. “What?”

“Don’t drink it. They starve you until you’re ready to gnaw your own arm, and then they give you drugged blood and haul you off. Most of the lab rats don’t come back.”

“And you know this how?” Spike asked.

“I’ve been here awhile,” the voice replied. “I was out chasing the Slayer, and she led me right into their arms.”

Spike hid his snort. There was no way Buffy had done anything of the sort. More than likely, the commandos had come along in time to clean up Buffy’s leftovers, possibly from Sunday’s gang. “That right? She’s the one responsible for this?”

“Who else?” the vampire asked.
“Right,” Spike muttered, thinking fast. There had to be a way he could use that information to his advantage. He glanced around, trying to plan the best escape route. His eyes caught sight of the vampire across the way. She looked familiar, but it took him a few seconds to place her. “Bloody hell. Harmony.”

Seeing her hollow eyes and listless gaze caused him to feel pity. Even though she’d bitten Willow, Spike knew she didn’t deserve this sort of fate. If he could manage to get her out during his own escape, he would.

Thinking about the voice on the other side of him, Spike’s eyes narrowed, beginning to plan. Because although Spike had absolutely no doubt that Buffy would start hunting for him once she figured out he was missing, he had no desire for her to find him. Not when it would mean bringing attention to herself.

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“Shouldn’t we be doing a spell by now?” Buffy demanded, watching as Wesley went from one book to another. “We have no idea how long these goons have had Spike!”

“Four days, give or take a day,” Wesley replied without looking up. “That’s about when he was supposed to be in town.”

Buffy resumed her pacing. “How much longer are you thinking it’s going to take?”

“I don’t know,” Wesley snapped. “Do remember that you aren’t the only one who’s concerned here.”

“Okay!” Willow said, getting in between them. “Buffy? Why don’t you call Giles? Maybe he could help us figure this out faster.”

Buffy glanced at the clock. “That might not be such a good idea,” she hedged.

Willow raised her eyebrows. “Because?”
“Because he was at mom’s house earlier, and they’re probably either in bed or…you know.”

Willow wrinkled her face. “Okay, good point, but they’re grownups. I think they can handle the interruption since it’s for a good cause.” When Buffy still appeared hesitant, Willow huffed. “Fine. I’ll call Giles.”

She held out her hand for Wesley’s cell phone, which he handed her without comment. Willow left the room to call, and Buffy slumped down in one of the wooden kitchen chairs. “So what’s keeping you?”

“I don’t want to disrupt the spell on the bracelet if I don’t have to,” Wesley replied. “I’m sure that both you and Spike would rather I not break your birthday present.”

Buffy traced a pattern on the table with the condensation from her water glass. “I think both Spike and I would prefer he be in one piece,” she said softly. “If that’s what you have to do, that’s what you have to do.”

“I think I can figure out how not to disrupt the spell,” Wesley said. “I’ve nearly got it now. Willow was right to call Giles, though. Neither of us have the experience to cast a spell requiring this kind of delicacy.”

“But Giles does?” Buffy asked anxiously.

“He does have a certain reputation among other Watchers,” Wesley said carefully.

Buffy glowered. “Which was why they fired him.”

“No. Actually, it was the thought that he’d gone soft that got him fired,” Wesley corrected. “His abilities with magic have never been in question.”

Buffy frowned thoughtfully. “How good was he supposed to be?”

“Good enough to get him an active Slayer.”
"You got two active Slayers," Buffy pointed out, although there was more teasing than rancor in her tone. "That doesn’t tell me anything at all."

Wesley sighed. "Giles has more experience in certain magical areas, which is what this spell is going to require. If you’ll recall, I performed the truth spell on Faith because I was the one who had experience. If it was simply about power, Willow could do it."

"Willow could do what?" the redhead asked as she entered the kitchen.

"You could do this spell if all that was required was power," Wesley explained. "What did Giles say?"

"That he would get dressed and be over immediately," Willow said. "And, Buffy, for your information they were both asleep. Giles said not to worry about waking him up because it was an emergency."

Buffy got a rebellious expression on her face. "Yeah, I’ll bet that isn’t what he would say if I interrupted something else."

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Spike had been very, very careful not to allow any of the drugged blood to get into his system. He was already handicapped enough by his injuries; the last thing he needed was to have his senses dulled.

It was difficult to lie motionless on the floor, waiting for something to happen. In fact, just being here was making him anxious. Waiting for the soldiers to return to cart him away to his fate—unless he could escape—was a little too much like waiting in the dark, waiting for Angelus to return to torture him again.

To say that this was triggering bad memories was putting it mildly.

Spike would have to worry about his nightmares later, though. Right now he just needed to get out before they did anything else to him.
He heard the swishing noise of the door sliding aside, the clicking of the lab techs’ shoes as they walked across the floor. Spike allowed himself to be lifted off the floor, remaining limp in their hands. Once they put him on the gurney, however, he burst into motion.

Spike brought his elbow up under one man’s chin, ignoring the tearing of the stitches in his chest. He kicked out with a heavy boot, catching the second tech in the stomach and sending the man to his knees. Without pause, Spike jumped off the gurney, kicking both men into unconsciousness with a boot against the temple.

He fumbled in their pockets for the key card, knowing that there would be more soldiers coming for him at any moment. There was no way they didn’t have these corridors wired for video and sound. Spike swiped the card through the slot on the door to the left of him, releasing the vampire who had warned him about the bagged blood. Then he turned to the cell across the hall. “Let’s go, Harmony.”

Hope flared in her eyes. “You’re taking me with you?”

“Wouldn’t leave a dead dog in here with these bastards,” he snarled. “But if you don’t get moving —”

The unspoken threat had Harmony scrambling to her feet, following Spike down the hallway. He dragged her with him under the security door, the other vampire just barely making it before it closed.

“Now what?” Harmony asked.

Just then, the elevator across from them began to open, commandos coming pouring out.

“Shit.” Spike hated to do it, but there didn’t seem to be another choice. “Looks like we’re splitting up, mate.” He shoved the other vampire at the soldiers, keeping a secure grip on Harmony as he fled in the opposite direction.

His sense of direction was shot to hell in this underground warren, and Spike knew that it wouldn’t be long before the soldiers caught the trail. “Bugger this,” he muttered.
“That way,” Harmony said, pointing at a ventilation duct.

“You sure, pet?” Spike asked. “A bit hard to tell up from down in here.”

Harmony nodded. “I’m sure. I might have flunked Algebra, but I have a killer sense of direction.”

Spike hesitated, then nodded. “Up you go, then.”

Giles hadn’t been terribly happy to be pulled out of a deep sleep, but he’d known it was an emergency as soon as he heard the first ring. It was one of those sixth senses he supposed you developed as a parent—or a Watcher.

He’d listened to Willow’s rather garbled explanation of their evening’s activities, told her he would come, and then had gotten dressed. Joyce had awoken fully to listen to his side of the conversation, watching him with concern. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come?”

“I’ll call you as soon as we know anything,” Giles promised. “But, no. It might be better if you stay here.”

“Keep the noncombatants out of the way?” Joyce asked.

“I would really not have to worry more than I am already,” Giles replied, giving her a quick kiss. “I’ll let you know what happens.”

Spike’s place was only a few minutes’ drive, and he entered the house without knocking. “How are we doing?” he asked without preamble.

“I’ve nearly got the spell,” Wesley replied. “I wanted to work with the charm that Spike had placed on Buffy’s bracelet, rather than disrupting the spell with another.”

Giles sat down at the table, taking the cup of coffee that Willow held out to him. “How are you,
“Buffy?” he asked.

“I’ll be a lot better when we find my boyfriend,” she replied. “If something happens to him, I will pull the campus apart to find out who’s responsible.”

“Let’s not jump to any conclusions,” Giles warned her. “There might be a perfectly reasonable explanation for all of this.”

Three rather accusing pairs of eyes looked up at him. “Not that there’s a good chance of that,” Giles quickly added.

Wesley scribbled down a few more words and handed the sheet of paper to Giles, who scanned the spell, then read it again more carefully. “Yes, I think this will work. Well done, Wesley.”

Wesley flushed. “Thank you. Let’s just hope that it gives us the information we need to find Spike.”

“Indeed.” Giles held out his hand to Buffy, who dropped the bracelet into his waiting palm. Seeing her pained expression, Giles said gently, “We will find him, Buffy. Spike has survived for a long time. I’ve no doubt that if he is in trouble, he’s more than capable of getting himself out of it again.”

Buffy shook her head. “I don’t know, Giles. He doesn’t miss a meeting with me after he comes back from a trip. That’s just Spike.”

“I know.” His large hand closed around the silver chain with its charm, feeling the body heat that still lingered in the metal. He just hoped for Buffy’s sake that he was as good at this spell as they were hoping he would be.

And that Spike was in one piece when they found him.
Chapter 13

“I do not care to talk to you although/Your speech evokes a thousand sympathies,/And all my being’s silent harmonies/Wake trembling into music. When you go/It is as if some sudden, dreadful blow/Had severed all the strings with savage ease./No, do not talk; but let us rather seize/This intimate gift of silence which we know./Others may guess your thoughts from what you say/As storms are guessed from clouds when darkness broods./To me the very essence of the day/Reveals its inner purpose and its moods;/As poplars feel the rain and then straightway/Reverse their leaves and shimmer through the woods.” ~Amy Lowell, “Dreams”

Spike gritted his teeth against the pain as they crawled through the ventilation ducts. It was going to take him days, if not weeks, to heal from his injuries. He was still trying to figure out what he was going to do with Harmony when they got out.

He had to believe that it would be when and not if.

Not that he would dust her; that would feel too much like betrayal. Spike wasn't sure he could let her go, though. Not only would Harmony not be safe in Sunnydale, but he also didn't want to risk having to stake her for eating someone.

Which left him with no options, really. Spike supposed the whole thing was a futile exercise in making the best of a bad situation.

In truth, he wasn't thinking about the last few days, or even about what the future would hold. Spike knew he couldn't afford to think about any of that. His focus had to be on survival, on getting to Buffy, on making sure the soldiers didn't catch him again. He wouldn't be caught unawares again, Spike promised himself that.

It had been stupid. Spike had been tired after a long trip, and he'd wanted to stop in and see his girl. The taser had hit him in the back before he'd even registered the soldiers' presence. The first thought that had gone through his head was that Buffy was going to kick his arse for being stupid enough to get caught on campus especially after she'd warned him about being careful. Hell, Spike figured he deserved to have his arse kicked.

Waking up in the lab, strapped to the table, Spike had experienced a flashback to his past. Angelus had enjoyed strapping him down as well.
And the possibility of escape had appeared just as remote.

Spike knew he wouldn't have lasted very long in there without going crazy. Even now, the madness niggled at the back of his mind—the memory of endless pain, of being reduced to his base impulses, incapable of anything better or nobler. That's what those soldiers were doing with the demons they captured, and although Spike knew very well that some of them were dangerous, none of them deserved to be used as lab rats. A quick death, perhaps, but not that.

It wasn't important, though. What was important was escaping the underground warren without being discovered.

After that, he would start thinking about taking his revenge.

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Wesley's solution was really quite ingenious, in Giles' opinion. What it did was essentially reverse engineer the original charm without disrupting it. After he cast the spell, if all went according to plan, the small compass Giles had purchased would essentially work as Spike's did and would be keyed to its mate. It was a much more complicated spell than either Willow or Wesley had ever undertaken, however, so Giles was the one nominated to make the attempt.

In truth, he was feeling the pressure, because he didn't want to be the one who had to tell Buffy that they wouldn't be able to locate Spike.

Giles kept his words and movements precise, blocking out the presence of the others behind him. They were silent, but he could feel Buffy's worry like a tangible thing.

Not that he could blame her. Giles knew he'd feel the same way if something happened to Joyce.

The bracelet pulsed with a golden light, and the compass began to pulse with the same beat. With the final words of the spell, the light flared and then died away, and Giles took a deep breath, leaning forward to pick them up. The metal of both was warm to the touch, and he held up the compass, watching as the needle spun wildly for a moment before pointing at a direction that was most certainly not north.

Handing the bracelet and the compass to the Slayer, Giles said, "I think it worked."
Buffy clasped the bracelet back around her wrist, and then turned to look at Wesley. "You want in on this?"

"You know I do," he replied.

Willow frowned. "Do you want me to come, Buffy?"

"I don't think that magic is going to do us much good right now," Buffy said, sounding apologetic. "Once we find Spike, it's probably going to be more of a muscle thing."

Giles leaned back against the kitchen counter. "Are you sure, Buffy? You may want to wait."

"I'm going to find Spike," Buffy insisted. "I'm not going on a suicide mission, but I'm not going to let anything stand in my way either."

"And if what stands in your way is a number of men with guns?"

"Then I make sure they aren't walking home anytime soon if they've harmed one hair on Spike's head." Buffy's eyes glittered. "And they learn what it means to mess with the Slayer."

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The ventilation shaft let out somewhere on campus. Spike recognized the landscape, but he wasn't completely sure where he was in relation to Buffy's dorm. The first task, of course, was to get somewhere safe, which would probably mean his own place, or possibly Wesley's. Spike didn't think they knew where he was living, since they hadn't bothered taking his wallet. Spike reached into his pocket, pulling out his keychain with the compass on it. It was still working, which was one piece of luck at least.

In some ways it hurt that they hadn't searched him more carefully, as though they didn't believe vampires—or demons—capable of any kind of rational thought.
"What do we do now?" Harmony asked.

"We don't do anything," Spike replied. "This is where we split up." Harmony's eyes widened, and Spike sighed, hating himself. "Look, Harm, you have to get out of Sunnydale. Find a safe place to hole up for a bit." He hesitated, and then added, "You might want to think about giving up eating people. It's more trouble than it's worth, and you're not very good at it."

"But where am I supposed to go?" Harmony asked.

Spike thought for a moment, wanting to give her some assistance at least. “Go to L.A. There’s a demon there by the name of Lorne, runs a bar called Caritas. He’ll be able to point you in the right direction.” Pulling out his wallet, Spike grabbed a few bills and pressed them into her hand. “Best bet is to get on the first bus out of town. That should do it.”

Spike refused to be moved by her wide eyes and trembling lip. He had no intention of telling Buffy that he had let the other vampire go, and the only way he could really justify it was if he sent her out of town. Since Harmony had bitten Willow, Spike had the feeling that the Slayer wouldn’t be inclined to give Harmony a free pass, no matter what the soldiers had done to her.

Harmony nodded, bravely trying to keep the tears at bay. "Okay. Thanks. For getting me out of there."

Spike sighed. "You're alright, Harmony. Keep your head down, huh?"

"I'm going to try."

Harmony darted off into the underbrush, and Spike couldn't help but hope that she made it out of town okay. It was better that they split up, though. With more than one target, the soldiers might find it more difficult to locate either of them.

His next step was going to be stealing a shirt. Spike knew he needed to be a little less conspicuous if he wanted to make it to safety.
Buffy raised her eyebrows when she saw the holster under Wesley's jacket. "Is that a tranq pistol, or is that the real thing?"

"I don't plan on using it unless I have to," Wesley said. "But if it's you or them, I'm going to shoot to kill."

Buffy gave him a strange look. "You're serious."

"How would I be able to face Spike again if I allowed something to happen to you?" Wesley replied.

Buffy tried to suppress a smile. It was sweet of Wesley, really, especially considering the fact that she was the Slayer and more than capable of taking care of herself. At the same time, she appreciated his confidence that they would find Spike. "I could probably say the same thing," she teased.

"Spike is my employer and my friend," Wesley replied. "I could do no less."

Hearing Wesley's words, Buffy suddenly realized exactly why Spike had hired the man. He'd gotten someone who was absolutely loyal and didn't flinch from doing what was necessary—no matter how distasteful.

Buffy glanced down at the compass. It was still pointing towards the campus, so she picked up her pace. Wesley stayed by her side, his face grim, but she had the feeling that he was just a little bit nervous. After all, it wasn't every day that you got ready to raid a secret...something under a college campus to rescue a vampire.

She'd meant what she told Giles. Buffy wasn't planning on doing anything to get herself or Wesley killed, but she had every intention of finding Spike tonight.

"What do you think, Wes?" Buffy asked. "How are we getting him out?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I imagine if we're going to have to break in somewhere it might be better to have a plan."
“Really?” Buffy asked. “Because I've found that just walking in with guns blazing works great.”

Wesley lifted an eyebrow. “Have you considered that you might not want them to know about you?”

“You’re sounding like Spike.”

“Thank you.”

Buffy fought back a grin, despite her worry. Wesley’s tone had been so dry she had no idea if he was being sarcastic or serious. She had the feeling that it was a little of both. “What do you think this is really about?”

“I don’t know,” Wesley admitted. “Judging from the scant information Spike’s sources were able to give us, as well as the soldier we saw that day in the woods, I would guess that it’s a military operation of some kind. It’s possible that it’s a paramilitary operation, but if they’re operating from a site on the campus, it’s more likely that they would have government authorization.”

“That’s what you’re worried about,” Buffy said quietly. “That if it is the government, there may be no way to fight them. It might be too big.”

He nodded with obvious hesitation. “Yes. That’s my concern.”

“What if they do have Spike? We have to find some way of getting him out.”

“I’m not arguing with you,” Wesley replied. “But I think you may have to be prepared to wait for a time. Getting in and getting Spike out might take a little more manpower.”

Buffy sighed. “I know. I do. It’s just—”

“I understand, Buffy.”

“Thanks, Wes,” she said quietly. “Spike was right, you know.”
“Right about what?”

“Hiring you. It was a good idea.” Buffy didn’t think she was imagining the blush of pleasure that spread across his face even though he didn’t reply.

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Spike was beginning to feel trapped. He’d managed to sneak into one of the laundry facilities to steal a shirt. He needed to blend in, and the black Megadeth t-shirt was better than running around looking like Frankenstein’s monster.

He had planned on getting off campus, getting to his car, and then deciding where to go. Spike wasn’t sure if he wanted to risk going to his place yet. Wesley’s apartment was one possibility, as was Giles’ place or even the Summers’ residence. He figured he’d make that decision once he got clear and got a better idea of the lay of the land.

The only problem was that the soldiers were out in full force. Spike kept seeing patrols circling, and although they were trying to blend in, he had their scent now. The antiseptic smell of the underground laboratory clung to them, and they moved differently. Now that he knew what to look for, it didn’t take much effort to pick them out of the students roaming campus after dark.

There weren’t all that many people wandering around at this hour anyway, and the soldiers walked with a purpose.

Spike didn’t know how he was going to get past them, not in his current condition, and fear was beginning to claw at him, clouding his thinking. He felt like a cornered animal, and Spike knew that he couldn’t allow himself to be recaptured. He would make sure that he was dust first.

There was only one place close by that might be safe. Spike would just have to hope that inside the dorms would be the last place the soldiers would look.

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Willow felt a trifle glum. It had been good to get out and help Wesley with his locator spell. In his
company, working to find Spike, she had been able to forget about missing Oz for a while. Back in her room, alone, Willow found it easy to let self-pity take over.

She just missed Oz so much.

It made her feel guilty to be so caught up in her own pain, though. Willow had no reason to believe that Oz was in danger, and she knew that Buffy was probably beginning to go a little crazy with not knowing where Spike was.

She sighed, wishing there was some way to help Buffy even if she couldn’t be out there helping them look for the missing vampire. The knock on the door had her frowning, and she went over to open it cautiously, gasping when she saw Spike on the threshold.

He looked like death warmed over. Willow didn’t think she’d seen him look this bad since Faith and her poison arrow.

“Spike!” She quickly ushered him inside. “What happened to you?”

“Got caught by those bastards that have been rounding up demons on campus,” Spike replied.

When Willow noticed that he was almost ready to drop, she led him over to Buffy’s bed, sitting him down. “Do you want something? I’m sorry we don’t have any blood here, but maybe water or juice or something?”

He shook his head. “No. Gotta get out of here. They were starting to close in, and I don’t know how long I’ll be safe here.”

“Buffy’s probably on her way,” Willow assured him. “Giles did a spell on the bracelet so we could find you.”

“Call Wesley then,” Spike insisted. “They’re coming, and they aren’t going to take me without a fight, Red. I’d sooner kill myself.”

Willow didn’t like the sound of that. “No one’s dying,” she insisted. “Wesley’s with Buffy, so I’ll
just call him. Do you know his number?”

She dialed the number Spike rattled off and bit her lip as the phone rang. Spike looked a little wild, like he was right on the edge and about ready to go over. Somehow, she was pretty sure she didn’t want to be around for that.

“What?”

She let out a sigh of relief when Wesley answered. “He’s here.”

“We’re on our way.”

Willow heard him end the connection, and she turned back to Spike. “They’re on their way, Spike. It’s going to be fine. Buffy was ready to turn the campus upside down looking for you, so it’s really good that you’re here so she doesn’t have to do that.”

“Real good thing,” he replied.

Willow went to sit next to him on the bed, almost afraid to get too close. “Are you okay?”

Spike’s eyes were bright when he looked at her, and she could see both the desperation and the light of madness in them. “I will be. Just need to get out of here. Feels too closed in.” He jumped when the door opened, his eyes going gold.

Willow didn’t think she’d ever seen Spike this ready to rip someone’s throat out before. It was more than a little scary.

His eyes were blue again, though, just as soon as he saw Buffy.

“Spike.” There was a wealth of relief in her voice, and she grabbed him in a hug, releasing him when he grunted in pain. “What happened?”

“Got grabbed by those soldiers I’d been told about,” Spike replied. “They’re looking for me.
Couldn’t get off campus without running into one of their patrols.”

Buffy didn’t look satisfied with that answer, but she nodded. “You look like shit, you know. I’m going to want the whole story.”

“Later.”

“Okay.” Buffy sighed, looking around. “I left Wesley outside as a lookout, but—”

The lights went out, and Willow stiffened. “Buffy?”

“Bloody hell,” Spike snarled. “It’s them.”

Buffy’s voice was calm. “We’re going to get out of here,” she said. “Can you fight, Spike?”

“I’ll rip their throats out before I let them touch you.”

Willow could hear the smile in Buffy’s voice. “You say the sweetest things.”

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Xander knocked on the front door of Buffy’s house. Well, not really Buffy’s house anymore. It was Joyce’s house, and apparently Giles’ as well, since this is where Giles had said he could be reached. The Watcher had said something about helping him out with stocking books for just compensation, and Xander liked the sound of that.

Finding a decent job was proving to be more difficult than he’d thought it would be.

Joyce answered the door, giving him a smile. “Hi, Xander. What brings you by?”

“Giles said something about seeing him if I wanted to make some extra money stocking books,” he
replied. “I figured anything would be better than delivering pizzas.”

“Come in,” she said. “Giles just got back.”

Xander followed her through to the kitchen, wondering why his mom couldn’t be more like Buffy’s. Not that he didn’t love his mother, but sometimes it was hard to understand her, especially when she was drunk.

“Xander,” Giles said. “What brings you by?”

“Uh, the message you left,” Xander replied. “Something about getting paid for my time? Not that I would refuse to help even if there wasn’t money involved. You know me. I’m all about the helping.”

“Do you want something to drink?” Joyce asked him. “I could fix something.”

Xander shook his head. “No, I’m good.”

“Where’s Anya this evening?” Giles asked.

Xander shrugged. “We didn’t make plans, so I thought I’d see if you had anything for me.”

“Not right now,” Giles replied. “I’m waiting to hear from Buffy, and I’d rather not miss her call.”

Xander’s ears perked up at that. “Is something going on?” he asked. “Is the Hellmouth spilling over again?”

Giles shook his head. “It appears as though Spike has gone missing.”

“Buffy’s supposed to call as soon as they know something,” Joyce stated.
Xander felt a pang at that. “Did anyone go with her?”

“She took Wesley,” Giles replied, not realizing that he was bruising Xander’s ego with that news. “They were worried about running into the soldiers.”

“What soldiers?” Xander asked. “And why would Spike go missing? And why for the love of God would Buffy take Wesley with her anywhere?”
Chapter 14

“Was there a time when dancers with their fiddles/In children’s circuses could stay their troubles?/There was a time they could cry over books/But time has set its maggot on their track./Under the arc of the sky they are unsafe./What’s never known is safest in this life./Under the skysigns they who have no arms/Have cleanest hands, and, as the heartless ghost/Alone’s unhurt, so the blind man sees best.” Dylan Thomas “Was There A Time?”

Wesley knew why Buffy had stationed him outside. It made perfect sense, really. He just hated being the lookout. He was worried that he was going to miss something.

His eyes widened when he saw the lights in the windows of the dorm blink out. “Oh, bugger,” he muttered, trying to figure out what to do. He could see the soldiers entering the building, like shadows detaching themselves from the surrounding night. There were nearly half a dozen. They had obviously shut off the power to give themselves the advantage, and although he had meant it when he told Buffy that he’d use the gun he carried, Wesley preferred to avoid that. It would draw too much attention, and presented too great a risk of harming an innocent bystander, especially when shooting in the dark.

On the other hand, Wesley had grabbed a flashlight on his way out the door, along with his gun. He’d thought it might come in handy if they had to go underground, but if the soldiers had cut off the lights, there was every reason to think that they were equipped to see in the dark.

Wesley went in through the door. He didn’t have to worry about groping his way to Buffy’s room since it was easy enough to hear the sounds of a struggle. There were masculine shouts, and although he didn’t recognize their voices, it boded well for how Buffy was likely doing.

When he got close enough to the soldiers, Wesley turned on the flashlight, hitting the nearest one right in the eyes. The soldier cried out in pain, putting his hand over his night-vision goggles.

“Get her out of here!” Buffy called out to him.

Wesley could just make out Buffy in the beam of his light, and it looked as though she had her hands full with Spike. He caught sight of Willow and pulled his gun, using the butt on one of the soldiers who tried to get in between them. He hit another in the eyes with the light again and heard another cry of pain with a sense of satisfaction.
“Here,” Wesley said, handing Willow the flashlight, grabbing her free hand.

There was a hiss as one of the soldiers hit the fire extinguisher Buffy held with the taser darts, and Wesley welcomed the cloud of gas that filled the hallway. He hurried Willow through the confusion, keeping his head down.

Wesley didn’t stop until they were outside, and he turned to see if Buffy was behind him. She had a firm grip on Spike, who looked like he was ready to topple over. “We have to get Spike out of here.” They were surrounded by milling students who had either heard the commotion from outside and had come to gawk, or who had been inside and hadn’t felt safe. Wesley found himself grateful for the crowd. It was less likely that the soldiers would try again with so many witnesses.

“Where are we going?” Wesley asked.

Buffy glanced at the vampire. “Do they know where you live, Spike?”

“Don’t think so. Bunch of idiots. They didn’t even bother checking my wallet.”

Wesley released Willow and went over to Spike’s side. “We need to hurry.”

“I agree,” Buffy replied. “But we should drive.”

“If my car didn’t get towed, it’s close. Just a couple blocks off campus,” Spike said.

“Let’s go,” Buffy said.

Willow looked back at the dorm. “Are we going to be able to go back tonight?”

Buffy shook her head. “We’ll worry about that later. I imagine that once they clear out, they won’t be in a hurry to come back. They’ll probably want to keep their identities a secret.”

Wesley began to lead Spike off through the crowd of students. “As long as they don’t know ours. I don’t want to find out how far they would go to bring Spike back into custody.”
“Let them try,” Buffy replied, her eyes locking with Spike’s. Wesley could hear the promise in her tone, and he knew it was for the vampire’s benefit. “They’ll find out what the Slayer’s all about.”

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“I know you’re hurt.” Buffy’s voice was low. She could hear Wesley in the other room, talking to Giles on the phone, and Willow was in the bathroom. She didn’t know why Spike wouldn’t tell her what was wrong, but she didn’t have any trouble with prying the information out of him. “You have to tell me, Spike.”

He wouldn’t meet her eyes. “They roughed me up a bit, that’s all.”

“You’re bleeding,” Buffy insisted.

Spike glanced down, seeing the stain in the middle of his chest. It was difficult to see on black fabric, but Buffy had an eye for this sort of thing, so he wasn’t surprised that she’d noticed. “Buffy—”

“Spike, please.” Her hand traced the line of his jaw. She noted the shadows under his eyes, the fear and the madness that lurked within. Buffy understood both better than Spike might give her credit for—she had some idea of what being caged again would mean to him.

After all, she’d witnessed one or two of his nightmares.

With a sigh, Spike pulled up his shirt, wincing when she gasped.

“Why?” she finally managed to ask.

“Overheard them saying that they knew I hadn’t been feeding off of humans,” Spike replied. “That changed their plans for me. Don’t know what they would have done otherwise. Think they might have done some scans while I was out, but they said something about a chip not being picked up. They were sure it was in there, so they cut me open and fiddled around for a while.”
Buffy’s jaw tightened. “I’ll kill them.”

A half-hearted smile tugged at Spike’s lips. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I don’t want them knowing about you.”

“They don’t have to know if I don’t leave any witnesses,” she joked. When Spike tried to pull his shirt down, she stopped him gently. “I don’t think we can leave it like that.”

He looked away, giving a bitter laugh. “Yeah. I figured.”

“You’re going to need more blood,” Buffy said, nodding at the empty mug that sat next to him. “And that’s going to require a trip to the butcher’s. Your chest, though…”

“You might want to let me take care of it,” Wesley offered from the doorway.

Buffy gave him a skeptical look. “Not that I’m doubting your abilities right now, Wes, but are you sure?”

“Who else is going to do it?” he asked. “Giles and I have had training in first aid and that did involve learning how to stitch someone up.”

“And Rupert’s not here,” Spike said. “Wes can do it, luv. Why don’t you take Willow with you? I don’t think they’ll be watching the butchers, but—”

“Be careful,” Buffy finished for him. “I will.” She leaned down, giving Spike a gentle kiss on the lips. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.” Turning to Wesley, she said, “Take care of him.”

Wesley and Spike were both silent as Buffy called to Willow, and then both girls left. When the door closed behind them, Wesley sighed. “Do you want me to get the whiskey?”

“Oh, yeah,” Spike replied.

It was an awkward job, to say the least. The stitches the scientists had put in were large and uneven, and several had torn. Spike hadn’t begun to heal yet, which meant that the ugly black
threads were about the only thing keeping his insides on the inside.

In the end, Wesley waited until Spike had drunk most of the remaining bottle of whiskey. The alcohol took the edge off the pain as Wesley carefully began sewing the skin together, removing the other stitches as he went.

“I want that gem, Wes.”

He kept his focus on the task at hand, knowing what Spike was referring to, as well as why he had changed his mind. The last time they’d talked about it, Spike had still been hesitant to go after the Gem of Amara, even knowing that they would have the time to go after it in the near future.

“As soon as you’re ready, we’ll go after it,” Wesley promised. “You’ll need to heal a bit first, and it might be a good idea for you to keep your head down for a while. They’ll be looking for you.”

Spike was quiet for a moment, and then he said, “They won’t take me again.”

Wesley just nodded and kept stitching.

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“What are you going to do, Buffy?” Willow asked as they made their way back to Spike’s house. The butcher’s shop had actually had an order ready for the vampire, and all Buffy had needed to do was to mention his name. Apparently he had a running tab that he paid up every month or so. Buffy had been uncharacteristically silent the entire trip, and Willow was beginning to get concerned. The Slayer had a tendency to be a little irrational when her boyfriends got hurt.

“Do about what?”

“About Spike and the soldiers.”

“I don’t know.” The admission sounded as though it had been dragged out of her. “Will, they cut him open for no good reason. You should have seen it. They knew he hadn’t been feeding on humans, so they cut him open because they wanted to know why. They could have just asked
Willow nodded. “So what are you going to do about them?”

“I don’t know,” Buffy repeated. “I want to hurt them, but this is even bigger than the Mayor. I might not be able to fight these guys.”

“Not head on,” Willow agreed. “But there are other ways, Buffy. What about the Council? Surely Giles still knows people, and they could find out what’s going on. We definitely need more information.”

“We’ll see,” Buffy replied. “If I need to do that, I will.” She gave her friend a wry look. “Are you really that worried that I’m going to go on a rampage?”

Willow raised an eyebrow. “Uh, Buffy? Remember the last time somebody hurt Spike really badly? She’s still in a coma.”

Buffy winced at the reminder. “That was different. That was one person, I knew who was responsible, and it was my battle to fight.”

Willow didn’t know what to say to that. Buffy was right. There were too many unknowns at the moment, too many ways that things could go wrong. “Are we staying at Spike’s tonight?”

“I am,” Buffy replied. “I think it’s probably okay for you to go back, if you want to. Wesley might be able to give you a ride unless you want to stay.”

Willow rather thought that Buffy and Spike would want their privacy. “No, that’s okay. All my stuff is there anyway.”

“Thanks for all your help, Will,” Buffy said. “I know you’ve been missing Oz recently, and…”

“No, Buffy!” Willow was quick to protest. “It was good to help. It’s a good distraction, and I like Spike, too. I don’t want to see him hurt any more than you do.”
“Thanks,” she repeated. “I have a feeling we’re going to need you in this.”

Willow laid a hand on Buffy’s arm. “Say the word, Buffy. I’m your girl.”

“I know.”

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Buffy was grateful that Wesley agreed to take Willow back to the dorms without an argument, and she told him to go home and get some sleep. He looked like he was ready to collapse, which was probably why he acquiesced so readily.

Spike was asleep when she went back into his bedroom, and Buffy put the mug she’d warmed down on the nightstand. Although the Y-incision was still ghastly, after Wesley’s efforts it looked much better.

His eyes blinked open. “Any trouble?”

“No. Here,” she handed him the mug. “You need to keep eating.”

The fact that Spike didn’t even protest told Buffy everything she needed to know about his state of mind. She watched as he swallowed convulsively, and then she set the mug back down. Even though she knew it would probably be a good idea to rinse it out, she didn’t want to let him out of her sight again.

Buffy lay down next to him, careful not to hurt him. Sensing her concern, Spike pulled her closer. “You aren’t going to hurt me.”

“I missed you.”

“Missed you, too.”
She clung to him, the realization that she might have lost him sinking in as the last of the adrenaline wore off. “I’m sorry, Spike.”

“For what, pet?”

“For not getting you out of there sooner,” she replied. “If Wesley hadn’t realized that you had gone missing, I wouldn’t have even known. I should have—”

“Hush,” he commanded gently. “Wasn’t your fault, luv. Should have been more careful. I was stupid enough to get caught.”

She smiled. “I won’t argue with you.”

“Very funny.” Spike stroked her hair, feeling exhaustion beginning to set in now that she was here beside him. They were both safe for the moment.

“Go to sleep,” Buffy whispered. “I’ll stay awake.”

Spike allowed himself to drift off. “Love you, Buffy.”

“I love you, too. Always.”

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Willow wasn’t terribly surprised when she didn’t see Buffy the next day. She was a little concerned about psychology, though, since Professor Walsh didn’t like students taking absences. She had already kicked Oz out of her class, and Willow was a little hesitant to explain that Buffy was out for a family emergency.

She didn’t have to say anything, though, because Riley stopped her as she was leaving. “Where’s Buffy today?” he asked. “She’s been pretty good about coming.”

Willow winced. “Her boyfriend had to go in for emergency surgery yesterday. She was in the
“I’m sorry to hear that,” Riley replied. “She’s got to come to class, though. Professor Walsh doesn’t make exceptions.”

“So I’ve heard,” Willow replied dryly. “I’m sure Buffy won’t miss any more classes after this.”

Riley gave her a smile, and Willow left, thinking about Spike and his situation. There had to be something she could do to make things easier.

Or maybe just to make it harder for the soldiers to find him again.

The message light on the machine was blinking when Willow returned to the room, and she hit play, thinking that it was probably Buffy. Giles’ voice greeted her, however. “This is Giles. Please call me back when you can.” He left a number that Willow didn’t recognize, and she wondered where he was calling from.

The phone rang several times before he answered. “Oh, hello, Willow,” he said once she identified herself. “I was wondering if you would mind giving me a hand today. Xander has agreed to help, as well as Joyce, but I didn’t want to bother Spike or Buffy after what happened.”

Willow frowned. “Help you with what?”

“The shop? My opening is in just a few days.”

Willow wracked her brain, trying to remember if Giles had said anything about opening a shop of some kind. “What shop?”

There was a long silence. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“I don’t think so,” Willow replied. “I haven’t talked to you since Oz…” She trailed off. “You know.”

“I’m so very sorry,” Giles apologized. “I meant to tell you, but after, well, after everything
happened, I didn’t want to bother you. Would you mind giving me a hand today? I wouldn’t ask, but I’m on something of a tight schedule.”

“No, I’ll be right over,” Willow replied. “Where do you want me to meet you?” She scribbled down the address that Giles gave her and set the phone back in its cradle. This might work out for the best, since she would have a chance to ask Giles if he had any ideas. Surely he would know something she could do to help.

And if Giles didn’t know…

Willow bit her lip, trying to remember the number that Spike had given her last night. With some hesitation, she punched the number in, feeling relief when Wesley’s voice greeted her. “Hello?”

“Wesley? It’s Willow.”

“What can I do for you?”

“Giles wants some help with his shop, and I was wondering if I could get a ride over there and maybe pick your brain,” she replied.

There was a pause on the other end. “About what?”

“Something to help Spike,” Willow replied. “Maybe something to prevent the soldiers from finding him? I don’t really know, and I can’t ask Buffy. This isn’t really her thing. She’s the one who beats up the bad guys, not the one who figures out what spell to use.”

“All right.” Wesley sighed. “I’ll be over as soon as I can.”

Willow realized that she’d probably awoken him, given how tired he’d been when dropping her off the previous night. “I’m sorry. I woke you up.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he replied. “I’ll be over in half an hour.”
Willow put the phone back, thinking that Wesley really was a nice guy.

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Wesley wasn’t particularly happy about being dragged out of bed. Although, to be fair, he’d been mostly awake. He just hadn’t wanted to get up.

Thoughts of what the soldiers had done to Spike, as well as his professed desire to search for the Gem, plagued him. Not that Wesley blamed him, but it worried him nonetheless. Spike’s desire struck him as the beginnings of an obsession, not the rational decision to retrieve something that might prove to be of use. It didn’t matter why Spike wanted it, however. Wesley would help him get it, then he’d just hope that Spike didn’t go on a rampage.

After all, an invulnerable vampire could do quite a bit of damage.

He took a quick shower but didn’t bother shaving. It wasn’t worth it when he’d only be helping Giles get his shop set up. There was no one there who would care how he looked. Wesley took Spike’s car again, knowing that the vampire would call him when he wanted it back.

When he picked up Willow, he caught her staring at him. “What?” he asked, not sure how to take the look on her face.

Willow, for her part, was a little surprised. She’d been too focused on finding Spike the previous day to pay much attention to Wesley or how he looked. Today, however, she realized that he still hadn’t shaved, his hair was disheveled, and slightly wet from the shower, and he wore jeans and a sweater.

All in all, he looked really good. Willow hadn’t been expecting that. “You, uh, didn’t shave.”

He ran a hand over his face self-consciously. “I didn’t think anyone would care.”

“I don’t care,” she was quick to say. “I mean, you look fine. Shaving is a personal choice, and I try to respect other people’s choices.”
His lips twitched. “You wanted to talk about Spike?”

“Is there anything we can do to keep the soldiers from seeing him, or noticing him, or knowing that it is him?” Willow asked. “I’ve been thinking about it, and I want to help, I just don’t know what to do. I know I’m not very good with the spells yet, but I thought between the two of us, and with Giles’ help, we might be able to figure something out.”

“We might,” Wesley replied. “I haven’t given it much thought. Spike wants to go after the Gem of Amara, which will make him a much tougher target.”

“What’s that?” Willow asked.

He shrugged, maneuvering the car easily. “It’s a vampire’s Holy Grail, in a way. It’s supposed to render them invulnerable to all the things that would normally kill them—holy water, crosses, wooden stakes, sunlight.”

Willow blinked. “That’s probably better than some spell I could do.”

“Your idea isn’t a bad one,” he was quick to assure her. “The Gem of Amara is probably more for Spike’s peace of mind than anything else.”

“Why would he need a spell if he had that?”

“Because it might not just be Spike who ends up needing the spell,” Wesley replied. “This may end up being a threat to all of us. It would depend on if these are reasonable people we’re dealing with.”

“And if they’re not reasonable?” Willow asked with some trepidation.

“Then they may not draw much distinction between demons and their friends, and less distinction between demons who are on the side of right and those that present a danger.”

Willow hadn’t quite thought about it that way before, but she thought Wesley might be right.
“Maybe nothingness is to be without your presence,/without you moving, slicing the noon/like a blue flower, without you walking/later through the fog and the cobbles/without the light you carry in your hand./golden, which maybe others will not see,/which maybe no one knew was growing/like the red beginnings of a rose./In short, without your presence: without your coming/suddenly, incitingly, to know my life,/gust of a rosebush, wheat of wind:/since then I am because you are,/since then you are, I am, we are,/and through love I will be, you will be, we’ll be.” ~Pablo Neruda, “Sonnet LXIX”

Buffy woke slowly, feeling a jolt of panic when she realized that Spike was no longer beside her.

She’d stayed awake until the sun rose, wanting to be sure that the soldiers didn’t know where Spike was living. At that point, unable to keep her eyes open any longer, Buffy had shoved a chair under the doorknob, figuring that if anyone did try to break in, that would give them a little warning.

When she looked, the chair had been moved back to sit in front of the small, antique desk. Buffy rose and walked out to the kitchen. Spike stood at the sink, looking out the window to the miniscule backyard. It was late afternoon, and the sun was on the other side of the house, keeping him safe from its rays.

"How are you feeling?"

He turned to face her. "Better."

Buffy could see that he was at least calmer, but there was still a light in his eyes that worried her. "What are you thinking?"

"Just thinking."

She took a deep breath. "Spike, please don't shut me out."

"I'm not shutting you out," he replied. "This is—what do you want me to say?"
"I don't know." Buffy stepped closer, resting a hand on his arm. "Maybe just what's going through your head right now."

"I swore to myself that I was never going to be in that position again." Spike's eyes blazed. "They're in my town, Buffy, dealing with forces they don't understand."

Buffy sat at the table, waiting for him to join her before she spoke. "What do you want to do?"

"I'm going after the gem."

"Okay." Buffy knew exactly what he was saying, and she couldn't argue with him. The Gem of Amara, if it worked as it was supposed to, would keep him that much safer. "What about all the reasons you used to have for not going after it?"

"I'm going after the gem," Spike repeated, hurt creeping into his voice. "Buffy—"

"Did I say you shouldn't?" she demanded. "I'm not suggesting that you shouldn't go after it, Spike. I want you safe, and if it makes you safe, then I'm all for it. The last time we talked about this, though, you had some darn good reasons for not looking for it."

"I think the benefits outweigh the potential problems," Spike said. "They won't take me again, Buffy. Next time, it's them or me."

"Then it had better be them," she said fiercely. "Because I am not losing you."

Spike stood. "You're not going to lose me."

"Promise me, Spike," she insisted. "I want you alive and in one piece, and I want you to swear that you're not going to go on a suicide mission, or get yourself dusted. If the worst happens, I will get you out. I will be there for you, but you need to stay alive for me."

"Luv," Spike began.
Buffy cut him off. "Because I swear to you, if you get yourself dusted, I will find a way to resurrect you, and then I will kick your ass."

Something in his eyes settled then, and the last of the madness seemed to leave his gaze. "I promise."

"Good." Buffy gave him a stern look. "Shirt up, mister. I want to make sure you're healing."

Spike knew that there was no way he was going to be able to argue with her, not when Buffy used that tone of voice. He raised his t-shirt, knowing from the expression on her face that it still looked bad. Not that Spike thought it had looked much better himself, but seeing the concern mixed with anger on the Slayer's face only reinforced it.

She ran a hand along his side, her touch tender. "So what do you want to do today?"

"Dunno, other than getting my keys back from Wes," Spike replied. "You have any ideas?"

"I thought maybe I'd call Giles later, see what he's got," Buffy replied. She straightened. "I think I'll move in with you for the time being, though."

Spike shook his head. "That's not necessary."

"I think it is," she insisted. "I don't want you going out on your own, Spike. I think I should be with you, or Wesley. An extra pair of eyes will keep you safer."

"No," he shot back. "I'm not going to become a prisoner in my own house because of these bastards."

Buffy raised an eyebrow. "Okay, fine. Let's pretend for a minute that our positions were reversed." She paused to let that idea sink in. "What would you be saying to me right now?"

Spike scratched the back of head, his expression sheepish. "The same thing."
"That's what I thought," she said. "So?"

"I'll do it," he grumbled. "That doesn't mean I have to like it, though."

She gave him a sweet smile. "Just think of how much quality time we'll get to spend together."

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The bookstore was beginning to take shape. Most of the shelves were put together, and Xander was working on the last few. Wesley had started out by helping Xander, but after the second time he'd hit his thumb with the hammer, Joyce had suggested that he try something else.

That was why Wesley found himself helping Willow finish the last of the cleaning before beginning to shelve the books. "So what made you decide on a bookstore, Giles?" Willow asked. "Other than liking books, I mean."

"I wanted to do something," Giles stated. "I thought owning a shop might be interesting."

"You got bored," Joyce added, sounding amused.

"That too," he admitted.

Willow grinned. "I like it. I think it'll be a really cool place."

Giles murmured a thank you, although it was clear from the expression on his face that he wasn't really going for "cool."

Wesley smiled, then patted his pockets as his cell phone began to ring. "Hello?"

"Wes, it's me."
Wesley turned away from the others, retreating to a corner of the room to talk with Spike. "How are you?"

"Better than I was," he replied. "You still have my car?"

"Do you need it?"

"Not right this minute," Spike replied. "If you bring it after the sun's down, that'll be soon enough."

"I'm at Giles' shop," Wesley replied. "I can bring it by now, if you like."

"Forget it," Spike replied. "Buffy and I will head over there as soon as it's dark."

"Are you sure?" Wesley asked. "I could give you a ride."

Spike snorted. "Don't coddle me. I'm getting enough of that from Buffy."

"Can you blame her?"

"No," Spike replied. "That's not the point. We'll be there in a bit."

"Everyone else there, too?"

"I promise we won't hover," Wesley said.

"Ta, mate." Spike hung up, and Wesley looked at the rest of the group, all of whom were watching him with varying expressions of concern.

"How is he?" Giles asked quietly.

Wesley shrugged, pocketing his cell phone. "As well as might be expected. You all heard what I said?"
"Well, I wasn't going to hover," Xander said. "I mean, I'm happy that Spike's okay, but I wasn't going to do anything unmanly."

"Heaven forbid," Joyce observed with a smile. "We won't embarrass him."

They went back to work, and Willow sidled up next to Wesley. "When do you think we should talk to Giles? And should we say anything to Spike? Not about what happened, but about helping. Maybe he'd like to know that we want to help."

"Why don't we wait on that?" he suggested. "We'll talk to Giles as soon as we can get him alone, but there's no sense in telling Spike anything until we have something solid."

Willow nodded. "Right. Something solid." She gave him a look. "Are we going to get something solid?"

"I have no bloody clue."

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They walked into a wall of silence, and Spike had to hide a wince. He hated that they might think less of him after this. That what the soldiers had done would change their perception. That they would see him as a monster, when they never really had before.

"Spike." Joyce was the first to greet him with a gentle hug. Somehow she made it seem as though she always hugged him when she saw him. Her whispered words gave him a warm feeling. "I'm so glad you're okay."

After that, it was easier. Willow flashed him a smile, Xander raised a hand in greeting, and Giles gave him a warm smile. "I'm glad you could make it, Spike. We still have plenty to do."

Spike didn't see the look that Buffy exchanged with her mother, or Joyce's nod. "Why don't you help me, Spike? I know you have a steady hand."
Spike raised an eyebrow when he saw the sign over the front counter Joyce was painting. "Yeah, sure," he said, knowing that she was giving him a less strenuous job.

After a few minutes, conversation started up again. Xander talked about his latest date with Anya, and Spike could see Willow rolling her eyes. Buffy asked Willow what she'd missed, and Willow told her what Riley had said.

"Would the teacher really kick you out just for missing one class?" Joyce asked. "That seems a little harsh."

"Harsh is one word for Professor Walsh," Buffy commented. "She's not the most understanding person."

Willow winced, remembering what the professor had said when she'd asked about Oz. "Really not."

The conversation ebbed and flowed, and Spike let it wash over him. The sense of camaraderie was very real, and he was reminded that he was more than what the soldiers believed him to be.

He wasn't a monster; Spike had fought to make himself more.

"Your keys," Wesley said, handing them over during a break. The others were arguing over what they wanted for dinner. "One of these days, I'm going to steal your car."

Spike smirked. "I'd hunt you down."

"Which is why I haven't done it yet," Wesley replied. He looked apologetic. "Don't be angry, but would you like me to stay with you tonight?"

Spike glared at him. "Buffy already told me she’s moving in for the time being. Bloody hell. Get caught off guard once and you never live it down."

"Would you let me live it down?" Wesley inquired.
"Not on your life." Spike met his eyes. "Appreciate you coming, Wes. Buffy said you were the one who called in the troops."

Wesley shrugged, not knowing what to say in reply to that.

"What do you boys want to eat?" Joyce called over to them.

They exchanged identical looks, amused that she would call them boys. "Whatever," Spike said. "I'll eat anything."

"What have we got?" Wesley asked, walking over to look at the take-out menu.

Spike watched, a sense of melancholy stealing over him. He was caught in between worlds, with one foot in darkness and one in light. He knew that this could change everything. If he wasn’t careful, he could let the darkness take him.

He wasn’t going to let it.

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"Hey, Anya?" Xander called.

She was flipping channels on his television set as he got ready for work. He had an interview with a construction company that was interested in hiring laborers in a couple of days, and he was hoping it worked out. Xander needed to make more money if he ever wanted to get out of his parents’ basement.

He’d been thinking, though. Giles had told him about what had happened to Spike, and Willow had filled in the rest of the missing details later. If they had known that Spike wasn’t feeding off of people, then it was possible that they could find out that Anya had been a demon.

And if they found out that she had been a demon, would they care that she was human now?
"What, Xander?" Anya said.

"Maybe you should stay away from the campus," he suggested.

She frowned. "I never go on campus unless I'm with you. You don't go on campus. Are you planning on going there?"

"No, I'm not going there, but I think it might be better if you avoided the campus." Xander hesitated. He didn't want to scare her, but he did want her to take his warning seriously. "There have been some shady characters around there, and some of them got to Spike. I just want to be sure you're safe, that's all."

"Are you worried about me?" Anya asked.

Xander shrugged. "No," he replied, not knowing what Anya wanted to hear. Then he stopped and decided on telling her the truth. "A little. I just don't want anything to happen to you."

She rewarded him with a luminous smile. "So you really aren't just interested in sex?"

"What?" Xander asked, a sinking feeling in his stomach. He really didn't like where this conversation was going. This was how it started. Girls asked questions like this, and no matter how you answered, you found yourself in the doghouse. "Of course not."

Anya shut the TV off. "Because we don't talk," she pointed out. "All we do is have sex."

"I thought that's what you wanted to do," Xander replied. "You were the one who said we should interlock."

"And I thought we were going to have a relationship," Anya replied. "That's what you asking me to the party was about. I wore a bunny costume for you."

Xander almost laughed, and then he stopped himself, knowing that Anya probably wouldn't
appreciate it. "Why a bunny costume?" he asked.

Anya frowned. "What?"

"I've been wondering," Xander stated. "Why a bunny costume?"

"Bunnies are scary," Anya replied, in a tone of voice that said Xander should have known better than to ask. "Haven't you seen them?"

Xander thought about making a snide comment. In fact, he thought about making a dozen snide comments, but in the end all he said was, "Maybe you could tell me why you don't like bunnies sometime when I'm not late for work." He gave her a lopsided smile. "We could talk about it."

"Could we talk about something else?" she asked.

Xander grinned. "Yeah. Whatever you want."

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Giles handed Wesley a cup of tea. Willow already had hers, and she was stirring a spoonful of sugar in, her nerves obvious. "What did the two of you want to talk about?" he asked. "I assume it has something to do with Spike."

"I’ll let Willow explain, as it was her idea," Wesley stated.

Willow glanced at him and then set her cup down. "We—I thought maybe we could do something to help Spike. To make it harder for the soldiers to find him."

"As we’re not sure how they did find him in the first place, I don’t know what that would be," Giles replied gently. "It’s a good idea, Willow, I just don’t see what we might do."

"What if we made him appear human?" Willow asked. "If Spike did manage to get this Gem of Amara, and it works like it’s supposed to, there won’t be any way to tell he’s a vampire unless
you’re checking body temperature or pulse.”

“Body temperature would be the easiest way to tell if someone’s a vampire,” Wesley observed. “If we’re speaking about technology. Perhaps if there was an illusion that would raise his body temperature, at least to the casual observer.”

“You’re talking about a sustained illusion.” Giles shook his head. “Those are notoriously difficult. They require tremendous energy to keep them going, and they tend to break down over time.”

Willow shook her head. “But they won’t be looking for vampires during the day. The only time Spike would need the spell would be after dark.”

“We need to know who these people are.” Wesley put down his cup. “Until we know that, it’s going to be impossible to make plans.”

Giles nodded. “You’re right, I think. It’s imperative that we discover as much as possible about them and their objectives here in Sunnydale. It is possible that Spike’s capture was a mistake. They may have believed him to be under someone’s control, which would explain why they were so anxious to discover the reason he wasn’t feeding from humans.”

“That only leads to the conclusion that they have the same desires, Giles.” Wesley stood.

Willow’s eyes got big as she realized what Giles and Wesley were suggesting. “Demons as weapons?” she said, her voice rising. She lowered her voice again hastily as she realized that Joyce was upstairs, probably trying to sleep. “Isn’t that a little scary?”

“We don’t know that,” Giles said firmly. “Now is not the time to be jumping to conclusions. We need more information. I think it’s best for the time being if Spike keeps his head down. Buffy’s already talked to me about that. You’re helping him locate the gem?”

“I am,” Wesley replied. “What are you going to do?”

“I have some friends,” Giles replied. “Mining information from these particular channels is time-consuming, however. I don’t know when I’ll have more information. Meanwhile, I think the gem and perhaps some sort of illusion is what we ought to focus on.”
Willow took a deep breath. “Where should I start with the illusion?”

“I have a few books that might prove useful.” Giles gave her a stern look. “Be careful, Willow. I want you to come to me or Wesley before attempting anything.”

Willow nodded. “I will.”

“Good,” Giles said, rising. “Be careful going home.”

“Do you want a ride back to campus?” Wesley asked once they were outside. His car, ancient and half-rust, sat in the driveway.

Willow gave the vehicle a skeptical look. “Are you sure it’s safe?”

“Safe enough,” Wesley said, sighing. “I really do need to get a new form of transportation. There just hasn’t been time.”

Willow smiled sympathetically. “Somehow I don’t think there’s going to be a lot of time from here on out.”

It turned out that she was right.
Chapter 16

“Oh why is heaven built so far,/Oh why is earth set so remote?/I cannot reach the nearest star/That hangs afloat./I would not care to reach the moon,/One round monotonous of change;/Yet even she repeats her tune/Beyond my range./I never watch the scatter’d fire/Of stars, or sun’s far-trailing train,/But all my heart is one desire,/And all in vain:/For I am bound with fleshly bands,/Joy, beauty lie beyond my scope;/I strain my heart, I stretch my hands,/And catch at hope.” ~Christina Rossetti, “De Profundis”

Buffy secured the backpack with a grimace as she climbed down into the hole. Wesley had predicted that it would take them a weekend to find the Gem of Amara; Spike had said it would be more like a week. So far, they had spent nine days digging, moving earth and rock, following the plans that they had laid out. Buffy had lent her strength when she could, occasionally trying to pry Spike out of the tunnels.

That was easier said than done.

Buffy had never seen this side of Spike before. He was absolutely focused on finding the gem, which meant that he had no time for her, no time to do anything that they normally did. He probably would have foregone eating if she and Wesley didn’t constantly remind him. The only thing he could think of was finding this jewel. Although Buffy didn’t like leaving him, it was a relief to be able to get out into the sun on occasion. Poor Wesley was stuck underground with Spike constantly.

“Buffy,” Wesley looked pleased to see her, probably because she usually brought food and drink.

“Hey, Wes,” she replied, dropping the pack and opening it. She tossed him a bottle of water, which he immediately began guzzling. “I brought sandwiches for you and blood for Spike, too.”

“Thank you.” Wesley wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He was covered in dirt and grime, and Buffy wondered when he had last gone home. “If you can get Spike to take a break, it might do him good.”

“Oh, he’s taking a break if I have to drag him out of here,” Buffy said. “Mom wanted me to let you know you’re welcome at Thanksgiving dinner.”

He frowned. “Thanksgiving?”
“You know, the American holiday where we all get together and eat way too much turkey,” Buffy supplied. “It’s at my house this year, and Mom’s cooking. She said to let you know.”

Wesley hesitated. “Are you certain? I know it’s a family holiday, and I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“Spike and Giles are going to be there,” Buffy replied. “Not to mention Willow, Xander and Anya, pretty much everybody.”

“Where am I going to be?” Spike asked, emerging from the farthest end of the tunnel he and Wesley had been working on.

“Thanksgiving,” Buffy replied. “In two days. And, no, you don’t have a choice. You’re taking a break from this.”

“Slayer…” His tone was heated, and Buffy knew he was going to try and argue with her. He’d been cranky for the last few days, since they figured out that they were going to go through solid rock for a few feet. It had slowed the progress considerably.

“No, Spike,” Buffy stated. “You are taking a break. Both of you are. Look at Wesley! He hasn’t had a day off since you started this thing!”

Wesley looked a little alarmed at being dragged into their argument. “I’m fine,” he protested.

“No, you’re not,” Buffy shot back. She looked at Spike. “Well?”

Spike was looking at Wesley, some of the obstinacy leaving his face. “You look like you could use some sleep, mate.”

“That’s because neither of you have been sleeping,” Buffy said. “Wesley, go home. Get some sleep. I’ll stay with Spike, and then I’m going to drag him out of here before sunrise. We’ll see you Thursday at my house at noon.”
Wesley looked from Spike to Buffy and back again, clearly unwilling to abandon Spike, while wanting to take a break. “Go,” Spike said. “You can’t reason with her when she’s like this.”

“Here,” Buffy said, handing him a brown paper sack. “So you don’t have to do any cooking tonight.”

“Thank you.” Wesley hesitated. “Are you sure you won’t need me, Spike?”

“We’ll get started again on Friday,” Spike said. “Slayer won’t let me do anything else.”

He nodded. “See you then. Good night, Buffy.”

“’Night, Wes.” Buffy watched him go, and a tense silence filled the cave. “Are you mad at me?”

“For what?” he asked, grabbing the thermos full of blood out of the pack.

She leaned back against the wall. “For making you take a break.”

“Wesley needed one,” Spike replied.

“You need one,” Buffy countered.

He gave her a dirty look. “You know, I was taking care of myself a long time before I ever met you.”

“You want to go back to taking care of yourself?” Buffy challenged. “Say the word, Spike, and I’ll leave you alone. If you don’t need me, fine. I just want to know.”

Spike blinked. She sounded serious. “Buffy…”

“What? Not ‘Slayer?’” Buffy straightened. “I know you’re kind of freaked about this whole thing. I
know getting this gem is going to help you protect yourself. But don’t get mad at me just because I want to take care of you.”

Spike turned away from her, putting some distance between them. “Maybe it would be better.”

Buffy’s stomach clenched. “Maybe what would be better?”

“Maybe it would be better if we weren’t together.”

“You don’t mean it.”

“Yeah, I do.” Spike turned to look at her again, his face completely expressionless. “I need space, Buffy. You’ve been hovering, and it’s starting to drive me crazy. I don’t need you coddling me.”

Buffy’s eyes narrowed, and then she punched him in the nose. “Fine. You don’t want me coddling you? That’s easy enough.”

“What the bloody hell was that for?” Spike demanded, his hand over his nose. He pulled his hand away to check for blood, but it didn’t appear to be bleeding.

“That was for being stupidly noble, or trying to,” Buffy snapped. “Don’t you even try to pull that ‘you’ll be better off without me’ shit, because we both know that’s not true.”

Spike rubbed his nose, looking sulky. It was a hell of a lot better than the cool detachment that had been emanating from him over the last couple of weeks. “You said to tell you if I didn’t need you. Why’d you even ask if you were just going to hit me?”

“Because you didn’t mean it, and you thought you were doing the best thing for me,” Buffy snapped back. “I know that look in your eyes, Spike. If I really thought you didn’t love me anymore, it would be a different story.”

“I couldn’t stop loving you even if I tried,” Spike said, sighing and slumping against the wall. “Buffy, I’m not good company right now. Might be better if we—I don’t know. Took a break for a while. Be easier on you, maybe.”
“I’m not interested in easy,” Buffy said, squatting down next to him. “But if that’s what you really want…”

“No,” he admitted hoarsely.

She edged closer to him. “You haven’t been sleeping, Spike.”

“Can’t.”

“Okay.”

“I need this gem,” he said, his voice coated with raw desire. It was nearing an obsession for him, Buffy knew, which was why she hadn’t believed him when he’d said he wanted a break. Spike wasn’t thinking straight right now, which was why it was her job to make sure he didn’t do anything incredibly stupid.

She caressed his face. “I know, sweetheart. But I need you.”

“I’ll come to Thanksgiving dinner,” he said.

“Good.” Buffy decided that she needed to remember to pop Spike in the nose next time he was being an idiot, because it seemed to work wonders.

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Wesley pulled up in front of 1630 Revello, feeling a little strange. He’d taken his day off to do things like pay bills and clean his apartment, as both situations were getting a little dire. Then, he’d made an impulse purchase.

Well, it hadn’t been completely impulsive. Wesley had wanted a motorcycle for a while, and when he’d seen the Triumph Bonneville, he hadn’t been able to resist.
“Wesley?”

He took his helmet off, turning to look at Willow, who was coming up the sidewalk. “Hello.”

“You got a motorcycle.”

“Uh, yes, I did.” He stood, swinging his leg over, waiting for the ridicule to begin.

Instead of laughter, however, Willow just gave him a long, searching look. “It looks fun.”

“It—it is,” he replied, thrown off balance by her words. “If you like, you could ride with me sometime. I picked up an extra helmet, just in case.”

Willow’s eyebrows went up. “Just in case I wanted to ride with you?”

Wesley felt his face flush. “No!” he exclaimed, realizing that it had sounded as though he’d presumed upon a relationship they didn’t even have. “No, in case anyone needed to ride with me.”

She grinned at him. “I was pulling your leg, Wes. Are you here for dinner?”

“Uh, yes, I am. Buffy invited me the other day.” Wesley gestured for her to precede him up the walk. “How have you been?”

“Pretty good,” Willow replied. “We had a murder on campus yesterday, so I had to wake Buffy up. She wasn’t very happy about that.”

“She was with Spike?”

“Yeah, she said she managed to drag him out for a couple of days. They have a deal. Spike does Thanksgiving, and Buffy helps him out until school starts on Monday.” Willow shrugged. “She hadn’t gotten much sleep, though.”
“I can imagine,” Wesley murmured. The few times he’d actually convinced Spike to catch a few hours of sleep over the last week they’d been digging, Spike had woken both of them with his nightmares. “What was the murder about?”

“We don’t really know yet,” Willow replied. “It was a professor on campus. Her throat was cut, and somebody sliced her ear off. We went to the crime scene, and there was a Chumash knife missing, but we don’t know much more than that. Buffy went to talk to a priest who’s supposed to know a lot about the history of Sunnydale.”

“So much for sleeping, huh?” Wesley asked.

“Yeah.” Willow rang the doorbell before entering. “Mrs. Summers?”

“Come in, Willow,” Joyce said, emerging from the kitchen. “Buffy hasn’t made it back yet, and I sent Giles out for supplies.” She gave Wesley a warm smile. “How are you, Wesley?”

“Just fine, Mrs. Summers,” he replied.

“Call me Joyce,” she invited. “Would you two mind giving me a hand?”

“Is Spike here?” Wesley asked. He was a little concerned about the vampire, even though he knew that Joyce and Buffy were more than capable of making sure he took care of himself. At least well enough to keep body and soul together.

Joyce’s smile faltered. “He’s in the garage looking at my car,” she replied, the worry in her voice clear. “I told him I’d heard something that concerned me.”

“Did you really?” Wesley asked softly.

Joyce shook her head. “He seemed to want something to occupy himself.” She handed Willow a potato peeler. “If you’ll peel the potatoes, Wesley can help me baste the turkey.”

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Tinkering with a car engine was something Spike was good at, and it required just enough of his concentration that he couldn’t let his mind wander to less pleasant matters. He’d registered the roar of an engine, and he wondered mildly who it was, but he was safe enough here. There was nothing to tie him to this place, no one to suspect that there might be a vampire working on Joyce Summers’ Jeep. Here, he was just Spike, Buffy’s boyfriend.

Spike finished checking the belts and slammed the hood closed, wiping his hands off on a rag. It had been foolish to try to trick Buffy into thinking he wanted to break things off. They both knew each other better than that. If there was one thing that Spike was absolutely certain of it was Buffy’s love for him. And yet, he couldn’t see how he would be good for her, not now.

Not when he was more of a liability than an asset.

The only thing that scared Spike more than getting recaptured by those bastards was having them find out who and what Buffy was. He figured that there was less chance of that if he wasn’t around her, but Buffy wasn’t having any of it.

In truth, he was glad of it.

When you got right down to it, Spike knew he was a selfish bastard, and the last thing he’d wanted was to walk away from Buffy. He loved her enough to do it, though, if that’s what it took to keep her safe.

“How are you?”

Spike turned to see Wesley in the doorway, holding two bottles of beer. “Fine. One of those for me?”

“Giles stocked up,” Wesley said in reply, handing one over. “Buffy just got back. It seems that there may be some trouble.”

Spike perked up at that. “What kind of trouble?”

“You knew there was a murder on campus?” Wesley asked. When Spike nodded, he continued,
“Apparently, the priest Buffy went to speak to was killed by some sort of Native American spirit.” He grimaced. “There’s a rather lively discussion going on about whether or not Buffy ought to fight this manifestation.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “What’s the big deal? It’s killed two people.”

“Yes, well, it claims to be a spirit of vengeance that’s visiting retribution for crimes against its people. Willow is saying that the Native Americans have a right to justice, and Buffy’s waffling.” Wesley shrugged. “I decided not to get involved.”

“Hence, the beer.”

“Precisely.”

They stood in companionable silence, drinking their beers. It wasn’t too long before Giles joined them. “Did you get in the middle?” Spike inquired.

“It’s impossible not to,” Giles replied defensively. “Xander showed up with Anya. Apparently, the spirit has inflicted him with a number of diseases like those his people suffered from.”

“What’s Buffy going to do?” Spike asked.

Giles sighed, taking a drink from his own bottle. “I believe she’s going to help Joyce make dinner. We’re still debating on how to deal with this spirit.”

“What’s to debate?” Spike shrugged. “Get an exorcist and banish the bloody thing. Who cares what happened back when? It’s dead and we’re not.”

Giles snorted. “Don’t say that in front of Willow. You’ll get an earful.”

“I’ll remember that,” Wesley stated.

Buffy stuck her head through the door. “I think the spirit—Hus—might be planning on targeting
Dean Guerrero. Willow said she’d go warn him. Mom still needs my help with dinner.”

“I’ll take her,” Wesley offered. “It would be quicker.”

“Oh, was that your motorcycle?” Buffy asked. “I saw it out there, but I forgot to ask.”

“You got a bike?” Spike asked, sounding surprised, and maybe just a little envious.

Wesley shrugged. “I needed something other than the car I was driving.”

“It was a piece of shit,” Spike agreed.

Buffy raised her eyebrows. “Then maybe you can put that new ride to work for you, Wes.” She watched as he went inside, and then she looked at Giles. “Mom needs your help with something.”

Spike leaned back against the car, watching as Giles went inside. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Who said I wanted to talk?” Buffy asked, taking his beer out of his hand and setting it aside. “Maybe I just wanted you to myself for a while.”

Time seemed to stand still. Their kiss seemed to go on forever. The last week hadn’t been conducive to any kind of lovemaking. Physical contact had seemed to go by the wayside with Spike so obsessed about getting the gem.

“Buffy! Spike!” Joyce’s voice had them both jumping away from each other before they realized that her voice was coming from inside the house.

Buffy hurried into the house, Spike on her heels. “Mom?”

“In the dining room! Someone’s shooting arrows in here!” Joyce called back. She had hunkered down under the large table that had been set for dinner.
“Stay down!” Giles warned. He was in the hallway between the front door and the living room, trying to make sure no one came through either the door or the window. “It appears as though Hus brought friends. Spike, please make sure the kitchen door is locked.”

“Oh, crap,” Buffy said, trying to keep an eye out for flying arrows as she made her way to Giles’ side. “What happened to a quiet Thanksgiving?”

“Doesn’t look like they got the memo,” Spike said, leaving her to go check the kitchen as Giles requested.

Buffy made sure the front door was dead-bolted. The living room, with its large picture window was another story altogether. Unfortunately, her mom’s house really wasn’t built for a siege. “What are you going to do, Buffy?” Giles asked.

Buffy sighed. “I’m going to kill them. I mean, it’s one thing to be upset about past atrocities, but they’re not going to get away with threatening my mother. Where are Xander and Anya?”

“Upstairs,” Giles replied. “Joyce sent Xander up to lie down just a few minutes ago.”

“Spike? How are you doing?” Buffy called.

“They’re not going to be happy shooting arrows forever, Buffy!” he called back. “They’re going to try to break in!”

The arrow that broke through the picture window and embedded itself into the wall suggested that Spike might be right. “Can you hold them in the kitchen?”

“Depends on how many try to come through at once!” Spike called back.

Just then, one of the warriors came bursting through the window, and Buffy rose to grapple with him. This was definitely not turning out to be the best of Thanksgivings.
“Shall we, too, rise forgetful from our sleep,/And shall my soul that lies within your hand/Remember nothing, as the blowing sand/Forgets the palm where long blue shadows creep/When winds along the darkened desert sweep?/Or would it still remember, tho’ it spanned/A thousand heavens, while the planets fanned/The vacant ether with their voices deep?/Soul of my soul, no word shall be forgot,/Nor yet alone, beloved, shall we see/The desolation of extinguished suns,/Nor fear the void wherethro’ our planet runs,/For still together shall we go and not,/Fare forth alone to front eternity.” ~Sara Teasdale, “Love and Death”

Willow clung to Wesley, feeling just a little strange. She’d never been this close to any guy before except for Oz, and riding on the back of Wesley’s motorcycle, pressed up against him, felt—intimate. She felt the thrum of the motorcycle’s engine, the hard muscles of his back.

It was a really good thing that she’d worn pants, rather than a skirt.

The trip took only a few minutes on the bike, and Wesley pulled up in front of Dean Guerrero’s house smoothly. “Do you want me to come with you?” he asked.

Willow tugged off the helmet he’d let her wear. He hadn’t brought a second helmet with him, so he’d gone bareheaded. She appreciated the gesture, although she didn’t really like wearing it. “Probably not,” she replied. “It’s going to be hard enough to convince him that there are bad guys bent on cutting off his ear.”

“You don’t think I’d be convincing?” Wesley asked, the hurt in his tone belied by the humor in his eyes.

Willow just raised an eyebrow. “Not when you look like Spike’s second cousin.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Wesley, you’re riding a motorcycle and wearing a leather jacket,” Willow pointed out patiently. “You look like a…” She trailed off, trying to find the right word.
“Punk?” he suggested.

“Something like that,” she replied. “I’ll be right back.”

Willow wasn’t really expecting to have a lot of success with the dean. After all, it was a lot to swallow—that vengeful Chumash spirits had killed Professor Gerhardt, a priest, and might be planning on killing him, too. It was really too bad that she hadn’t thought of having Wesley pose as a police detective until now. She took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

Dean Guerrero opened the door, frowning. “Can I help you?”

Willow smiled brightly. “Hi! I’m Willow Rosenberg. I’m a student at UC Sunnydale, and I just thought you should be aware that you might be in danger.”

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“Maybe we should go downstairs,” Xander suggested, trying to rise from the guest bed.

Anya shook her head firmly, pushing him back down. “I don’t think so. You’re just going to fall over again. The smallpox is probably going to start showing up any minute now.”

“As long as we’ve got some time before I go blind and crazy from the syphilis,” Xander joked weakly. “Unless they break in and kill us first.”

“I thought Buffy and Spike were supposed to stop them,” Anya said, an edge of worry creeping into her tone. There was a crash from downstairs, and they both winced in unison. “Why aren’t they stopping them?”

“I’m sure they’re working on it, Anya,” Xander replied, pushing himself up off the bed. He couldn’t hide upstairs any longer, not when Buffy might need him. Besides, he hated not knowing what was going on. “I’m just going to make sure everything is okay. You can stay up here if you want.”

“By myself?” she asked incredulously. “When they could come through the windows?”
As one, they turned to look out the window. Sure enough, there was a Chumash warrior squatting on the roof, trying to open the window. “Why did you have to say that?” Xander demanded, looking around wildly for a weapon.

“I didn’t mean to!” Anya shot back, dashing out of the room.

Xander dropped to the floor as the warrior sent an arrow through the open window. “Anya! Where are you going?”

“I’m trying to find something to hit it with!” she shouted back. Anya came running back into the room a moment later, waving a sword around.

“Where did you find that?” Xander asked, grabbing it from her hand before she could accidentally take his head off.

She gestured behind her. “In Mrs. Summers’ room. I think it belongs to Giles. Use it to make him go away!”

Xander turned back to the window, where the very solid spirit was now climbing in the window. He gripped the sword, desperately hoping that he could actually manage to do some damage before the other man killed him.

Or Anya. Xander set his jaw. There was no way he was going to let Anya get hurt.

~~~~~

“Oh, bloody hell,” Spike muttered, grabbing the carving knife from the counter. It was the weapon that was closest to hand, although he’d have preferred something with a little more reach. “Buffy!”

“I’ve got my hands full in here!” she yelled back. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Just peachy!” Spike hollered back, ducking the knife that the warrior was using, bringing up his
own weapon to slice across the inside of his opponent’s elbow. He was expecting the spirit to drop the knife, thinking that if he could be cut, he could certainly be hurt. Instead, the warrior merely switched hands and came after him again, the deep laceration healing as Spike watched.

“Oh, balls.” Spike backpedaled rapidly, trying to figure out what to do. What did you do with an invulnerable opponent?

It looked like there had only been one of them at the kitchen door, and the Chumash followed him through the kitchen and into the hall. “Spike?”

“I can’t hurt him,” Spike snarled as he met Giles in the hallway, turning to defend himself from the warrior.

Buffy was fighting with her own opponent in the living room. “Well, we need to figure something out quick, or we’re going to be in big trouble.”

A pounding came at the front door. “Spike!”

Giles dove for the door to let Wesley and Willow in. “Did you have any success?” he asked as he helped Wesley slam the door shut on another three Chumash.

“I think the dean thought I was crazy,” Willow replied, leaning up against the door.

Spike snapped the neck of his attacker, hoping that it would at least keep him down for a few minutes, then he turned to give Buffy a hand. There was a yelp from the dining room, and Joyce came stumbling into the hall, a poker in her hand. “I don’t think I did much damage,” she said apologetically.

“I’m sure you did just fine,” Spike replied, grabbing the poker from her hand and hitting one of the warriors attacking Buffy across the back. The blow provided enough of a distraction for Buffy to disarm him and cut the warrior across the arm with his own knife.

The cut didn’t heal right away this time, and Buffy’s eyes widened. “Your own weapons can kill you.” She looked over at Spike. “Spike—”
Spike jumped back as the Chumash warrior morphed into a bear. “You made a bear!”

“I didn’t mean to!” Buffy protested, backing off as the bear swiped at her with its paw.

“Spike!”

He turned to see Wesley and Giles trying to protect Joyce and Willow from another three warriors, and Spike knew that if they didn’t end this quickly, someone was going to get hurt. With a hoarse shout, he tossed the poker to Wesley, who caught it and began swinging it around to keep the Chumash warriors at bay. Rolling his shoulders, Spike leaped onto the bear’s back, hanging on tightly as it snarled and tried to dislodge him. “Now, Buffy!”

She buried the Chumash knife to the hilt in the bear’s chest. Dissolving into green mist, Hus and the other spirits disappeared, depositing Spike on the floor with a hard thump. “Are you okay?” Buffy asked, hurrying over to help him up.

“Think so,” he replied, pushing himself off the floor and ignoring her hand. “You lot alright?”

“We’re all in one piece,” Wesley replied, looking at the poker in his hand as though he didn’t know quite what to do with it.

Joyce took it from him, looking around her house in dismay. “This is going to take awhile to clean up.”

“We can do it later,” Giles suggested. “Perhaps now we ought to just eat dinner.” He glanced around. “I’m sure it won’t take too long with all of us working on it.”

Buffy winced. “I’m sorry, Mom. I had no idea they’d attack me here.”

Wesley raised his eyebrows. “It makes sense,” he said. “They would attack the strongest warrior on the enemy side. That would be you, Buffy.”

She glared at him. “You didn’t think of this earlier?”
“No one asked me,” Wesley replied defensively. “I didn’t realize why they would have gone after the professor and the priest until we were on our way back here.”

“It’s fine, Wesley,” Joyce said, patting his arm. “It wasn’t your fault. Why don’t you and Willow get the table set again?”

“I’ll go check on Xander and Anya,” Buffy said, although her errand was made unnecessary when the couple appeared on the stairs.

“You know, I’m feeling a lot better,” Xander announced. “Good work, Buff.”

Buffy surveyed the damage, and glanced over at Spike, who had obviously distanced himself from her and the others again. “Yeah, great work.”

It looked as though it was going to be a fun Thanksgiving.

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She kept her promise. Buffy spent the rest of her Thanksgiving break underground, helping Spike and Wesley dig for the gem. Even with her supernatural strength, the work was difficult at best, and Buffy was bone-tired by Sunday night. They were closer to the spot that Wesley swore held the gem, but it was going to take at least another day to reach it.

Buffy had convinced Wesley to leave for the day, and she sat down on the floor wearily, wondering if she would be able to get Spike to come back to his place with her. He had insisted on working day and night since early Friday morning. If they’d had more people, it would have gone faster, but they didn’t. It was too bad that Willow couldn’t magic the work done, but she wasn’t capable of that yet.

“You quitting for the day?” Spike asked, sitting down beside her.

She nodded. “I’ve got to go back to class tomorrow.”
“Maybe you should stay at the dorms tonight, then,” Spike suggested. “I’ll stay here.”

Buffy sighed. “Spike, you need to sleep.” She knew she sounded like a broken record, but Buffy couldn’t help it. She worried about him. She worried that even when he did find the gem, it wouldn’t be enough. He’d find some new obsession to distract him from what the soldiers had done to him, how they had made him feel.

Buffy worried that she was losing him, even when he was close enough to touch.

“I’ll be fine.”

She closed her eyes, and then she stood. “Fine. I guess I’ll stay at the dorm tonight. I’ll see you later.” Buffy grabbed her things and headed for the exit, suddenly unable to bear his presence. She couldn’t bear his shutting her out one moment more.

A hand grabbed her arm, halting her progress. “Buffy, luv…”

Buffy turned to face him. He wore a pained expression. “What, Spike?”

He pulled her close, his arms holding her tightly. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I have to do this. I have to.”

“You think I don’t get that?” Buffy demanded, pulling back from him. “I just don’t know what to do for you, Spike! You keep pushing me away. You don’t want my help, you don’t seem to want my company. I’m trying, but—”

“You’re doing fine,” Spike replied, his voice breaking. “It’s—I’d forgotten what it was to be a monster.”

Buffy frowned. “You’re not a monster.”

“Yes, I am,” he replied. “I’m a vampire. No matter what I do, what I accomplish, who I’m with, that’s always going to be true.”
“So what?” Buffy glared at him. “I don’t care! I don’t care what you are because you’re so much more than that.”

“Those soldiers—”

“Those bastards don’t know you the way I know you,” Buffy shot back. “Is that what’s been freaking you out?”

His face had gone blank, and Buffy could see that he was withdrawing again. She’d blown her chance. “Part of it. It’s not a big deal.”

“No,” Buffy said, her voice low and fierce. “No, you are not doing this again. You’re not shutting me out. I told you that I would fight every single one of those stupid soldiers for you, and I meant it. I am not walking away from you until you tell me why you keep pushing me away.”

“You don’t understand!” Spike cried out. “You don’t bloody get it, Buffy! You never have.”

“What haven’t I gotten?”

He shook his head, obviously unwilling to explain.

Buffy dropped her pack, pushing him backwards. “I’m not leaving until we get this straightened out.”

“Buffy—” Spike took a step back. “You’ve got school.”

“I don’t care,” Buffy said stubbornly. “I’m not leaving you.”

Spike turned away from her. “Look, I need some time. If you’re not willing to give me that—”

“You don’t need time, you need your ass kicked.” Buffy touched his shoulder, running her hand
down his arm, her gentle touch belying her words. “If I leave you alone, what’s to say that you won’t decide you don’t need me?”

He moved away from her. “I need you.”

“That’s funny, because it sure doesn’t feel that way.”

“I can’t do this right now, Buffy.” Spike’s shoulders were slumped, and Buffy thought that he stood as though he bore the weight of the world.

“Look at me,” she commanded gently. When he kept his back to her, Buffy turned him around, putting her hand on his cheek to turn his head so she could meet his eyes. “What is it, Spike? Do you really not want me around right now?”

“It’s stupid,” Spike stated. “I know I’m not good company, but I’ll be fine. I just need some time.”

“Time and maybe some TLC,” Buffy suggested, her hands going to the hem of his t-shirt. They hadn’t really made love since the soldiers had captured him. At first, Buffy had been worried about causing him further harm, but then Spike had begun his search for the Gem of Amara, and there hadn’t been the opportunity. Buffy had hoped that by pulling him out for a couple of days over her Thanksgiving break, it would give them the chance to spend some quality time together. Instead, Spike had collapsed, exhausted, begging off any sort of physical activity.

She thought that maybe now, maybe if she could just touch him, show him that she still loved him, no matter what had happened. Maybe she could make him feel it.

“Now’s not the time,” he said, pushing her hand away.

Buffy stared at him, feeling unbelievably hurt. “Spike?”

He looked stung by her tone. “Buffy, we’re both tired, and you’ve got classes in the morning.”

She stared at him, and then her eyes narrowed. She wasn’t above using a little emotional blackmail in a situation like this. “You don’t want me?” she asked, knowing that it sounded as though she was
about to cry.

It wasn’t a complete act. Buffy was ready to cry—out of frustration, if nothing else.

“Of course I want you,” Spike was quick to assure her. “Just don’t think that now’s the right time is all. Maybe after—”

“After you find the gem?” Buffy asked. “And then what excuse are you going to use?” She pulled herself up. “If you didn’t want me anymore, all you had to do was to say so.”

“That’s not it!” Spike said, sounding angry. “I told you.”

“Then show me,” she challenged. When he visibly hesitated, the look in his eyes turning to something akin to shame, Buffy thought she finally caught a glimpse of what it was that had been bothering him so badly. “Oh, Spike.”

She moved forward, tugging at the hem of his t-shirt. “Buffy…”

“I don’t care.”

“Luv, it’s not—it’s still bad. Give it more time, and it’ll fade, but…”

Buffy wasn’t listening to him. Or she was, but she wasn’t going to let him get away with hiding any longer. “I love you, you stupid vampire. I love the demon, and I love the man. You’d be doing the same for me. Now let me show you.”

He finally dropped his hands, not fighting her anymore. Buffy pulled the shirt over his head, looking at the red scar on his chest. Spike had removed the stitches himself, but the Y-incision was still angry-looking against his pale skin, a constant reminder of what they had done. Of how they saw him. In their eyes, Spike was nothing more than another monster to be exterminated.

Maybe if he’d never known Buffy, it wouldn’t have mattered so much. She had been the one who had taught him what it meant to feel like a man again, what it meant to feel, period. In a way, Spike had forgotten that he wasn’t a man, or had deluded himself into thinking that it didn’t really matter.
It mattered now, all too much.

He closed his eyes as Buffy pressed her lips to his collarbone, working her way down his chest, kissing every inch of that thick red line. As though she could erase it with her love. “Buffy—”

“You might be a monster, Spike,” Buffy said softly, in between kisses. “But you’ve made yourself so much more than that. You think I don’t understand? You think I haven’t seen the scars?” She put her hands on his bare shoulders, her fingers tracing the scar tissue on his back. He never had told her what had caused them.

Spike shuddered under her tender onslaught. “Thought maybe you didn’t see me.”

“I see you.” Buffy kissed him, her hands holding him to her gently, but with a strength he couldn’t hope to fight. “You saw me first.”

“Couldn’t do without you,” he said, and when he looked at her, Buffy could see that he was completely open to her gaze.

She’d have to remember not to take no for an answer in the future.

“Ditto.” Buffy ran her hands down his cool chest, feeling the raised line, reading his pain as if it had been written in Braille and she was blind. Maybe she had been up until now. “They can’t change who you are.”

Spike buried his hands in her hair, his lips trailing down her neck, feeling the heat flush her skin as he blazed a trail. Buffy stepped back from him, pulling her filthy shirt over her head, baring gold-tinged skin and cream colored lace. She began to undress, watching as he did the same. They were both dirt-streaked and tired, bruised and battered from long days of digging and hauling rock.

They had both been marked.

Their lovemaking was gentle, a renewal of a bond that had been forged in pain and shared experiences, in trust and love. Their limbs tangled on the sleeping bag Spike had been using—that Buffy had insisted he use. He really hadn’t been sleeping much.
In the end, he slept in her arms, and Buffy planned to never let him go.

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The bell over the door jangled cheerfully, and Giles straightened, ready to greet his first customer of the day. “I brought lunch,” Joyce said.

He sighed. “Thank you.”

She looked around the shop. “It’s pretty dead today, huh?”

Giles shrugged. “You’re the first person I’ve seen.”

Joyce set the paper sack on his counter. “I imagine that will change. The Christmas season always brings more shoppers out.”

He nodded. “I’ve noticed that it tends to ebb and flow, but rarely at the same time.”

The bell rang again, and a young man entered, looking a little harried. “Hi, I’m supposed to read a book for my English class, and the university bookstore is out of copies.”

“When did you need to have it read by?” Giles inquired, coming out from behind the counter.

The teenager looked sheepish. “Tomorrow. Do you have A Tale of Two Cities?”

“Of course,” Giles replied. “It’s just over here.” He showed the boy where he could find the novels by Dickens, then rejoined Joyce. “I’ve been getting a few university students, as well as mothers with their children. I probably ought to see about getting more children’s books.”

“Did you have those business cards made up?” Joyce asked. “If you did, I’ll put a pile of them on the counter at the gallery.”
The boy came up to the counter with several books. “You have a great classics section.”

“Thank you,” Giles replied, smiling at the compliment. “If you’re interested in rare volumes, I can also help you with your needs in that area.”

“I wish,” the boy replied. “I’ll be back, though. Thanks!” He zipped out the door, and Giles frowned thoughtfully. “You know, I hadn’t thought about advertising on campus, but I really should.”

Joyce smiled. “If you can pry Buffy away from Spike’s side, you might be able to convince her to put fliers up.”

“I think I’ll ask Willow if she wouldn’t mind helping out,” Giles replied. “Buffy has her hands full right now.”

“Have you spoken to Spike recently?” Joyce asked. “The last time I saw him, he seemed very subdued. I’m concerned about him.”

“I think this thing with the soldiers has affected him deeply,” Giles replied. “I can’t say that I understand all that’s going on in his head, but Wesley thought it might have something to do with Angelus.”

Joyce sighed. “Well, I imagine we’ll just have to keep an eye on him.” She gave him an inquisitive look. “You are staying here for Christmas this year, aren’t you?”

“I had planned on it,” Giles responded. “Had you made plans?”

“I just wanted to make sure any plans would include you.”

Giles raised an eyebrow. “I had no intentions of going anywhere.”

“Good.” Joyce gave him a very satisfied look. “I have plans for us.”
Giles was going to ask her what her plans included, but the bell over the door rang again, bringing in an older man, closely followed by two mothers with their children in tow.

He never did get to finish his lunch.
“Hope is the thing with feathers/That perches in the soul,/And sings the tune without the words,/And never stops at all,/And sweetest in the gale is heard;/And sore must be the storm/That could abash that little bird/That kept so many warm./I’ve heard it in the chillest land,/And on the strangest sea;/Yet, never, in extremity,/It asked a crumb of me.” ~Emily Dickenson, “Hope is the thing with feathers”

Willow knocked, feeling a little weird about just showing up on Wesley’s doorstep like this. She knew that Buffy was planning on dragging Spike away from his digging, which meant that Wesley should be home.

The door swung open, and Wesley looked at her blearily. “Willow?”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” she said. “Did I wake you up?” Peering at him a little more closely, she saw that Wesley hadn’t even changed his clothing. Not unless he normally went around in filthy jeans and a t-shirt.

He rubbed a hand over his face. “I must have fallen asleep.”

“I can come back later,” Willow said. “In fact, why don’t I come back later? I don’t want to cut in on your sleep.”

Wesley shook his head. “No, come in. I imagine you want to talk about the protection spells. Do you mind if I shower first?”

“No, go ahead,” Willow said. “Do you want me to make tea or coffee or something?”

Wesley chuckled. “I thought that was my line.”

“I’m perfectly capable of brewing caffeinated beverages,” Willow replied with a grin. “Especially since I’m the one who woke you up.”

“If you would make a pot of coffee,” he said. “I’ll be out shortly.”
He disappeared back into his bedroom, and Willow went to the small kitchen area, randomly opening cupboards in an attempt to find the coffee paraphernalia. Once she’d located the coffee and filters, she got the pot brewing and sat at the tiny table, pulling out the tomes she’d borrowed from Giles for that purpose.

There had been a few spells Willow had thought might prove useful, but she wasn’t sure whether they would work on a vampire. She was hoping that Wesley might have some knowledge in that area. Giles might have known, but he was busy with the shop these days. When she’d shown up there on Saturday, there had been a number of customers in the store, and Giles had been trying to get some paperwork done.

Willow was beginning to feel really lonely. Buffy was constantly with Spike now, if she wasn’t in class. Giles had his shop and Joyce, and Xander was ignoring her in favor of spending his time with Anya. Not that she could blame any of them, because Willow remembered what it had been like with Oz around. She’d wanted to spend a lot of time with Oz, too, particularly at the beginning of their relationship. She hadn’t been able to get enough of him.

That pretty much explained why she was feeling so dreadfully lonely. Oz still hadn’t returned, and although Willow made it a habit to stop by his room on occasion to breathe in his scent, to feel his presence, it wasn’t the same as having him there.

Willow wanted him to come home. She wanted him to at least send a letter to let her know when she might expect him to return. So far, though, there had been nothing.

“Are you alright?”

Wesley’s voice broke into her melancholy thoughts, and Willow glanced up at him. He was still damp from the shower, fully dressed in clean trousers and a sweater. “I’m okay. Just thinking.”

“About Oz?” he asked gently. Her surprise must have shown on her face, because Wesley explained, “You just looked as though you were missing someone. I thought—forgive me. It was rude to pry.”

“No, it’s okay,” Willow said quickly. “I mean, I appreciate your concern. It’s—I’ve kind of felt lately that everyone’s forgotten that Oz isn’t here anymore.”
Wesley looked sympathetic. “Spike—”

“Oh, I understand!” Willow was quick to assure him. “Buffy needs to be with Spike, and Xander and Anya are a new couple—even though I still don’t see what Xander sees in her—and Giles has his shop…”

“And you have magic,” Wesley added, tapping the books that were lying on the table. He poured himself a cup of coffee, and turned back to her. “Would you like a cup?”

“I’d better not,” she replied. “Caffeine makes me jumpy.”

“What have you found?” Wesley asked, sitting down in the only other chair at the table.

Willow opened the first book and flipped to the pertinent spell. “This one is an illusion, but I don’t know how we’d keep it going for a long period of time. It would have to pretty much be permanent, and I don’t know that it’s going to be easy to make a vampire appear human.”

Wesley frowned. “It might be possible. If we can find the Gem of Amara, we might be able to tie the spell to that. With sunlight not an issue, all we would truly have to be concerned about would be body temperature.”

She nodded. “That’s what I thought, but it would take a lot of power, and I don’t know that I can do it.”

“We might be able to do it together,” Wesley replied. “What’s next?”

Willow picked up the second book. “This one is a protection spell, but it’s against magic. Maybe we could make it work against technology?”

Wesley scanned the spell, nodding slowly. “Perhaps. If we could make it work, that would be quite handy, particularly if the soldiers present a threat to all of us.” There was a third book on the table. “And the last one?”

Willow shrugged. “That one’s just a locator spell, but it’s a permanent one, so you always know
where somebody is. It might be nice for everyone, just in case something happens.”

“You’ve spent a lot of time on this,” Wesley commented.

Willow looked away from him. “I’ve had a lot of extra time on my hands lately.”

Wesley understood what she meant, but he didn’t know what else to say. “Are you hungry?”

She met his eyes, surprised. “What?”

“I haven’t eaten all day,” Wesley said. “And I don’t have anything here. Are you hungry?”

Willow almost asked if Wesley was asking her out, but she bit back the question before it could escape. They were friends, like she and Xander were friends, and Wesley was probably just as lonely as she was. After all, it wasn’t like he was dating anybody either. Willow figured he probably felt like a third wheel a lot with Spike and Buffy.

So it was just dinner with a friend who didn’t have anyone else to eat with.

“Starving.”

He smiled. “Good. I’ll get my things.”

Willow watched him leave the room, wondering why she’d never previously noticed how cute Wesley was.

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The sound of the jackhammer died, leaving only an echo behind. Wesley pulled his mask off, joining Spike on the platform they’d built to lie on while drilling through the ceiling. “Hand me the lantern,” Spike said.
Wesley handed him the battery-powered light, grabbing a second one and following Spike up into the cavern. Their light played across the treasure, heaps of it. Gold and jewels sparkled as they both moved the lanterns around to view it all. “I never thought…” Wesley murmured, trailing off reverentially.

“Me neither,” Spike replied. “Guess neither of us is going to have to work again if we don’t want to.” At Wesley’s questioning look, Spike raised his eyebrows. “It’s an even split, Wes. You were the one who did the research.”

“You—” Wesley paused to gather his thoughts. Spike had essentially just given him a place as an equal partner. It meant the world to him. “Thank you.”

“Thank me later, after we’ve hauled all this stuff out and converted it,” Spike replied. “That’s going to take a lot of work. But until then…” He trailed off. “Bloody hell, finding the gem is going to be like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

Wesley shook his head. “All the references indicate that it’s small, greenish in color, and part of something that would be inconspicuous.” Spike raised an eyebrow. “I’ve continued my research,” Wesley explained.

“I guess that at least gives us a place to start,” Spike responded.

They both started combing through the treasure carefully, but it didn’t take long for Spike to grow frustrated. “This is pointless!” he burst out. “It’s going to take for-sodding-ever.”

Wesley sighed. “Go get something to eat,” he suggested. “I’ll keep looking.”

“Little hard for you to figure out if it works or not without me around,” Spike snapped, and then sighed. “Sorry. I’ve been a right sod the past couple of weeks, Wes.”

“You’ve had cause,” Wesley said. “You seem to be in a better mood today, though.”

“Buffy stayed all night last night,” was all Spike would admit to, although a smile warmed his features at the thought.
Wesley stifled his jealousy. It had been longer than he cared to think of since he’d been with anyone. Not since before he left England, in fact. “Hang on,” he muttered, picking up a ring. It fit the description of being inconspicuous and green. “Spike, try this.”

Spike took the ring from him with a shrug, slipping it on his left hand. “Want to stake me?”

“No,” Wesley shot back. “At least, not very often. And I’m not going to test it out.”

The vampire looked around, and locating an ornate cross, picked it up. He stared at and then switched hands so that he held it in his right hand. There was no pain, no mark, no burning. “This is it.”

Wesley approached him. “You should try it out.”

Spike looked up at him, meeting Wesley’s eyes, his own expression stunned. “Outside.”

“Yes.” Wesley grinned. “You could meet Buffy after her last class.” He pulled the keys to his motorcycle out of his pocket, dangling them in front of Spike’s face. “You take the bike, and I’ll drive your car back.”

“You just want to drive the Mustang again,” Spike accused him, but he took the keys in exchange for his own, swallowing hard. “Wes—thanks.”

“It was my pleasure,” Wesley replied. “Go find your girl.”

Spike didn’t need further encouragement.

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Buffy was walking next to Willow. “So you and Wesley went out to dinner?”

“Yeah, it was nice. He’s nice,” Willow said. “Just as a friend, you know, but he’s got all this interesting information. Did you know that he speaks more than a dozen different languages? Not
just the ones Giles does, but a bunch more.”

The Slayer just nodded, wondering if Willow realized that she sounded like she had the beginnings of a crush. In some ways, it made sense. Willow probably had more in common with Wesley than anyone else did. Buffy was just grateful that Willow wasn’t quite so focused on Oz’s departure. Her search for spells to help Spike seemed to be providing a distraction on a number of different levels.

“It’s an awfully nice day out, isn’t it?”

The voice coming from behind them should have been impossible. Except that Buffy knew it was him. She whirled, seeing Spike standing there in blue jeans and a white t-shirt, his black leather jacket open. He looked completely different in the sunlight, his pale skin luminescent. A smile tilted the corners of his lips, and he was obviously waiting for her reaction. “Spike?”

“Thought I’d surprise you,” he said. “How am I doing?”

Buffy threw herself at him, feeling his arms come around her as he laughed. He hadn’t laughed in weeks.

Seeing him here, in the daylight, caused Buffy to realize just how much she’d given up by dating a vampire. Not that she would give Spike up for anything, but this was a dream come true.

Buffy pulled back to get a good look at him. “Really well. When did you guys find it?”

“An hour or so ago,” Spike replied. “I stopped by the house to shower and change, but Wesley suggested I borrow the bike to surprise you. Want to go for a ride?”

“Do you even have to ask?” Buffy demanded.

Willow was beaming at both of them. “Can I see it?”

Spike moved closer to her, trying to make his movements inconspicuous. Both Willow and Buffy inspected the ring, and Buffy raised her eyebrows, impressed. “Wow. It’s even pretty.”
“You should have seen some of the other stuff we found,” Spike said. “Some of it was truly ghastly. I don’t know what I would have done if I’d had to wear something that ugly.”

Buffy laughed, and then she glanced around. “Should you really be on campus, though? I’m happy to see you, but…”

“What are they going to do, Buffy?” Spike asked, his eyes glittering with a mixture of menace and daring. “They can’t touch me, even if they did figure out that my heart isn’t beating. Why would they even suspect that I’m anything other than what I appear to be?”

“And what’s that?” she asked, teasing him.

“Just a guy who’s come to pick up his girl. Was thinking you might like an evening out on the town.” Spike leered at her. “We can pick up where we left off last night.”

Buffy decided that it wouldn’t be prudent to question this sudden shift in Spike’s mood. He’d gone from distant and morose back to his old confident, ebullient self. As long as this wasn’t a temporary change, she could concentrate on being happy he was back to normal.

Of course, if it were temporary, then Buffy would just have to figure out how to make him happy again.

“Do you mind, Will?” Buffy asked, knowing that they were supposed to hang out later that night.

“No, you go on, have a good time,” Willow said, just as pleased as Buffy at Spike’s improved mood. “I’ll see you guys when you get back.”

Buffy gave her a grateful look, walking hand-in-hand with Spike, both of them enjoying the sunshine.
It didn’t take Willow long to wish that Buffy hadn’t gone off with Spike. She didn’t begrudge them their happiness. Really, she didn’t. After all they’d been through recently, they both deserved an afternoon together without an emergency or interruption.

With Buffy and Spike gone, however, Willow was left without anyone to talk to, and she really needed to talk to somebody. She needed someone to be there for her, especially now that she knew that Oz wasn’t going to be there for her ever again.

Over the last couple of months, Willow had convinced herself that it was only a matter of time before Oz came back. When he was back—she had told herself—they would make things work again, they would make things good again. She could forgive him, and he would stay.

Only he wasn’t coming back. Oz had sent for his things, with no word to her. He hadn’t even left a message for her with Devon.

What Willow really wanted was some girl-time, but in Buffy’s absence, she thought that Xander would be an acceptable substitute. When she called, however, Xander had other plans. “Sorry, Will, but I can’t hang out tonight,” Xander replied, sounding regretful. “Anya and I are supposed to meet in a couple of hours. Unless it’s an emergency. If you need me for something big—”

“No,” Willow replied. “It’s not an emergency.” She didn’t want to explain herself. “I just thought it might be fun to get together. I’ll see you some other time.” Willow hung up the phone before he could reply, knowing that she was being rude and abrupt and not caring.

Stopping by Giles’ shop was a last-ditch effort on her part. She thought that if Giles was free, she could talk to him about the options she had discussed with Wesley, see what he thought they should do. Anything to distract herself.

Willow felt like her heart had been broken all over again.

Giles was ringing up a customer when she arrived, though, with two more in line. He glanced up for long enough to smile at her, but it was obvious that he was busy, and he wasn’t going to be free anytime soon.

Willow left, wandering down the street disconsolately. Nothing was going to be okay again, there was nothing she could think of to cheer herself up.
“Willow? Are you alright?”

It took a minute for the question to penetrate the fog around her, and Willow had run into Wesley by that point. At least, she would have run into Wesley if he hadn’t stopped her by gripping her shoulders. “Oh, hey.”

“You’re not okay,” he stated. “Are you hurt?”

“No. Yes. I—Oz is gone.” It wasn’t the most coherent explanation Willow could have given him, but Wesley didn’t ask for further explanations. He put his hand on her back, steering her down the street to the Espresso Pump. “Where are we going?”

“We’re going to sit down until you get your feet under you again,” Wesley replied firmly, sitting her down at one of the free tables. “I’ll be right back.”

Willow sat there because it was easier than trying to figure out where she was supposed to go next. What she was supposed to do next? Her future had always included Oz, and now it didn’t.

“It’s terrible tea, but it’s the best I can do for the moment,” Wesley said, handing her the paper cup. “Would you like to talk about it?”

“Oz sent for his things,” Willow replied, watching as he settled himself across from her. “He didn’t even call or write or anything. His things were just gone when I went by his room today, and Buffy and Spike are gone, Xander is with Anya, and Giles was busy.”

Wesley glanced down at his tea, the bag floating in the scalding water. It really was terrible tea. He didn’t think he’d ever get used to the American concept of a cuppa. “I realize that I’m a poor substitute, but if you’d like company, I don’t have any plans.”

Willow stared at him, then shook her head. “No, that’s okay. I know you’ve been working nonstop. I’m sure you have better things to do.”

“What would that be?” Wesley responded. “We could go over the spells you found more in depth, perhaps determine which one would be best to use.” When she didn’t appear convinced, he added, “It might be better to keep your mind off things. It’s always better to have a distraction, rather than to ruminate on it.”
“I don’t know,” Willow said, not convinced. “I don’t want to be any trouble.” Actually, it would be more accurate to say that she wasn’t sure she wanted to be with Wesley. She didn’t know him well enough to feel comfortable being miserable around him, not the way she would have with Buffy or Xander. Or even Spike.

Wesley shrugged. “If you’d rather be alone, I would understand.”

Being alone suddenly sounded like a really bad idea. Willow didn’t want to spend the evening by herself. That would just emphasize how pathetic she was. “No. Let’s go over those spells. I think a distraction is just what the doctor ordered.”

“I still have your books at my place,” Wesley suggested. “Unless you’d be more comfortable at your room.”

“Let’s go back to your place,” Willow replied. Maybe the evening with Wesley was a good idea. It would definitely prevent her from moping, and it would give her something constructive to do.

She needed to forget about Oz, and while she might not have Oz, she would always have magic.
“since feeling is first/who pays any attention/to the syntax of things/will never wholly kiss you;/wholly to be a fool/while Spring is in the world/my blood approves./and kisses are a better fate/than wisdom/lady i swear by all the flowers. Don’t cry/—the best gesture of my brain is less than/your eyelids’ flutter which says/we are for each other:then/laugh,leaning back in my arms/for life’s not a paragraph/And death i think is no parenthesis” ~e. e. cummings, “since feeling is first”

The wind seemed to catch and disperse all the fear and frustration of the last couple of weeks. The sun was shining brightly, and the hum of the engine echoed through her bones. Buffy was seriously thinking about making Spike get a motorcycle. Granted, his car was cool, but riding on the back of the bike with him was a phenomenal feeling.

Not least because Spike was actually happy.

He took the coast road, and he drove fast. If anyone but Spike had been driving, Buffy probably would have been a little nervous. Slayer or not, getting thrown off a motorcycle would hurt. He was in complete control, however, and she could feel it.

A rare flash of insight told Buffy how much Spike was probably enjoying this—being in control.

The funny part was that it was probably just as exhilarating for her to let him take it.

Spike finally got off the highway in a little town Buffy had never heard of before, and she wondered where he planned on taking them. He pulled up in front of a tiny restaurant, and she pulled her borrowed helmet off, looking around. “Where are we?”

“Little restaurant I ran across once,” he replied. “Always meant to bring you here someday, but…” Spike trailed off, and Buffy thought she understood. It was so easy to get busy and let things go. Despite the best of intentions, they both had a tendency to forget that time was limited. In truth, it was often easier not to remember.

“I’m glad you brought me now,” Buffy replied. She slipped her hand into his, pleased when Spike pulled her closer. “It’s good to see you happy again.”
Spike nodded. “Won’t lie to you, luv. Now that I’ve got this ring, I’m going to be doing some nosing around. We need to know what those wankers are planning.”

Buffy sighed. “I know. I do. But can we not talk about that right now? Can we just be Buffy and Spike?”

He smiled. “Yeah, luv. It’s just us right now. I was thinking maybe we could get a hotel room tonight, not go back until tomorrow. Wes said he didn’t need the bike back right away.”

“I’ll have to call Giles, just so they don’t send out the cavalry after us, but I’d like that,” Buffy admitted.

Spike appeared hesitant. “Are you sure? I don’t want you to get into trouble over missing classes.”

“I can miss the morning class, as long as you get me back by afternoon,” Buffy replied.

“It’s a deal.” The interior of the restaurant was dim and cool, and Buffy breathed a sigh of relief. She wondered if the gem would protect Spike from sunburn, or if he’d need to wear SPF 50 until he was used to the sunlight again.

Buffy smiled at the thought. They would both have to get used to the sun again.

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There were times when Xander wondered what he was doing with Anya. Actually, there were a lot of times he wondered. She was blunt, and often tactless, and she would say things in front of people that were really embarrassing. Like talking about the desire for oral sex in front of Giles and Joyce when they’d stopped in at the bookstore. All Xander had wanted was an update on Spike, since he hadn’t heard whether he had been able to retrieve the gem. Anya had taken the interruption of their date somewhat amiss and had informed him that she expected oral sex later.

It was bad enough for that to happen in front of a couple of people old enough to be your parents; it was worse when the expression on Joyce’s face suggested that she’d been inspired. Now that was a mental image that it was going to take Xander forever to get rid of.
“You really can’t say things like that in public, Anya,” he repeated, wondering if he’d actually manage to get through this time.

“Why?” she asked. “It’s true. I do expect orgasms tonight, Xander, preferably through oral sex. Last week—”

“I know!” he blurted out, not wanting to hear her say what she’d done last week. The truth was, hearing Anya talk so bluntly about all of that embarrassed him. Not that he minded her straightforward attitude in bed. Bed was where he wanted to keep it, though, particularly in front of people like Joyce and Giles.

Xander would prefer to believe that they’d never even heard of sex.

Anya glared at him. “Maybe if you can’t talk about it, we shouldn’t do it anymore.”

He sighed. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know.” Anya hated it when Xander asked these kinds of questions. Really, like she had any better idea of what they were doing. Sometimes she wondered why on earth she was even with him. The sex was nice, but she had a nagging feeling that it wasn’t all there should be.

“Well, what do you want to do next? Do you want to go back to my place?” Xander asked. Really, he didn’t see why it was such a big deal to look into the bookstore. There hadn’t been many opportunities for Scooby meetings lately, and Xander was beginning to wonder if they even needed him. Buffy had Spike—and apparently Wesley—not to mention Willow and Giles. What role was he supposed to play?

Anya nodded, unable to think of anything else to do. At least sex would be fun, and besides, while Xander might not be able to say the words out loud, he wasn’t shy in bed. “Sure.”

Xander reached for her hand, wanting to establish a connection he didn’t always feel, and he was pleased when she met him halfway.

“Thanks for letting me stop,” Xander offered.
Anya moved just a little bit closer. “It’s okay.”

It really almost was.

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Wesley hadn’t seemed to be in any hurry to send her home, and in fact had suggested they get take-out so they could continue working on the spells. The illusion spell was looking like their best option at the moment, since neither of them could figure out how to ensure that a spell protecting them from technology didn’t affect the things they wanted to keep working, including computers and cell phones.

They’d disagreed about the permanent locator spell, mostly because it wasn’t clear what the best thing to tie it to would be. The spell worked in a similar manner as the charm on Buffy’s bracelet, but there was nothing in the text about using it on a number of different people at once.

Willow thought it a little weird to spend so much time with Wesley. Last year, she’d been less than impressed with him, but now… Well, he’d definitely changed.

“We’ll have to wait for Spike to return to cast the illusion,” Wesley stated. “By tying the spell to the ring, I think we’ll achieve the necessary effect. How long it will last without some sort of reinforcement is difficult to say.”

Willow nodded. “I guess we’ll just have to see what happens then.”

“I guess so.” Wesley met her eyes. “Are you alright?”

Willow nodded bravely. “Yeah. This has been great, Wes. Thanks for staying with me tonight.”

“We did need to discuss the details of the spells,” Wesley replied, rising from the table and beginning to clear the remains of their dinner.

Willow suddenly wondered if that’s all it was. Not that she wanted more, but—was she not attractive anymore? Did guys just not want her? Or maybe Oz would the only guy who would ever
want her, and now that he was gone, no one would want her again. With Oz, she’d felt confident and sexy. Now, she just felt like drab, boring Willow again.

“Do you think I’m attractive?”

The question was out of her mouth before Willow could call it back. Wesley froze as he was loading the dishwasher. After a second, he finished, and then he turned to look at her. “I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing,” Willow said, not wanting to know the answer anymore. It was stupid; of course, Wesley didn’t think she was attractive. He’d been after Cordelia last year, and Willow knew that she couldn’t hold a candle to Cordelia Chase. It had been one of her first lessons in school; right after the alphabet.

Which, technically, she’d already known backwards and forwards.

“Willow—”

She heard it in his voice. Wesley sounded like a man caught between a rock and a hard place. He obviously didn’t find her attractive, but he didn’t want to hurt her feelings. “Forget it,” she insisted. “Really.”

The silence that fell was no longer comfortable, not like it had been earlier. Researching with Wesley was kind of fun. He enjoyed it as much as she did, and now she’d ruined it. Things would get weird, and—

“I find you very attractive.”

Willow’s head shot up, and her eyes met his. “Oh.” There was a long pause, where neither of them knew quite what to say. She swallowed hard, no longer certain of what it was she wanted. There was a part of her that wanted to ask another question, like what about her Wesley liked, and whether he’d ever want to kiss her. There was another part of her that recognized the risks inherent in a question like that.

There were questions it was better not to ask sometimes.
“I should be getting back to the dorm,” Willow said.

“I’ll give you a ride.” It wasn’t an offer, it was a statement, and Willow didn’t try to argue. She didn’t particularly want to walk home after dark anyway.

“Okay.”

Willow grew more aware of the silence that hung between them the longer it went on. Although she wanted to fill the space between them with something, she had the feeling that anything she said would simply make it worse. She kind of wished that Wesley had his motorcycle rather than Spike’s car. It wouldn’t have been so noticeable then.

He pulled up in the parking lot that was closest to Stevenson. “I’ll walk you in.”

Willow nodded. “Thanks.” They walked side-by-side, and Willow was hyper-aware of him, of the fact that their sleeves were brushing. “Did you mean it?” she blurted out. “Or were you just saying it to be nice?”

“You’re a highly intelligent, beautiful girl,” Wesley replied. “Why wouldn’t I be attracted to you?”

Willow could buy the highly intelligent part; she’d always known that. She wasn’t so sure about “beautiful,” though. “It’s just—Oz…”

“I didn’t know him well enough to form an opinion of his actions,” Wesley said quietly. “But I know you well enough to understand that his decision had nothing to do with you. I don’t see how it could.”

They were standing in front of the residence hall, and Willow could just make out his expression in the light of the streetlamp. Wesley looked shy, awkward, and he wasn’t meeting her eyes.

“Oh.” Willow had no idea what to say now.
“I don’t want things to be strained between us,” Wesley said quickly. “I understand that you are still in love with him, and how I feel doesn’t matter really. I’ve enjoyed working with you, and I don’t want—”

“I like working with you, too.”

Willow managed a brief smile, and then she called out a goodnight as she scurried inside. Leaving the scene seemed to be the best way to deal with it. Willow liked Wesley as a friend, but she’d never even thought of him as more than that.

Except now, of course, knowing what she knew, and with Oz gone—

It was going to stay on her mind.

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Buffy woke with the sudden realization that Spike was no longer in bed with her. She sat up, looking around the hotel room, and immediately spotted him by the window. They had an eastern exposure, and he’d parted the heavy drapes just enough to watch the sun rise.

“Spike?”

He glanced back at her. “Did I wake you?”

“You not being here did.” She groped around and found the t-shirt he’d worn the previous day, pulling it over her head before coming to stand next to him by the window. “What are you doing up?”

“The sun’s coming up,” he said quietly.

Buffy stepped closer, pressing her lips to the scarred skin of his back and putting her arms around his waist. She rarely saw the sunrise. Sunset was her time, but she could understand why this would be such an important moment for him. It was the first time in over a hundred years he didn’t have to fear it; the first time Spike didn’t have to worry about finding shelter for the day.
As if the world were putting on a show just for them, the array of colors was spectacular. Buffy stood with him, watching the horizon as it lightened gradually, the pink and red and gold hues shifting moment by moment. Spike didn’t turn away until the sun was fully up, and too bright to look at.

“Never thought that would be something I’d see again,” Spike said.

Buffy sighed. “Do we have to go back?”

Spike cupped her face in his hand. “Not just yet. We’ve got some time.”

She kissed him, an edge of desperation present in her embrace, knowing that going back to Sunnydale meant that they would have to take up arms again. She wanted more time to just be together, but it was impossible.

She knew she had to savor every moment.

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Spike glanced around the interior of the bar, noting that several familiar faces were missing. His jaw clenched. Not that every demon there was a saint, but many were harmless, provided you let well enough alone. There was a balance to be kept, and the soldier boys were upsetting it.

A smile touched his lips, and he headed back to Rof’s usual table. “How are you, mate?”

“Well,” Rof replied. “You are not so well, I think.”

“You heard what happened?” Spike asked.

Rof made a movement that approximated a shrug. “I hear nothing, but we have spoken many times. Your eyes say what your lips do not.”
Spike sighed. “You were right about the rumors. There’s some kind of government, or quasi-government installation operating under the college campus. I want you to pass the word along to steer clear if possible, and if not, to be careful.”

“I will pass the message to all who might listen,” Rof said. “But not all will.”

“I’ll have done all I can on that end, though.” Spike tried to sound as though he didn’t care, but the truth was he wouldn’t wish getting tangled up with that bunch on anyone. The very idea that they might take more—that they would—

“You have done all that can be asked.” Rof touched his arm. “I will say also that information would be appreciated, yes?”


“Be well.”

Spike didn’t respond, instead wandering out into the night. He’d dropped Buffy off at the campus that afternoon, and had immediately started his digging for information at the city library, looking for any information about construction done on campus. A project that big wouldn’t go unnoticed. He’d wanted to check with his contacts before meeting up with the Slayer again for a quick patrol. Then Spike knew he’d have to figure out what he wanted to do next.

The Gem of Amara had finished the healing process, and the scar on his chest was now only a thin white line, barely noticeable. Physically, at least, he was in better shape than he’d ever been. He knew from past experience, however, that it was the heart and mind that took longest to heal, and he didn’t think he’d be comfortable in Sunnydale again until he knew everything there was to know about those soldiers—and stopped them.

“I wondered where you’d gotten to.”

Spike smiled. “Had to run an errand.”

Buffy came out of the shadows where she’d been waiting for him up the street. “I didn’t want to interrupt. Everyone in Willy’s tends to get really quiet when I’m around for some reason. I have no idea why that would be.”
He gave her a soft kiss in greeting. “How’d you know where to find me?”

Buffy held up the compass she’d been using. “Remember? I told you Giles did the whole charm duplication thingie. I just followed the little arrow.” Her eyes troubled, she said, “Spike, I know that the ring helps, but I’m still not crazy about you being out here on your own. Couldn’t you have taken Wes with you?”

“I could have, but the man hasn’t had a day off in awhile,” Spike replied. “Besides, the ring takes care of a lot.”

Buffy nodded, hesitant to argue with him. She knew she couldn’t force Spike to take someone with him everywhere he went. Moreover, Buffy really didn’t want to disturb the fragile peace they’d managed to reach. Spike had begun to distance himself as soon as they hit Sunnydale’s city limits, although she didn’t think it would end up being as bad as before. “Okay. Do you want to do a quick patrol?”

Spike grinned. “Yeah, sure. I could use a good fight.”

There was something in his smile that made Buffy hope fervently that they didn’t run into any of the soldiers.

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It was beginning to look a lot like Christmas, and Buffy was grateful for that. It was actually beginning to feel a lot like Christmas, and that was something of a relief as well. With everything that had been going on, Buffy hadn’t been sure that the holidays would be merry.

“Are you coming over on Christmas Eve?” Buffy asked. “It’s supposed to be a big thing.” She made a face. “Giles is going to be there, too.”

Willow’s eyebrows went up. “On Christmas morning, you mean?”

“Yes,” Buffy replied. “I thought about staying with Spike, just so I didn’t have to think about it, but I know Mom wants me home. I did make her swear that they wouldn’t do anything to
Willow grinned. “It’s not that bad, is it? Your mom and Giles, I mean. It’s got to be almost like…”

“Like having real parents again?” Buffy asked. “Yeah, which is what’s kind of freaky. If it were just them together, it would be fine. But they’re sleeping in the same bedroom, which I can ignore when I’m not staying there.”

Her friend made a sympathetic face. “Mom and Dad are out of town, so I should be able to make it.” Trying to sound as casual as possible, Willow asked, “Did you guys invite Wesley?”

Buffy tried to hide a smirk. She had a feeling that there was more than just friendly interest there. As soon as she’d returned to town after her impromptu trip with Spike, Willow had told her about Oz—and also about what Wesley had said.

“I just don’t know what to think,” Willow had confessed. “He’s nice, Buffy, but… He’s Wesley. And if my mom flipped over me dating a musician, what is she going to say about a guy that’s—I don’t even know how much older he is.”

Buffy had been sympathetic, but she’d pointed out that she also had to deal with something of an age difference. “Do you like him?”

Willow had just sighed. “I miss Oz really badly,” was all she would admit to.

Finals had forced both of them to concentrate more on their studies than on either Spike or Wesley, however. It had distracted Buffy from worrying about Spike and Willow from missing Oz. Both men were busy emptying the cavern where they’d found the Gem of Amara, sifting through the treasure for any magical artifacts, and converting what they could to cash. Spike wouldn’t tell her exactly how much they’d already racked up, and Buffy wasn’t sure she wanted to know an exact dollar figure.

On the other hand, Buffy knew that the money was another safety net for Spike. Another way to ensure that he had resources at his disposal to prevent the soldiers from getting to him again.

Buffy flopped back on the bed. She’d already done her packing for Christmas break. A lot of her things were at Spike’s house anyway. She still had yet to figure out if her mom was going to care if
she didn’t spend every night at home.

After all, it seemed a little strange to just bring it up in conversation. When she got right down to it, Buffy would much prefer to just sneak out of the house and avoid the issue entirely.

“You really don’t think that Mom would let Wesley spend Christmas on his own, do you?” Buffy asked. “I mean, she asked Faith last year, and Wesley’s much nicer than Faith.”

Willow nodded, focusing on her box of books she planned on reading over break. “Yeah, I thought so. I’ll try to be there.” She dropped down on the bed, meeting Buffy’s eyes. “I don’t know what to do.”

Buffy sat up, sensing Willow’s need for some serious girl-talk. They really hadn’t indulged in anything like that for a while. “About what?”

“Wesley.” Willow twisted her hands. “I still miss Oz, Buffy. Every day. It’s not like it ever goes away, but then I think about him not coming back, and it’s like why not? Why shouldn’t I have fun with someone else? And Wesley’s nice, and he said he found me attractive, and he’s nice looking.”

Buffy took a deep breath. “Will, I still miss Angel sometimes. What Spike and I have is great, and I wouldn’t give it up for anything, but it’s not like that ever goes away. Just because you move on doesn’t mean you’re going to forget him.”

“What if he does come back?” Willow asked.

Buffy winced, then asked, “Do you really want him to at this point?”

“I don’t know,” Willow admitted. “I do, because I love him, but…”

“But he left, and then he sent for his things without letting you know,” Buffy supplied. “Maybe Oz will come back, but you have to figure out whether you’re willing to wait for something that might never happen. Whether it’s with Wesley or someone else, maybe you should move on.”

Willow sighed. “I just don’t know.”
Buffy wished she knew what to tell her friend, but she was fresh out of ideas.
“My life was tinted purple by so much love,/and I veered helter-skelter like a blinded bird/till I reached your window, my friend:/you heard the murmur of a broken heart./There from the shadows I rose to your breast:/without being or knowing, I flew up the towers of wheat,/I surged to life in your hands,/I rose from the sea to your joy./No one can reckon what I owe you, Love,/what I owe you is lucid, it is like a root/from Arauco, what I owe you, Love./Clearly, it is like a star, all that I owe you,/what I owe you is like a well in a wilderness/where time watches over the wandering lightning.” ~Pablo Neruda, “Sonnet LXIV”

“So, did Joyce ask you over for Christmas Eve?” Spike asked.

Wesley raised an eyebrow. “Why do you ask?”

“Because if she didn’t ask you, I would. It’s not right to spend the holidays on your own.”

They had just left the bank and were standing outside under the bright California sun. Wesley wondered if Spike still thought about the daylight, if he still regarded it as a threat. But if there was any fear at all in him, it didn’t show. Spike’s confidence appeared to be completely restored.

Wesley, perhaps better than anyone, knew differently.

Spike tapped a cigarette out of his pack and lit up, inhaling deeply. To anyone else, they would have looked like a couple of up-and-coming young businessmen in their suits and ties. They both certainly looked both completely normal and completely human. “We’d better get going. We’re supposed to be meeting Cordelia in fifteen minutes, and my sense is that she wouldn’t appreciate us being late.”

“She doesn’t,” Wesley confirmed. “Although, she’s rarely on time herself.”

“One of her more charming qualities.” Spike led the way back to the Mustang. The car had been the best vehicle to take for the early meeting with the bank trustee.

Although they had not quite cleared the cavern, they’d agreed that it was best to begin to process of
converting it over to cash immediately. Spike had contacted Robert, their client, to find out who he used, and he’d recommended Avery. The bank was in L.A., so they’d left early that morning to make the meeting, and Spike had called Cordelia to see if she wanted to have a late lunch with them.

Wesley thought it was a pleasure not to have to worry about staying overnight or avoiding the sun. On the other hand, given what Robert had said about Avery, she would have understood.

He thought he knew why Spike was asking about his holiday plans. Wesley had seen the expression on his face when Avery had asked if they had designated beneficiaries to the trust. Spike had, of course, immediately named Buffy. Wesley had merely shrugged. “I suppose it ought to be Spike. There isn’t anyone else.”

Wesley probably could have named his parents. He might have if he thought his father would even take the money. Their last conversation had been less than pleasant, though.

“No one should have to be alone for the holidays,” Spike said, returning to their previous thread of conversation. “Besides, knowing Joyce, she already asked you.”

“She did,” Wesley admitted, sinking down into the bucket seat and loosening his tie. “I’m planning on being there.”

“You know, if you wanted to go home for the holidays, you could,” Spike suggested. “You deserve the time off if you want it.”

Wesley shook his head. “There’s no point in it.”

“You piss your dad off that badly by working for me?”

“It was more than that.” Wesley didn’t know that he wanted to say more on the issue. His relationship with his father had been strained at the best of times. He was always trying to do more and to be more, to live up to what Roger Wyndam-Pryce wanted for his only son. He’d never quite measured up.

Things were different with Spike, with the others. There was, at least, the hope of making a difference. Why Wesley would want to go home only to face his father’s disapproval and disdain
was beyond him, not when he could have a very nice holiday at home.

Although, it was a bit odd to think of Sunnydale as home.

“One of those things, yeah?” Spike asked. “It’s really too bad we don’t get to choose our parents.”

Wesley couldn’t argue about that, so he changed the subject. “Do you think I ought to get gifts for anyone?”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “You asking about everybody in general? Because I’d tell you to get gifts for whoever you want to. I have a feeling that you’re referring to someone in particular, though.”

“Willow.”

Spike glanced over at him, a little surprised. “You interested in Red now?”

He winced. “I don’t know.”

“Okay, let me give you a hint, Wes,” Spike said patiently. “If you don’t know, you generally aren’t.”

Wesley gave Spike a dirty look. “I find her very attractive, but she just lost her boyfriend. I don’t want to be the rebound.”

Spike smirked. “You mean you really like her.”

“Forget it,” Wesley snapped. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Get her something small,” Spike advised, turning serious. “Personal. A book, something you know she’ll like. You might be the rebound guy, but that doesn’t mean anything necessarily. Look at me and Buffy.”
“That’s different,” Wesley replied stubbornly. “Spike, I’m more than ten years her senior.” When Spike started laughing, he grimaced. “Fine, age doesn’t matter. But you’re in a slightly different situation.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m never going to age,” Spike replied. “Wes, if you like the girl, go for it. She could use somebody who’ll stick around.”

Wesley looked over at him. “Is that what we’re going to do? Spike, this thing—”

“We’ll make it through this.” Spike smiled. “After all, I promised Buffy I would stay.”

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“Spike!”

He knew that Cordelia was doing much better immediately. Her grin split her face, and she laughed delightedly when she saw him. Spike returned her hug with real affection, pulling back to look at her. “You’re looking good, pet.”

“Thanks!” Cordelia replied. “And you! Sunlight agrees with you.” She turned to look at Wesley. “Hey, Wes.” Her embrace was affectionate. “So what gives? You two are all dressed up.”

“We had a meeting with the bankers,” Spike replied. “They like you to wear a tie for some reason.” His was still in the car, although he’d kept the suit jacket on, and he was glad now. Cordelia looked stunning, and he hated to be underdressed.

Actually, he didn’t care, but the restaurant wouldn’t let him through the door without a jacket.

“Bankers, huh?” Cordelia asked, tucking a hand through each of their arms. “I’m not going to complain. I’ll be the envy of every woman in there.”

Spike had to hide a smirk at Wesley’s smug grin. “I think we’ll be the envy of every man,” Spike said gallantly. He gave his name to the maitre d’ and turned back to Cordelia. “So how’d seeing Lorne work out for you?”
Cordelia glared at him and swatted him on the arm. “You could have warned me it was a demon bar!” she hissed, not wanting anyone to overhear her. “And he was great, of course.” She smacked him again. “You could have told me I’d have to sing, too.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Spike asked, grinning. “You lose all the fun there.”

Wesley frowned. “What is this place?”

“You haven’t made Wesley sing yet?” Cordelia demanded.

“Wesley knows what he’s doing.” Spike shrugged. “It’s a karaoke bar,” he explained. “Lorne’s an anagogic demon, and he reads you when you sing.”

“I think I’ll pass,” Wesley said.

Spike smiled. “We’ll go sometime. It’s an interesting joint.” Their conversation was interrupted when the maitre d’ announced that their table was ready, and they followed him back. “What was the outcome?”

Cordelia smiled. “Well…” She was enjoying drawing the story out. “There was this party I wasn’t going to go to, mostly because I didn’t have anything to wear.” She didn’t mention that she’d been about ready to throw in the towel at that point. She had even started looking for jobs in retail, which was so not her calling. “Lorne said that I should go, and I should make sure I stayed near the punch bowl.”

“And?” Wesley said impatiently.

She rolled her eyes at him. “Come on, Wes. It’s a story. Anyway, there was an agent there, and he saw me, and he said he had absolutely the spot for me. They needed someone to play a cheerleader in a movie. It wasn’t a big part, but I had a couple lines. He asked if I had a problem playing a bitch, and of course I said no.” Cordelia grinned. “And that was that.”

Spike and Wesley looked at each other. “What do you mean ‘that was that?’” Wesley demanded. “That’s all?”
“No, of course not!” Cordelia exclaimed. “But after I got the part in the movie, I got a tanning commercial, and after that I got another part in a movie, and I had more lines. The point is that I actually found a decent apartment. Oh! And I have a ghost.”

Spike hadn’t been expecting that. “A ghost?”

“His name is Dennis,” Cordelia explained. “Lorne knew my old place was pretty bad, and he knew a guy who knew Doyle, who heard that this place was really cheap. And then Lorne and Doyle helped put the ghost to rest.”

Spike’s eyes narrowed. “This Doyle someone I need to meet?”

Cordelia tossed her hair. “He’s just a friend. It’s no big deal.” Spike wasn’t buying it, but he decided to let it go in the interests of peace. “Oh, and Harmony says to say hello.”

Wesley frowned. “Harmony? Isn’t she—”

“I got her out,” Spike muttered.

Cordelia looked from one to the other. “Oh. I didn’t know…”

“It’s fine,” Wesley said quickly. “How is she?”

“Good,” Cordelia replied, still looking uncertain. “She was staying with me, but then she was worried about the temptation, so she found her own place. She even has a job.”

Spike nodded. “That’s good. Glad she’s alright.”

The rest of their lunch passed pleasantly enough. Cordelia was full of tales of Hollywood, people she’d met and mishaps on set. Although neither man had much interest, they listened attentively anyway. Doyle came up more than once, usually in the guise of an irritant, but Spike had his own theories about that. He made a mental note to be sure to meet this Doyle the next time he was in
It was several hours later before they could leave for Sunnydale again. Spike was hoping that Wesley would have forgotten about Cordelia’s slip, but the man had a mind like a steel trap. It could be rather annoying at times.

“Harmony?”

Spike sighed. At least Wesley had done him the courtesy of waiting to grill him. “She was inside the lab with me, Wes. I couldn’t leave her there.”

“No, of course not,” Wesley replied. “Still, she bit Willow.”

“She left Sunnydale, didn’t she?” Spike asked. “I told her to quit eating people and sent her to Lorne. You weren’t there, Wesley. You don’t know what it was like.”

“No, I don’t,” he readily admitted. “I’m not saying you shouldn’t have acted as you did, Spike. It’s just—you didn’t say anything.”

“I didn’t think anyone would understand.”

“Perhaps we wouldn’t have understood completely, but I think we would have accepted that you made the best decision you could under the circumstances,” Wesley said. “I won’t say anything about it.”

Spike sighed. “Don’t worry about it. If it comes up, I’ll tell Buffy. It just hasn’t come up before.”

Wesley was quiet for a long moment. “Spike?”

“Yeah.”
“Does the gem help?”

“Some.” Spike’s eyes went distant. “Not enough.”

Wesley nodded. “That’s what I thought.”

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Willow was dithering, and she knew it. She’d promised herself that if she didn’t hear from Oz by the time finals were over, she would take the plunge. Not that it was a big deal, because it really wasn’t. Not a big deal at all. It was just a present for a friend. She was getting something for everyone else, even Anya, and Willow didn’t know if anyone would think to get Wesley a gift. She didn’t want him to feel left out.

But she was a little concerned that he would see it as meaning more than it did. Because it was just because they were friends.

And he’d said he was attracted to her.

Very attracted.

“Can I help you find something?”

Willow jumped, and then winced, knowing that Giles would ask her what was wrong when she didn’t want to explain it. “No, it’s okay. I was just looking for a gift.”

Giles nodded. He was supposed to be meeting Joyce shortly, and Willow was the last one in his shop. “For anyone in particular?”

“What do Watchers like?” Willow asked, thinking that maybe Giles could help her decide.

Giles blinked. “Pardon me?”
Willow realized how that sounded. She wanted to get a gift for a friend, that was all, and this was going to blow it out of all proportion. “Never mind. I’ll come back later.”

Giles knew he was going to regret asking, but he was really a glutton for punishment sometimes. “Were you looking for a gift for Wesley?” It was the logical question, since she’d never given him a Christmas gift, and he didn’t think that she would start now. Nor would she be asking him if she were.

“I just didn’t want him to feel left out,” Willow explained, hoping that she wasn’t lying, because she really couldn’t lie to save her life.

Giles considered that for a moment. He hadn’t really thought about it like that. “I’m sure he would appreciate that,” he said carefully. “What were you thinking?”

“A book or something?” Willow asked. “I don’t know. I know he likes books, but the ones I was thinking of are a little out of my price range.”

Giles shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t be of much help, Willow. You might want to ask Spike.”

“Yeah, but Spike’s going to tease,” Willow stated. She sighed. “Okay. Thanks, Giles.”

He glanced outside. “Are you certain you don’t want a ride home? It’s dark, and I was just about to lock up if you don’t mind waiting.”

Willow shook her head. “I don’t mind.” She browsed the shelves, racking her brain. She didn’t want to ask Spike, because he would give her a hard time. Not in a mean way, of course, but that was just how he was.

She actually hadn’t seen Wesley in days now; he’d been busy with the treasure trove. Willow was feeling lonely again. Now that Buffy was home for break, and with her parents gone, there wasn’t anyone around. Her house was empty, and while last year had marked the beginning of her reconciliation with Oz, this year the hole left by his absence was even bigger.

The bell over the door rang, startling her out of her thoughts, and she turned to see who had entered.
just as Giles called from the back, “We’re closing in just a minute!”

“It’s me,” Wesley called back. “I just thought I’d stop in and see how you were.” He looked at Willow, and she thought he might be blushing. “Willow. How nice to see you.”

“It’s good to see you, too,” she replied. “It’s been a while.” Wesley was wearing a suit, his tie loosened. It was a little incongruous with the leather jacket he wore over the top. “You’re all dressed up.”

“I had a meeting with the bank trustees this morning in L.A.,” Wesley explained. “I, uh, didn’t have a chance to change yet.”

Willow nodded. “You look nice.”

He was definitely blushing. “Thank you.”

Giles came out of the back just then. “Wesley. How did the meeting go this morning?”

“Good, I think,” Wesley replied. “We got all the papers filled out at least. I wanted to let you know that Spike and I decided to do as we discussed.”

Giles nodded. “That’s fine. We’ll hope that my services aren’t needed.”

“What kind of services?” Willow asked curiously.

“Power of attorney,” Wesley replied. “We both thought that should something happen, it could easily be to both of us at once. Someone needed to have the power to make decisions. It—it’s sometimes best not to have someone so closely involved required to make those decisions immediately.”

Willow’s eyes widened as she realized what Wesley was saying. “Nothing’s going to happen to you guys!” she protested.
“Of course not,” Wesley said quickly. “It’s merely a formality.”

“I should be meeting Joyce,” Giles said. “I hope we’ll see you in a few days, Wesley.”

“Certainly.” He hesitated. “Willow? Would you like a ride home?”

“Sure. Giles is probably already late,” Willow said, thinking that it was a nice excuse to go with Wesley instead. Not that she minded spending time with Giles at all, but Wesley had the motorcycle.

Giles didn’t correct her even though he raised an eyebrow. “Good. I’ll see both of you soon.”

They took his cue and left the store just ahead of him, walking over to Wesley’s bike. Willow realized that this would be the first time she rode with him knowing that he probably enjoyed it as much as she did.

Wesley handed her the second helmet without a word. “You’re staying at your parents’ house?”

“Yeah,” Willow replied. “Do you know where it is?”

“You’d better give me directions now.”

Willow was glad to have something else to concentrate on. She could see the wheels in Wesley’s head turn as he processed her directions. They didn’t say any more than that, and Willow climbed on, wanting to give Wesley something more. Some encouragement. Except that she didn’t know what she wanted, not really.

She was hyper-aware of him, even more so than the first time she’d ridden with him. The ride was too short, really, because they pulled up in her driveway in no time at all. Willow waited until he cut the engine before climbing off and handing back the helmet. “Do you want to come inside?”

Wesley took off his own helmet. “Did you need something?”
“I need to not be alone right now,” Willow confessed.

Wesley nodded. “I can do that.”

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Joyce watched as Buffy put the phone down. “Was that Spike?”

Buffy nodded. “He just got back in.”

“Are you going to meet him?”

“Do you mind?” Buffy asked. “I know you were planning on having dinner with Giles.”

Joyce didn’t mind, although she felt a pang of regret. They both had their own lives now. It was no longer a mother and her daughter against the world. Most days, that was better, but Joyce still felt some regret for the loss of that closeness. “Of course not.” She looked at her daughter. “Is everything okay between the two of you?”

“Yeah,” Buffy said quickly. “It’s fine.” She stopped. “It’s better than it was,” she admitted slowly, thinking that her mom might understand. “Right after, Spike was really distant, but he’s been better lately. It’s just that I feel like things aren’t the way they were, Mom.”

Joyce sighed. “Change doesn’t necessarily mean things are worse, Buffy.”

“I know,” Buffy said quickly. “We’re not as close, though. I think—I think he’s going to try to do something about the soldiers, and that scares me.”

Her mother might not know a lot about what went on in Buffy’s world. She kept her ears open, however, and Giles talked to her—probably more than he realized. She knew that Giles had contacted some of his friends in the Council, those he still kept in touch with. She also knew that they hadn’t come up with much yet, and that in itself worried him.
Joyce, with a mother’s wisdom, had seen Spike’s eyes. He looked haunted again, and while she couldn’t quite put her finger on why, it troubled her.

As a mother, Buffy’s uncertainty concerned her.

“Spike loves you,” Joyce said. “I don’t doubt that one bit. But that doesn’t mean he’s going to tell you everything, or even that he’ll be able to do so. Give him time, Buffy.”

“I know,” she repeated. “I’m sure everything will be fine. Once we know more, things will be fine.”

Buffy left then, and Joyce frowned. She couldn’t help but wonder if it wasn’t time for her to intervene.
“Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;/Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;/Nor winks the gold fin in the porphry font;/The firefly wakens: waken thou with me./Now droops the milk-white peacock like a ghost,/And like a ghost she glimmers on to me./Now slides the silent meteor on, and leaves/A shining furrow, as thy thoughts on me./Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,/And slips into the bosom of the lake:/So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip/Into my bosom and be lost in me.” ~Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Summer Night”

“Where are your parents?” Wesley asked, wondering a little at the silence of the house. Although he was aware that Willow was Jewish, and therefore her parents were unlikely to celebrate Christmas, their absence seemed strange.

“They went to visit some colleagues,” Willow replied. “I think they might be coming back next week.”

Wesley raised his eyebrows. “They seem to be gone quite a bit.”

Willow shrugged, as though she didn’t care. “Their work keeps them busy.”

“I’m sure.”

“So how are things going with the treasure?” Willow asked.

“We got the paperwork sorted today. It’s strange to have so much extra cash,” Wesley admitted. “It’s a bit hard to know what to do with it.”

“How much was there?” she asked, curious. Willow didn’t think that Buffy even knew the full extent of what was in the cave.

“A lot,” he said vaguely, uncomfortable with revealing exactly how much there had been. There was probably enough to pay off whoever was behind the mysterious soldiers and then some, although they hadn’t discussed that option. “Enough to keep the both of us quite comfortably.”
Willow frowned, realizing that if money wasn’t an issue, Wesley could go back to England if he wanted to see his family. “How come you aren’t going home for Christmas then?” At the expression on his face, she hurried on to add, “Not that I think you should go back. I mean, if you wanted to go, I think it would be good. But I think it’s great that you’re staying.”

Wesley chuckled at Willow’s backpedaling. “My father and I aren’t quite on speaking terms at the moment.”

“Because you’re working for Spike?”

“That’s one reason.” He took the soda that she silently offered him. “My dismissal from the Council would be another. He had some choice words to say about Spike the last time we spoke, and I hung up on him.”

“Oh.” Willow led the way into the living room. It was odd to be back here, in her parents’ house, after living in the dorms for the last few months. She didn’t really understand fighting with parents, since hers had never been the sort to fight with her. The closest she’d ever come to fighting with her mother had been over that thing with MOO. It had taken a spell to cause her mom to pay attention to her. Even her dating Oz hadn’t really raised her mother’s eyebrows.

Willow sometimes wondered if her parents saw her as one more interesting study on the human condition. Not really as a person, not as their daughter, just as an intriguing experiment.

Wesley appeared uncomfortable. Not even Spike knew much about his relationship with his father, or what it consisted of, although the vampire could probably make some fairly accurate guesses. “It’s probably for the best. I’m sure the distance will do us good.”

“You guys don’t get along?”

Wesley met her eyes, and then said softly, “I’ve never really measured up, you know.”

“Oh,” Willow repeated, but she did understand this time. “I get that.” They were facing each other, sitting sideways on her couch, and she was suddenly reminded of last Christmas, and her failed seduction attempt with Oz.

No, not failed. They’d gotten back together, after all.
She leaned forward, meeting his lips with her own with a brief caress. When she pulled back, Wesley was watching her. “Why?”

Willow shook her head. “I don’t know. You’ve been nice. You’ve changed.”

“Have I? Sometimes I still feel like the same man.”

“I know.” They were two of a kind, Willow thought. She often wondered if people saw her any differently than they had when she was in high school. Did they still see mousy little Willow Rosenberg, or could they see glimmers of the powerful witch she dreamed of becoming? Oz had been the only one to see her as more than that, outside of Buffy and Xander, who had their own conception of her. Willow saw herself reflected in Wesley’s eyes, and she thought perhaps he might see her clearly.

Or maybe they were beginning to see each other.

She leaned back against the couch. “Do you ever wonder if anybody sees you the way you see yourself?”

Wesley laughed, a little uncomfortably. “I hope not,” he said fervently.

“Really? It can’t be that bad,” Willow objected.

He shook his head, unwilling to explain. “How do you see yourself?”

Willow hesitated, then said, “I don’t know. I thought I had it all figured out, and then Oz left. It changed everything.”

“It’s odd how that works,” he acknowledged. “When something you believed to be secure proves to be ephemeral, it’s hard to know what to do next.”

“What did you believe to be secure?”
“The Council; everything I learned there.” Wesley grimaced. “Most of it has turned out to be half-truths at best.”

“Are you disappointed?” she asked.

“No,” Wesley admitted. “I never would have thought it, but I’m glad things have turned out the way that they have.”

Willow didn’t know that she would be able to ever say that, but she was beginning to think that one of these days, things might turn out okay.

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Joyce had decided to wait until after Christmas to speak with Spike. She understood all too well that meddling had to be done judiciously. Done too often, people stopped listening when you spoke. The timing had to be just right.

She also knew her daughter, and Buffy was young enough to still believe that if you loved someone, you told them everything, that you would always be close. Joyce knew better; sometimes it was those you loved that you found hardest to connect with. She’d wanted to get a feel for Spike over Christmas, to see whether Buffy’s worries would disappear with a little more time, or if she needed to have a talk with him.

In truth, Joyce wasn’t sure she’d have noticed anything amiss with the vampire if she didn’t know what to look for. Spike had managed to get thoughtful gifts for everyone, even Anya. He helped her with dinner preparations and made small talk. The signs of trouble were all in the eyes, in the spaces in between the words, in the silences.

It was in the way Spike would go from being the center of attention to being on the fringes when no one was watching.

Joyce thought that he was doing a good job at hiding his discomfort. The only people who seemed to notice, besides herself, were Buffy and Wesley. Both of them watched Spike with concern at odd moments, although neither commented.
By the end of the day, Joyce had made her decision; she just had to wait for the right moment. It was a good thing she was a patient woman.

She decided to wait until after the chaos of the holidays, when Giles had gone back to his shop, and Buffy had gone back to school. Joyce turned the gallery over to her assistant early, then went home and called Spike, asking him to meet her. She knew very well that her rather cryptic request would bring him running.

Metaphorically speaking, anyway.

Spike appeared on her doorstep about fifteen minutes after she made the call, blue eyes concerned. “What’s up?” he asked without preamble. “Your car giving you trouble again?”

“Why don’t you come inside, William?” she invited. It had been a long time since she’d called him by his given name, and Joyce used it deliberately. “Do you want something to drink?”

Spike looked at her, his eyes wary. “No, that’s alright.”

“Are you sure? It’s been a long time since I’ve made hot chocolate, and I have the little marshmallows.”

He seemed to give up trying to figure out what it was she wanted at that point, shrugging. “Sure. That would be fine.”

“It’s been awhile since we’ve had the chance to talk,” Joyce explained. “I haven’t seen you much recently.”

“We’ve both been busy,” he replied, sitting down at the kitchen island, appearing deeply uncertain. “Works that way sometimes.”

“Yes, it does,” she agreed. Joyce let the silence hang, going about making the hot chocolate with practiced movements. She didn’t think it would be long before Spike’s curiosity got the better of him, and she was right.

“You didn’t just call me over to have hot cocoa,” Spike stated.
Joyce took her time answering, waiting until she’d poured them both a mug. “I might have. Would that be so strange?”

Spike toyed with the handle of his mug, ignoring the bag of marshmallows she’d set next to him. “Did Buffy talk to you?”

“She did, but that’s not why I called you, William.”

He shook his head impatiently. “I know she’s not real happy with me right now, but I’m working on it. I just need a bit more time is all.”

“Buffy’s not angry with you,” Joyce corrected him. “She’s worried about you.”

“I’m fine.” Spike stood. “I’ve got some things to take care of. Thanks for the cuppa, but if you don’t need me, I should be going.”

She stopped him with a hand on his arm, the gentlest of gestures. He could have shrugged it off easily, but Joyce had always brought out the best in him. Spike stilled under her touch. “Sit,” she said, waiting until he sat back down. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing is wrong,” Spike replied. “It’s just the soldiers—they worry me. Haven’t seen hide nor hair of them for the last couple weeks, and it makes me nervous. I want to know what their game is before someone gets hurt.”

Spike’s slip was telling. “Before someone else gets hurt,” she corrected him.

He looked away, uncomfortable. “Yeah, sure.”

Joyce searched his face, ruddier now with his exposure to sunlight. The color made him look more human; in fact, if she hadn’t known that his skin was cool to the touch, or that his heart wasn’t beating, Joyce would never have known that he was a vampire.
Somehow she thought that might be part of the problem.

“You know,” she began conversationally, “when Hank and I divorced, I didn’t think I’d be able to get close to anyone again. I certainly couldn’t see myself falling in love. I was sure that the entire world would look at me and see a failure. I had failed at my marriage, and I was failing at parenthood. We had to move here to find a school that would accept my daughter, who had burned down a school gymnasium.”

Spike was silent, staring into his rapidly cooling drink. “It took me a long time to see that I wasn’t a failure, and longer still to be open to the idea of being in love again.” She paused, waiting to see if he’d reply. “William, they were wrong.”

His head came up, and he met her eyes. “What?”

“No one looks at you any differently than we ever have,” she said gently, knowing from the expression on his face that she’d hit the nail on the head. “What they did—it doesn’t make a difference. Not to us. Not to me.”


“It takes a long time to feel it.” Joyce understood. “It’s easier when you let people in, though.”

“I spent almost a century alone,” Spike replied. “Old habits die hard, yeah?”

Joyce sighed, knowing all too well how that worked. “Yes, they do.” Then, because she would have done the same for her daughter, Joyce pulled him into a hug. Spike returned her embrace after only a moment’s hesitation.

Joyce wasn’t fooling herself. It was going to take a lot more than a hug and hot chocolate to ease the pain that was obvious in Spike’s eyes, but she hoped that it got him moving in the right direction. She only wished there was more she could do.
“So, you and Wesley, huh?” Buffy asked. She and Willow were both back in the dorms. Although Buffy would have preferred to continue to stay with Spike full-time, he had insisted that he would be fine. Buffy thought that he’d wanted to prove it to himself as much as to her.

She could be sensitive when she wanted to be.

“Yeah,” Willow replied, fingering the pentacle he’d given her when everyone had exchanged gifts. It was a truly beautiful piece of jewelry, and she just hoped that the shirt she’d given him didn’t look like a stupid gift in comparison. She’d thought it would look good on him, and also that he probably had a tendency to ruin a lot of clothes in his line of work. He had appeared pleased, rather than disappointed, so she hoped it was okay.

The night she’d asked him inside, they had talked for hours—about family, magic, school, the future. She’d asked about his Watcher training, and what it had been like. Wesley had asked what she wanted to accomplish in her training as a witch. It turned out they had more in common than she’d ever dreamed.

Buffy sat down on her own bed. “Are you okay with things?”

“We’re taking it slow,” Willow replied. There had been a few goodnight kisses, but nothing more intense than that. “He said he would give me as much time as I wanted.”

“That’s good,” Buffy replied. “Right?”

“It is. I like him, Buffy,” Willow confessed. “It’s just—”

“You still miss Oz,” Buffy finished for her. “I get that.”

“I know you do.” Willow decided that it would be a good time to change the subject. “What about you and Spike? How are things between you guys?”

“Better, I think,” Buffy replied. “He’s talking more, anyway, so that has to be a positive thing. We’re supposed to go see Giles tonight. He said that he wanted to talk to us about the information he’s gathered from his sources, although I don’t think there’s been much.”
“The more you guys know, the better you’ll be able to protect Spike, though, right?” Willow asked. “And Wesley and I are almost ready with that spell. We should be able to do it in another couple of days. As long as Spike’s wearing the Gem of Amara, no one will know that he’s not human.”

“That’s really good.” Buffy sighed. “He’s been going out hunting. I think he’s looking for the soldiers, but I don’t know if he’s seen any of them or not.”

Willow’s eyes widened. “Did he tell you that?”

“I followed him the other night,” Buffy admitted. “I woke up when he was sneaking out of bed, and I waited until he left before I went after him. I think he’s done it more than once, but I don’t know exactly what he’s been doing. He didn’t run across any soldiers the other night.”

“He might just be trying to get some information,” Willow suggested.

“I might believe that if I thought information was all he wanted,” Buffy replied. “It’s Spike, though, and I trust him. He won’t kill anybody unless he has to.”

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Spike hadn’t killed anyone yet. The first time he’d run across a group of soldiers taking down a vampire, he’d been sorely tempted. Had, in fact, nearly twisted the head off one of the buggers. Instead, he made sure that every single one of them had a broken bone of some kind, and then he dusted the vampire they’d been trying to capture.

Let them figure that one out.

That first occasion had been more accident than anything else. Spike hadn’t gone looking for the soldiers, mostly because he had no idea whether he’d be able to resist the temptation to kill. Well, he’d resisted, and that had made him feel a bit better.

Okay, so the sound of their bones cracking had made him feel a lot better.

He hadn’t told Buffy what he was doing because he didn’t know that she would understand.
Wesley might have, but Spike wasn’t about to bring the man along, and he’d insist upon it. He’d be concerned that if something happened to Spike, it could be hours or days before anyone knew about it.

Spike didn’t plan on allowing anything to happen. He knew he’d become a little soft in Sunnydale. The luxury of friends and a safe place to stay would do that to a bloke. He’d let down his guard; that was why the soldiers had been able to capture him in the first place. Spike wasn’t a legend for nothing, though; he wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.

He’d taken up hunting the soldiers, wanting to know everything he could about their habits, their patrols, their intentions. After the first night, he didn’t intervene unless they attempted to capture a demon or vampire. It had only occurred twice more after that first occasion, and Spike had meted out the same punishment—killing the Polgara demon they’d meant to capture the first time and letting the Kirwnsal free with a word of warning the second. He had no idea what they wanted with the Kirwnsal, because they were peaceful buggers, and were typically scared of their own shadows.

Spike had appreciated Joyce’s words, and her kindness, but he didn’t think that opening up or sharing his feelings was going to do any good in this situation. He wasn’t going to be satisfied until he knew exactly what the soldiers wanted and made sure they didn’t get it.

He started off in the direction of the Summers’ home. Remembering Joyce’s intervention had reminded him that he was supposed to be meeting Giles and Buffy to talk about what the Watcher had found out through his sources.

They were waiting for him when he arrived, and Spike settled down next to Buffy on the couch. “So what’s the word, Rupert?”

“So far, not much,” Giles responded. “There are rumors circulating, of course, but nothing solid. The little I have been able to pick up would seem to indicate that this is a military-sponsored organization. What their ultimate goals might be, I can’t say, but my contacts were concerned enough that they’re digging deeper.”

Spike sighed. “That’s it? That’s the big news?”

“Spike,” Buffy said, her tone a warning. “Be nice.”
“Sorry,” Spike muttered, not sounding very apologetic. “But that doesn’t give us much help.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Giles agreed. “I’m afraid we’ll have to continue to rely on our own resources.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “What resources? We haven’t got much.”

“We agreed that it would be better to wait, rather than drawing attention to ourselves,” Giles reminded him. “This is going to require patience, Spike. That might not be your strong suit, but I’m afraid you’ll just have to deal with it.”

“Yeah, right,” Spike said, rising. “Maybe we should go patrol, Buffy. Let the Watcher get back to his regularly scheduled life.”

“Spike.”

Giles managed to turn his name into a rebuke, and Spike nodded wearily. “I’m sorry. I’m in a foul mood tonight.”

Giles nodded. “Of course. I’ll see you both soon, then.”

“I do appreciate the help,” Spike said before he left.

Buffy lingered behind for a few minutes to talk to her Watcher. “I’m sorry, Giles. He’s been really prickly lately.”

“Don’t worry about it, Buffy,” Giles responded. “We all have our bad days.”

Buffy sighed. “Maybe so, but these days, Spike’s bad days are outnumbering his good ones.”
Buffy was daydreaming her way through class, thinking more about Spike and his weird moods than the professor’s lecture. He’d been so strange the last few weeks—back to his old self one moment, and quiet and withdrawn another. Or he was just plain pissy. Buffy didn’t have a problem telling him to knock it off when he got short with her; he’d returned the favor a number of times himself. It was just that she didn’t know what to say to get through to him. To make things go back to the way they had been.

She didn’t like to think about the fact that things might never be the way they’d been.

Sitting up straight, Buffy suddenly realized that the room had gone dark. “Why has the sun gone down?”

“Maybe because it’s that time of day.” Spike was smiling at her from the front of the now-empty lecture hall. “You know the monsters only come out at night. Guess that’s why I’m here.”

“You’re not a monster,” Buffy responded, coming down to meet him. “The light isn’t a threat anymore.”

“No, but the darkness still is.” He turned and walked away from her, out into the hallway.

Buffy followed, close on his heels. “What does the darkness bring?”

“Listen,” Spike said, pointing.

She turned to see a little girl standing at the end of the hall, a carved wooden box in her hands. The child was singing, and Buffy thought it sounded like a nursery rhyme. “Can’t even shout, can’t even cry, the gentlemen are coming by. 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.”

Buffy swallowed hard, feeling a hand on her shoulder. Certain that it was Spike, she turned, only to see a grotesque, grinning face.
If you pay really close attention to things like timing, and time of the year, you’ll probably notice that I’ve taken liberties with canon for my own nefarious purposes. Oh well. I’m evil like that.

“…If ever any beauty I did see,/Which I desired, and got, ‘twas but a dream of thee./And now good morrow to our waking souls,/Which watch not one another out of fear;/For love all love of other sights controls./And makes one little room an everywhere./Let sea discovers to new worlds have gone./Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown:/Let us possess one world; each hath one, and is one./My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears./And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;/Where can we find two better hemispheres,/Without sharp North, without declining West?/Whatever dies was not mixed equally:/If our two loves be one, or thou and I/Love so alike that none do slacken, none can die.” ~John Donne, “The Good-Morrow”

Giles glanced up at the customer who had just entered, giving the woman a smile and a wave. She immediately began browsing, so it appeared that she didn’t need much help. “What did the little girl say?” He scribbled down the rhyme quickly, repeating it back to her to make sure he had it word for word. “It sounds like a nursery rhyme. Have you heard it before?” At Buffy’s negative answer, Giles nodded, “Well, all right. I’ll see what I can find and get back to you as soon as possible.”

“What’s that?”

He looked up to see Spike standing in front of the counter. Giles responded in a low voice so as not to be overheard by his customer. “Buffy just called. She said that she had a Slayer dream.” Pushing the paper across the counter, he asked, “Have you ever heard of ‘the gentlemen?’”

Spike shook his head. “No, it doesn’t sound familiar. Wes might know, though. I’m supposed to meet him and Willow later. I’ll ask him then, if you don’t mind me taking a copy of this.”

“No, go ahead,” Giles replied. “I’ll just make sure this customer is alright, and then I’ll be back.” He was curious as to why the vampire had suddenly decided to make an appearance. Spike had been in a couple of times, but it was usually to pass along a message or drop something off. He didn’t just stop in to chat out of the blue.
Once he’d assured himself that the woman was browsing, rather than looking for something in particular, Giles headed back to where Spike lounged against the front counter. “Is there a reason you came by today, Spike?”

“Wanted to apologize for the other night,” Spike replied softly. “I was out of line, and I was taking my frustration out on you.”

Giles nodded. “Well, I can certainly understand why you’d be frustrated. I’m sorry I don’t have more information for you.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not your fault,” Spike said. “I’m looking through my own channels, but I’m not having much luck either.”

“Have you been seen them again?”

There was a long pause. “A few times,” Spike acknowledged. “Buffy talk to you?”

“No, but I didn’t think you’d pass up an opportunity to collect information any way you could. It seemed a reasonable next step.” Giles sighed. “She’s worried about you.”

“I know.” Spike looked away. “Don’t mean for it to happen that way, but…”

Giles nodded. “Be careful, Spike.”

“Always.” Spike held up the piece of paper. “I’ll show this to Wes. Maybe he’ll know something.”

Giles frowned. “Are they trying the illusion tonight?”

“Yeah, we’ll see how it works.” A glint of humor entered into Spike’s eyes. “If it does, the only thing I’ll be missing is a heartbeat.”
Giles watched him leave the store, walking deliberately out into the sunlight. Even though Spike appeared to be more human than he had at any time in the past, Giles couldn’t help but think that he seemed less so. He was, perhaps, wilder, more untamed. He seemed edgier. Noticeably other.

It concerned him.

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Willow’s pace picked up as soon as she spotted Wesley waiting for her outside the dorm. It was decidedly strange to go from a meeting with a Wicca group that refused to believe in magic to meeting with a man who was going to help her do magic.

And it didn’t hurt her feelings any that girls kept staring at him as they entered the residence hall.

“Hey, Wesley.”

“Willow.” He leaned down to give her a chaste kiss. “How did the meeting go?”

She sighed. “It was pretty much a bust. It was all bake sales, and meetings. I suggested we do some actual magic, and they w wigged.” Willow rolled her eyes. “Bunch of wanna-blessed-bes.”

Wesley smiled at her description. “I’m sorry it didn’t turn out the way you wanted.”

Willow shrugged. “I guess it’s not that big of a deal. At least I’ve got you. I feel like I’ve learned a lot just from researching the spells to help Spike.”

“I’m always happy to help.” Wesley led the way back to his motorcycle, handing her his spare helmet. “I left the supplies at Spike’s, so we’ll just head straight over, if that’s okay.”

“Sounds good to me.” In truth, Willow really didn’t mind riding on the back of Wesley’s motorcycle. She loved the hum of the engine, paired with the feeling of being pressed up so close against him. It was as intimate as she’d been with him, and it whetted her appetite for more. Although Willow was grateful that he was willing to go slow, sometimes she wondered whether he would be more insistent if he really liked her as much as he said he did.
Or maybe he liked her so much that he was as scared of screwing this up as she was.

The trip to Spike’s place went a lot faster than Willow would have preferred, but she dismounted without complaint, heading up the front walk with Wesley at her heels. “Do you really think this is going to work?” she asked as Wesley rang the doorbell.

Wesley shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve already warned Spike that there’s no guarantee of success. He seemed to be okay with that.”

“I am okay with that,” Spike said as he opened the door. “The gem is all the protection I really need. This is just added insurance.”

“Well, let’s get going,” Willow said cheerfully. Once they were inside, she and Wesley began setting up the spell components.

They had nearly finished when Spike straightened. “Before I forget, and in case this ends up backfiring horribly, Buffy had a Slayer dream. I talked to Rupert, and I offered to have you look into it, Wes.”

Wesley took the piece of paper Spike held out to him, reading over it quickly. “This is rather cryptic,” he commented. “I can certainly look into it as soon as we’ve finished the spell, though.”

“That would be good,” Spike replied. “Slayer dreams tend to be a bit important.”

Willow frowned at Spike. Buffy had told her about the dream and Spike’s part in it. She thought it was strange that they hadn’t spoken to each other. “Didn’t you talk to Buffy at all?”

Spike nodded. “Yeah. She’s supposed to meet me here later, assuming I survive this.”

“You’d better,” Willow said sharply. “Buffy would kill both of us otherwise.”

Wesley gave Spike a reproving look. “Spike, technically we’re doing the spell on the gem, not on
you. There’s no risk. Both Willow and I have gone over this with Buffy.”

“She wouldn’t have let us try otherwise,” Willow pointed out. “Okay, I think we’re set. Wesley?”

“I’m ready.” He met her eyes, and Willow could feel the energy hum between the two of them. Although she’d worked spells in his presence, and vice versa, this would be their first attempt at tandem spell casting. Everything Willow had read on the matter had suggested that it was a highly intimate affair.

She just hoped that neither of them did anything to embarrass one another in front of Spike.

Wesley had been correct. The spell was being cast on the Gem of Amara, but they would be linking it to Spike, so that it wouldn’t work for any other vampire wearing the ring. There really wasn’t any danger to the vampire, although neither of them had talked about what might happen if it didn’t work for some reason.

Well, they knew it would either fizzle or blow up. Willow was hoping for fizzle if that was the case.

The lines were chalked on Spike’s kitchen floor; Wesley had come by earlier that day to make sure the measurements were perfect. Willow sat down at the southern point of the circle, with Wesley directly across from her. Spike took off the ring and placed it in Wesley’s outstretched palm, and Willow laid her hand over it, holding the gem cupped between their palms.

“Ready?” Wesley asked softly.

“Ready.”

Willow followed his unspoken signal, and they began chanting at precisely the same time. The words of the ancient language tripped off their tongues, and Willow could feel the ring warming in between their hands.

She could also feel the energies of the magic swirling around them, stronger than she’d ever experienced in the past. In fact, she could feel Wesley, his aura, his strength. Willow felt connected to him in a way she’d never experienced with another person—not even Oz. It was different, deeper in a way.
Her eyes were locked on his, and she could see from his expression that he was experiencing the same thing.

The spell drew to a close, and their words slowed, neither one of them willing to give up the sensations crowding them. Willow felt like she was riding a wave. It felt amazingly powerful. Amazingly right.

With the last word spoken, the magic coalesced in the ring, and Willow felt the loss of connection like a tangible thing. She felt Wesley’s hand lingering under hers, and she knew that he was just as reluctant to let her go as she was to release him.

Breaking the connection with a sigh, Wesley handed the ring to Spike. “Put the ring on,” he instructed. “It should key to the first person to wear it, and it won’t work for anyone else.”

Spike raised an eyebrow and then put the ring back on. “Don’t feel any different.”

“Give it a minute,” Wesley advised, rising from his position on the floor and offering Willow a hand up. He looked at her. “Do you want to be the first to try it out?”

Willow shrugged, then held her hand out to Spike, waiting for him to shake it. With a skeptical expression, Spike took her hand, and she grinned. “It’s working.”

Spike looked disappointed. “I still don’t feel any different.”

“You aren’t supposed to,” Wesley explained patiently. “It’s an illusion. It affects the senses of those around you. As long as you have the ring on, you’ll appear as warm to the touch as any other human, and that should even fool technological means of detection.”

Spike nodded slowly, looking down at his hands. He’d thought he’d feel different, changed. “I guess we’ll have to see what the Slayer says. She’s the expert.”

Both Wesley and Willow diplomatically ignored that comment.
“Spike?” Buffy entered his townhouse slowly, wondering how he’d be today. Although things had been better between the two of them recently, he was still moody.

“Here.” He came out of the bedroom, his hands shoved in his pockets. “How was your day?”

Buffy gave him a strange look. They rarely did small talk these days, and he appeared nervous. “It was good. How did things go with Wes and Willow?”

“Pretty good, I think.” Spike scratched the back of his head. “I know I’ve been hard to live with lately, and I wanted to make it up to you.”

Buffy shook her head. “Spike, it’s okay. I understand.”

“Know you do, luv.” He stepped forward, holding out a hand to her. “Doesn’t mean it’s been easy.”

“No, it hasn’t,” she agreed with a wry smile. Buffy’s eyes widened when she took his hand. “What—it worked!”

“I feel the same, but Wes said it’d fool everyone else.”

Spike’s skin was warm to the touch, something Buffy wasn’t used to at all. She raised a hand to touch his face, running a hand over his cheek, then pulling his head down for a kiss. It was strange, to say the least. She’d kissed human guys before, but she’d never been with anyone but a vampire. She was used to cool skin against hers at this point, not warmth.

When she pulled back, Spike appeared hesitant. “I can take the ring off,” he offered. “That’s what the illusion’s tied to, so—”

“No,” she replied. “No, it’s a little weird, but not in a bad way.” Buffy took his hand, the one wearing the ring, in hers. “You said you wanted to make it up to me?”
Spike grinned. “Yeah, I had some thoughts along that line.”

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Giles was unlocking the front door just as Joyce pulled into the driveway, and he glanced over his shoulder as she came up behind him. “You’re back early,” she commented. “I thought you had a shipment coming in.”

“They postponed it until tomorrow,” Giles replied. “There was an item that didn’t come in on time.”

“Well, lucky for me then,” Joyce stated. “I thought I’d make dinner.”

“Would you mind terribly if I do some research?” Giles asked, sounding apologetic. “Buffy called earlier today with some concerns. I wanted to at least make a start on it.”

Joyce shook her head. “No, of course not. That should come first.”

“I don’t think it will take all evening,” Giles stated. “At least, I only plan on spending a few hours on it.”

“Rupert, I do understand that you still have duties as Buffy’s Watcher. I have some bills to pay and paperwork to go over for the gallery.”

“Thank you, love,” Giles replied. He wondered, not for the first time, how he’d managed to rate such a woman.

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Xander was at a loss. How was he supposed to respond to an accusation that all he wanted was sex when he’d honestly believed that Anya was just as into it as he was? “It’s not just about orgasms,” he said.
Anya glared at him. “Yes, it is. That’s all you think about!”

“We do other things!” Xander protested.

Anya crossed her arms. “Like what?”

“We’ve gone to the Bronze,” Xander pointed out. “And we went to the Halloween party. Oh! Plus, we go to Scooby meetings.”

“We’ve gone to the Bronze twice, and we never got to the Halloween party,” Anya pointed out ruthlessly. “And the Scooby meetings are for you and your friends, not for me. We don’t talk. You never ask about my day or what I like to do.”

Xander did what he usually did to relieve the tension. He made a joke. “Wow, they really did turn you into a real girl, didn’t they?” It didn’t work this time either.

“And now you’re making fun of my pain,” Anya said, turning to leave.

He grabbed her arm. Xander had had plans for a nice evening with Anya, and now it didn’t look like that was going to happen. “Wait, Anya. You know I care about you.”

“How much?” she asked. When he found himself at a loss for words, Anya pressed harder. “What do I mean to you?”

Xander dropped her arm. “Can’t we talk about this some other time? We were supposed to have a romantic evening.”

“No, I want to talk about it now,” Anya insisted. “This is important, Xander.”

“Anyा—”
She huffed. “Forget it. We can talk when you figure it out.”

Xander sighed as she left. It didn’t appear that he was any better with ex-demons than he was with regular girls.

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Wesley woke slowly, rubbing his eyes, the early morning sun filtering through the tiny kitchen window. He glanced around the room, noting the piles of books on the table, as well as the notes he’d made from his research. He’d worked late, and had apparently fallen asleep over the text he’d been reading. Not that it was the first time he’d ever done so.

He rose, going about getting the coffee started with brisk efficiency. Wesley thought he’d take a shower, and then he’d go by the bookstore to talk to Giles about what he’d discovered. There hadn’t been much, but he had found a few intriguing references.

The still figure on the couch stopped Wesley in his tracks. How could he have forgotten that Willow had stayed? They’d been spending a number of evenings together. Wesley knew that she was lonely without Oz, and with Spike focused so intently on the soldiers, Spike wasn’t company for him either. They hadn’t taken a job since Spike had been captured, and Wesley didn’t know that they would again, at least not until things were resolved.

After they’d left Spike’s place, he had offered to drop her back at the dorm, but she had said she’d rather help out with his research. About two, he’d suggested she lay down on the couch, but Wesley had forgotten that she’d stayed.

He crouched down next to the couch, watching her as she slept, smiling reflectively. She really was quite lovely. Wesley touched her cheek, hoping to wake her gently. Willow’s eyes fluttered open, and she smiled sleepily.

Wesley opened his mouth to say good morning.

And nothing came out.

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Buffy stretched slowly, feeling pleasantly sore from the previous night’s exertions. Spike had promised to make it up to her, and he certainly had. She didn’t think she’d ever been quite so satisfied. Spike had really outdone himself, that was for sure.

She rolled over, watching him sleep beside her, stretched out on his back, one arm above his head. Smiling, Buffy got out of bed, pulling on one of Spike’s t-shirts. After a quick trip to the bathroom, she went out to the kitchen to start the coffee, then put a mug of blood in the microwave for Spike.

Buffy sighed, thinking of the night before, mentally calculating how long they had until she had to be back on campus. Maybe she could skip her first class, because she had some ideas that she hadn’t gotten a chance to try out the night before.

A pair of strong arms came around her from behind, and she twisted in Spike’s embrace to kiss him good morning. Pulling back, she said, “Hey, you.” At least, that’s what she tried to say, but no sound came out.

Buffy would have stumbled and fallen out of surprise had Spike not already been holding her. “What’s going on?” she mouthed.

He frowned in concern. “I don’t know.” No sound emerged when he tried to speak either, and Buffy could feel his hands clutch at her harder.

“Spike?” she mouthed.

He released her to grab a piece of paper. “What happened last night?” he wrote. “Is there anything we did?”


Spike shook his head. “It would have happened immediately,” he scribbled. “Don’t think so.”

“Giles,” Buffy wrote. “And the others.”
“Get dressed, then we head to your mum’s,” was Spike’s quick reply.

Buffy nodded, and her face must have shown her trepidation, because Spike pulled her tight to his chest, his hands running soothing circles on her back. She might have been a little more comforted if she hadn’t felt a tremor running through him, too.
“I would live in your love as the sea-grasses live in the sea,/Borne up by each wave as it passes, drawn down by each wave that recedes;/I would empty my soul of the dreams that have gathered in me,/I would beat with your heart as it beats, I would follow your soul as it leads.” ~Sara Teasdale, “I Would Live In Your Love”

Joyce was rarely a participant in the Hellmouth activity. There had been the open house at the high school, before she’d known Buffy was the Slayer, and there had been the incident with the band candy, not to mention MOO, but that was pretty much it. Waking up to find her voice completely gone reinforced her feeling that she was better off as an on-looker.

The alarm had gone off, and she’d kissed Giles awake, watching as his eyes opened slowly. He’d tried to say good morning, but no sound had come out. She’d stayed calm with some effort, allowing Giles to pull her close, reassuring her with hands and lips because words wouldn’t come.

After that, she’d comforted herself with activities—fixing coffee and tea, then starting breakfast as soon as people started arriving. Spike and Buffy showed up first, Buffy giving first her mother and then Giles a hard hug.

Wesley and Willow arrived together, and Joyce noticed that Willow was hanging onto Wesley’s hand when they walked through the door. With a few scribbled messages, Wesley indicated that he’d been up for most of the night with Willow, researching Buffy’s Slayer dream.

Writing everything out was a slow process, and very frustrating for everyone concerned. Once Joyce started setting plates full of eggs and toast on the table, things seemed to settle down, however. It wasn’t long before Xander and Anya showed up, both of them looking unhappy with one another, yet not wanting to lose contact. Joyce could see the signs of a fight; she’d been through enough of them herself.

Joyce leaned against the kitchen counter, watching as Wesley and Giles scribbled notes back and forth, trying to resolve just what it was that had caused this sudden loss of their voices. Buffy had already identified the fact that it had something to do with her Slayer dream.

She felt a strong arm snake around her shoulders, and Joyce glanced over to see Spike standing next to her. She gave him a warm smile, and in return he squeezed her shoulder and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Suddenly, something occurred to her, and she touched his cheek, realizing that Spike’s skin was warm to the touch.
He seemed to realize what her gesture indicated, and Spike raised a hand, showing her the gem. Although Joyce didn’t know why the Gem of Amara would affect his body temperature, she decided not to ask.

Well, she decided it wasn’t worth the trouble to ask.

She didn’t mind when Spike left his arm where it was; it felt good to be in physical contact with someone, and Giles was busy, as he should be.

Not for the first time did Joyce give silent thanks that Spike was around.

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“So you stayed at Wesley’s all night?”

Willow raised her eyebrows at Buffy’s scribbled message, then wrote back. “Nothing happened. I slept on his couch.”

“No smoochies?”

“No.” Willow sighed, then wrote, “This morning. A little one.”

They had both freaked out just a little when they realized that their voices were gone. At first, Willow had wondered if she’d done something wrong. If, perhaps, she had unwittingly performed some kind of spell that had affected them.

The sound of a slamming door in the hallway had Wesley motioning her to stay put while he went to check things out. It didn’t take long for them to realize that whatever had happened had affected a lot more people than the two of them. Several of Wesley’s neighbors were in the hallway, obviously seeking reassurance from someone or something, with none in sight.

Willow had been really grateful that she was with Wesley, and that he’d sensed her worry. It was
mutual, though; she could tell that he’d been just as concerned.

After that, it had been an easy decision to head over to the Summers’ residence. Giles would be there, and Buffy and Spike were sure to show up. The house had become the unofficial gathering spot for the Scooby gang, now that Giles was living there pretty much full-time.

She and Buffy both looked up as Xander started snapping his fingers; he was pointing excitedly at the television, and they all wandered over. The newscaster was delivering the story: “Big news item from Sunnydale, California. Apparently, the entire town has been quarantined due to an epidemic of, as strange as this may sound, laryngitis. It seems the town has been rendered unable to speak. There’s no word yet on what might have caused this epidemic. Local authorities have issued a statement, a written statement, I should say, blaming recent flu vaccinations. A few skeptics call it a citywide hoax. In the meantime, Sunnydale has effectively shut down. All schools and businesses will be closed for the time being, and residents are advised to stay home and rest up. The Center for Disease Control has ordered the entire town quarantined. No one can go in or out until the syndrome is identified or the symptoms disappear. We’ll bring you more on that as it develops.”

Buffy grabbed a piece of paper, scribbling a message and handing it to Giles. “I should be in town tonight.”

Spike came over and glanced at the words, raising his eyebrows.

Giles nodded slowly.

Joyce read the message and then mouthed, “Why?”

Spike explained. “People are going to be upset and probably acting stupid. We can try to keep order.”

Giles wrote his response to that, passing it around to the rest of the group. “Everyone else, stay inside. Too dangerous to be out on your own.”

Willow glanced over at Wesley, and he gave her a reassuring smile. She really hoped that he wouldn’t mind company for the night, because there was no way she was going to stay in her dorm room alone.
Buffy splashed water on her face, wondering how much coffee it was going to take to wake her up. She and Spike had been out for most of the night, until it looked like pretty much everybody had gone inside. They had run into Riley Finn, her TA from last semester, and while he’d given her a friendly nod, they hadn’t stopped to not-speak. She hadn’t been able to spare more than a moment to wonder what Riley had been doing wandering around, and had dismissed the question.

In some ways, not being able to talk had done wonders for her relationship with Spike. It probably hadn’t hurt that they’d had that really nice make-up sex right beforehand, but when you *couldn’t* speak, not talking about certain issues didn’t seem like such a big deal.

They had patrolled in perfect accord, just like always. Feeling him at her back or at her side had reminded her of how good it could be. How good it was. They had always communicated better through action than they had through words; at least, she had. Spike was better with the talking part, which made it that much harder when he *wasn’t* talking.

Buffy felt his hands slip around her from behind, and she twisted in his grasp. She wondered what it said about her that not seeing Spike in the mirror didn’t even faze her these days. Their lips met, and it was hello and good morning and I love you all in one.

When they finally broke it off, Spike rested his forehead against hers, and they stood that way for a long time, just remaining in contact. Buffy finally pulled back, looking up at him, raising her eyebrows in silent question.

With a sigh, Spike nodded, although he wanted nothing more than to stay home and be with his girl. They had their duties, though, and right now that required them to be at her mom’s house, helping the others with their research.

Buffy noticed that the silence was no longer uncomfortable, filled with things they wouldn’t say. The silence was scary because it held the unknown—an enemy no one understood—but it wasn’t uncomfortable.

She wondered what that meant for them, if it felt as good to Spike as it did to her, to know that they were okay in the silences between the words. When touch was all that spoke, it was enough.

It was a strange comfort.
Spike had smelled it on him. He hadn’t recognized the soldier on sight, but he had caught the antiseptic scent of the laboratory, and he’d hurried Buffy away, glad when she didn’t appear keen on stopping to chat.

He wanted to ask how she knew the wanker, but there wasn’t the opportunity or the time. Besides, Spike hadn’t wanted to get into it. Things between him and Buffy were good right now, and he didn’t want to mess it up.

Spike knew he’d been hard to live with. He’d been short tempered with nearly everyone—except possibly for Harris, whom he simply hadn’t spent much time with. To a large extent, he hadn’t been able to help it. It was never comfortable to be forced to question everything you thought you knew about yourself.

He thought he’d managed to repair much of the damage the previous night; re-connecting had been almost magical. Spike couldn’t help but wonder if Buffy had thought the illusion of body-heat strange, but she hadn’t seemed to mind. Perhaps it felt more like a novelty. In any case, it was almost a relief to not be able to speak.

Well, it was frightening, as well as rather upsetting, but at the same time, Spike didn’t feel pressured to talk about what was going through his head. Nor did he have to be concerned about the wrong thing coming out of his mouth and hurting Buffy’s feelings. That part was nice.

They had patrolled through town, trying to stop fights and keep people calm as best as possible. When simply pulling combatants apart and giving them a nudge didn’t work, they used force. Spike sensed more soldiers than just the one Buffy had seemed to know. They were among those trying to keep order, and he made sure to steer Buffy away from them anytime he caught a whiff of that laboratory smell.

It was the early hours of the morning before things calmed down. By that time, they were both ready to drop, and he and Buffy went back to his place to sleep. The Slayer had double-checked to make sure that Willow wasn’t going to be by herself, but she’d indicated that she was planning on staying with Wesley again. They were all pairing up; no one particularly wanted to be alone. The silence was overwhelming then.

As exhausted as they both were, Spike wasn’t surprised when Buffy pushed his shirt up as soon as
they were inside the door, her warm hands running up and down bare skin. Spike allowed her to pull his shirt off, and he returned the favor, feeling a sense of desperation enter into their embrace.

Everything felt so ephemeral these days, as though it could all end in a moment. Buffy could realize exactly who and what he was, and Spike was horribly afraid that once she did, any love she had for him would die a sudden death.

It was a stupid fear, he knew that, but as Joyce had said, it took a little longer to believe something sometimes, even when you knew it was the truth.

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Wesley couldn’t quite believe what had happened. Two days ago, he and Willow had been taking small steps towards a relationship. He hadn’t wanted to push her, for fear it would send her running. She’d been hurt so recently, Wesley wanted to give her all the time she needed to determine what she wanted from him.

Now, tonight, he stood in her dorm room, waiting for her to get a book she’d insisted she needed so she could come back over to his place.

Not that he harbored any illusions that they would be sharing a bed or anything, at least to do more than sleep. She’d slept in his bed last night as well, while he took the couch. It wasn’t quite long enough to accommodate him, and so his sleep had been fitful at best. He’d been awake when the demons had floated by, with their horrible grins and shambling minions.

Wesley was no artist, but he’d managed a credible representation, enough for Giles to figure out which demons had come to town and stolen their voices. That and the reports of the three gruesome murders, the bodies with the hearts ripped out, had been enough. Wesley supposed he’d helped, and that was something. He would have preferred to be out with Spike, hunting the creatures down. Sometime in the past months he’d grown used to being part of the action, rather than being relegated to research.

He glanced out the window. It was late, and he hadn’t wanted to come back to the dorms, concerned about risking Willow’s safety when the Gentlemen were about. Her notes had been insistent, however. She had every confidence that Buffy would manage to stop the creatures, and she had a reading assignment to finish for class the next day.
Wesley smiled. He couldn’t really blame her; he probably would have done the same thing.

Willow looked over her shoulder, giving him a quick grin and holding up a hand, indicating that it was only going to take one more minute. She went back to her computer screen, perusing an email that had to be answered that night. Wesley didn’t have a connection to the university’s servers at his apartment, so any email she wanted to answer had to be done immediately.

The pounding in the hallway startled the both of them, and Wesley exchanged an alarmed look with Willow. He motioned her to stay where she was then went over to the door. The pounding sounded again, and to his ears it held a sense of desperation.

He picked up the crossbow from where he’d set it by the door, peeking out into the hallway cautiously. Wesley could see a young girl beating desperately on a door just down the hall, casting fearful looks over her shoulder.

Knocking on the doorframe to get her attention, he motioned her to come near when she looked towards him. In response, she hurried towards him, and he could see the fear in her eyes. Over her shoulder, he could see what had caused her terror.

Two of the Gentlemen floated several inches off the floor, heading towards them, and Wesley could see their minions behind them. What’s worse, they had seen him and the open door, and he knew they needed to get somewhere a little more defensible.

Wesley looked back into the dorm room. Willow was watching him with wide eyes, and he gestured to her to hurry. She grabbed her pack and slung it over her shoulder. Wesley ushered her out the door, pushing the two girls ahead of him, down the hall and out the exit door.

If it had just been him and Willow, he probably would have tried making a break for his bike, but with the other girl there as well, it wasn’t a possibility. If he’d known Willow would be able to drive the motorcycle, he’d have sent the two of them on, and he’d have stayed behind to guard their backs as they made their getaway.

As it was, he just had to hope that they would be able to defend themselves.

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Xander knew Anya was still mad at him, even though she hadn’t left his side all day and all last night. No one wanted to be alone just now.

Of course, that didn’t mean she was planning on forgiving him any time soon.

Anya had refused to sit next to him on the bed, instead taking the recliner. Although Xander knew the chair was comfortable, he didn’t want Anya sleeping there, particularly since he wanted her with him.

He just didn’t know how to tell her that.

The crazy part was that not hearing Anya’s voice had shown him how much he liked hearing her talk, even when he was tuning her out. Xander liked her crazy observations on the world, and her commentary on life. He missed the way she said his name, and the way she cuddled up next to his side.

And there was no way to tell her that.

She’d asked how much he cared, and the answer to that was “a lot,” but without a way to say it, Xander had no idea how to convince her. He was scared that once their voices did return, she wouldn’t stick around long enough for him to get the words out, even if he could.

Xander wasn’t so sure about that. Telling someone you really liked them—maybe even loved them a little bit—was about the scariest thing he’d done. Not even facing down scary Jack O’Toole could compare.

Gritting his teeth, Xander stood, rooting around among his things for a piece of paper and something to write with. He’d pretty much gotten rid of anything that would remotely remind him of school when moving down to the basement, and not even for Anya was he willing to tear out a page of his comic books.

Finally coming up with a piece of scrap paper and a pen, Xander tried to scribble down the few words he thought might patch things up.

Except the pen wasn’t working.
Letting out a silent curse, Xander went in search of something else to write with. He had no desire to go upstairs, risking a run-in with one or both parents. The enforced silence meant that they were drinking more than usual, and Xander had a feeling that his father’s inability to shout curses would only result in his being free with his fists.

A pen appeared in front of his nose, and he glanced up at Anya, who was holding it out to him, impatience written all over her face.

Xander sighed, then wrote his message, hoping that Anya would understand what he was trying to say.

She read his words, then her eyes got big and a big grin broke out over her face, just before she tackled him, knocking both of them back onto the bed.

The piece of paper floated to the floor, forgotten, although the words wouldn’t be anytime soon. “It’s not just about the sex. I miss hearing your voice.”

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Buffy glanced around anxiously for Spike. Somehow, in all the chaos, they’d become separated. Although she knew he couldn’t be harmed, not with the gem on, she still feared for him. She supposed worrying over Spike was second nature to her at this point.

Another one of those Igor-things shuffled her way. They moved scary-fast, a lot faster than you’d think they should be able to. Buffy lashed out with a roundhouse kick, trying to figure out where they would be heading. She needed to figure out how to kill them and get everyone’s voices back.

Actually, reverse the order, since she’d need her voice before she could kill them.

It was really too bad she had to do something so stereotypically girly like scream in order to kill the ghoulish creatures. Buffy was used to kicking ass, not calling for help, but if screaming was what it took, that’s what she’d do, and she’d burst their eardrums while she was at it.

Someone caught her arm, pulling her out of the way of the demon’s grasping arms. Spike’s heavy
boot caught the demon under the chin, and it sailed about twenty feet before it hit the ground. Buffy turned to look at him, seeing his manic grin before he began pulling her along towards the clock tower.

Buffy looked up, seeing lights at the top, which was certainly not normal. No one went up there anymore. She nodded at Spike, indicating that she understood, and they both took off running, dodging the demons in their straightjackets.

Buffy had seen some pretty creepy things in her time, but the Gentlemen, with their bright, gleaming smiles and mummy-esque minions topped the list. She was just grateful that Giles was with her mom and Wesley was with Willow. Xander would be safe enough tucked away in his basement lair. It was only Spike she needed to be concerned about, and he looked like he was having the time of his life.

At least Spike seemed to finally be coming out of his funk.

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Wesley slammed the door shut, looking around for anything to brace it. He had a feeling that now that the demons had seen them, they wouldn’t be dissuaded by a mere door.

Willow tugged on his sleeve, looking over at the soda machine. Wesley immediately got what she was thinking, and pulled both Tara and Willow over by the wall. Willow took his hand immediately, their fingers intertwining.

The soda machine shifted a few feet and stopped. Wesley hissed soundlessly. Without the proper implements to focus his small power, he wasn’t going to be much help. They tried again, in concert, and it slid a few more feet, but it was still short of the door.

He felt a sudden jolt as a rush of power hit him, and the heavy machine hit the door with a big thud. Looking over, he saw the stranger’s hand in Willow’s, who was looking at the girl with a new respect.

He experienced a jolt of jealousy, but then Willow let go of the girl’s hand, while still keeping a tight grip on his. She did shift closer to the girl, though, as though to provide support, and the three of them waited in silence for either the return of their voices or the arrival of morning.
“Bitter love, a violet with its crown/of thorns in a thicket of spiky passions,/spear of sorrow, corolla of rage: how did you come/to conquer my soul? What via dolorosa brought you?/Why did you pour your tender fire/so quickly, over my life’s cool leaves?/Who pointed the way to you? What flower,/what rock, what smoke showed you where I live?/Because the earth shook—it did—, that awful night;/then dawn filled all the goblets with its wine;/the heavenly sun declared itself;/while inside, a ferocious love wound around/and around me—till it pierced me with its thorns, its sword,/slashing a seared road through my heart.” ~Pablo Neruda, “Sonnet III”

It was weird to fight without being able to talk, without being able to communicate with Spike and make sure he was okay without a visual.

Not to mention the fact that she desperately wanted to know why Riley Finn had shown up in his military-type clothing and his heavy-duty weaponry.

Buffy had been more than a little bit surprised when she’d run into Riley while fighting off the demons. Spike hadn’t been surprised, although she’d been sure that he was going to change right there. He’d controlled himself with some difficulty, however, and they had returned their focus to keeping the Gentlemen from stealing any more hearts.

The clock tower was cluttered with wooden boxes and barrels, and with all the demons running around, it made for a tight fit. Riley and Spike had actually worked together long enough for Buffy to get upstairs, where she saw the jarred hearts and other implements of their grisly work.

She’d seen the box from her dream then, and had made a lunge for it, only to be stopped by several of the straightjacketed demons. She had one on each arm and a third holding her shoulders, bending her over backwards against the big winch used for the bells.

One of the Gentlemen approached her with a scalpel ready, and Buffy struggled wildly, trying to free herself. The demon suddenly stopped in his tracks, rotating to look at Riley, who was holding some sort of gun. Spike suddenly burst into sight, grabbing the demon holding her shoulders down, tossing him to the other side of the room with a silent roar.

Buffy shook off the other two demons, making a desperate lunge for the box again, only to be stopped by another of the Igor-things. They seemed to come in an endless supply.
She gestured frantically to Riley, making an open-shut gesture with her hands, looking from his face to the table with the box and back again. There wasn’t more than a second or two to get her point across. Buffy was soon busy fighting off the creatures again, as she watched while Riley brought the butt of his rifle down on a different container.

Buffy sighed and rolled her eyes, then watched as Spike picked up the wooden box with the black markings on its top and sides, dropped it on the floor, and deliberately stomped on it.

White mist floated up from the splinters, separating and flying out of the window—and into her throat.

She knew immediately when her voice had come back, and Buffy opened her mouth, letting loose a scream that would have put horror-flick actresses to shame.

The Gentlemen froze, their toothy smiles fixed, right before their heads exploded.

“Spike?” Buffy asked.

“I’m good.” He deliberately backed away from Riley.

Buffy looked at her former TA. “Riley?”

“Uh, hey, Buffy.” He glanced down at his clothing and weaponry, which was obviously military-issue. Riley looked over at Spike. “Is this your boyfriend?”

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“Well, that was fun,” Willow said cheerfully, looking at Wesley and Tara. They both stared at her incredulously. “Kidding. Mostly.” She grimaced, looking at the soda machine that was now blocking their exit. “Can we move it back the same way we moved it over?”

“I have no idea,” Wesley admitted. “I imagine we should at least be able to shift it away from the
door, if nothing else.” He glanced over at the other girl. “Are you alright?”

“I-I’m f-f-fine,” she managed to stutter.

Willow seemed to recall her manners. “Oh! I’m sorry! Wesley, this is Tara. She’s from the Wicca group on campus. Tara, this is my boyfriend, Wesley.”

Tara gave them both a timid wave.

Wesley smiled, hoping that his expression was reassuring. “Well, I don’t know about the two of you, but I could certainly use a cup of tea once we get out of here.”

Willow nodded. “Right there with you. Tara?”

“I-I think w-w-w-we can m-move it back.”

Willow hadn’t removed her hand from Wesley’s, and so she took Tara’s hand with her free one, watching as the soda machine slid across the floor slowly, bumping into the wall with a dull thud. She heaved a sigh of relief. “I hope Buffy and Spike are okay.”

“I imagine they would be, since we’re speaking,” Wesley commented, pushing himself up off the floor, and pulling Willow with him. He offered Tara a hand up without thinking much of it, helping her to her feet.

“Who?” Tara asked, still sounding like she was ready to run away at any moment.

“My friend and her boyfriend,” Willow explained. “We figured out what was causing the whole silent thing, and they went to stop the demons.” She gave the other girl a curious look. “What brought you out?”

“I thought th-that m-maybe we c-could do something about it.” Then, in a voice so low Wesley and Willow almost missed it, she added, “A spell.”
Willow’s eyes widened. “You do magic?” she asked, lowering her voice as she realized that they were in the middle of the hallway, and that wasn’t necessarily something she wanted a lot of people to be overhearing. “Sorry. Maybe we should go to my room.” She threw an apologetic look at Wesley. “No tea, though.”

“I think I’ll survive,” he said dryly, following Willow through the door. “You thought you could do a spell?”

Tara ducked her head, unwilling to look at either of them. “I—I—I—”

Willow glanced over at Wesley, then sat down next to Tara. “It’s okay,” she assured her. “We both get the whole magic thing. It was really great of you to want to help.”

“Of course, it was,” Wesley added. He wasn’t quite sure how to handle this girl, who seemed so skittish. “You were very brave to come out tonight.”

The flush that crept up her cheeks was unmistakable, and Wesley realized that she wasn’t going to be comfortable talking to both of them. Perhaps if it was just Willow, whom she was at least a little familiar with, and who was her own age. “It’s late,” he said, meeting Willow’s eyes. “We should probably walk you home.”

Willow caught Wesley’s intentions immediately. “We should get together tomorrow,” she suggested. “Maybe after class? It is pretty late.”

Tara nodded slowly, her dark blonde hair hanging in her face, hiding her expression from the two of them. “O-Okay.”

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Buffy could be sensitive when she wanted to be, and it was fairly obvious that Spike didn’t want to stick around and chat with Riley. Buffy, on the other hand, wondered if she couldn’t use this to their advantage. Neither she nor Spike wanted the soldiers to come after him again; if she could just explain to Riley that Spike wasn’t to be harmed, maybe they would listen to her. She thought it might be a good idea to at least feel Riley out a bit.

Buffy thought that she might be able to fix it, and maybe she could make sure Spike was safe.
Of course, now didn’t seem like the time to argue with her boyfriend about it, given that things were pretty good between them.

They stopped by her mom’s house on the way back to Spike’s, since Giles had asked them to check in. They gave him a quick report of what had happened, including the run-in with Riley, and then it was pretty much straight to bed.

Although, not quite straight to sleep. Faith had been right about that much; slaying did tend to make her hungry and horny.

Buffy hadn’t talked to Spike about what they might say to Riley, or what they might want to find out. She didn’t particularly want to know what Spike thought, because she had the feeling that he was going to be stubborn about it. Not that she could blame him, but they needed information, and they hadn’t been able to get it any other way.

That was why, when Riley showed up at her dorm room, she silently let him inside.

“Hi.”

“Hi.” Buffy didn’t want to be the first one to break the ice.

“You seemed to know what you were doing last night.”

She took a seat on her bed, watching as Riley sat down across from her. “I could say the same for you.”

Riley shook his head. “You knew more than I did, Buffy. You knew how to stop those things.”

She hesitated. Telling anybody that she was the Slayer wasn’t something she took lightly. Back when Wesley had first come to Sunnydale, he’d accused her of being loose with the information, which wasn’t the case. In truth, it wasn’t a big school, and people tended to see more than they let on. Besides, they lived on top of a Hellmouth; that got a little hard to hide.
At college, however, she’d had the option of being anonymous, of having a secret identity again, but now she was blowing her cover. Deliberately. Buffy knew that she could lie; she could make something up about living in Sunnydale and learning to take care of herself.

But she didn’t want to. She wanted to put her cards on the table so that Riley, and everyone he was working with, knew exactly who they would be messing with if he came after the people she cared about again.

“I’m the Slayer,” she stated flatly. “Stopping things like that is my job.”

Riley just stared at her. “You’re the what?”

“Slayer comma the. You haven’t heard of me? I assumed that with all those demons and vampires you guys were rounding up you must have heard something.”

It probably came out a lot sharper than she’d meant it to, but she wasn’t sure she cared. Riley was clearly taken aback by how much she already knew. “What are you talking about?”

“Demons and vampires disappearing from campus, underground laboratory.” Buffy listed off the facts as she knew them. “Ringing any bells?”

Riley shook his head. “You know a lot more about me than I know about you. I’d kind of assumed we were a little more stealthy than that.”

“You were, but some of your friends weren’t,” Buffy replied. “Who are you working for, Riley?”

He shook his head. “I can’t tell you that. In fact, I shouldn’t even be here right now.”

“Why can’t you tell me?” Buffy demanded. “I already know the important things.” She decided it was time to start guessing, hoping that she’d hit the mark. “You work for the government, right? For the military? You guys go out and capture demons so you can do experiments to find out how they work? You probably even have a technical name for them, like non-sapiens or something. How am I doing?”
“Hostile sub-terrestrials, and a little too well.” Riley stood. “I can’t tell you more than you already know, not before I clear it with my superiors.” He stared at her. “I don’t get it.”

“What?”

“You. I saw you fight, saw you move,” he said. “Your boyfriend, too. You’re both stronger, faster, than anyone I’ve ever seen.”

Buffy felt a jolt of fear. They couldn’t find out about Spike, who he was, not until she was certain that they would listen. She was human—mostly—and he wasn’t. “Spike’s just a regular guy,” she lied. “I’m the one with the destiny.”

Riley stared at her, and then walked over to the door. “I have to talk to my superiors. I don’t have to tell you not to say anything. It wouldn’t be good if you did.”

Buffy watched him leave, wondering what he’d do with the information she’d given him, and hoping that she hadn’t just made a huge mistake.

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Willow sat down across from Tara at one of the lunch tables outside. “So how’s it going?”

“G-good,” she replied. “Thanks for meeting me.”

“I’m happy to,” Willow replied. “I mean, I thought that Wicca group was just a bunch of wannabes, instead of real witches. It was okay, because there’s Wesley, and he knows what he’s doing, but it was kinda disappointing to find out that none of them actually knew about real magic, you know?” She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I’m babbling. I just haven’t ever met anyone who knows about this stuff before. For real.”

Tara appeared intrigued. “What about Wesley?”

“Oh, I mean outside my friends,” Willow explained. “We all know about the weird stuff that goes on in this town. We’ve been fighting evil since high school.”
Now the other girl appeared equal parts interested and alarmed. “Oh, well, you don’t need me, then. I don’t—I mean, I can’t help much. I’m not very powerful or anything.”

“No!” Willow said quickly. “We can use all the help we can get! Xander can’t do magic or anything, and he still helps.” At Tara’s blank look, she clarified, “My best friend. We’ve known each other since kindergarten.”

Tara didn’t seem to be reassured, although Willow wasn’t sure she could blame her. She was talking about a lot of people that Tara would have no way of knowing. “It—it sounds like you have a lot of friends.”

Willow smiled. “Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I can’t use another.” When Tara flushed with pleasure, she leaned forward. “So how long have you been practicing?”

“As long as I can remember,” Tara replied hesitantly. “My mom—she knew. She saw things. I didn’t know that anyone else did. I’ve never met…”

Willow touched her hand. “I know. It helps, when you know people who understand, who can see the same things that you do.”

“When did you know?”

“Pretty much after I started hanging out with Buffy,” Willow admitted. “I wanted to help, and we needed magic done, and it sounded interesting, so…” She shrugged. “I’ve been working hard at it lately with Wesley.”

“You guys seem close,” Tara ventured.

Willow could feel herself flushing. “It’s pretty new,” she admitted. “My boyfriend, well, ex-boyfriend, left, and Wesley was just there, and it was good.” She hesitated, then asked, “Do you—I mean, we could kind of have our own coven. It’s just two, well, three with Wesley, but—I think it would be good. We could really help.”

Tara looked away, her eyes seeing beyond the students going about their days, beyond the ordinary
world that everyone else saw. She saw what Willow was offering her, and though it scared her to death, she wanted to take it.

She’d always wanted to make a difference.

“Okay.”

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Professor Walsh leaned back in her chair, fixing Riley with a hard stare. “I don’t think I need to remind you that secrecy is our top priority, Agent Finn. The fact that you allowed a civilian to see you—”

“With all due respect, Professor Walsh, she’s not a civilian,” Riley quickly inserted. “She called herself the Slayer, and she’s strong. Maybe stronger than I am. I know we both took a beating, and she didn’t have a scratch on her when I saw her later the next day.”

Maggie Walsh’s eyes narrowed. Among her other projects was the goal of making soldiers stronger, faster, and more resilient. If there was a girl out there who happened to be all of those things, she wanted to know why.

And how she could replicate it.

The Initiative was her project, her darling, although it was merely the umbrella under which all her other side jobs were located. The computer chip was working, and with time she’d have it perfected. Not only would it prevent hostiles from harming humans, but it would also completely control their behavior. It would be a true modification chip.

It was unfortunate that they hadn’t been able to locate the chip used on Hostile 17 before he escaped. She’d gone over the scans and tests they’d been able to run again and again, and she’d come up with only one answer. Someone had been able to perfect their control on a vampire, rendering it completely harmless to humans, without any obvious alterations.

She hadn’t given up hope on finding the creature again, and finding out who had technology that sophisticated. The fact that someone was already able to use vampires—and possibly demons—as weapons was deeply troubling. The idea that someone else might have discovered how to create a
super-soldier was even worse.

Her job was to keep ahead of what the opposition was doing, to create new weapons, new soldiers, new ways of waging war. They had been authorized to use whatever means necessary, and if Buffy Summers was going to be a threat, it would be easy enough to take her out of the picture.

And if she could be used, it would be easy enough to do that as well.

College girls, unless you were very lucky, typically came with friends and family, however, which meant that she would need to be very careful indeed. It would be better if she could learn this Slayer’s secrets without alarming her.

“Tell her what she wants to know,” Maggie instructed him, not bothering to explain why she wanted this girl brought in. She had a feeling that Finn might object to her motives; he was still idealistic to believe that they were in the business of saving the world. “At least the basics. And I’d like to meet her.”

Riley’s expression was dubious. “She was in your psych class,” he pointed out.

“I’d like to meet her as the head of the Initiative,” Maggie replied. “Be careful. I don’t want her to be alarmed. I want her to trust us.”

Riley replied in the affirmative and left, knowing a dismissal when he heard one. Maggie knew she’d chosen the right man for the job. Riley Finn not only had an honest face, but he believed in what they were doing here, in their mission. Or what he thought was their mission.

The Slayer would come, and Maggie Walsh would have one more weapon to use.
“I’ve listened: and all the sounds I heard/Were music,—wind, and stream, and bird./With youth who sang from hill to hill/I’ve listened: my heart is hungry still./I’ve looked: the morning world was green;/Bright roofs and towers of town I’ve seen;/And stars, wheeling through wingless night./I’ve looked: and my soul yet longs for light./I’ve thought: but in my sense survives/Only the impulse of those lives/That were my making./Hear me say,‘I’ve thought!’—and darkness hides my day.” ~Siegfried Sassoon, “Alone”

Giles pinched the bridge of his nose, suddenly feeling very old. He really didn’t like being put in the middle of things, but that was exactly what Buffy was doing. When Spike found out what she’d done, who she’d been talking to, he wasn’t going to be happy, and Giles couldn’t blame him in the slightest. He wasn’t too happy with her at the moment either.

“Do you really think that’s a good idea?” he asked, keeping his voice carefully neutral. “We still don’t know what their ultimate objective might be.”

“They’re interested in the same thing I am, Giles,” Buffy replied. “Riley told me that their focus is on keeping people safe from demons. It’s the same thing I do, only with more funding.”

Giles wasn’t so sure of that. “Riley may not know everything,” he warned her. “In fact, he may have been deliberately kept in the dark about certain aspects of the Initiative’s goals.”

“He’s a captain,” Buffy said, as though that was supposed to mean something. “He’s pretty high up.”

“I see.” Giles sighed, knowing that when Buffy set her sights on a course of action there was little anyone could do to dissuade her. She tended to be rather single-minded at times.

Giles still wasn’t quite sure what her goal was in telling him about things. He wasn’t her Watcher any longer, and Buffy hadn’t been treating him as such except for occasionally asking for his help whenever there was something only he could handle. She’d already had the conversation with Riley, and she’d agreed to help out the soldiers on a temporary basis—all without consulting with anyone.

“Did you tell him about Spike?”
“No,” Buffy said quickly. “I want to be sure that they’ll listen to me first. I mean, it’s probably hard to believe that a vampire has a soul when you don’t even know what makes a Slayer work. I think he believes I take some intense vitamins or something.”

That was exactly what concerned Giles, and he knew it concerned Spike. If they believed that the Slayer was nothing more than some kind of specially enhanced girl, they might decide to duplicate the Council’s work. Or they might decide that the only way to know how the Slayer worked was to take Buffy apart.

“And when are you going to tell Spike about this?” Giles asked.

Buffy winced. “I was hoping you’d talk to him,” she suggested. “He’ll listen to you.”

And her purposes in coming to him first became clear. “No. Absolutely not,” was Giles’ unequivocal answer. “You were the one who decided to talk to Riley without discussing it with the rest of us first. You can be the one to explain that fact to Spike.”

She sighed. “You know he’s going to overreact, Giles. I just—what if they can help? What if they’re the good guys? They made a mistake with Spike, but once they understand what a Slayer is, they’ll know not to mess with him again. I want him to be safe, and if the Initiative can help me do my job, I don’t see why I shouldn’t take advantage of that? I’m killing two birds with one stone.”

Giles leaned back in his chair, wishing that Joyce were with him. Not that he believed that she’d be able to talk any sense into her daughter, but he felt as though he could use the moral support, particularly where it concerned Buffy’s relationship with Spike. He could picture Spike’s reaction, and he suspected that it might border on the irrational. In fact, Giles would be greatly surprised if Spike even let her get as far as explaining her reasoning behind her decision.

Once Buffy told the vampire that she’d spoken to one of the soldiers who had cut him open, Giles doubted very much that Spike would be willing to listen further.

“You have to do what you think is best, Buffy,” he finally said. “But don’t be surprised when Spike doesn’t understand.”

“I’m sure he will,” Buffy replied, sounding a lot more confident than she looked. “I’ll just explain things to him.”
Giles was sincerely grateful that he didn’t have to be there for that.

“You what?” Spike’s voice was dangerously soft, and Buffy felt her stomach clench. She’d suspected that this conversation wasn’t going to go well, but she’d never seen that look in his eyes before. His eyes were cold—colder than she’d ever seen them.

Buffy had agreed to work with the Initiative without considering the consequences. The idea was to protect Spike from the inside, since they hadn’t been able to do much from the outside. It made no sense for Spike to continue to live in fear of being recaptured when she might be able to do something about it. Riley seemed like a reasonable guy, and once Buffy explained things—once she could get him to see that Spike was different, that not all demons were the same—he could convince them to lay off Spike.

It had seemed like a golden opportunity when he’d offered her a place with the organization, one that she couldn’t hesitate to take for fear it would be retracted. Of course, she’d rethought her decision about five minutes later, but changing her mind would mean admitting that she’d been wrong.

Buffy hated admitting that she was wrong.

“I talked to Riley,” Buffy repeated. “And he talked to his superiors. His boss was my psych professor from last semester, and she wants to meet me. We talked about the Initiative’s goals, and I told him that I was completely on board, of course. You know, playing along.”

Spike stood, moving away from his tiny kitchen table. Light filtered through the window weakly; the sun was on the other side of the townhouse in the late afternoon. Not that the position of the sun was a concern these days. “Did you tell him about me?”

“No,” Buffy said quickly. “I want to be sure that you’re going to be safe.”

“And what about you?” Spike demanded in a low voice. “What’s going to keep you safe?”
“I’m the Slayer, Spike. I’m human.” Buffy stood, wanting to reach out to him, but she could see from the way that he was holding himself that such an overture on her part would not be welcomed. “I want to protect you. Once they understand—”

“Understand what?” he demanded. “You’re talking about working with the sodding enemy, Buffy. These are the bastards who knew I wasn’t feeding on humans, and instead of asking politely why that might be, they cut me open and fiddled around.”

Buffy shook her head. She’d known he’d be hard to convince, but she was beginning to think that she had had no idea of the depth of Spike’s anger with the soldiers. “They didn’t know, Spike. I’m sure they just thought that you were a regular vampire.”

“Just like they think all the other demons are regular demons,” Spike snarled. “The ones who wouldn’t harm a flea. Sure, they’ll take down the big, nasty ones, but they aren’t real choosy. Demon’s a demon, right?”

“Spike—”

Buffy was silent as he turned to face her again, the betrayal on his face clear. “You know what they did to me,” he said quietly, “and you’re going to be allies with them now?”

“They’re not experimenting on humans, Spike. We have the same goals.”

“I’m a demon. You want to get rid of me?”

“What? No!” Buffy stared at him, aghast. “How can you even think that?”

“It’s what you just said, innit?” he demanded. “Rid the world of all demon-kind, right? It’s just a little hypocritical of you to say you want to rid the world of demons when you’re sleeping with one.”

“Wasn’t it you who told me I shouldn’t worry so much about the shades of gray?” Buffy asked angrily. “That if I started thinking about that I might be putting myself in danger?”
“When you’re out patrolling, yeah!” Spike shot back. “Bloody hell, don’t you get it? These bastards don’t see us as any more than animals, to be used for whatever purpose they see fit. Why the hell would they believe that I’m any different? Or that any other demon would be? They find out who and what I am, and then they’ll be after me even harder than before, because they’ll want to know what makes me different. Only it’s not something you can explain, so they’ll cut and they’ll cut, and they’ll take piece after piece until there’s nothing left of me!”

“I wouldn’t let that happen,” Buffy replied, hurt that he would even think that she’d allow him to be taken again. She would make them understand, if not with her words, then certainly with her fists.

“You might not be able to stop it,” Spike replied. He took a deep breath. “I don’t want you to do this, Buffy. Just—don’t do this, please.”

“I have to, Spike. If we can work together—”

“You aren’t listening.” His voice was cold again; he sounded like winter. “They think of demons as nothing, less than nothing. That means they think of me that way. If you work with them, you’re saying that they’re right. You’re saying that you agree.”

Buffy swallowed. “Spike, of course you’re different. But—”

“No, I’m not.” Spike stared at her, his face twisting with some unnamed emotion. “I might look human, might even feel human while I’m wearing this ring, but I’m not.”

Buffy shook her head. “Spike, you say you want me to see the shades of gray, but that’s exactly what I’m doing. Not all demons are evil, but they’re not all good, and the Initiative has the same goals I do when it comes to stopping them.”

“Except that they’re not real discriminating when it comes to who they kill,” Spike said. “And you’re going to have to do the same. They won’t let you see anything but the black and white, Buffy—and probably only the black. They won’t want you to think for yourself.”

“That’s not true!” Buffy shot back.

“You’re saying that they’re right,” Spike continued, as though he hadn’t heard her. “You somehow
think that demon equals bad and human equals good.”

“I’m the Slayer, Spike!” she snapped. “My job is to protect humans.”

Buffy knew, as soon as the words came out of her mouth, that she’d effectively ended the conversation. Spike wouldn’t listen to anything else she had to say now, not after that statement, not after what he’d just told her.

The funny part was that Buffy had been trying to get Spike to talk to her for months about this very thing, about what was going through his head. Now she knew, and she’d just royally screwed things up.

“Right,” he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. “I’d been wondering when you’d figure out that a vampire isn’t worthy of the Slayer’s time. I should have known. I should have bloody well known.”

He was gone after that—out of the kitchen and through the front door so fast that Buffy didn’t even have a chance to call him back. She stood there, her hand pressed to her mouth, hoping to keep the sobs back.

Buffy had expected him to be angry, but she hadn’t known to expect this. She’d seen the end of their relationship in his eyes.

She took a deep breath, trying to keep the tears at bay. There was no point in going after Spike now. He would be ready to talk when he was ready to talk, and not a moment before. Eventually, he would understand. Buffy would figure out what the Initiative was really up to, and she would make Spike see that she’d been right all along. This was the best way to handle it.

Until then, however, somebody probably needed to make sure that the stupid vampire didn’t get himself killed.

She picked up Spike’s phone, dialing the number she’d committed to memory over the last months, and taking a deep breath when she heard Wesley’s voice telling her to leave a name and number. “Wesley, it’s Buffy. Spike and I just had a fight, and I think he might do something really dumb. Do me a favor and keep him out of trouble until he cools down. Please?”

Buffy pressed her hands to her eyes. It was going to be fine; she was sure of it. Her plan would
Wesley had silenced his phone since he was meeting Willow and Tara for lunch. Willow had warned him that Tara was shy, which he’d guessed for himself, and so he wanted to tread carefully. It always bothered him when people interrupted a conversation to answer their phone; he felt it was disrespectful, and he wasn’t about to do the same.

Between his own efforts and Willow’s, they managed to draw Tara out. She was reserved, and seemed unwilling to talk much about herself or her past. Once the conversation turned to magic, however, she began to open up a little more. “My mother practiced,” Tara explained. “She t-taught me, but…” She trailed off, then admitted, “My d-dad didn’t approve.”

Wesley grimaced, knowing exactly how that was. “I understand. Parents don’t always understand your calling.”

Tara offered him a timid smile. “No, they don’t.”

“How old were you when you started practicing?” Willow asked.

She hesitated. “I don’t remember. I-I think it’s been a part of m-me for as long as I c-can remember.”

“It will be nice to have someone who knows so much,” Wesley stated. “I’ve known witches who have had that sort of experience, and they’re invaluable for the anchoring they can provide.”

Tara appeared alarmed. “I don’t know that much,” she protested. “I-I’m r-r-really n-not that g-good.”

“You probably know more than I do,” Willow was quick to assure her. “You’ve been at this for a lot longer than I have.”

The other girl seemed encouraged by that idea, and the conversation turned to other things—
favorite subjects and classes and professors. Tara left soon after to attend a class, but Willow lingered. “What do you think of her?”

“She seems like a very nice girl,” Wesley replied. “What about you?”

“I think we might want to ease her into things slowly,” Willow replied. “I mean, Buffy and the rest of the gang are great, but all of them at once might be overwhelming.”

“I know it’s overwhelming,” Wesley said, remembering his initial reaction to a Slayer with friends. He’d felt out-numbered and out-maneuvered at every turn. He might have deserved it, but Tara didn’t. “Am I going to see you tonight?”

Willow hesitated, then said apologetically, “I’ve got a paper I’d probably better get done before I do anything else. Tomorrow? We could go to the Bronze.”

“Alright.” They shared a kiss, sweet and lingering, Wesley’s hand coming up to cup her face.

A smile lit her face. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Until tomorrow, then.” Wesley watched her walk away, feeling curiously relaxed. It had been so long since he’d dated anybody, and he was finding it difficult to take things slow. Willow hadn’t given him any signs that she wanted to speed the process up, but Wesley was beginning to consider it. Perhaps he’d ask her back to his place after they went to the Bronze.

He pulled out his cell phone and checked for messages, quickly dialing his voicemail when he realized he’d missed a call from Spike. The message wasn’t from Spike, however, and the tone of Buffy’s voice concerned him enough that Wesley decided to immediately head to his place.

Buffy had sounded close to tears, which he knew was highly unusual for her.

Wesley rummaged through the chest that held his magic supplies, pulling out what he needed for a locator spell. As much practice as he’d gotten lately performing magic, it didn’t take him long to figure out that Spike was at Willy’s. With any luck, he wouldn’t go far before Wesley could get there.
The trip didn’t take long on the bike, and Wesley headed inside the bar without hesitation.

“You’re in the wrong place, human.”

The demon who stopped him was formidable, but Wesley’s focus was on Spike, who was sitting in a back booth with a bottle and a shot glass in front of him. “I think I’m in the right place,” Wesley replied calmly. “So if you’ll step out of my way, I would appreciate it.”

“And what will you do if I don’t?” he asked, his face inches away from Wesley’s, yellow-orange teeth bared.

“I don’t know about him, but I’ll rip your sodding head off.” Spike’s cold voice cut through the quiet of the nearly empty bar.

The demon might have been spoiling for a fight, but he wasn’t ready to chance one with Spike, obviously sensing that the vampire was ready to chew him up and spit him out. He backed off with a growl of warning, and Wesley followed Spike back to his seat.

“What are you doing here?” Spike asked, a snarl in his voice.

Wesley sat down across from him. “Buffy called me. She said you’d had a fight and that you might do something stupid. Was she right?”

“I’m not the one doing something stupid,” Spike responded. “She went to them.”

“She went to—” Wesley broke off as he realized exactly who Spike was referring to. “The soldiers?”

“She talked to the one we ran into while we were dealing with the Gentlemen,” Spike said softly.

Wesley hesitated. “Surely that isn’t the end of the world, Spike. From what you said, he had to know there was something up with you. If Buffy could—”
“She talked to him for the second time yesterday,” Spike continued, ignoring Wesley’s words. “He told her that he works for a group called the Initiative, and that they’re a government-sponsored demon-fighting unit. He said they want to protect humans from demons, and asked if she’d like to get involved.” Spike paused. “She told him yes.”

Wesley hissed, knowing that it must have seemed like the ultimate betrayal to Spike. At the same time, he knew the Slayer well enough to know that her intentions were good. “Perhaps she merely wants to protect you.”

“I’m sure she does,” Spike said, “but I asked her not to do this, Wes. She went behind my back to talk to that wanker, and then she comes and announces she’s working with them for the time being. I don’t care about her motives. She had to know how that would make me feel.”

“Did she?” Wesley didn’t want to anger Spike, but at the same time, he hadn’t been very communicative lately. It was possible that Buffy didn’t know how he would feel if she decided to work with the soldiers. At least, she might not have realized how deep Spike’s rage and fear went.

“She should have,” Spike said stubbornly. “Buffy should have at least talked to me first before doing this.”

Wesley couldn’t argue with Spike there. It was entirely possible that Buffy’s decision could lead to trouble down the road. Big trouble. He watched as the vampire fished around in his jacket pocket, pulling out his keys. Spike’s motions were deliberate as he pulled off the compass on his key chain, handing it over to Wesley.

“What are you doing?” Wesley asked.

Spike’s blue eyes were dark with pain. “You keep that. I don’t want anything on me that’ll connect me to the Slayer. I don’t want to make it any easier for those bastards to find me.”

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting a bit?” Wesley asked. “Buffy would never—”

“Buffy wouldn’t,” Spike agreed. “But that doesn’t mean they wouldn’t use her to get to me. She’s got the mate to this one, and if they figure that out, not even this bloody ring will hide me.”

Wesley looked at the compass, watching as the needle quivered. The Slayer was apparently on the
move. “Maybe you should leave town,” he suggested softly. “Take a job, give yourself some time to cool off.”

Spike shook his head. “No. I won’t leave her.”

Wesley frowned, perplexed. “But I thought—”

“Don’t think I want to see her right now,” Spike said. “But what if those soldiers decide to add a Slayer to their collection? I won’t let that happen, no matter how pissed off at her I might be.”

“What are you going to tell her?” Wesley asked.

Spike shook his head. “I’m not going to tell her anything. If we run into each other, fine, but I don’t think I can deal with her right now.” His eyes darkened. “Maybe she didn’t mean it that way, but it feels too much like betrayal for me to let it go.”
Buffy was beginning to get a little concerned. She and Spike had fought before; they had said things they didn’t mean and gotten angry. This was the first time that Spike had ignored her after he’d had some time to cool off, though. She’d tried calling both his home and cell phones, and he hadn’t picked up.

She wanted to be sure he was okay, so she grabbed her compass and followed it to Wesley’s apartment. Buffy wondered if Wesley had invited Spike over after her message the day before. The ex-Watcher hadn’t returned her call, so she wasn’t sure if he’d gotten it or not.

Buffy knocked on the door, giving Wesley a slightly sheepish smile when he answered. “Hey. Can I talk to Spike?”

Wesley gave her a long look, then stepped aside. “You’d better come inside.”

She entered, worry beginning to blossom. “Is Spike here, Wes? My compass…” Buffy trailed off when she saw the look on his face. “You have it, don’t you?”

“Let’s sit down,” he said gently. He led the way into his living area and sat down on the couch. She sat down next to him, watching his face anxiously. “Spike gave me his compass for safe-keeping.”

Buffy felt like she’d been slapped. “What is he worried about?”

“I think you know,” Wesley said.
Buffy stood abruptly, wrapping her arms around herself. “Do you know where he is?”

“He said he would be keeping in touch, but no, I don’t know where he went.” Wesley paused. “I suggested he contact one of our clients, maybe take a job out of town until things cool down, but he wouldn’t leave you.”

Buffy laughed bitterly. “He wouldn’t leave, but he’s not going to talk to me, is that it? So Spike’s punishing me for going behind his back? I was trying to help him!”

“You had to know that it would hurt.” Wesley’s tone was sharp. “He feels as though you betrayed him.”

“I didn’t betray him,” Buffy said coldly, anger beginning to take the place of worry. “I’m doing this to get information, and maybe get a new ally.”

“Spike doesn’t want anything to do with the soldiers.”

“He doesn’t have to do anything with them!” Buffy shot back. “That’s why I was the one to talk to Riley. I wanted to keep him out of this.”

“If he’s with you, he’s forced to deal with them,” Wesley pointed out. “If you’re working with them, then he’s linked to them. This isn’t just about Spike’s feelings, Buffy. It’s also about what the Initiative stands for.”

“They stand for the same thing I do,” Buffy stated. “Saving people from demons.” She stalked over to the door. “Tell Spike when you see him that next time he wants to break up with me, he should do it himself.”

Buffy practically ran back to her dorm, managing to shut the door behind her before the tears began to fall. She hadn’t wanted Wesley to see her cry; Spike was the only one she normally allowed to see her like that, and it was hard then.

Of course, now he was the one she was crying over.
The worst part was that Buffy knew that Wesley was at least partially right. She had known that Spike wouldn’t be happy with her having anything to do with the Initiative. Maybe if all she’d done was talk to Riley, get what information she could out of him, and then had rejected his offer of an alliance out of hand, it would have been more acceptable to him. Instead, Riley had offered the opportunity to work together, and she had taken it, even while knowing in the back of her head that it would upset Spike. She’d figured that he would get over it. He’d realize that it was for the best.

Instead, he’d disappeared.

Buffy still thought he was overreacting, though. The soldiers had hurt him; she’d seen what they’d done, and it was awful. But then, they hadn’t known that Spike was anything more than an ordinary vampire, so it wasn’t like they’d gone after one of the good guys on purpose.

“You know how Spike and I got into a fight yesterday about Riley and the soldiers?” Willow nodded. “He took off. He’s not answering his phone, and he left his compass with Wesley so I can’t find him.”

Willow bit her lip. She was fairly sure that she could do a locator spell on Spike, but the vampire seemed to be going to great lengths to avoid Buffy. While she understood that her role as best friend was to be supportive and bash Spike, the fact that she was Spike’s friend, too, made it difficult.

Besides, she could at least see where Spike was coming from on this one. She’d seen the madness in his eyes after he’d first escaped.

“Maybe he just needs time to cool down,” Willow suggested. “You know how angry Spike can get sometimes. He probably just has to think it over, and then he’ll be fine.”

Buffy took a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah, maybe.” She swiped at her cheeks with her hands. “God, Will, I miss him already. I just want to see him so I can explain. I just want him to
understand that I didn’t do this to hurt him.”

“I’m sure he understands, Buffy.”

“Then why won’t he talk to me?” she demanded. “He could at least let me explain.”

“Give it a few days,” Willow advised, hoping that she was giving the right advice. Maybe she could do a locator spell, but she thought it might be better just to let things go for the moment, at least until she talked to Wesley about it. He’d have a better idea of how to handle Spike.

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Spike woke from his nightmare with a shudder, sitting up in the middle of the large bed, his chest heaving. He was grateful that he hadn’t screamed out loud; at least he didn’t think that he had.

The hotel room was posh. He hadn’t been sure whether to go underground, or to hide himself in plain sight, but Spike had grown used to a decent bed and a hot shower. He had the money for it, so there was no reason to allow the soldiers to cause more discomfort than they already had.

Spike knew he was overreacting a bit. He understood quite well that Buffy hadn’t meant to hurt him, though he refused to acknowledge that she hadn’t known he’d be upset by her talking to those Initiative bastards. His nightmare was a perfect example of why he couldn’t be around her, though, not until he sorted things out inside his own head.

The dream had featured Buffy laughing while Angelus, dressed as one of the lab doctors, held him down and cut him open. Spike knew that Buffy hadn’t betrayed him as Drusilla had, but it felt that way.

Her words had hurt worse.

Spike had truly believed that Buffy accepted him for all that he was. Maybe he wasn’t your typical vampire, but that didn’t mean he was human. That didn’t mean he could accept what they were doing—taking demons apart piece by piece. Some demons were evil, and it was the Slayer’s job to prevent them from doing any harm, but that was different. That was in the heat of battle, not in the cold sterility of a science lab. Even the Council, for all their misgivings about his motives, had left him alone over the years.
He walked over to the window, putting his hand against the glass; it was warm against his palm, the late afternoon sun causing the temperature to rise. Spike looked at the ring on his hand, the green gem glittering in the sunlight. He’d missed sleeping next to Buffy. Although they didn’t spend every night together, she stayed at his place often enough that the king-sized bed had seemed very large without her.

Spike had a feeling that it was going to be a while before he was sharing a bed again, though. Not until things with the soldiers were settled one way or another.

He glanced at the clock. There was time to catch a shower and then grab something to eat before heading out in search of the soldiers. He was going to be keeping an extra-close eye on them until he knew exactly what the Initiative wanted with the Slayer.

His plan was to stay in the hotel a few days longer, until he was certain he would be able to keep his cool if he ran into Buffy.

Spike leaned his head against his arm, wishing that there were a way he could leave town. There was a part of him that wished he were the sort of man to cut his losses and run. Wes would be fine; he was well taken care of financially, and he was part of the group now. Buffy had her human friends and family to lean on. There was nothing holding him here except his love for her.

Well, that and the fact that he wasn’t a quitter.

Spike drew in an unnecessary breath and straightened. He had hunting to do.

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Giles looked up as the bell over the door rang, and Wesley walked in. “What brings you by?” he asked.

Wesley hesitated, then said, “Has Buffy talked to you about her recent conversations?”

“Yes, she has.” Giles sighed. The store was empty, so he grabbed his mug of tea and sat down at the reading table in the middle of the shop. “I haven’t heard how Spike is taking it, however. I’m
guessing that it didn’t go well, since you’re here.”

“Spike feels betrayed, and is therefore in hiding,” Wesley said with a sigh. “And when Buffy came by my place trying to track him down, she was understandably angry that he’d disappeared without a word and left no way of locating him.”

Giles frowned. “You or Willow could do a locator spell, correct?”

“I think both of us are hoping that Buffy doesn’t ask,” Wesley said with a rueful smile. “We’re already in the middle. Being asked to locate Spike when he doesn’t want to be found has the potential to make matters worse.”

Giles sipped his tea. “I don’t envy you your position.”

“I don’t think Buffy likes me very much right now,” Wesley confessed. “I essentially told her that she deserved Spike’s anger for going behind his back.”

Giles winced. “I don’t imagine she took that well. Do you know what Spike is planning?”

“He’s not leaving Sunnydale,” Wesley stated. “I don’t think he trusts that the Initiative won’t come after Buffy.”

“I understand his anger,” Giles said. “I wasn’t terribly happy with the fact that Buffy hadn’t spoken to me about telling the Initiative who she was, either, but isn’t he overreacting slightly?”

Wesley shifted, feeling certain that the bits of information he’d picked up from Spike over the last few months were not general information. “How much do you know about his relationship with Angelus and Drusilla?”

Giles frowned. “You think his reaction has something to do with that?”

“That would be my best guess,” Wesley affirmed. “Spike is hurt and angry, and he’s not quite sure what to do. I think he fears that the soldiers will somehow use Buffy to get to him, and while he wants to protect her, he doesn’t want to risk getting taken again.”
“That’s understandable,” Giles murmured. “I’ll talk to her, hopefully keep tabs on what kind of information the Initiative is requesting. Meanwhile, you might want to keep track of Spike if you can.”

“Of course,” Wesley said, rising. “You know how to get in touch with me if you need me.”

The bell jangled again as Joyce entered, and she gave Wesley a smile. “Hello, Wesley. I haven’t seen you for a while. You’ll have to have dinner with us again sometime.”

“That would be nice,” Wesley said. “Although for now, I should be going. I’m supposed to be meeting Willow.”

He left, and Giles turned to Joyce. “How are you?”

“Just fine,” Joyce replied. “You don’t look terribly happy with things, though.”

Giles shook his head. “There seems to be some trouble with Buffy and Spike. I don’t think there’s anything I can do about it, however.”

Joyce sighed. “I had hoped that they would manage to work things out.”

“You knew this was coming?”

“I knew that Buffy was worried, and that Spike was having difficulty dealing with what the soldiers did to him,” was her response. “I believe they made him feel as though he was less than human. He was concerned that what happened would change how we felt about him.”

Giles didn’t have any trouble putting the pieces together for himself. He could suddenly understand why Spike would react so badly to Buffy’s working with the Initiative in any capacity, although Buffy thought she was acting in his best interests.

“I love you,” he said, wanting her to know that, reminded as he’d been of the fragility of
relationships, the potential for misunderstanding.

A smile warmed her face, and Joyce bent to brush his lips with hers. “I love you, too.” She sighed. “I do hope they work things out.”

“I’m sure they will,” Giles replied, but he wasn’t sure of anything of the sort.

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Willow glanced around the Bronze, wondering where Wesley was. She felt a little guilty about meeting him; it almost felt as though they were on opposing sides. He was the best friend of the guy who’d just hurt her best friend, and vice versa. They probably shouldn’t even be speaking. Except that she really liked Wesley, and he was her boyfriend, and they weren’t fighting.

That didn’t change the fact that Willow had very carefully not told Buffy where she was going.

Buffy hadn’t asked, though, so it wasn’t like she’d lied. She was meeting Riley again, to talk some more about the Initiative. Buffy had mentioned possibly getting a tour of the facility, and meeting Professor Walsh. They had already met, of course, but meeting her in a different way.

The idea of Buffy going into the Initiative by herself made Willow uneasy, but there didn’t seem to be anything she could do about it.

“Sorry I’m late,” Wesley said, sliding into the seat next to her. “I thought I’d stop to see Giles on my way.”

“What did he say?” she asked. “Did he know?”

“He knew about Buffy talking to the soldier, but not about her fight with Spike,” Wesley replied. He pressed a kiss to her lips, encouraged when she tugged him closer. Their embrace was definitely not chaste, and he finally pulled back reluctantly. “Maybe we can pick this up again at my place,” he murmured huskily.

Willow could feel a flush rising to her cheeks, even though the suggestion was welcome. “Okay,”
she whispered.

The sound of a throat clearing behind them had Willow straightening in her chair. Xander was standing behind them with Anya’s hand in his. “You know, public displays of affection are kind of disturbing.”

“No, they’re not,” Anya disagreed. “We display affection in public all the time, and you don’t complain then.”

Willow had never been quite so happy to have Anya around before. “You know we’re dating, Xander. Get over it,” she said with a quelling look.

“So where are Spike and Buffy?” Xander asked. “Patrolling, or dare I ask?”

Willow exchanged a look with Wesley. “Do you want to explain or should I?”

“Explain what?” Xander asked, his face darkening. “Please don’t tell me I got left out of the loop again.”

“You don’t want to be in this loop,” Willow said firmly. “If you’re in the loop, you’re in the middle, and that’s a very uncomfortable place to be.” She quickly explained the gist of the disagreement, including where things now stood.

Xander whistled under his breath. “Okay, can I be the first to say that I never saw this one coming? I mean, Spike and Buffy—”

“They haven’t broken up,” Willow said. “They’re just…taking a break.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?” Anya asked. “Because it seems like the same thing. If they’re not talking, and they’re not having sex anymore; that certainly seems like they’re not together.”

“Just because they’re fighting doesn’t mean they’ve broken up.” Willow didn’t want to talk about it anymore. “Come on, Wes. Let’s dance.”
Wesley winced. “I’m not a very good dancer.”

“So what?” Willow asked. “Neither am I.”

He hadn’t lied; Wesley wasn’t a very good dancer, but Willow refrained from laughing. It was decidedly odd, being with him and Xander and Anya. It felt wrong. This was just the kind of night where Buffy and Spike would have joined them, and they would have all just hung out. Like in high school, only with a slightly different crowd.

When a slow dance came on, Willow allowed Wesley to pull her into his arms, and they swayed in place. Willow knew that relationships were often a lot more temporary than you’d think they’d be. She wasn’t sure that she would ever take her relationship with Wesley for granted the way she had with Oz. At the same time, you seized the moment, because it might be the only one you had. Willow was just beginning to understand that.

Seeing the rift form between Spike and Buffy was just another reminder of how quickly things could change.

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“So where’s your boyfriend?” Riley asked as they walked through campus to Lowell House.

Buffy didn’t want any attention on Spike at all. That wasn’t her purpose. “He’s traveling for business,” she replied nonchalantly. “He’s gone quite a bit.”

“So how did you guys meet?” Riley asked. “He obviously knows about you.”

“Spike has a history with this sort of work. He’s traveled a lot.” Buffy seized her chance to change the subject. “What about you? You must have seen quite a bit yourself.”

“More since coming here,” Riley admitted. “But not really. I joined the Army to go to school, and I liked it. Plus, I’ve got a real chance to make a difference with the Initiative. You must know how that is.”
“Yeah, I do,” Buffy replied, following him inside and standing in front of a mirror. “Okay, we’re going to stare at ourselves all night?”

He flashed her a quick grin in the mirror. “Just wait.”

Buffy heard the automated voice. “Retinal scan for Riley Finn and one guest.”

The mirror slid to the side, revealing an elevator. “It’s a quick trip from here,” he assured her.

“Right.” Buffy murmured, feeling a little claustrophobic. Riley didn’t mean her any harm, but she still felt a little bit like she was entering the lion’s den. She listened as Riley spoke to confirm the voiceprint, relieved when the door finally slid open again.

“This is it,” Riley said. “This is the Initiative.” He led her over to a railing, and Buffy looked down to see a half dozen metal tables. Most of them held a demon laid out, each in various stages of dissection, and she suddenly felt sick to her stomach.

They had done that to Spike.

Riley caught the expression on her face. “Hey, you okay?”

“Fine,” Buffy said quickly, putting on a cheerful mask. “It’s just so big.”

“Miss Summers,” Professor Walsh called as she came over to greet her. “It’s good to finally meet the Slayer. We’ve heard quite a bit about you, but you’ll forgive us if we believed you were a myth.”

“No problem,” Buffy said airily. “I get that all the time.”

And she was beginning to think that it might have been better if the Initiative still believed that.
“Deep in the night the cry of a swallow,/Under the stars he flew,/Keen as pain was his call to follow/Over the world to you./Love in my heart is a cry forever/Lost as the swallow’s flight./Seeking for you and never, never/Stilled by the stars at night.” ~Sara Teasdale, “Deep In the Night”

Wesley opened his apartment door to let Willow inside, following her in and locking the door behind them. “Do you—do you want to stay tonight?” he asked. “I can give you a ride later if you…” He trailed off. “I’m not sure what you want,” he admitted.

“You, for starters,” Willow replied, her smile a little shy.

He took off his jacket and hung it on the coat rack. “What changed your mind?”

Willow took off her own coat and handed it to him. “It just seems like you should make the most of every day, you know? This whole thing—everything that’s happened—I want to be with you. More time isn’t going to change my mind.’’

Wesley nodded. “Alright.” He hesitated, then asked, “Has Buffy asked you to do a locator spell on Spike yet?”

“No, and I’m really hoping that she doesn’t think about it.” Willow grimaced. “I don’t understand, Wesley. I know that Spike was a little crazy after he escaped from the Initiative, but he just seems to have snapped.”

“He hasn’t told me enough for me to fully understand what’s going through his mind,” Wesley said thoughtfully. “Has he ever told you anything about what happened with Angelus and Drusilla?”

“I know they tortured him,” Willow said. “Buffy told me about the scars on his back, but…” She trailed off. “He was in love with Drusilla, and she hurt him.”

Wesley nodded. “I think it might have something to do with that. I believe he’ll come around, he just needs time. Besides, to a certain extent I can understand both their points of view. I was taught to believe that all demons are evil, and so I know why Buffy might think that the Initiative would
be a valuable ally. I’ve also spent time with Spike’s clients, most of whom aren’t human—or not completely. The thought of any of them being subjected to the same treatment that Spike received is repugnant.”

Willow slumped on the couch. “Yeah, I could kind of see why they might disagree about this. Plus, Buffy didn’t discuss things with him before she made her decision. She does that a lot.” She glanced up at him. “If Buffy does ask one of us to do the locator spell, what are we going to tell her?”

“It’s up to you, at least for your part,” Wesley replied. “I’m going to have to tell her no. We might not be working much right now, but Spike is still my employer, and I owe him a great deal. I won’t risk betraying him.”

Willow sighed. “Okay. I’m probably going to tell her no, too. Spike’s my friend, and I don’t want him mad at me. I’m not even that angry with him, even though as a best friend of Buffy’s it’s sorta my job.”

Wesley laughed. “We do have ourselves between a rock and a hard place, don’t we?”

“It definitely looks that way.” Willow raised an eyebrow. “What are we going to do about it?”

“I say we pick up where we left off earlier,” he suggested, sitting down next to her. “See where that takes us.”

She smiled. “I’m okay with that. I’ve never—I mean, it’s just that Oz…”

“We’ll take our time,” Wesley promised.

The kiss started out slow and tentative, but as at the Bronze, it quickly became heated. Lips and tongues were no longer enough, and Willow’s hands busied themselves with the buttons on Wesley’s shirt. His large hands, callused now from hours of weapons training, slipped under the thin fabric of the t-shirt she wore, and Willow pulled back.

Wesley released her quickly, searching her face for signs that he’d gone too far, but she simply shook her head, pulling the shirt over her head. She smiled as he stared at her, his expression hungry, and leaned forward to meet his lips again.
They tasted one another’s skin, traced the length of limbs with their hands and eyes, discovering what felt right and what didn’t. At some point, Willow hit a ticklish spot, which had Wesley gasping for breath and completely at her mercy. At a later point, she was the one at his mercy, as he discovered what caused her to go limp and pliant with pleasure.

When Willow finally fell asleep—they had managed to make it to Wesley’s bed eventually—she decided that the only way to live was by seizing the moment.

There was no point in letting fear hold you back.

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Buffy managed to keep a smile on her face the entire time she was inside the Initiative, even though she didn’t care for some of Maggie Walsh’s questions. Professor Walsh was really interested in understanding the nature of the Slayer, and how the Slayer got to be the Slayer, and what exactly made Buffy so strong and fast.

If she could have thought of any way of saying, “No thanks,” when Walsh handed her the pager, Buffy would have, but it was too late by then. She had committed herself from the moment she’d accepted the tour of the facility, because if she declined to work with them now, Buffy knew they would begin to get suspicious.

Buffy couldn’t afford for that to happen, because it posed too great a risk to those she loved; there was no real reason she could give for why seeing demons chopped apart made her sick to her stomach—other than the fact that her boyfriend was a vampire.

That would not go over well. She realized that now.

So she took the pager with a sinking feeling, thinking that she might as well be selling her soul, and allowed Riley to escort her out.

“It’s going to be great working with you,” he said sincerely. “I mean, I’ve seen you fight, and you’re amazing. Maybe you should ask your boyfriend to come along, too. We can use guys like him.”
Buffy smiled, hoping that the expression didn’t look too strained. “You know, Spike’s not one for structure. I have a feeling that he’d piss Professor Walsh off first chance he got.”

Riley laughed and shrugged. “Well, if he changes his mind, let me know, and I’ll clear it with the professor. You sure you don’t need an escort home?”

“No, I’m good,” Buffy replied. “Thanks.” She started walking back towards her dorm, then changed directions, heading to her mother’s place. Giles was the only person she could talk to about all of this. She needed his advice.

Of course, she probably should have asked for his advice before agreeing to talk to Professor Walsh, but that was water under the bridge; there was nothing she could do about it now.

Buffy could see a light on in the living room as she approached the house, and she pulled out her key to let herself in. “Hello?”

“Buffy?” Joyce stepped into the hallway, her eyes concerned. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m really not,” she said, her face crumpling. “Oh, Mom, I don’t know what to do.”

Joyce put her arms around her daughter. “Sweetheart, it’s going to be okay.”

“No, it’s not. Spike’s mad at me, and he’s not talking to me. I think I really screwed this up.” Buffy felt her shoulders shaking. She hadn’t come to cry on her mother’s shoulder, but she couldn’t hold it in anymore.

It hurt too much. She needed Spike, and he wasn’t there.

“It’s going to be okay,” Joyce repeated. “Spike will come around. You just need to give him time.”

“I think I really hurt him,” Buffy said.

Joyce sighed. “You probably did, but I know you didn’t do it intentionally, and as soon as he stops
and thinks about it, I’m sure he’ll figure that out, too. Do you want some hot chocolate?”

“Yeah, that would be good,” Buffy replied, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “Is Giles here?”

“He’s still at the shop.” Joyce pulled the milk out of the fridge and gathered the other ingredients. “Did you want to speak with him?”

“Yeah, about the Initiative. I got the grand tour today, and it was kind of scary. It’s big. Really big.”

“I know you’ll make the right decision, sweetheart.” Joyce gave her a reassuring smile.

Buffy wasn’t so sure. “Have you seen Spike?”

“No, not in the last few days,” Joyce said. “I have a feeling that we won’t see him until he’s ready to be seen.”

“He gave his compass to Wesley,” Buffy said. “I thought about asking Willow to do a locator spell, but I know she already feels like she’s in the middle, especially now that she’s officially dating Wesley.”

“Did they make it official?” Joyce asked. “That’s good. He seems like he would be a very good match for her.”

Buffy made a face. “I would have said the same thing about Oz, and look how that turned out.” Tears were suddenly threatening again. “Or look at Spike and me.”

“It’s not over until you both give up,” Joyce said. “And from what I’ve heard, neither one of you have.”

She took the hot chocolate Joyce held out, staring down into the warm mug. She didn’t like the little marshmallows the way that Spike did; she always teased him about that, because it seemed like such a little kid thing to like. That was Spike, though—full of contradictions. “When did you know that you and Dad weren’t going to work out?” Buffy asked. “Is that what happened? You
both just gave up?”

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” Joyce replied. At the expression on her daughter’s face, she added, “I know that sounds like I’m avoiding the question, but I’m not. Your father and I loved each other very much, and then one day we didn’t. It was one of those things that can happen when you live with someone and share a life with them, but you aren’t sharing yourself. You grow apart, and by the time you realize what’s happening, it’s too late.”

Buffy was quiet. That’s not what had happened with her and Spike, but she was afraid that he would regard her decision as too great a betrayal to forgive. Not that she believed that she had betrayed him. Maybe her decision had been rash; she hadn’t fully understood how he felt about the soldiers, and once she did, it was too late.

Her fear was that it would be too late all the way around.

The sound of the front door opening broke the silence that had fallen, and Giles’ voice called out, “Joyce?”

“We’re in the kitchen, Rupert,” Joyce called. She hugged Buffy and kissed her cheek. “Be careful.”

“I will,” Buffy promised, watching as her mom and Watcher greeted one another with a quick kiss and a few quiet words of explanation. She was beginning to get used to the thought of them together, and to the idea that she could come home and find both of them. It was one-stop shopping for advice, and that was nice.

Giles came to join her at the counter. “Your mother said you wanted to talk with me.”

“I take it you heard,” Buffy replied.

“Wesley came by,” he explained. “He told me what happened. He said you were angry at him.”

“More just mad in general,” Buffy said with a sigh. “Wesley was at least partially right, Giles. I should have talked to Spike first, but—I knew how he felt about it. I thought if I just went ahead, he’d be mad, but he’d get over it.”
Giles sighed. “That’s probably not the best way to run a relationship, Buffy.”

“I know that now,” she said. “I also went to the Initiative tonight. Riley gave me the tour, and I met Professor Walsh. She had a lot of questions about me being the Slayer.”

“Did you answer them?”

“Most of them,” Buffy replied. “I was kind of vague where I could be. She ended up giving me a pager so I could start going on patrols with the soldiers.” Buffy shook her head. “I don’t know what to do, Giles. I hated what they did to Spike, but it was Spike, you know? I figured that maybe they made a mistake, and it could happen to anybody. Then I went in there, and there were all these scientists doing the same thing to other demons, and I thought—”

When she stopped, Giles said gently, “You could see them doing the same thing to Spike?”

“Yeah,” Buffy said. “I hadn’t—I didn’t know. I wanted to get out of there right then, but I didn’t think I could manage it without raising suspicions, and I don’t want them suspicious. It might lead them back to Spike, and I won’t let them get their hands on him again.”

Giles sighed. “I think you might be right, Buffy. There might come a point where you could gracefully excuse yourself, but for now I think you ought to make the best of a rather bad situation. This might be our only opportunity to gather information.”

She could tell from the look on his face that Giles hated the idea, that he wanted her out of the Initiative and away from their influence. That he, like Spike, was concerned that they might get a little too interested in the Slayer.

After having seen what they were doing to demons, Buffy was a little nervous about that herself.

“Okay, I’ll be careful,” Buffy said, rising. “Look, if you see Spike, would you tell him—” She hesitated. “Would you tell him I’m sorry?”

“I’ll tell him to talk to you so you can pass the message along yourself,” Giles responded gently. “Keep me informed, Buffy. Please.”
“I will.” She left, wishing that she could go to Spike’s place, that she had some hope of finding him there. That she could curl up next to him.

She needed him, and he wasn’t there.

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Spike watched as Buffy left her mother’s house, heading back in the direction of the dorm, and shadowed her, careful to keep outside the range of her senses. The last thing he wanted to do was to piss her off by appearing to stalk her.

Although he was stalking; there really wasn’t another word for what he was doing.

He’d heard everything she said to her mom and Giles, and there was a part of him that wanted to go to her now, hurt feelings be damned. There was another part of him that was now even more concerned about getting close to her. What if they were together when the Initiative attacked, and the soldiers managed to take both of them at once? Didn’t it make more sense to keep his distance until the moment they revealed their true motives? Buffy would have a weapon in reserve that the soldiers didn’t know about, and he could better protect her.

It didn’t make things easier now, but Spike believed it was best in the long run.

He watched until she made it inside, and then he waited until the light in her dorm room went on. Watching from outside, Spike lit a cigarette, knowing exactly what she was doing just by seeing her shadow move across the window. He knew her inside and out.

That was another reason why he was tempted to forgive and forget. This wasn’t the first time that Buffy had made a decision without consulting him. She’d done it the year before with the Mayor, when she’d decided to steal the Box of Gavrok. Spike had made her promise that she wouldn’t do that again, and he’d known she would probably break that promise. She was the Slayer, after all, and just as prone to rash decisions as he was.

Spike sighed. If he’d talked to her honestly about how he was feeling, she might not have been quite as inclined to go off and meet the soldier. If he’d talked to her, she might not have felt the need to protect him. He had the benefit of age and over a hundred years of experience. Spike had heard about experiments like this back in the ‘30’s and ‘40’s; the Nazis had been trying to use demons as weapons as well.
He’d kept it to himself, however, and now there was a distance between them that seemed impossible to bridge.

Spike had made a few calls; one of them had been to Robert, who kept an ear out for this sort of thing. As a half-breed, Robert regarded programs like this as his business, and Spike had known that he owed his client both a phone call and a visit. The phone call had been taken care of, but he would have to head down to L.A. as soon as possible; they needed more information, and Spike had to figure out the best way to extract Buffy from the Initiative’s control.

He had no doubt that they would try to control her; the Slayer was potentially too great a weapon to let go to waste.

Of course, that meant that he would miss her birthday.

Spike sighed, turning away from the dorm as Buffy’s light went off. He’d planned on making it a special weekend, taking a trip up the coast to an exclusive hotel-resort that he knew of and making sure that none of her usual bad luck followed.

Instead, he was planning on going to L.A. alone, leaving town when it might turn out that Buffy needed him most. Spike hated that he was acting like one more bloke who was letting her down.

It couldn’t be helped, however; the Initiative had to be his top priority right now. Spike would stop by Wesley’s place before he headed up to Los Angeles in the hope that Wesley could keep an eye on things until he got back. Maybe once he knew more, Spike would be able to make an informed decision as to what he was going to do next.

He just wished this were easier.

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Wesley kissed Willow awake, knowing that she had a class in an hour and that she wouldn’t want to sleep through it.

“Hey,” she said sleepily. “What time is it?”
“Just past eight,” he said. “I know you have a morning class.”

She twisted to see the bedside clock and sighed. “You’re right. I should get back to campus.”

“Give me a chance to get dressed, and I’ll give you a ride,” Wesley promised, reaching for his clothing.

Willow hesitated. “Was—did you sleep okay?” she asked, changing her mind at the last minute before asking the question.

Wesley turned back to her. “Last night was wonderful.” He tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “Was it okay for you?”

“More than okay,” she said. “It was—” Willow couldn’t explain how nice it was to wake up next to someone again, to feel both desired and desirable. After seeing Oz with Veruca, she’d honestly wondered whether she’d ever be able to feel that way again. “It was really good,” she finally said, unable to explain.

Wesley just smiled. “Let me get dressed.”

“I’m meeting with Tara for lunch again today,” Willow said. “Do you want to join us?”

“If you don’t think I’ll be in the way,” he replied. “I get the feeling that she’s not very comfortable around me.”

“I don’t think it’s you specifically.” Willow tugged her shirt over her head. “And she’s definitely warming up to you.”

Wesley grabbed a clean t-shirt from his drawer and pulled it on, then bent to lace up his shoes. “I’ll try to be there,” he said. “I need to try and contact Spike. I want to be sure he’s not doing anything stupid.”
“We were going to meet at the little sandwich shop on campus, like we did last time,” Willow said. “But if you can’t make it, I’ll understand.”

Wesley promised to make it if he could, then drove Willow back to campus, giving her a quick farewell kiss. He still couldn’t quite believe the night before. It had been good—maybe a little awkward in places, but that was only to be expected. By and large it had simply felt right, and Wesley didn’t want to do anything that would bugger it up.

Particularly after watching Spike and Buffy’s relationship implode.

He was feeling fairly cheerful when he got back to his apartment, but he realized immediately that he wasn’t alone when he walked inside. Reaching for the stake he carried at all times, he called out cautiously, “Hello?”

Spike appeared from the kitchen. “Hope you don’t mind that I let myself in.”

“No, of course not,” Wesley replied, tucking the stake back into his jacket pocket, an edge of sarcasm in his voice. “By all means, make yourself at home.”

“No need to get snippy,” Spike replied, a half-smile appearing. “Didn’t know when you’d be back, and I checked out of my motel room.”

“So are you going to stop being a stubborn git and talk to Buffy now?” Wesley asked.

Spike sighed. “I have to make a trip to L.A. to see Robert. I called him, and he said he might have something for me.” There was a pause, and he added, “I also wanted to set something up, just in case the Initiative comes after Buffy. We might need to disappear for a while.”

Wesley raised an eyebrow. “I thought you said you weren’t leaving town.”

“It can’t be helped,” Spike replied. “This is something that has to be done in person. I wanted to ask you to look after her while I’m gone, though.” He pulled an envelope out of his jacket pocket. “And give her this. It’s her birthday day after tomorrow, and I don’t think I’ll make it back in time.”
Wesley took the envelope with a feeling of trepidation. “You are coming back, aren’t you?”

“’Course I’m coming back,” Spike snapped irritably. “It’s an errand, Wes. If this is going to get nasty, I want to be prepared.”

Wesley nodded. “I’ll make sure she gets it.”

“Thanks, mate,” Spike replied. “I’ll be in touch. Call my mobile if you need me.” The vampire headed for the front door, turning just as he reached it. “So how was your night last night?” he asked with a wicked grin and a touch of his old humor.

Wesley gave him a pointed glare. “It was just fine, although I’ll remind you that I don’t pry into your love life.”


“It’s the least I can do,” Wesley replied, watching as Spike left, and feeling rather inadequate for the job at hand. He just hoped that Buffy didn’t throw Spike’s letter back in his face.

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Giles slipped inside the house as quietly as he was able, feeling just a little bit foolish. The last thing on his mind had been a drink with Ethan Rayne, as he’d have preferred giving him a good thrashing, but then Ethan had mentioned having information on the soldiers. It was just about the only thing that could have saved him.

One drink had turned into two, which had then turned into a pitcher of rather poor beer, but Giles had quite enjoyed himself. It had reminded him of old times, of when he was young and headstrong and impetuous. When he’d been known as Ripper.

He loved Joyce, loved being Buffy’s Watcher and owning a book store, but there were times when he wished he could recapture just a bit of that abandoned life, if only for a few hours.

Of course, now it was long past midnight, and Joyce had no idea where he’d been. Giles just hoped
that she wouldn’t be terribly angry with him.

“Rupert?”

He looked up to see her coming down the stairs, worry etched into her face. Feeling a pang of remorse, Giles tried for a reassuring smile. “I’m sorry. Did I wake you?”

“I wasn’t really sleeping,” she responded. “I wasn’t sure where you were.”

There was a rebuke in her tone, and he winced. It really hadn’t been very considerate to let her worry and not call. “I’m sorry. I ran into an old friend, and he asked me to join him for a drink. Time just got away from me.”

She sighed, and he could hear it from where he was standing. “I wish you would have called,” she replied, “but it’s fine. This isn’t the first time I’ve had to wait up for someone. Come to bed?”

“I’ll be right up,” Giles promised, shaking his head to try and rid it of some of the alcohol-induced fog. As late as it was, he’d probably have to wait until tomorrow to patch things up.

He hadn’t expected to wake up as a demon.
“Age covers us like drizzle;/time is interminable and sad;/a salt feather touches your face;/a trickle
ate through my shirt./Time does not distinguish between my hands/and a flock of oranges in
yours:/with snow and picks life chips away/at your life, which is my life./My life, which I gave
you, fills/with years like a swelling cluster of fruit./The grapes will return to the earth./And even
down there time/continues, waiting, raining/on the dust, eager to erase even absence.” ~Pablo
Neruda, “Sonnet XCI”

Spike followed Robert inside the palatial house, feeling ill at ease. Being away from Buffy right
now was making him just a little bit nervous, and he wondered if Wesley had been able to talk to
her, to deliver his message. He’d thought about contacting Cordelia and possibly Harmony while
he was in town, but all he really wanted at the moment was to conduct his business and get back to
Sunnydale.

“I made some phone calls after you contacted me,” Robert was saying, as he led Spike back
towards his library. “I have a few friends in government, people who tend to know about this sort
of thing. I’ve done them favors in the past, and so they owe me.” He went over to the dry bar
stationed on one side of the room. “Drink?”

“Please,” Spike replied. “Did they have information?”

“A few snippets,” Robert replied. “This project is military funded, but I’m not sure that they’re
fulfilling their mission. The goal is the protection of humans from specific threats, not turning
demons into weapons. There are enough people at the top who realize what a bad idea that would
be, particularly when there are those such as you and I who contribute to society.”

Spike took the proffered drink, raising an eyebrow. “So you think these soldiers are going outside
the scope of their mission?”

“It’s entirely possible,” Robert acknowledged. “The problem with that, of course, is if the end
result is something that is useful, they might allow the project to continue as it has. Such covert
projects’ ends often justify their means. They’ll apologize later, and continue to use demons as they
see fit.”

“Unless someone does something to stop it,” Spike said.
“There is that possibility, of course.” Robert sipped his drink, his silver eyes glowing. “Should the project prove untenable and too expensive, it will be shut down. If, however, they provide the government with a source of controllable soldiers, it will be a different story. You understand that if they can find a way to use demons, they will be able to send them on their most dangerous missions, without having to worry about writing home to worried parents. They will be expendable, like ammunition, and they can save their human soldiers for tasks that will bring glory.”

Spike slammed the rest of his drink back. “That’s what I was afraid of,” he said. “Problem is, they’ve got their hooks into my girl now.”

“The Slayer?” Robert asked, looking slightly alarmed. “She’s working with them?”

Spike sighed. “She’s young and inexperienced, and she thought that she was protecting me.”

“That is a problem,” Robert said. “If they were able to harness the power of the Slayer, they would be nearly unstoppable.”

“They might try, but no one knows how being Chosen actually works,” Spike replied. “There are theories, but if anyone knows, it’s the Watcher’s Council, and they aren’t talking. My concern is that they’ll decide to take her apart to figure it out.”

“I think you are right to be concerned,” Robert replied. “I do not know the person in charge of this project, but I think she might be going beyond what she is authorized to do. I am going to continue to talk to friends and others I know who might hold some influence. Perhaps we can take care of this diplomatically. Until then, however, I do not know what to tell you.”

Spike’s expression was grim. “Until then, we make sure that this project fails miserably, and that it’s as expensive as possible to keep it going. We might manage to shut it down that way.”

Robert nodded. “Good luck, my friend. If you need a safe haven, you are welcome here.”

Spike nodded. “I appreciate it. Let me know if you need anything.”

Robert smiled. “You have already done much for me, Spike. It’s my honor to return the favor.” He paused, adding, “You are a good man, William. We each live in two worlds, and it is a difficult
thing at times.”

Spike’s face relaxed into a smile. “Thanks, Robert. I should be going. I’ve got a couple more stops to make.”

“Be careful,” the half-breed warned.

Spike nodded. “I’ll be in touch.” He saw himself out, feeling just a little bit better.

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Joyce thought she could be forgiven for screaming. After all, it wasn’t every day that a person went to sleep next to her lover and woke up lying next to a demon. A big, green demon with horns, no less. She was, however, a fairly intelligent woman, who generally kept her head in the middle of a crisis, and the fact that the demon did not attack her, was holding up its hands in the international gesture of surrender, and was wearing Rupert’s pajama bottoms—

Well, it seemed fairly logical to assume that the demon was Rupert.

After she’d calmed down, she ordered the demon to sit down on the bed, which he immediately did. “Are you Rupert?” she demanded when it looked as though the creature understood English, even if what was coming out of its mouth sounded like gibberish. The demon nodded frantically, and Joyce sighed. She hadn’t bothered getting the whole story from Giles the night before because she’d been tired and just a little put out with him.

It wasn’t that she cared about him spending time drinking with a friend; he was a grown man, and he could do what he liked with his time. She had been concerned, however, and she didn’t like waiting up until the early hours of the morning to make sure he was okay.

Really, they both ought to get cell phones. Giles would protest—Luddite that he was—but it only made sense.

“Okay,” Joyce said. “I’ll call Buffy, and—” Demon-Giles shook his head, speaking quickly. “I can’t understand you,” she said shortly, glaring at him. “Honestly, Rupert. I can’t believe you got yourself into this mess. I’m assuming it had something to do with what you were up to last night.”
If a demon could look guilty, this one certainly did. Joyce took his garbled grunt as one of assent. “Fine. I’ll call Spike and see if he can’t figure this one out.” Giles didn’t seem ready to protest that one, and Joyce dialed Spike’s number.

“’lo?”

“Spike, it’s Joyce. I need your help.”

“Don’t think I need another pep-talk, Joyce, but thanks all the same,” Spike replied.

Joyce let out an exasperated sigh. “Quit being a stubborn idiot and listen to me,” she said sharply. “Rupert went out drinking with an old friend last night, and he woke up this morning as a demon. He doesn’t want me to call Buffy for some reason that I can’t fathom, seeing as how I can’t understand a word that comes out of his mouth, so I called you.”

There was a long pause, and then Spike said quietly. “I’m sorry, luv; that was out of line. I can’t make it, though. I had to make a trip to L.A., and I’m right in the middle of some business. Why don’t you call Wesley?”

“If you’ll give me his number, I will,” Joyce replied. “And Spike, why don’t you just call Buffy? She’d probably appreciate the phone call.”

“I’ll think about it,” was his noncommittal answer. “Here’s Wes’s number. I have to get going. I was right in the middle of a meeting when you called.”

Joyce took down the number, feeling more than a little frustrated. “Thank you, Spike.” She knew she didn’t sound terribly sincere.

“I’m sorry I can’t be there,” he said. “Wish I could, but I need to do this, for Buffy as much as for me. Soon as I get back to town, I promise I’ll talk to her, yeah?”

Joyce sighed. “Come by and see me, Spike. I’ve stocked up on the little marshmallows.”
“I could stand some hot chocolate,” Spike replied. “I’ll see you then.”

Joyce hung up the phone and looked at Demon-Giles. “How on earth is it that you men manage to get yourself into trouble every time I turn around?”

Of course, she couldn’t really understand his reply.

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Wesley still hadn’t managed to see Buffy. He’d met Willow and Tara for lunch, with the intention of stopping by to see the Slayer and deliver Spike’s letter and message. Buffy was nowhere to be found, however, and after waiting around for a few hours, he’d needed to leave to get a few errands run.

He had asked Willow to call him when Buffy got back in, but she hadn’t returned until late that night after participating in a patrol with the Initiative soldiers. Wesley knew that he probably should have been shadowing her, but he’d wanted to speak to her first.

Wesley also wanted to be sure that the soldiers wouldn’t shoot first and ask questions later if they saw him.

He had plans on tracking her down that day; Wesley had Spike’s compass, and he was prepared to follow her until he had an opportunity to speak with her alone.

In fact, he was just on his way out the door when his cell phone rang. “Hello?”

“Wesley? It’s Joyce. I need your help right away. It’s Rupert.”

Wesley hesitated, torn between finding the Slayer and dealing with this new emergency. “I’ll be right over,” he promised, finally making up his mind. He quickly dialed the number for the dorm room the girls shared. The phone rang several times before Buffy picked up. “Buffy, it’s Wesley. I need to speak with you as soon as possible.”

He’d half-expected her to hang up on him, but instead she asked, “When can you be here?”
“I have something to take care of right now,” Wesley replied. “Can you meet me at my apartment later this afternoon? I’ll call you if this errand takes longer than expected.”

There was a pause, and then he heard her sigh. “Is it about Spike?”

“He left something for you,” Wesley said. “He wanted me to deliver it personally.”

“I’ll come after my last class,” Buffy replied. “Say, around four?”

“Perfect.” With that taken care of, Wesley hopped on his bike for the trip over to the Summers’ residence. It seemed he was becoming a rather popular fellow, what with everyone wanting him for something; somehow it only made him feel harried, rather than needed.

He pulled into the driveway, surprised when Joyce came out to meet him. “Rupert is a demon,” she warned him.

Wesley blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“I woke up this morning, and there was a demon sharing my bed,” Joyce said bluntly. “I knew it was Rupert, and I was going to call Buffy, but he didn’t seem to think that was a good idea. When I called Spike, he said he was in L.A. and to call you.”

Wesley sighed. This was getting stranger by the moment. “Was Giles able to give any explanation for why he might suddenly wake up as a demon?”

Joyce snorted. “I can’t understand a word he’s saying, but he came in very late last night, and he said he was drinking with an old friend.”

Wesley raised an eyebrow. “If that’s what happens when Giles drinks with a friend, I’d hate to see him after drinking with an enemy.”

“Precisely what I thought,” Joyce replied. “I’m hoping that you can understand him well enough to
get to the bottom of this. Or figure out how to reverse it. Not that I have anything against demons, but I liked Rupert the way he was.”

“Understandable,” Wesley replied. “I’ll certainly see what I can do. With the Initiative running about, I think it’s probably better that he not go out of the house.”

“That’s what I thought,” Joyce said with a satisfied nod.

Wesley rather thought that the older man might be spending some time on the couch when this was all over. When he entered the house, he could immediately see what Joyce was talking about; the most dejected-looking Fyarl he’d ever seen was sitting on the couch, his hands hanging between his knees. Wesley had to bite his lip to keep from laughing; he hadn’t known that a Fyarl could look like such a wet blanket.

“Giles?” he called.

The Fyarl’s head shot up, and in perfect Fyarl he said, “Wesley, can you understand me? I’ve been trying to explain what happened to Joyce, but it’s impossible. I can’t even hold a writing implement!”

Wesley couldn’t help it at that point; he burst out laughing, even though he knew it was in bad form. “I’m sorry, Giles,” he apologized through his chuckles. “It’s just that I’ve never heard a Fyarl say ‘implement’ before. Normally they’re very focused on smashing things.”

Now Giles definitely looked grumpy. “Go ahead and laugh,” he said bitterly. “You’re not the one stuck like this.”

“No, I’m not,” Wesley replied. “But I wasn’t the one out drinking last night either. Do you know who did this to you?”

“Ethan Rayne,” Giles replied with a very Fyarl-like growl. “And when I get my hands on him, I’m going to rip his arms off and beat him to death.”

Wesley snickered, then wiped the smile off his face when he saw Joyce’s expression. “That sounds more like a Fyarl. I’ll find this Rayne character, and haul him back here. I think it would be a very bad idea for you to leave the house; if any of the soldiers were to see you, it would be very difficult
“Fine,” Giles replied. “But do hurry. I’d like to be able to sleep in my own bed tonight.”

Wesley turned to Joyce, who was glaring at demon-Giles with an expression that would have cowed the bravest of men. “You were drinking with Ethan Rayne? I thought you said that you were out with a friend.”

Giles seemed to shrink a little. “He had information about the Initiative!”

“Would you mind giving me a hand?” Wesley asked Joyce. “I have to meet your daughter at four, and I’d like to get this taken care of quickly. By the way, Giles said that Rayne had information about the Initiative.”

Joyce rolled her eyes and headed back to the kitchen. Wesley offered Giles a conciliatory shrug and followed her. “What are we doing?” she asked.

“Calling the hotels in the area and asking for Ethan Rayne,” Wesley replied. “If it turns out he checked in under an assumed name, I’ll try something else, but I’m hoping that he wouldn’t think of using an alias. I would imagine that he didn’t think anyone knew Fyarl.”

“How do you know the language?” Joyce asked.

Wesley smiled tightly. “My father believed that I ought to learn as many demon languages as possible. Since Fyarl are often used as foot soldiers, it seemed logical to be able to understand them in case I would have to interrogate one some day. It turns out that he wasn’t too far off the mark.”

Joyce laid her hand over Wesley’s where it rested on the counter. “Thank you for coming on such short notice.”

“It’s my pleasure to be able to help,” Wesley replied. “Let’s see if we can’t find out where this Rayne fellow is staying.”
Buffy couldn’t help but wonder what Wesley wanted, and what kind of message he might have from Spike. It had been several days since she’d seen him, and while this certainly wasn’t the first time they’d been separated, it was the first time when they had been fighting.

What if he had decided that he didn’t want to be with her anymore? There would be no reason for him to come back to Sunnydale, and every reason to leave; Spike could have decided that it would be easier to start again somewhere else.

Maybe the worst part was that Buffy had actually been looking forward to her birthday this year; Spike had a tendency to be really creative when he wanted to be. Now, with the date only a couple of days away, and no sign of Spike, it looked like she would be spending it without him. Plus no one else had mentioned it, either, and she was beginning to think she’d been forgotten, with everything else going on.

It wasn’t anything new, since her birthdays tended to suck, but it still hurt.

Willow was coming in as Buffy was going out. “Are you meeting Riley again?”

Buffy shook her head. “Actually, Wesley wanted to see me. Spike left a message of some kind with him.”

“Maybe you guys will finally start talking again,” Willow suggested.

Buffy shrugged. “Maybe. I wasn’t the one who stopped talking and disappeared, though.”

Willow grimaced. “Yeah. Look, Buffy, we were going to throw you a surprise party for your birthday, but I’ve already talked with Xander and the others. Your mom said she’d make dinner and have a cake for everybody, and we could keep it quiet and off-campus. That way, if Spike can make it, he doesn’t have to worry about running into the soldiers.”

“I’d appreciate it, Will,” Buffy replied. “I just—I don’t feel much like celebrating right now.”
“I get that,” Willow said. “I’ll see you later?”

Buffy nodded. “Probably, depending on what comes up tonight.”

She headed to Wesley’s, the walk giving her time to think. Too much time to think. Buffy felt as though that was all she’d been doing lately—just thinking about everything that had gone wrong, and how to make it better, only to come up empty handed.

Wesley answered the door immediately when she knocked, looking disheveled and out of sorts. “What happened to you?”

He ushered her inside, explaining, “Your mother called me this morning. Apparently, a man named Ethan Rayne managed to turn your Watcher into a Fyarl demon. Since I speak Fyarl, I was able to figure out exactly what happened, and then I had to hunt the man down and drag him back to your house, where I forced him to reverse the spell.”

Buffy frowned. “Wait. Giles got turned into a demon and no one called me?”

“He didn’t like the idea of you seeing him like that,” Wesley explained. “Fyarl demons aren’t pretty, and he knew you’d be a bit upset upon finding out that he’d had a few drinks with Rayne.”

“A bit upset?” Buffy echoed. “Try really pissed off. How stupid is he? Ethan Rayne turned the whole town into teenagers last year. What did he think was going to happen?”

“I believe Rayne told him that he had information on the Initiative,” Wesley replied, a smile playing around the corners of his mouth. Buffy sounded a lot like Joyce in that moment, who had said something very similar. “And your mother is giving him a tongue-lashing as we speak. She woke up next to him this morning, and I don’t think she’s going to recover from the shock soon.”

Buffy sighed, knowing that she didn’t really have room to talk. After all, she was the one who had agreed to work with the Initiative without consulting anyone. “What did Rayne have to say about the Initiative?”

“I don’t know. I think Giles wanted to talk to you about that tomorrow night.” Wesley gave her a sympathetic smile. “I heard it was your birthday.”
“Some birthday,” Buffy muttered. She looked over at him. “Is Spike going to be in town?”

“I don’t know,” Wesley admitted. “He didn’t know how long this trip was going to take. Spike asked me to give you this, though.” When her ex-Watcher handed her a sealed envelope, Buffy held it for a long moment. “I think I’m supposed to be here when you open it,” Wesley said gently. “Spike asked me to look after you.”

Buffy nodded slowly and tore it open, quickly scanning the page before starting to read again, this time more slowly.

“Dear Buffy,” she read silently. “I know I won’t be in town for your birthday. Wish it could be different, but I think our focus has to be on the Initiative right now. I’m working out a few things in L.A., trying to come up with a way to stop them, and some means to keep you safe. I don’t want you hurt. I know you decided to work with the soldiers because you didn’t have all the information, and you wanted to keep me safe. I know you weren’t trying to betray me, but that’s what it felt like, and I needed to get away for a bit until I sorted things out for myself.

“I asked Wes to look out for you while I’m out of town. If you go out with the soldiers, I’d ask that you let him tag along, out of sight. I want someone I trust watching your back, if I can’t be there to do it myself.

“I’ll see you when I get back into town, and we’ll talk then. I don’t know what this means, love. I don’t know if I can be with someone who’s working for the Initiative. I’m sorry for that. I’m sorry I couldn’t be stronger for you. All my love, Spike.”

Buffy swallowed hard. “I don’t know that I have a choice about working with the Initiative right now, Wesley. It’s not like a class that I can drop.”

“I know,” he said gently. “I think that’s one of the things that Spike’s afraid of, that you’ll find yourself in too deep, with no one to pull you out.”

Buffy folded Spike’s note carefully. “You can come with me,” she said slowly. “But I want you to stay out of sight. I don’t want you hurt. I don’t think I could… You’ll be careful?”

“Of course,” Wesley replied. “That’s the whole idea.”
She nodded, hoping that Spike’s concern meant that he wasn’t quite ready to give up on their relationship yet, because she certainly wasn’t.
“I see thine image through my tears to-night,/And yet to-day I saw thee smiling. How/Refer the cause?—Beloved, is it thou/Or I, who makes me sad? The acolyte/Amid the chanted joy and thankful rite/May fall so flat, with pale insensate brow,/on the altar-stair. I hear thy voice and vow./Perplexed, uncertain, since thou art out of sight./As he, in his swooning ears, the choir’s Amen./Beloved, dost thou love? or did I see all/The glory as I dreamed, and fainted when/Too vehement light dilated my ideal/For my soul’s eyes? Will that light come again,/As now these tears come—falling hot and real?” Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Sonnet 30: I See Thine Image Through My Tears To-Night”

When Wesley had dragged Ethan Rayne through the front door of the Summers’ house, Giles had merely glared at the magician from behind horns and green skin. He had really wanted to rip the man’s arms off, and he might have if Joyce and Wesley hadn’t been there. The thick bloodlust of the Fyarl had begun clouding his mind as soon as he saw the magician, and he’d been ready to kill.

“Hello, Ripper,” Ethan had smirked. “You’re looking a little green today.”

Giles took one step forward, but Wesley waved him back, pushing the gun a little harder into the man’s back. “You’ll reverse the spell now,” Wesley ordered.

“And if I don’t?”

“Then you’ll get a bullet through your foot,” Wesley replied. “It might not kill you, but I’ve heard it’s painful, and you certainly won’t be able to run far enough or fast enough to prevent Giles from killing you.”

Joyce was standing in the doorway watching the whole thing, and she spoke up. “I don’t think Rupert is the one he needs to worry about.”

Wesley smiled. “You heard the woman, Rayne. She wants Giles back.”

The spell had been amazingly quick to reverse, and Giles had immediately gone upstairs to put on a shirt, leaving Wesley to watch over the magician. Wesley had done quite a good job cleaning up this little mess, and if Giles hadn’t been convinced before, he would be now. Giles found himself thinking that every young Watcher ought to be put under Spike’s tutelage for a while.
By the time he’d gone back downstairs, Giles had found Wesley and Joyce cheerfully discussing what they ought to do with Ethan. Joyce seemed to think that shooting him in the foot and dropping him in the desert somewhere would be a nice option. Wesley said he knew where a family of baby Ebrir demons were, and they could shut Ethan up in there and let them nibble him to death.

Ethan was looking decidedly pale.

As soon as Giles entered the room, however, Joyce went quiet, and Wesley stood. “I have to go,” he said. “I’m meeting Buffy soon. Is there anything else you need?”

“No, you’ve been a great help today, Wesley,” Giles said quietly. “I think I can handle Ethan from here.”

Wesley nodded. “Any time.”

Joyce offered him a warm smile. “Why don’t you come by tomorrow night for dinner?” she suggested. “I know you’ll be back here the night after for Buffy’s party, but I’d like to say thank you.”

“I don’t think I could ever get enough of your cooking, Joyce,” Wesley replied, giving Giles a look that was all-too-plainly filled with pity. “What time would you like me to come over?”

She walked him to the door, and Giles glared at Ethan. “I ought to kill you for that. You put her in danger.”

“You didn’t mention that you were sleeping with someone,” Ethan pointed out.

“Would that have changed your mind?”

“Probably not,” he admitted rather cheerfully. “You were such an easy target.”

Giles stood. “You are going to leave town, and you are not to return,” he said. “The next time I see you, I will make sure you don’t live to regret it.”
Ethan rose, brushing out imaginary wrinkles in his clothing. “Fine, Ripper, I’ll leave you to your domesticated life.” He looked over at Giles. “You were never meant for mundane things, you know. You have the rest of your life, and you’re living like—”

He squeaked a bit as Joyce showed up with a large kitchen knife. “He’s living like what?” she asked, her tone daring him to complete the sentence.

“Nothing,” Ethan said, not being a stupid man. “I’m sure he has a very nice life.”

Joyce narrowed her eyes. “If you come back to town again, Rupert won’t have to do anything to you if I get there first. I don’t like being treated like someone’s toy, and every time you come to town, you disrupt our lives just to watch the fun. Next time, I promise that you won’t be having any fun at all.” She took a step back. “You’re lucky Spike wasn’t able to make it. I would have let him eat you this time.”

Ethan took his opportunity and slipped out of the house, moving as quickly as he could without running.

“Joyce, that was—”

“I don’t want to talk to you right now,” she said simply. “I need to call my assistant at the gallery, and then I’m going to take a hot bath. I think I deserve one.”

That had been several hours ago, and she still wasn’t talking to him. Giles felt rather silly for having been caught up in Ethan’s spell in the first place, but that didn’t compare to the helplessness of not knowing what to say to Joyce to get her to talk to him again. He watched her from the kitchen entrance as she put dinner together; apparently she wasn’t so upset that she’d given up feeding him. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sure you are,” she replied, pausing in her chopping. “You have to be more careful, Rupert. What if Wesley hadn’t been able to find that man, or if he’d already left town? What would we have done then? I could have lost you.”

“We would have figured something out,” Giles responded.
Joyce turned. “And if they hadn’t? You know, it might be one thing if Ethan was an old friend, but he’s tried to kill you three times now!”

“There was only the one time,” Giles said, “and I was in danger anyway.” At the expression on her face, he realized that now was not a good time to argue about it. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have had a drink with him. Next time he comes offering information, I’ll beat it out of him, and I won’t bother with the drink.”

Joyce sighed and shook her head. “Fine.”

“Are you still angry at me?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “It was a little disturbing to wake up next to a demon this morning.”

Giles stepped behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders. “Is there anything I can do that would make it up to you?”

“I think you should probably use your imagination,” Joyce replied. “And you’d better make it good.”

Giles began to knead her shoulders, knowing that he had his evening’s work cut out for him. “I can manage that.”

Really, Ethan had no idea what he was talking about; this was the only life he wanted.

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The soldiers moved slowly, and not so silently that Buffy was concerned about them hearing Wesley tailing them. She’d asked him to keep his distance, not wanting him to risk discovery. He had the tranquilizer rifle, as well as the handgun she’d spotted him carrying when they’d been trying to rescue Spike; she just hoped that he didn’t need either.

This was the first time she’d patrolled with a squad, rather than just Riley and maybe one of his buddies. They all seemed nice enough, but she could see them giving her strange looks on
occasion, as though they were trying to categorize her and coming up short. It made her feel strange and uncomfortable, and she was beginning to understand why Spike had been so upset by her blithe acceptance of their goals.

It had been one thing when she was talking to Riley, who had treated her with respect and enthusiasm, or with Professor Walsh, whose curiosity had made her uncomfortable, but hadn’t been unkind.

The other soldiers might not have done anything untoward, but Buffy got the feeling that they looked at her as something not quite human.

Her friends had never treated her that way, and neither had Spike.

The first problem in the evening arose when they came upon a vampire; Buffy was all for staking it, but Riley’s quiet order came through clearly. “We’re bagging and tagging tonight. Professor’s orders.”

Buffy watched the vampire stroll along, knowing exactly what would happen if she followed Riley’s command. They would capture him, one or two of the guys would take him back to the lab, and then they’d stick him in a cage for who knew how long; only when he served no other purpose would they kill him.

She knew this, because they’d done the same thing to Spike.

It didn’t feel right.

“I’ve got it,” Buffy said quietly, springing out of her hiding place before Riley could call her back. She hit the vampire with a flying kick, watching as he got to his feet again with a snarl.

“Slayer,” he hissed.

She smiled. “Slayee.”

He was obviously not terribly bright, because instead of running away, he launched himself at her.
Buffy pulled out a stake, allowing the vampire to impale himself, hoping that it looked enough like an accident that no one would suspect that she’d killed him on purpose.

“Buffy!” Riley whispered. “That was supposed to be a live capture.”

She hoped she appeared properly apologetic. “Sorry, I guess habit just took over. It won’t happen again.”

There was some grumbling from the other guys, but no one said anything, and the Slayer sent up a brief prayer that they wouldn’t run into any more vampires or demons tonight. She didn’t think she’d be able to get away with that again.

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Wesley moved carefully—more carefully than the soldiers, anyway. They didn’t seem too worried about being either seen or heard, and he used their movements to disguise any noises he made.

After Buffy killed the first vampire they ran into, he found himself hoping that they didn’t run into any other vampires or demons. He’d heard Riley’s rebuke, and he knew that Buffy wouldn’t get away with dusting another vampire after that, even if she made it look accidental.

Although he wasn’t close enough to hear their words, Wesley watched as they sped up, moving in on a nearby demon that their devices had detected. He picked up his own pace to match, keeping a sharp eye out for the demon, hoping that it was something legitimately dangerous that neither he nor Buffy would have to feel too badly about letting them capture.

Wesley’s heart sank as he saw exactly who it was.

Rof stood in a small clearing; he had obviously sensed the soldiers, because he was holding his square body stiffly, and his bright orange eyes were wide with fear.

There was no way Wesley could allow him to be taken. Not only would Spike be furious that the Initiative had one of his friends, but Wesley liked Rof. He was not only harmless, he was also very helpful, and what the Initiative would do to him—
It didn’t bear thinking about.

Wesley knew that there was no way to get a message to Buffy, and she had no way of knowing that the soldiers were closing in on one of Spike’s friends. He would just have to hope that he could give Rof an opportunity to escape, and that Buffy would understand when he started dropping soldiers with tranq darts.

And if that didn’t work, Wesley had a gun; he knew that he couldn’t allow Rof to be taken alive, not when he knew what they would do to him.

Not when the demon would almost certainly prefer death.

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The first thing Buffy noticed when she saw the demon was the curiously human expression it wore—it looked scared to death, and not at all scary. It had sensed their approach, and was looking around wildly from some way of escape, but the Initiative had trained their soldiers well. They flanked the demon, Tasers out and ready, and Buffy knew that there was nothing she could do.

She just hoped that she was imagining things, and that the demon was extremely dangerous and truly better off in an Initiative cell.

Buffy heard a muffled grunt, and she watched as one of the soldiers went down hard. She could just make out the tufted end of the tranq dart embedded in his thigh. Her eyes widened as she realized exactly what Wesley was doing, and another soldier went down.

Riley and the remaining three soldiers were immediately on alert for the attacker. “Where is he?” Riley called. “Does anyone have a visual?”

Buffy took her opportunity, tackling the demon and holding tightly as she rolled both of them into the bushes. She made certain that it was on top, hoping that she wasn’t doing something phenomenally stupid and that it wasn’t going to kill her. “Run,” she ordered.

The demon didn’t have to be told twice, although she thought she might have seen gratitude in its eyes before it disappeared into the underbrush.
“Buffy?” She heard Riley called to her, and she rolled out from the bushes with a groan. “Are you okay?” he demanded, coming over to help her up. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “As soon as I touched its skin, I started feeling sick.”

He looked torn. “We have to get the guys back to base. Maybe you should come back with us, get yourself checked over.”

Buffy shook her head, not wanting to spend any more time in the underground lab than she absolutely had to. “No, I’m sure it’ll wear off in a minute. I think I may just head home. You take care of your men.”

“Are you sure?” Riley asked. “I can call you a ride.”

“No, I’ll be fine,” she said again. “I’m already feeling better.” Buffy stood up straighter. “It must just have been a passing thing.”

He nodded, still not looking happy about it, but clearly focused on getting his men out of there. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Sure thing,” Buffy replied, watching as the soldiers disappeared, carrying their unconscious comrades with them. She stood where she was, wondering if Wesley was going to come out of hiding.

“You handled that well,” he said, stepping out from among the trees.

She turned to look at him. “So did you. Nice shooting.” Buffy hesitated. “Any particular reason you nearly blew your cover?”

“The demon—Rof—is a friend of Spike’s,” Wesley explained. “I didn’t think he’d be very happy to find out that he’d been picked up by the Initiative.”
Buffy swallowed hard. “No, I don’t think he would.” She stared into the trees. “Did you see him?”

“He got off all right,” Wesley assured her. “I saw him as he left. The good news is that Rof will spread the word that you aren’t working with the Initiative, even if it appears that you are.”

“What good will that do?” Buffy demanded. “I’m supposed to be the one killing demons, Wes. I’m the Slayer; it’s my job.”

“It’s not your job to help the government use them for experimental purposes.” Wesley put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Rof is harmless; I wouldn’t have—”

“I know,” she said quickly. “I’m not upset at that, it’s just… This should have been perfect, Wesley. The Initiative could do so much, they could protect so many people, save so many lives. Instead, they’re doing God knows what, for who knows what purpose. I don’t know what side they’re even on.”

“Maybe they’re not on any side but their own.” He gave her an apologetic smile. “Come on, I’ll give you a ride home.”

Buffy nodded slowly. “That would be nice. Do you know when Spike’s coming back?”

“No idea,” Wesley said. “I’m sure he’ll be back as soon as he can be, though. I know he didn’t want to leave you.”

She laughed shortly. “Right. Because he has every reason to stay.”

“He has you,” Wesley said simply.

Buffy wondered if that was enough now that she was working with the enemy.

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“Let me get this straight, Agent Finn,” Maggie Walsh said slowly, as if she was speaking to a very
small child. “You found one vampire and one hostile of unknown origin tonight, and you didn’t capture either of them. Not only that, but two of your men are in the infirmary right now sleeping off some sort of drug from tranquilizer darts.”

“Professor,” Riley began, only to be cut off.

“I want to know what happened,” she snapped, “and I don’t want any excuses.”

“Buffy dusted the vampire,” Riley said. “She said it was an accident.”

Walsh looked from Riley to Forrest and Graham. “And you believe her?”

“She is the Slayer.” Riley felt the need to protect Buffy, at least until she grew a little more used to the discipline of the Initiative. She was a rookie, and he wanted to give her time to adjust. “She’s not used to capturing them alive.”

“And the demon?”

“She said there was something on its skin that made her feel sick,” Riley replied. “She looked pretty bad, too.”

Walsh nodded reluctantly. “I see. And the marksman?”

“Unknown, Professor,” Riley replied. “We couldn’t afford to lose any more men, not when we couldn’t find him.”

Walsh sighed. “Fine. Don’t let something like this happen again, Agent Finn. Next time, we could have bodies in the morgue rather than the infirmary. You’re dismissed.”

As she’d expected, Riley was the first one out the door, and she asked Forrest to stay. “Your opinion, Agent Gates?”

“I think the Slayer is a liability,” Forrest replied. “She’s sloppy and undisciplined, and she’s a
distraction to the men.”

Walsh nodded. “What about the vampire and the demon? Accidents, or something else?”

Forrest hesitated. “I can’t say. Dusting the vampire could have been an accident. She was carrying a stake, not a taser, so it’s possible. Riley was right about her looking sick right after she came into contact with the demon. It’s all plausible.”

“I want you to put a watch on her,” Walsh instructed. “I want to know where she goes, who she’s with, and if there’s anything suspicious, I want to know right away.”

Forrest raised his eyebrows. “You think she’s hiding something from us?”

Walsh shook her head. “I don’t know. We haven’t been able to discover any reason behind her strength and speed. We do know that she’s capable of taking out an entire platoon without breaking a sweat. I think you might be right; she might be a liability rather than an asset.”

“Should I say anything to Finn?” Forrest asked.

“No,” Walsh replied. “I don’t think he’d understand. You’re on point on this one, Agent Gates.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the soldier said, waiting until he was out of her office to grin. It looked like Riley was finding himself out of favor.

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“Spike!” Cordelia waved him over to a table where she sat with Harmony and a thin, dark-haired man he didn’t recognize. “How are you?” she asked, giving him a hug.

He managed a smile for her. “Good, pet. If I didn’t think it was impossible, I’d say you were looking even better than you were the last time I saw you.”

She beamed at him. “It’s the fame and fortune,” she replied. “It agrees with me.” Cordelia turned to
“You remember Harmony, and this is Doyle. He insisted on tagging along tonight.”

“Someone has to keep you two lovely ladies out of trouble,” Doyle said, causing Harmony to giggle.

“Hi, Spike,” she said. “I wanted to thank you for sending me to Lorne. He was a huge help.”

Spike smiled. “Glad to hear it, Harmony. You’re doing okay, then?”

“Oh, yeah!” she responded enthusiastically. “I found a job and everything, and I’m on a human-free diet. It’s been great. I’m much happier than I was when I was trying to be evil.”

“Great,” he replied, looking around for Lorne. He’d called Cordelia to let her know that he was in town, even though he didn’t have much time to chat. When Spike had informed her that he was planning on going to Caritas, she’d insisted on meeting him there, saying that she hadn’t been in ages, and she wanted to see Lorne anyway.

“I told Lorne you were coming, and he said he’d be on the lookout for you.” Cordelia touched the chair next to her in invitation. “Why don’t you have a seat?”

Spike shook his head. “Sorry, luv. I’m already running late as it is. I was hoping to get in and get out as quickly as possible.”

“I never would have guessed,” Lorne said, coming up behind him. “Why don’t we go somewhere a little more private,” he suggested.

The green-skinned demon led the way behind the stage, where there wouldn’t be quite so many eyes on them. “I need your advice,” Spike said without preamble.

Lorne’s red eyes widened. Spike had often sent others his way for guidance, but he’d never tried singing, and had insisted that Lorne keep whatever opinions he had to himself. The demon decided that it wasn’t worth the time or effort to get him up on stage; Spike had the air of a desperate man, and it wouldn’t do to push him too far.
“Hum a few bars for me, sweet cheeks,” Lorne directed. “I’ll see what I can do.” Spike sang the first few bars of “My Way,” and Lorne held up a hand to stop him. “Okay, this is the easy part. That girl of yours is in trouble; stick close to her, otherwise things could turn out very bad for both of you, not to mention the rest of the world. The hard part is letting this go.”

Spike shook his head. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Sure, you do,” Lorne replied. “You keep thinking that how those soldiers treated you changes something.” He pushed the curtain aside slightly. “Look at them,” he ordered, pointing at Cordelia, Harmony, and Doyle. “They’re all in a better place because of what you did.”

Spike snorted. “I didn’t do anything. Gave them your number and sent them on their way.”

“You cared enough to take the time to do that,” Lorne corrected him. “Most people would have given up, or said that it wasn’t any of their business. You pointed them in the right direction, and then you let them make the choice. That’s what makes you who you are, William. Remember that.”

Spike stared at the table of three, watching as Cordelia and Harmony laughed at something Doyle said. Cordelia put her hand on Doyle’s arm, a natural gesture, and the man’s face lit up as though she’d just given him the moon. They looked happy—all of them. According to Lorne, he had something to do with that.

“You’ll tell Cordelia I’ll give her a call next time I’m in town?” Spike asked. “I’ve got a party to make.”

“Get out of here,” Lorne ordered. “And next time you get the chance, bring that girl with you.”

Spike nodded. “What about them—the soldiers?”

“I can’t tell you that,” Lorne replied. “It could go either way right now. Just stick close to your girl, and make sure you’re watching her back.”

“Thanks,” Spike said, heading out the back way for his car. He was already late, but if he hurried, he just might make it.
Spike parked his car at his place and then headed to the Summers’ residence on foot. After what Lorne had said, he had no intentions of letting Buffy out of his sight, although he wanted to go carefully after that warning. It wouldn’t do to draw attention to himself at this juncture, and while he loved his Mustang, that’s exactly what it did.

He found himself looking forward to seeing Buffy and the others with a desperation that startled him. Spike had believed himself capable of making it on his own, but Lorne’s words had reminded him that he was happier when he was with others. Being with the Slayer and her friends had taught him that, and he wouldn’t give it up again.

If he did, Spike would have allowed the soldiers to win, and he would prove them right.

Lorne’s warning, plus his own sixth sense told him to go carefully, and he spotted the two men before they saw him. Spike stopped, undecided. He could go around through the backyard, but he didn’t want to risk being seen. If they were already suspicious of Buffy, and then recognized him, it might go worse for her.

After a moment’s thought, Spike disappeared back into the night, heading for the convenience store nearest the Summers’ house. He dialed their number, smiling as Joyce answered. “Hello?”

“It’s me,” he said. “Can I speak to Buffy?”

“Where are you?” Joyce asked. “Is everything okay?”

Spike hesitated. “Not quite, but I don’t think there’s anything to be concerned about right now. Just thought I’d wish Buffy a happy birthday, yeah?”

“Okay, Spike, but I still want to see you soon.”

“Tomorrow,” Spike promised. “I’ll stop by the gallery.”
“Stop by the house tomorrow afternoon,” Joyce corrected. “My assistant can handle things for a few hours.”

“Alright, luv. I’ll see you then.”

Spike waited for a few seconds before he heard Buffy’s voice; it had been too long. “Spike?”

“Yeah, it’s me,” he replied. “I’m in town.”

He could hear her swallow. “You can’t make it?”

“You’ve got two soldiers sitting outside your house, keeping an eye on you,” Spike replied. “Last thing I want is for one of them to recognize me and get you into more trouble.”

“Oh.” There was a long pause. “I got your letter.”

Spike closed his eyes, wanting nothing more than to be there with her. “Yeah. I’m sorry, Buffy.”

“Don’t be,” she replied. “I should have talked to you first.”

“I should have been talking in the first place,” Spike responded. “We both handled things badly.”

“What are we going to do now?” Buffy asked.

Spike knew she wasn’t going to like it. “What have you told the soldiers about me? Anything?”

“Riley’s really the only one who knows anything about you,” Buffy said. “I’ve told him you were out of town on business.”

“Let’s keep it that way,” Spike said. “I don’t want them to connect me to you.”
“No, I think that would be bad,” Buffy agreed. “Do you—can we meet at some point?”

“Don’t think that would be a good idea as long as you’ve got a tail,” Spike said, his tone apologetic. “I’m fairly sure this won’t last much longer.”

Buffy was quiet for a moment. “You think they’re going to try something?”

“I have it from a good source that it’s likely,” Spike said. “I’ve got your back, luv. You may not see me, but I’ll be there.”

“Be careful, Spike,” she said, sounding just a little desperate.

“You too,” Spike replied. “And happy birthday, Buffy.”

He cut the connection, but not before he heard her whispered, “I love you.”
“Woe is me, woe is us, my dearest:/we wanted only love, to love one another,/but among so many griefs it was fated/that only we two would be so hurt./We wanted the you and the me for ourselves,/the you of a kiss, the me of a secret bread:/and that’s how it was, infinitely simple,/till hatred came in through the window./They hate, those who did not love/our love, nor any other love: those people/wretched as the chairs in an empty room—/till they were tangled in ashes,/till their ominous faces/faded in the fading twilight.” ~Pablo Neruda, “Sonnet LXII”

“I know it’s your birthday, Buffy,” Giles began, “but I don’t think this can wait.”

Buffy shook her head. “It’s okay, Giles. This year was better than last, anyway.”

Her Watcher winced, knowing exactly why that was. “I didn’t get much from Ethan,” he admitted. “The demon world is talking about the Initiative, and there are rumors about something called ‘314,’ but he didn’t know more than that.”

“Why would he even want to tell you about something like that?” Xander asked from the couch, Anya perched next to him. “He seems more of a trouble-maker than someone who would, you know, actually care.”

“Ethan worships chaos,” Giles replied. “That would seem to suggest that whatever the soldiers are doing represents a threat to order for him to get involved. As to why he came to me, I imagine he didn’t believe that I would have the chance to pass along the information.”

“Isn’t that what the Initiative is about, though?” Willow asked. “I mean, from what Buffy’s said, they’re all about the order and discipline, so he’d be against that, right?”

Wesley shook his head. “There’s a balance to be maintained. The Slayer is part of that; the Initiative, on the other hand, is playing with forces they know nothing about.”

Buffy nodded. “Okay, so I’ve got Spike’s vote for waiting to see what happens. What about you, Giles?”
“I’m going to agree with Spike,” he replied. “This is our best chance to get information. Be careful, though. Spike might be able to watch your back when you’re out on patrol with them, but if you’re in the lab when they try something…”

“Bad news,” Buffy agreed. “What about losing the tail? It wouldn’t be that hard.”

“No,” Wesley said firmly. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Giles nodded. “If you lose them, they’ll be that much warier in the future. The best thing you can do to protect yourself is to make sure they’re underestimating you.”

Xander grinned. “Yeah, that hasn’t happened before.”

Buffy wasn’t nearly so happy with that idea. “That means Spike stays away, since he doesn’t want to risk them recognizing him.”

“It’s probably better, Buffy,” Willow said encouragingly. “They won’t know to expect him the way they might if they saw him with you. All they know is that your boyfriend is out of town; they don’t know he’s an invulnerable vampire.”

“He’s your secret weapon,” Xander said. “It always works better if it’s secret.”

Buffy sighed, glancing over at Wesley. “Will you see him soon?”

“I imagine so,” Wesley replied. “Although, we haven’t made any plans.”

Buffy nodded. “You’ll let him know what’s going on?”

“Of course,” he said. “I don’t think the rest of us need to worry about being watched, at least for the moment.”

They all left soon after, but Buffy stayed behind to talk to Giles. “What happens when the Initiative does come after me? It’s not like I can spend the rest of my life on the run.”
“There are a few people I can talk to,” Giles said quietly. “I have friends I still trust on the Council, and I think they ought to know about this. Even though you’re not working for them anymore, I think they’ll regard the Initiative’s interest in you as infringing upon their territory.”

“I’m nobody’s territory,” Buffy objected, although her tone wasn’t angry, merely weary.

Giles’ eyes were concerned. “Buffy—”

“I’m just tired, Giles.” She summoned up a smile for him. “It’s been a long couple of weeks—or months.”

“I’ll do what I can,” he promised. “But Buffy, be careful. If Spike is right, and they’re getting ready to do something, you can’t afford to let your guard down.”

Buffy’s face was grim. “I haven’t let my guard down with them since my first visit to that lab.”

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“It’s really good of you to help out,” Willow said. “Wesley and I have been talking about doing permanent locator spells, but we’ve been having trouble with it. He thought it might be easier with an extra person.”

Tara smiled, feeling warm inside; it was always nice to be needed. “I’m happy to help.”

Willow made a face. “With the Initiative, we need all the help we can get. I mean, we’ve been outnumbered before, but this is bigger than anything we’ve faced. It’s the government.”

“I think we can figure something out,” Tara replied, hugging her books tighter to her chest. “With the three of us working on it, it’ll go faster.”

“Let’s hope so.”
Tara was really enjoying being around Wesley and Willow. They were the first people she’d felt at all close to since coming to the university. The girls in the Wicca group were nice, but they didn’t truly understand, and they certainly didn’t see things as Tara did. Willow was the first person she’d met who did, and Wesley—

Wesley was the first man she’d felt safe around in a long time.

She wasn’t sure how she felt about meeting their other friends, since there seemed to be so many of them, but Willow hadn’t pushed, and Tara hadn’t asked. She was just fine working with the two of them and not having anyone else know about her existence.

Tara liked staying in the shadows.

“Come in,” Wesley said when they knocked on his door. “Do either of you want tea?”

“That would be nice,” Tara replied, looking around his apartment with curiosity. There wasn’t much in the way of furniture or pictures on the wall, but there were books—in bookshelves, in piles, scattered over every available flat surface.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I got started without you,” Wesley said, giving Willow a kiss in greeting. “I woke up early this morning.”

“Less work for us,” Willow teased in response. She passed a mug on to Tara and took the second. “What have we got so far?”

Wesley sighed. “The problem is still finding something to which to anchor the spell. It has to be able to withstand quite a bit in the way of magical energies, and I’d rather it be something inconspicuous. If it fell into the wrong hands…”

“W-what about making some sort of key to it?” Tara asked. “So only one or two people could use it?”

Wesley considered that idea, and then nodded. “I suppose that would work, but we would have to figure out who to tie it to.”
“Xander,” Willow said. “He’s got military experience, and he’s not patrolling or anything quite so much these days either. If something happened, he would probably be in the best position to let the others know.”

Tara frowned. “What about a map? That’s something no one would look at twice.”

Willow grinned. “That’s perfect. An ordinary map would be great.”

“If we create the spell and key it to Xander, that would prevent the information from falling into the wrong hands,” Wesley agreed.

“How do we do that?” Willow asked. “That’s going to take a lot of power.”

“Which is why it’s probably a good thing that there’s three of us,” Wesley replied, giving Tara a conspiratorial smile. “As for the rest, it looks like we’re back to researching.”

The knock on the door startled all three of them, and Wesley rose to get it, stepping back to allow Spike to enter. “Spike!” Willow said, rising from the table.

“Hey, Red,” he said, giving her a smile. “It’s been a while.”

“Yeah, shame on you,” Willow replied, although her tone was light. “What are you doing here? Buffy said you were going to be her shadow.”

Spike shrugged. “She’s in class right now.” He looked at Tara pointedly. “You haven’t introduced me to your friend.”

“Spike, this is Tara. Tara, Spike,” Wesley said smoothly. “Tara’s been helping us with various means to fool the Initiative.”

Tara watched as he relaxed slightly. “Good to know. Did you lot talk to Buffy last night?”

“We all talked,” Wesley said. “Buffy agreed not to do anything that would indicate she knows that
she’s being followed, and Giles is going to call the Council. He thought they might take an interest, particularly if the Initiative attacks the Slayer.”

“I imagine they will,” Spike replied. “Not that I’m a big fan of those wankers, but at least they seem to know when to leave well enough alone.”

“How soon do you think they’ll make their move?” Willow asked.

“Dunno,” Spike said. “Could be today, could be a week from now. I imagine it’ll happen when they decide the Slayer is more a liability than an asset.”

“That might be sooner rather than later,” Wesley warned, explaining what had happened with the vampire and Rof. “Riley seemed to believe her story, but that doesn’t mean the others will.”

Spike’s expression was grim. “Thanks for looking after Rof, mate. He’s—”

“Rof is someone I would much prefer to have alive,” Wesley said. “Buffy was the one who did the real work, though; I merely provided the distraction.”

“Well, nice work either way,” Spike said. He glanced around at the books. “You lot need my help with anything?”

“Do you have some place to be?” Willow asked.

“Told Joyce I’d come by today,” Spike replied.

Wesley smiled. “Go. I think we’ve got things covered.”

Tara was startled when Spike met her eyes again; he’d seemed too preoccupied to give her more than a passing glance. “I appreciate you helping us out,” he said sincerely. “We could use a few more allies to even up the odds a bit.”

He left before Tara could frame a reply, and Willow turned to look at her. “What did you think?”
Tara shook her head, unsure what to think, other than she had never seen an aura quite like his before. “He seems really worried,” she finally said.

“Yeah,” Willow agreed. “I think he has been for a couple of months now.”

Wesley came back to join them at the table. “Let’s get started,” he said. “The sooner we have this spell completed, the better off we’ll all be.”

Tara nodded, picking up a book, unable to shake the feeling she got from the vampire. He was either the scariest person she’d ever met—or the safest. It was an interesting combination to say the least, and she had the sense that it would be a very bad thing to be one of those soldiers at the moment.

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The last thing Buffy had wanted to do was to pay another visit to the Initiative’s underground laboratory. She was supposed to be in class, and if Spike found out she’d put herself at this kind of risk, he’d probably have a fit.

There was no way she could get out of it without letting on that she knew they were suspicious of her, though, and she was with Riley. While the rest of the Initiative soldiers might be scary, Buffy was absolutely convinced that Riley was as straight as they came. He believed in what they were doing, and that their motives were good.

Buffy really didn’t want to find out where his allegiance was if they tried to prevent her from leaving, but there was no way around it.

Walsh and Engelman were conducting the briefing on the Polgara demon, the evening’s target, instructing them to capture it alive and not to damage the bone skewer in its arm. “Why aren’t we supposed to damage this polka thing’s arm?” Buffy asked.

All eyes turned to look at her. This wasn’t the first time she had asked a question during a briefing, and while Buffy knew it was frowned upon, she wasn’t going to let that stop her. If Walsh and the others were already suspicious, why fight it? She’d get as much information as she could, including the reasoning behind capturing this demon alive.
“It’s important for our research,” Engelman replied, his tone disapproving. “Now, can we move on?”

Buffy sat through the rest of the briefing, feeling increasingly anxious. When Walsh and Engelman dismissed the soldiers, Buffy took her opportunity to slip off, looking for anything that might give her a clue as to what the rumors about 314 had meant.

The Slayer watched as a man in a lab coat went through a door. She’d thought she’d gotten a tour of most of the facility, but she had never been down that hallway. It seemed like it was a good possibility that there might be something behind door number one that they didn’t want her to see.

Moving quickly, she slipped through the door just before it shut and latched. The hallway she found herself in was just another featureless hallway with numbered rooms behind heavy steel doors, and while there wasn’t a door number one, there was a room numbered 314. Buffy headed towards it, wanting to get a peek through the small window.

“What are you doing back here?”

She turned to see Dr. Engelman frowning at her. “What?”

“What are you doing here?” he repeated. “Only authorized personnel are allowed here.”

Buffy put on her most innocent expression. “I had no idea,” she said. “I was looking for the ladies’ room. It’s not down this hallway?”

“No, it’s not,” Engelman said. “This way, please.”

Buffy had no choice but to follow him out the door and back into the large open area inside the laboratory. Seeing Riley, she said cheerfully, “You know, I think I’ll just get Riley to show me back upstairs. I get so turned around in here.”

She hurried over to him, feeling the doctor’s eyes on her back, and Buffy knew that she was going to have to be extra careful when they went after that Polgara tonight.
Joyce ushered Spike inside. “I’m glad you could make it,” she said.

“You call and I come,” he replied.

She gave him a look. “How have you been?”

Spike wouldn’t meet her eyes, unable to bear the reproach he knew would be there. “All right.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

The words were soft, and if Spike could have blushed, he would have. “It’s been one of the worst weeks of my life,” he said. “Is that what you wanted to hear?”

He knew he sounded defiant and angry, but he really didn’t care. Buffy might have been hurt by his behavior, but he’d been hurt by hers as well, and Spike refused to be the bad guy in this.

“Oh, William.”

It was her tone of voice that had him looking up to see her face. Instead of rebuke, he saw nothing but sympathy in her eyes. “I’m sorry,” he muttered. “It’s just that—”

“Misunderstandings happen,” Joyce said quietly. “I’ve been there myself, and there are always two sides to a story.”

He looked down, scratching the back of his head awkwardly. “Yeah, well, I feel like I should have handled it better.”

She sighed. “Come have some hot chocolate.” Joyce put her arm around his shoulders. “You can tell me what you’ve been up to.”
“Not much to tell,” he replied. “Mostly I’ve just been following Buffy around, trying to make sure she doesn’t get hurt.” Spike hesitated before saying, “Went to L.A. to get some information and advice. I think I got things straightened out. You were right about it taking time.”

“Of course I was right,” Joyce said, smiling. “When is a mother ever wrong?”

He gave her a sheepish grin. “Yeah. Should have listened to you sooner.”

Joyce dropped a kiss on his forehead. “Just remember that for next time.”

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“She was snooping?” Walsh asked. “Did she see anything of importance?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Engelman replied. “I think I got there before she saw what was inside 314, but she shouldn’t have been there in the first place. She’s proving to be a liability.”

Walsh nodded. “I believe you’re right. She’s supposed to be with the squad capturing the Polgara, but I think I’ll put Agent Finn on that detail and ask Agent Gates to take Miss Summers with him. It’s probably better that Riley doesn’t know what we’re doing.”

Engelman frowned. “Do you think it’s wise to try to bring her back in? Some of the men might object; she looks human enough, and—”

Walsh cut him off. “I’m not worried about that. There’s a room right next door to Adam’s that should hold her. I don’t plan on keeping her alive for very long—just long enough to run some tests.”

“And then?” Engelman asked.

Walsh smiled, although it didn’t reach her eyes. “Then, I think I might have the perfect foundation for Eve.”
Buffy knew something was up when she didn’t see Riley anywhere. “Hey,” she said, hoping her nerves didn’t show in her voice. “Where’s Riley tonight?”

“He took a different team,” Forrest replied. “We decided to split up so we can cover more ground.”

She smiled uneasily. “That makes sense.”

It might make sense, but it didn’t make her feel better. Out of all the soldiers, Riley was the one who had seemed the most open to her presence, and the most enthusiastic about her help. Graham had been almost as nice, although his stoicism rivaled Oz’s, and so it was hard to get a read on him.

Forrest, on the other hand, was definitely the most hostile, and she didn’t recognize any of the other guys on the squad. Although Buffy had proven her ability to take care of herself after the training exercise she’d participated in last week, that didn’t mean she was comfortable with six to one odds.

Buffy tried to maintain her calm by telling herself that Spike was somewhere nearby, watching her back. Even if they did try something—and even if they managed to take her by surprise—she had no doubt that Spike would be there, making certain that nothing happened to her.

Too bad that thought didn’t offer her much comfort.

“So, uh, do I get one of those?” Buffy asked, eyeing the blasters that each soldier carried.

Forrest raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t bring an extra,” he said, his tone cool. “I thought you usually brought your own weapons to the party.”

“Yeah, of course I did,” Buffy replied. “It’s just that my weapons tend to be a little more lethal than yours.”
He shrugged. “Then maybe you ought to let us take the first shot at the demon.”

“Right,” Buffy replied. That was fine with her; she was probably going to be too focused on keeping the soldiers from getting the jump on her to pay much attention to a Polgara.

They started their patrol, moving through the woods near campus, every muscle in Buffy’s body tense. She couldn’t sense Spike anywhere nearby, and that worried her. What if he’d gotten caught up in something? Or what if one of the other patrols saw him?

The snapping of a branch startled her, and she turned toward the sound, suddenly realizing that she had somehow lost sight of three of the soldiers. Buffy glanced over at Forrest, who had stopped moving. “What is it?” she whispered.

He smiled nastily. “It’s the end of the line for you.”

Before she could react, Buffy felt the electricity of the taser shooting through her body, and the sharp pinch of tranq darts in her left arm and right leg. She didn’t even have time to wonder where Spike was before the darkness took her.

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Spike had been keeping his distance from the small knot of soldiers. He’d overheard Buffy’s conversation with one of them about weapons, and he knew there was a good chance that if they were going to attempt to capture the Slayer, it would be now.

He watched as the lead soldier stopped, and he could hear Buffy’s question and the man’s response. Spike rushed towards her, but he was too far away to prevent her from getting hit with the taser and two tranq darts.

Bursting into action, Spike knocked out the soldier with the taser by throwing him into a tree, and kicked one of the men holding a dart gun in the side of the head with a heavy boot. Forrest hit him with a blast from his high-tech weapon, but Spike just snarled, his face changing as he tackled the man, sinking his teeth into the soldier’s throat. He might have been tempted to drain him, but the soldier’s blood had a funny, chemical taste, and Spike spat it back out onto the ground.

At the last moment, Spike refrained from snapping the man’s neck, settling for hitting him with a
hard left hook to his jaw. The soldier went limp, and Spike made quick work of the remaining three.

Going to Buffy’s side, he felt for a pulse, finding it slow and steady under his fingers. Spike gently felt for the darts, pulling both out, as well as the leads from the taser. He pocketed one of the darts, concerned that they might need to know what kind of chemical they’d used to down the Slayer.

For now, however, going anywhere that the Initiative might look was out of the question. Until Buffy was back on her feet again, they couldn’t risk being seen. He cradled her limp body in his arms, heading towards his car.

Spike knew just the place.
“Let me not to the marriage of true minds/Admit impediments. Love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds,/Or bends with the remover to remove./O no, it is an ever-fixèd mark/That looks on tempests and is never shaken;/It is the star to every wand’ring bark,/Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken./Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks/Within his bending sickle’s compass come;/Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,/But bears it out even to the edge of doom./If this be error and upon me proved./I never writ, nor no man ever loved.” ~William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 116”

Buffy didn’t even have time to get her eyes open before the nausea hit her. She rolled over onto her side, beginning to retch, feeling strong hands on her head and back. Spike’s calm voice immediately reassured her. “That’s right, luv. I’ve got you. Not going anywhere.”

By the time she stopped vomiting, Buffy was gasping, her stomach muscles aching as tears streamed from her eyes. She tried opening them, but the light hurt so badly that she squeezed them tightly shut again. “Spike—”


She felt the glass at her lips and did as directed, opening one eye just enough to see the wastebasket Spike was holding under her head. “What happened?”

“Those bastards hit you with two tranq darts, and enough chemicals to put an elephant down. Reckon you probably have the worst hangover you’ll ever have.” She felt the bed move as he stood. “Just sit tight. I’m going to close those curtains and get rid of this mess.”

Buffy was too miserable to even move. She had a splitting headache, and her stomach was still roiling; she just hoped that Spike got back before she heaved again, because she wasn’t sure she could sit up, let alone get to the bathroom.

She heard the sound of a door opening and closing, and then a few seconds later heard it again. “I’m going to shut the curtains,” Spike said, wanting to let her know that it was only him. There was the soft sound of moving fabric, and then Buffy tried opening her eyes again.

Even the dim light hurt, but it wasn’t nearly as bad. She moved her head slightly as Spike came to sit next to her on the bed. “More water?” he asked.
“Please.” He wouldn’t let her take more than a little bit at a time, even though her mouth and throat were parched. “Spike—”

“Don’t want you getting sick again,” he said softly. “Best to go slow for right now.”

When she’d finally had enough, Spike put the glass back on the nightstand, and Buffy reached for him, her hand finding his. “Where are we?”

“A hotel I found awhile back,” Spike replied. “Looked into coming here for your birthday, just the two of us, before everything went to hell. I already called your mum, and she said she’d let the rest of them know what happened.”

“How long was I out?” she asked.

Spike hesitated. “Over twenty-four hours. I was about ready to take you to the hospital. Didn’t want to, because the Initiative might be watching for that, but when you wouldn’t wake up…”

Buffy opened her eyes, trying to sit up with some difficulty; she hadn’t been this weak since she’d had the flu, not long before Spike got to town. He helped her to sit with the support of his arm behind her shoulders, propping her up against the headboard.

She got a better look at the room they were in; it was nicer than she’d expected. The walls were wood-paneled and wallpapered, the colors dark and rich. Although Buffy didn’t know much about that sort of thing, the furniture appeared to be mostly antiques, and the bed was luxuriously soft. It wasn’t what she’d expected for a hideaway, and she figured that was probably a good thing, since the Initiative wouldn’t expect them to be in a place like this either.

“I’m sorry,” Spike said softly.

Buffy looked at him in surprise. “For what?”

“Letting them…” he trailed off. “I should have been quicker, luv. You never should have been hurt.”
“I’ll be fine, Spike,” she replied. “Once this stuff is out of my system, I’ll be back to my normal self.”

He shook his head. “If I hadn’t left, this never would have happened.”

“And if I hadn’t agreed to work with the Initiative, you wouldn’t have left,” Buffy replied. “We’ve been through this, Spike. We both screwed up.”

Spike stood, walking away from the bed, his back to her. She wished she had the strength to go to him, but sitting up was about all she was capable of right then. “I never told you,” Spike said quietly. “About Angelus and Dru.”

“You told me enough,” Buffy said. “Angelus tortured you and Drusilla helped.”

Spike was quiet for a long moment. “That’s true, but it’s not the whole truth. I managed to escape once, before Angelus got cursed with his soul. Dru knew about it. She even helped me, brought me blood to make me stronger. She made me think she still loved me, and when I freed myself, she waited until I’d gotten as far as the door, just inches away from freedom, before she called Angelus in. She’d never meant to let me go; she was just messing with my head. Then she helped Angelus teach me a lesson. That’s where most of the scars are from.”

Buffy could see the parallels, even with the drugs in her system slowing her brain down. She hadn’t meant to betray Spike; her intention had been to protect him, but it probably hadn’t appeared that way to him. “Spike—”

“I know you didn’t mean it that way,” Spike said earnestly, turning to look at her finally. “Didn’t mean it made it any easier to let it go after what they did to me.”

Buffy swallowed. “I wish you had told me how it made you feel. I knew you’d been hurt, but I had no idea that they’d made you feel as though you were worthless or something.”

His expression was rueful. “I know, luv. I just—I couldn’t say it. Couldn’t bear to know you thought less of me, and then when you agreed to work with them…”
“I love you,” Buffy said. “I told you that a long time ago, and I meant it then. I don’t—when I saw what they were doing, I understood why you were so upset. I hadn’t imagined—I thought it was just a mistake, and then—” She broke off, not knowing how to explain. “Can we just go back to where we were?”

“Don’t think that’s a good idea,” Spike said quietly. “Where we were before—we weren’t being honest with each other. Figure we can move on from here, though.”

“Then can you just be with me right now?” Buffy asked, her eyes filling with tears, the after-effects of the drugs and her fear overwhelming her. She was scared to death that Spike didn’t love her anymore, at least not enough to be with her. The realization of how close she’d come to death hit her hard.

He was at her side in two long strides, pulling her to him. Buffy clung to him, burying her face in his shoulder, shaking with the force of fear and relief in equal measure. “It’s going to be okay,” Spike promised, holding her tightly. “It’s all going to be okay, luv. I’m not going anywhere. We’re going to get through this together.”

They clung to each other as the sun set and the room grew dark, until they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

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Wesley watched Willow, his head propped up on one hand. He loved watching her sleep, the way he could almost see the dreams moving behind her closed eyes, her slow smile when she opened her eyes to see him there.

They had been up late the night before, waiting for Spike’s call letting them know that Buffy was awake and all was well. It had been nearly two in the morning before the call came in; he’d apologized for falling asleep and then told them that the Slayer was fine, aside from being a little sick from the drugs.

Giles had ordered them to stay put, telling Spike that he would work on keeping them both safe from his end, but that they needed to keep out of sight for the time being.

Wesley had offered Willow a ride home from the Summers’ house, but she’d declined, saying that she would rather stay with him, especially since it was a Friday night and she didn’t have to worry
about classes the next morning.

They had made some headway on the permanent locator spell, but it would probably be another day or two before they were ready to attempt it. With a little luck, they would know more about what they could expect from the Initiative by then. If Spike and Buffy were forced to stay away from Sunnydale, the locator spell could be that much more useful.

Although they still had to find something to tie it to.

Wesley could see her beginning to wake and brushed the hair out of her face, his smile matching her own.

“Mmm…what time is it?”

“Not quite nine,” he replied. “Go back to sleep.”

Her eyes fluttered open. “Why would I want to do that when there are so many other things we could be doing?”

His smile broadened. “I have no idea. We were up pretty late, though.”

“I’m young.” Willow gave him an impish grin as she stretched. “You, on the other hand, are old, and need all the sleep you can get.”

“Take that back,” he ordered. “I am not old.”

“Ancient,” she insisted, spoiling her serious face with a giggle.

Wesley raised an eyebrow. “We’ll see about that,” he challenged, beginning to tickle her.

She shrieked with laughter, scrambling across the bed to get away, only to have Wesley grab her hand and tug her back. Willow fell across him in a laughing heap.
It felt good for both of them to laugh after the fear and tension of the last few days. They were all safe for the moment, and their friends were together again; they would take the respite where they could get it.

“Do you really think I’m old?” Wesley asked after a moment, a plaintive note in his voice.

Willow snorted. “Oh, please, Wes. You’re not that old.”

“I’m older than you by a good bit,” he retorted.

She lifted her head to look at him. “Does that bother you?”

“How could it bother me when I’m with you?” he asked, perfectly serious. “But does it bother you?”

Willow sat up, sitting cross-legged on the bed. “Why should it?” she asked. “You’re successful, fun, handsome…” Willow ran her fingers down his bare chest. “I’m not seeing the bad anywhere in that.”

“Yes, but—” He stopped. “Don’t mind me. It must be the lack of sleep.”

Willow shook her head, keeping a hand on his chest. Wesley would have been able to brush her off easily, but he remained still, his eyes on her face. “I don’t think of you as old,” Willow finally said after a long silence. “But I don’t know that I’ve ever thought of myself as young.”

He took her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. “What did you think of yourself as?”

“I don’t know,” Willow replied. “But I always got along better with adults than with people my own age. I mean, Xander was always my best friend, since we were in footie pajamas. We looked out for each other, you know?”

Wesley nodded. “I think I understand.”
“Xander and Jesse and me—we were the three stooges, and then Jesse was killed and Buffy came, all at the same time. Buffy was so—so cool,” Willow said earnestly. “She was brave and strong and everything I wasn’t, but she makes the people around her better, you know? She makes you want to try to be all the things that she is, so you can hang out with her.”

“And Oz?” Wesley asked, noticing that she’d left him out.

Willow gave him a sad smile. “Oz was cool, too. He was the first guy who really noticed me, and he made me believe I was special.”

“You are.”

She looked away. “Sometimes I believe that, but more often I look in the mirror, and I still see plain, reliable Willow Rosenberg.”

“And I look at you sometimes and I wonder how it is that I could be with such a charming, intelligent woman,” Wesley replied softly. “I keep waiting to wake up, or for you to wake up and decide I’m not such a prize.”

Willow laughed. “And I see this really brave guy who used to scream at the sight of vampires.”

He gave her a sour look. “You had to bring that up?”

“You’ve changed,” Willow pointed out. “People call you now when they need somebody.”

“I keep waiting for them to figure out that I don’t know what I’m doing most of the time,” Wesley confessed, then paused. “May I ask you something?”

Willow knew it was serious when he had that expression on his face. “Okay.”

“That night in the haunted house—what was your fear?”
Willow didn’t hesitate. “That the magic would get out of hand, and I’d lose control. What was yours?”

“That I was shut up in a closet,” Wesley replied. “I don’t care for small, dark spaces.”

Willow made a face. “That would be pretty scary.”

“I think I’m in love with you,” he confessed suddenly.

Willow’s heart leapt. “Good, because that makes two of us.”

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Spike could feel Buffy begin to stir in his arms and loosened his grip slightly, not wanting to frighten her. She had trembled for hours, both before and after going to sleep, as much from fear as the drugs they’d put into her system. He’d had to help her to the bathroom when she’d woken in the middle of the night, which was when he’d called Giles to let the others know that the Slayer was awake, and that she would be all right.

He hoped so, anyway. It was always hard to tell with heavy drugs.

She moaned a little as she woke, but Spike waited until her eyes opened before he asked, “How are you feeling, luv?”

“A little better,” Buffy said. “I think I might actually be able to stand up on my own now.”

“That’s something,” he encouraged. “You want to get up?”

“Not really,” she replied, burrowing back down into the covers closer to him. “I think I’d like to lay here a little longer.”

He smiled, pulling her closer. “According to your Watcher, we’re officially on vacation until he can clear a few things up, so you can sleep as long as you like.”
“What about you?” she asked, sounding sleepy. “You can sleep, too.”

“Don’t need it,” Spike replied. “I only need a few hours at a time, and I got that. You want me to go pick up a few things for you?”

Buffy’s eyes fluttered open again. “Are you sure it’s okay?”

“Positive,” Spike said. “I wouldn’t go out if I thought any different. Besides, I didn’t leave those bastards in any kind of shape to tail us, and I was careful. We weren’t followed.”

She sighed, her eyes drifting shut again. “’kay, but hurry back.”

“You got it.” Spike waited until her breathing was slow and even before rising from the bed, pulling on his boots. He’d left the rest of his clothing on, wanting to be ready for anything on the off chance that someone had managed to find them. He didn’t necessarily want to leave her, as Buffy was still in no condition to fight; he wanted to send the dart he’d kept to Giles, however, just to make sure she would be all right, as well as pick up a few other things.

Spike had been keeping a traveling case in the trunk of his car for the last couple of weeks, ever since Buffy had agreed to work with the Initiative. Although he’d never planned on leaving her, he had been well aware that he might need to make a quick getaway.

There had also been the quiet voice in the back of his mind that had warned that Buffy might turn against him. That the soldiers might get to her, convince her that he was nothing more than a monster.

Those doubts had served him well enough that he now had everything he needed for a week or two in the trunk, but Buffy had the clothes on her back and nothing more. Spike knew she’d need both fresh clothing and toiletries, and he had no problem purchasing both for her.

Besides, he was still feeling guilty over her getting hurt. If only he’d been a little faster, or trusted her a little more, or been a little stronger. Spike knew that he might have done a dozen things differently that would have prevented Buffy from nearly getting killed.
Hell, he might have kidnapped her when she’d first said she was going to work with the soldiers, and then held her until she came to her senses. Not that it would have been the best option, but he could have.

The self-recriminations kept him company as Spike picked up the things he knew Buffy would need for a week’s stay, as well as a few things he knew she’d like. By the time he made it back to the hotel, it was late afternoon, and the Slayer was sitting up in bed watching TV.

“I see someone’s feeling better,” Spike said.

Buffy shrugged. “I can stand and walk, and I think I might even be getting hungry, so I’m definitely improved.”

“You want room service?” he asked. “I can call for it.”

“Let’s give it a little while,” Buffy replied. “I think my stomach might be ready for solids, but it’s early yet.” Her eyes lit up when she saw the bags. “Oooh! Presents!”

“Yeah, I picked up a few things for you, since we’re going to be here for a bit. Don’t know when we’ll make it back to Sunnydale.”

She winced. “Did you talk to Mom at all?”

“Not last night,” Spike said. “You can call her, though. Just be careful about letting her know where we are.”

“I don’t know where we are,” Buffy pointed out, taking the bags from him and beginning to look through them. “You still haven’t said anything other than we’re at some kind of inn.”

Spike sat on the edge of the bed, watching as she pulled articles of clothing out of the bags. Mostly it was just basics—a couple pairs of jeans, a few shirts, a set of pajamas, as well as personal hygiene items. He’d thought he knew her fairly well until he’d tried to go clothes-shopping for her; although Spike had no problem with sizes, he wasn’t sure what she’d like. “Is it okay?”
“It’s fine,” Buffy assured him. “It’ll be nice just to have something clean to wear.” She gave a little cry of delight when she saw the bubble bath. “Perfect. That tub is huge!”

“You should go soak,” he encouraged. “Get some of the ache out of your muscles.”

Buffy frowned at him. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“What are you going to eat, for starters?” she asked. “Room service is fine for me, but I don’t think they have what you need.”

There was a long, pregnant pause. “Actually, they do.”

Buffy blinked. “Excuse me?”

“That’s one of the reasons I thought about bringing you here for your birthday,” Spike said. “Robert, one of my clients, told me about this place. Demons and humans are welcome here, and the owner has a reputation for making sure everyone who comes in leaves in one piece. It’s very exclusive, and there’s no way that the Initiative will ever find out that we’re here.”

“Oh.” Buffy stared at him, and Spike wondered if he’d stepped over the line. This was the safest—and nicest—place he could think to bring her, but if she was uncomfortable, he wouldn’t ask her to stay.

Just when he thought she was going to let him have it, Buffy’s face softened and she took his hand, putting the bottle of bubble bath in it. “Join me?” she invited.

Spike smiled, feeling something loosen in his chest. Maybe she did understand after all.
Chapter 32

“Good-night? ah! no; the hour is ill/Which severs those it should unite;/Let us remain together still,/Then it will be good night./How can I call the lone night good,/Though thy sweet wishes wing its flight/?Be it not said, thought, understood—/Then it will be good night./To hearts which near each other move/From evening close to morning light./The night is good; because, my love,/They never say good-night.” ~Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Good-Night”

“Wait, Buffy attacked Forrest?” Riley said, trying to make sense of what Professor Walsh was telling him. “Why?”

Walsh stood. “Does it matter what her motives were?” she asked. “The Slayer is obviously not the ally we believed her to be. We know that she was working with a vampire.”

He still didn’t understand how that could be. Riley had watched Buffy fight the Gentlemen; he’d seen her dust vampires and kill demons. She was either a very good actress or there was something else going on here.

“What are your orders?” Riley finally asked.

Walsh’s face was grim. “For right now, you’re to do nothing. Approaching Miss Summers openly will only risk exposing the entire operation. If you see her, I want you to let me know. We’ll have to move carefully on this one.”

Riley nodded, leaving Walsh’s office and heading for the elevator. Forrest was in the infirmary, and he would remain under quarantine until they knew he hadn’t been infected. He knew the other soldiers who had been in the detail, but they were still being treated for broken bones and other injuries, and Riley didn’t want to ask them about what had happened while they were inside the lab.

Not when someone could be watching.

It wasn’t that he believed that Walsh was lying, but he also didn’t quite see how she could be telling the truth. More likely than not, something had happened while the team was out on patrol, something no one wanted to admit to. Maybe they had been attacked, but by a lone vampire who had managed to take all of them out.
That would be embarrassing enough to get them to falsify a report, and Riley knew that Forrest and some of the other guys didn’t like Buffy. It would be easy enough to blame her, especially if the vampire had grabbed her; there was no reason to believe that she’d survive, so they didn’t have to worry about her showing up and disagreeing with their story.

If no one knew the truth, though, and Buffy did somehow show up again—well, Riley knew that even if Walsh didn’t give the order, some of the other men might take matters into their own hands.

Riley told himself that he wasn’t questioning orders; all he wanted was to get to the truth so that no one had to get hurt.

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Joyce hung up the phone with a sigh of relief. She trusted Spike, of course, and she had believed him when he’d told her that Buffy would be fine, but his reassurances were no substitute for actually hearing Buffy’s voice. Although she’d been sick upon waking, she was feeling much better, and they would be home as soon as they could.

It hadn’t hurt to hear Spike’s rumbling voice in the background, and Buffy giggling at whatever he said. Apparently, they weren’t fighting anymore, and Joyce was relieved.

“How is she?” Giles asked.

She turned to look at him. “Better. Buffy said she was still feeling a little weak, but it’s passing. She sounds better.”

Giles nodded, pulling off his glasses. It had been a long couple of days for him, and he hadn’t been able to get much sleep since Spike had called and told them about the soldiers’ attempted capture. They’d all waited for his call to let them know that Buffy had regained consciousness, but after that Giles had gone to work.

There were still a few people on the Council that he’d kept in touch with, a few friends from the old days who were sympathetic to him and to his Slayer. Although Travers and his lot were steeped in tradition, not every Watcher embraced the old ways to the exclusion of anything new.
Giles had contacted every one of them that he could think of, and then had convinced several to talk to Travers. Perhaps he hadn’t been able to get much in the way of information out of those sources, but that didn’t mean that they couldn’t wield some influence.

Buffy, in spite of her decision to quit the Council, was still viewed as the Council’s territory. Travers, especially, would not like the idea that she was being targeted by a military organization, not with Faith in a coma and unlikely to recover.

The Council needed a Slayer, and Buffy was the one they had. Besides, Giles had a feeling that they wouldn’t agree with the Initiative’s methods. The experimentation indicated that they might be trying to find a way to use demons as weapons; Giles knew that the Council had tried to do the same in the past, but they’d failed so miserably that they were rather against anyone trying it again.

Giles couldn’t expect anyone else to put up with the time difference, however, and so he’d lost quite a bit of sleep, making phone calls and arguing with people.

Joyce put her hands on his shoulders, kneading tense muscles. “You should try and get some sleep,” she encouraged. “I’ll let you know if anyone calls.”

He shook his head. “I’m waiting for a call from Travers, and I’ll need to be sharp.”

“With a little sleep—”

“I’ll be muddle-headed,” Giles said, putting one hand over hers where it rested on his shoulder. “There will be time enough to sleep once I get this taken care of.”

“Do you think they’ll agree?”

“Yes, but I think they’ll ask for something in return,” Giles replied. “And given how Buffy feels about the Council, it might be out of the frying pan and into the fire.”

“At least they’re not trying to kill her,” Joyce said philosophically. “She’s the only Slayer they have, right?”
Giles sighed, leaning back and giving himself over to her ministrations. “That’s right, but the Council has been less than enthusiastic about her relationship with Spike, and I’ve had to put up with more than a few speeches about how Wesley has betrayed his Council oath.”

She snorted. “Please. They fired him, which cancels any promises he might have made.”

He chuckled at her outraged tone. “I don’t think he’s violating any principles, but Watchers take a life-long oath. Whether you work for the Council or not, you’re expected to follow its precepts.”

“Maybe they ought to rethink their rules,” she said. “Because they’re firing their best people.”

Giles murmured a disclaimer, but he wore a pleased grin nonetheless. The phone rang, and Giles picked it up. “This is Rupert Giles.”

“Rupert, this is Quentin Travers,” came the deep, measured voice. “I have an offer for you.”

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Tara’s eyes were wide as she listened to Willow’s story. “So we really need to work on that permanent locator spell,” Willow finished up. “Giles said he didn’t think we needed to worry about the Initiative coming after any of us, but if something were to happen, we wouldn’t have to take the time to get a spell together.”

At the expression on Tara’s face, Willow added, “I mean, you don’t have to help if you’re worried about them coming after you. I would understand if you didn’t want anything to do with us.”

Tara shook her head. “No, it’s just—it’s scary, but I want to help,” she said firmly.

“Good.” Willow grinned at her. “I don’t think we could do this without you.”

“I think it’s going to take all three of us,” Wesley agreed as he sat down at their table.
They had agreed to meet in one of the student lounges on campus to make plans, and then make a
decision as to where to go from there. The spell would require Xander to be present, if he was
going to be the only one who could activate the spell; that meant that neither Wesley’s apartment,
nor one of the girls’ dorm rooms would be the best location since there really wasn’t room to set
up the spell.

“Hey, you,” Willow greeted him. “Did you talk to Giles yet?”

“No yet,” Wesley said. “When I called, Joyce said he was in the middle of negotiations with the
Council, so I thought it best to leave him alone.” He smiled at Tara. “How are you?”

“Good,” she replied, then began digging through her bag, pulling out two objects. “I thought these
might work.”

Wesley leaned forward. There were two maps, one of Sunnydale, and very detailed, and one of the
continental United States, although much less detailed. “Will these stand up to much use?”

“I-I th-think so,” Tara replied, pulling a book out of her bag, showing him the passage she’d
marked. “I-I f-f-found this i-in one of my mom’s b-books.”

He scanned the spell, impressed as he saw what it was for. Wesley showed the spell to Willow,
who beamed at Tara. “This is perfect!”

“It was used for old documents, so they wouldn’t be destroyed,” Tara said, buoyed by their
enthusiastic response. “I thought it might be helpful for the maps.”

“Oh, quite helpful,” Wesley replied. “I think this will give us just what we need to complete the
spell. Well done, Tara.”

She blushed a bright red. “I-it’s n-no b-big deal.”

Before either of them could assure her that it was a very big deal, Riley appeared behind Willow.
“Can I talk to you for a minute, Willow?”
“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Wesley said, rising from his seat at the table.

Willow shook her head at him. “Wesley…”

“I don’t want him near you,” Wesley said, his voice deadly. Although Riley had a few inches on him, and about fifty pounds, Willow was pretty sure that Wesley would win in a fight. Mostly because she knew that Spike had taught him to fight dirty.

“What did you want, Riley?” Willow asked, standing up and inserting herself between the two men. She had to admit that it was kind of nice to have a guy willing to throw himself into danger for her, but Willow had no desire to be the cause of bloodshed.

“It’s about Buffy,” Riley said. “I think she might be in trouble.”

Willow drew herself up, staring at him in disbelief. “I don’t believe you!” she hissed. “After what you did, you’re going to pretend to be concerned? You know, I thought you were a nice guy.” She turned to the others. “We should probably get going.”

As she started to walk away, Riley grabbed her arm. “Look, Willow, I don’t know what you were told, but—”

“Get your hands off of her.” Wesley’s hand was inside his jacket, and Willow knew that the only thing preventing him from pulling the weapon she was certain that he had was the surrounding students.

Willow quickly shook him off, retreating towards Wesley, her back bumping into his chest. “Don’t make this worse, Riley,” she warned him. “Just leave us alone.”

She tucked her hand through Wesley’s arm, hoping that he would take the hint. They hurried away, and Willow glanced over her shoulder only to see Riley standing there with a strange expression on his face; he almost looked like he was in pain, but that didn’t make any sense. Buffy was the one who had been hurt.

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“You should probably roll over,” Buffy observed.

Spike didn’t bother opening his eyes. “Luv, if the sun won’t kill me, I doubt I have to worry about getting burned by sun lamps.”

“That’s so not the point,” she replied, shaking up the bottle of suntan lotion, warm from being under the fake-sun lamps.

He cracked an eyelid. “Then what is the point?” At her lifted eyebrow, Spike leered at her. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“Because you’re the one with a gutter-brain, so you’re supposed to know these things,” she teased, watching as he rolled over onto his stomach. Buffy began working the warm lotion into his back, reflecting that it was probably a miracle that she’d gotten Spike to agree to hang out with her by the pool at all. The extensive scarring on his back, as well as the new one on his chest, made Spike just a little shy about appearing in public without a shirt.

On the other hand, he seemed more comfortable here, with humans and demons freely mingling in equal measure. So far, Buffy hadn’t seen any other vampires, but there were a number of people whose features indicated that they had a little demon blood in them, and others who were fully demon.

Everyone seemed fairly intent on keeping to themselves, remaining in the company of people they knew, rather than trying to make new friends. It was different and weird.

And Buffy felt more comfortable here than she probably would have at any other hotel.

There was no worrying about making sure Spike had blood, or wondering where and how they were going to get it. She didn’t have to be concerned about suddenly having to work, because no one here was going to attack her. The hotel had a strict no-violence policy, and management had ways of enforcing the policy that no one wanted to risk.

Best of all, though, was the fact that Spike was utterly and completely relaxed, more so than he’d been for months. It was obvious that he felt comfortable here, and Buffy would have been willing to stay for that reason alone. The fact that she was enjoying herself made it that much better.
Once she’d gotten done with his back, she handed the bottle to him. “Your turn.”

He snorted, but sat up to face her. “Now I see what kind of ulterior motives you had.”

Buffy just gave him a sweet smile. “Yep. I want your hands all over me.”

His blue eyes darkened. “Maybe we better take this back up to the room.”

“I’m liking this pool-side thing,” she replied. “I haven’t been able to work on my tan in a while.”

Spike’s nimble fingers slipped underneath her bikini straps so he could reach her entire back. “These lights are really something,” he agreed. “I know a few vampires who come here just for the experience of getting a tan without going up in flames.”

“How come there aren’t more vampires here?” Buffy asked. “I haven’t seen any besides you.”

“Told you this place was exclusive,” Spike reminded her. “It’s also very expensive. There aren’t a lot of people or demons who can afford to come here. Besides, most vampires are just as happy to live in cemeteries or warehouses; there aren’t many of us who can appreciate the finer things in life.”

Buffy let out a little sigh of pleasure as he massaged already-lax muscles. “Have I mentioned how grateful I am that you’re one-of-a-kind?”

“Don’t think so,” Spike replied. “But feel free to mention it as often as you like.”

His cell phone rang, and Spike paused to pick it up. “Yeah?” There was a long pause, and then he handed the phone to Buffy. “It’s Rupert for you.”

Buffy took the phone, stifling a groan. She was having a very nice vacation, and the last thing she wanted to hear was that things were already settled and they could go back to the Hellmouth. Of course, she did want to go back home at some point, but not until she’d had a few more days with Spike. They still had some repair work to do on their relationship.
“What’s up, Giles?” she said, trying not to sound too put out at his interruption.

“I’ve managed to talk Travers into approaching the Initiative about leaving you alone,” he began. “He had some conditions, though.”

“I’m not working for them again,” Buffy warned him. “I’ve had enough of that.”

Giles sighed. “They want reports, mostly; they don’t like being out of touch. I told them they’d get them, but I didn’t promise that I would be the one writing them.”

Buffy frowned. “Who is going to be writing them?”

“Preferably Spike or Wesley,” Giles replied. “They can edit them for content, and you can send the Council whatever information you decide is appropriate. In exchange, they’re going to do what they can to get the military to back off. I’ll call and let you know when things are settled.”

“So we should stay put for now?” Buffy asked hopefully.

“I think that would be best,” Giles responded. “I received the package from Spike today, and I’ll have Willow analyze the chemicals in the tranquilizer dart and let you know the results when we get them. Are you okay where you are?”

Buffy smiled. “We’re just fine, Giles. I think we can manage to be away for a few more days.”

“Take care of yourself, Buffy,” he said, then cut the connection.

“So we’re to stay put for a few more days, huh?” Spike asked.

“Yeah. Did Giles tell you about the deal he made with the Council?”

“He did. Guess I’ll be making use of my writing talents.”
“What talents?”

“Watch it,” Spike warned her, a teasing note in his voice. “You might find yourself in that pool.”

“You wouldn’t,” Buffy replied.

Oh, yes, he would.

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Xander blinked. “You want me to what?”

“We need you to be the key for the locator spell,” Willow replied.

He leaned back in his chair at the dining room table. Xander had come over immediately when Willow called to tell him they needed him; he hadn’t been involved in the slaying recently, as busy as he was with his various jobs and Anya. Besides, Buffy had Spike and Wesley to help her on the demon-fighting front, as well as Willow to help with the magic. He had been beginning to feel as though he wasn’t necessary.

“Why me?” he finally asked.

Willow seemed to know exactly what he was thinking. “Because we thought it was a good idea if you were the one who knew where everybody was. You still have that military experience, and you can rally the troops if something happens.”

Xander shrugged. “If you need me, then I’m here. What do I need to do?”

“Nothing, really,” Wesley replied. “Willow, Tara, and I will be casting the spell. You just need to be present so we can make sure that you’re the one with access to the maps.”
He was beginning to realize that this was not merely a back-up position. If something happened, like when the Initiative grabbed Spike, he'd be one of the people with the information they needed. He would also be in the best position to help locate the missing person; it was a big responsibility, in a way.

“When do we get started?” Xander asked.

Wesley glanced over at Giles. They had already explained what they wanted to do, and the older man had agreed that it was a good idea. There was no reason for the Initiative to know anything at all about Xander, and therefore he was the best person to have the maps. They would be safest with him.

“I think now would be a good time,” Giles said. “We’ll need a personal item for everyone involved, though.”

Xander hesitated. “Is there a way to include Anya? Since she used to be a demon, if the soldiers ever found out…”

“I think that would be fine,” Wesley said. “One more person won’t make it any more difficult at this point.”

He nodded. “I’ll need to go grab the personal stuff.”

“We have to get something for Spike and Buffy,” Willow pointed out. “Maybe we can meet back here in an hour.”

“Sure,” Xander said, beginning to get a warm feeling. It looked like he was needed, after all.
Chapter 33

“Those envied places which do know her well,/And are so scornful of this lonely place,/Even now for once are emptied of her grace:/Nowhere but here she is: and while Love’s spell/From his predominant presence doth compel/All alien hours, an outworn populace,/The hours of Love fill full the echoing space/With sweet confederate music favourable./Now many memories make solicitous/The delicate love-lines of her mouth, till, lit/With quivering fire, the words take wing from it;/As here between our kisses we sit thus/Speaking of things remembered, and so sit/Speechless while things forgotten call to us.” ~Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “A Day of Love”

Riley was still struggling with Willow’s earlier reaction. When she’d been in Professor Walsh’s class, she’d always been friendly towards him; today, she had been downright hostile. The man she had been with had been prepared to pull a weapon on him, and he’d looked dangerous. Somehow, Riley hadn’t pegged Willow as the sort to hang out with a guy like that.

Besides, after what Willow had said—she’d thought he was a nice guy, but she apparently didn’t think so any longer. Riley could only assume that Buffy’s friends had been told a very different story from the one the soldiers had given. It didn’t make any sense at all.

Riley Finn had always been known as a good guy. He’d done well in school, performed well on the basketball court for his high school, joined ROTC to get through college, and followed orders. He believed in his mission, and he hadn’t hesitated to join up with the Initiative when the recruiter had told him that he would have the opportunity to save lives and make a real difference.

That’s all he’d really wanted, was to make a difference.

While he knew that the other soldiers within the Initiative looked on Buffy with suspicion and some measure of disdain—she’d wiped the floor with them in every exercise, after all—Riley liked her. What’s more, he admired her, recognizing in Buffy that same sense of duty he felt in himself; being the Slayer was more than a job to her, just as being a soldier was more than drawing a paycheck to him.

At the same time, Riley trusted his men, and he trusted Professor Walsh; if they said that the Slayer had switched sides, then he had no choice but to believe them.

And yet that uncomfortable feeling just wouldn’t go away.
After turning it over and over in his mind, Riley deliberately determined not to think about it. There was nothing he could do to discover the truth behind what had happened, not until some of the men who had been injured were out of the infirmary or Forrest was out of quarantine. Or, in the alternative, Riley could get one of Buffy’s friends to tell him what they knew. Until then, Riley would do what he’d always done: take his vitamins and follow orders.

Even though it felt as though everything was just a little off.

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Tara entered the house, feeling just a little bit nervous; it would be the first time she would be meeting any of Willow or Wesley’s friends, with the exception of Spike. Really, she’d only gotten a glimpse of him, so Tara didn’t feel as though she’d actually “met” him.

What made the nerves worse was that she was going to be one of the anchors for the locator spell, and if it didn’t work, she would be to blame. Well, they would all be responsible, but since she was the only person unknown to the rest of the group, Tara felt as though there was extra pressure on her to perform well.

She felt Wesley’s hand brush her shoulder in a friendly gesture, and when she glanced up at him, he offered her a reassuring smile. “I promise we don’t bite,” he murmured.

Tara couldn’t help the shy smile that crossed her face.

Willow started the introductions as they entered the living room. “Tara, this is Giles—he’s Buffy’s Watcher, and Mrs. Summers.” Tara nodded nervously at the middle-aged man and woman; she never was quite sure what to do about authority figures—particularly male authority figures. “And this is Xander and Anya,” Willow finished, indicating the young man and woman who both appeared to be her own age. “Xander’s the one we’re linking the spell to.”

“Hi.” It was about the only word she could manage with stuttering horribly, and Tara didn’t feel like fighting to speak.

Wesley stepped in smoothly. “Did you get the personal items, Xander?”
Xander nodded. “I think so.” He looked a little anxious. “I wasn’t sure what to bring, so I grabbed a couple of things, just in case.”

“That should be fine,” Wesley said. “It just needs to be an item that’s connected to you.”

Xander shrugged and placed his favorite comic book on the coffee table. “As long as the spell isn’t going to damage it,” he warned.

“It won’t,” Willow assured him.

One by one, they placed their items on the table next to Xander’s; a scarf for Anya, a book for Giles, one of Joyce’s necklaces, Mr. Gordo for Buffy, Spike’s spare cigarette lighter, Willow’s pentacle, one of Wesley’s toy soldiers from his childhood, and a ring for Tara that her mother had given her.

“That should work nicely,” Wesley said, sounding satisfied with the motley assortment. “We’ll get the circle set up, and then we can cast the spell.”

“Did you want to do it in here?” Joyce asked. “There might be more room in the basement.”

“The basement might be better,” Willow acknowledged. “What do you think, Wes?”

“Let’s go downstairs,” he decided.

Tara felt more comfortable once they began the preparations; although she’d never actually performed magic with either Wesley or Willow, she was at ease with them by now. The circle itself was fairly large, with the three of them seated on the edges and Xander in the middle, the various personal items placed around him.

Wesley, as the most experienced, began the spell, with first Willow joining him, and then Tara. She could feel the existing bond between the two, the camaraderie that was present, and she was grateful when she joined them effortlessly. The magic swirled around the three of them, and she added her own strength as they began tying the individuals to the maps one by one.
The maps were spread out in front of Wesley, and Tara could see the points of light form as they spoke the words of the spell for each person. Spike and Buffy came first, and the dual points became one, hovering over the map of the continental United States, somewhere north of Sunnydale. Each point was tinted a slightly different shade, as were the others that appeared over the map of Sunnydale.

When each person had been tied into the spell, the three of them spoke the final words of the locator spell and the points of light disappeared, becoming nothing more than colored dots on a map. Of course, if someone watched the dots for long enough, they would move of their own accord.

Once each person had been tied into the spell, it was time to key the maps to Xander, and Tara could feel Wesley beginning to falter slightly, his strength nearly gone. Tara was coming to the end of her power as well, and she could feel Willow increasing the energy she was putting into the spell to pick up the slack.

When the last words had been spoken, Tara could see Wesley slump wearily. “Are you okay?” Willow asked anxiously, rising as quickly as she could to go to him.

“Just a little tired,” he assured her, summoning up a weary smile.

Willow looked to Tara. “How about you?”

“F-f-fine,” Tara said firmly. “A little t-tired, but n-not b-b-bad.” She rose a little shakily, glancing over in surprise when Xander took her arm to steady her.

“That was pretty cool,” he commented, looking at the maps spread out on the floor. “But did it work?”

“Why don’t you test it out?” Willow asked.

Xander glanced at Tara to make sure she would be okay, then took the maps that Willow was holding out to him. “So what do I do?”

“Think about wanting to find Spike and Buffy,” Willow directed.
Xander looked skeptical, but his forehead furrowed in concentration. After a few seconds, his face cleared. “Hey, look at that!”

Anya, Giles, and Joyce came to look over his shoulder. Two dots, one black, one crimson, had appeared on the map, both hovering over a town about four hours north of Sunnydale. “Where am I?” Anya asked, sounding rather impressed.

Xander put the first map down and focused on the second. After a moment, a cluster of multi-colored dots appeared on Revello Drive, where the Summers’ house would be. “How does Xander clear the map?” Giles asked, sounding concerned. “If he forgets…”

“It doesn’t matter,” Wesley said. “A few seconds out of Xander’s hands, and they’d disappear. Look.” He pushed himself to his feet with Willow’s help and picked up the other map. The points representing Spike and Buffy had disappeared, just as he’d said.

“Well done,” Giles murmured, giving the three spell-casters an approving look. “This is amazing.”

“We wouldn’t have been able to do it without Tara,” Willow said loyally, wanting to be sure that everyone understood what an asset the other witch was. “She figured out how to make sure the maps survived the spell.”

“Yes, we’re happy to have your assistance, Tara,” Giles stated.

Joyce nodded. “I think Wesley needs to sit down before he falls down. Why don’t you come upstairs until you’re recovered? We can order pizza for dinner.”

“That would be good,” Wesley said, looking very pale. “That took a bit more out of me than I had expected.”

“It w-w-was a b-big spell,” Tara said, wanting to reassure him.

“A really big spell,” Willow said firmly, putting an arm around his waist.
Tara watched as the others filed upstairs, following Wesley and Willow, and she felt a warm glow of accomplishment. “Are you coming, Tara?” Giles asked, waiting for her to precede him. She gave him a smile in thanks, and started up the stairs, feeling for the first time in a long time as though she might have found a place to belong.

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Buffy leaned back into the overstuffed cushions of the couch, flipping through the pages of a fashion magazine while waiting for Spike to finish his conversation with the hotel manager. The plan was to stay another two nights and then head to Los Angeles so Spike could see a couple friends of his that he thought might be able to help.

She had no idea how they would help, but Buffy trusted that Spike knew what he was talking about, and Giles thought it was going to be another few days before it was safe to come back to Sunnydale. Just because the Council had agreed to negotiate with the people in charge of the Initiative, that didn’t mean they’d get anywhere very fast.

Apparently, since the Initiative was supposed to be a big secret, that made negotiating a much slower process.

Buffy couldn’t say she minded postponing getting back into town, though, since it would mean having to deal with the Initiative, and all the other things that came with being the Slayer. Here, they were just Buffy and Spike, one more couple on vacation.

She thought she might be able to get used to dating someone with money.

Sensing someone watching her, Buffy glanced up to see a little girl staring at her in open-mouthed fascination. The child’s human features and gray-green skin indicated that she was of mixed parentage, and Buffy couldn’t help but wonder if this was one of the few times the girl didn’t have to worry about looking different.

Well, given her age, it was probably her parents who worried about it.

“You’re really pretty,” the little girl whispered when she realized she had Buffy’s attention.

Buffy smiled, charmed by the earnest compliment. “Thank you. I think you’re pretty, too.”
“Inna, what did I tell you about wandering off?” A harried-looking woman, who didn’t appear to be much older than Buffy, hurried over. “I’m sorry if she was bothering you.”

“She wasn’t bothering me,” Buffy replied.

The woman managed a smile, then took Inna by the hand and hurried her off, the child looking back over her shoulder at Buffy.

Buffy waved at her, watching as the woman met a demon by the door, his skin color marking him as Inna’s likely father. He picked the girl up and settled her on one hip, then put an arm around the woman’s shoulders. The Slayer watched them leave, feeling a pang, knowing that they weren’t safe.

That small family wouldn’t survive the Initiative’s schemes, that was for sure.

“Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

Buffy looked up to see Spike standing next to her. His eyes were on the door, and she realized that he’d seen the same thing she had. “Wonder what?” she asked, standing up and putting an arm around his waist.

“Wonder what’s going to happen to them,” Spike said quietly. “It would be hard to bring a kid into this world, knowing you wouldn’t ever find a place for them to be at peace.”

Buffy sighed. “Are there many?”

“Many half-breeds?” Spike asked, leading the way towards the front doors. He’d promised her a trip to the shops in the nearby town. “Dunno, really. I imagine that there are a fair number. Most will pass for human if they can, and you’d never know the difference. Others find a place where they can among demons, and some…”

He trailed off, and Buffy suddenly understood that he was one of those who had largely made his way alone. She could imagine that a souled vampire would find it very difficult to fit in among either demons or humans.
In some ways, as the Slayer, Buffy could relate.

“I didn’t realize,” she admitted as they stepped out into the bright sunshine. She put on her sunglasses, watching as Spike did the same; Buffy wondered when he’d purchased them, because she didn’t think she’d seen him with them before.

“Realize what, pet?” he asked, opening the passenger door for her.

Buffy waited until he’d joined her inside the car before continuing. “I’m the Vampire Slayer,” Buffy explained. “I kill vampires, and sometimes demons when it’s necessary. I never really thought of demons as having families or going on vacation or anything like that.”

Spike was quiet for a long moment before he responded. “This is the side of things that Slayers don’t get to see,” he said quietly. “Most vampires, and a good number of demons, don’t want anything to do with humans. They know who the Slayer is, and they don’t see any need to draw attention to themselves.”

“So what you’re saying is that I haven’t been slaying innocents all these years?” Buffy said, trying to sound light-hearted, but not quite making it.

Spike sighed. “Buffy, you’re the Slayer. I highly doubt the demons you kill are even close to innocent, and the vampires certainly aren’t. You’re—” He was obviously searching for a way to explain. “You’re part of the natural order of things, luv. There’s always been a Slayer, and she’s always dusted vampires and killed demons and prevented the world from going to hell. These soldiers, they’re something different.”

Buffy nodded, looking out the window, remembering the harried woman and her daughter, wondering if she would have viewed the little girl as an actual person before knowing Spike.

“Don’t.”

She looked back over at him. “What?”

“Whatever you’re thinking, don’t,” Spike said. “You do the right thing, Buffy, even when it hurts.
“There’s no need to be questioning yourself now.”

“How can I not?” Buffy asked. “I thought the Initiative was doing the right thing.”

Spike pulled up in front of a small coffee shop, at the edge of a group of shops. “Come on.”

She followed him inside, wondering what they were doing here. Buffy let him order for her, unsurprised when he knew exactly what she wanted. He got a cup of coffee for himself as well and then led her over to a small table. Spike didn’t seem interested in meeting her eyes, instead focusing on the steam rising from his coffee.

“It wasn’t long after I got my soul anchored that I ran into a group of men—demon hunters, actually—who were intent on killing vampires.” Spike’s eyes were dark with old memories. “I nearly got myself dusted on my first run-in with them, but it didn’t take them long to realize that I’d be a valuable asset.” He chuckled, although the sound held little humor. “I talked them into it, to be honest. They didn’t much care if I had a soul or not, and it was the only way I could see to get out of there with my skin intact.”

“What happened?” Buffy asked.

Spike shrugged. “They killed vampires; I helped them do it. It was fine for a while, because I had no problem with their mission in a general sense. I just pictured Angelus’ face every time I dusted one.” He met her eyes for the first time. “And then one day we came across a pocket of demons. Peaceful buggers, just trying to find a remote location so they could live decently.”

Buffy swallowed. “You killed them.”

Spike shook his head. “No, but a lot of them died before the end. I tried to talk them out of it, but when I left to get something to eat that night, they went without me. By the time I caught up, they’d done a lot of damage.”

“Oh.” Spike’s situation hadn’t been the same, but there were parallels; Buffy understood what he was saying, though. He’d had a long time to learn about ulterior motives, and a lot of experiences along the way. Buffy had a tendency to forget how much he’d seen and done sometimes, and instead treat him like one of her friends.
In reality, Spike’s actual age made it like dating—well, maybe she wouldn’t go there.

It was a good reminder, though, that there was one more reason to go to Spike first before jumping into something with both feet.

One of these days Buffy might learn her lesson.

“I guess we’ve both done things we wish we could take back,” Buffy said quietly.

Spike gave her a rueful smile. “Live long enough, and that’s what happens.”

Buffy just reached for his hand, grateful when he entwined his fingers with hers. At least this mistake was one she could fix.

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Xander glanced over at Anya, making sure she was still deeply asleep. He picked up the map of Sunnydale and concentrated, watching as the multi-colored dots appeared. Tara was back on campus, Willow and Wesley were at his apartment, and Giles and Joyce were at home.

He put the map down, watching as the points of color faded away, leaving nothing behind to indicate it was more than it was.

That’s how he felt these days: completely and utterly ordinary.

Back in high school, Xander had been in the middle of things, helping to save the world. Of course, back then all the action had been in the library, and he’d been there every day anyway. Now, it seemed they’d all gone their separate ways. Xander was out of the loop more than he was in it, and while he appreciated being the one holding the maps, he also knew that he’d been chosen because he wasn’t involved anymore.

No one would know that he was part of the Scooby gang; there was nothing about him that would give it away.
Xander had to wonder if he was even part of the gang.

“Xander? Are you awake?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “Go back to sleep, Anya. It’s late.”

“Are you okay?” He felt the bed shift as she propped herself up to look at him through the darkness. “Why were you playing with the map?”

“Because it’s cool,” Xander admitted, thinking about eating pizza afterwards. It had been almost like old times—or it would have been if Buffy and Spike had been there. No one seemed to know when they’d be able to come back to town, though, or if it would ever be safe enough. Giles seemed to think that the Watcher’s Council would be able to work something out, but there was no guarantee.

He’d ended up offering his services for patrol, since Buffy wasn’t going to be around for the foreseeable future. Xander had seen Wesley and Giles exchange a look, as though communicating about whether or not it was a good idea. “I’m sure Buffy would appreciate that,” Giles had finally said. “Why don’t you talk with Wesley and Willow? They already told me that they’d be happy to help.”

Xander was having a hard time understanding how Willow had ended up dating Wesley. Oz had been cool—really cool, as in much cooler than Xander himself. Wesley, on the other hand, was...

Well, he was getting a lot better, that was for sure. Xander was beginning to understand why Spike had hired him, and why Willow would want to date him.

It just seemed a little harsh that Wesley—who had been such a loser—would now manage to have a girlfriend and a cool job and a cool motorcycle, while Xander was stuck in his parents’ basement with nothing.

Except for a girl. Xander couldn’t help but think that if he didn’t have Anya, he really wouldn’t have much of anything.
“Are you okay?” Anya asked again, worry and irritation in her tone in equal measure.

“Yeah, Anya, I’m fine,” Xander finally replied. He kissed her, reassuring her as much as himself that neither one of them were going anywhere.

If nothing else, Xander had the girl.
“being to timelessness as it’s to time./love did no more begin than love will end;/where nothing is to breathe to stroll to swim/love is the air the ocean the land/(do lovers suffer?all divinities/proudly descending put on deathful flesh:/are lovers glad?only their smallest joy’s/a universe emerging from a wish)/love is the voice under all silences,/the hope which has no opposite in fear;/the strength so strong mere force is feebleness:/the truth more first than sun more last than star/—do lovers love?why then to heaven with hell./Whatever sages say and fools,all’s well” ~e. e. cummings, “being to timelessness as it’s to time”

Willow awoke in an empty bed, frowning when her hand hit empty space beside her, rather than the warm body she’d been expecting. She fished around for the pajamas she kept at Wesley’s for just that purpose—she had to have something to put on when first getting up in the morning.

As expected, Wesley was in the kitchen, brewing a pot of tea. “Hey there.”

He half-turned to smile at her. “Good morning. Did I wake you?”

“No,” Willow assured him. “Although, I’d kind of expected you to still be sleeping. You were pretty tired last night.”

“I slept well,” he responded. “Do you need a ride back to campus?”

Willow shook her head. “I think I can skip classes today; it’s Friday, and I’ve already missed my first one.”

Wesley raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked, teasing. “Perhaps that spell did something to your brain.”

She snorted. “I’ll have you know that I can skip class with the best of them, mister.”

“Possibly better,” he agreed. “I doubt missing a class or two will harm you in any way.”
“And it might just do me some good, especially if I can spend the extra time with you.” Willow replied. When he didn’t respond, she frowned. “Earth to Wesley.”

“Hmm?”

He wore that absent-minded look he often got when thinking very hard, and Willow reached out to touch his arm. “Are you sure you’re okay? I know that spell took a lot out of you yesterday, but—”

“I’m fine.” Wesley glanced back out the window. “I was just thinking, that’s all.”

“Thinking about what?”

“A dream I had—well, a nightmare, really. It’s not important.”

Willow reached up to touch the worry-line that had formed on his forehead. He still appeared tired and drained, she noted, and she couldn’t help but wonder how long it would be before he was back to his usual self. “Wanna talk about it?”

“Not particularly.” He turned, and Willow could see him bring his attention to bear on her. “It has to do with being slightly claustrophobic.”

Willow made a face. “Do you know how you got to be claustrophobic?” she asked. “Because when we talked about it in my psych class, most people think that phobias are caused by a specific event or series of events. Sometimes if you can…” She trailed off when she saw the pained expression on Wesley’s face. “Never mind. I’m babbling again.”

He touched her cheek. “You’re not babbling, and I do have some idea where the phobia began, yes.”

“But it’s not something you want to talk about?” Willow guessed.

“I’ve never talked about it,” he corrected her. “It just—there was nothing that could be done.”
Willow frowned, trying to follow his train of thought, and something clicked. Wesley’s fear that night in the haunted house—being shut up in a closet—his distant relationship with his father, his comment that he’d never quite measured up, the fact that he hadn’t been able to do anything about it.

She knew that Xander had experienced some of the same issues with his parents, although they hadn’t locked him in a closet. His dad had smacked him around when Xander was young, though, and Willow knew that he did everything in his power to distance himself from the family gatherings that often turned into drunken free-for-alls.

In fact, of all the parents Willow knew, Buffy’s mom was the only one who was both actively involved and, well, nice.

Although, at this point, Willow could probably include Giles with “parents.”

Willow wasn’t sure what to say to him. There was nothing she could say that would make it better, that would remove the memories, so she did what she had done for Xander when he’d show up on her doorstep with the expression on his face that said that things at home were bad.

When she put her arms around him, Willow felt him return the embrace, holding on tightly. They held each other in the early morning light, knowing that sometimes words were unnecessary.

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“What did he have to say?” Joyce asked anxiously as Giles hung up the phone.

There had been enough phone calls coming in from the Council over the past few days that Joyce had come to recognize Quentin Travers voice without any trouble. She’d called the university, telling the administration that Buffy had contracted mono and wouldn’t able to attend classes for a while. Her fear at this point was that the Initiative’s presence in Sunnydale, and their interest in Buffy, would make it impossible for her to go back to college.

Joyce wanted Buffy home; her mother’s heart needed visual evidence that her daughter was fine.

At the moment, their best hope was that the Council would be able to convince the government to leave Buffy alone. Travers hadn’t made any promises regarding Spike, and Giles hadn’t asked for
any. The Gem of Amara was better insurance than the Council could likely provide, particularly since the soldiers seemed disinclined to believe in anything magical or mystical.

“Travers said that he had managed to convince them that the Slayer wasn’t a threat to them, and apparently his contact within the military was most understanding about the fact that duplicating the Slayer’s powers is not possible through scientific means.” Giles’s expression was rueful. “Of course, if the Initiative is already going beyond their parameters, that might not help.”

Joyce appreciated his honesty, but at the same time, she wished he wouldn’t always deliver the truth in such an unvarnished fashion. “But Buffy can come back?”

“I believe that it’s as safe as it’s going to be,” he replied. “Of course, I think it would be best if Buffy doesn’t patrol alone, and if she weren’t staying on campus, but I don’t believe that she’s in immediate danger.”

Joyce bit back a sigh, wishing that made her feel better. She knew there were no guarantees for safety, not when it concerned the Slayer, but that didn’t mean she didn’t want that assurance. “I imagine Spike would agree with you there. From what he’s said on the phone, I don’t think he’ll be letting her out of his sight any time soon.”

“The Initiative won’t find it easy, dealing with the two of them,” Giles said, his smile holding shades of Ripper. “One might almost hope that they do run into trouble. I don’t think it would be the soldiers walking away unscathed.”

“No, I don’t think so either,” Joyce said, unable to disagree with Giles’ sentiment. After what they’d done to Buffy, she certainly didn’t have any problems with them getting a taste of their own medicine.

The knock at the front door interrupted their conversation, and Giles went to answer it, staring at the young man standing on the porch. “Can I help you?”

“I’m looking for Joyce Summers,” the man replied. “Is she in?”

Giles moved so that he was blocking the doorway. “May I ask what this is about?”

“I wanted to talk to her about her daughter—Buffy.” He smiled affably. “Is she available?”
“Rupert?” Joyce came up behind him. “Who is it?”

“Are you Mrs. Summers?”

She frowned. “Yes. Can I help you?”

“I’m Riley Finn,” he introduced himself. “I don’t know if Buffy told you anything about me, but —”

“We know who you are,” Giles said, his voice cold. Turning slightly to look at Joyce, he explained, “He’s one of the soldiers.”

Joyce drew herself up, her eyes sparking with anger. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but you’re not welcome here, not after what you did to my daughter.”

Giles went to close the door, but Riley’s boot got in the way. “Look, I don’t know what you think happened, but I wasn’t a part of it. The story is that Buffy was working with vampires, and they attacked the squad she was with. I know Buffy well enough to know that’s not true. I don’t know what she told you, though.”

Giles regarded him steadily for a long time, finding that Riley met his eyes without fidgeting, and he finally nodded. “We can talk, but not here. I have a bookstore off of Maple. You can meet me there tomorrow. It closes at seven; be there shortly beforehand.”

Riley looked as though he was ready to argue, but he finally nodded. “I’ll be there.”

“Do you believe him?” Joyce asked once she was certain he was gone.

“I do,” Giles said, although he didn’t look terribly happy about it. “Finn was the one Buffy was first in contact with, and I think she trusted him. Perhaps wrongly, but I don’t know why he would want to know what story she’d told us.”
Joyce wasn’t quite so ready to let go of her suspicions. “He might try to find out where Buffy is.”

Giles smiled, but there was no humor in the expression, only danger. “He could try.”

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Wesley wasn’t sure what he thought about this idea; it was one thing to suggest that Xander patrol with them, something else altogether to actually do it. Although he knew that he’d been virtually worthless out on patrol at one time, Wesley didn’t have much hope that Xander had gotten over it in the recent past.

Of course, he couldn’t actually reject Xander’s help on that basis. It would be rather like the pot calling the kettle black.

When Xander showed up at his apartment, obviously ready to go, they stared at each other for a long time. “Where’s Willow?” the younger man finally asked.

“She couldn’t make it,” Wesley replied. “Are you ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Xander responded, watching as Wesley grabbed his weapons and a jacket. The thought had crossed his mind that it simply wasn’t fair that Wesley had once made Xander look cool, and now definitely outranked him.

“Where do you think we ought to start?” Wesley asked, not necessarily because he wanted to hear Xander’s opinion, but because it seemed the diplomatic thing to do.

Xander shrugged. “How about Restfield? Buffy usually finds a few vampires there.”

Wesley nodded. “Lead the way.”

“I thought Willow was supposed to come along,” Xander said as they walked towards the cemetery.
“She had a test to study for.” Wesley’s voice was perfectly even, and Xander couldn’t help but wonder what was going on between the two of them. They appeared close, and at least moving towards the sort of closeness that Willow had had with Oz.

Xander wasn’t sure how he felt about that, not that he thought he had any say in the matter. Willow could and would date anyone she wanted to, but after what had happened with Oz—after seeing how broken Willow had been—Xander wondered when he’d be called upon to pick up the pieces again.

Besides, it was Wesley.

“Did you want to say something to me?” Wesley asked. Xander kept glancing over at him, the look on his face a mixture of uncertainty and distaste.

“What are you planning on doing with Willow?”

Wesley stopped, staring at the younger man in surprise. “Excuse me?”

Xander squared his shoulders. “What are your intentions with Willow?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business,” Wesley replied with some heat. “Our relationship is private, and it’s between the two of us.”

“Look, Willow has been my best friend since kindergarten,” Xander said. “I just want to be sure that you’re not going to hurt her.”

“I would never hurt Willow,” Wesley said, hurt creeping into his tone. “I’m not that kind of man.”

Xander frowned. “Look, last time I knew, you were after Cordelia, and—”

“Cordelia and I are friends,” Wesley replied. “It simply didn’t work out between us.”

They stared at each other for a long moment—two men with very little in common, except concern
for their mutual friends.

Xander took a deep breath. “So…”

“Shall we go back to patrolling?” Wesley suggested.

“Just as long as you understand that if you hurt Willow, I will hurt you.”

Wesley barely refrained from rolling his eyes. “Fine. Now that we understand one another, can we get back to business?”

“Sure. Just as long as we’re clear.”

“Crystal.”

Amazingly enough, they actually managed to stake the three vampires they ran across that night.

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“Hey, luv. We’re here.”

Buffy came out of her light doze slowly, blinking sleepily at her boyfriend. “Huh?”

“We’re in L.A.,” he said, smiling. “At the friend’s place I told you about? You ready to get out of the car for a bit?”

Buffy nodded, stretching. “Yeah, sorry. I wasn’t much company for the drive down.”

“We didn’t get much sleep last night,” Spike said, giving her a wicked smile. “And I don’t plan on getting much tonight either.”
She raised an eyebrow. “As long as you promise to sleep at some point.”

“Don’t worry about me, pet.”

“I’ll worry about you if I want to,” Buffy shot back, sticking out her tongue at him playfully.

Spike smirked. “Better watch that tongue of yours, Slayer. I might have to put it to use.”

Buffy just smiled sweetly. “Name the place and the time. I’ll show you how it’s done.”

His eyes darkened. “Maybe we should just go find a hotel room,” Spike suggested.

Buffy looked wistful. “Not that I want to be the voice of reason, but isn’t your friend waiting for us?”

“Yeah,” Spike said, looking over her shoulder through the passenger window. “Looks like he’s sending out the help, too.”

Sure enough, there was a sharply dressed man opening Buffy’s door for her. She got out, looking over at Spike, who had opened his own door. “The bag’s in the trunk,” he said, tossing the keys to the man. “I take it Robert’s waiting for us.”

“He’s been expecting you, sir.”

Spike nodded. “Right, then. Better get inside. Ready, Buffy?”

“Sure,” Buffy said bravely, trying not to let onto how intimidated she was. She’d had friends at Hemery who’d had “help,” and she knew that Cordelia’s family had employed a maid or two, but the home she found herself in front of was palatial.

Buffy was also aware that their host wasn’t completely human, and she had no idea how he felt
about the Slayer. While she was certain that Spike wouldn’t have brought her if there were any danger, she had never really known any other demons except for Spike and Angel.

Her fears were quickly laid to rest, however, because Robert met them at the door with a warm smile. “Spike! I’m glad you could make it.”

“We appreciate the hospitality,” Spike replied, returning the handshake. “This is Buffy. Buffy, this is Robert.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Buffy replied.

Robert’s silver eyes glowed. “The pleasure is all mine, I assure you. I’m glad I can finally meet the woman who managed to steal Spike’s heart. There were a number of us who didn’t believe it could be done.”

“Have you known Spike long?” Buffy inquired curiously, following him into a study and taking the seat he offered.

“How long has it been?” Robert asked the vampire.

Spike shrugged. “Five, maybe ten years, I reckon. Haven’t really kept track.”

“Spike had quite the reputation for not getting emotionally involved,” Robert stated. “When word started getting around that he’d become rather attached to the Slayer, there was quite a bit of money that exchanged hands.”

Spike gave him a sour look. “And did you win your bet?”

“I didn’t bet,” Robert replied easily. “But I knew it was only a matter of time.” He went over to the dry bar. “Would either of you like a drink?”

“Do you have soda?” Buffy asked.
“Of course,” Robert replied. “I have to keep it around for one of my clients. He’s a Draxal demon, and they’re positively addicted to Diet Coke. Spike?”

“Scotch, neat,” Spike said. “Did you get any more information?”

Robert handed them their drinks before sitting down again. “I did.” He looked over at Buffy. “It seems your Council has involved themselves, which is most unusual. They’ve taken the Initiative’s interest in the Slayer rather personally.”

“It’s in their best interests to keep Buffy in one piece, what with Faith in a coma,” Spike remarked bitterly.

“Be that as it may, it’s still unusual.” Robert took a sip of his own drink. “As for my own sources, there are rumors that the head of the project has been raising a few eyebrows. She is apparently a scientist, and not military, and therefore not trusted by some of those in charge. It’s my understanding that they may be looking for an excuse to remove her.”

“So if we make it really obvious that this isn’t working, the project could get shut down?” Buffy asked eagerly.

“Certainly redirected,” Robert corrected gently. “I doubt that they would shut the entire project down; they’ve spent quite a bit of money on it up to this point.”

“Might get them to relocate it, though,” Spike said. “If what they’re doing goes beyond mission parameters or some such rubbish, they might decide to go back to doing actual soldier work.”

“One might hope,” Robert replied. He stood. “I should let the two of you get freshened up for dinner. As Spike can tell you, Buffy, my cook is quite good.”

Spike waited until they were alone in their room before speaking. “So what did you think?”

“He’s really nice,” Buffy said honestly. “I’m glad you wanted me to meet him, Spike. I’d like to get to know your friends.”
“Never really thought of Robert as a friend,” he admitted. “He was more a business associate who kept good alcohol on hand. After this whole thing, though… He offered both of us a safe place to stay, and he didn’t have to do that.”

“Well, I’m glad we came,” Buffy said. “I forgot to ask. Did Giles call?”

“Yeah. Supposed to tell you that all’s clear to head back to town whenever.”

Buffy groaned. “Which means as soon as possible.”

Spike shrugged. “Knew it couldn’t last forever.”

Buffy wrapped her arms around him. “At least we’re going into this together.”

He held her close, grateful that they’d managed the time away, even though Buffy had had to come so close to death to do it. Whatever came, they would be meeting it together.

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The dim, nearly ancient corridor of the Sunnydale hospital was mostly deserted. The rooms were unoccupied for the most part, the hospital administration preferring to keep the nicer rooms for people who could appreciate them.

Or people who had visitors who could appreciate them.

The teenage girl in the rather bare room received no guests, nor did she get flowers or cards. Her only visitors were the doctors and nurses who came by periodically to check her vital signs and note them in her chart.

The fact that so few people came around might have had something to do with why no one noticed when her eyes began moving behind closed eyelids, indicating that she was awakening.

And why no one was there to greet her when her eyes did open.
“Hold your soul open for my welcoming./Let the quiet of your spirit bathe me/With its clear and rippled coolness,/That, loose-limbed and weary, I find rest./Outstretched upon your peace, as on a bed of ivory./Let the flickering flame of your soul play all about me,/That into my limbs may come the keenness of fire,/The life and joy of tongues of flame,/And, going out from you, tightly strung and in tune,/I may rouse the blar-eyed world,/And pour into it the beauty which you have begotten.” ~Amy Lowell, “The Giver of Stars”

Wesley picked up the phone on the second ring, answering absently. “Hello, this is Wesley.”

“We have a problem.” Giles said immediately. “Faith is awake.”

He sat up straight, dropping the pen he’d been using to make notes on the text he was reading. Wesley had been refreshing his memory on some of the Watchers’ diaries; they made for fascinating studies on Slayers and their methods of operation, and he’d thought he might get a few ideas on the best way to handle the Initiative.

It sounded like they would soon have more Slayer troubles. “When did it happen?”

“Yesterday evening sometime, rather late, I think,” Giles replied. “She apparently woke up, then beat another girl badly and took her clothing.”

Wesley rubbed his temple, where he could already feel a headache beginning. “I suppose it’s too much to hope for that she woke up in a less murderous frame of mind.”

“It seems that way.” Wesley could hear Giles sigh. “I’ve already called Buffy and Spike. They were planning on coming back to town today, so they should be here in a couple of hours.”

Wesley let out a breath. “I see. Are we meeting once they get into town?”

“I think meeting at Spike’s place would be best,” Giles said. “Riley Finn came by the house yesterday. He’s supposed to be meeting me at the bookstore just before I close. I’d prefer to keep Buffy and Spike away from him, if at all possible.”
“Giles—” Wesley began, surprised that the older man would even consider a meeting with one of the soldiers.

Giles cut him off. “He appeared honestly concerned for Buffy’s safety, and he seemed to have no idea of what had happened. Besides, I have no intention of joining. I merely want information.”

“I’m not sure Spike or Buffy would see it that way, but I’ll keep them away, if that’s what you want.” Wesley wasn’t quite sure about that idea himself, but he could see where Giles was coming from.

“That would be helpful.”

“And Faith?” Wesley asked.

“Be careful,” Giles advised him. “There’s no telling what she’s capable of at this point. It would be better to err on the side of caution.”

“You’ll get no arguments from me,” Wesley said. “We’ll see you when you arrive.”

The knock at his front door had him rising, feeling a little apprehensive about answering after what Giles had told him. Not that Wesley thought Faith would be at his door—it would be quite difficult for her to find out where he lived—but he knew that it was entirely possible that she might decide to target him.

Wesley had been her Watcher, and he’d failed her; he was well aware of that.

When he peered through the peephole, however, he could see Willow and Tara, and he quickly opened the door. “Hey,” Willow said, smiling brightly. “We thought we’d surprise you.”

“Come in,” Wesley said, greeting her with a kiss. He managed a smile for Tara and waved both of them inside. “How were classes today?”

He grimaced, wishing that he was a little less easy to read, and led the way into the living room. “Why don’t we sit down?” he suggested, waiting until they were all comfortable before speaking. “Giles just called. Apparently, Faith is awake and already engaging in mayhem. He’s already called Spike and Buffy, and they’re on their way back to town.”

Willow made a face. “That’s not good. What are we going to do?”

“Be careful,” Wesley said, repeated what Giles had said. “I’m not sure that we can do much more than that, at least not until Buffy and Spike get back. As a Slayer, Faith would be more than a match for any of us.”

Tara had remained silent up to this point, but now she asked, “Who’s F-Faith?”

“Oh! I’m sorry,” Willow said. “I forgot that you weren’t there for that.”

“Faith is a Slayer,” Wesley explained. “A few years ago, Buffy was dead for a few moments, long enough for another Slayer to be activated. Kendra was killed by a vampire, and Faith was activated. She—well, she went bad.”

“With a vengeance!” Willow interjected. “She threatened me, she was working for the Mayor—who was evil,” she added for Tara’s benefit. “Faith almost killed Spike! She’s bad news.”

Tara’s eyes had gotten very big. “Oh.”

“We’ll sort it out,” Wesley said, projecting a confidence he didn’t feel.

Willow didn’t appear convinced. “Hopefully without anyone getting killed.”
Faith was terribly disoriented; she wasn’t sure how to react to the idea that she’d just lost months of her life. Waking up, only to find Sunnydale much as she’d left it and the Mayor dead hadn’t even been a possibility she’d thought of.

The Mayor was supposed to win, and instead the good guys had defeated him. It was disappointing, to say the least.

She wandered around town aimlessly, trying to figure out what her next move ought to be. Faith knew she probably ought to figure out what Buffy and all her goody-goody friends were up to. At least she knew that Spike was dust, since there was no way Buffy could have saved him without Faith’s blood.

Faith went to the old school, staring at the wreckage; the building was nothing more than a burned-out shell, and she couldn’t help but wonder if anything would have been different had she won and Buffy lost.

She’d let him down—the Mayor had been like a father to her, a real one.

Faith turned away from the building blindly, trying not to think about what the destruction meant. Her next order of business was to figure out where Buffy and all her super-friends were, but stopping by Giles’ apartment didn’t give her any clues. His place was locked tight and shrouded in darkness, with the feel of a home that hadn’t been lived in for quite some time.

She frowned, her steps taking her towards the middle of town. Faith knew that Buffy’s house was an option, but it was unlikely that the other Slayer would be there. Besides, she still wasn’t quite up to full strength. Give it another day, and she’d be able to give Buffy a run for her money, but Faith wanted a chance to warm up a little first.

As she walked past the shops in downtown Sunnydale, Faith froze in front of a bookstore window. The sign above the door read “The Reader’s Corner,” and she could see Giles through the window. He was sitting at a wooden table in the middle of the store, talking to a good-looking guy who looked to be a few years older than Faith.

She thought about walking in, giving the old man a scare, but decided that it wasn’t the best idea. Buffy was the one she wanted; she could be patient for a little longer.

Turning away from the shop, Faith kept wandering, heading down an alley as a shortcut, thinking
she might find a place to break into and stay for the night. She was hungry, too, and she needed to find something to eat.

Then, perhaps, she’d find Buffy on the college campus. Faith couldn’t wait to see the expression on her face.

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Buffy knew the call was serious as soon as the phone rang. It was a Slayer’s sixth sense, as well as the awareness that everyone knew they were coming back to Sunnydale today—just as soon as she’d done a little shopping. Even if she hadn’t sensed it, the expression on Spike’s face would have given it away, though. He definitely didn’t look happy.

“What is it?” Buffy demanded as soon as he hung up the phone.

Spike tucked his cell phone in his pocket. “Faith’s awake. Apparently, she came to yesterday evening, beat a girl up, and stole her clothing.”

Buffy closed her eyes, knowing that this was the last thing that they needed. Even though the Initiative was supposed to be backing off, there was no real guarantee that they would. They’d had enough to worry about, and the way their luck was going recently, it was unlikely that Faith would be in a better mood after spending eight months in a coma.

Buffy had plenty of guilt where the other Slayer was concerned; she’d shoved a knife into Faith’s gut, and although she still felt as though she’d had little choice in the matter, that didn’t do much to assuage her conscience.

“I guess it’s a good thing that we were planning on heading back today,” Buffy commented, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

Spike looked over at her, and Buffy could see the concern on his face even though the sunglasses hid his eyes. “You okay?”

“Sure,” Buffy replied. “It’s good to be needed, right?”
Spike stopped, taking her by the arm with his free hand. Like the good boyfriend he was, he’d offered to carry her shopping bags. Although Buffy had planned on hitting a few more shops before they left L.A., and Spike had wanted to take her by a bar he knew of, it looked like their trip was going to be cut short.

“What’s up, luv?” he asked.

Buffy swallowed. “I just—I hate being the Slayer sometimes, Spike. That’s all it is. I’m sorry, I should just… I don’t know.”

“Yeah.” He looked down the street; the car was a few blocks away, and they’d been heading back that way to drop their purchases off anyway. Spike only wished that they didn’t have to hurry back. Dealing with the Initiative had been worrisome enough, but add in a rogue Slayer, and it was that much more stressful.

Not for the first time, Spike wanted to whisk Buffy away. The last week away had been good for the both of them, and good for their relationship; he could understand why she wouldn’t be in a hurry to get back to Sunnydale.

“When this is all over, I promise we’ll get out of town for a couple of weeks.” Spike touched her cheek. “We’ll go to London, swing by Paris. I’ll show you everything you want to see, just the two of us.”

Buffy looked torn between hope and doubt. “The Hellmouth—”

“Will survive without us for a week or two,” Spike replied. “We’ll leave Wes in charge, and he can take his vacation later. Between him and Red and the others, it’ll be fine.”

She took a deep breath. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

Buffy nodded. They would do this; they would go back to Sunnydale, and deal with the Initiative and Faith. They would come through in one piece, and they would go to Europe, just like she’d always wanted. “Absolutely. This is what we do best.” She grimaced. “I don’t know what we’re going to do about Faith, though.”
Spike started walking again, relishing Buffy’s arm looped through his. “Hell if I know,” he admitted. “If she’s not willing to deal with us, we’re going to have to make some tough decisions. The cops wouldn’t be able to handle her, and the Council was bloody useless last time.”

“I know,” Buffy responded grimly. “That’s what I’m afraid of. Faith is my responsibility, but I don’t want to kill her, Spike. I don’t want it to come to that.”

“Maybe it won’t,” he soothed. “The Mayor’s gone; there’s no reason for her to stick around. Could be if we offer her a chance to leave town, she’ll take it. I’d even give her a bit of dosh to speed her on her way, if necessary.”

Buffy gave him a sour look. “You’re very forgiving.”

“Bribery often works wonders,” Spike replied with a smirk. “Didn’t say I was doing it for her; I’d be doing it for us. Of course, if she does want to change her ways, we could use another Slayer to go up against the Initiative.”

“It’s not supposed to get that far,” Buffy reminded him. “But if it does, you’re right. We could use anybody we can get.”

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Riley shook his head. “You’re lying. You have to be.”

“I’m most certainly not lying,” Giles shot back. “You were the one who came to me, wanting information about Buffy. You wanted to know her side of the story; I just gave it to you.”

“Professor Walsh wouldn’t hurt Buffy!” Riley insisted. “She wanted to bring the Slayer on board. We’re on the same side, and there’s no reason to hurt her.”

“Even if your boss doesn’t believe her to be quite human?” Giles challenged him.
“Of course Buffy’s human,” Riley said, scoffing. “She’s as human as I am. She’s just stronger than most people.”

Giles sighed. “I’ll grant you that Buffy is human, but she’s something more, as well. The Slayers have always possessed a mystical strength. It’s not based on your science; this is something you know nothing about, and your professor couldn’t help but be curious—and greedy.” When it appeared as though Riley was going to renew his protests, Giles continued. “Buffy was getting close to something called ‘314.’ We have reason to believe that this is something dangerous, that’s best left alone.”

Riley frowned. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never heard of anything called ‘314.’”

“That doesn’t mean it does not exist,” Giles replied. “You’ll pardon me for saying so, Riley, but I don’t particularly care if you believe me or not. Your friends nearly killed my Slayer, and if it weren’t for Spike’s quick action, she most likely would be dead by now. The only reason I’m here is because you wanted the information.”

Riley frowned. “Wait, Spike? Buffy’s boyfriend?”

“That’s right,” Giles said smoothly.

“But they were attacked by vampires,” the soldier objected.

Giles shrugged, not hesitating to lie. “That may be so. I’m certain that Spike did not stick around to be sure that your men would be able to defend themselves should something happen along. He was too busy making certain that Buffy was going to stay alive.”

Riley let that go; Giles explanation was certainly feasible. Sunnydale was rife with vampires and demons; that was one of the reasons that the Initiative was here in the first place. He was too focused on the story that the older man had just told.

Forrest and his squad had tried to kill Buffy—a girl, and a civilian. Maybe she was stronger and faster than most of them put together, but she was still an innocent, one of the people they were supposed to be protecting.
No, worse, she was one of the people on their side, trying to make the world a better place. Riley was certain that if you took out one of the good guys, no matter what your intentions might be, you couldn’t be doing good work.

If what Giles had just told him were true, that would seem to suggest that something inside the Initiative itself had gone terribly wrong.

He wasn’t sure he could handle that right now.

“I have to go,” Riley said, standing. “I don’t—I can’t believe this.”

Giles merely nodded. “Believe what you like. You have the truth, Agent Finn. What you do with it is up to you.”

Riley was afraid that might be all too true.

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Walsh was furious. Of course, she hadn’t planned on going after Buffy Summers again, mostly because she didn’t know that there would be a need. According to Agent Gates, he and his men had been attacked by a vampire, one that was unusually strong. Although it had appeared that the hostile had been aiding Miss Summers, that was highly unlikely. Maggie Walsh had been certain that the vampire had merely wanted a taste of Slayer’s blood, and had seized its chance.

Now, it appeared that she had not only survived the creature’s attack, but that she also had friends highly placed within the government. Her superiors had been very direct—she was to stop any efforts to recruit or otherwise use the Slayer. Her boss’s exact words had been, “The Slayer is on our side, but she plays for a different team. Leave her alone.”

That didn’t sit well with her, especially now that Buffy had seen so much of the inner workings of the operation. Walsh didn’t think they needed to worry about Buffy going to the press or the public. The Slayer operated in secrecy from everything she had discovered.

It wasn’t fear of what secrets Buffy might reveal; Walsh simply didn’t like the idea of anyone coming between her and her project. Buffy Summers represented an unknown—the prospect of creating an entire race of super-soldiers was not so far-fetched when you considered the
possibilities.

All she had to do was to find out what made the Slayer tick.

Walsh hadn’t given up all hope, however. The Slayer would be no match for Adam, and she had learned that it was sometimes better to beg pardon than to ask for permission. If Buffy Summers were dead, there would be nothing anyone could do about it.

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Buffy took the cell phone from Spike, seeing the sign saying “Welcome to Sunnydale” out the window. “Hello?”

“Buffy?”

“Hey, Mom,” Buffy said, glancing over at Spike, who couldn’t quite hide his worry. She knew that he still blamed himself for her getting hurt, and that he was worried about facing her friends and family after what he saw as his failure. It was silly, and that’s what she’d told him, but they both had their own share of guilt.

“Are you back in town yet?” Joyce asked.

“Just crossed the city limits,” Buffy replied. “We’re going to stop at Spike’s first, and then we’ll come by the house.”

“I’ll meet you there,” Joyce stated, her tone brooking no arguments. “There’s no need for you to come over when I know you’ll both be tired from driving.”

“We don’t mind,” Buffy said.

“I’ll see you there in a few minutes.”

Buffy stared at the phone, realizing that her mom had cut the connection. “What was that about, I
“She was worried,” Spike said quietly. “Probably didn’t want to wait a moment longer to make sure you were okay with her own eyes.”

It made a lot of sense now that he’d said it, and Buffy sighed. “Another thing I hate about being the Slayer: worrying my mother. It looks like we’re not getting any alone-time for a while.”

Spike reached over and took her hand in his, squeezing briefly before releasing her hand to work the gearshift. “We’ll sneak some. Figure no one will question us spending a lot of time together for safety’s sake.”

Buffy gave him a smug smile. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asked.

“For finding me the perfect excuse to move in with you for the time being,” Buffy replied. “The dorm would be too close to the Initiative, and you’re the only one who has a shot at protecting me.”

Spike just smirked. “Always glad to be of service.”

Their eyes met briefly, and they shared a look, knowing that they were going back into battle.
Chapter 36

“If hope grew on a bush,/And joy grew on a tree,/What a nosegay for the plucking/There would be! /But oh! in windy autumn,/When frail flowers wither,/What should we do for hope and joy,/Fading together?” ~Christina Rossetti, “If Hope”

Buffy had just gotten into the house when the knock on the front door came. Spike had parked in the garage and put the door down, so no one knew he was home. As he’d said, while Faith might not expect him to be alive, there was no point advertising the fact that he was, just in case she happened by.

She didn’t even have the door open before her mom was inside, pulling her into a tight embrace. Buffy hugged her back, hard, realizing yet again that she very nearly hadn’t seen her mom again.

Joyce pulled back, searching her face. “You look good,” she said, sounding surprised. “And tan.”

“It was the nifty sunlamps in the hotel we stayed at,” Buffy replied. “We had some time to hang out by the pool.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” Joyce said, sounding a little tearful. “Where’s Spike?”

“I think he’s getting the stuff out of the car,” Buffy replied.

Spike entered the living room. “How on earth did we manage to load up on so much junk, Buffy? It’s going to take me three trips just to—”

His complaint was cut short when he saw Joyce, who gave him the exact same treatment she’d given Buffy. Spike returned her hug awkwardly. “’Lo, Joyce.”

“Thank you,” she said, her tone serious.

If Spike could have blushed, he probably would have. “Yeah, I’m just sorry I couldn’t get there sooner.”
“You were right on time, as far as I’m concerned,” Joyce responded, searching his face, finally breaking out into a wide smile. “You’re looking good.”

Spike shrugged, still looking rather embarrassed. “Little R&R never hurt anybody, I reckon.”

“Is Giles coming, too?” Buffy asked.

Joyce shook her head. “Not just yet. He’s closing up the bookstore, but he’ll be over as soon as he can be.”

“Spike?” Wesley’s voice echoed through the front hall. He soon appeared, carrying a brown paper sack. “I hope you don’t mind, but I brought fresh blood. I wasn’t sure if you’d stopped or not.”


“I’ll just put it in the fridge,” Wesley said.

Willow and Tara were on his heels, and Willow almost squealed when she saw Buffy. “Buffy!”

“Hey, Willow!” Buffy returned her friend’s hug, careful not to squeeze too tightly.

“You look really good,” Willow said.

Buffy smiled. “A little vacation is good for the soul.” She looked past Willow to Tara, raising an eyebrow.

“This is Tara,” Willow quickly said. “She’s cool. Tara, this is Buffy. You know Mrs. Summers and Spike already.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Buffy said warmly, although she felt a pang. There were already so many people there, particularly after it being just her and Spike for the last week. Vacation was over,
though, and it was time to get back to work. “Has anyone spotted Faith yet?”

“So far, no signs of her,” Willow replied. “But we haven’t really been looking all that hard. We just found out about her being awake today, and we were kind of waiting for you.”

Buffy nodded. “That’s probably the best thing. What time is Giles supposed to be here?” she asked Joyce. “I thought the shop closed at seven.”

Joyce winced. “Well, I think he might have been planning on staying a little later.”

Buffy couldn’t disguise her hurt. “Oh, okay.”

“He was meeting with Riley Finn,” Wesley said bluntly, coming back out of the kitchen.

Her eyes widened. “He what?”

“Giles is meeting with Riley tonight,” Wesley stated. “He wanted you and Spike kept away for obvious reasons, but he wanted to get some information.”

Buffy looked over at her mom, who appeared apologetic. “Riley came by the house yesterday,” she explained. “He was quite insistent on wanting to know what had happened to you. Apparently, whatever story they were telling him at the Initiative wasn’t very satisfactory.”

The muscle in Spike’s jaw was ticking, and the Slayer knew he was upset. She watched him, waiting for his reaction. “Right. Buffy? What do you think?”

“About Riley?” Buffy asked tentatively. She still felt a little strange talking about the Initiative around Spike, particularly saying anything that might put any of the soldiers in a positive light.

“Spit it out, luv,” he said, his voice gentle.

“I don’t think Riley was in on it,” Buffy admitted. “He’s a good guy, and I don’t think he’d hurt me, but I don’t know if he would ever leave the army. It’s pretty much his life.”
“That was our impression,” Joyce responded. “I think Rupert wanted to do anything he could to spread the truth. Perhaps it would start a mutiny.”

“Doubt that,” Spike said sourly. “Those gits are all brainwashed to believe whatever they’re told to believe.”

Wesley spoke up. “That may be so, Spike, but if we could get one of them on our side, the information and the assistance could be invaluable.”

Spike nodded slowly. “Right. As long as he’s working for us and not the other way around, I can live with it.” He glanced around the room. “Figure we’re going to have to talk about Faith at some point. Why don’t you lot get comfortable and I’ll call for pizza. This might be a long night.”

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Xander couldn’t help but think that this was more like it. They were having a Scooby meeting, and he was an essential participant. He gathered up the maps and glanced over at Anya. “I’m sorry, An. We’ll have to do this another night.”

Anya sighed, used to Xander’s friends interrupting their time together by now. Things had been quiet lately, but she’d known it couldn’t last. “I get it, Xander. Your friends are important.”

“This is about Faith,” he replied. “You remember her, don’t you? She was planning on helping the Mayor destroy Sunnydale. They need the maps, and I’m the only one who can work them.”

“I get it,” Anya repeated, just a little more sharply. Honestly, sometimes he talked to her like she was stupid. Just because she hadn’t been human in twelve centuries didn’t mean she hadn’t seen a few things. The Mayor had been scary; Faith was bad news. The Slayer saved the day. Anya knew how it was supposed to work.

Xander straightened. “You don’t have to come. It’s probably going to be pretty boring for you.”

Anya’s lips tightened. “Fine, Xander. Give me a call when you want to get together again.”
He watched her go, feeling as though he probably could have handled that a little better, but not sure how he would have done so. So much of the time, he felt like he and Anya were on completely different wavelengths, and real communication was impossible.

The trip across town was a little scary, knowing that Faith was out there, probably on the hunt. Maybe on the hunt for him, since they’d had a thing.

When Xander got to Spike’s place, he gave a perfunctory knock and then entered. Everyone except for Giles was already there. “Come on in, Harris,” Spike called from the living room. “We’ll wait to start until Rupert gets here.”

Xander entered the living room, his eyes immediately seeking out Buffy, who looked pretty good for someone who had nearly been killed. “Buffster. You’re looking good.”

Buffy rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “I think I should leave town more often if that’s the response I get.” She gave Xander a hug, then immediately went back to perching on the arm of Spike’s chair. “So what about these maps we’ve been hearing so much about?” She gave Willow a fond look. “You guys were busy while we were gone.”

“We couldn’t have done it without Tara,” Willow said, wanting to be sure that the other girl received her share of the credit, since it was unlikely that Tara would put herself forward. Willow wanted to make her feel welcome.

“I’m glad Tara was there, then,” Buffy said, giving the girl a smile. Tara just bobbed her head shyly.

Xander spread out the map of Sunnydale on the coffee table where everyone could see it. “Watch.” He touched the map, and within a few moments, all the various colored dots had appeared. The dark green dot designating Giles and the lavender dot for Anya were the only ones not clustered together, obviously where Spike’s address would be. Giles was apparently making his way over, however, because the dot was drawing nearer.

“Neat,” Spike said, grinning. “Who thought this up?”

“Willow, mostly,” Wesley said. “Tara came up with the spell to protect the maps from damage, though.”
“And Wesley worked out how to link the locator spell to Xander,” Willow said quickly, not wanting her boyfriend to lose out on the praise.

“Go team,” Buffy said. “This is really great, guys. Thank you.”

Giles’ dot stopped when it hit the cluster, and soon enough they could hear his voice. “I take it the pizza is for us.”

“I’ve got it,” Spike called.

“Don’t worry about it,” Giles said. He soon came into the living room with several pizza boxes, setting them down on the coffee table before turning to Buffy. “Buffy.”

She returned his hug, grateful that she’d returned to Sunnydale for this, at least. As nice as her time alone with Spike had been, Buffy had missed her friends and family. “Don’t tell me,” she said with a smile. “I look good.”

“You do, actually, but I wasn’t expecting anything else,” Giles replied. He took the seat Joyce had held for him on the couch.

“What did Riley have to say?” Buffy asked, resuming her seat.

Giles shook his head. “Not much. Apparently, the story among the soldiers is that you were working with vampires, who attacked the group. They’re making it sound as if you led them into a trap.”

Buffy sniffed. “It was more like a mutual trap.”

“Yes, well, that’s essentially what I said,” Giles met Spike’s eyes. “I told him that you were involved in Buffy’s rescue, but led him to believe that you were human.”

Spike nodded. “Probably for the best.”
“Do we really think that the Initiative is going to leave Buffy alone?” Willow asked. “If they went to that much trouble to capture her in the first place…”

“I don’t know,” Giles admitted. “I would imagine it would depend on whether or not Professor Walsh is willing to follow orders.”

“My first impression?” Buffy asked. “Would be a big no. I think she feels like she’s god or something.”

“I think our primary concern ought to be Faith,” Wesley interjected. “The Initiative has every reason to keep their movements and goals secret. Faith does not.”

“Agreed,” Spike said. “If Faith decides to make trouble, it’s going to get interesting. I figure our best bet is for Buffy and me to stick together, both to deal with her and the soldiers. The rest of you lot can work on keeping a low profile. I think it’s less likely she’d come after any of you.”

“Are you sure about that?” Xander asked. “You know we had a thing, and she might—”

Spike gave him a slightly pitying look. “Sorry, Harris, but a girl like Faith has probably forgotten all about it by now.”

Willow hastened to change the subject, both because she didn’t want to think about Xander and Faith together, and also because her friend looked crushed. “What if Riley starts asking questions again?”

“We could probably talk to him,” Buffy suggested, looking over at Spike. “Maybe he’ll believe it when he hears it from my mouth.” When Spike opened his mouth to argue, she told him, “If he sees you in the sunlight, there’s no way he’d be able to tell that you’re a vampire.” She gave him an impish grin. “We could probably even tell him that you’re some kind of male Slayer.”

Spike considered that suggestion. “Not a bad idea, although if it gets back to his superiors, they might redouble their efforts to get their hands on the both of us.”

“I would suggest not saying anything at all.” Giles hesitated. “Although, if it comes down to it, I
think that telling him that Spike’s some sort of Slayer might be the best option. He thinks of you as human, Buffy. There’s no sense in tempting fate by telling him that Spike’s a vampire.”

Wesley shook his head. “I’m not certain that’s a good idea. It might be easier to allow Riley to think that Spike’s some sort of soldier himself. He appears old enough so that he could easily have served in the army. That way, you don’t have to give him any incentive.”

“Okay, so we don’t tell Riley about Spike,” Buffy said. “What about Faith? If she does make trouble…”

“I think we may have to face the fact that we won’t have another option this time, pet,” Spike said gently. “If it’s her or you, I know who I’m going to choose.”

“Spike’s right, Buffy,” Giles sighed. “If there’s any other option, we’ll take it, but if she leaves you no choice, then you’ll have to take whatever action is necessary.”

Wesley stared down at his hands. “What about calling the Council?”

“They didn’t do such a great job last time,” Spike pointed out.

“They didn’t know the full extent of what they would be dealing with last time,” Wesley responded. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they were already on their way.”

“If they want to take her off our hands, I’m not sure we can refuse the offer,” Giles said.

Joyce frowned. “What does that mean?” she objected. “What would they do with her?”

“We’ve dealt with rogue Slayers before,” Giles admitted. “Typically, they’re held until they are no longer a threat.”

“Let’s hope Faith decides that getting out of town is her best option,” Buffy said. “Or that she decides that working for the good guys is the way to go. Until we know what she’s going to do, we can’t really make any plans except to stick together and keep an eye out.”
There was more talk after that, most of it largely pointless in Spike’s opinion. As Buffy had said, there weren’t any plans that could be made until they knew more. It was late before the meeting broke up, though, and Spike was grateful when Joyce and Giles offered to drive those who had walked over, leaving him alone with Buffy.

The long day had taken its toll, and they both collapsed in bed, falling asleep immediately. Spike woke that morning when Buffy got out of bed, and he glanced over at her sleepily. “Luv?”

“I have class,” she said apologetically. “Mom convinced the school that I had mono, but unless I want to call the entire year a waste of time, I can’t miss much more.”

“I’ll go with you,” he protested.

Buffy smiled at him. “I’ll be fine. Class is done at eleven, and then I’ll head over to the dorm to pick some stuff up.”

“I’ll meet up with you later,” he promised.

Buffy gave him a quick kiss. “See that you do.”

Spike slept for a few more hours, then woke to shower and dress, giving Wesley a call before he headed over to the campus. “What are you up to today?”

“Not much,” Wesley admitted. “Did you have something in mind?”

“You want to help us look for Faith?”

“Of course.”
Spike went by Wesley’s place to pick him up before heading over to the campus. “Do you think that Faith will show up?” Wesley asked.

Spike hesitated. “Yeah, reckon she will. She has nothing to lose at this point.”

Wesley winced. “That’s never a good thing.”

“No, it’s not. You still have my compass?” Spike asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

Wesley pulled it out of his pocket immediately. “I thought you might be asking for it.”

Spike checked the direction, and made a quick right turn. “Looks like she’s on the other end of the campus.”

They had parked and were following the direction of the arrow when it became unnecessary. The commotion ahead of them had both men breaking into a run. Spike was just in time to watch as Faith’s heavy boot caught Buffy in the chest, throwing her back.

“Looks like you recovered quick, Slayer,” Spike called, hoping that the sight of him would throw her off for long enough to give Buffy a chance to recover.

Faith’s eyes widened. “Spike?”

Buffy flipped to her feet, catching Faith’s temple in a roundhouse kick. The other Slayer staggered back, stunned, looking from Buffy to Spike in snarling amazement. “You just wait,” she said. “I’ll finish what I started and then some.” Her eyes flickered over Willow and Wesley before she took off running.

Spike ran after her, Buffy at his side. They moved as one, hearing the police sirens behind them; Sunnydale’s finest were late again, it seemed.

And so were they.
When they reached the high, stone wall, they both scaled it quickly, looking for any sign of Faith, but she’d disappeared. “Shoot,” Buffy muttered. “Where did she go?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Spike replied. “We’ll have to look for her this evening. Faith always was more of a creature of the night. Figure she probably was on campus looking for you.”

“She wasn’t real keen on the idea,” Buffy replied. “Although, the look on her face when she saw you alive—in a manner of speaking—and walking around in the sunlight was worth it. That definitely threw her off.”

Spike looked grim. “She won’t be taken by surprise again.”

Wesley and Willow came jogging up to meet them. “Did you lose her?” Wesley asked.

“Yeah,” Spike said. “We’ll go out hunting tonight with the tranq gun. It looks like it’s time to pull it out of storage.”

“Tranq darts don’t last forever,” Willow said dubiously. “I’m thinking a good ass-kicking might be in order.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “You sound pretty fierce, Red.”

“Well, she threatened me with a knife and she almost killed you,” Willow shot back. “I don’t like it when someone tries to kill my friends.”

“No one does,” Spike replied. “Look, maybe we ought to split up tonight.” He gave Buffy an apologetic look. “If one of you lot runs into her, it might not be good.”

Buffy nodded. “You’re right. I’ll take Wesley, and you take Willow.”

Spike hesitated before agreeing. The teams definitely made the most use of their various strengths. “Wesley, Willow, you two okay with that?”
“I’m ready to kick some butt,” Willow said. “Or watch you do it.”

Wesley shrugged. “If that’s where I’ll be of most use.”

“Then we’re set for tonight,” Spike said, wishing he felt more sure of their aims.

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Maggie Walsh frowned as she looked at the reports on her desk. She routinely received information from the Sunnydale hospital, as well as police reports, the better to monitor vampire and demon activity in the area. There had been quite a bit of buzz in the last couple of days about a young woman who was wanted for manslaughter and other crimes.

The girl was listed as extremely dangerous, and police had been warned to use caution before they approached her. Furthermore, one of her men had spotted a young woman matching Faith’s description engaging another girl in a fight. A girl who looked a lot like Buffy Summers.

From her agent’s description of the fight, it had been evenly matched, although short-lived. A blond man had arrived on the scene and had broken it up, and the dark-haired girl had fled.

Walsh leaned back in her chair, considering the possibilities. Was it possible that there was another Slayer? Her superiors had warned her away from Buffy, but if she could get her hands on Faith—and if the girl was a Slayer—Walsh might have found the perfect compromise.

Besides, if Buffy and this other girl were fighting, there was every possibility that the people who wanted Miss Summers alive and in one piece wouldn’t be nearly as concerned about this other girl.

She pressed the button on her intercom for her assistant. “I want you to bring me all the information you can find on this Faith girl,” Walsh ordered.

Maybe Christmas had come early this year.
“Whoever loved as we did? Let us hunt/for the ancient cinders of a heart that burned/and make our kisses fall one by one,/till that empty flower rises again./Let us love the love that consumed its fruit and went/down, its image and its power, into the earth:/you and I are the light that endures,/its irrevocable delicate thorn./Bring to that love, entombed by so much cold time,/by snow and spring, by oblivion and autumn,/the light of a new apple, light,/of a freshness opened by a new wound,/like that ancient love that passes in silence/through an eternity of buried mouths.” —Pablo Neruda “Sonnet XCV”

Xander wasn’t really comfortable in Giles’ bookstore. The library had been one thing; it had become demon-fighting central, and it was where all the books they needed were. The bookstore, on the other hand, was Giles’ place, filled with books that intimidated Xander.

He really preferred his comics; there was just something about a book without pictures that he found depressing.

Giles wanted to be kept apprised of the hunt for Faith, however, and Xander was the one who could use the maps. Both groups had cell phones, and Giles had the new one that Joyce had purchased for him after the Ethan debacle. She hadn’t wanted to leave him with an excuse not to call her again.

That meant that Xander would be spending the evening with Giles, rather than with Anya, who was none too happy with his sudden reintegration back into the group. He hoped that she developed some understanding as to how important this was, because otherwise their relationship wasn’t going to last.

Xander knew that it wasn’t just about Buffy either. It was about doing something useful when it felt as though his life was going nowhere fast.

“Where are they now?” Giles asked, leaning over his shoulder.

Xander put aside his comic and placed his hand on the map, watching as the colored dots appeared. Joyce was still at the gallery, Anya was at her apartment, but the two pairs of most interest had fanned out. Wesley and Buffy were patrolling around the Bronze and warehouse area, while Spike and Willow were still on campus.
Well, Spike, Willow, and Tara. Xander still wasn’t sure how he felt about the other girl. She seemed so quiet that it was impossible to get a read on her, although she did appear nice. Xander wondered why they’d decided to pick her up when it was unlikely that Tara would be any good in a fight.

No better than he would be anyway, that was for sure, and he was stuck with Giles and the books for the night.

“What’s Tara doing with them?” Xander asked.

Giles was watching the dots move around in fascination. “Hmm? Oh, I think Willow mentioned something about Tara thinking that she might have an idea to locate Faith.” He straightened. “I’m going to be closing up in a few minutes, then we can go by and pick Joyce up on our way back to the house.”

Xander stifled a sigh, reminding himself that he had wanted to be included more often. “Sure.”

Giles patted him on the shoulder. “Thank you for doing this, Xander. I know you’ve given up your evening.”

Somehow, those words made it all worth it.

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“So what’s this I hear about a spell?” Spike asked, anxious to be out and searching. He was none too sure about their ability to locate Faith, which was why he was amenable to the idea of checking with Tara first.

“W-w-w—” Tara stopped, looking frustrated.

“Take your time, pet,” Spike advised gently.

“A l-locator spell,” Tara finally managed to say. “I-if y-you have any of her things.”
Spike shook his head. “Not a bad idea, but I don’t think we’ve got anything of hers left lying around. She cleared out pretty good, and she’s been in a coma for eight months; that doesn’t give a person much chance at accumulating things.”

“What about the hospital room she was in?” Willow asked. “There might be something there.”

Spike hesitated, but had to nix that idea as well. “Don’t think so, ladies. I hate to say it, but I think we’re out of luck as far as the spell goes. It’s gonna have to be old-fashioned leg-work.” At Tara’s crestfallen expression, Spike tipped her chin up. “It was a good idea, Tara. Had it been anyone else but Faith, that probably would have saved us some time, even if I had to break and enter to get what you needed. Circumstances being what they are, I don’t think we can risk it and lose the time.”

“We’ll see you later,” Willow promised. “Tomorrow for sure.”

When they had left, Spike turned to Willow. “Okay, want to tell me what that was about?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Willow protested.

“Sure you do,” Spike responded. “Red, you knew a locator spell wasn’t going to work on Faith. We don’t have anything that belongs to her.”

Willow shrugged uncomfortably. “Well, Tara suggested it, and I didn’t want to be the one to tell her it wouldn’t work. She’s trying really hard to help.”

“She is helping,” Spike pointed out. “She took care of those maps, didn’t she? Don’t push it too hard, Red. The girl will get comfortable in good time. It takes a bit sometimes, though.”

“I know.” Willow sighed. “Do you think we’re really going to find her, Spike? Just wandering around like this, I mean. Sunnydale isn’t a big town, but the chances of bumping into Faith are pretty slim.”

Spike knew she was right; he’d known that from the moment they’d decided to do things this way. The problem was that they needed to find Faith, and they didn’t seem to have a better way of doing
“What would you suggest?” he finally asked.

“Well, she seems pretty intent on finding Buffy,” Willow pointed out. “She was on campus yesterday, obviously trying to pick a fight. Faith might try going somewhere Buffy would be.”

Spike’s eyes narrowed as he thought about that. Willow was right; of course, now that Faith knew that he was still around, there were a couple of different places that Faith might try to catch Buffy by surprise. Joyce’s place was one, his place was another. He didn’t think she’d try the campus again.

He turned around abruptly. “I think we’re going to need your friend’s help after all.”

Willow’s eyes widened, and she hurried to keep up with him. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re going hunting,” Spike replied. “Just a little differently, that’s all.”

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Faith stared down at the metal device in her hand. Leave it to the boss to think up something like this. She knew that she wasn’t going to get away with it, not unless she was really lucky or really careful. Spike, for example, wouldn’t be fooled forever.

Of course, if she managed to switch bodies with Buffy, that didn’t mean she’d have to stick around Sunnydale. If Faith left in Buffy’s body, it would leave Buffy at the mercy of the police and everyone else out to get her, which would devastate Spike. So all she really had to do was to complete the actual hand-to-hand contact, like the Mayor had said, and then get herself out of town.

Mexico was probably nice this time of year.

Faith wasn’t quite sure how to feel about the Mayor’s parting gift. He had been right, of course; there was no place left for her in this world, no one to care about her.
This was Buffy’s world; it always had been.

Still, there was also a certain allure of just leaving Sunnydale behind her, maybe stealing a car and driving south to Baja, or just out of the state. Faith didn’t think she would be on America’s Most Wanted list yet, and that meant she still had a chance to disappear.

Faith frowned thoughtfully, thinking about her earlier run in with Buffy. Seeing Spike had been a surprise, both because he was actually walking around, and because it was in the broad daylight. Wesley had been something of a surprise, too—she hadn’t thought he would stick around Sunnydale. She wondered what that meant.

Hopping down from the pawnshop counter, where she’d broken in to view the videotape the Mayor had left for her, Faith headed towards the door. This was the legacy that the Mayor had left for her; this was what he’d wanted her to do.

With any luck, if they took her out, Faith would manage to take out a couple on her way.

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“How are you with sandwiches, Xander?” Joyce asked as they entered the house through the front door. “I’m afraid I haven’t had a chance to get to the store recently.”

“That’s great,” Xander replied. His mom still tried to fix snacks for him on occasion, but it wasn’t the same. When his mom asked him questions like that, Xander felt as though she was refusing to let him grow up. When Joyce asked, it seemed as though she was taking his opinion under consideration, which was a different matter entirely.

He froze when he saw the men in the living room, causing Giles to bump into him. “Xander! Watch—” Giles broke off, staring at the three strangers. “Would you both please go into the kitchen?” he asked quietly.

“Rupert,” Joyce began, but the expression on his face silenced her. “Alright. Xander, would you mind helping me?”
“No,” he replied, following her back into the kitchen. “What’s that about?” Xander asked in a whisper.

Joyce shook her head, her lips tightening. “I’m not certain,” she admitted, “but I imagine that Rupert will tell us when they leave.”

Xander raised his eyebrows; he didn’t think he’d ever heard Joyce use that tone of voice before. It was a little scary. He helped her fix the sandwiches and set the table, mostly in silence, although she asked him about his job and Anya. Xander wished he felt comfortable enough with her to ask about his relationship with his girlfriend, but he didn’t know how Joyce would respond to being asked for dating advice.

Giles entered the room shortly; in fact, the strangers hadn’t stayed nearly as long as Xander had thought that they would.

“Why were those men sitting in my living room?” Joyce asked immediately. “Without an invitation?”

“They were from the Council,” Giles replied, not bothering to try and put her off. He didn’t think it would do much good anyway. “They’ve been sent to retrieve Faith.”

Xander snorted. “Like they did such a great job last time.”

“That’s not the team that the Council sent last time,” Giles responded. “These men are the ones that the Council uses for its dirty work. They’re dangerous, and they’re very good at what they do.”

The phone rang, and Joyce reached for it. “Yes?...Hello, Spike...Of course, I’ll let him know. Thanks for calling.” She hung up and turned to Giles. “Spike said that he thinks Faith is going to try to confront Buffy by showing up somewhere she might be found. He thought that this might be a likely place and wanted to warn us.”

Giles nodded. “That’s entirely possible. We hadn’t really thought about it, but Faith could easily decide to come after Buffy at one of her usual haunts. Did he say where he was going to be?”

“No, only that we should be careful,” Joyce replied. “Do you think that we should stay here?”
Giles frowned. “I think we’ll be safe enough. Even so, we’ll remain armed and alert. I have a feeling that if Faith realizes that we’re waiting for her, and that Buffy’s not around, she’ll leave well enough alone.”

“‘What did he have to say?’ Buffy asked as soon as Wesley put his cell phone away.

Wesley glanced over at her. ‘That he thinks Faith will seek you out. Spike said that he called Joyce and let them know to be on their guard. He thought it might be easier to set a trap for her.’

Buffy looked around at the clusters of people walking down Sunnydale’s main thoroughfare, most of them going in and out of the few nice restaurants in town, or the movie theater. It did seem rather pointless to wander around for hours in hopes of running into Faith. ‘What does Spike have in mind?’

“He thought Faith might be likely to show up at his place, now that she knows he’s still in town, and that the two of you are still together.” Wesley turned in the direction of Spike’s townhouse and started walking. “Spike said that he would station Willow and Tara at a distance, so that they could alert him when she shows up, as she might sense his presence.”

“And you and I walk right into the trap?” Buffy asked wryly. “I’m not sure I like that plan.”

“It does make sense,” Wesley pointed out.

Buffy sighed. It did make sense, even more so because Faith was probably most pissed off at the two of them, and she wouldn’t be expecting Wesley to be capable of taking care of himself. Not that Buffy would give him great odds against a Slayer, but at least he might be able to hold her off for long enough to give Spike a chance to show up.

It was a crazy plan, but Buffy figured that crazy was what they had right now.

“It makes sense,” Buffy agreed. “I just don’t like being the bait.”
“At least there will be fewer people to be caught in the crossfire,” Wesley replied. “Willow and Tara will be a safe distance away, and you’ll have Spike and me there.”

Buffy laughed. “Wes, not that I doubt your abilities, but Faith is a Slayer; Spike’s the one who has the best shot at beating her, and that’s only because he’s wearing that ring.”

“Then I suppose it’s a good thing that Spike will be there, then,” Wesley said. “Between the two of you, there shouldn’t be a problem getting her under control.”

She scowled at him. “Don’t say that; you’ll jinx us.”

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Maggie Walsh caressed the still form of her greatest achievement. Adam was nearing completion; in a few days, he would be ready to awaken, and she would have the perfect means of bringing the Slayer—one or both of them—under her control.

Walsh wanted a chance to prove her theory that she could build a better soldier. The men she controlled were good—better than your average infantryman, certainly, but they were nothing in comparison to what Adam might be. They were fragile creatures, even with their enhanced strength, while Adam would be nearly indestructible.

And totally dependent upon her.

Walsh knew that Adam was as much her child as anything that could come from her flesh and bone. In time, her superiors would understand her true brilliance, the full extent to which she would change the face of the world. Through Adam, and through the behavioral modification chip, Walsh would make the world a safer place, and she would make it hers—make it match her vision of what it could be.

With one last pat, she left Adam’s side, opening the door and letting it slide shut behind her. Walsh didn’t look back, or she might have seen Riley standing in the hallway, pressing himself into the recessed doorway. As soon as she was gone, he strode up to the door marked ‘314,’ peeking through the door.
Riley could see through the small window, spotting the sheet-draped figure on the table. He frowned, wondering what the table held. He hesitated, knowing that if he tried entering the room and failed, Walsh would find out. While Riley wanted the truth, he didn’t want to risk exposure at this point.

He felt a sense of failure as he turned away from the door; there was nothing he could do right now, not unless he could get inside without alerting security.

“Hey! What are you doing back here?” Riley turned to see Dr. Engelman hurrying towards him. “You’re not supposed to be here; it’s a secure area.”

“What’s back here?” Riley asked.

“This is a research and development area, Agent Finn,” Dr. Engelman said severely. “It’s closed to you.”

“Sorry, doctor,” Riley said, knowing that he didn’t sound apologetic. “The door was open, so I didn’t think it mattered.” He turned to go, knowing that he wasn’t going to get anywhere now.

He glanced over his shoulder as he left the corridor, noting Engelman’s speculative expression. The doctor would talk to Walsh, who would want to know why he’d been snooping; Riley didn’t know what he could possibly tell her, other than that he didn’t believe that Buffy was working with vampires. Riley didn’t think that would go over well.

He was heading towards the exit when he saw Graham coming towards him. “Riley. What are you doing?”

“Just stopping in,” Riley replied. “Have you seen Forrest?”

“He’s not out of quarantine yet.”

“What about the other guys?” Riley asked. “They out of the infirmary?”

Graham gave him an inscrutable look. “What are you thinking, Ri?”
“I’m thinking that something isn’t right,” Riley said. “We know that our patrols have been attacked recently, and that the HSTs that they had captured were then either killed or set free. Now Forrest nearly had his throat ripped out, and five other guys wound up in the infirmary with broken bones. I want to know what’s going on.”

Graham shook his head. “There’s nothing to it. We’ve got HSTs roaming this town on a nightly basis. It’s understandable that we’d have problems.”

“These aren’t normal problems,” Riley argued. “There’s something bigger here.”

Graham stared at him. “Let it go. This is what we do; we kill the monsters. Let the professor do whatever she’s going to do.”

“I don’t know that I can, Graham. I need to know the truth. I need to know that what we’re doing is the right thing.”

Graham looked alarmed. “Riley—”

“I have to go,” Riley said. “I’ll see you later.”

Riley didn’t know if he’d be back, or if he’d be welcome. He just had to know the truth.
“When I consider every thing that grows/Holds in perfection but a little moment./That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows/Whereon the stars in secret influence comment./ When I perceive that men as plants increase,/Cheerèd and checked even by the self-same sky,/Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,/And wear their brave state out of memory;/Then the conceit of this inconstant stay./Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,/Where wasteful Time debateth with decay/To change your day of youth to sullied night;/And all in war with Time for love of you./As he takes from you, I engraft you new.”
~William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 15”

Tara couldn’t believe that she was actually doing this—she was staking out a house in the hopes that a crazy Slayer would come and they would be able to warn the others in time. Spike had stationed them carefully, making sure that Faith wouldn’t spot them if she did come to his house. He was far enough away to avoid her Slayer senses, and Buffy and Wesley were on their way.

She had accepted that there were risks in doing magic with Willow and Wesley, but she hadn’t thought about what it might mean to actually get involved in the action. If Faith did see them, if she attacked them, Tara would be next to useless, and she’d told Spike that when he’d asked her to help out.

“I don’t want you to fight, pet,” he’d replied. “In fact, I’m going to insist that you don’t. Best thing you can do is holler at the top of your lungs and send up a flare.” He’d looked concerned then. “You can do that, right? Send up a light or something?”

That much Tara could do; it was easy enough, even for someone of her limited powers. Spike had left her with an encouraging smile, about a dozen yards away from the front of the house on one side, with Willow equidistant in the opposite direction.

She nearly squeaked in fright as she sensed someone coming up next to her before she recognized Wesley. “How are you?” he asked in a whisper.

“Fine,” Tara replied. “Any sign of her?”

“Not yet,” Wesley said. “We met up with Spike, and he thought I should join you.”
“He w-w-wanted to m-make sure I didn’t get hurt.” Tara wasn’t sure whether to be touched or annoyed that Spike had sent Wesley to protect her.

“Spike takes his duties very seriously where it concerns those he’s decided to protect,” Wesley murmured. “He’s taken a liking to you.” At Tara’s alarmed expression, he smiled. “It does seem that way at first—rather alarming, I mean. Knowing Spike can’t help but change you, although I do believe it’s for the better.”

“Why me?” she asked. “He doesn’t even know me.”

Tara could see Wesley’s eyes in the darkness, shining with amusement, as though he knew a particularly good secret. “He didn’t know me either,” was all he said, before turning back to watch.

Tara was left to turn that enigmatic response over in her head as they waited for the rogue Slayer to show up.

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Buffy didn’t like being bait; it was an uncomfortable feeling, waiting for Faith to jump out of the darkness at her, even knowing that she was surrounded by her friends.

She unlocked Spike’s door with her key, calling out his name as though she didn’t know whether or not he was home. “Spike? Are you home?”

“He’s not, but I am.” Faith strode out of his kitchen area, smirking at Buffy. “Funny how Spike never changed his locks, but I guess he wasn’t expecting me to let myself in again.”

“No, I guess he wasn’t,” Buffy replied. “I’ll have to kick his ass for that later.”

“Why not allow me?” Faith asked. “I’d be happy to help.”

“I think I’ll settle for kicking yours.” Buffy attacked without warning, knowing that Faith would have done the same.
Their fight was fast and furious, much like the one they’d had when Buffy had confronted her after she’d poisoned Spike. Like the last time, they were evenly matched. Whatever lingering weakness Faith had from her months in a coma was there for Buffy as well, as the last of the drugs were just now working through her system.

Still, Buffy had a slight edge; she had been training with Spike for the last eight months, as sparring was just as much foreplay as duty. Faith, perhaps, wanted it more, however, because she managed to get a blow through Buffy’s defenses. Her right hook caught Buffy on the chin, knocking her back into the wall.

Faith’s hands were at Buffy’s throat, choking her; Buffy fought the grip, clamping down around the other Slayer’s wrists, trying to force her to let go. Faith dropped one hand, bringing the back of her fist down on Buffy’s temple.

The world grayed out for a moment, and Buffy fought furiously to retain consciousness, knowing that if she blacked out, it would all be over. She wondered where Spike was, or if he even knew that Faith was here.

When she came to completely, Buffy found herself on her back, Faith straddling her middle. “Looks like I wound up on top this time,” Faith sneered. “I’m going to stay on top, too, B. You’ll know how it feels to be in my skin.”

Buffy caught the glint of metal in Faith’s open hand as she brought it down to grasp Buffy’s.

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Spike saw the flare of light from Willow’s direction and took off running towards the townhouse, hoping that he wasn’t going to be too late. He hated to stay too far away, but he didn’t want Faith to catch wind of him too early in the game. They needed to keep her off her guard as much as possible; he wasn’t about to underestimate the girl.

Willow called out to him as he passed, “I saw them fighting inside. I think Faith might have been here first.”

Spike cursed, but didn’t slow down, bursting through the front door of his house, seeing Faith sitting on top of Buffy, her hand coming down to strike Buffy’s open palm. Spike lunged, grasping
Faith’s wrist and yanking her off-balance, allowing Buffy to buck her off.

Faith yanked her hand free, and then tried to slap Spike with the metal device strapped to her palm. Spike avoided her blow instinctively, ducking under her hand and rabbit punching her in the gut. Buffy hit her from behind with a forearm to the back of the neck, and Spike grabbed her wrist, stripping the metal device from her palm and bringing his heavy boot down on top of it.

There was a flash of light, and Faith cried out, “NO!”

“Thought that might be important to you,” Spike said, keeping his grip on her wrist and yanking her around, her back to his chest and her arm twisted up behind her. “Look, Faith, we all know you got a rough deal, and that the cops don’t have a prayer of holding you. We could turn you over, but you’d just break loose again, and then we’d be back where we started. So I’m offering you the same deal I did before. You leave Sunnydale, and we’ll forget all of this. You’ll get a fresh start.”

“Bite me,” Faith snarled.

Spike’s face shifted. “Be careful what you wish for.”

Buffy shook her head, rubbing the bruises on her neck that were already forming. “Don’t, Spike. Faith, the offer is good for a limited time only. What’s it going to be?”

“I don’t need your charity,” Faith snarled, and in one smooth movement that Spike wasn’t expecting, she twisted free of his grip, bringing her boot down on his instep and catching his temple with a well-placed fist.

Buffy snap-kicked her in the stomach, then tried for a round house kick to Faith’s head, but Faith blocked her attack, shoving Buffy back into Spike and sending them both tumbling to the floor of the kitchen.

Faith was out the door moments later, both Buffy and Spike scrambling to catch up to her, realizing that they’d lost her once more when they made it to the door, finding Faith nowhere in sight.

“Bloody hell,” Spike snarled as they were joined by their three lookouts. “You lot see where she went?”
“East, I believe,” Wesley replied. “I wasn’t sure that we should run after her.”

“No, it’s good that you guys didn’t,” Buffy replied. “There wouldn’t be much you could do if you caught up with her.”

“What are we going to do now?” Willow asked, sounding nervous. “I mean, if Faith’s still out there, and obviously holding a grudge…”

Spike shook his head. “Stick together and hope that she takes the hint and leaves town anyway. I don’t know that we’ve got another choice at the moment, although Buffy and I will be actively hunting for her.” He sighed. “Tara, you should be safe enough; Faith doesn’t know anything about you. If she came after anyone, it’s going to be Buffy or me.”

“Or me,” Wesley said quietly. “I was her old Watcher; she has a grudge.”

Spike winced. “Probably more than one. She’s pissed as hell, and she’s going to be a pain in our arses for the next little while.”

While we try to make sure that the Initiative isn’t doing any more damage,” Buffy sighed. “Crap. This is not going to be the most fun ever, that’s for sure.”

Spike shook his head. “No, I don’t reckon so. You okay to stay here on your own, luv? I think I’ll see the others home, make sure Faith doesn’t try anything. I think she’ll lay low for tonight, but it never hurts to be on the safe side.”

“Wait, Spike,” Willow protested, seeing the flaw in that plan. “Faith doesn’t need an invitation to enter anyone’s house. She could just barge on in.”

Noting that she was looking directly at Wesley, Spike knew where most of her concern lay, and there was good reason for that. Willow was right; Faith didn’t need an invitation, but he and Buffy were perfectly capable of holding their own against the rogue Slayer. Wesley—not so much.

“I’ll sleep with a crossbow under my pillow,” Wesley assured her. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”
Buffy glared at him. “Wesley, how many times do I have to tell you not to jinx us?”

“Maybe Wes should bunk with me the next couple of days,” Spike suggested, throwing an apologetic look at Buffy. “You might be better off with Willow, luv.”

Buffy sighed. “Fine. We’ll pair up again.”

Spike didn’t think Willow minded Buffy’s obvious reluctance much; she was giving Wesley the same wistful look Buffy was giving him. Until this was settled, none of them were going to be having much fun.

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Before anyone could seek their beds, however, Spike had promised to see Giles and give him an update on Faith. Buffy was the one who had suggested that Spike and Wesley go, while she saw Willow and Tara back to campus. “It’s late, and we’ve got class tomorrow,” she said reluctantly. “I think it might be better if we go back to the dorms.”

“Right then,” Spike said with a sigh, giving her a lingering kiss. Wesley was speaking in a quiet voice to Willow, probably sharing a very similar goodbye. “See you tomorrow?”

“You’d better,” Buffy said.

Spike’s car wasn’t really big enough for the five of them, but the girls assured him that they didn’t mind walking. The trip over to the Summers’ house was quick and made in silence. Giles met them at the door, a worried expression on his face. “She got away?”

“She did.” Spike sighed. “Sorry about that, Rupert. I had her, but—”

The older man grimaced. “One of the Council’s teams was here earlier tonight; they’ll be looking for her.”
“Good luck,” Spike said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. “They wouldn’t know what to do with her if they caught her. They weren’t of much use last time.”

Giles raised an eyebrow, glancing over at Wesley. “This is a different sort of team.”

Wesley’s eyes widened. “The Council sent them?”

Spike followed Giles into the living room. “I take it they’re a little more professional about matters.”

“Professional is one way to put it,” Wesley said. “In fact, it’s whispered that they’re essentially the Council’s professional assassins.”

Spike’s eyes narrowed. “I’d heard rumors, but that was a long time ago. I had no idea they still existed.”

“They exist all right,” Giles said. “And they essentially warned me not to get in the middle.”

“Why would you want to?” Spike asked. “They at least have a better chance of holding Faith than the cops do. I offered to give her a free pass out of town, but she wasn’t having any of it.”

Giles shook his head. “Let’s hope that with all those intent on finding her, Faith decides that Sunnydale isn’t a good place for her to stay.”

“What? So she can go do some damage somewhere else?” Xander asked.

“No, so we don’t have to decide what to do with the girl,” Spike said. “Think about it, mate. If Faith decides to stick around, we’ll have to figure out what to do with her. That’s not going to be pretty.”

Xander winced. “Okay, I get it.”

“Perhaps she’ll surprise us,” Wesley said hopefully. “It’s possible that she could still be reached,
“Maybe, but I’m not going to hold my breath,” Spike said. “And I’m not dropping my guard. Between the Council, the Initiative, and us, Faith may decide she’d just as soon find another place to go, and I can’t say I’d be sorry for it.”

Joyce interrupted them. “Why don’t we have something to drink?” she suggested. “It’s been a long night, and there isn’t much more we can do tonight.”

Spike gave her a hopeful look. “Hot chocolate?”

She smiled indulgently. “I think I can manage that. Wesley?”

“If you don’t mind,” he replied, enjoying the experience of being mothered, as he always did.

“Xander? Would you give me a hand?” she asked.

The young man followed her into the kitchen, and Giles glanced over at Spike. “You said Faith had something in her hand when you called.”


“Do you think she had more than the one?” Giles asked. “I’d hate to think of what it might have been for.”

Spike shook his head. “Doubt it. It looked like more of a one of a kind sort of thing to me.”

“Let’s hope that was the case,” Wesley said. “Faith hasn’t been awake for long, which means that she either knew about this thing before Buffy put her in a coma, or someone has already made contact with her.”
Faith was still stinging from Spike’s offer, although she couldn’t have said why. She had nearly killed him—the only way he could have survived was if Buffy gave him her own blood, and they had given her a free pass.

So she could leave Sunnydale, huh? Well, that just showed that they weren’t taking her seriously enough. Faith would show them just how big of a threat she could be; she would make Spike regret ever turning his back on her.

In reality, although Faith couldn’t have put it into words, what hurt the most was the fact that Spike wasn’t intent on revenge. Maybe he wasn’t inclined to be her friend again, but the fact that he hadn’t killed her—even though he very easily could have—seemed to suggest that he had forgiven her. The fact that Buffy was willing to go along with it said the same thing. Neither one of them were holding a grudge, at least not enough of one to hurt her.

The very idea that they might have forgiven her pissed Faith off. What she’d done was unforgivable, and they ought to be trying to kill her, not give her a free pass.

She would show them—she would make them understand that she was irredeemable, that she was bad in the truest sense of the word.

Faith decided she make sure that Spike had no choice but to strike back at her; she would hurt him where he was weakest—she would hurt the people he loved.

She smiled; she would get her revenge at the same time.

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Buffy opened the door of her dorm room, expecting to see Spike on the other side. Instead, Riley was standing there, looking uncomfortable and a little angry. “Riley. What are you doing here?”

“I needed to see you,” he replied. “I had to know if what Professor Walsh told me was the truth.”

She hesitated, and then stepped out into the hallway. “We can talk in the lounge,” Buffy said, not wanting to be alone in her room with him, particularly if Spike happened to drop by. Besides, if
this were some sort of trick, Riley would find it a lot harder to get the drop on her in a public place.

“What happened, Buffy?” Riley asked in an urgent whisper. “Professor Walsh told me that you were working with vampires, and Mr. Giles told me that Forrest tried to kill you. Your friends look at me like I’m some kind of monster every time I see them. What’s going on?”

“Giles was telling the truth, Riley,” Buffy replied. At the expression on his face, she raised an eyebrow impatiently. “What did you expect me to say? That my Watcher was lying and I really am planning on taking over the world?”

He grimaced, looking away. “I found 314,” Riley admitted in a low voice. “It’s a room in a secured area of the lab. I couldn’t get inside to see what was in there, but it’s one of Professor Walsh’s projects.”

Buffy leaned back in her seat. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I shouldn’t even be talking to you. If someone sees me…”

“What have we here?”

Spike’s tone indicated that he was not happy about finding Buffy with one of the soldiers, and after recent events, Buffy couldn’t blame him. “Riley was just telling me that he’s found out what 314 refers to.”

Spike sat down next to her on the couch. “Do tell. Let’s hear it.”

Riley frowned. “Buffy…” He was obviously confused as to Spike’s identity.

“Riley, this is Spike, my boyfriend. Spike, this is Riley Finn.” Buffy had forgotten that they’d never actually met before. “You can tell him.”

“In fact, I’m going to pretty much insist on it,” Spike said. “I don’t want you alone with my girl.”
Buffy rolled her eyes at that showing of macho possessiveness, but she didn’t argue; Spike had good reason to not want her to be alone with any of the soldiers. “It’s okay, Riley.”

Riley hesitated, and then said, “It’s a room inside the Initiative, one of the professor’s special projects. I couldn’t see what was in there; all I could see was something on a table. It looked like a body.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Spike said.

“Neither do I,” Buffy admitted. She glanced at Riley. “Is there any way for us to access Walsh’s files?”

Riley shook his head. “I don’t think so. The Initiative has its own server, and it’s all managed internally. There aren’t any remote locations, and I know that the professor doesn’t take her work home with her.”

“Red might still be able to access it,” Spike pointed out. “She’d know if she could hack her way inside.”

Buffy nodded slowly. “We’ll have to talk to her.”

Riley looked alarmed. “I can’t be a part of that. I told you this as a favor, Buffy. I don’t want you hurt.”

“I appreciate it, Riley,” she assured him, “but the Initiative obviously had plans for me, and I’d kind of like to know what they are. I wouldn’t be so concerned if they hadn’t tried to take me alive, but…”

“You’re right, luv,” Spike stated. “She had something in mind for you, and we need to know what it was. Right now, though, we’ve got an appointment to keep.”

Buffy nodded, knowing that he was referring to the search for Faith. “Let’s go.” She looked at Riley. “We’ve got something else we have to take care of. Be careful.”
He nodded. “You, too.”

As they left the lounge, Buffy looked around, realizing that she hadn’t seen Wesley, and he was supposed to be with Spike. “Where’s Wesley?”

Spike shrugged. “He’s in your room, waiting for Willow. He thought that they’d be safe enough sticking together.”

Buffy nodded. “I’m sure. He’s come a long way over the last year.”

“Red, too,” Spike pointed out. “Besides, Faith always did like to sleep during the day. We should probably start with the motels.”

“Good idea,” she replied, dismissing the twinge she felt at the idea of leaving Wesley and Willow on their own. Spike was right; Faith was unlikely to attack during the day, and there were plenty of people around. Buffy didn’t think that the other Slayer wanted to risk getting caught by the cops again.
Chapter 39

“Love, from seed to seed, from planet to planet,/the wind with its net through the darkening
dations/war with its bloody shoes,/or even the day, with a thorny night./Wherever we went,
islands or bridges or flags/there were the violins of the fleeing autumn, bullet-
laced/happiness echoing in the rim of the wineglass/sorrow detaining us, with its lesson of
tears. /Through all those republics the wind whipped—/its arrogant pavilions, its glacial
hair/it would return the flowers, later, to their work./But no withering autumn ever touched
us./In our stable place a love sprouted, grew:/as rightfully empowered as the dew.” ~Pablo
Neruda, “Sonnet XXVIII”

Although Willow had a paper to work on, she thought it might be a good idea to get some time
with her boyfriend while she could. Finding him waiting for her in her room was a pleasant
surprise, and she grinned at him. “Hey, you. Where’s Spike?”

“He went off to find Buffy,” Wesley replied. “He seemed to think she’d be close by.”

Willow nodded. “Well, Spike would know. Do you want to walk with me to get a cup of coffee? I
think I need the energy for that paper.”

“Sure, if you want to go,” Wesley replied. “It’s a nice day outside; I’ll walk with you.”

They walked along, chatting idly under the warm sun. The air was brisk and cool, and when
Wesley noticed her slight shivering, he removed his jacket and draped it around her shoulders.
“Better?” he inquired.

“Much,” she responded with a thankful smile. “What are you going to be doing tonight while Spike
and Buffy go hunting for Faith?”

“What will you be doing?” he countered.

“Probably writing a paper,” Willow replied. “It’s due in another couple of days, so I need to get it
done.”

She gave him a mock-glare. “Are you going to let me work?”

“For long enough to get your paper done,” Wesley replied, smiling. “Having something to look forward to will give you an incentive to work faster.”

Willow giggled. “Okay, but if you distract me too much, I’m kicking you out.”

“I promise.” Wesley glanced around, noticing that they were going through a quiet part of campus, with no one around them.

“What’s wrong?” Willow asked.

He shook his head. “Nothing, I just—”

Willow suddenly went flying, sprawling across the path. “Wesley!” She heard the sounds of struggle, and rolled over, just in time to see Faith punch him in the face. Willow glared at her, holding out her hand, attempting a spell she’d never tried before. “Quiesce.”

She didn’t have enough control; she knew it as soon as the word left her mouth. “Looks like you’re still trying to get the magic to work for you, Will. Doesn’t look like you’re going to manage it any time soon,” Faith said with a smirk.

Darkness took her when Faith’s fist connected with her chin.

Willow didn’t know how long she’d been out when she started coming around. A young woman was leaning over her, her face a mask of concern. “Are you okay?”

“No,” Willow said frankly. “Someone hit me. Wesley!” She looked around frantically for her boyfriend. “What time is it?” she demanded.

The girl looked at her as if she was crazy. “What time?”
“Yeah, what time?” Willow asked. “She attacked my boyfriend, and I don’t know where he is.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” the girl asked. “Look, maybe I should call the police.”

“The police won’t do us any good,” Willow replied, standing shakily. “I have to find Wesley.”

The girl was pulling out her cell phone. “I’ll call the police.”

“Fine,” Willow said. “Tell them it’s Faith. They’ll know who you’re talking about. Dark-haired girl, about my height, skanky. And she has my boyfriend.”

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Wesley wagered he’d put up a pretty good fight. He’d managed to get his gun out, at least, even if she’d tossed it into the bushes. He’d also managed to hit her a couple of times before Faith knocked him out.

He wasn’t terribly surprised when he woke to find himself gagged and tied to a chair. The pain had already started; his face hurt from where she’d hit him, and he could taste blood in his mouth.

“So nice of you to finally join me,” Faith said. “I was beginning to think that I’d have to start without you.”

Wesley glared at her, knowing that he was impotent to do any more than that.

“Yeah, it looks like you’ve grown a pair since the last time I saw you,” Faith said, circling his chair. “It makes me wonder how well you can take torture.”

Wesley struggled against the ropes.

“You don’t like that word,” Faith said. “There aren’t many who do, you know. Most people can’t take it for long, not without begging for release. I wonder how long it’s going to take you to beg me to kill you.”
Time slowed to a crawl, measured not by minutes, but by seconds, pain blossoming in a dozen different points. She had used blunt and sharp objects, and Wesley knew it was only going to get worse. Faith had a lot more creativity than he would have given her credit for.

Wesley stubbornly held onto consciousness, even when the pain threatened to overwhelm him; he knew that all he had to do was hold on until help could arrive. Once they realized that Faith had him, they would get his location from Xander’s maps, and then Spike would rescue him. Well, Spike and Buffy.

He gasped as Faith yanked his head back by gripping his hair. She held up the bloody knife she’d been using on him. “What do you think, Wes? You ever thought about what would have happened if you’d never come to Sunnydale? Maybe it would be Giles in that chair instead. Or maybe I’d never have turned out this way without you pushing me over the edge.” She smiled cruelly. “Face it, Wes, you were a real loser, walking around like you had some stick rammed up your ass. If I’d had a different Watcher, I would have turned out differently.”

Wesley glared at her, wondering if she was going to pull the gag out of his mouth so that he could respond to her accusations. She seemed to sense the words in his eyes, because she pulled the bloody handkerchief from his mouth. “You made your own choices,” Wesley replied.

“Really? I think you probably can take some of the blame for this,” Faith replied. “You were a failure as a Watcher.”

Wesley smiled, although he thought it probably looked more like a grimace. “And you were a failure as a Slayer, Faith. Are you going to play the victim forever? Oh, poor Faith, you didn’t have anything. Spare us. In truth, you just weren’t strong enough for this job.”

He wasn’t surprised when Faith’s blow rocked his head back, and she shoved the gag back in his mouth. “I’ll show you strong,” she snarled. “You’ll be screaming like a girl before this is all over, and we’ll see who’s the strong one.”

Wesley didn’t doubt she meant it, or that she would carry out her threat. He knew that every man had his breaking point; Wesley just hoped that he hadn’t reached his yet.

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Spike pulled out his cell phone, answering on the second ring. “What’s up, Red?” He could barely make out her words; she was nearly incoherent with panic. “Slow down, pet.”

“It’s Wesley, Spike. Faith has him. She ambushed us when we went to get coffee. I don’t know how long I was out, so I don’t know how long she’s had him.”

“Bloody hell,” Spike said. “Stay where you are.”

“Spike, we have to get the map from Xander, and he’s working,” Willow said. “We don’t know what Faith is doing to him!”

Spike could guess, but he didn’t want to think about it; he couldn’t afford the distraction at the moment. “We’ll get him back,” he promised. “Look, if we can’t find Harris, you and Tara can do a locator spell. You got anything of Wesley’s with you now?”

He sensed her hesitation. “Yeah, but—”

“Call Tara, tell her to get over there and get started with the spell. If you get his location before we do, call me, and I’ll do the same,” Spike ordered. He hung up the phone and looked over at Buffy.

“She has Wesley?” Buffy asked, piecing it together from Spike’s side of the conversation.

“We’ve got to get Xander to read the maps,” Spike replied.

“Let’s go, then,” Buffy said. “Faith isn’t going to get away with this.”

“No, she’s not,” Spike replied. “She doesn’t get a free pass this time. If anything happens to Wesley…” He trailed off, and the two of them took off at a run for his car. They’d parked in the hotel parking lot to talk to the man at the front desk. It had been the last motel she could have been at in Sunnydale, and it was anyone’s guess where she might have Wesley.

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Maggie Walsh flipped the switch on Adam, watching as he slowly came to life. She had planned on waiting a few days, but the news that Riley Finn had been snooping around had Walsh moving her plans up. She wanted the proof of her success for all to see; once those in command saw what she’d managed to accomplish, they would understand.

Adam’s eyes opened slowly and focused on her. “Hello, Adam,” Walsh said softly. “Do you hear me?”

“Yes, I hear you,” he responded clearly and concisely, and Walsh’s heart leapt within her chest.

“Good,” she replied. “I need you to do something for me. Can you sit up?” Walsh stepped back from the table, and Adam slowly sat up. “Stand,” she ordered. He did so, completely obedient to her will. “Good, very good, Adam. I need you to kill someone for me.”

“Of course, mother,” Adam replied.

Walsh smiled. Now she was getting somewhere; no more sending out boys to do men’s work. “This is the girl,” she said, showing him a picture of Buffy. “And this girl—” She held up the picture of Faith she’d gotten from the police files. “Bring her back here—alive.”

“Yes, mother.” Adam made a quick about-face, heading for the door.

“Oh, and Adam?” Walsh called after him.

“Yes?” he asked politely.

“Don’t be seen.”

“I will make certain of it,” he said.

Walsh didn’t bother asking how he was going to do that.
“He left over an hour ago,” Buffy said, sliding into the passenger side of Spike’s car. “They don’t know where he went.”

“Xander still isn’t answering his phone?” Spike asked.

Buffy shook her head. “He’s probably with Anya, but who knows where they are.”

“We’ll stop by his place anyway,” Spike decided. “He might not be answering his phone.”

Buffy made a face. “Now that’s a mental image I didn’t need.”

“I’ll knock loudly,” Spike said, pulling up in front of Xander’s house. “Doesn’t he have a private entrance around the back?”

Buffy nodded. “You going to go?”

“Do you want to?” Spike asked.

She made a face. “Definitely not.”

Spike got out and went around the back, bending down and looking through one of the basement windows. He groaned when he saw Xander and Anya under the sheets together. Thankfully, it looked as though he’d caught them during a break. He rapped sharply on the glass, watching as Xander sat up straight in bed, staring at him. Anya, on the other hand, glared at him angrily.

Spike could sympathize; he hated being interrupted as well, but at the moment he didn’t care about her feelings.

Xander waved at him, and Spike straightened and stepped back from the window, waiting for him to open the door. Sure enough, a few moments later, Xander stuck his head out the basement door. “Spike, what are you doing here?”
“We need the map,” Spike said without preamble. “Faith has Wesley.”

Xander’s expression changed from mild irritation to utter seriousness. It was moments like this when Spike remembered why he was a decent guy to have around. “I’ll be right there.”

Spike could easily hear Anya’s raised voice, asking why Xander had to leave, along with Xander’s response that he was needed. “I’m sorry, An,” he finally said. “I have to go.”

He came outside, map in hand. “It looks like Wes is at the high school.”

Spike grimaced, pulling out his cell phone to call Willow. “Red? He’s at the high school. We’re heading over there right now.”

“We’ll meet you there,” Willow said firmly.

Spike’s eyes widened in alarm. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, pet. Let Buffy and I take care of Faith.”

“Who’s going to take care of Wesley?” Willow demanded. “If you have to go after Faith, and Wesley needs medical attention—”

“Fair enough,” Spike said, “but we’re driving, and we’ve got Xander with us. You can meet us there.”

By the time he’d hung up the phone, they were in his car, Xander in the back seat. “Why didn’t you pick up your phone?” Buffy demanded, glaring at him.

Xander winced. “It won’t happen again, Buf.”

Having heard Anya’s objections to Xander leaving, Spike could guess just why Xander hadn’t answered the phone. He’d probably been trying to walk the fine line between doing his duty and keeping his girl happy. “Wesley’s at the old school, and Willow said that they’re going to meet us there in case Wes needs medical attention.”
Buffy winced, thinking about what they might find when they got there; she still remembered what Faith had done to the demon, and the old professor. “Probably a good idea. Xander, stay back until Spike and I can get Faith away from Wesley.”

“You got it, Buffy,” he replied. “I’ll take care of him.”

“I know you will,” she responded, giving him a smile.

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Wesley could take her blows, and the sharp edges of the knife and pieces of broken glass she’d found lying around. When she brought out her lighter and an aerosol can of hairspray that she’d brought with her, he began to doubt his capacity to take much more.

He’d been burned before; he didn’t think he would last for long.

Faith could see the fear in his eyes, and she smirked. “Yeah, it’s time for heat, Wes. Won’t that be fun?”

He swallowed, his mouth dry with fear and the cotton of the handkerchief.

“Drop it.”

Wesley’s eyes found Spike in the doorway, looking like an avenging angel, a crossbow trained on Faith’s chest. “You wouldn’t,” she scoffed.

The bolt flew from the string, and it would have hit her if Faith hadn’t dived out of the way. “Oh, I would,” Spike replied, he and Buffy moving slowly to place themselves between Wesley and Faith.

Wesley could see Xander hovering in the doorway, and the boy gave him an encouraging nod; it was only a matter of time before Faith was far enough away for Xander to come to his side.
“You see, Faith,” Spike said, holding up the crossbow menacingly, watching for her emergence from behind the half-burned science lab table. “I can accept that you came after me. That was between us, and I’ve had people do worse to me before. Coming after Wesley was your mistake.”

“You decide that Buffy wasn’t quite your style?” Faith taunted from her spot behind the table.

Spike and Buffy exchanged a look, and Buffy began moving around the tables, looking for a clear shot at Faith. “No, Wes is my friend,” Spike replied. “But you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“I know all about having friends,” Faith yelled back. “You killed him.”

“He wasn’t your friend,” Buffy said. “He was using you to do his dirty work, Faith.”

“He was a lot better to me than any of you were,” Faith shouted. “He treated me like I mattered.”

“And what did I do?” Spike asked, advancing on the table.

“You were too busy with your precious Buffy to do anything for me,” Faith snarled, popping up into sight briefly before tackling Buffy to the ground.

Spike raised the crossbow again, trying to get a shot at Faith, but Buffy was struggling with her, and there wasn’t a clear opportunity. After seeing Wesley’s battered features, Spike didn’t much care whether if he had to take a killing shot, just as long as he didn’t hurt Buffy.

He cursed when Faith got the upper hand, dragging Buffy to a standing position in front of her, preventing Spike from shooting unless he was to go through Buffy first—and that wasn’t going to happen.

“Let her go,” Spike snarled.

“Make me,” Faith challenged, dragging Buffy backwards with her. She glanced over her shoulder at Xander, who looked ready to try something, although he obviously wasn’t sure what. “Move, and you die,” she warned him.
As soon as she was out of the door, Spike barked at Xander, “Take care of him!” Then he cautiously followed the two Slayers.

Xander was at Wesley’s side immediately, pulling the gag out of his mouth and looking around frantically for anything sharp enough to cut his bonds. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Wesley replied through gritted teeth.

“Hang on,” Xander said. “I’ve nearly got it.” He kept sawing at the ropes with the piece of broken glass he’d found. “Willow’s supposed to be on her way, I think with Tara.”

Wesley nodded, breathing a sigh of relief when Xander finally sawed through the ropes around his wrists.

“Wesley!” Willow came barreling through the door, Tara at her heels. “We got here as soon as we could.” She was at his side in a moment, tilting his chin to get a better look at his injuries. “You look awful.”

He frowned at her, finding it difficult to focus through his pain and without his glasses, but he could see that Willow had a dark bruise forming on her chin. “She hurt you.”

Willow waved a hand dismissively. “It’s nothing; I’ve had worse. You need a doctor.”

“I’ll be fine,” Wesley said. “It’s just superficial cuts and bruises mostly.”

Tara frowned at him, touching one cheek where he’d been cut. “Willow’s right,” she insisted, sounding uncharacteristically firm. “You need to see the doctor. She might have hurt you worse than you know.”

He sighed, allowing Willow and Tara to help him up once Xander had the rope off his ankles. When he stumbled a bit, Willow reached into her pocket for the cell phone Wesley had left in his jacket. “I’m going to call Giles. You’re not walking to the hospital. And where are Spike and Buffy?”

Wesley winced, knowing that he was in for quite a bit of mother-henning, because if Giles knew about this, Joyce would know, too, and then he’d have three women who thought that they knew what was best for him.

“They’re chasing Faith down, I hope,” he replied, deciding that it was better just to give up and give in to the inevitable. Wesley didn’t have the strength to argue anyway.
“When we met first and loved, I did not build/Upon the event with marble. Could it mean/To last, a love set pendulous between/Sorrow and sorrow? Nay, I rather thrilled./Distrusting every light that seemed to gild/The onward path, and feared to overlean/A finger even. And, though I have grown serene/And strong since then, I think that God has willed/A still renewable fear…O love, O troth…/Lest these enclasped hands should never hold,/This mutual kiss drop down between us both/As an unowned thing, once the lips being cold./And Love, be false! if he, to keep one oath,/Must lose one joy, by his life’s star foretold.”
~Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Sonnet 36, When We Met First and Loved, I Did Not Build”

They moved like twin shadows, their lithe forms covering ground faster than was humanly possible. There was no other way to keep up with Faith, who had apparently decided that running was her best option.

She’d shoved Buffy through a half-burned door on her way out, diving through an open window that had had the glass blown out from the bomb. Spike had slowed his steps just enough to make sure that Buffy wasn’t badly hurt, and then had pursued Faith, following the quick glimpses he caught and the faint traces of her scent.

Buffy joined him before he’d gone too far, and they chased her together, communicating silently. Spike knew that this could only end one way at this point; he couldn’t let Faith go again and risk her hurting someone else he loved, someone else that he was responsible for.

Spike couldn’t help but think that Faith wanted something from him, from them. She wouldn’t have gone after Wesley otherwise; this wasn’t simply about revenge. He couldn’t quite figure out what it was, though. She had to know that he would kill her for this.

Nearly stumbling at the realization, Spike realized that Faith wanted to die. She wanted them to kill her; she wanted to go out in a blaze of glory, because there was no reason for her to live.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered under his breath. More than anything else, it pissed him off; Spike didn’t like the idea of Faith using him to commit suicide.

Buffy glanced over at him, concern in her eyes. Spike gave a quick shake of his head, not wanting her to hesitate. If Faith did want to commit suicide by vampire, he’d let her; he wouldn’t like it, and he’d probably have nightmares about it for the next century or so, but he’d let her. There were some people, he’d learned, who simply couldn’t be reached.
Spike caught a glimpse of something else out of the corner of his eye, and he frowned. There was a
cry of pain ahead of him, and both he and Buffy increased their pace, putting on a final burst of
speed.

They found Faith in a clearing, staring at a creature that looked part man, part demon, and part
machine. She was holding her arm, and she glanced around wildly when Buffy and Spike skidded
to a halt. “What the hell is that thing?” she demanded, forgetting for a moment that they were
supposed to be mortal enemies.

“I don’t know,” Buffy said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Can you say Initiative?” Spike asked.

The creature looked at Faith. “You must come with me,” he said. “Mother wants to see you.”

“You know, my mother told me not to talk to strangers,” Faith quipped.

The man-demon cyborg frowned, as though he didn’t quite understand. “I am Adam, and mother
wants to see you.” He turned to look at Buffy and Spike. “You aren’t wanted.”

“Gee, that’s a first,” Faith commented.

“And I feel hurt,” Buffy said.

Spike moved quickly, shoving Buffy out of the way of Adam’s strike at her with the spine that
emerged from his arm. The vampire recognized that weapon as coming from a Polgara demon, and
he knew what the Initiative wanted the dissected demons for. To a certain extent, this was probably
what they’d planned for him, and for Buffy. The Initiative was building soldiers, and they didn’t
care how they got them, just as long as they were strong, fast, and obedient.

“You don’t want to tangle with these bastards, Faith,” Spike warned her.
Faith gave him a short nod, knowing that it was better to deal with the devil you knew than the one you didn’t, and that their dispute was only being put on hold. “Truce, then, for now.”

Before Spike could warn her to back off, she attacked Adam again, but he swatted her back like a fly. With a silent look, Buffy and Spike assaulted him together; Buffy just bounced off, and even with the gem, Spike barely made a dent. Seeing that he had managed something, however, caused Spike to throw a punch at Adam’s stomach, going for the solar plexus, where it didn’t look as though he had a lot of metal.

The cyborg was forced to take a step back, but that was it. “I am not weak like you,” Adam said, grinning. “I feel no pain.”

“We’ll see about that,” Faith said from behind him. She took the tree branch she’d broken off and attempted to ram it through his chest. Considering that her usual targets were vampires, Spike had to give her points for consistency, but the branch splintered, leaving Adam undamaged.

He heard the crack of wood, and he shouted at Faith, pulling Buffy down beside him as he dove for cover, just before the rain of bullets began.

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The one good thing about looking as bad as he did was that they didn’t have to wait in the ER very long. The triage nurse had taken one look at Wesley and had immediately ushered him back to a curtained cubicle, getting him onto a bed.

She tried to shoo Willow out—she’d already ordered Xander, Giles, and Tara to stay in the waiting room—but the girl shook her head stubbornly. “I’m staying with him.”

“Please,” Wesley said. “I’d prefer it if she stayed with me.”

“Very well,” the nurse said, hurrying out to get more help.

Willow smiled. “Very nice puppy dog eyes. I didn’t know you could do that.”
“I didn’t either,” Wesley replied. “I thought you might want to stay.”

“If you don’t want me here—”

“I didn’t say that,” Wesley said quickly. “It’s just that…” he trailed off. “I don’t know. I wish I knew how Spike and Buffy were doing.”

“I know,” Willow replied. “Me too, but I think Spike would do me some serious physical harm if I didn’t make sure that you were okay before looking for him.” She glanced over her shoulder. “I could ask Xander to check the map, but I don’t want to leave in case they don’t let me back in.”

“Don’t leave,” Wesley said. “I might not know much right now, but I know I want you here.”

Another nurse came bustling in, followed closely by an intern in medical scrubs. Willow was shoved off to the side as they began to take Wesley’s vital signs and talked about X-rays and other tests they needed to perform. She held his eyes, needing to know that he was okay.

Willow had believed that she would never love someone like she had loved Oz, and that was true; she never would. Oz was Oz, and Wesley was Wesley. That didn’t mean that she didn’t love Wesley, and the thought of losing him did things to her insides that she never would have expected.

She supposed she should have known that you love different people differently. It had been true of what she had felt for Xander, compared to how she felt about Oz, and now there was Wesley.

Willow hoped that there would always be Wesley.

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Giles and Tara leaned over Xander’s shoulder, looking at the map as if it would tell them everything that they wanted to know. Little colored dots didn’t really give a lot of information, however; all they were certain of was that Buffy and Spike were staying largely in one spot and that they were still alive. Tara had been fairly sure that if something happened to either of them, they would know.
“What do you think is keeping them?” Xander asked anxiously. “Are they coming?”

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t be staring at this blasted map.” Giles couldn’t prevent the anxiety he felt from turning into frustration. He’d seen what Faith had done to Wesley; Giles didn’t want to know what she might do to Buffy or Spike given the chance.

Although, he wasn’t terribly worried about Spike. The vampire had the gem, and it was unlikely that he would get hurt; Buffy was a different story.

“I’m sure they’re fine, Giles,” Xander said. “You didn’t see Spike; he was ready to go for the kill.”

“I know that both of them are capable of taking care of themselves,” Giles said, calming himself with some effort. “Faith is unpredictable, however. They might—”

Xander shook his head. “I’m serious, Giles. Spike was ready to rip her into little tiny pieces. I don’t think she’ll be able to hurt them.”

Giles sighed, unwilling to admit that Xander might have a point. Buffy was his Slayer, out there with not only Faith, but the Initiative and the Council’s team, and there was no guarantee that she would emerge from this conflict safely, particularly given her recent brush with death.

Tara took a breath, and then stopped, uncomfortable with the two men. She was staying because she knew that Willow wanted her there, and because she was worried about Wesley. “Is there something you wanted to say, Tara?” Giles asked.

She shook her head.

“I’m sure they’ll all be fine,” Giles said, more for her benefit than his own. That was his role as the grown-up, after all. Hearing the phone ring, Giles pulled out the cell phone that Joyce had bought him. “Hello?”

“Where are you?” she asked.

“We’re at the hospital,” Giles replied. “Wesley was hurt, but Spike and Buffy were fine the last
anyone saw them. They went after Faith and haven’t returned yet.”

“Should I come?” Joyce asked. “If you need me—”

“Stay,” Giles urged her. “We’re just waiting right now.”

Joyce agreed, although her reluctance was obvious. “You’ll call me as soon as you know anything?”

“Of course,” Giles replied. He put the phone away, and glanced over at Xander and Tara, who were watching him intently. “It’s going to be fine,” he repeated.

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“Who the bloody hell are they?” Spike demanded.

“How should I know?” Buffy shot back. “Maybe they’ll shoot Adam.”

Spike grimaced. “They are shooting him; they aren’t doing any good.”

That much was true; although the unknown gunmen were firing steadily at the cyborg, Adam was obviously unaffected by the hail of bullets. In fact, he began walking towards one of the spots where the gunfire was coming from, reaching into the bushes to yank out a black-clad man, taking the automatic rifle away and bending it in two. “Do you really think your weapons can harm me?”

“What the sodding hell—” the man began.

Adam was holding the man by the collar with his green, demon hand, and the spine shot out, piercing him through the chest. The demon dropped the lifeless body to the ground, meeting the charge of the next two men with ease.

Buffy watched the short-lived fight with a sinking sensation in her stomach. Whatever Adam was, he appeared nearly indestructible, and he had no problem killing. Buffy wondered if she shouldn’t
be trying to save the lives of the men attacking the demon, but they had been shooting at her and Spike. Even if they weren’t the targets, it didn’t matter; they could have easily been hit.

When three bodies lay on the ground around Adam, Buffy glanced over at Spike, her eyes wide. “Spike…”

“We can’t handle him,” Spike muttered. “There’s no way, not right now.”

“What about Faith?” she asked.

“Get her and get out,” Spike said. “We can’t let the Initiative—”

“Stop!” Adam called.

He had seen Faith try to slip away, and he moved to seize her. For something so big—and made of metal—Adam moved unbelievably fast. Faith ducked his grasping hand, darting away. “I’m not going with you, big and ugly.”

“You don’t have a choice,” he replied.

“Yes, she does,” Buffy said, knowing that they couldn’t allow the Initiative to get their hands on Faith. There was no way she would allow them to get their hands on a Slayer; whatever Faith had done, she didn’t deserve what they had planned for her.

Buffy heard Spike cursing behind her, and she knew that he was not happy about having to face Adam, at least not without a rocket launcher.

Later, looking back, Buffy was never certain exactly what happened. Faith, always impulsive, threw herself at Adam. Buffy moved in to make sure Adam didn’t get his hands on her, and the cyborg turned on her, bringing his fist down on her temple. She went down like a ton of bricks, darkness clouding her vision for a long moment.

When she woke, Spike was carrying her and moving at a quick jog, and Adam and Faith were nowhere in sight. “Spike! Where’s Faith?”
“Dead.” Spike’s jaw muscle was ticking, and Buffy struggled, trying to get down. “Just hold still,” he snapped. “You’re not bloody walking.”

“What happened?” she asked.

“Later,” he said. “We need to get somewhere safe. Adam wanted Faith alive, but he wanted you dead. I don’t want to know what he’ll do once the confusion wears off.”

Buffy stilled, knowing that there was no reasoning with him at the moment. “Where are we going?”

“Your mum’s place,” Spike replied. “It’s closer.”

Buffy was silent the rest of the trip to her mom’s house. Joyce met them at the door, her eyes filled with concern. “Buffy?”

“I’m fine, Mom,” Buffy said, giving Spike a look that he easily interpreted. He put her on her feet, and after a moment, she was fine to stand on her own, the remaining dizziness clearing. “See? I’m great. What about Wesley?”

Joyce gave her a gentle hug, not wanting to hurt her daughter. “Rupert just called from the hospital. They’re releasing Wesley tonight with the understanding that he would go straight home. Willow’s staying with him.”

“How is he?” Spike asked.

Joyce shook her head. “I don’t know the details. Rupert said that he would be okay, so I assumed that he would be fine.”

“I’m sure he will be,” Spike said. “Wesley’s tougher than he looks. Does that mean that Rupert is on his way back?”
“As soon as he finished dropping everyone off,” Joyce replied. “What happened with Faith?”

Spike shook his head. “I don’t want to tell this story more than once.”

“I’ll get us something to drink.”

“Better make it something a little stronger than hot chocolate,” Spike said.

As soon as her mother had left the room, Buffy turned to her boyfriend. “Spike, the Initiative still has Faith’s body.”

“I’m well aware of that, luv,” Spike said evenly. “I had two choices: save you or grab Faith’s body. You think I should have made a different choice?”

“No, I’m just saying that we can’t let them keep it, not after…” Buffy trailed off. They had used a human as the basis for that cobbled-together monster; she only hoped that he’d been dead when they had cut him to pieces. The idea that they’d used a living man…

“Pretty sure he was dead when they started piecing him together,” Spike said quietly, trying to be reassuring. “He wouldn’t have survived something like that; nothing human could.”

Buffy swallowed. “What are we going to do?”

“Now might be the time to get that big Boy Scout to give us a hand,” Spike said. “If he could get us information on that thing, and maybe on where they have Faith’s body, we might be able to do something about it.”

Buffy nodded. “I’ll talk to Riley tomorrow.” She glanced up when her mother came back into the room, carrying a tray of drinks. She had a double shot of scotch for Spike, the same for herself, and a soda for Buffy, who frowned. “I think I deserve a drink, too.”

“You’re not old enough, sweetheart,” Joyce replied.
Spike shared a look with the woman, then handed his glass to Buffy. “Give it a try, luv, if you want.”

Buffy took a healthy swallow and nearly spit it back out. “Blegh!”

Spike rescued his glass. “Yeah, it’s not the most pleasant-tasting stuff.”

“Then why would you drink it?” Buffy asked.

Spike shrugged. “Takes the edge off. Besides, I’m used to the taste. I imagine you would be too, if you had been around as long as I have.”

The front door opened, and Giles called out, “Hello?”

“We’re in here, Rupert,” Joyce said.

He joined them in the living room, accepting his own drink from Joyce and sitting down. Looking at Buffy and Spike, he sighed, “I’m guessing that Faith escaped.”

Spike shook his head. “She’s dead, Rupert.”

Giles frowned. “What?”

Spike quickly explained what had happened, including their run-in with the three gunmen as well as Faith’s death at Adam’s hands. “I don’t think he was supposed to kill her,” Spike explained. “He’d knocked Buffy out, and he was going for Faith. She plunged her hand into his chest. It’s probably the only vulnerable spot on him, and he reacted by reflex—if something like him has reflexes. Knocked her into a tree, and it broke her neck. I didn’t want to leave Faith behind, but it was either her or Buffy at that point.”

“You did the right thing,” Giles was quick to assure him.

“We can’t let them keep her, Giles,” Buffy insisted. “We have to get her body back.”
“I agree, of course,” Giles said. “We can’t go rushing into this, however, not when we know next to nothing about this creature. If there’s a way to get information—”

“The soldier boy,” Spike stated. “We go to him, see if he’ll help. He said he saw a body on a table. Bet that was what he saw.”

“He might help if he knew about Adam,” Buffy agreed.

Giles nodded. “Do that, then. We need to make sure that the Initiative has no opportunity to get their hands on a Slayer.”

“What about Wes?” Spike asked. “He’s okay, yeah?”

Giles nodded. “Bruised ribs, cuts and bruises, a few stitches, but nothing life threatening.”

Spike sighed. “Wish it was just about the surface stuff.”

The older man nodded. “We’ll all do whatever we can for him. I think Wesley knows that.”

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Riley presented himself in Walsh’s office, as ordered. “You wanted to see me, Professor?”

“What were you doing in the restricted access area, Agent Finn?” Walsh asked, her tone cold.

“The door was open,” Riley said, keeping a bland expression. “I didn’t realize that I needed a higher clearance to be in that area.”

Walsh stared at him long and hard, as though she could read the truth in his face. Riley desperately hoped that she had no idea about the doubts that were flooding his mind. With what he’d seen recently, Riley thought it might be better to keep that to himself.
“Yes, well, I’d advise you to stay out of that area from now on,” Walsh said with a grudging smile. “You know what they say about curiosity.”

“Of course, Professor,” Riley replied. “I won’t go back there again.”

“Good.” It was a dismissal, and he left the office, thanking his lucky stars that Walsh didn’t question him any more closely than that. She’d be watching him like a hawk from here on out, but Riley didn’t plan on giving her a reason to dismiss him, or doubt his loyalty.

Although, he planned on keeping his eyes open.

Riley froze as he watched a tall figure walk up to the door leading to the restricted area, the figure of a girl draped over his arms. It wasn’t the circumstances that caused him to halt his steps, it was the sight of the creature—half man, half demon, with bits of metal glinting in the fluorescent lights.

Riley swallowed hard as the figure disappeared. It looked like he was working for Dr. Frankenstein.
Wesley pushed himself up, groaning a bit from the pain; it was going to be a while before he could move without aching in various locations. Faith had certainly done a number on him. He pulled his robe on, stumbling out of his room but freezing when he saw Willow talking with Spike.

“Hey there,” Willow said as soon as she saw him. “How are you feeling?”

“A bit sore, but I think I’ll live,” Wesley replied. “What about Faith?”

“She’s dead,” Spike said quietly. “The Initiative has her body, and we’re going to have to get it back, but she’s not a threat to you anymore, mate.”

Wesley nodded, unable to hide the relief he felt. “Thank you, Spike.”

“Well, now that Spike’s here, I’d probably better get to campus,” Willow said. “I have to turn my paper in, and I promised I’d let Tara know how you were.” She gave him a gentle kiss. “Take it easy, okay?”

“Of course,” he replied, watching as she left. “I assume she asked you over to make sure someone was with me?”

Spike shrugged. “Does it matter either way? Besides, I wanted to see for myself that you were alright.”

Wesley nodded. “I’m fine, but I think I want to take a shower.”
“You do that,” Spike responded. “I’ll be right here.”

Wesley wasn’t sure whether to feel insulted or warmed that everyone was so concerned. It was rather like the previous night when the doctors had released him from the hospital; even Giles and Xander had had a difficult time hiding their concern. He was just grateful to be able to spend the night in his own bed; it was all he’d really wanted.

The shower and clean clothing revived him considerably, and when he made his way to the kitchen, Wesley was unsurprised to find that Spike had already brewed a pot of coffee and was busy making breakfast. “You didn’t have to do that,” he said, pouring a cup of coffee.

“That’s not the point,” Spike replied. “I’m under strict orders to take good care of you.” He gave Wesley a sharp look, naked concern in his eyes. “You really alright?” When Wesley opened his mouth to reply, Spike added, “I’m not talking about the physical. I’ve been tortured before, Wes.”

Wesley looked away, then back at Spike, managing a real smile. “It wasn’t pleasant, but I knew that you would come.”

“Wes, I—”

“The torture didn’t matter as much as seeing everyone riding to my rescue did,” Wesley explained. “It was—it’s difficult to explain.”

“I think I understand,” Spike replied. “If I had known that Faith would come after you, I wouldn’t have let her go.”

“But you couldn’t have known, Spike,” Wesley reminded him. “This was not your fault, not by a long shot. Faith made her choice, and there was nothing you could do about it, anymore than I could have changed things.”

Spike smiled. “You’ve come a long way.”

“Thanks to you,” Wesley replied. “You can’t save everyone.”
“No, you can’t,” he agreed. Spike looked at the clock. “I’m under orders to make sure you don’t do yourself more harm before we go over to Joyce’s for dinner.”

Wesley didn’t bother to hide his groan. “She’s going to mother me.”

“You have a problem with that?”

Wesley glared at Spike, hearing the amusement in his tone. “I believe I remember you not liking people hovering, either.”

Spike shrugged. “It’s not so bad; at least you know that she’s going to feed you. Besides, it’s a chance to talk about what our next move is going to be. The sooner we can get Faith’s body back, the better.”

“Why is it so important that we have her body?” Wesley asked. “If she’s dead, she’s of no more use to the Initiative.”

“I only wish that were true,” Spike replied. “I guess no one’s filled you in on Adam yet.”

“I was a bit out of it from the pain killers last night,” Wesley reminded him.

Spike nodded. “Then I guess I’ll explain it now.”

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“So he’s okay?” Buffy asked.

“He was this morning.” Willow made a face. “I don’t know, though. Faith hurt him really badly, and it’s hard to tell what’s behind that stiff upper lip.”

“He seemed okay last night,” Tara offered. “I-I don’t th-think he was hiding anything.”
Willow breathed a sigh of relief; she knew, by this point, how good Tara was at reading people. “That’s good. I’m sure he’d tell me if he was hurting eventually, but…”

“In the meantime, you hate that he *is* hurting,” Buffy guessed, knowing all too well how that worked.

“Pretty much,” Willow agreed. “What are we going to do about the Initiative?”

“That depends on what you and Riley can manage,” Buffy replied. “We need to know more about this Adam, and that means getting access to Walsh’s files. Do you think you could do it?”

“I don’t know,” Willow replied doubtfully. “You’re talking about hacking into a top secret military installation. It’s definitely going to be a challenge.”

“But doable?” Buffy pressed.

Willow shook her head. “Maybe. I can give it a shot anyway. What about Riley?”

“We’re hoping he’ll help us get information, or possibly get inside.” Buffy made a face. “I don’t think Spike’s real happy at the thought of us breaking in, but I don’t think that there’s another way to get Faith’s body back.”

Tara and Willow exchanged a look. “That’s pretty macabre, Buffy,” Willow commented.

“I don’t think Faith would want to be used as the basis for something like Adam,” Buffy replied. “It might be morbid, but we can’t let that happen to her.” Her jaw set. “Besides, if we can get inside, we might be able to do enough damage on the way out that it’ll make it very clear that they can’t run their operation in this town.”

“What are you thinking?” Tara asked.

“I’m thinking that Adam needs to be destroyed, and so does the Initiative,” Buffy replied. “It’s just
When the alarms went off, Riley didn’t hesitate to join the other soldiers as they headed for the laboratory. He’d had a sleepless night, trying to decide what he was going to do next; Riley knew that whatever that creature had been, it wasn’t part of their mission—at least, not the one he’d signed up for.

They were supposed to be killing existing demons, not building new ones.

“What’s going on?” he asked Graham as they entered the lab.

“Something got loose,” Graham replied. “I haven’t heard any more than that.”

Just then, Riley spotted Forrest for the first time in weeks. “Forrest!”

The tall dark-skinned man lifted his chin in greeting. “What’s up, Riley?”

“I should be asking you that,” Riley replied. “What’s the word?”

“One of the professor’s pet projects escaped,” Forrest said. “Sounds like he took something with him, too.”

“I need your attention!” Professor Walsh called from the front of the room. The soldiers all lapsed into silence, their eyes fixed on her. “I’ve been working on a special project, as you might have heard; that project, Adam, has escaped, and he needs to be brought back as soon as possible.”

“What are we looking for?” one of the men asked.

“Adam is unmistakable,” Walsh said. “Remember that he was built to be a weapon, and approach him cautiously.”
“What’s going to take him down, Professor?” Riley asked, remembering the creature he’d seen the day before. It had been big, ugly, and very scary looking; if that’s what Walsh had been doing with the demon parts, things could get very sticky.

Walsh smiled tightly. “I think that’s your job to figure out, Agent Finn. Just remember that a lot of money has been spent on Adam, and do your best to bring him in unharmed.”

Riley tried to keep the scowl off his face, not liking the sound of that. Having to be careful not to harm the creature was going to put his men in more danger, and Riley was very focused on making sure his men stayed in one piece.

“Dismissed,” Walsh barked.

Riley moved away, wondering what his next move was going to be. There was no way he was going to risk his men just to bring that thing back in one piece. “What’s next, Ri?” Graham asked, immediately at his side.

“We find this thing and bring it in,” Riley replied. “Any way we can. Graham, get the guys we can trust.” Riley met his friend’s eyes, hoping that the other man would get the message—guys who wouldn’t mind questioning orders, if that was the way they had to do it.

Graham nodded. “Give me five minutes.”

Riley watched as Graham began rounding up men to form their squad, seeing Forrest doing the same across the room. He wondered when things had changed; Forrest was studiously avoiding him, where once before he would have been at Riley’s right hand.

No, Riley knew when things had changed; Buffy had changed everything. Riley wondered what it said about him that he didn’t regret it.

“Ready?” Graham asked, four men lining up behind him.

Riley looked over the chosen few and gave a satisfied nod. “Let’s move.”
Spike watched, amused, as Joyce hovered. “Can I get you anything else, Wesley?”

“I’m quite alright,” he assured her.

Spike took pity on the man. “Could I get a drink, Joyce? I’d get it myself, but I’m not sure where you keep your alcohol.”

She smiled at him. “Of course. Wesley?”

“Please,” he said fervently.

“You aren’t taking anything?” Spike asked under his breath.

Wesley shook his head. “I don’t like how they make me feel.” He gave Spike an inquiring look. “What are we going to do about the Initiative, Spike? Now that we know what they’re trying to do…”

“We have to do something,” Spike agreed. He glanced up, hearing the girls’ approach even through the front door. He stood to greet Buffy, keeping a hand on Wesley’s shoulder so he couldn’t get up. “Sit.”

Buffy came to give him a kiss, and then gave Wesley a sympathetic look. “If you feel as bad as you look…”

“I probably look worse,” he replied, trying once again to rise to greet Willow.

“Sit,” she said, leaning down to kiss him. “You’re going to get taken care of, mister, whether you like it or not.”
There was a long pause, broken only by Buffy and Spike’s snickers as they both caught the unintentional innuendo, before Tara’s voice broke the silence. “I’m pretty sure that Wesley isn’t going to dislike it.”

Wesley couldn’t help the smile that broke out over his face. “I’m fairly sure you’re right.” He touched the side of Willow’s face that hadn’t been bruised by Faith’s fist. “I’m fine, Willow.”

Spike watched with interest as their eyes met for a long moment, and Willow finally nodded, seemingly reassured. “As long as you’re okay.”

They seemed to forget that they weren’t the only people in the room until Spike cleared his throat. “Now that we’re almost all here…”

“Where’s Giles?” Willow asked to cover her blush.

“Right here,” he said, coming into the room behind Joyce with the tray of drinks. “Willow, can you break into the computers?”

“I don’t know,” Willow admitted. “If they have an internal server, there might not be an access point unless we can get inside the lab itself.”

Spike scowled. “I don’t want you going in, Red.”

“We might not have another choice,” Buffy reminded him.

“I think it should be a last resort,” Spike insisted.

“That goes without saying,” Wesley inserted. “The question is how to stop them.”

“Can we blow the place up?” Spike asked, not entirely joking about it.

Giles frowned at him. “I don’t think that’s going to help, Spike. We need a long-term solution.”
“It is a long-term solution,” Buffy said pragmatically. “It worked for the Mayor.”

Spike shrugged. “Plant enough explosives, and that place will cave in on itself. Saves the military the trouble of doing it.”

“We’re not blowing anything up,” Giles said sternly. “At least, not yet.”

There was a perfunctory knock on the front door before Xander came rushing in, Anya on his heels. “We’ve got trouble,” he announced.

“When don’t we have trouble?” Buffy asked rhetorically.

Xander shook his head. “This trouble is a little different. We’re talking dead, mutilated kid kind of trouble.”

Buffy’s face paled. “A kid?”

“I don’t know details, but it’s all over the news,” Xander replied. “I figured it probably didn’t mean good things for us.”

Spike stood at the same time that Buffy did. “It’s Adam; it’s got to be. We have to look for him,” Buffy insisted.

“What are you going to do when you find him?” Giles objected. “If it is Adam, from what you’ve told me, he’s nearly indestructible.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Buffy said, giving him what she hoped was a confident smile. “We always do.”

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Riley led his group out into the woods, knowing that they were running blind. They had no way to track Adam at the moment; he gave off none of the pheromones that many of the other demons did, and so they just had to hope that one of the squads ran across the cyborg and didn’t wind up getting killed while they were at it.

He was more than a little worried about their ability to take it down, since they didn’t have any technical specifications regarding its weaknesses or its capacities for damage. They didn’t know what kinds of weaponry it had at its disposal, and Professor Walsh—for all her desire to get her pet project back—hadn’t given them anything to go on.

“Riley, we’ve got trouble,” Graham said quietly.

Riley glanced over at his friend. “What’s the problem?”

“Looks like Adam’s already cutting loose,” Graham said. “They found a boy’s body in the woods near campus.”

“Let’s go.” They set off, covering the ground in an easy lope. The woods loomed in front of them, and Riley didn’t hesitate to plunge in. His men followed him, fanning out, but staying within calling distance.

Riley caught a glimpse of a blond head through the thick underbrush, and he knew it wasn’t one of his men, nor was it Adam.

“There!”

Graham’s voice came from his left, and Riley veered in that direction, sensing the other men in his squad converging on the location.

Adam seemed to rise up in front of him, and Riley slid to a halt, lifting his blaster to a firing position. He didn’t care what Walsh’s orders were at the moment; Adam had killed a child, and that was all the information he needed.

Riley fired without hesitation, stumbling back a step when Adam seemed to drink in the power, rather than being hurt. “Ah, that was helpful.” Adam gave him a grimace that might have passed for a smile.
Up close, he could see the half-human, half-demon features, the glinting of metal giving some clue as to why the blast from the weapon had no effect. “Professor Walsh is looking for you,” Riley said, wondering if he could reason with the creature.

Although he’d be happier if he could destroy it.

“Mother wishes to hide the world from me,” Adam said. “I wish to see it.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Riley replied. “You’re a soldier; you have to take orders just like the rest of us.”

“Perhaps you must take orders,” Adam said. “But I do not.”

The black-clad figure came hurtling out of the darkness so quickly that Riley didn’t even have time to train his weapon. He heard the charging up of his men’s blasters and quickly called, “Hold your fire!”

Adam hurled Spike off of him and into the trees as Riley charged forward, thrusting the butt of his rifle into Adam’s gut. The cyborg backhanded him, and he went flying. Someone helped him to his feet, and Riley recognized Buffy. “What are you doing here?”

“We met your friend the other night,” she responded. “He’s already killed once, and it looks like he has a taste for it now. Did you get any instructions on an off-switch?”

Riley shook his head. “We’re supposed to bring him in unharmed.”

Buffy’s eyebrows went up. “You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m all for killing it,” Riley said defensively.

“Can your men cause a distraction?” Buffy asked. “Spike and I will try to—I don’t know, break him or something.”
“Are you sure? We could—”

“Get killed,” Buffy said shortly. “He’s already killed a Slayer; I don’t think he’s going to have a problem with a few soldiers.”

She took off, and Riley hastened to follow her. His men were spread out in a flanking action, but they obviously had no idea what to do next, not when their weapons didn’t work. Riley couldn’t help but wish for an old-fashioned shotgun, or a grenade, which might at least do some damage; he doubted that Adam could incorporate shot the way he could the energy from the blasters.

Buffy hit Adam with a kick in the back, aiming for his spine in hopes of breaking it. When the cyborg turned on her, Riley picked up a rock, for lack of anything better, and threw it at Adam’s head. The rock bounced off, not even leaving a mark, but Adam turned away from Buffy to look at him. “I think it’s time to go home, Adam,” Riley said.

“You have no power,” Adam replied. “Mother has not gifted you as she has gifted me. And soon, I will have a companion.”

That moment of distraction was all Spike needed to leap up and thrust his hand into Adam’s side, where soft flesh was unprotected by metal. Adam gave a roar, grasping Spike around the throat and holding him aloft.

“Spike!” Buffy called, driving a fist into Adam’s gut, trying to get the creature to loosen his grip.

“Graham,” Riley called.

As one, they ran at Adam from behind, driving their shoulders into Adam’s back, preventing him from attacking Buffy and causing him to stumble and release Spike. With a cry of rage, Adam ran off into the woods.

The other men turned to Riley, waiting to see what his orders were going to be. “We need different weapons,” Riley said. “There’s no point in getting ourselves killed until we know what’s going to take him down.”
He could see the relief on their faces, and Riley turned to look at Buffy, who was helping Spike up. A human’s throat would have been crushed by Adam’s grip, but Spike didn’t even look bruised. “Graham, make contact with the other squads; let them know what Adam’s capable of. The rest of you are dismissed; I’ll make the report to Professor Walsh.”

No one argued with him, possibly because, by making the report, Riley would be taking responsibility for their failure to capture the Professor’s pet project; no one wanted to deliver that news.

They didn’t call Walsh the “Evil Bitch-Monster of Death” for nothing.

Buffy and Spike stood still, both of them meeting Riley’s frank gaze easily. “Can you stop him?” Riley asked.

“We don’t know,” Buffy replied. “It’s going to take more information, at the very least. Can you get it for us?”

Riley shook his head. “I’ll see what I can do, but Walsh isn’t talking.” He sighed. “I need to talk to you both, but not here.”

He watched as Buffy looked at Spike, a silent conversation seeming to transpire. “Buffy’s place,” Spike said. “We’ll meet you there tomorrow afternoon around four. Bring whatever information you can.”

Riley nodded. “You got it.”

They disappeared into the night like two shadows, and Riley wiped the sweat from his face, cursing angrily, knowing what he was going to have to do unless Walsh could give him answers, and good ones.

He couldn’t believe that he was actually thinking about committing treason; Riley hadn’t thought that he was that kind of guy.
Chapter 42

“How is it that I am now so softly awakened,/My leaves shaken down with music?—/Darling, I love you./It is not your mouth, for I have known mouths before,—/Though your mouth is more alive than roses,/Roses singing softly/To green leaves after rain…Your face flowers whitely among cold leaves,/Soil clings to you, bark falls from you,/You rouse and stretch upward, exhaling earth, inhaling sky,/I touch you and we drift off together like moons./Earth dips from under,/We are alone in an immensity of sunlight,/Specks in an infinite golden radiance,/Whirled and tossed upon silent cataracts and torrents./Give me your hand darling!/We float downward.” ~Conrad Aiken, “How Is It That I Am Now So Softly Awakened”

Wesley watched as Willow threw some things into a knapsack. “You don’t have to do this.”

She gave him what he recognized as her resolve face. “It’s not about ‘have to,’ it’s about want to,” Willow responded. “I just want to be sure that you’re okay.”

“I am okay,” Wesley insisted.

Willow sat down on her bed. “Do you not want me to stay with you?”

“No!” Wesley was quick to assure her. “Not at all. I just don’t want you to worry, love. I’m really quite all right.”

Willow frowned. “But you were tortured.”

“And there were people who showed up,” Wesley pointed out. “That’s what makes the difference.” When it appeared that Willow was going to argue, he continued, “I’m not saying that I won’t have bad dreams on occasion, but I’m fine right now.”

Willow gave him a hard look. “You’re not just doing the stiff upper-lippy thing?”

“I promise,” Wesley replied, grabbing her hand and tugging her towards him.
Willow leaned down, kissing him gently, careful of the bruises. “I can’t help worrying about you,” she murmured. “When I think about what might have happened if we hadn’t been able to find you, or if—”

A knock on the door cut off whatever Willow had planned on saying. “Come in,” she called.

The door swung open, and Willow took a quick step away from Wesley, her eyes widening in shock. “Oz.”

“Hey.” Oz looked from Willow to Wesley and back again. “Willow.”

Willow took a step towards him and then stopped, looking at Wesley over her shoulder with a panicked expression.

Wesley took that as his cue and stood. “I should go. Buffy and Spike will—they’ll be expecting me, and I’m sure you two will want to catch up.”

He left before Willow could protest, not wanting to know whether he was going to be able to compete with Oz, who was, after all, her first love. Wesley wasn’t sure that anyone could hope to compete with that.

Walking blindly, he didn’t even see Tara until he ran into her. Wesley apologized, clutching her arms to keep her upright. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you okay?” she asked, frowning at him with concern. “You don’t look so great.”

Wesley glanced over his shoulder. “I’m fine, really.”

“No, you’re not.” Tara looked a little surprised at her own boldness. “You want to get something to drink? A cup of coffee?”

“I—yes.” Wesley took a deep breath. “Yes, I think that might be a good idea. I should give Willow some time to—I should give her some time.” Tara tucked her hand through his arm, and Wesley smiled, grateful for her gentle presence.
Willow had no idea what she was supposed to say, what she was supposed to do. Oz looked like he was freaking out in a big way, and she couldn’t blame him, although at the same time she was a little put out that he had thought she would be willing to wait for him.

To wait months, without a letter or any other contact, without knowing if he would ever return. It wasn’t fair.

“So…” Oz stared at her, his eyes wounded and hungry at the same time. “You and Wesley?”

Willow took a deep breath, nodding. “Yeah. It was a surprise, but—he was there for me.”

Oz winced, as though she’d slapped him. “I just needed to get this under control. I needed the wolf—I needed to make sure I wouldn’t hurt you.”

Willow wrapped her arms around herself tightly. “But you did hurt me. I loved you, and you left. You didn’t give me a choice, and you just left.”

Oz couldn’t deny the truth behind that statement. “How long?”

“A little while,” Willow replied. “We’ve been going slow.”

He stared down at the carpet as though it fascinated him. “I shouldn’t have expected you to wait.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.” Willow could feel the tears begin to fall. “If I had known you were coming back, I would have. I—” She stopped, thinking about her relationship with Wesley, how good it was. She loved them both, and couldn’t say that she loved one of them more, but Oz had left, and Wesley had stayed.

Willow had shared magic with Wesley, had been connected to him on a level that she hadn’t reached with Oz.
In truth, at that moment, Willow wasn’t sure that she’d have done anything differently.

Oz nodded slowly, acceptance beginning to soak in.

“Did you get it under control?” Willow asked. “The wolf, I mean?”

Oz gave her a slight smile. “Yeah, I think so.”

Willow swallowed. “Was it worth it?”

His eyes were a little lost. “I don’t know.”

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Spike looked at his watch, wondering where the hell Wesley was. He’d said that he’d be there when Riley arrived; so had Willow, for that matter. Riley was sitting on the edge of the couch, staring down at his clasped hands while they waited, and Spike noted that he looked nervous.

Not that he cared much about that fact. Let the soldier stew a little; give him a taste of his own medicine.

“Let’s get started,” Spike finally said. “They’ll show when they show.”

Of course, just as he said that, the front door opened. “Sorry we’re late,” Wesley said, Tara following him inside.

“Where’s Willow?” Buffy asked.

Wesley shook his head. “Oz showed up unexpectedly. I believe she’s doing some catching up.”
Spike gave him a sharp look, wanting to be sure that Wesley was okay; the man had been through quite a bit recently. “We were just getting started, so you didn’t miss anything,” he assured his friend. “Why don’t you sit down?”

“Here, Wes,” Buffy said, vacating her chair. “You sit.”

He sighed, obviously a little tired of being fussed over, but didn’t argue with her. “So what’s our next step?”

“The only way to access Professor Walsh’s files is from the inside of the lab,” Riley began. “She’s the one responsible for creating Adam, so she’s the one with the information on how to stop him.”

Giles polished his glasses, then spoke up from his spot by the fireplace. “She’s given you no information as to how to stop this creature? Surely she built in some means of controlling it.”

“I’m getting the impression that there may not be a way to stop Adam, short of destroying him,” Riley replied. “I think Professor Walsh was so sure she had him under control that she didn’t think to create a fail-safe.”

“Why are you even helping us?” Spike challenged.

Riley shook his head. “I didn’t sign up so I could watch while innocent kids die because someone’s built a better weapon; I signed up so I could save people. Adam—” He stopped, the muscle in his jaw beginning to tick.

“It’s okay,” Buffy assured him, shooting Spike a warning look. “I think we all get that. We’re grateful that you’re willing to help us. The question is how we’re supposed to get the information we need.”

Riley shook his head. “You saw how tight security is. I don’t think that there’s any way I could sneak anyone in, not unless you were cleared first. Even then, you’d have to be able to get access to Walsh’s private files, and I’m not sure it can be done.”

“Is there a back way in?” Xander asked. “Some entrance that isn’t guarded heavily? Almost every base has a back door.”
Riley looked thoughtful. “I don’t know. It’s possible; the Initiative was built into a series of caverns that ran under the campus, but I don’t know the tunnels that well.”

“I know some blokes who do,” Spike said. “I can see if they have some ideas.”

“Once we’re in, then what?” Buffy asked. “How do we manage to avoid being detected?”

“That’s where we might be able to help,” Wesley said quietly. “Tara and I were talking this afternoon; she had several very good ideas as to how to get in and out unseen.”

“So we find a way inside, Willow finds a way to crack the Professor’s files, and we discover how to stop Adam,” Buffy summed up.

“Could it really be that easy?” Wesley his tone wry.

“Of course not,” Spike replied with a smirk. “It’s never that easy.”

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There was more talk, but Wesley found his thoughts drifting back to Willow and Oz, wondering what she was doing with him. Not that he thought she would do anything—not without letting him know that things were over between them anyway.

Wesley was fairly certain that she wouldn’t end their relationship just because Oz had returned, but he had to wonder if she would be completely happy with him now. Whether he hadn’t been the rebound guy, and whether, now that Oz was back, Willow would want to be with him instead.

Maybe Wesley wouldn’t have doubted her quite so much if he hadn’t seen them together, but he knew how close they had been—so close that everyone had been shocked when Oz had left so suddenly, and in the manner he had. If it had been a slow break up, if they had grown apart or stopped loving one another, Wesley wouldn’t have been so worried.
But he had been there for her grief, and he knew very well how she had loved Oz.

Wesley wasn’t quite so sure of Willow’s love for him.

“Would you like something to drink?”

Joyce’s quiet voice broke him out of his melancholy thoughts, and he smiled, although he wasn’t sure how successful he was with it. “Please. I can help.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You can follow me into the kitchen, but I don’t think you’ll be helping.”

Wesley sighed. “When will people stop coddling me?” he asked as he entered the kitchen, leaving the others to their discussion.

“Probably when the bruises fade,” Joyce said pragmatically. “As long as the reminder is there, we’ll probably be treating you gently. It’s part of having a family, Wesley.”

Wesley couldn’t define the emotion that rushed through him. “It’s not something I’m used to,” he confessed, once he felt as though he could speak without choking on the lump in his throat.

“I know.” Joyce gave him the smile she reserved for all her lost boys. “Spike wasn’t either.”

Wesley laughed shakily. “Yes, well…”

“We’re heading out,” Spike said, coming into the kitchen and interrupting the moment. “Buffy and I are going to patrol tonight, and then you and I can pay a visit to Rof and some others tomorrow evening, Wes. I imagine you and Tara will want some time to work those spells out, and it won’t do to rush into things and get ourselves killed.”

“You? Not rush into things?” Wesley asked, glad to have some fun at Spike’s expense.

“None of that now, or I’ll leave you behind tomorrow,” Spike said, although his tone indicated that he wasn’t serious. “Tara and Xander need a ride; you want to take them in the car? I won’t need it
tonight.”

Wesley knew that this was just one more attempt on Spike’s part to make sure that he was okay, but he couldn’t argue. Well, he wouldn’t argue, not when it meant that he could drive the Mustang. “I’ll take care of it.”

Spike clapped him on the shoulder, glancing at Joyce and then giving him a look. “Don’t worry about Red.”

Wesley hoped he was a little more successful with his smile this time around. “Who said I was worried?”

Spike nodded, the anxious light not leaving his eyes as he took the tray of drinks from Joyce. “As long as you’re alright.”

Wesley nodded in reassurance, then followed the two of them back into the living room, thinking that he just might be okay—amazingly enough.

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“Maybe we should check on them,” Buffy said, her head leaning against Spike’s shoulder as they ambled along.

“Maybe we should let them be,” Spike countered. “Willow’s going to have to figure this out on her own, luv.”

Buffy sighed. “I know, Spike. It’s just that—it’s Wesley. I like him.”


“Shouldn’t we do something?”

“Do what?”
Buffy was silent, not knowing what she would say, except “don’t do something stupid.” She could understand Willow’s dilemma; although she might not have always felt that way, Buffy found herself rooting for Wesley. He was, like Spike, the kind of guy to stick around.

“I hate that I can’t do anything,” Buffy finally admitted.

“I know.” Spike squeezed her shoulders. “We can’t do anything about those two, but we can do our best to make sure that Adam doesn’t hurt anyone else tonight.”

Buffy gave him an inquiring look. “What about your sources?”

“I’ll contact a couple of them tomorrow with Wes,” Spike replied. “He was going to be working with Tara on the spells tonight, and that’s the first step, anyway. Won’t do a bit of good to find the entrance if we can’t use it.”

“Then let’s see if we can’t find us a demonic cyborg,” Buffy said, offering a feral smile that he returned in kind.

They had always been best at action.

~~~

Xander was surprised to find Anya waiting for him when he got back to his basement lair. He’d asked her to come to the Scooby meeting with him, but she’d turned him down flat, saying that she didn’t want to spend her evening being bored. He wondered how long it would be before she rebelled against this new state of affairs where Buffy and the others seemed to need him.

“I don’t understand,” Anya said bluntly when he’d come to stand in front of her.

“Understand what?” he asked, even though he thought he might know.

She glared at him. “You know what. Why you have to go help them all the time. You said I was
important to you.”

“You are, Anya,” he replied, knowing that he sounded a little desperate. “I’ve told you that. It’s just that these are my friends.”

“But I still don’t understand why,” she said unhappily.

Xander sat down beside her gingerly, thinking about how hard it must be for her to be human again. He’d never really thought about that fact before, particularly since he hadn’t been sorry that she was human; the fact that a lot of people wouldn’t be cursed because she wasn’t a vengeance demon anymore didn’t hurt his feelings at all.

Over the last couple of months, though, and having seen Spike’s struggle—even from a distance—Xander was beginning to develop some sympathy for her. Anya might be human, but he’d bet his measly paycheck that she didn’t necessarily feel human.

Anya probably didn’t even understand why she liked him, which explained a lot, although Xander didn’t like to think much about that aspect of it.

“Just because they’re my friends doesn’t mean that I don’t need you,” Xander said simply. “They’ll always be my friends, but you’re more than that. This is just something that I have to do, just like you had to grant wishes. I don’t get why you had to do that, either.”

“Oh.” Anya gave him a speculative look. “Are you sure?”

“About which part?” Xander asked.

“The part about needing me.”

He smiled. “Yes.”

As she kissed him, Xander wondered why he couldn’t find the right words to say more often.
Willow looked up at the full moon that hung overhead as they stood outside the dorm. In spite of their rough beginning, she and Oz had spent the last few hours catching up with one another; he’d told her about Tibet, and she told him about everything that had gone on in the last few months. As was typical, she had done a lot more of the talking. “You really did it.”

“I really did.” Oz’s gaze followed her eyes.

“How does it work?”

“Chants, a few herbs, a lot of control.” He sighed. “I almost lost it for a second when I first saw you.”

Willow winced, knowing the reason for it; it was a good thing Oz hadn’t lost it on campus, with all the Initiative soldiers running around. “Yeah.”

“I don’t know if I can stay,” Oz admitted. “Not when…”

“I know.” Willow looked at him. “We can use all the help we can get, but I’ll understand if you can’t.”

“I want to stay.” Oz swallowed hard. He had assumed that Willow would wait for him, that their love was a forever thing, solid as bedrock; he hadn’t realized what he was doing by leaving Willow with no word, but he should have. He was smart enough to know that a girl like Willow wouldn’t be alone forever.

And that the manner of his leaving would make it much less likely that she would be waiting for him on his return.

He could still help, though; try to offer what little protection he could provide. After all, Oz owed her.

“Maybe for a while,” he finally said quietly. “I could help.”
“I’d like that.” Willow still loved him; the feeling was there, but different now. She’d stopped longing for him to return.

There was someone else taking up that place in her heart now.

“I should go,” Willow said. “I already missed the meeting today, and Wesley—he was hurt. He needs me.”

Oz nodded. “You should go.”

“Do you have a place to stay?” she asked.

“I’ll drop in on Devon,” Oz said.

“I’ll see you soon?”

“Yeah,” Oz replied, turning away. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Willow watched him go then headed back into the dorm. As soon as she got inside, she dialed Wesley’s cell. “Hey.”

“Hello.” His tone was cool. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Willow said. “How did the meeting go today?”

“We think we have a plan,” Wesley replied. “We’ll need you for it.”

“I’m there,” she assured him. “But maybe you could come pick me up?”
There was a long pause. “Are you sure?”

“Oh,” Willow said, her tone growing sharp. “Let’s get this straight. I was not using you as a distraction until Oz came back. I wouldn’t do that, Wesley.”

“Oh.” There was another long pause. “I knew that.”

Willow rolled her eyes, a smile tugging up the corners of her mouth. They really weren’t all that different; she would have been just as insecure as Wesley, had their positions been reversed. “Then would you mind coming by? Unless you’re not in good enough shape to be driving the bike.”

“I’m perfectly capable of riding my motorcycle,” he said stiffly, sounding like his old self. “But Spike lent me his car for the evening, so it doesn’t matter. I’ll be by shortly.”

Willow set the phone down with a sigh and a smile. It was odd how things worked out sometimes, but she couldn’t say that she was disappointed.
“What other woman could be loved like you,/Or how of you should love possess his fill?/After the fullness of all rapture, still,—/As at the end of some deep avenue/A tender glamour of day,—there comes to view/Far in your eyes a yet more hungering thrill,—/Such fire as Love’s soul-winnowing hands distill/Even from his inmost arc of light and dew./And as the traveler triumphs with the sun,/Glorying in heat’s mid-height, yet started brings/From limpid lambent hours of day begun;—/Even so, through eyes and voice, your soul doth move/My soul with changeful light of infinite love.” ~Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Buffy was about ready to tell Spike that they needed to head home, that she was exhausted, when he stopped suddenly in his tracks, sniffing the air.

“What is it?” she whispered urgently.

“Faith.” He turned fierce eyes on her. “I don’t think it’s the Initiative that has her anymore.”

Buffy wrinkled her nose. “What would Adam want with her?” she demanded.

“How would I know what runs through Mr. Bits ‘n Pieces’ head?” Spike asked in turn. “I say we get her back tonight.”

Buffy nodded, thinking that it was probably a good idea in the abstract; actually going about it, however, might get a little interesting. “What’s the plan?”

“I distract him, you run in and grab the body.”

Her eyes widened in disbelief. “That’s it? That’s the plan?”

“You got a better one?” Spike challenged.

“No, but…” She trailed off, scowling. “I don’t want you getting hurt.”
Spike held up the hand with the Gem of Amara on it. “Unlikely.”

Buffy had to concede the point. “Okay, but distraction only, Spike. Maybe he can’t hurt you when you’ve got that on, but we haven’t seen what ripping your head off will do to the whole invulnerability thing, and I don’t want to find out.”

“You got it, luv.” He leaned in to give her a lingering kiss. “I’ll see you later.” Spike said it like a promise, then slipped off into the darkness.

Buffy followed him, although at a distance. She could see the cave set into the hillside as a darker smudge against the night, and Spike walked right up to it, calling out, “Hey, big and ugly! You got something of ours.”

Silence greeted Spike’s words, and Buffy desperately hoped that Adam was out prowling so that they didn’t have to engage him right now. She immediately felt guilty over that thought, because if Adam was out and about, that did not bode well for the innocents who might also be caught.

A moment later, however, Adam emerged from his cave, staring at Spike with an expression that could only be defined as one of consternation. “What are you doing here?”

“The body you have belongs to us,” Spike said boldly, even though he looked a bit like David confronting Goliath. “Give it back.”

“Mother said that she was to be a companion for me,” Adam responded. “She’s mine.”

“She’s dead, isn’t she?” Spike asked. “What kind of companion can a dead body be?”

Adam appeared to consider that for a moment. “She will not always be dead,” he finally said. “She will be like me.”

Spike shook his head, sounding almost apologetic. “I don’t think I can let that happen, mate.”

“I will not let you have her.” Adam lunged forward, and Spike danced out of his way, leading him away from the cave where Faith’s body lay.
Buffy, watching the scene, couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for Adam; in a way, he was as much a victim of the Initiative as Spike had been, or the other demons that they’d cut up and pieced together to create him. Who had Adam been before Walsh had used his body as the foundation for her super-soldier? Would anyone ever know?

Did he have family who would now never be able to visit his grave?

As soon as Spike had led Adam far enough away, Buffy darted forward, into the cave, cursing the inky darkness that made it impossible to see her hand in front of her face. She could smell the stink of death, and breathed through her mouth as much as she could to avoid the stench.

Buffy didn’t find the body so much as stumble over it, and she just barely caught herself from falling on top of it. With a breathless half-sob, Buffy grabbed Faith as best as she was able, slinging the other Slayer’s still form over her shoulder.

She stumbled out of the cave, not staggering beneath the weight so much as the stiff, unwieldy body and the stench.

And the thought of carrying a dead Slayer. Buffy whispered an apology, then started moving as quickly as she could, hoping that Spike would get away without being harmed.

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“How did the meeting go?” Willow asked Wesley when she got into the car.

“Good,” he replied. “Tara and I talked about some spells we might do to allow us to get in and out of the Initiative labs without being detected.”

“Who’s going in?” Willow asked, a little alarmed at the prospect.

Wesley hesitated. “You, and whomever else is needed.”
Willow gulped. “Because of the computer stuff?”

“You’re the only one with the skills to get the information on Adam that we need,” Wesley said. “Not that I’m terribly thrilled with the idea myself.”

Willow shook her head. “No, it makes sense that I be the one to go. Who else?”

“We haven’t decided that yet,” Wesley replied. “I suppose it depends on what we can come up with on the spell front.” He visibly hesitated. “Did you and Oz have a nice time?”

“Yeah, we did,” Willow said. “I think he’s going to stick around to help with Adam.”

“That’s good,” Wesley managed to say. “We can use all the help we can get. Where is he staying?”

“With Devon.”

“Good.”

Willow waited for him to say something else, anything else, but silence seemed to fill the inside of Spike’s car like a living thing. “What do you want me to say, Wesley?”

He pulled up in front of his apartment building. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Uncomfortable silence?” Willow asked. “You looking like I’m about ready to break up with you? It’s not my fault that Oz showed up.”

“Did I say it was?” he asked shortly. “I have no problems with Oz coming back to Sunnydale. It’s a free country, and he can go where he likes.”

Willow rolled her eyes. “Please, Wes. You ran out of there today like I was going to jump him right in front of you.”
“I did not!” he said hotly. “I left to give you a chance to catch up with him. I thought you might appreciate it.”

“You might have asked,” Willow shot back. “My ex-boyfriend comes into town, and my current boyfriend takes off, leaving me in a very awkward situation. Maybe I didn’t want you to leave.”

“Maybe I didn’t want to stay,” Wesley countered. “You loved him.”

“Past tense,” Willow said, her voice softer. “You’re present tense.”

Wesley gripped the steering wheel tightly, then released it before he turned to look at her. “I know.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.” He kissed her, his lips demanding, almost angry, and Willow felt herself responding to his urgency. “We’d better get inside,” Wesley muttered. “Otherwise Spike’s not going to let me borrow his car again.”

Willow giggled. “That would be a tragedy.”

They managed to make it inside, though they didn’t make it to his bed.

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Giles came immediately, without asking any questions. Buffy had laid down Faith’s body in the shelter of a tree in the park nearest her house. She had no idea what to do next, whether to call the police or just leave Faith somewhere safe; too bad Buffy didn’t know where that would be. The only person she could think to call, who would know what to do with a fallen Slayer, was Giles.

“Buffy.” She turned to find him standing next to her; he’d come upon her while she stood by the merry-go-round, waiting for him.
Wordlessly, she hugged him, burying her face in his faded t-shirt. It smelled like Giles, and a little like the fabric softener her mother always used; if Buffy let herself think about it, Giles smelled like her home. She supposed it was fitting.

“Where did you find her?” he finally asked.

She pulled back from him, trying to push the horror of it all from her mind. “We went patrolling, and Spike smelled her. He led Adam off while I got the body.” Buffy winced. “She’s—”

“I know.” Giles had seen bodies that were several days old before, and he had some idea of what Buffy had seen. “Where were you and Spike planning to meet?”

“At his house,” Buffy replied. “I think, anyway. It doesn’t matter; he has his compass.”

Giles nodded. “I want you to go back to Spike’s place, then. I’ll call the police.”

Buffy frowned. “Are you sure? I mean—”

Giles gestured at his clothing, and Buffy realized that he hadn’t just thrown on anything that came to hand; he was dressed as though he was going for a jog, and while it was late, it wasn’t impossible to believe that a dedicated runner would be out. He gave her a smile. “I’m a respectable businessman out for some exercise. I think it’s better that they not look too closely at your association with Faith.”

Buffy nodded. “Okay, but what about—later? I mean…” She trailed off, not knowing how to ask him about Faith’s funeral, if she’d even have one, what they would do for her.

Maybe Faith had hurt her, had hurt people that she loved, but she was still a Slayer. Buffy thought that still meant something.

“I’ll see that it’s taken care of,” Giles responded. “Go on. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Buffy nodded, summoning up the ghost of a smile for him before turning towards Spike’s place. She had just reached his door and was unlocking it when she felt him behind her. Buffy pushed the
door open, unsurprised when he followed her inside without a word.

She turned to look at him, grabbing the front of his jacket and pulling him to her, feeling his warm lips on hers. “Spike—”

“Hush, luv,” he murmured against her mouth, brushing her hair back. “She’s home now. It’s gonna be just fine.”

“Need you,” Buffy managed to gasp out, wanting to feel him, to feel anchored again. To remember that she was alive.

Spike understood all of that without her needing to explain, as he so often seemed to do, and he steered her towards the bedroom, stripping her of her clothes as they went.

They came together as they had done so often in the past, and Buffy felt like she was coming home.

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Riley felt sick; first the boy, and now a young woman, both dead because of Adam. He knew that a few of the other guys in his squad were beginning to get restless. They wanted to hunt the thing down and kill it, but word had already spread about his squad’s encounter with the creature. The rumor was that it couldn’t be killed, that Walsh had created the perfect soldier.

Morale was down, and no one wanted to talk about Adam, or how they were going to stop him, for fear that word would get back to the Professor. There were no plans for mutiny yet, but Riley knew that enthusiasm for their jobs was waning.

Graham grabbed his arm as he headed out of Lowell House. “We need to talk.”

Riley glanced around. “Walk with me,” he said, not wanting to risk talking indoors, where there was a good possibility that they might be overheard. “What’s up, Graham?”

“What are we going to do, Riley?” Graham asked.
“Why are you asking me?”

“Because you’re the one who hasn’t been happy with the way the professor has been running things lately,” Graham replied. “I figure you have some ideas.”

“I might.” Riley hesitated, wondering if he could actually trust his friend. “I’m working on something, but it’s not just my skin at risk, Graham.”

The other man gave him an intense look. “Who? The Slayer?” Riley was silent. “Forrest told me what happened, man.”

“What did he tell you?” Riley asked. He and Forrest hadn’t spoken much recently; he had known instinctively that the other man wouldn’t go along with him.

“That Walsh ordered him to bring in the Slayer,” Graham replied. “They got attacked by something as soon as they shot her with a taser. He said he didn’t know what it was, just that it looked like a vampire, but didn’t react to the blaster at all.”

Riley frowned. “He give you a description?”

“Forrest said it looked a lot like Hostile 17.”

An idea suddenly occurred to Riley, but he dismissed the thought immediately. There was no way that Spike could be Hostile 17; Riley had seen the other man in the daylight, so he obviously wasn’t a vampire. “Could have been,” Riley finally said, remembering that Giles had said that it was possible that vampires had come upon the injured men after Spike rescued Buffy. Everything matched up. “He’d have a grudge. Do you think it’s the same one attacking our patrols?”

Graham shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

Riley shook his head. It really was no wonder morale was falling, between the mysterious attacks on their patrols—which had sent a number of men to the infirmary—and Adam. They seemed to be caught between an enemy that they couldn’t see and an enemy they couldn’t defeat. “If we come up with a way to take Adam down, are you with me?”
“You know it,” Graham replied. “There are some others, too. I’ll pass the word along.” He hesitated, then said quietly, “Morris said he was going to be calling his grandfather.”

Morris’s grandfather was a three-star general, well known for his unwillingness to pull strings for family members in the military lest he be accused of nepotism. The fact that Morris was going to call him indicated how bad things were getting.

General Morris might be one of the few in the upper ranks that would be able to pull the plug on Walsh, though.

“I hope he can do something,” Riley replied. “I don’t like where this is headed.”

“Nobody does,” Graham said. “I’ll see you later?”

“Yeah, sure thing,” Riley replied, heading for his meeting with Buffy and the others, hoping that they would be able to find some way to stop Adam.

And that he wasn’t going to be facing a court martial when the whole ordeal was over.

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Spike noticed that Wesley wasn’t nearly as worried about walking into Willy’s this time around. In fact, the one demon that tried to get in their way found himself backing down in the face of Spike’s fierce glare and the glimpse of Wesley’s semi-automatic.

Spike smiled smugly. He did good work.

Rof and his other regular informants were waiting for him, and Willy brought a round of drinks over immediately, used to the way things worked at this point. “Rof. It’s good to see you, mate.”

The demon nodded, then looked at Wesley. “I did not thank you for your quick action.”
Wesley waved off his thanks. “It was nothing.”

“I still live to see my offspring,” Rof said insistently. His orange eyes met Spike’s. “You will tell your mate that I thank her?”

Spike wondered what Buffy would think about being thanked by a demon; he had a feeling that she wouldn’t have the problem with it now that she would have in the past. “She will be glad to know that you yet live,” Spike said formally. “I came for information about the Initiative. We want to shut it down.

One of the demons let out a bitter laugh. “They are too big.”

“They are getting bigger than the humans appreciate,” Spike replied. “We can stop them, but we need to find a back way in.”

At the alarmed expressions on all the faces, Wesley inserted, “All we need is the knowledge. We wouldn’t ask anyone to put themselves in danger for us.”

“I will go.” Rof didn’t hesitate. “If you require me, I will go. My life is yours until I may return the favor.”

Spike nodded. “It’s appreciated, mate, but I don’t want anyone getting hurt. We’ve got one of them helping us anyway, and I don’t want him to spot you. He might decide that helping us isn’t such a good idea.”

A dark-skinned demon grinned fiercely. “You play one side off the other? You are clever.”

“I try,” Spike replied modestly. “So, does anyone know of an entrance?”

“I do,” the demon Spike knew as Idry said. “I’ll show you.”

Spike nodded. “Thanks. If you can take us today, we’ll be able to get the information we need that much sooner, and then we can stop these bastards.”
Buffy frowned, not liking what she was seeing. She and Willow were heading back to the dorm after getting dinner, and Riley was in the middle of the footpath, Forrest in front of him and several other guys beginning to close in. The sun was beginning to set, and Buffy and Willow were headed back to the dorm—Willow to meet Tara and Wesley to go over spells, and Buffy to meet Spike for patrol.

“What’s going on?” Willow asked, her eyes widening as she took in what was going on the same time that Buffy did.

“I don’t know, but it looks like they’ve figured out that Riley’s up to something,” Buffy said, picking up her pace.

As she got closer, she heard Forrest say, “Come on, Riley. You don’t want to make a scene.”

“I’m still wondering why it took six of you to tell me that the Professor wants to see me,” Riley replied, the way he was holding himself indicating that he was ready to fight.

“You’ve been hanging out with undesirables, man,” Forrest replied. “You know what Professor Walsh said about the Slayer. She nearly killed me.”

“Way I heard it, you nearly killed her first,” Riley responded.

“She’s not human.”

“She’s on our side.” Riley stared at him. “And she’s human enough for me. She’s a only a girl, Forrest, what kind of threat could she be?”

Forrest glared at him. “Maybe she rubbed off on you. It’s not smart to question orders.”

“Maybe that’s the only smart thing to do.” Riley glanced around at the men who had flanked him.
“You going to take me by force?”

“If I have to,” Forrest said. “It doesn’t have to be that way, though.”

Riley shook his head. “You know, I really think that it does.”

Buffy didn’t wait to hear more. “Go get Spike and Wesley,” she hissed to Willow. “Tell them what happened, and that I’m getting Riley out of here. We’ll go to Giles’ place; he’s not using it.”

Willow didn’t argue, taking off at a run down a side path that would take her around the knot of men and to Stevenson Hall. Buffy began walking towards Riley and the other soldiers, deliberately moving slowly. She smirked when she saw Forrest’s eyes widen as he caught sight of her. “Hey, guys,” she called. “Is this a private party, or can anyone join in?”

Riley looked over his shoulder at her. “Hey, Buffy. What brings you into this neck of the woods?”

“Oh, just enjoying the evening,” she replied. “Hi, Forrest. You know, I never got a chance to talk to you about that little misunderstanding that we had.” Buffy could see the scars that Spike had left on his neck, and while it was probably a good thing that Spike hadn’t killed him, she couldn’t help but wish that she didn’t have to deal with him yet again.

“What misunderstanding?” Forrest asked warily.

“The one where you nearly killed me,” Buffy said, springing into action. The soldiers had apparently already forgotten just how easy it was for her to wipe the floor with them when they weren’t shooting her full of tranq darts from behind.

She took Forrest out first with a quick spin kick, her toe catching his temple, then whirled, backhanding another soldier in the jaw and punching a third in the solar plexus. At this point, a couple had managed to pull out their Tasers, but Riley wasn’t playing passive observer, and he wasn’t too bad at the action hero stuff himself.

“Let’s go,” Buffy called, grabbing Riley’s arm and beginning to run as soon as it looked like they had a break.
“Where are we going?” Riley asked.

“I’ll tell you when we get there,” Buffy said. “What was that all about?”

“Apparently, word got back to Walsh that I was talking to you,” Riley said. “She wanted me brought in.”

“You think she would have tried to kill you?”

“I don’t know,” Riley admitted. “But if she tried to kill you, I didn’t think that I wanted to take the chance.”

“Good idea.” Buffy glanced over her shoulder, relieved when she didn’t see any signs of pursuit. “How badly do you think they’ll want you back?”

“I don’t know,” Riley replied. “The military tends to frown on deserters, though.” He gave her a half-smile. “I don’t think I can go back.”

Buffy nodded. “Let’s just hope that when all this is over, they won’t care so much.”

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Tara hurried down the hall; she was late to meet Wesley and Willow, but she had gotten caught up in her research. One of her mother’s books was proving to be really helpful, and she thought she might have found exactly the spell that they needed. The only problem was that it would take three people to cast it, and they would have to continue the spell the entire time that the others were inside the Initiative—and Willow was one of the people who was supposed to go in.

Well, they would just have to find a third person.

She halted uncertainly when she saw the young man waiting outside Willow and Buffy’s room, but then continued to approach cautiously. “Hello?”
He turned, his face nearly expressionless, except for a flickering of an unidentifiable emotion in his eyes. “Hey.”

“Um, a-are y-you w-w-w-waiting for W-Willow? O-or B-Buffy?”

He shrugged. “Willow, but I’d talk to Buffy, too. Do you know where they are?”

Tara shook her head. “I-I’m supposed to b-b-be m-m-meeting Willow here.”

“Oh.” He considered that for a moment. “I’m Oz.”

“T-Tara.”

They stared at one another. “Do you know where else they’d be?” Oz finally asked.

“Maybe at Mrs. Summers’ house?” Tara suggested.

“You want a ride?” Oz offered.

Tara ducked her head. She didn’t know Oz, except what Willow had told her, and despite how things had ended between them, Willow had never given her a reason to think that she couldn’t trust him. Taking his offer of a ride was probably a better idea than sitting outside Willow’s door, waiting for someone to show up. “O-okay.”
Chapter 44

“when life is quite through with/and leaves say alas,/much is to do/for the swallow,that
closes/a flight in the blue;/when love’s had his tears out,/perhaps shall pass/a million
years/(while a bee dozes/on the poppies, the dears;/when all’s done and said, and/under the
grass/lie her head/by oaks and roses/deliberated.)” ~e. e. cummings, “when life is quite
through with”

Spike didn’t particularly like the idea of coming to Riley’s rescue, but he had to admit that the man
had put himself on the line for them. Besides, if Buffy had involved herself, then he was bound and
determined to make sure she didn’t get hurt.

He’d sent Wesley off with Willow in his car to get Giles; with any luck, they’d get the Watcher
there before Buffy and Riley had to break in. Spike didn’t think the Initiative would think to look
for Riley at Giles’ flat, but it never hurt to take precautions, and it would be safer if no one alerted
the cops that someone had broken into the empty apartment.

At the moment, Spike wasn’t taking anything for granted; their luck had been rather poor of late.

Spike followed the compass, frowning when it began leading him away from Giles’ place. Picking
up his pace, Spike tried to catch Buffy’s scent, or the scent of soldiers, but there was nothing.

He heard the crack of a branch behind him, and turned to see Riley step out of the bushes.
“Where’s Buffy?” Spike demanded.

“We split up,” Riley said. “She said we had a better chance of getting away clean that way.”

Spike scowled. He would have preferred to have found Buffy, just so he knew that she was okay.
“Fine. Let’s get to Rupert’s place.” He led the way, glancing over at Riley. “Were you being
followed?”

“We ran into a patrol,” Riley admitted. “Graham was the one leading it, though, so he wasn’t
following too hard.”

“Good to know that you’ve still got friends on the inside,” Spike replied.
“They’re good men,” Riley insisted.

Spike didn’t bother to answer him, figuring that anything he said would merely be inflammatory and would probably only blow his cover. That wasn’t something he was willing to do just yet.

“I can understand why you’d have a grudge against us,” Riley continued, reading Spike’s cold silence correctly. “If Buffy had been my girlfriend—”

“It’s not about Buffy, although that didn’t endear your men to me,” Spike snarled. “It’s about the fact that you lot don’t have the first clue about what you’re delving into. Reckon you think every demon is the same, and those that take up with them are somehow wrong or evil.”

Riley opened his mouth to respond, but Spike cut him off. “I’ve been around the world a time or two. I’ve seen a lot of things, done a lot of things. I’ve known good people and bad people, good demons and bad demons. They’re not so different from you, you know.” Spike had nearly said “we’re,” which could have been disastrous.

“I’ve seen what demons can do,” Riley countered.

“Yeah, they’re nasty buggers a lot of the time,” Spike agreed. “I’m not trying to tell you otherwise. I’m just saying that maybe it’s not as cut and dried as you want it to be.”

Riley was silent the rest of the way to Giles’ apartment.

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Buffy smirked as she climbed into her own bedroom window; she’d left the soldiers behind a few blocks back, having successfully evaded them. She had deliberately decided not to head to Giles’ place right away, thinking that she could shed the pursuers and lead them away from where Riley and the others would eventually end up.

“Hello?” her mother’s alarmed voice called out.
“It’s just me, Mom!” Buffy called back. “Sorry, but I needed to do some dodging.”

Joyce came into the room. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Buffy assured her. “The bad guys are eating my dust as we speak.”

Joyce sighed. “Giles already left. Wesley and Willow called, and he went to meet Riley at his place.”

Buffy nodded. “What about Spike?”

“I think they were assuming that he was going to catch up with you,” Joyce said. “What happened, Buffy?”

“Some of Riley’s men attacked him,” Buffy said. “I think they were trying to arrest him or something for talking to me. I figured it probably wasn’t a good idea to let them have him.”

“That makes sense.” The doorbell rang, and Joyce headed downstairs to answer it, Buffy on her heels.

“I’ll get it,” Buffy said, wanting to be sure it wasn’t any of the soldiers who had somehow managed to follow her. Her eyes widened when she saw Oz and Tara standing there. She hadn’t seen Oz yet, and to find him on her doorstep was something of a shock. “Oz?”

“Hey, Buffy,” he replied, looking at her warily.

She felt her face break out into a grin; even after what Oz had done, he had still been a friend, and it was good to see him alive and in one piece. “Hey!”

Oz appeared to relax a bit at her friendly greeting, although his change of expression wouldn’t have been noticeable except to someone who knew him well. “It’s good to see you.”

“Come in,” she invited. “What brings you guys by?”
“I was supposed to meet Wesley and Willow,” Tara said shyly. “They weren’t at the dorm.”

Buffy nodded. “Something came up, as you probably already guessed. Some of the Initiative guys came after Riley. I think we’re going to end up meeting at Giles’ apartment.” She gave her mom a wry look. “Good thing he decided to keep it in reserve, huh?”

“I suppose so,” Joyce said. “Are you heading over there now?”

“We’d better,” Buffy replied, then hesitated, thinking that her mom might like to be included, even if there wouldn’t be much she could do. “Do you want to come with us?”

Joyce smiled. “No, sweetheart; I think I’m just going to enjoy having the house to myself for a change, but thank you for asking.”

Buffy followed Tara and Oz out to the van. “Are you staying for a while, Oz?”

“Yeah, I thought I might lend a hand,” Oz replied. “Willow told me that there’s been some pretty strange stuff going on.”

“Something like that,” Buffy replied. “Now that Walsh has pulled off the gloves, I’m going to enjoy going after her in a major way.”

“You weren’t going after her before?” Tara ventured timidly.

Buffy shrugged. “Well, yeah, but this just gives me one more reason to shut her down. She’s starting to go after her own men now. It seems like she’s feeling a lot like a god.”

Oz lifted an eyebrow as he drove the familiar route to Giles’ apartment. “You know what they say about power.”

Buffy just smiled coldly. “And I’m looking forward to taking some of it away.”
It didn’t take anyone long to realize that they had everything they needed in place for the raid on the Initiative; Tara had done her homework well, and the spell was exactly what they needed. Moreover, their informant had shown them the back way in, and there seemed to be no time to waste. The longer Adam was allowed to run loose, the more people would die; that much seemed clear.

Of course, figuring out who was going inside the Initiative was a different matter entirely.

There needed to be at least one more person capable of some heavy-duty spell casting in addition to Tara and Wesley, and Giles quickly volunteered. Willow, of course, had to go, since she was the only one with a shot at cracking the computer files, and Riley was an obvious choice, because he was the only one who knew the Initiative complex well.

That left a third opening in the team, and both Buffy and Spike were equally adamant about going in—and that the other didn’t.

“I don’t want you to put yourself at risk, Spike. I’m the Slayer, and this is my job,” Buffy insisted, Riley’s presence making it impossible for her to point out that they’d already had their chance at dusting him, and she didn’t want to give them another.

Spike scowled, then glanced down at his hand significantly. “I’m not worried about my safety. You’re the one who could get hurt. Makes more sense for me to go; we’ve lost one Slayer already.”

Giles cleared his throat. “Would both of you come with me, please?” he asked, leading them outside where they could speak privately. Once they were outside, Giles said, “I think it should be Buffy.”

“What?” Spike demanded angrily. “Rupert—”

Giles raised a hand, cutting him off. “You have a good point, Spike, but what happens if the worst were to occur? You might be the only one capable of extracting all three of them. And what if someone recognized you? The Initiative would be able to get their hands on the Gem of Amara, and it’s impossible to know what they might do with that information.”
Spike shifted uncomfortably. “How would they know?” he demanded, a sullen note in his voice. “Those prats revere science as a god; they don’t know anything about magic.”

“No, but they would understand that a vampire who could be harmed is now invulnerable, and they might start looking for reasons why,” Giles said patiently, knowing that Spike had to be won over. “Besides, I’m not sure you want Riley knowing what you really are, and he would have to be informed if you went.”

Spike heaved a very audible sigh, scowling. “Fine, but I reserve the right to say ‘I told you so’ in case anything goes wrong.”

Giles nodded, heading back inside and leaving Buffy and Spike alone.

“I don’t like this.”

“I know.” Buffy met his eyes. “You know this is the best alternative, though. I need you on the outside, just in case things go badly.”

“And if they do?” Spike asked quietly. “What then, luv?”

“Then you come riding to my rescue,” Buffy said. “You can even ride a white horse.”

He pulled her close. “Won’t need a bloody horse. I’m going with you as far as I can, since I’m the only one besides Wesley who knows the way in.”

“And I imagine you’ll be sitting at the entrance when I come out,” Buffy said, putting a slight emphasis on “when” just so Spike would know that she was confident that things were going to work out.

“You know I will be,” he replied. “I’ll always wait for you.”

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Everything was moving so fast that it had Willow’s head spinning. Wesley had gone off to get magic supplies for the cloaking spell, and she was in the passenger seat of Spike’s car to retrieve clothing for her and Buffy to wear inside the Initiative while Buffy and Riley planned their attack.

Well, not really an attack, since no one wanted a confrontation—only whatever information on Adam that they could get.

Once they knew how to defeat the demon cyborg, Buffy and Spike would take him out, and then they would be back to ignoring the Initiative and hoping that they didn’t come after anybody. Willow knew that there was nothing any of them could do to shut the place down.

“Be right back,” Spike said, sprinting from the car and into his townhouse while Willow waited. Buffy had given him explicit instructions on what clothing he was to pick up for her, the idea being that she and Willow would pose as scientists, just in case the cloaking spell failed. No one had talked about what would happen to Riley under the same circumstances.

She supposed that they would all just have to hope that the cloaking spell didn’t fail.

Spike was back shortly, and tossed Buffy’s clothing carelessly into the back seat. Willow raised an eyebrow, giving him a stern look.

“They’re not going to be back there long enough to get wrinkled,” he protested.

“If you say so,” Willow said doubtfully, knowing how particular Buffy could be.

He parked the car as close to the dorm as he could, and Willow started to get out of the car. “I’ll just run in.”

“I’ll go with you,” Spike replied.

Willow gave him a look. “Spike, they’re not looking for me. Don’t worry about it.”

“Humor me,” he said dryly. She shrugged, and Spike got out to walk with her. “How are you and Wes?”
“We’re fine,” Willow replied.

“Not thinking about getting back with Oz?”

Willow snorted. “I told Wes that I wasn’t using him to get over Oz.”

“Didn’t think you were,” Spike said mildly. “But that doesn’t always mean anything. Things change, and sometimes feelings change with them.”

“My feelings for Oz changed when he didn’t come back,” Willow said softly. “I love him, Spike, but how am I ever going to trust that he won’t just up and leave again? I don’t think Sunnydale can hold him forever, not anymore.”

Spike nodded, watching as Willow finished collecting the clothing she needed. “Makes sense, Red.”

Willow sighed. “I wish—” She stopped, wondering if she really did wish that Oz had never come back. It would have been easier, but maybe she’d needed this to drive home what she really wanted.

Or just to remind her that she already had everything she wanted.

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“I don’t like this,” Spike said for the thousandth time, watching as Buffy pulled on her blouse in the privacy of Wesley’s bedroom. Willow had already changed, although she’d dressed alone, obviously feeling a little uncomfortable flaunting her relationship with Wesley while Oz was present. While Buffy didn’t mind getting a few moments in private with her boyfriend, she almost wished he’d stayed outside.

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Buffy said, “We talked about this, Spike. Besides, you heard what Giles said. If one of them gets too tired, you’re the only one who could take over, besides being the best one to stage a rescue if it’s needed.”
“I don’t care,” he said, sounding like a rather sulky little boy. “I don’t like you going in there. If the spell fails—”

“Hush.” Buffy didn’t tell him that the spell wouldn’t fail; that would jinx them for sure. Nor did she tell him not to worry, because she would worry were their positions reversed. All she could say was, “Remember your promise? We’re going to Europe this summer, come hell or high water, and I have no intention of letting you off the hook for any reason whatsoever.”

She rested her forehead against his, taking deep breaths of his scent—leather and tobacco—wishing that there was more time. It never seemed like there was enough time for just the two of them, and while Spike was going with them as far as he could, there would be no privacy then. Whatever goodbyes they wanted to say, they had to say them now.

Buffy wasn’t planning on saying goodbye, though.

Spike’s lips were warm and soft under hers; she was used to the illusion now, but Buffy didn’t think she’d mind if his flesh were cool. Whatever his temperature, Spike was the guy for her.

“I’ll see you in a few hours,” Spike whispered.

“Absolutely.”

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When the phone rang, Wesley took the call. “Alright, we’re ready to begin,” he said, and then he cut the connection. “They’re at the entrance, and they’re heading inside as soon as the spell is ready. Spike will call in fifteen minutes if he doesn’t see any change, and we’ll know that the spell isn’t working.”

Tara could see from the tension in his jaw how worried he was—about getting the spell right, about Willow being inside the Initiative, about his strength failing midway through and putting them all in danger.

Hanging out with Wesley the other night had been fun. Tara had spent time with he and Willow as
a couple, but it had never been just she and Wesley; somehow they had begun talking about their respective fathers. Strangely enough, their families weren’t all that different.

There were still moments when she thought about her upcoming birthday and what it would mean. She was going to be twenty and, according to her father, that’s when the demon side started showing itself. The funny part was, after meeting Willow’s friends—particularly Spike—Tara wasn’t quite so worried. Even if her demon side did come out, so what? Unless she turned evil all of a sudden—and that would be something that she’d have to discuss with the others soon—it didn’t matter.

Spike was a demon, and he got along with everybody just fine.

She cast a look over at Oz, who had been watching the proceedings with haunted eyes; Tara knew that it had hurt him to come back and find that Willow had moved on. He would recover, though; he appeared to be a very solid sort of person.

Bringing her thoughts to bear on the spell and its requirements, Tara took Wesley’s hand to her right and Giles’ to her left. Their large, callused hands dwarfed her own, and she found it strange to be seated in between them.

It was more than a little intimidating to be in the circle with Giles, who represented male authority, something Tara was always a little wary of.

As the most experienced among them, it was Giles who started off the chant, with Wesley picking up the thread. Tara came in last, feeling herself begin to slip into a trance, the magic flowing between them.

Oddly enough, it was even more balanced than it had been with Willow in the circle, possibly because she and Wesley always joined forces so seamlessly, leaving Tara feeling a little like a third wheel. Or perhaps it was because Willow had outstripped everyone in power, although she had just begun to test it. The three of them were much closer to being equals, and the spell seemed to ebb and flow naturally.

Tara felt amazingly secure, and the world dropped away, narrowing to the words she spoke and the power that flowed between them. She felt as though she could go on forever, but after a while, she could feel Wesley begin to falter. Tara tried to pick up the slack, but the spell had been going on for longer than anyone had anticipated, she realized, and she had no more strength left to give, only enough to keep up her end.
Suddenly the circle was buoyed by new strength, and she could sense Spike’s essence as his hand slipped into hers just as Wesley’s slipped out. Spike’s rough baritone took up the chant, and his supernatural strength shored her up as well.

Tara just hoped that the transition wasn’t too noticeable to the outside world.

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“What was that?” Buffy hissed.

Riley shook his head. “I don’t know.”

The Slayer looked at the cameras above them, sure that she had sensed something. If the spell had slipped at the wrong moment, while someone was looking at the surveillance video in Walsh’s office, they were going to be in deep trouble, without having gotten the information they were looking for.

She turned back to Willow, swallowing her anxiety. There was no way to know for sure, and Willow assured them that she was close, that she just needed a little time.

Buffy just wanted to get out of there.

Spike had escorted them to the entrance of the cavern, and then had given them explicit instructions on how to get into the Initiative complex; once he’d called Wesley to initiate the spell, he’d stolen one last kiss and they had gone inside, Spike watching them disappear.

They had taken one wrong turn, but had quickly realized their mistake and turned around, though not without losing some time. Each of them knew how important it was to keep this quick in order to prevent burnout for those casting the spell.

Encountering the first commando had brought a very nervous moment as all three of them pressed themselves against the wall, trying to make themselves as thin as possible. The soldier had passed by without even a second glance, however, leaving them to make their way to Walsh’s office.
There had been another couple of close calls, but no one had seen them; the spell held firm.

Willow was still trying to crack the files on Adam; she had managed to get into Walsh’s computer easily enough, but the files were something else altogether.

“How much longer?” Buffy asked.

Willow shook her head, her fingers dancing over the keyboard. “I don’t know.”

“I thought you said another few minutes,” Riley said.

“That’s what I thought,” Willow hissed, her voice betraying her frustration. “I don’t know what else to say.”

“Ease up, Riley,” Buffy warned him.

He sighed heavily and walked to the other side of the office, leaning against the wall. “We can’t stay much longer.”

“I know,” Willow said. She frowned in concentration, and Buffy tensed, knowing that look when she saw it. It was Willow’s “almost there” expression, and it meant they were on the edge of a breakthrough.

“Will?”

“Got it!” she said triumphantly, the text of the schematics scrolling in front of her. She stuck the disk she’d found in one of the drawers of the office in the drive, quickly saving the file and tucking the disk inside her blazer pocket.

“Good job,” Buffy said. “Now let’s get out of here.”
Riley nodded. “We’re out of here.”

“Riley?” Graham’s voice called from the doorway. “I know you’re here.”
Chapter 45

“Twice or thrice had I loved thee,/Before I knew thy face or name,/So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame,/Angels affect us oft, and worship’d be;/Still when, to where thou wert, I came,/Some lovely glorious nothing I did see,/But since my soul, whose child love is,/Takes limbs of flesh, and else could nothing do,/More subtile than the parent is,/Love must not be, but take a body too,/And therefore what thou wert, and who,/I bid Love ask, and now/That it assume thy body, I allow,/And fix itself in thy lip, eye, and brow...Then as an Angel, face, and wings/Of air, not pure as it, yet pure doth wear,/So thy love may be my love’s sphere…”

~John Donne, “Air and Angels”

Willow froze, her hands poised over the keyboard, and Riley stood up straight, ready to intervene if necessary. The screen was facing away from the door, but there was no way that the other soldier wouldn’t see the glow of the screen in the darkened room.

“Look, I told Carlisle that he was seeing things, and that I would check it out, but you can’t be found in here,” Graham went on. “I don’t know how long I can cover for you.” He paused. “Be careful, Ri. I think Walsh is going to try to blame Adam’s escape on you. She was talking about how you were a loose cannon, and that’s why he got out. Most of the guys aren’t buying it, though. Just—be careful.”

It was probably the longest speech Riley had ever heard Graham make, possibly because Riley himself didn’t usually stay silent. As soon as the other man was gone, Riley whispered, “Willow? We have to leave. Now.”

“I’ve got it,” Willow replied softly, hitting a few more keys and then ejecting the disk. “Okay.”

“Did you get what we needed, Will?” Buffy asked.

Willow shook her head. “I got everything I could. I think we’re just going to have to hope that it’s good enough.”

Riley ushered them out the door. “It had better be enough, because there isn’t much chance that we’re going to be successful at this again.”

They fell silent after that out of necessity; while it was obvious that the cloaking spell had failed momentarily, it was apparently working again, and it wouldn’t do to blow their cover by speaking
where someone could hear them. Riley led them down the corridors, thankful that, at this late hour,
there were very few people about.

He could feel the eyes of the demons on them as they passed the cells on the way out; Riley knew
that they had other means of sensing things passing by other than sight. He couldn’t get Spike’s
words out of his head. His whole world had been turned completely upside down in the last few
months, and he wasn’t all that happy about it. In reality, Riley had been just as happy with his
clear-cut black and white world.

There was no going back at this point, though, even if he had no idea how to go forward—or where
he would go.

Where he could go. He certainly couldn’t go home; the Army would look for him there. Riley
knew he’d have to call his parents soon, before the military did it for him. Or perhaps they
wouldn’t call, and would just make sure he had a “training accident.”

And maybe his body would wind up as the foundation for the next cyborg.

Riley swallowed hard, shoving the thought to the back of his mind. The idea that they would use
what was left of him to create something like Adam was abhorrent and frightening; what would
happen to him if they did that—to the man called Riley Finn? Would he be gone, or would some
part of him linger in the flesh?

Did Adam remember who he had been before Walsh had diced him up? Was there some small part
of him waiting to be released, as if from prison?

“Riley?” Buffy’s voice called him back to himself, and he realized that they were nearing the end
of the tunnels. He’d been lost in his thoughts, and flushed in shame at the realization, knowing that
they might have been attacked along the way. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he replied.

She frowned. “You don’t look fine. You’re sweating.”

“The tunnels were hot,” he replied dismissively. Riley wasn’t feeling all that great, but there was
nothing they could do about it. He had to get the girls out of the woods and back to Giles’
apartment; that was his job, and he was responsible for them.

He didn’t see the look that Buffy and Willow exchanged, but Buffy grabbed his arm, pulling him outside the cave and pushing him into a seated position on the ground. “Don’t move,” she ordered, pulling out a cell phone.

“Hey, Wes. Where’s Spike?” he heard her ask as he put his head between his knees. Riley could feel the sweat trickling down his back, and he fought back the sick fear in his gut. Adam could be anywhere; they could run into one of the Initiative patrols. How would he be able to protect them?

“Sure thing,” Buffy said, ending the conversation. She squatted down next to him, looking at Willow and then meeting his eyes. “Wesley’s going to pick us up. I don’t think you’re in any shape to be walking back.”

Riley shook his head. “We shouldn’t stay here. It’s too exposed. They’ll find us.”

“They aren’t going to find us,” Buffy replied, motioning to the brush that surrounded them. “As long as we keep quiet, there’s not much that could find us, and Wesley said he’d be here in fifteen minutes. He thought the others could keep up the spell that long, anyway.”

Willow appeared concerned. “Is he okay?”

“He said that Spike pulled him out before he was completely exhausted,” Buffy replied. “And the others seem to be fine.” She gripped his arm. “I just need you to hang in there, Riley, alright?”

Riley nodded, swallowing down the fear and hoping that he could manage to keep from going crazy, because he felt like he could crawl out of his skin.

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Wesley neared the cave’s entrance and called Giles’ apartment. When Oz picked up, he said, “I’m here. Release the spell.”

“It’s done,” Oz said a few seconds later. “Be careful.”
Wesley put the phone away, smiling with relief when Willow emerged from the bushes. “Wesley.”

“Are you alright, love?” he asked, going to her immediately.

“I’m fine, but Buffy needs your help with Riley,” she replied.

Wesley watched as Buffy coaxed the big soldier out; the other man was shaking and sweating, glancing around in fear. “Wes? A little help here?”

At Buffy’s words, Wesley went to Riley’s side. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” Riley said through chattering teeth.

Wesley drew one arm over his shoulder and started walking him towards the car. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Buffy replied. “He started sweating and shaking in the cave tunnels; he was talking to himself, too. I just wanted to get us out of there as quickly as I could.”

“A good idea,” he agreed. Wesley looked at Riley’s eyes and winced. “He looks as though he’s coming off something.”

Buffy frowned. “What are you talking about?” she asked, still speaking in a whisper. “Riley doesn’t take drugs.”

“He may not have known he was taking them,” Wesley said with dawning realization. If the Initiative were truly trying to build a better soldier, they would start with the men they already had at their disposal; this certainly wouldn’t have been the first time that the military experimented on its own men.

Willow’s eyes widened, then narrowed. “I wish I could say I was surprised,” she said bitterly. “I don’t think anything the government does will shock me now.”
“This is only one segment of the government, Willow,” Wesley reminded her. “And with any luck, they won’t be around for much longer.” He unlocked the car, letting the girls get into the back seat before putting Riley in the front. The soldier was barely coherent, wrapping his arms around himself as he shook with the chills from his withdrawal.

Buffy looked anxiously from Riley to Wesley. “Isn’t there anything we can do for him?”

“We can wait it out,” Wesley replied. “Time will have to do the rest.”

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Spike didn’t want to feel sympathy for one of the soldiers, but he found himself doing so anyway. Riley had insisted that he didn’t want to go to bed; he wanted to see what kind of information Willow had managed to retrieve. While no one was sure that that was a good idea, no one wanted to argue with the rather agitated man; it was just easier to allow him to stay.

Willow had been busy accessing the data on the disk, using the printer Joyce had brought over when Giles called with his request. Now, Joyce was snuggled up next to Giles on his couch as they spoke in low voices. Wesley was leaning over Willow’s shoulder, watching the data scroll by as she printed off what they needed.

Buffy, for lack of any other place to sit, was on Spike’s lap, and Tara was fussing over Riley, trying to make him comfortable on the other end of the couch. Xander, Oz, and Anya were scattered around the room, wherever they could find a spot to sit. It was crowded, but no one had made any move to leave; everyone wanted to know how Adam could be stopped.

“Wait, I’ve got it,” Willow exclaimed. “Adam’s specifications.” Her eyes went round as she continued to read. “Oh.”

“What is it, Will?” Xander said, squeezing Anya’s hand. He didn’t like Willow’s tone; he knew it didn’t bode well.

She didn’t respond, and Wesley finally spoke. “There’s a picture of—the man they used for Adam in here.”
“Who was he?” Riley asked hoarsely.

“He was a soldier.” Wesley was silent for what seemed like a long time. “His neck was broken.”

Buffy was the only one brave enough to ask. “Was he dead when…?”

“Only after the military pulled the plug,” Wesley finally replied. “It doesn’t appear as though anyone’s permission was given to do so.”

“How was he hurt?” Riley asked.

“Some kind of training exercise,” Willow replied.

Riley stood, dropping the blanket that Tara had wrapped around his shoulders. “We can’t stay here. We have to stop them. They can’t do this. They can’t take—”

“It wasn’t just a dead soldier they took,” Spike said, almost snarling. “It was a lot of live demons as well.”

Riley opened his mouth to reply; from the look on his face, it wasn’t going to be very complimentary.

“That’s enough,” Buffy said calmly. Her eyes begged Spike not to make an issue, and he backed off with a sigh. Now wasn’t the time to point out the error of Riley’s assumptions—he was in no condition for something like that.

She turned back to Riley. “Riley, we’re going to stop Adam, I promise, but you need to rest. You’re in no shape to do anything about him right now.” Buffy looked at her Watcher. “Can he use your bed?”

“I’ll take him up,” Joyce said, ever the mother. “Come on, Riley. You look like you need to lie down for a little while.”
Riley shook his head, obviously confused. “I don’t know. Shouldn’t I—”

“Come upstairs, Riley,” Joyce said in what the others recognized as her full-out ‘Mom’ voice. “You aren’t going to do anybody any good if you collapse.”

The soldier followed Joyce upstairs docilely enough, and Spike treated his girlfriend to a raised eyebrow.

She rolled her eyes in return, although her expression was sympathetic. “You’re both right, Spike,” she said quietly. “They had no right to what they took, and we’re going to stop them.”

Spike nodded, mollified by her words. “Yeah, luv, suppose they didn’t. Question is how we’re to stop Mr. Bits.”

“His power source is located approximately where the heart would be,” Willow said. “It’s got a uranium core, so it’s virtually inexhaustible, but if we could pull it out, that would stop him. It’s the only thing that would.”

Xander, who hadn’t seen Adam yet, asked, “How hard can that be? Spike can hold his arms while Buffy yanks it out.”

Spike snorted. “It’s not that easy. Bastard’s tough, and quicker than he ought to be.” He frowned speculatively. “Besides, there ought to be a way to stop him and shut down the Initiative, too.”

“What are you thinking?” Giles asked.

Spike smirked. “What with Adam, and whatever drugs they’re feeding those soldiers, there’s got to be plenty of them who aren’t so happy with the current administration, right?”

Buffy nodded. “That’s basically what Graham said. He let us go, even though he didn’t have to, and probably shouldn’t have. He always seemed to be one of the decent ones, but there are probably more like him. What are you thinking Spike?”

“I say we uncover the whole thing at once,” Spike said. “They haven’t all seen Adam yet. I say we
make sure that they do see him, see what he’s capable of doing. And I say we set the demons loose.”

Willow’s eyes widened. “Spike, that’s—is that a good idea? Some of them probably shouldn’t be set free.”

“Didn’t say they’d make it out alive, necessarily,” Spike replied, sounding more nonchalant than he felt about it. “Controlled chaos. I’ve done it a couple of times in the past; you can get rid of a lot of enemies at once that way, and it’s about the only thing I can think of to make sure that the army takes a loss.”

“It’s going to take a big loss for them to shut the project down.” Wesley’s voice was calm. “It will have to be carefully done.”

Giles pinched the bridge of his nose; he knew what kind of a death toll Spike was talking about, and while not all of them would be innocents, some of them would be. “I think we should talk about this,” he said. “If it isn’t very carefully planned, it could come out badly.”

Spike met his eyes. “I know. This isn’t a decision to be made lightly, but you’ve seen what they’re willing to do to meet their objectives. Total failure is the only thing that would discourage them from attempting this again.”

Giles nodded reluctantly. “I don’t believe that you’re wrong.”

Joyce came downstairs just then. “Do you think we ought to take him to the doctor?” she asked in a low voice so that her words wouldn’t carry upstairs.

“I think it’s too risky,” Giles said regretfully. “They’ll be looking for that.”

“Someone will have to stay with him,” Joyce said, nodding as though she’d expected that response.

“I can.”

Everyone looked over at Oz, who had spoken for the first time. “Are you sure?” Willow ventured.
Oz shrugged. “Everyone else probably has somewhere to be, and I’m not holding a grudge.”

It made sense, and Buffy nodded, relieved. “That would be a huge help, Oz.”

“I could stay, too,” Tara said softly. “I have some studying to do anyway. I can do it here just as well as at the library, and I-I’ve taken care of sick people before.”

“You don’t have to do that, Tara,” Wesley said gently.

She shook her head firmly. “I don’t m-m-mind.”

“Thank you,” Wesley said. “There probably ought to be two people here, just in case.”

He didn’t say just in case of what, but no one had to ask; there were any number of things that could happen on the Hellmouth, and it was always better to be safe than sorry.

“Call if you need anything,” Spike said. “Don’t be hesitant, pet.”

Tara nodded shyly, embarrassed as always by the attention. “Okay.”

As they all filtered out, Buffy glanced over at Spike hopefully. “I’ve still got energy to burn.”

He grinned. “Better take care of that, then.”

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“How are you doing?” Willow asked quietly once they’d reached Wesley’s apartment; she knew how much spells like that could take out of a person.
“I’m a little tired,” Wesley admitted. “If Spike hadn’t stepped in when he did, I probably would have been completely drained.”

Willow winced. “Then I’m glad Spike stepped in. I’m sorry it took me so long to crack the code.”

“Don’t apologize,” Wesley said, touching her cheek. “You got the information we needed, and that’s what’s important.”

Willow pulled his head down for a kiss, knowing that the time they had now was a brief respite; this thing with the Initiative was bound to come to a head soon. “Do you know what Spike was thinking?”

He shook his head. “Not exactly, although I have some idea. I think he means to make certain that the underground laboratories are unusable, as well as ensuring that those in charge believe their experiment to be a complete failure.”

Willow’s eyes widened as she began to catch a glimpse of what that would mean. “That’s—a lot of people could get killed.”

“Yes, they could,” Wesley replied steadily, although his eyes were troubled.

Willow thought she understood why Giles hadn’t been enthusiastic about the idea; the more people that were killed, the less chance there would be of the military doing something like this again, particularly if more soldiers than demons were killed. Still, while Spike might not have much trouble with the idea of the soldiers being killed, some of them were bound to be more like Riley—decent guys who were doing the wrong thing with the best of intentions.

She hesitated before saying, “I got a chance to look at where the Initiative’s power was coming from. I think I could cut the power from the outside.”

Wesley took a deep breath. “I see.”

“Do you think I should have told Spike?”
“Not tonight,” Wesley said firmly. “Giles was right; this is something that we need to think about very carefully before making a decision. And anyway, I have other plans for tonight.”

Willow didn’t have any problem with Wesley’s plans.

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Maggie Walsh immediately knew that someone had been messing around in her office when she entered; the chair had been moved, and a few things on her desk looked as though they’d been shoved out of the way. She called down to security, requesting the tapes from the previous night; she wanted to know who had been there.

Once she was able to view the footage, Walsh wasn’t terribly surprised to see the Slayer and Riley. Walsh had meant to have him confined to the brig, and had toyed with the idea of having him meet with an accident. That was one of the nice things about working with soldiers; they often met with accidents, even while on routine training missions.

Of course, it was always easier when there was no family that wanted the body returned.

She would have liked to know how the Slayer and those with her had remained invisible to the cameras, and obviously to Agent Miller, as he’d come and looked into the room but had walked by. Since Walsh couldn’t see anyone in there, it was impossible to know whether or not Riley and the others were still present when the other soldier poked his head inside the door.

The mystical side of the demon world wasn’t something Walsh had ever paid much attention to, if only because it wasn’t something that she could quantify and control. It was obvious that quite a bit could be done, however, if you had someone who knew what they were doing. Walsh thought that it might be time to look into finding a magician—one she could control, of course.

Walsh somehow suspected that she wouldn’t have much luck with that.

Unless one showed up unexpectedly, she would just have to content herself with getting Adam back.

“Hello, Mother.” Walsh’s head shot up so quickly that she almost gave herself whiplash. “I heard that you wanted to see me.”
Chapter 46

“To-night I close my eyes and see/A strange procession passing me—/The years before I saw your face/Go by me with a wistful grace;/They pass, the sensitive, shy years,/As one who strive to dance, half blind with tears;/The years went by and never knew/That each one brought me nearer you;/Their path was narrow and apart/And yet it led me to your heart—/Oh, sensitive, shy years, oh, lonely years./That strove to sing with voices drowned in tears.” ~Sara Teasdale, “The Years”

“Is everything alright?” Giles asked.

Joyce looked up, smiling absent-mindedly. “Hm? Oh, I’m fine.”

He hesitated. “It doesn’t seem like everything is alright.”

“I was just thinking about yesterday.”

She didn’t have to specify what about the previous day she was thinking about. “Are you worried?”

“I’m a mother, Rupert,” Joyce said with a laughing sigh. “I always worry. I just—I never realized what it meant to be involved in Buffy’s life. This last year…”

Giles gave her a sympathetic look. “You don’t have to be involved if you don’t want to be.”

“That’s not it,” Joyce said. “It was just easier to be ignorant, you know? She could so easily be killed—any one of them could be killed. Before I knew that Buffy was the Slayer, I worried about her, but for very different reasons.”

“And now that you know what to worry about…” Giles prompted.

“It’s harder to deny how dangerous it all is,” Joyce admitted. “But I’m not sure I would go back to not knowing, either.”
“I wish I could spare you the worry.” Giles touched her arm gently. “Although I can’t be sorry that you know.”

“No.” Joyce knew quite well that their relationship never would have worked if she hadn’t known the truth about her daughter’s extracurricular activities; they never would have met if Buffy hadn’t been the Slayer.

It was a high price to pay, but Joyce thought it might be worth it. Thinking about Buffy’s relationship with Spike, she guessed that her daughter might say the same.

The knock on the door startled both of them, and Joyce put a hand on her suddenly queasy stomach. “Rupert?”

“I’ll get it,” he said, rising quickly.

Joyce frowned as he left, wondering what had her feeling so ill all of a sudden. She’d only had a couple of pieces of toast and a cup of coffee for breakfast. Giles came back into the kitchen, a young man she didn’t recognize close behind him. “Is everything okay?” she asked.

“This is Graham Miller,” Giles explained. “He’s one of Riley’s friends, the one Buffy and Willow were talking about.”

It took her a moment to recall what he was referring to. “Oh! It’s nice to meet you, Graham.”

“Likewise, Mrs. Summers,” Graham responded formally. “I thought this might be the best place to come to get word to Riley about Professor Walsh.”

“What about her?” Joyce asked, glancing over at Giles, who was already on the phone.

“She was killed this morning,” Graham said somberly. “Some of the guys saw Adam, and they’re not very happy about it. It’s chaotic right now.”

Joyce felt her stomach sink, knowing with a mother’s intuition what that meant; chaos meant that no one would be in charge, and Spike’s plan could be carried out with ease.
Giles hung up the phone after his quick, mostly whispered, conversation; Joyce hadn’t been able to catch who exactly he was talking to. He met Graham’s eyes. “How many of the men do you think you could get out of there?”

Graham’s eyes flickered with an unreadable emotion. “I don’t know.” He stared at Giles for a long moment. “Most.”

“We have to stop Adam,” Giles said quietly. “I think we can do it, but we would prefer to minimize casualties.”

Graham nodded. “I’ll do what I can. Riley knows how to get in touch with me.”

Joyce watched him go; Giles was already getting ready to leave. “I have to go,” he said. “Do you want to come, or—”

“No, I need to be at the gallery today,” Joyce replied. “What about the bookstore?”

Giles frowned thoughtfully. “Perhaps I should ask someone to help out. Not today, of course, but…” He shook his head. “There’s nothing I can do about it right now, but I’ll need to get someone to help me for just this reason.”

“You’ll call as soon as you decide what you’re going to do?” Joyce asked.

“Of course,” he kissed her, and then was out the door.

Joyce rushed upstairs to her bathroom, thankful that her stomach had waited until he was gone to rebel. He didn’t need one more thing to worry about.
It had been weird staying in a strange apartment, with two men she barely knew, but Tara’s night hadn’t been too bad. Oz had been a gentleman and insisted she take the couch, so she’d managed to sleep. Thankfully, Riley hadn’t been any trouble; she had checked on him a few times, but other than requesting aspirin for his headache, he hadn’t wanted anything.

There wasn’t any food in the apartment, and Oz had gone to get them something for breakfast. Willow and Wesley were supposed to relieve them shortly, but she wasn’t sure what the plans for the rest of the day were. Mr. Giles had wanted to think about Spike’s plan, but how much time would be required to think about it, Tara didn’t know.

“Hey.”

Tara glanced up to see Riley standing in the living room, looking better, but still much the worse for wear. “How are you feeling?”

“Better, I think.” He took a deep breath. “What—uh, what did they decide?”

“To think about it,” Tara replied. “You didn’t miss anything, really.”

Riley sat down on the couch wearily. “Spike was upset over the demons.”

Tara wasn’t sure how to respond to that statement, finally saying, “Some of his best friends are demons.”

Riley shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“They’re not all bad.” Tara hoped he could see that; she hoped that Riley could begin to see past his own narrow worldview.

The big soldier stared at his hands. “Spike is one of them, isn’t he?”

Tara kept her mouth shut, feeling very exposed all of a sudden. If Riley decided to go berserk, there would be nothing she could do.
No, she reminded herself; she was a witch. She had more than a few tricks up her sleeve; she just had to believe in her own abilities.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Riley took a deep breath. “I remember where I’d seen him before. He’s Hostile 17. I didn’t believe my own eyes, because I’ve seen him in the sunlight, but after going into the Initiative, and no one seeing us… It’s something like that, isn’t it?”

Tara bit her lip, not wanting to say anything for fear of putting Spike in danger.

“It’s okay, pet. Go ahead and say it.”

Spike stood in the doorway, Buffy and Oz behind him. The late morning sun fell on him fully, and Tara looked from one to the other, waiting to see Riley’s reaction.

Riley stared at him, his mouth twisting in distaste—and something else. “You don’t have a chip, do you?”

“No, he has a soul,” Buffy said tartly. “And a scar from where you sliced him open for no reason.”

“I don’t understand,” Riley said helplessly.

“Demons aren’t so different from humans,” Spike said, entering the apartment. “Some of them are good, some bad. Maybe there are a few more that are bad, but I’m not quite sure you can’t say the same thing about people.”

Oz handed Riley a sack filled with his own greasy breakfast. “I didn’t know what you wanted.”

“I’m sure this is fine,” Riley said, sounding stiff, but not angry.
Tara saw the look that Buffy and Spike exchanged, and she knew it meant trouble. “Is everything okay?”

“Adam snuck back into the Initiative labs,” Buffy said, her voice gentler now. “He killed Professor Walsh.”

Riley shook his head. “But why? Why would he even go back?”

“Not sure that anything like logical thought runs through that brain of his,” Spike said gruffly. “Best guess, though, is that he regarded her as some sort of threat.”

“How did you find out?” Riley asked.

“Graham came by my house this morning,” Buffy said. “Giles talked to him; he’s on his way over now.”

“Graham?” Riley asked, sounding hopeful.

“Giles,” Buffy clarified apologetically. “I think we’re going to put our plan into action; Graham said he thought he could get most of the soldiers out of the labs since things are pretty chaotic right now.”

Riley’s eyes widened, and he stood as he realized what Buffy was saying. “You—you can’t! Do you know how many people will be killed?”

“We set it up right, it’ll be mostly demons getting killed,” Spike said. “And your soldiers can take care of themselves. Our concern is shutting the Initiative down; I’m sure you can understand why.”

For a moment, Tara believed that he was going to balk, outright refuse to participate and insist on sounding the alarm. Instead, Riley’s shoulders slumped as he sat back down, burying his face in his hands. Tara could feel the confusion and dismay radiating off of him, and she put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

There was a long, painful silence, and then Riley lifted his face. “What do you want me to do?”
Buffy sat next to Spike outside, watching as he smoked another cigarette; she knew he was anxious just from the fact that he was chain-smoking. As impulsive as they both could be, neither one of them had planned on acting this quickly. They had expected to have more time to plan, and instead they were rushing forward, hoping for the best.

“Rupert tell you that the morgue called?” Spike asked quietly.

She shook her head. “No. What did they say?”

“They’re releasing the body. He asked to be notified since she doesn’t have any relatives; I think he’s going to pay for a funeral.”

Buffy felt a wave of sorrow pass over her. They had been too busy since Faith was killed for her to grieve properly. Even though they had been on opposing sides, the other girl had been a Slayer, and they were connected in that way; there was no one who knew what it was like to be the Chosen One—except for the other girl who had been chosen. Not even Spike completely understood.

Then again, Buffy didn’t know what it was like to be a souled vampire, so she figured that they were even.

Buffy looked out over Giles’ courtyard; they were still waiting for Wesley and Willow to arrive. “I think we should cremate her.”

Spike met her eyes and then nodded slowly. “Might be best. A Slayer’s body…” He trailed off, not wanting to explore the macabre subject any more than that. “This is moving too quickly,” he murmured. “Feel like I’m on a runaway train, and I don’t know where it’s going.”

“I know.” She reached over to take his hand. “We know how to stop Adam, though. Between the two of us, I think we can manage it.”

“I know we can,” Spike said. “Question is, how many more people will have to get hurt before we stop that monster?”
Buffy couldn’t answer that, but she was spared from trying when Wesley and Willow entered the courtyard. “Sorry it took us a while,” Willow said. “We slept through the alarm.”

“You both had a full day.” Spike said, dismissing her apology with a wave of his hand. “We think we need to move on this in the next few hours, though. Apparently, Adam’s been sighted within the Initiative; hard to know what he wants, but as long as he’s there, we have a chance to shut the whole thing down once and for all.”

“What about the soldiers?” Wesley asked.

Buffy smiled grimly. “It sounds like Professor Walsh had begun to raise a lot of eyebrows. Graham said that he thought he could convince most of the guys to go out on patrol today and just not come back. Things are so crazy right now that it’s unlikely anyone will really notice, but that’s why it has to be done now.”

Wesley nodded. “What’s our first step?”

“We were waiting for you to start planning,” Spike said. “But Xander said he’d be on his way. I think we’ll need all hands on deck for this one.”

“You’ve got us,” Willow said, her chin coming up in a gesture of defiance.

Buffy looked at them and felt some of the anxiety loosen; with friends like these, it was hard to believe that they couldn’t face down their enemies.

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“What about Adam? Are you just going to ask him nicely to stand still while you yank out his battery?” Xander asked.

Spike shrugged. “Figure I’ll hold his arms while the Slayer yanks it out.”
“Could you hit him with something first?” Willow asked tentatively. “Something that would slow him down?”

“I vote for a rocket launcher,” Xander said. “Those are always fun.”

Buffy raised an eyebrow. “Can we get a rocket launcher?”

“I can.” Riley’s expression was stubborn. “But only if you promise to use it on Adam.”

“I don’t want to kill anybody I don’t have to,” Buffy assured him.

Riley didn’t look completely satisfied with her answer, but he nodded anyway. “What else?”

“That means you’ll have to go in,” Buffy pointed out. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Riley said; he held out a hand that was still shaky, but it was easy to see that the worst had passed. “Some of my men will be in there. I have to go.”

“We’ll need you to call Graham and get as much information about Adam’s whereabouts as you can,” she told him. “According to what he told Giles, Adam’s still inside.” Buffy looked to Willow. “Will, what about you? Can you cut the power from the outside, or are you going to need to go in?”

“I think I can do it from the outside,” Willow replied.

“We’ll need better than ‘I think I can,’” Spike said, although his gentle tone belied the harshness of the words. “We’re only going to have one shot at this, pet.”

Willow nodded. “I can do it from outside.” She glanced at Wesley. “I’m going to need help with the computer stuff, though, if we’re going to get it done in time.” Wesley nodded, knowing what she was telling him without words. “Oz?”

“I’m there,” he said instantly.
“Where does that leave me?” Wesley asked.

Spike eyed the other man, trying to decide whether or not he was in good enough shape to accompany them into the Initiative, knowing that it hadn’t been very long since Faith had tested out her torture techniques. “Are you fit for it?” he finally asked.

Wesley nodded, his gaze steady. “I am.”

“Then you’re with us.” Spike turned to Tara, Giles, and Xander. “I need you lot to do something else for me.”

“What’s that?” Xander asked suspiciously, wondering if he was being shoved out of the way of the action.

Spike smiled. “You’re going to help us with the clean up.”

Tara’s eyes went wide. “Clean up?”

The vampire just grinned. “I have plans for this summer, and I don’t want to spend my time cleaning up the mess left by these bastards. We’re going to make it just a little bit easier.”

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Joyce swallowed hard as Giles told her the plan. “What time do you think you’ll be home?” she finally asked, hoping that none of her fear was evident in her voice.

“Late, I’m sure,” he replied. “I won’t tell you not to wait up for us, though.”

“Thank you,” she said dryly. “It wouldn’t do any good.”

Giles took a deep breath. “If it makes you feel any better, I’ll mostly be out of harm’s way. We’re
just making sure that no one slips through the net.”

“What if something does slip through?” Joyce asked. She knew that he was trying to tell her that he’d be fine, without making hard and fast promises, but she was still worried about him.

She was worried about all of them; anything could happen.

“Then we’ll take care of it,” Giles replied, sounding confident. “It won’t be just me, Joyce. There will be others there.”

Joyce clutched the phone, but responded calmly, “Then I’m sure you’ll be fine. I’ll see you later.”

“Of course.” Then, in a softer voice, Giles added, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Joyce took a deep breath, trying to compose herself before Buffy got on the phone. “Hey, sweetheart.”

“Hey, Mom, I don’t have much time. I just—Spike thought I should say hello, and he said to tell you that he promises to take us all out to dinner next week.”

Joyce smiled, knowing that Spike meant it to be reassuring, which it was. He would be with her daughter, making sure that she came out of the fight alive and in one piece. There probably wasn’t anyone she trusted more to watch Buffy’s back. “Tell him thank you for me. How’s Riley doing?”

“He’s feeling better,” Buffy replied. “Good enough to go in with us anyway.” There was a pause, and Joyce could hear her talking to someone, the voices muffled as though Buffy had put her hand over the mouthpiece. “Okay, I have to go. Love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too.”

Joyce stared at the phone long after the connection had been cut, wondering what she was supposed to do now, how she was supposed to fill her time while waiting.
How was she supposed to distract herself from the knowledge that nearly everyone she loved was going into battle?

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“Are you sure that’s going to work?” Giles asked for the tenth time.

Xander shot him a dirty look. “It’s not like I can’t follow a set of instructions.” At Giles’ raised eyebrow, he scowled. “I can so follow directions.”

“Did I say anything?” Giles asked, pleased that he’d managed to get a rise out of him. He did enjoy baiting Xander at times.

Xander mumbled something under his breath that Giles couldn’t quite catch, and then, out loud, “The detonator is the tricky part, and Tara’s providing that.”

Giles glanced over at the young woman, who was watching the proceedings with wide eyes. After having seen Tara in action, and having worked with her, he had no doubt that she could set off the explosives without any trouble.

He had to admit that Spike’s idea was a good one. It wasn’t likely that many demons would make it out using this route, but it was possible, and it was their job to plug the hole. The explosion would take care of that, as well as cutting off Adam’s potential escape route. From there, they would go to Lowell House, making sure that anyone coming out wasn’t a dangerous demon; non-dangerous demons were to be left alone.

That’s where there was the potential for things to get dangerous, depending on how many demons got through.

Oz and Willow were already working on hacking into the electric company’s grid; Willow would have to be careful not to cut the power to any more locations than were necessary. The hospital, for example, needed to keep their power supply uninterrupted.

Spike, Buffy, Riley, and Wesley were headed down into the Initiative labs. If Graham had kept his promise, most of the soldiers would be out of there. That would leave Adam and the demons—assuming that Adam was still down there.
According to Graham, Adam had killed Walsh and then barricaded himself in one of the offices. After two soldiers were killed trying to take him out, they had decided to leave him alone. It was anyone’s guess as to what he was doing, but then again, the one who knew him best was dead—and Walsh hadn’t been able to control him once he was activated.

It was a good plan, Giles reminded himself. They had covered all their bases, and there were enough people to go around.

However, even that knowledge wasn’t enough to calm his anxiety.
“My own Beloved, who hast lifted me/From this drear flat of earth where I was thrown,/And, in betwixt the languid ringlets, blown/A life-breath, till the forehead hopefully/Shines out again, as all the angels see,/Before thy saving kiss! My own, my own,/Who camest to me when the world was gone,/And I who looked for only God, found thee!/I find thee; I am safe, and strong, and glad./As one who stands in dewless asphodel/Looks backward on the tedious time he had/In the upper life,—so I, with bosom-swell,/Make witness, here, between the good and bad,/That Love, as strong as Death, retrieves as well.” ~Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Sonnet 27: My Own Beloved, Who Hast Lifted Me”

Willow worked feverishly to hack into the mainframe of the energy company; it was possible, of course, that the Initiative had their own generators as a back-up, but cutting the power would throw everything into confusion, and make it that much easier to catch the soldiers—and Adam—off guard.

They were on a timetable, though if she couldn’t hack in quickly enough, they could wait. As Spike had impressed upon her, however, the longer they waited to go in, the better the chance there would be that the soldiers would begin to return to base, and Adam would decide to leave.

And Wesley was one of the ones going in.

Willow shoved that thought to the back of her mind, focusing on the task at hand. The passing thought went through her mind that it was strange to be here with Oz, trying to prevent more people from dying, even if it wasn’t exactly apocalyptic in nature.

“There,” Oz said quietly, pointing at the screen.

Willow understood what he was trying to tell her immediately, and her fingers flew over the keyboard, trying out a new tactic to get them inside. They were working from her dorm room because it was the only place that had a fast enough internet connection; she just hoped that the electric company didn’t trace her IP address, because that would be bad.

She had no desire to get into trouble for this. Of course, she’d never been caught before, so she wasn’t too worried.

Minutes later, she was inside, with just minutes to spare to meet the deadline. “Okay, I’m in. Which
grids?"

Oz looked at the map of Sunnydale, the electric lines superimposed over the image. “You’d better do J and K,” he replied. “I would probably take care of it, but it’s hard to say how far underground the labs go.”

Willow nodded, then shut down the required grids. For one, brief moment, she didn’t think it had worked, and then the room went dark.

“I guess it worked,” she said, watching as Oz lit the waiting candle. She unplugged the laptop cord from the wall, knowing that her battery would last her at least a couple of hours. By then, the electric company would have turned the power back on, but not before the Initiative had been thrown into further chaos. And really, that was the main purpose. “Now we just have to wait.”

“Yeah.” Oz was quiet. “I don’t think I’ll stay in town after this.”

Willow hadn’t thought that he would. “Where will you go?”

“I liked traveling,” he admitted. “I saw—so much.” His face was mournful in the flickering candlelight. “I’m sorry. If I haven’t said it before.”

“You have.” Willow sighed. “If you hadn’t left, I—I forgave you, you know? I wanted to make it work. That’s what hurt the most.”

Oz bent his head, and she wished that this was easier. “I’ll always love you.”

Willow swallowed back her tears. “I know.” It was all she could get out past the lump in her throat, even though she felt the same way.

If things had been different, maybe they might have worked it all out, but things weren’t different, and they hadn’t, and as happy as she was with her circumstances, it didn’t make the hurt any less.

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Although it was entirely possible that the Initiative hadn’t had time to revoke Riley’s clearance, they weren’t about to risk getting stuck at that early of a stage. Instead, between Buffy and Spike, they forced the elevator doors open, then they set about rappelling down the shaft.

Spike and Wesley went first, Wesley wearing his sidearm openly. “You ready to use that thing?” Spike asked as they shoved off from the wall again.

“I wouldn’t have brought it otherwise,” Wesley replied. “I imagine we’ll meet some resistance, both from the demons and the soldiers.”

“Demons will probably fight amongst themselves,” Spike opined. “And whatever soldiers are left will be too busy trying to keep control to worry much about us. At least, that’s the idea.” They descended another fifteen feet. “That’s why Willow’s cutting the power. Should make things easier on us, and it’ll make them much less likely to try and reopen this place.”

“I’m glad she’s well out of this,” Wesley admitted.

Both of them landed on top of the elevator at the same time with twin thuds of their boots. Working in silence, they managed to get out of their harnesses, looking up to wait for Riley and Buffy. “Imagine you are,” Spike agreed. “Wish I could say the same.”

“There’s no way she would have allowed you to come without her.”

“I know that.”

It only took a few more minutes before Buffy and Riley touched down. “Where to?” Buffy asked, looking at Riley.

He was the one who would be leading them into the warren of hallways. From Graham’s report, they had some idea of where Adam might be hiding; it was down the same hallway that Walsh had kept him, anyway. What he was doing was anyone’s guess, but it didn’t really matter, as long as they managed to stop him before he finished it.

“That way,” Riley replied, pointing.
Buffy pulled a couple of flashlights out of the small pack she carried, handing one to Wesley and keeping one for herself. She gave Wesley and Riley both a very serious look. “I want you both to stay away from Adam. Spike and I will take care of him.”

“And if Adam gives us no choice?” Wesley countered.

Buffy started to shake her head, but Spike cut her off. “Do what you think is best, Wes. I trust your instincts.” He didn’t—couldn’t—say the same for Riley, but he knew that the other man would do the same.

Buffy gave him a look, but she didn’t contradict his order. “Fine. I want you both to be careful, though.”

They were silent then, waiting for the electricity to go out. The only lights in the elevator shaft were small emergency lights. “Do you know what kind of generators the Initiative has?” Wesley asked suddenly.

Riley shook his head. “The generators aren’t powerful enough to provide power to the entire complex; all they’ll do is allow power to the control room and the elevator. The idea was that if something like a blackout was to happen, the cells would still be locked, even if the doors weren’t electrified, and it would hold most of them for long enough to get it back on.”

Buffy glanced at Spike. “If the doors are locked…”

Spike shook his head. “Trust me, luv. Someone will make the attempt as soon as the lights go out, and soon as one gets out, the rest will follow in short order.” Silence fell again, and Spike glanced at his watch. “If Willow’s on time, the power should be cut in another minute.”

Just as he spoke, the emergency lights went out. Wesley grinned, his expression visible in the light from their flashlights. “She’s always so punctual.”

“Let’s get going,” Spike said. He and Buffy pried open the trap door in the top of the elevator, and Spike dropped through first, taking Wesley’s flashlight to provide the others with light. The others dropped down one at a time, and then he and Buffy opened the doors to get out of the elevator.
Graham was standing there, his expression grim. “Riley.”

“What are you doing here?” Riley asked, wary of his friend’s presence, thinking that perhaps Graham had changed his mind.

“Thought you could use the help,” Graham said. “Things are crazy down here.” He cocked his head as a scream sounded. “It’s going to get worse.”

“It always does,” Spike commented. “Don’t get in my way, and we’ll be happy to have you.”

Graham nodded, not saying anything in reply. They set off down the darkened hallway, Riley in the lead. “How many of our men are still here?” Riley asked.

The other soldier thought for a moment. “Maybe twenty,” he estimated. “Most of them are cool, though.”

“How many who aren’t ‘cool’?” Buffy asked.


Buffy scowled. “Crap.”

“He’d better hope I don’t see him,” Spike warned. “I won’t hold back this time.”

Graham frowned. “This time?”

“Let it go,” Riley warned him. “It’s better not to know.”

Graham shot Spike a curious look, but that was it; he stayed on Riley’s heels unquestioningly.

Spike’s head came up. “We’re getting closer.”
There was another scream, and Riley’s steps faltered. “What—”

“You keep going,” Spike said. “You keep going and you don’t stop. We’re going to take Adam out, and then we’ll deal with the rest of it.”

Riley and Graham both looked torn, and Spike wondered if they were going to accept his authority. “Adam’s our first priority,” Riley agreed.

Spike nodded. “Good.”

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Buffy couldn’t help but wonder how they were all supposed to make it out of the Initiative alive once she saw the melee out on the floor. A number of demons had already broken loose and were attacking the soldiers that had remained with vicious savagery; even though Buffy was dedicated to protecting humans, she couldn’t say that she felt much sympathy, not after what they had done to Spike, and tried to do to her.

The soldiers weren’t doing very well for the most part, fighting back-to-back in small groups or crouched behind the lab tables or around corners. As she watched, a vampire managed to tear out one man’s throat, though the soldier’s comrade immediately stunned him with a blaster.

She heard Spike snort from just behind her. “They’d be a lot better off with more lethal weapons.”

“We can’t do anything about that now.” Buffy looked around; no one had spotted them yet, but it was only a matter of time before they did, and the hallway leading to 314 was all the way across the room. “What’s the plan?”

“We clear the way,” Wesley said, pulling his gun out of its holster. “You two have to be in one piece to take on Adam.”

Buffy would have liked to argue with him; she hated to think about Wesley getting hurt, if only because Willow would never forgive her. He was right, though; she and Spike were the only ones capable of taking down Adam.
Assuming that they were capable of stopping the cyborg, of course.

She finally nodded. “Okay, we’ll follow you.”

It was a nightmarish journey across the open lab, with small fights going on everywhere they looked and flying bodies coming at them from every direction. The only lights were those few powered by the generators, and the low lighting was interspersed with the light from weapons fire. While Buffy would have liked to wade in, she couldn’t worry about the soldiers—or the demons—right then. Adam had to be stopped; clean up could be done on the way out.

Buffy nearly got skewered by a Polgara before Riley managed to shoot it with the blaster he’d brought with him; she kept Graham from being gutted by a demon of unknown origin, and Wesley killed several more with well-placed bullets.

It took them nearly twenty minutes to traverse the laboratory floor, and when they reached the door leading to the hallway holding 314, there was a moment’s pause as they considered how they were going to get inside.

Riley reached out and tried the handle, and they all breathed a sigh of relief as it turned easily under his hand. “What about that rocket launcher?” Spike asked.

The big soldier opened the door, motioning them inside. “I’ll be right back; the armory isn’t too far from here.”

“Spike—” Buffy began, thinking that it was probably not a good idea for Riley to go by himself.

He rolled his eyes, not at all happy with her unspoken plan, although he agreed with her assessment. “Do not let Adam see you,” Spike ordered her.

“When have I ever gone in without you?” Buffy asked. When he opened his mouth to speak, she gave him a dirty look. “Never mind. Go. I’ll wait.”

The trouble was that the hallway really didn’t have any areas to hide, and Buffy wasn’t sure where to stand to make sure that Adam didn’t catch sight of them. If Adam was even still around.
“Wait here,” she told the guys.

“Buffy—” Wesley began.

She cut him off. “I’ll be careful, Wes. Just sit tight.” Buffy made her way down the hallway carefully, peeking through the first window she came to. She couldn’t see anything inside; it was just an empty room. Sidling up to the next door, she peeked through the window, again not seeing anything.

Buffy thought about calling the guys, thinking that they could at least be out of sight in there, when she saw 314. Hesitating, she thought about turning around and walking away, but the window was uncovered, and it might help if they at least knew that Adam was inside.

Standing on tiptoe, Buffy peeked through the window.

And looked directly into Adam’s eyes.

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Joyce had a bad feeling, and it didn’t have anything to do with the fact that Rupert hadn’t called her yet. As concerned as she was about Buffy and the others returning safely, she trusted her daughter’s abilities, as well as Spike’s. The others would do fine as well.

No, what worried her was the fact that the nausea she’d felt earlier that day had completely dissipated by lunchtime, and she was starving. In fact, when Joyce thought about it, her appetite had been bigger over the last few weeks.

Maybe if she hadn’t been pregnant before, the idea wouldn’t have even crossed her mind. She would have chalked up the fact that she’d missed at least one period to the early onset of menopause and left it at that.

But Joyce had been pregnant before, and she remembered the nausea that came on strong in the morning and was gone by lunch. She also remembered her appetite increasing to the point that Hank had teased her about eating for three, and—perhaps most telling of all—the fact that she
knew exactly when it had happened.

There had been one night when they hadn’t taken any precautions, mostly because they had forgotten. At the time, she’d dismissed the danger because women her age didn’t become pregnant.

Except that sometimes they did.

“This is not happening,” she muttered, taking the pregnancy test out of the box with a grimace; she wasn’t sure how accurate it would be, but it was worth a shot. Maybe she was just imagining things, creating symptoms. Now that she had the idea in her head, she couldn’t get it out. That was all it was.

Joyce read the directions carefully, not wanting to mess up and get a false positive, and then she waited.

And watched the blue lines appear.

She leaned against the bathroom sink heavily. “Oh, dear,” she murmured. “What am I going to tell Rupert?”

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“We should have done this before,” Spike muttered. “Buffy’s going to get herself into trouble. It never fails.”

Riley didn’t even look up. “Just a second,” he muttered. “Almost there.”

“You’d better be,” Spike warned. “Because if something happens to her, I’m blaming you.”

“Here.” Riley stood in front of the box that held the rocket launcher he thought would do the trick. “I don’t have the key, though.”

The wooden box had a padlock on it, and Spike snorted. “Right.” One solid kick had the hasp
breaking away from the box, and he pulled the weapon out of the packing with a whistle, soon followed by a satisfied grin. “This ought to knock him back a step.”

“Let’s go,” Riley said, leading the way out of the armory.

It had been obvious to Spike that no one, demon or human, had been back there to collect weapons, and he found that rather strange. “Why were we the only ones pulling something like this out?”

“Most of the men don’t have access,” Riley explained.

Spike raised an eyebrow. “Why should that matter? The only things working right now are the emergency lights.”

Riley shrugged. “I guess they just didn’t think about it with all the fighting.”

Spike couldn’t help but mutter under his breath, “They really teach you to think on your feet, don’t they?”

Riley glared at him but didn’t answer, not really having a response for that. They reached the door quickly, moving at double-time; Spike didn’t want to leave Buffy for any longer than he had to, knowing that it was likely her curiosity would get the better of her. Luckily, most of the fighting was in the center of the lab, not on the fringes, and it appeared as though it was beginning to die down. That meant either that the soldiers had killed most of the demons that had escaped, or that Giles and the others were going to have their work cut out for them.

Spike heard the shots before he reached the door, and both he and Riley sprinted the remaining steps. The other man opened the door and was through first, Spike following. They both froze at the tableau that faced them.

Adam had Buffy by the neck, holding her up off the ground. She was struggling, but Spike could tell that she was getting weaker by the second. Adam already had one eye gone, Wesley having been able to hit him dead on, but it hadn’t slowed the cyborg down.

Obviously, Walsh had done her work too well.
Spike shoved the rocket launcher at Riley. “You have a chance, you take your shot,” he ordered, running down the hallway, hoping that he wasn’t already too late.

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Xander looked over his shoulder as Willow and Oz came to stand behind them on the lawn outside Lowell House. “What are you guys doing here?” he asked.

“We finished hacking in,” Willow explained. “There wasn’t anything left to do, so we figured we’d come give you guys a hand.”

“There hasn’t been any activity.” Giles looked at his watch. “It’s been hours since they went in.”

Tara gave him an encouraging smile. “I’m sure they’re fine.”

“Of course they are,” Giles said impatiently. “Spike and Buffy have taken on dangerous foes in the past.”

At the hurt expression on Tara’s face, Willow gave the older man a dirty look. “Just because you’re worried doesn’t mean you can take it out on whoever you want.”

Giles glanced at the girls and winced. “Forgive me. I’m a bit on edge.”

“It’s okay,” Tara murmured.

“Weren’t you supposed to be blowing up the cave?” Willow asked, hoping to distract them.

“We already did,” Xander responded. “It went up with a bang, just like we planned.”

When Willow looked to Tara for confirmation, the other girl nodded. “No one can get out that way. We made sure of it.”
“Do you really think anything will get out this way?” Oz asked.

Xander shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not, but at least we’ll be here when Buffy and the others come out.”

Silence fell, and they watched the front of the house, waiting for some sign of the others. No one they knew appeared, but they watched as a rather large demon exited the building, looking around in the late afternoon sunlight.

“Crap.” Xander spoke for all of them. “I thought we were going to get off easy.”

Tara and Willow clasped hands, and the demon began to float, spinning in the air. It screeched angrily, and Willow looked over at Giles and Xander. “Well? What are you waiting for? An engraved invitation?”

They moved quickly, and Giles cut the demon’s head off with a quick sword stroke. “Do you see any more coming?”

Xander shook his head. “No, I—Yes!” The last was spoken in a panicked tone of voice as a slime demon came running out of Lowell House, charging straight for Xander.

Tara and Willow couldn’t act quite quickly enough, and the demon bowled the young man over, grabbing his shoulders and beginning to pound his head against the ground. Oz hit the demon with a flying tackle, pulling him away from Xander.

Xander scrambled to his feet, pulling out his stake and driving it through the demon’s back; Giles finished it off with a quick thrust. They stood shoulder to shoulder in front of the house, all of them breathing heavily. “Okay,” Willow said. “That was interesting. How many more do you think will come out?”

“I’m hoping not too many more.” Giles wiped his sword on the grass.

“Incoming,” Oz called, and they all got ready to deal with the next escapee.
Chapter 48

“I do not love you as if you were salt-rose, or topaz,/or the arrow of carnations the fire shoots off./I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,/in secret, between the shadow and the soul./I love you as the plant that never blooms/but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers;/thanks to your love a certain solid fragrance,/risen from the earth, lives darkly in my body./I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where./I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride;/so I love you because I know no other way/than this: where I does not exist, nor you,/so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,/so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.” ~Pablo Neruda, “Sonnet XVII”

Spike ran down the hallway towards the cyborg, watching as Buffy hooked one of her legs over Adam’s arm, and caught his chin with her boot. Adam didn’t loosen his grip, but the blow served as enough of a distraction that Spike was able to plunge a hand into Adam’s side with a straight-fingered blow.

Adam dropped Buffy immediately to turn on Spike, who caught the punch that the cyborg threw. “Think you can mess with my girl?” Spike asked with a sneer. “Think again.”

“You will not stop me,” Adam said. “There must be more.”

“More what?” Buffy asked.

“More like me,” Adam replied, his eyes glittering. “I will make an army, just like Mother wanted.”

“Knowing your mother, I don’t blame you for killing her,” Spike said. “Course, that just means we’re going to have to kill you, since she didn’t give you the proper discipline.”

Adam offered a grimace that was probably supposed to pass for a smile. “I feel no pain. There is nothing you can do to me.”

“Is that right?” Spike asked. Moving as quickly as only a supernaturally enhanced vampire could, he pulled Buffy to his chest and flew the few steps to the first door he came to, hitting it with his shoulder and back in order to prevent her from being harmed.
The concussion from the explosion hit almost immediately, and Spike could feel the heat on his boots and his back. He met Buffy’s eyes and knew that she understood his plan; the unspoken communication passed between them easily, and Spike scrambled to his feet with a little help from her.

Adam was lying in the hallway, the walls bearing the scorch marks from the blast, and the ceiling tiles beginning to fall. The creature was starting to stir, and Spike knew that they only had moments to complete their mission.

Spike seized Adam’s shoulders, holding him against the ground, and Spike felt the cyborg begin to struggle against his grip, although Adam wasn’t moving all that well. “Buffy! Now!”

She didn’t have to be told twice; Buffy plunged her hand into Adam’s chest, staring down into the creature’s eyes. “This is for Faith,” she said as she pulled out his power core.

Spike could have sworn he saw relief flit over Adam’s features before he became still for good.

“Spike? Buffy?” Wesley’s voice called down the darkened hallway, and the beam of his flashlight waved wildly and then steadied, hitting Adam’s body.

“We’re fine, Wes,” Buffy called. “It’s done. We just have to get out of here.”

The lights began to flicker, and the intact fluorescent lights down at the end of the hall came back on. “Looks like the electric company worked around Willow’s hack job,” Spike commented, standing up and offering a hand to Buffy. “How’s your throat, luv?”

“Sore, but I’ll live.” Buffy gave him a sheepish look. “I know you told me to wait, but…”

Spike sighed. “Yeah, but I didn’t actually think you would. What happened?”

“I was looking for a hiding spot for us, and Adam saw me,” Buffy admitted. “He had Walsh in there, and I think he was trying to—you know.”

“Think I do,” Spike replied. He met Riley’s eyes and said grudgingly, “Nice shooting.”
“It was my pleasure,” Riley replied. “You ready to get out of here?” he asked, directing the question to Buffy.

“It can’t happen too soon,” she said fervently.

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Getting out of the Initiative wasn’t nearly as difficult as they’d thought it would be; their small team grew slightly as it picked up the knots of remaining soldiers on their way out, providing them with a little more in the way of cover. Buffy felt bad for those left behind, since she could tell that the number making it out was significantly fewer than those she’d seen fighting on the way in. She knew that most of the dead had been like Riley—well meaning, idealistic, and fighting for something that didn’t exist.

The Initiative had never been what it claimed to be; its true face was found in Adam.

Still, that wasn’t their fault, and even if Buffy couldn’t feel much sympathy for the dead soldiers, she knew that many of them probably had families that would miss them. There were always more victims than just the dead.

By the time they all spilled out into the hallways of Lowell House, Buffy was exhausted, her only desire to sleep for a week—preferably alongside Spike.

“You guys should get out of here,” Riley said once they were clear of the elevator; it was apparently a lot easier to go up with unauthorized personnel than it was to go down.

“Are you sure?” Buffy asked.

Riley nodded. “It’ll be easier if I can keep your name out of it. With everything those in charge are going to see down there, it probably won’t be too difficult to convince them that the Slayer was just a figment of the Professor’s imagination. I don’t think the guys will argue with me.”

“Gonna take all the credit?” Spike asked, though his tone was more interested than angry.
Riley smiled. “You bet. At least, we will.” He motioned to Graham and, by extension, the rest of the soldiers. “I’ll let you know what’s going to happen to this place; I owe you that much.”

Buffy gave him a weary smile. “We’ll see you later, then.” As they made their way out of the house, she gave a limping Wesley a concerned look. “You okay?”

“I twisted my knee at some point,” Wesley replied. “I’m sure it’s fine, though.”

“We’ll get you off your feet as quick as we can, mate,” Spike said. “You did good in there today.”

Wesley shrugged. “I did what had to be done.”

Spike nodded. “Yeah. Suppose we all did.”

“Wesley!” Willow came dashing up as soon as they were in the doorway. “Are you okay?” She looked at Spike and Buffy, obviously not knowing whom to go to first.

“We’re all fine, Will,” Buffy assured her. She met Giles’ eyes, and she could see that he’d been just as worried. “Really, we’re all okay, and Adam’s gone.”

He gave her a relieved smile. “Well done.”

Buffy suddenly noticed the bodies of half a dozen demons littering the lawn. “I guess you guys had some trouble?”

Xander shrugged. “Nothing we couldn’t handle.”

She laughed, leaning back against Spike, and for the first time in a long time, felt as though worry wasn’t her constant companion.
Joyce met them as they came through the door, her eyes searching each for signs of injuries. It appeared as though everyone was fine, although Wesley was limping a bit and Xander had a scrape across one cheek. Giles gave her a smile and a slight nod, and Buffy met her with a hug. “It’s okay, Mom.”

She gave a sigh of relief. “Is anyone hungry?” Joyce asked.

“Starving,” several people said at once.

“I’ll call for pizza.” Joyce turned to go into the kitchen where she’d left the phone, unsurprised when Giles followed her. “How did it go?”

“About as well as could be expected,” Giles responded, pulling her into his arms for a much-needed embrace. “At least we didn’t take any losses.”

Joyce leaned her head on his shoulder. “But there were losses.”

“There always are,” he replied softly. “Riley and Graham are going to talk to those in charge; with luck, they’ll say the right thing to convince them that the Initiative ought to be shut down.”

“Do you really think they will?” she asked hopefully.

“I think that there’s a good possibility that the dead bodies will do it for them.” Giles pressed a kiss to her forehead. “It’s going to be fine.”

Joyce believed him, although she couldn’t help but wonder if he would say the same when he heard her news.

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Buffy straightened her black dress, hating that she had to do this. She hated funerals; they only served as a reminder of her own ending, particularly when it was a Slayer’s funeral she was
One of Giles’ friends in the Council had told him that the new Slayer had been located in Germany, and that she would be staying there; apparently, she had been training for years, and was well-versed in the standard Council rhetoric.

Buffy had to wonder how long she’d last.

“You ready to go?”

She turned to see Spike standing in the doorway of what was effectively ‘their’ bedroom these days. The school year was almost over, and Buffy wasn’t planning on moving back into the dorms the next year; there was no point, when Spike had a nice place that wasn’t too far away.

Spike was wearing a suit and dark tie, which Buffy hadn’t known he owned. He looked good, but Buffy wished that he were wearing his standard jeans and t-shirt, because this was just one more reminder that this day was out of the ordinary.

“Yeah.” Buffy tried for a smile, but couldn’t quite make it.

Spike put his hands on her shoulders, his thumbs rubbing her tense shoulders in soothing circles. “I know, luv.”

“I don’t want to do this,” she confessed.

“Me neither,” he agreed.

She leaned her head against his chest. “We have to go, though.”

“We do.” Spike pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Come on; we don’t want to be late.”

Buffy thought that the gathering at the columbarium was pitifully small; only her mother and Giles, Xander and Anya—who didn’t quite understand what it was all about—Tara, Willow, Oz, and
Wesley. Buffy was a little surprised that Wesley had agreed to attend, given the fact that Faith had tortured him for a few hours; she wondered briefly if it had something to do with knowing for certain that the other Slayer was dead and her ashes interred, but that seemed a little harsh for Wes.

The preacher was the only outsider there, and he spoke the ritual words of the funeral service in a measured, solemn voice, talking about youth cut short. He didn’t know about Faith’s past, only that she had been murdered. Maybe it was better that way, because there was no hypocrisy in his voice when he talked about the tragedy that her death had been.

Of course, Faith’s death was a tragedy, because she would never have a chance to do better for herself; Buffy wondered if she ever really would have had a chance.

When the minister stepped back to give them a chance to say a few words, Buffy watched as Giles stepped forward first to place a rose on the floor, though he didn’t say anything.

The others came forward one by one to do the same, although no one spoke. Spike went just before her. “Wish we could have saved you, Faith,” he said.


And then it was time to go home.

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“I have to go.”

Willow had known this was coming since the day she’d seen Oz again, if she was to be honest with herself. She stood in her dorm, in nearly the same spot she’d been when he’d first shown up again. “I know. Where will you go?”

He gave a quick shake of his head. “I don’t know. There are a lot of places I haven’t seen yet.”

Willow took a deep breath. “Yeah. There are a lot of places in the world to see.”
“I shouldn’t have come back,” Oz said. “It was stupid to think that you’d be—”

“Waiting?” Willow asked. “I tried. I waited, and then…”

“There was Wesley.” Oz studied the tops of his shoes.

“Pretty much.” Willow choked back the tears. “I wrote you letters—so many letters—but I didn’t have anywhere to send them.”

He nodded, looking away. “I know. I—I’m sorry.”

“I know.” Willow tried for a smile. “If you ever feel like passing through this part of the world again, I’ll probably be here.”

He nodded. “Maybe so.”

She hugged him, the scent that was uniquely Oz filling her nostrils. Willow remembered how safe Oz’s arms had made her feel, and it hurt that they no longer let her feel safe, only sad, like she’d lost some vital piece of herself.

Willow waited until the door had closed behind him, the spot on her forehead burning where his lips had brushed her skin, before bursting into tears. Oz had been her best friend, her first lover, her first love, and his loss—permanent and irreplaceable—hurt like nothing else ever had. As much as she loved Wesley, it still hurt.

She was still fighting the tears a couple of hours later when Buffy came back after her first final. “Will?”

“Oz is gone.”

“Oh.” Buffy immediately sat down on the bed next to her, pulling her into a hug. “I’m so sorry.”
“I knew he wasn’t going to stay, you know?” Willow said. “And I love Wesley; I didn’t think I was going to get back together with Oz or anything. It’s just—”

Buffy sighed. “I know. He was your first.”

Willow nodded, putting her head on Buffy’s shoulder, mourning both the ending and the new beginning. No one had ever told her how much new beginnings hurt, even when they represented something good.

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“H’lo, pet.”

Tara glanced up, surprised to see Spike standing next to the bench she was seated on. “Hi.”

“Can I sit down?” he asked.

“Sure.” Tara watched as he sat next to her, the sunlight nearly causing his blond hair to glow. “W-what are you doing on campus?”

“Meeting Buffy,” Spike replied. “But she was busy with Willow when I showed up, so I thought I’d wander for a bit.” He gave her a smile. “No danger in being here now.”

Tara knew what he was referring to; Riley had come to talk to Buffy the previous day, letting her know that the army was closing the base, and that he was being transferred out. Apparently, the combination of the massacre of both soldiers and demons, the discovery that Walsh had violated the soldiers by feeding them highly experimental drugs, and the fact that one of the soldiers in question had been a general’s grandson had led them to call the experiment a failure.

Later, after Riley had left, Spike had opined that one of his demon friends might also have had something to do with it, since Robert had been pressuring some highly placed friends to make sure the Initiative went away.

It was still odd for Tara to hear Spike talk about demons as though they were people, rather than
the evil creatures her father had always said that they were. Had always told her that she would someday be.

Tara had always thought that her escape from her family would be temporary, only until the demon came out. Once that happened, she would be forced to go where she wouldn’t hurt anyone. At least, that’s what she’d thought until she’d met Willow and Wesley and the others. The fact that Spike was a demon didn’t hurt, either.

“It’s good that we don’t have to worry about them anymore,” Tara said.

“S’pose it is,” Spike agreed. “What about you? You doing okay now?”

“S-sure,” Tara said, not knowing what he was getting at.

Spike shrugged. “Sometimes that first apocalypse will show a person that maybe this isn’t what they want.” He gave her a reassuring smile. “Not that we don’t want you; just want to know that you’re okay with it all.”

“More than okay,” she said. “It’s been…” Tara couldn’t explain what it had been.

“You do know that you’re one of us now, right?” Spike asked. “Stop an apocalypse, and you’re one of the family.”

Tara could feel herself blushing. “I—”

“It’s the way it works,” Spike said firmly. “Remind me to let you know when we go down to L.A.; I’ll introduce you to my friend Robert. Good man.”

Tara swallowed. “I-is that the one that’s half demon?”

As he ambled away, Tara wondered if he knew.

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Xander kept watch on the doors of the Bronze, anxiously awaiting Anya’s arrival; she was supposed to be off work soon. She’d heard about Giles wanting someone to watch the bookstore for him on occasion and had jumped at the chance, and Xander was grateful that she had something to do now that he was working full time at the construction site; it made it less likely that she’d make a fuss when he wanted to spend time with his friends.

He thought that they might have finally reached an agreement about his desire to help Buffy and the others. As long as he didn’t get hurt or killed, and saved plenty of time to give her orgasms, Anya was willing to share him. Xander, for his part, had every intention of keeping her happy.

It was more than the fact that Anya seemed to be the only one who would have him, more than the fact that she was pretty and good in bed. More than the fact that she was the one really good thing in his life.

Xander had finally realized that he loved her. The others might think he was crazy for it, but he did.

He felt a smile start to form as she entered the Bronze, and Xander waved at her. “Hey.”

“Hi!” Anya said brightly. “Giles said that today was our highest grossing day of the week, and I got to count the drawer.”

Xander smiled indulgently. “That’s great, An. I take it today was a good day.”

“A very good day,” she confirmed. “Or it will be if you come home with me and give me celebratory orgasms.”

Xander hesitated, looking around the Bronze for the others. Spike and Buffy hadn’t arrived yet, but Wesley, Willow, and Tara were already there somewhere.
“Go,” Tara said, suddenly appearing at his elbow. “I’ll tell the others where you went.”

“Thanks, Tara,” Xander said gratefully, knowing that this was one of those compromises a guy had to make for his girl. “Tell Buffy that I’ll see her before she takes off.”

Xander turned to Anya. “Let’s go.”

He had a girlfriend to make happy.

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Giles swallowed hard. “Are you sure?”

“As certain as I can be before going to the doctor,” Joyce replied. “I might have thought that it was just menopause, but…” She trailed off as she realized that Giles was looking very uncomfortable at the discussion of female organs.

Which was just silly, since he had no trouble enjoying female organs.

He leaned back in his chair. “What—what are we going to do?”

“That depends on what you want to do,” Joyce said evenly, hiding her disappointment. She’d hoped that he’d be excited, although she’d expected disbelief and shock. “Did you not want children?”

“It wasn’t something I’d thought about,” Giles replied honestly. “I hadn’t thought it possible, and now…” Shock was giving way to something akin to acceptance, and maybe even excitement. “Did you want more children?”

“I think I felt the same way you did,” Joyce said. “I didn’t think it was possible, so…” She sighed. “Hank and I had talked about having another child, but it was never the right time, and then there was no time.”
Giles nodded slowly. “I had probably best give up the apartment, then. I think it’s time to get rid of the security blanket, don’t you think?” He gave her a cautious smile. “Unless you want to kick me out.”

“Hardly,” Joyce said. “But are you really okay with this?”

“It’s going to take some time to get used to the idea,” Giles said. “And I’ll probably panic at least once when it finally does sink in, but yes.” His smile broadened to a grin, and he suddenly laughed. “I’m going to be a father.”

Joyce laughed with him. “Yes, you are.”

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Willow shifted, trying to find a spot on Wesley’s couch where the springs wouldn’t poke her; she really did need to convince him to get some new furniture.

“You were quiet tonight,” Wesley commented.

Willow looked at him, distracted. “Huh?” They had gone out for dinner, and were at his place, trying to have a date. Willow knew she had been lost in her own thoughts for most of the evening, however.

“Are you alright?” Wesley asked. “Did I do something?”

“No,” Willow said quickly. “No, it’s not you. I’m just not very good company tonight.”

Wesley hesitated and then asked, “Do you want to go back to your house tonight? I could drive you.”

“No,” Willow said firmly. “I don’t want to go home, but…” She gave him a pleading look. “Could we go for a drive?”
He frowned. “On the motorcycle?”

She nodded. “I just—I need to get out of here tonight.”

“Okay.” Wesley didn’t ask any more questions; he simply handed Willow her helmet and led the way to his bike.

Willow wondered how he’d known to take the coast road, that she’d wanted to feel the wind rushing over them. She felt the heat of the bike and the road and his body, the strong muscles of his back and thighs. Tonight, Willow needed to feel safe; she needed to be reminded that she had everything she wanted right here—with him.

Wesley stopped the bike at a scenic overlook, and they took off their helmets and sat at the cliff’s edge, their feet dangling. The silence hung between them, thick as the darkness and the stars overhead.

“I love you.”

He turned to look at her, and a gentle smile lit his face. “I love you, too.”

“I just thought you needed to know that,” Willow added.

Wesley chuckled. She loved that sound. “It’s always nice to hear.”

“Maybe we could go somewhere this summer, too,” Willow suggested. “After Spike and Buffy get back.”

Wesley nodded. “We can do that.”

“You don’t mind that I’m going to share a room with Tara next year, do you?” she asked suddenly, anxiously. “I mean, I know that Buffy’s moving in with Spike, and I didn’t know if you were wondering why I wasn’t moving in with you, and—”
Wesley stopped her with a finger to her lips. “Spike and Buffy have been dating for much longer that we’ve been dating, and Tara needs someone to share expenses with her.” He smiled, obviously amused. “It’s fine, Willow.”

“Oh.”

“Is that what had you so worried?”

“Some of it,” she admitted.

“Next time, just talk to me,” Wesley said.

Of course, there really wasn’t much talking after that.

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Buffy finished packing and zipped her suitcase shut. “Okay, I think that’s all of it.”

“Are you sure you’re only packing for two weeks and not two months?” Spike asked.

“Shut up,” she ordered him. “You don’t know what kind of clothes I’m going to need.”

Spike just smirked, laying back on the bed, watching as Buffy rushed around getting the last few things together for their trip to Europe. They were flying into London first, then heading to Paris, and he’d promised that they would see more the next time they went.

There would be a next time, and he was unspeakably grateful for that fact.

Buffy suddenly stopped in her preparations. “I still can’t believe that Mom’s going to have a baby.”

Spike snickered; he couldn’t help it. Buffy had been making comments like that for the last two
days, ever since Joyce had given them the news. “I guess it makes it real.”

“It makes what real?” Buffy asked.

“The fact that your mum and Rupert are shagging.”

Spike wasn’t terribly surprised when she hit him with a pillow. “Stop it!” He just laughed as Buffy continued to smack him with her makeshift weapon, finally grabbing her wrists and wrestling her to the bed. She lay panting and breathless under him, her face flushed with laughter, and Spike thought that she’d never looked more beautiful.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Buffy sighed as Spike rolled over, stretching out next to her. “It’s just that I’ve always been an only child, you know? It’s weird. Besides, Mom is old.”

“I’m older,” Spike pointed out.

She pouted. “That’s so not the point. Besides, you’re a different kind of old.”

Spike smiled indulgently. “If you say so.”

Buffy snuggled up next to him. “I guess it means I’m kind of related to Giles now. That’s not so bad.”

Spike had to think a moment before he could follow her thought process, realizing that she meant they’d share a blood relation, which did connect them in an attenuated sense. Not that he was going to point that out. “Figure you’ll be related in more than just blood before the year is out.”

Buffy frowned, and then her eyes widened. “You think they’ll get married?”

“No reason why they wouldn’t, and a couple why they would,” Spike pointed out. “I don’t think they’ll be in a hurry, but I imagine it’ll happen sooner or later.”
“I’d like that,” Buffy decided. “It’ll be nice to know that someone will be looking after Mom.”

Spike tugged her closer at the reminder that she wasn’t going to be around forever. “You’ll be there to do it for a long time to come, luv.”

Buffy didn’t respond verbally, instead slinging an arm over his middle, snuggling down on the bed next to him. “How long before we have to leave?”

“Few hours yet,” Spike said. “There’s time for you to take a nap.”

“Thank you,” Buffy murmured, fighting sleep.

Spike frowned. “For what?”

“For this. For sticking around, for loving me.” Buffy listed off the reasons one after another and followed it up with a long kiss. “It makes it all worth it, you know?”

“Yeah,” Spike said quietly. “Wouldn’t give this up for anything, Buffy.”

He was beyond grateful that this last year had only strengthened what they felt for each other, rather than tearing them apart. Whatever the future might bring, there was nothing that could destroy their love.

Spike thought that he just might be the luckiest man in the world; he had everything under the sun.

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