## Work in Progress

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**Archive Warning:** No Archive Warnings Apply  
**Category:** F/M, Gen  
**Fandom:** Buffy the Vampire Slayer (TV), Angel: the Series  
**Relationship:** Winifred "Fred" Burkle & Spike, Winifred "Fred" Burkle/Spike, Spike (BtVS)/Winifred "Fred" Burkle, Angel & Cordelia Chase, Angel (BtVS)/Cordelia Chase, Xander Harris/Dawn Summers, Xander Harris & Dawn Summers, Tara Maclay/Willow Rosenberg, Charles Gunn/Anne Steele, Buffy & the Scooby Gang, Spike & Buffy Summers  
**Character:** Spike (BtVS), Angel Investigations, Angel (BtVS), Buffy Summers, Willow Rosenberg, Xander Harris, Rupert Giles, Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, Charles Gunn, Winifred "Fred" Burkle, Dawn Summers, Lorne | Krevlornswath, Cordelia Chase, Harmony Kendall, Eve (AtS), Cyvus Vail, Connor (AtS), Anne Steele  
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**Summary**

The sequel to The Ghost and Ms. Burkle: Buffy comes to L.A. to investigate Spike's recent reappearance and the death of a young slayer. But Spike's new life with Fred is the last thing Buffy imagined that she would find!

"Forget how she clung to him, how her body eased into his like the first clasp of a practiced waltz. Forget how she smelled, all angry and piquant, the subtle differences mixed with the familiar. The new splash of Europe on her wrists and in her hair, on the surface of her clothes could not mask the true core scent that he would always associate with her.

Forget her he had, but it all came rushing back with her arms and legs entwined with his."

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Work in Progress (duh, check the title) updating regularly to completion 2019
The day you suss out what you do want, there'll probably be a parade, Spike told her once. Seventy-six bloody trombones.

Spoiler alert? There had been no parade.

What there had been was an increasing dislike of that infamous phrase, All roads lead to Rome. Really, how long could you actually live in the Eternal City before you became plain sick of hearing that?

Because in actuality, there were many roads. Many out of it, too, most of them with horrible traffic.

Unfortunately, about a dozen flights a day going in all different directions led out of it as well (she should know, she would be bumped from most of them by the end of twenty four hours).

Every single one of them were also pricey enough to red flag her junior watcher's expense account. No way to fly under the radar on this one. Shoes were easy enough to slip past the Council accountant's nose. Tickets to LAX, not so much.

She finally decided on the American Airlines junket that connected in New York's JFK and had the flexible return date. JFK because, hello Bloomies' layover shopping, and flexible return because, well, Andrew had a big mouth.

How had it gone down again? Oh, yeah.

Willow told Xander, who told Dawn, who told Andrew with the caveat to not squeal like a Mr. Gordo that Spike was not only as alive as a vampire got, but had also felled another slayer. Poor Andrew. Buffy knew that she and Spike were his Pyramus and Thisbe; or more like it, his Han Solo and Princess Leia, and didn't all his favorite characters deserve a happy ending?

"Go to him, Buffy," Andrew had pleaded solemnly. "He's waiting for you like the guardian knight of the grail."

When the shock of hearing "Spike" and "not dead" uttered in the same sentence wore off, Buffy had the presence of mind to then ask, "The grail? When did you go all medieval and creatively anachronistic?"

"No silly, the knight in the Last Crusade," Andrew scoffed. "Be his Indy. Rescue him from the binds of his eternal watch."

She rolled her eyes at this typical bent of over-dramatization, but one of the words rang too true: rescue.

It made sense. They'd been doing it for each other for years.

So on the pretense of following up with Willow's investigation of a fallen potential-turned-Slayer, Buffy clocked her time in California as official watcher business. Yet sometime after the pre-board shots of courage with Xander at the café, and the post-lunch medicinal aid of red wine, and the mid-flight cocktail break, Buffy's certainty about her real mission began to waver.

Spike probably hated her. Worse yet, he'd be right.
Then: no, not Spike. He'd already forgiven a multitude of her sins. His burning to death in an apocalyptic rain of fire would be just another lover's spat, one easily corrected with the right kind of kiss.

Right?

Besides, he had to know that she couldn't really despise any man she kissed like that. All that deep soul kissing, where you really taste a man where he lives, in the back of his throat. He never tasted dead to her. He had his own flavor, like a spice or like wine. Pepper burgundy hiding thick on the back of his tongue and kissing her like he wanted to plunge inside of her.

And then of course later…how he did just that.

She shivered. Best not to think about it too much. That had been their problem all along, hadn't it? The silly time they wasted with her constant debating and deliberating, when the moments that really mattered were when she gave her mind the night off, put her body on autopilot, and let herself feel. No conversation, no awkward small talk, only two mouths and two bodies that knew what they wanted and how to get it.

Now if only the plane would stop circling before she lost her nerve.

If she looked windblown and crazy-eyed post-landing, the LA cabbie paid no mind, or at least thought her a typical patron of her destination: Wolfram & Hart. (And about that - really? The evil law firm he'd sworn to put down like a rabid dog? What did Angel think he was doing working at this place? Never mind, she'd have to straighten him out later. Nothing could interfere with the Slayer's Mission.)

She put her palm up to Angel's outstretched hand and slack open jaw when he tried to greet her at the entrance.

"Hi. Good. Flight sucked." She dropped her luggage at his feet. "Where is he?"

"Spike?" Angel looked confused. "He's in the lab."

"The lab. All right. I'm going to the lab." She ran past him, up the stairs to the second floor, glanced around, and ran back down again. "Where... is... the lab?"

Set finally on her correct course, Buffy thought about the scenario. Petri dishes, white rats, a sterile environment, the ideal place to experiment with her new-found resolve on how to make everything right with Spike, starting with what they did best. She'd leave him with no question as to her intentions.

She ignored the white cloaks as she rushed in, tuned out the pert brunette with a clipboard and an attitude who wanted to know just what Buffy thought she was doing. Her eyes planted firmly on her prize, Buffy strode purposely over to Spike and clutched his face between her sweaty palms.

"Hey! What the –?" he sputtered.

"Shut up," she whispered and pressed her lips hungrily onto his. She was so flustered and flush with the public display of her own impulsive affection that it took several seconds for her to realize: he wasn't kissing her back.

Slowly, she pulled her pucker away from his unresponsive lips.

"Spike?"
He untangled himself from her embrace, looking uncomfortable and embarrassed. He cleared his throat, smoothed his shirt and flashed an uneasy grin. Clipboard Girl scurried to his side.

"So again: can I help you?" the now peeved woman asked Buffy. "Or maybe more to the point, would you consider not helping yourself to my boyfriend?"

Buffy clapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh, god, I'm really sorry. I don't know what came over me, I –" Her chatter went on automatic.

Then the realization of Spike's title sunk in.

"Boyfriend?" she asked the girl. "Boyfriend?" she asked Spike with more scorn in her voice than she wanted to be there.

"Ladies," Spike began patiently, his voice balm-ready to soothe any number of hurts. Holding each girl gently by her elbow, he presented one to the other like the Victorian gentleman Buffy recalled he once was. "Buffy Summers this is Winifred Burkle, the head of the science department. Win, love. This is Buffy."

"Ohhh!" Fred cried and stuck her hand out.

The girl had one of the loopiest grins Buffy had ever seen, one part relieved, one part mortified, and all parts floored. Buffy made sure to shake back firmly.

"Buffy, hi. I'm Fred. It's so good to meet you finally. I've heard, well. I guess you know probably everything that I've heard 'cause you were pretty much living it. Not that I heard anything bad," she was quick to add. "Spike wouldn't say anything bad. Not that bad things didn't happen, but not on purpose, you know, with you or anything."

"Boyfriend," Buffy said again, still shaking Fred's hand and looking searchingly over at Spike, who was watching Fred with fond amusement.

Fred released her hand and wiped it awkwardly on her skirt. "Yeah, sorry about pouncing on you like that."

"She's a little, uh, possessive," Spike drawled, biting his lip and roving his eyes from her head to toe. He pulled Fred under his arm and gave her, God, Buffy thought dismally. He gave her the pout!

"Excuse me!" Fred nudged him playfully. "I think 'protective' is more the word for it. Like you're one to talk, nearly knocking my new lab tech out for brushing off my lab coat." She teases him so pretty, Buffy thought. No thoughts of demons or evil undead or soul sloshing flitted through Fred's big science brain. Not enough to keep her from Spike, anyway.

Spike growled good-naturedly and pinched her lab-coat covered bottom. "He was grabbing your ass. I know one when I see it. He's got good taste in them; I'll give him that."

They laughed together and Buffy felt her on-flight meal on its way up.

"Oh, yeah," she muttered. "Definitely picked the wrong day to experiment."

Fred glanced back to Buffy, her eyes wide and pooling full of apologies. "So you're here to visit. And that's...great. Sure, it's great. I think you guys should visit and get all caught up and holler at me when you're ready to eat. What do you think?"

"Win, are you sure?" Spike asked, watching her carefully, his hands reluctantly releasing her.
Fred agreed a little too eagerly. "Sure, I'm definitely sure and most of all, I'm great. Buffy's here and that's great. Right?"


"Fine," Spike answered. "I'll take Buffy over to the conference room. Come find me at supper?"

Fred nodded and he kissed her temple, rumbled something low and husky into her ear that made her giggle. In the meantime, Buffy found herself enthralled with the pattern of the floor tiles. It wasn't from the kiss. Spike's megawatt smile for Fred made Buffy's heart hurt to look at him.

He shoved his hands into the back pockets of his jeans and shook his head ruefully as he escorted her down the hall. "I'll say this for you, Slayer. You can still make a hell of an entrance."

He held open the door for her and ushered her inside the conference room. "By all means, psychotic ladies first."

Buffy met his eyes. "Wow. She hates me."

"Balls," Spike scoffed. "Not my girl. What's a kiss between friends who don't know any better?"

The dark creature of the night wardrobe notwithstanding, black jeans/t-shirt/boots, he looked relatively unchanged. Better somehow. Well-rested is the word for it, Buffy thought.

"Fred – your...girl," Buffy opened, beginning the small talk portion of their meeting. "She seems nice."

"Yes, she's nice and great and sure and bollocks."

Spike leaned against the wall facing her and folded his arms. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Angel didn't tell you I was coming?"

"No," he said evenly, tapping his fingers against his arm. "There's a vampire who's going to be sore about the neck and shoulders tomorrow."

"Don't," she held up her hand. "I told him not to say anything. I didn't think he'd actually do it."

"He's gotten quite docile in his dotage. You'd be surprised."

"Oh, I am. I so am." She slumped into one of the leather conference chairs.

"Are you?" He stretched his legs out and crossed them at the ankles, making himself comfortable. Buffy tried to will him not to tilt his head at her.

Damn. Too late.

He cocked his head at her quizzically. "With what exactly?"

"You. Big with the life changing, and Wolfram & Hart working, the alive and a boyfriend being and," she gestured at him weakly. "Everything."

He shrugged. "Globe keeps spinning. You gotta roll with it if you want to stay on."

This was too much. She leaned her elbows on the table and raked her fingers through her tangled hair. "Who are you and what have you done with Spike?"
"Easy now," he set the warning edge to his voice off like a flare. He straightened his back and puffed his chest out with pride. "It's the new and improved me. The Sunny-Hell Light version."

She peered out at him from under the veil of her hair. "How did it happen?"

"What do you mean? I burned in the Hellmouth, popped out as a ghost into Angel's office, fell in love with Winifred while she made me corporeal and killed another slayer before the slayer killed us all," he said nonchalantly. "Day's work."

"Oh, is that all?" she said with soft sarcasm.

"I gave you the condensed edition there, pet. But if you don't think I'm me, who exactly were you looking for?"

"Clearly someone not here," she said and pushed her chair back with a flourish.

She'd heard enough. At this point, she was ready to interview Angel, fill out the requisite paperwork for the council files, and high tail it back to Rome on a steady jet stream of Chianti. Spike watched her calmly and made no moves to stop her. This was the Hellmouth goodbye scene, take two, and she knew she'd never get another chance to play it again.

"I guess…” she faltered. "Oh, boy here goes. I guess I'm looking for the Spike who told me he loved me."

He stared at her stoically. "I did."

She frowned. "Did tell me or did love me?"

"Uh, the former," he said. "Neither. I mean, both. Oh, Christ," he sighed. "Isn't that always the wrench in our works? Never knowing what the hell the other's saying even when we're bloody saying it?"

"Then know this: I told you that I love you," Buffy said. "Past tense 'told.' You got that much, right?"

"Look, you wanted to give me a cheery send-off to the great beyond," Spike said, pacing the room. "I didn't want you to live with another death breathing down your back, so that's why I said...wait."

He looked over to her. "Present tense? 'Love'?"

The harsh furrow of his brow jumped up in surprise and the old look of longing for her returned to his face. Buffy found this expression of his so beloved and familiar, she felt as though she'd come home.

"What, like I could turn that off? You're dead so I stop loving you, poof?" She shook her head. "You should know, Spike. It's never been that easy for me." She stepped towards him.

As quickly as it had appeared, his gaze of devotion cooled. Buffy could tell what stopped him. Fred might as well have walked into the room so palpable was her presence.

"But now," he began.

"There's Fred. I know. You've come to mean a lot to each other, I get that."

He snorted. "You couldn't possibly."
"Spike," she said impatiently. "I know what we shared. I know how in spending time together, how feelings grow…"

"I'm telling you that it's not the same. You really don't want to tug at this thread, pet," he smirked tightly.

"What?" Buffy finally cried in frustration. "What could possibly be so different with this girl Fred in a few short months that could change the years we spent together?"

His jaw quivered.

"For starters, I never had to claw my way into her heart, or get a boot shoved in my face in the answer to a plea for help, or get beaten down time after time for being nothing more or less than what I'd been pigeonholed to be. Never had to prove to her that I'm more than monster and nearly get killed trying. In short, what's different? Everything is different. She's different." He strode across the room to her in all of his cocksure glory.

"In other words, Slayer, she's not you."

Just like him, she thought, to make every word hit home.

Buffy bowed her head and tried reaching for his hand. "Spike." She held nothing but air.

He waved his hand in front of the glass window. "Magic glass, you know," he said. "Seems everything here's too good to be true." He mused to himself in tones Buffy could barely hear.

"Win was the only bird who saw through all my lines, she did. Gave back as good as she got, too, but never closed her heart. She's my love. My girlfriend," he chuckled at the word. "Fancy that. Me, with a real girl, who's not superstrength, or well, dead? All she's given me, I'll put my life on the line to protect. Because what she's given me, is a real life."

He spoke with all of the tenderness she'd heard for Drusilla, that night they stood shackled in his crypt. All of the heat that he breathed into her that morning in her kitchen, leaning into her to retrieve his lighter. With all of the promise and love he'd vowed in protecting Dawn. All of those things, all in one girl.

"Wow."

He turned around then, as if remembering that she was still there. "I'm sorry for shagging it rough to you like I did there, love. But I can't have you wondering if there's a backdoor here for us somewhere, because there isn't. I shut the door on us when I fell in love with Winifred."

"William and Winifred," Buffy announced. "It sounds…cute in a sort of syrupy, disgustingly cloying kind of way."

"Mmm," he grunted, refusing her bait. A small smile played on his lips. "You all right?"

"Kosher as I can be, under the circumstances. You know what they say, pride goeth before the fall," she smiled gamely.

He walked over and rubbed her shoulder, the first Spike touch for her that was nothing more or less than exactly what it was supposed to be, an expression of friendly care.

"And how's the pride feeling?" he asked.
She leaned into his arm and pouted. "Major owie."
"He hasn't moved his hand," Buffy thought, relishing in the accidental contact, even after he started speaking and it seemed he had forgotten he'd put his hand anywhere. *It means something.*

*Right?*

"You missed quite a show," he stated with a kind of calm assurance that she'd forgotten about Spike. In a low, matter-of-fact voice, he described what it felt like to burn up in the Hellmouth, to give everything up and be ready to die, only to return in a less-than-hospitable form. "Those first days, I couldn't help but think of you. You coming back from the grave and desperate to feel – anything, other than scared and alone and –"

"Torn," Buffy finished quietly. "It must have been hell for you."

He choked out a laugh. "Yeah, that too," and proceeded to tell her about the Reaper, Pavayne, and all that Fred tried to do for him. "It's how we started." His voice hushed shyly. "Only a matter of time before I prodded her into taking me home, spirit me anywhere if it meant out of that bloody laboratory. Now that's where I spend most of my days with her. Funny, isn't it?"

"It's a side-splitter," Buffy agreed grimly.

She looked to her shoulder where his hand still hadn't moved. It had been what? Probably fifteen minutes since she'd confessed her hurt pride, she'd leaned in, he'd gripped her shoulder in a quick sign of comfort, and there it had remained. She glanced up at him and he met her gaze for one agonizing second. His forefinger reached out and brushed a curl from her neck and she sat very still.

"Buffy," he whispered, and she heard his apology before he had the chance to form the words.

"So where does the psycho slayer fit in, huh? She break into the lab and get fingerprints on all the test tubes or what?" she asked shakily. His hand still rested on her shoulder.

"Not exactly. I –"

"Oh!" Fred exclaimed at the doorway. "You're still here talkin'. I can leave."

"No!" he bellowed, jerking his hand away from Buffy's back and nearly lunging at the door. "I was just about to fetch you. We're done here."

*We are?* Buffy mumbled to herself.

"Don't need to ask whether you're hungry or not," she heard Spike tease Fred. "Your last meal being what, a whole hour ago?"

"Ha-ha."

"You mistake me. I like a bird with a hearty appetite; keeps up your stamina. Missed you sweet," he purred and out of the corner of her eye, Buffy saw him lean into her neck.

"Missed you, too," Fred whispered back shyly.

"Did you now? Give us a kiss?"

Fred glanced over at Buffy and cleared her throat. "If we're going to leave, I should grab my purse,"
"Right, I'll help you with that then." He turned to Buffy. "It's a very big purse." He grabbed Fred's hand and took off with her down the hall.

"And the hits just keep on coming," Buffy muttered.

Angel appeared in the doorway. "Where are they going?"

"To get her purse. Apparently it's a two-person job."

"Yeah," Angel sighed. "A lot of those come up with Spike and Fred."

"I mean, enough with the PDA! Get a room already!" Buffy tried to laugh.

"This is from the girl whose new greeting is shoving her tongue in someone's mouth," Angel said dryly.

She rolled her eyes. "You heard, huh. That didn't take long. When did he get a chance to gloat?"

"Spike didn't say anything. Fred's whole lab is buzzing over your stunt. I haven't seen them this excited since they discovered the exploding mold."

Buffy gave him a puzzled look.

"Yeah, don't ask."

"Can I at least ask what you think you're doing with this place?"

He gave one of his graphic sighs. "I thought I knew."

"You do know that you're running the corporate law equivalent of the Death Star here?" Buffy caught herself. "Sorry, I'm in watcher training with a sci-fi geek who puts the word fan in fanatic. Must be rubbing off."

"So that's what you're worried about, a little of the evil empire rubbing off?"

"On me? Not so much. On you, though..." She shook her head. "Angel, you despised everything about this place. Everything it stood for."

"And I thought we could use it to our advantage, do some kind of good with it. Lately," he shrugged tiredly. "I don't know anymore."

"Hey there!" Spike poked his head in the doorway looking distracted and Buffy could see that his shirt was halfway untucked. "Hi. Listen, Fred's got a lot of uh, inventory to do and uh, she really needs me. You two can manage without us?"

"We'll find a way to cope," Buffy replied wryly. "But I do have to talk to you before I fly back."

"You do? You mean, more than you did already?"

"Hello?" Buffy prompted. "You killed another Slayer, Spike. Maybe in self-defense, but I still have to file a report for the council."

"Right," Angel leapt in. "So Spike should definitely talk to you about that. About killing the Slayer."
Spike eyed both of them warily. "Well, I will then. Soon. Tomorrow even." He squinted at Buffy. "When did you say you'd be leaving?"

_Ouch._ Buffy raised her eyebrows in surprise. "I didn't. A lot of it will depend on how many blanks you can fill in for me. So return date cloudy. Ask again later."

"You should take her to that new sushi hut downtown," Spike advised Angel. "She always did like the raw and squiggly bits."

"I'll keep that in mind," Angel drawled.

"Night," Spike waved and headed back down the hall.

"So," Buffy turned to Angel with false brightness. "Who's up for raw and squiggly?"

Angel barely spoke to her on the way to the restaurant, not even acknowledging her compliment on his fleet of sports cars - backhanded as it was. "So this is what the price of a soul is going for these days," she commented as he opened the Viper's door for her. "Good to know." She could tell from the grim set of his chin and his ever-darting eyes that he was working himself up to something.

Thus it wasn't a complete surprise when he guided her to one of the dimly lit back booths and barely let her sit down before blurting out, "Your dough certainly got cooked in a big hurry!"

Buffy blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Italy's climate works as some kind of convection oven? I haven't seen you go after something like this since...well, since you wanted to kill him!"

"I got carried away. Who knew Spike would make an encore from the dead? It threw me, that's all," she tried to dismiss.

"L.A's not exactly around the corner from Rome. This trip took some planning," Angel paused and searched her face. "You really wanted this, didn't you? By 'this' I mean Spike?"

She frowned. "Seemed like a good idea at the time. That's what I get for being decision girl. The whole ignorance is bliss thing? So everything its cracked up to be." She shrugged. "I missed him."

"He missed you, too. Until..."

Buffy winced. "I know, until he fell fangs over heels for little Miss Southern Comfort. Are you sure she's not evil? Any girl that skinny has got to have some demon blood flowing in there somewhere."

"Sorry, but Fred's 100% all American, demon-free. I've known her for years."

"And the answer to the 50 million dollar question on why no one called me?"

Angel took a sip of water. "Spike said not to."

"Oh, of course. You two being such tight buds and all, I can see why his opinion so swayed you."

"I'm sure he figured that Willow would tell you anyway."

She shook her head. "Lame. Try again."
Angel lifted his hands in surrender and rolled his eyes. "Obviously, it all worked out because you still managed to get here. Buffy, Spike and I work together. He's really...come through for me in a lot of ways. Especially this latest problem."

"The recently departed slayer?"

"Well that, and everything that's happened since then. I'm sort of short-staffed. Wesley and Gunn...left the company for a while. When Fred found out, she cut short her medical leave and got Spike to pitch in. I guess I'm pretty grateful."

"Medical leave. She's sick?"

"Um, not exactly."

"She's pregnant?" Buffy joked.

Angel looked pained. "Of course not."

"Right. Vampires aren't exactly the breeding kind."

The little color left drained from his face and he scrambled to pick up the menu. "Maybe we should order."

She snatched the menu out of his hands. "Angel? Maybe you should tell me whatever it is that's got you so freaked. I'm not thinking it's the catch of the day."

"Buffy, trust me when I say it's a really long story."

"Great. I'll order an appetizer first. Now spill."

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I can't wear lipstick anymore," Fred smiled, dabbing first her mouth and then Spike's with the heel of her thumb. "It doesn't stay on long enough."

"You don't need it. Damn gorgeous as you are." His eyes barely made their way across her face when he stopped, tipped her chin up as though examining her expression in the light. "What's the matter, pet? Come on, out with it. Twenty questions front and center."

She shook her head. "It's none of my business."

"If some bloke waltzed in and threw down with you, I'd bloody well make it my business. What do you want to know?"

Fred hesitated then let the words rush out that had been beating inside her head all day. "She came back for you, just like I knew she would."

"Ah, I'm a whim of hers, that's all," he sniffed, with a wave of his hand that looked much too cavalier to Fred. "Slayer's feeling homesick among the ruins and heard a rumor that an old flame sparked up. She's done the same thing with Angel you know, countless times."

Fred's eyes tipped up to his. "She still loves you."
"Then I reckon she's having a bit of a brood over it, because I'll tell you what I told her. The life I want's with you, Win." He stared back at her with a direct simplicity that warmed her heart with the truth of it.

"Really?"

He glanced at the wall clock of her office for effect. "Got 14 hours. That enough time to convince you?"

"It's a start," she smiled and leaned over to kiss him again.

He walked her downstairs to the garage, opened the driver's side door and nodded to it.

"Get in."

"You want me to drive?" She took a step. "Really. You want me to drive? I thought you liked this car."

"I love you. Driving practice aside, I want to watch you. Can't do that and mind the road at the same time."

Spike adjusted her behind the wheel of the Viper, explaining all the while the intricacies of its powerful engine while it thrummed through the leather seat beneath her. His palm wrapped snugly around her upper thigh when he wasn't helping her shift. She mused on how very far she'd come from being a passenger in the past few months. Only Spike could catalyze sex into something as mundane as driving. But then, that's the world she lived in now.

Not too many years had passed for Fred to forget her parents' treatise on the birds and the bees. How she'd blushed at all the adults in her life! To think they all did that thing seemed so impossible. She found the same childish embarrassment returning for a different reason.

She knew she wore Spike's mark on her like war paint; the telltale bloom of desire and craving that obliterated all reason. One bleary-eyed morning, she spied her scandalized stuffed rabbit perched on her bookcase, a ringside seat for her nights of marathon lovemaking. "Feigenbaum," she whispered in awe, watching an exhausted Spike sprawl naked and snoring on her bed. "I don't think we're in Texas anymore."

He took her to a place that, in his words, her previous suitors had sorely overlooked. Someplace dark and hot and close, where the taste of salt on a man's skin becomes fuel for a fire that always burns and one touch from him means exploding immediately into something that used to take a while. Dressing for the day meant outfits designed for easy entry and exit, the workplace a jungle of nooks and crannies for stealing a few needful gropes. Cars - a limitless playground given a little imagination and agility.

She'd heard the girls in the commissary discussing their love lives, where the ruling school of feminine thought contended that the great sex guys wouldn't last. Best to find a stalwart Everyman like Gunn, or a hopeless Merchant Ivory-brand romantic like Wesley. Pure sex boys didn't fall in love; their staying power resigned solely in the bedroom. So how to explain a formerly evil, still lascivious vampire who'd maintained a long-term relationship for over a century?

For all his tough-from-the-street bravado, Charles was at heart an innocent, his sexual experimentation limited to basement fumblings with the neighborhood girls during B-grade soft porn flicks on pirated cable TV. Fred and Gunn became Adam and Eve in the garden, both delighted to
find that the person they wanted to see and talk to most during the day transformed into the same person they whispered to under the covers. Every night became another exploration, another uncharted territory and turned into another morning's sticky smooch over diner pancakes.

She had no frame of reference, but she imagined that even with Wes' patented dark mystique, he'd be nothing but another foppish dreamer, an over-grown prom date with a wilted corsage proffered from his back pocket, imagining the gymnasium floor into Prince Charming's ballroom.

Her curiosity and love of science shaped and formed her, and that could often explain why she thought the way she did and saw the world in her particular way. But Spike.

Pure sex forged Spike and real love moved between the two of them, a gravitational pull on an already solid constellation. When she found that she could influence him in the same way, she felt a power and delight akin to touching the stars.
Buffy couldn't have been more stunned if, well, if someone had told her that Darla had borne Angel's son.

Which had actually just happened.

"You're a dad. This is huge. You're actually somebody's father."

"Not really. Connor's got his own family. Fabricated, but still family."

"And in order for this new life to take, you erased his memory in his own and in all of your friends' minds in exchange for the CEO gig, until the memories came back for some reason, which is why your friends made with the disappearing act."

“The memories didn’t come back for ‘some reason,’” he frowned. “They came back for the same reason I’ve had centuries of messes to clean up.”

“Karma?” Buffy asked innocently.

He glared at her. “Spike!”

She wrinkled her nose. “Spike reversed it? How did he even know?”

“He didn’t know what he was doing,” Angel groaned, rubbing his forehead. “Like that ever changes. He knew it was a forgetting spell I’d done and that it had…consequences.”

“Gee, magic has consequences? Even magic from the evil law firm, too?” Buffy batted her eyelashes in faux naïveté. “There’s a shocker.”

“Well, when you say it like that…” Angel muttered. “Though I didn’t really have time to think about it all at the time.”

“You made a decision and ran with it,” she nodded. “Believe me, I get it. So what was the fallout?”

“Wes wasn’t sleeping, Gunn avoided me like I gave him hives. Fred, though. Fred got migraines. That’s all Spike cared about. He got the chance to stop them. He made a deal and he took it.”

Even though he’d said them, the words that’s all Spike cared about seemed to stick in her throat.

She coughed.

“Lemme see if I’m following: now everybody knows why you took over Wolfram & Hart - so where’s the secret? Tell yourself you're fired and get out of there.”

“It's not as easy as it sounds. Like Eve said.”

“Who?”

“My special little liaison to the Senior Partners.”

“Evil?”

Angel shrugged. “Probably. Doesn’t mean she’s wrong when she told me that in order to keep this
business running, I have to keep this business running. I can’t sabotage it, as much as I want to.”

“So instead you’re making deals, wiping your friends memories when it suits, negotiating with terrorists,” Buffy listed off on her fingers.

“If you mean demons, then, well, yes.”

Buffy folded her hands on the table and fixed him with a barely patient stare.

“Angel, if I told you that I thought I could maybe, I don’t know, *reason* with the Turok Han so we didn’t have to sink Sunnydale, would you think I had already lost my mind or was just on my way there?” She shook her head crossly. “This is what evil does, Angel. I thought you knew this. It finds you at your worst, at your lowest moment and…pokes you.” She gave a little jab with one of her chopsticks to illustrate.

He raised his eyebrows. “I was expecting something a little worse than poking.”

“Well, you’re living it, aren’t you? Because they haven’t just poked you, they’ve trapped you. Survey says? Leave. Before anything worse can happen.”

“There’s also Cordelia - her condition, the coma. No more Wolfram & Hart means no more round-the-clock medical care. Moving her at this stage could ruin any chance of her recovery.”

“This top-notch evil medical team give you an ETA on that recovery?”

Angel sighed and shook his head.

“She's the closest to a link we’ve got to the powers that be. If she’d only come to, give me some sign, a vision even. I know that I can't make a move without her.”

About to make a flippant comment about the suckiness of unconsciousness and its drag on visions and helpful signs in general, Buffy halted when she saw how stricken Angel looked.

"I'd give anything to have her back.”

Buffy tapped her chopstick on the side of her plate as his expression hit home.

"Am I nuts for thinking that sounds like you want her back for more than her visions?”

"Buffy,” Angel reached for her hand and for the second time that day, she heard the familiar drones of sympathy in an ex-boyfriend's voice. "Cordy and I...there was this thing. Sort of. It's...we never resolved it or anything but if I get another chance…”

She closed her eyes. "Oh, God.”

"Buffy…”

“First Spike. Now you. What is this, two-for-one special day at the Mover's On Club?”

"You were all unbaked the last I knew! What do you want me to say, Buffy? You're here, so let's roll back the clock?”

"I'll bet you'd be pretty good at that, too,” she smirked.

Angel narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about?”
"Wiping your friends memories, resetting your son's whole life, why not throw time travel into the mix? When are you going to get that screwing with all these dimensional folds is a shortcut to Angst-Ville, Angel, no matter how good your intentions?"

"It's dawned on me once or twice, thanks."

The once-coveted sashimi and California roll that she knew must be delicious hit her gullet like lead pellets. What more could you say to a man who'd sired a biologically impossible child, left its mother in dust, and let strangers raise it in the 'burbs in exchange for running an evil law firm? She pleaded jet lag and checked into a hotel, as conveniently far from Wolfram & Hart as her Hilton Honor Points would carry her.

Buffy dialed Willow before bed and gave her the Cliff's Notes on her day.

"All in all," she concluded. "Clearly not a day to bookmark in the Watcher Diaries. Is Dawn okay? She hasn't gotten married or given birth to any mystical children since I left, has she? Please Will, I know it's way early for you over there, but I need a big smack with the normal stick."

"Dawn's fine. It went that bad, huh?"

"Put it this way, I made like a Maserati in reverse: 110 to zero in 2.3 seconds."

"Oh, Buffy. I'm so sorry."

"And speaking of Maseratis, you know Angel's got one! How he's got a shiny car to drive for every day of the week he's pining for Cordelia to snap out of it. Will, you should have told me – about Connor, about everything. Especially about Spike's new limb that he actually called his girlfriend," she added pointedly.

"I was working up to it! I just didn't know how to start. Besides, I thought you were investigating that slayer, Leah Morgan. When did this trip become prime time to mack on your exes?"

"I got all sentimentally somewhere over Nevada and I ran with it," Buffy groaned with the memory. "Definitely the last impulse I'll be acting on for a while."

Buffy could hear Willow struggling for a response on the other end. "Fred's nice though isn't she?" she finally managed, with a nervous chuckle.

"Good night, Will," Buffy sighed. "Talk to you later."
"Late!" Fred shrieked from the bathroom the next morning. "Oh, we are so late! I won't even have time for a toaster waffle. You - " she gestured wildly. "You're not even dressed!"

"I got something better than a waffle. Wanna see it?"

Spike sat on the edge of the bed, rumpled and naked and wrapped in a sheet.

He curled his finger towards her.

"Morning, kitten. Come, let's have a look at you."

"We so do not have time for this," she scolded, one hand on her hip.

"Oh, she doesn't have time for me!" he exclaimed in false shock. "The honeymoon is over," he pouted.

Then he began to smirk. "Suppose I say please. Like you said please, last night. Would that do it? Please, Fred. Oh, yeah, baby, oh, please…"

She walked over slowly, watching him with amusement.

He spun his finger. "Turn 'round."

She pursed her lips and rolled her eyes, but did as he asked.

"Fresh and pressed you are. Saucy little work clothes, hair all blown out, and shiny pink lips in such a pretty scowl," he clucked his tongue at her and reached up to undo the top button of her blouse. "Want nothing more than to rumple you."

Her top teeth caught on her bottom lip and she inhaled sharply. "You're not going to get dressed at all, are you?"

He grinned devilishly and continued his exploration of her. "Is it my imagination or do those skirts of yours go farther up your thighs every day? You don't wear stockings, thank God. Mmm, look at all those miles of bare leg to climb up. Sweet little knobby knees." He cupped his hand on the smooth underside of her thigh and gripped the muscle there as if testing its strength, rubbing slowly, deeply, rough fingers kneading upward steadily, inquisitively.

"My knees aren't knobby," she corrected him huskily, running her fingers through his tousled blonde hair.

Spike rumbled in the back of his throat, like a large purring cat and the sound of him growling for her caused a surge of fire in her blood.

"How you balance in those heels of yours is a wonder. But you stalk like you mean it, baby. All that’s missing’s your whip. Might have to bring one home, see what you’d do with it. What you’d do with me. Show me how I’ve been a bad, bad, boy." His tongue curled over his teeth and Fred felt a fresh flood of heat.

"Most of the time I’m trying not to fall," she admitted with a blush.

"S’allright, love. If you’d fall," he pulled her to the bed and she gasped.
"You'd always catch me."

"Always. Straddle me, like this. Right, let's part those gorgeous, milky thighs, hmm," he said and helped her put action to words. "That's my good girl. Now what do I have here?"

He pressed his lips against the pulse at her throat and collarbone, causing her breath to falter. Dizzy with his strength, the thought flashed through her mind how much natural impulse he'd acted on in his life when his hunt and her blood meant a battle of survival. Even given that power, that inclination, she knew he would never, ever pierce her skin for it.

Unless she wanted him to.

All she could do was press herself closer to him, urging him on. But, oh, how he loved to take his time. He grazed his nose around the gauzy cotton of her blouse and teased her nipple hard through her bra. His one hand rubbed her right buttock and the other held firm against the small of her back.

Languid heat spread through her like the after taste of liquor. "Mmm," she sighed and dropped back into the security of his hands. "Spike…"

"Ah, there she goes," he noted with pleasure. He carefully folded back the hem of her skirt and she felt his hand reach around to massage the moist mound of her panties with strokes careful and insistent.

"Thought I'd convinced you to stop wearing these."

She giggled. "I've got to give you some kind of a challenge."

"No, you don't," he replied, his voice catching, breaking.

Her eyes flew open.

How quickly she could forget this about him. Hands so strong but his heart stayed vulnerable still. Something hurt that had never fully healed lay barely buried behind his eyes, which now watched her both tentative and hopeful.

"Hey," she whispered, cupping his cheek, rubbing his jawbone with her thumb. "I'm right here. Not going anywhere, okay?"

These moments of uncertainty made her want him even more, to be everything for him that he had missed. She kissed his forehead and cheeks until his troubled expression passed and his stroking of her resumed.

This is my power, she thought with a rush, I can make it all better for him. Me. I can kiss him and make any dark thoughts disappear.

"Challenges are for wanting what you can't have," he continued quietly, moving back into her heat. "Is that what you are?" He slipped his fingers under the elastic of the thin wet cotton. "Something I can't have?"

“No,” she groaned, moving into his fingers and closing her eyes to concentrate on his touch. “You can have me, you can, you do.”

"For always?” his voice cracked soft and searching, probing, like how his hands probed with sweet need under her skirt.
"Yes," she breathed. "Yes, please."

"God, Win, love this, love you. How we are, what you do, fucking hell, you’re so good, so very good…"

Mouths open, eyes closed, still they found each other and Fred couldn’t kiss him enough. Kisses so far gone from cute or sweet or dear, but deep and hungry and necessary as air. He guided her onto him and both hands went to her lower back, supporting her while he eased her backward until she felt suspended in midair, her calves squeezing against his hips, heels pinching his flanks.

"Every time I see you peeking out of your skirt, balancing on these beautiful coltish legs of yours, all I want is to have them wrapped around me. Wanna watch you, just like this. Bring you to the edge and watch you shatter for me, over and again.” He paused. “Trust me, baby?"

She nodded and he eased her back farther, slipping in at yet another angle, while his hands eased her pelvis rhythmically down against his. One arm bracing her back, the other lifted her shirt, flipped her bra open, and massaged her breasts. The hand continued to stroke down her ribs and abdomen until it settled right above where their bodies joined.

He rubbed her rhythmically and continued to rock her onto him. "I've got you just where I need you to be, just where you belong, just where you fit. And how you fit...God, that’s it. My sweet, good girl, Win, God - yes. Just like that…”

Every time, he filled her completely and all of her depended on him inside of her. He had everything in control, he knew her body better than she did, and there was nothing left for her to do but give in to him, embrace what he gave to her, squeeze and finally let go with a shivering, shaking, body quaking moan of release and pleasure that finally rose into a scream. He wouldn’t stop moving, wouldn’t stop giving her everything he had until he had wrung every last cry of release out of her.

In one agile twist, he picked her up and pressed her down to the bed and gave himself into her, once, twice, and trembled with the force of it. He lay with his head cradled against her chest.

"We'll call in today," he muttered with gruff authority, a perfect compliment to the soft circles he licked in outline at her heart and throat.

"Again?" she asked lazily and wrapped her arms and legs around the angles of his hips. Spike made sure they called in sick to work quite often.

"Not yet," he said, not speaking about work at all but about him twitching with life against her belly. He pulled her even closer so that their two sets of lanky limbs fell into place against each other.

"But soon enough."

***

“Buffy! Don’t tell me you’re already in Los Angeles!”

A wake up call via international Giles - not the preferred way to be roused in a Heaven Sent Bed. From how she felt, she imagined he must be calling her at daybreak. What a shock to discover that she’d dozed through most of the morning and the bedside clock read 10:45am.
“Huh?” she grunted.

He paused. “Surely you’re not still sleeping.”

Thousands of miles away and no longer her Watcher, but the guy could still scold her and make the guilt stick. Some kind of super power there for sure.

“I’m up,” she said more clearly, leaning forward so that she wasn’t lying to him.

“Up and in California then?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Buffy, that trip hadn’t yet been approved.”

Now she sat bolt upright. “I didn’t know it had to be. Giles, I’ve been in England with you, in Spain with Faith, you sent Xander to Africa - all on Slayer Search 2004. We go, we look, we retrieve. Pass the inflight peanuts.”

“Yes, but that’s not what you’re doing,” he said impatiently. “You’re investigating. Completely different budget category.”

“Budget?” she echoed with a start. “Since when do we have budgets?”

“Since always,” he sighed, that edge of barely patient explanation creeping into his voice. “You’ve missed our last six meetings about them.”

Oh, yeah. She knew she’d blown off a few of the past Watcher Council conference calls, but six? Along with the meeting requests had been some attached forms they were supposed to review, something about expense reports maybe? Probably? No big, they were all still in her email. Somewhere.

As though reading her mind, Giles then asked, “Buffy, when was the last time you checked your Watcher mail account?”

“Um, you know, I really don’t use it all that much ‘cause I got this invite-only deal to this awesome new one called Gmail, so…”

“Buffy!” He rapped out. “Your Watcher account was never designed for socializing. It’s how we transmit vital information between multiple parties in various countries in the least amount of time possible.”

She raised her eyebrows. “This from the former librarian dude who said letter-writing’s a lost art.”

“I still am and it still is,” he replied tightly. “I’ve had to…adapt, albeit reluctantly, to technology in favor of convenience.”

“Great! Does this mean I can start texting you now?”

“Absolutely not. About this investigation. What notes do you have so far?”

Buffy gaped at the phone. “Giles, you know I just touched down yesterday, right?”

“Yes. Plenty of time for you to conduct all your necessary interviews at Wolfram & Hart, compile your notes, and make your report today. You should be able to return this evening by the latest.”
“Whoa!” Buffy jumped out of the bed. “Giles, I barely got through dinner with Angel yesterday. Ask me how many notes he gave me for my investigation. Go ahead, try me.”

Giles heaved a monumental sigh. “I dread to.”


“Buffy, there’s an entire list of individuals to interview listed in this report: Wesley, Charles Gunn, Winifred Burkle, Angel, Spike - dear Lord. I thought they all had offices at Wolfram & Hart.”

“Maybe once upon a time, but except for Spike and Fred, they’ve all bailed on Angel.”

“Due to Wolfram & Hart’s reputation, no doubt,” Giles muttered bitterly.

“Sure, let’s go with that,” Buffy blew her hair out of her eyes. She really didn’t want to go into the blowup of Angel’s forgetting spell right this second.

“Anyway, they’ve scattered to the winds,” she continued. “Tracking them all down and getting them to talk with me might be right up there with trying to get my cashmere back from Dawn.”

Giles paused. “Perhaps we’ll have to try a different tactic then.” His voice sounded grave.

“What do you mean?” she asked slowly, starting to feel suspicious.

“Buffy, this would’ve been so much easier had you simply read your mail and attended our meetings! Suffice to say, rebuilding the Watcher’s Council has been tenuous at best. With Quentin gone, along with most of his investments, the Council’s finances are limited. Severely so. With so many Slayers needing training, guidance, housing, education, even medical care, our resources are stretched extremely thin. At the same time, we need Watchers. We can’t assign one Watcher to twenty girls, they simply wouldn’t receive the attention they need. So we must recruit - no easy task when the Watcher employment package we offer is so - ”

“Sucky?” she filled in.

“I was going to say spartan, actually. When I became a Watcher, it meant responding to a vocation. There simply aren’t enough called to the task. Hence the need to hire outside our sphere.”

“And no idiot not from a Hellmouth is gonna do this gig for free,” Buffy realized aloud.

“Not when they know the dangers, such as an entire Council blown to bits by a madman.”

“Combat pay can’t touch that,” she agreed. She slumped into one of her hotel room’s easy chairs, her thoughts spinning.

“Hence the need for funding, for budgets, and for proper documentation. We have a group of investors who’ve indicated interest in our cause. However, they have additional requirements in mind.”

“Like…”

“Slayers are valuable, Buffy.”

She blinked at the phone. “No duh.”

“No, you misunderstand,” he replied impatiently. “Our investors are interested in Slayers as…as a commodity.”
Buffy was back on her feet. “What?”

“They envision sending Slayers to battle, whether it be to stem activity in Hellmouths, in the jungles of third world countries, on 24/7 patrol through active cemeteries or to paranormal sites in any part of the world.”

“Screw that,” Buffy spat, her heart racing.

“It wouldn’t be much of a change from what you’ve already done…”

“Oh, no - except for the lack of any of my choice in it.” Buffy started to pace now.

“It sounds extreme only because it’s new and different,” she heard Giles trying to rationalize. “They recognize and appreciate your power. They only wish to protect it.”

“How?” Buffy’s mouth went dry.

“For a start, by making it a capital offense to kill one of you. For any reason.”

“Capital,” she stammered. “Meaning…”

“Punishable by death.”

_Not Spike. Not dead. Not again._

She felt panic rise like bile in her throat. “Giles, but, but… the Council couldn’t just sentence someone to death and have that be it…”

“Of course not,” he chided her gently. “There would be an inquiry and a trial. I imagine in a case such as Leah’s, the information would overwhelmingly be in favor of those who protected themselves against her.”

“But a trial.”

“Indeed. Buffy, all lives are valuable, I know you understand that, perhaps better than most. By investigating her death, you’re giving this young woman a voice, perhaps one she never had.”

She sat on the edge of the bed and worried a hangnail with her teeth.

“Giles, this bites. I don’t want to be a commodity. I’m not grain.”

He sighed again into the phone. “I don’t care particularly for it, either. You’re certainly more akin to gold, in my estimation.”

She smiled faintly.

“I hate all of it,” he said flatly, his voice more strident. “I’d dearly love to tell the moneybags to kindly shove their funding where the sun won’t shine.”

“Yeah Giles!” she cheered, slapping her hand on the bed.

“But I can’t. They’re the only investors we have interested and we’re down to Quentin’s last few accounts. One crisis and it could collapse the entire organization, leaving all our Slayers abandoned.”

“Great,” she smirked ruefully. “So I get to tell the guy who burned up in fiery torment - helping _us_
stop the last apocalypse, by the way - that self-defense doesn’t quite cut it according to our new board of mis-directors and that he better dust off his best inquisition leather.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily lead with that but if the interviews don’t go as planned, you may need to play that card. Buffy,” his voice went gentle. “I am sorry to relay all this to you by phone. I know it’s a shock.”

“Shock, awe, the whole doomsday package, but I’ll deal,” she swallowed hard. “I always do.”

“Do your best to speak to them all. I’ll buy you as much time as I can.”

The line went click.

*Spike on trial, me as character witness, I could be his champion for once.*

*Right, like they’d really let a vampire walk free? He’d be as good as dust.*

*But maybe…if he worked for the Watcher’s Council, they’d give him a pass.*

*Would he do it? Would Fred follow him or would another deal with another kind of devil be too much for her?*

*I’m dooming him to die…*

*I could still save him!*

*God, is this what Angel feels everyday?*

“Hey, room service? Could I order some breakfast? Pretty much the whole menu would be awesome, thanks.”

Tomorrow she would have to redirect her mission.

Today she needed to fortify and plan her attack.

With waffles.
“Right,” Angel nodded as he listened on his desk phone. “I’ll be right there.” He hung up, then looked up.

“Hi - what happened to you? I expected you a good twenty four hours ago.”

Buffy stood in his office doorway, carrying a leather briefcase between her hands that appeared bulky, uncomfortable, and completely incongruous with the typical Slayer image.

She shrugged. “Sorry I flaked. I gave into the jet lag.”

“Good for you taking a break. Sounds like you needed it.” He shuffled a few papers on his desk and made a few piles. “The thing is, I sort of cleared my yesterday for you, which has doubled my today so - ”

“Your evil calendar full of evil meetings?”

He shot her an evil look. “Hey, fighting evil here, remember? I still have a schedule to keep.”

Then he noticed she was smiling.

“And you’re joking.” He smiled back wryly.

“Mostly. We still gotta get you out of here but I’ll respect the exit strategy. So,” she said, walking over to his desk and sitting on the corner of his desk with a hop. “What’s on the CEO’s agenda today?” She snatched his leather-bound day book before he could grab it away.

She stared at it. “It’s empty.”

“That’s because I already know where I need to be,” he said quietly, taking the book out of her hands. “Today, it’s the medical ward.” He paused. “I stop by every day for a few minutes. But Cordy gets tests done on her progress every other week and when she does, I spend the day with her so I can see what they’re doing and get the results.”

Buffy whistled low. “Angel, I don’t know if she even knows you’re there…”

“No. But I do.”

Buffy looked down, feeling not only foolish but hugely sympathetic.

“Oh, Angel. God, I’m sorry. Maybe I better go back and bury myself in goose down for another day.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he dismissed. “I get what you’re saying. You just have to get that I’m not going to do anything different.”

“Okay, so I’ll just head to the lab and get Spike and Fred’s statements while I’m here…”

Angel blanched. “Uh, they’re working from home today, actually.”

“She has a lab at home?”

“Sort of?” he shrugged feebly.
Buffy rolled her eyes. “Great, then give me an address and I’ll be on my way.”

“Why?” he gulped.

She stared at him. “Angel, you’re not the only one on a schedule. I’ve got reports due to the Council, like, past yesterday.” When he continued to stonewall her with his silence, she breathed out her frustration in a huff.

“Fine! I’ll just have to go get it from Harmony…” she started to walk out.

“Buffy. Don’t.”

She stopped, dropped her head, and spun around slowly. “Angel, don’t tell me what to do. Not you. Of all people, not you, too.”

He held up his hand in supplication. “Then I’m asking. Firmly, hopefully persuasively, asking. Leave them alone. You’ll get your reports, promise. Just - not today.”

“They’re not really working, are they?” she sighed. “But you let them come and go as they please because you don’t want them to leave you like everyone else, is that it?”

He shrugged. "Partly. I don't know, two people who aren't excited to come in to work at the evil law firm every day? Not really seeing the bad."

"Hey," her face brightened. "I've got a great idea. Why don't I come with and I can take your statement while you're visiting Cordy? Look at me, all big with the multi-tasking. See? Even brought my briefcase.

"Buffy, I’m not going to give you a statement when I’m with Cordy.”

"Come on, you know you want the company."

She knew he didn’t really. She did. Maybe he noticed that because he finally nodded his head in reluctant agreement.

"Her hair looks nice," Buffy offered.

"The nurses. They knew, had heard, about Cordy. It gave them something to do for her. Not that we've been able to do much else." He picked up one of her limp hands that had been recently manicured and moisturized, squeezing it gently. He looked at her face intently and held her hand up to his cheek.

"Come on, Cord. Come on, baby. Listen to me.”

Buffy sat in his silence for a few awkward moments, wondering what they could possibly be listening to other than the hiss of the AC fan. Finally, she cleared her throat.

"Uh, quick tip here. If you want her to listen to you, it helps to say something.”

"Ssh!" Angel hushed her. "I'm trying to speak to her with my mind.”

"Oh, of course you are," Buffy leaned back in her chair wondering when exactly Angel had gone insane. "Go you.”
"She's a seer, Buffy. Well, was," he sighed. "Maybe she's operating on a plane that we can't access." He closed his eyes and meditated next to her for another few quiet seconds.

Buffy came up on the other side of the bed and took Cordy's other hand.

Angel's eyes opened and rested on her.

"Maybe I can help."

He smiled gratefully.

She tried hard to be still, but the hospital smell bothered her and reminded her of other even less pleasant times (I miss you, Mom), the A/C made the room cold and dry, and the fact that Angel chose such a strange way of communicating with Cordy bothered her not a little.

"I'm sorry," Buffy whispered. "Is there something I should be saying? I mean, in my head? Shouldn't we be saying the same thing so she doesn't get confused?"

"Okay," Angel said. "How about we greet her, like 'Hello Cordelia,' then say, 'let us know you hear us.' Sound good?"

"Hey, it would bring me out of a coma any day."

Angel flashed her a reproving look and the two closed their eyes again.

After a few more painful moments of silence, Buffy couldn't help but let out a sigh of exasperation.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Sorry. I was just wondering: what will you do if she wakes up?" At the widening of his eyes, Buffy quickly changed her question. "When, I mean. When she wakes up?"

"Welcome her home," he answered quietly. "I can't tell you anything more than that. What she feels, what she thinks, what she's remembered. I have no way of knowing. I just want her back."

He leaned into Buffy's face. "Look. I'm not asking you to understand, I'm not telling you it's anything like we were…"

"Don't," Buffy said, holding up her hand. "Just...don't. She took a small breath. "It's not like I gave you the inside scoop on Spike."

"He was... in your heart, if I recall," he replied stiffly.

"Yeah," she admitted. "He still is."

"Even after…oh." Angel sounded surprised. "I'm sorry."

Buffy shrugged. "I'll deal. So Cordy?"

He hesitated. "She's in my heart."

"Right. Got it." She could barely form the next words. "You love her."

After watching Spike with Fred, after her awkwardness with Angel at dinner, she thought that his revelation would hurt less or not matter as much somehow. But Angel nodded and her world crashed down again.
"She's changed," Angel said as if by way of explanation.

"Yeah, into what?" Buffy couldn't help asking. "Last you told me, she became the queen bee of one damn evil hive."

"It wasn't her fault!" Angel snapped. "She had no idea what she was getting into."

"Just like we have no idea what's already gotten into her once she comes back. Think about it, Angel. What if she comes back, well, wrong?"

Angel looked at Cordelia's peaceful face, threaded his fingers between her own. "I can't just leave her there, wherever she is."

Buffy tried to look at him with as much sympathy as she felt. "Maybe she's in a better place."

"You mean like you were?"

Buffy sat back, startled. "Hold it. What exactly do you think I'm saying?"

Angel turned to her, hands on his hips and shaking his head with disgust.

"You think she's died the hero's death, just like you did and I'm making some big pull-her-back-from-the-great-beyond-gesture just like your friends did with you. One problem with that: Cordelia's not dead! You never fail to see yourself in every situation, do you Buffy?"

"Angel, I'm not going out of my way to identify with Cordelia here, believe me. I want you to, you know, look at all the possibilities. Her coming back might not be a good thing."

"For you, you mean."

"For you, you thickheaded moron," Buffy shot back, rolling her eyes. "You might get back a little less than you want and a little more than you can handle."

"I appreciate your concern," he said curtly. "You can leave at any time."

"Leave you to do what? Make a go of your deep thoughts with Snow White here?"

Angel stood up and pushed his chair back with a screech of wood against tile.

"Stop now."

She stood up and curled her hands into fists. "Not even warmed up."

"Buffy, this isn't the time or the place."

"Then name it, because I'm a little too stunned by your new trips to denial land to care about being polite."

"This isn't about Cordy at all is it? It's still about Wolfram & Hart. After everything I've told you, you don't trust me."

"I want to trust you! Only it seems you don't trust yourself - that's what scares me more than anything. This place, what it's doing to you, to your judgment – to your whole team! This evil you're supposedly fighting has tainted every person close to you here. Doesn't that scream a big Danger Will Robinson?"
"Of course it does!" Angel yelled. "So I'm supposed to pull out now, completely blind, not knowing what's caused any of this or who's behind it? Not to mention what they'll do to any of us if we try to run."

Buffy threw up her hands. "So you keep going in further? That's your answer?"

"Noooooo!" Cordy screamed and sat straight up in bed. Angel and Buffy jumped away from her body in surprise as the once-comatose girl continued to scream.

"No, no, God, no, it can't be! It can't be happening!" she panted and Angel rushed back to her side, grabbed her flailing hands, trying in vain to soothe her.

"Cordelia! It's me! It's Angel!"

She pulled her hands away, stroked his face and his hair with trembling, desperate touches. "Angel, Angel, is it really you?"

"Yes, it's me, me and Buffy and…"

Cordy turned horrified eyes in Buffy's direction and began to scream anew.

Buffy retreated into a corner of the room, too stunned from Cordelia's reaction to move.

"Cordy stop!" Angel said over the din and at that moment, three nurses and two doctors rushed into the room with a hypodermic needle and restraints.

"No, don't touch her! She just woke up!"

"Sir, this is for Ms. Chase's own good. This is a very mild sedative, simply to calm her." Angel watched miserably while the medical team held poor Cordelia down with the restraints they attached to the bed, then injected her.

He stroked her face, which was now sweaty and flushed.

"Angel, my God, you have to get away from it!" she whispered, her eyes growing heavy. "It's going to destroy us all!" Her head slumped over to the side of her pillow and Angel pressed his fingers against her throat.

"Her pulse is racing," he said.

Buffy stepped forward tentatively. "Well, that was intense," she said with a shaking voice. "Remind me never to underestimate the powers of meditation."

He looked up at her. "I don't think that was it. I think she heard us arguing and was responding the only way she knew how."

"With a vision?"

Angel nodded. "I'm not leaving her side until she comes to. Given her reaction to you, Buffy, I think…"

"Yeah, fine, I'll go," she held up her hand to keep him from saying the words that she knew would sting. "But I have to do something in this town besides shoe shopping. I need to clock my time for the Council."

Angel frowned and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, rifling through bills and extracting one
business card and a yellow post-it note.

"The information on that piece of paper is what Wes and Gunn gave me for emergency contacts in case something came up. The business card is Lorne's. It's a good place for a demon bar; he keeps it under a spell as a sanctuary, meaning no violence. You'll be safe."

“You say ‘no violence’ like it’s a good thing,” Buffy muttered, thinking how she’d dearly love to slay nearly anything. She took the pieces of paper from him. "You know, even if I get to talk to all of them today, that doesn't mean I'm finished here."

"I know. But Cordelia has to be my priority right now, Buffy, I'm sorry." His eyes were huge with hope and she could almost see him smile. That alone gave her a final push out the door.

*Demon bar, huh?* She fingered Lorne's business card.

“Hey, it’s five o’clock somewhere.”
Fred brushed her lips against the cool cheek of her snoozing lover, thinking briefly that she should wake him and tell him her plans for the day. She frowned then, remembering her promise to Angel. She'd made so many promises to Angel. Today it felt like too many.

"Honey, I'm going out for a while," she whispered in Spike's ear, earning only a drowsy grunt. Feeling vaguely unsatisfied by his response, she grabbed her keys and headed out into the fierce morning sun.

Suddenly, her stomach clenched. *No, oh, no, not again,* she thought, tensing. She'd been having bouts of hellfire heartburn flaring up the past few weeks but this - nope, not sickness at all but a bottoming-out of her guts feeling, like she forgot to write a paper or pay a bill or something.

Yesterday. They were supposed to be at work yesterday, meeting with Buffy and confessing to Leah's murder. No one had called; no one had knocked on their door. Maybe they'd somehow dodged the Buffy bullet.

Heh. As Spike would say, “Not bloody likely.”

In the meantime, she'd committed more crimes: lying to her boyfriend by omission for one. She had to do better detective work and fast.

Hands shaking faintly on the wheel, Fred ventured the car out onto the freeway, cursing both the traffic and her new fear of it. Once she settled on a speed in one of the slower lanes, she felt her thoughts unwind, as they always seemed to do on these trips.

Fred Burkle was a murderer. Now twice over.

Another human being stopped breathing, feeling, talking, - because of her. Sure, a crazed killer, true, but a living person nonetheless. No more hiding behind the boys who could do it better, she'd shown again how she could do just fine on her own. Now that her brain had replayed this unpleasant reminder, it could flit away on to more pressing matters. Today, the recent reappearance of Buffy suddenly vied for attention. Well, she wouldn't think about that, either.

Connor. He had to be the priority.

Last week, she'd taken Angel's directions to his family's home in the suburbs, finding Connor's beat up Volvo hatchback in the driveway and the Reillys enjoying a cook out on their deck. From the camouflage of the privet hedge around the house, she listened to how Connor never had enough gas money and brought home twice as much laundry then he'd ever had living under their roof, but heard no evidence of traumas new or old. If he seemed plagued with memories of a past life, he certainly kept them hidden.

But then, we all got pretty good at that, Fred thought.

This week, Angel asked her to do some recon at Connor's college. Why he couldn't go himself, Fred knew enough not to ask. He'd seen Connor only once after the mindwipe and since then, Angel explained, nothing had gone right. Better he stay away, make the Senior Partners think that he'd taken to his post with gusto. Fred had nodded, but she knew the truth. If Connor's memories had really returned, she didn't think Angel could bear seeing him in that kind of pain again. She didn't know if she could either, but she wasn't his parent. In theory, she could be detached.

She parked in visitor parking and checked herself out in the rear view mirror: hair pulled back in a
ponytail, just a hint of lip-gloss. She would fit right in.

As she made her way around campus, a burn of nostalgia wallowed up in the back of her throat. Oh, how she had wanted this, all of it. From her first dorm room where she had to unplug her lamp to play her boombox so she wouldn’t blow a fuse, to the pre-dawn hours in the library when she’d look up from her books to hear birds and be astounded that an entire night had passed so quickly. She hoped that whatever Connor did with his time here, that he enjoyed it.

A quick knock on the door of the room the student directory said belonged to Connor Reilly brought out an altogether different, shirtless boy with a toothbrush stuck in his mouth.

"Yeah?" he mumbled and did a quick appraisal of Fred's smile and figure. "Hey," he said. "Quick sec, hon, lemme spit." He ducked behind the door.

He reappeared with a towel wrapped around his neck and a minty fresh grin.

"You've got a sink in there?" she asked.

His grin faded. "Uh, no."

Fred wrinkled her nose. "I'm looking for Connor. Is he around?"

The boy's eyes widened. "Are you Brenda? 'Cause, you know, I know he didn't mean anything, he wasn't blowin' you off or nuthin…"

"No, I'm not Brenda," she said patiently. "I'm... I'm his uh, tutor."

"No shit," the boy scratched his head, looking relieved. "I bet he's in the library. Second floor stacks? He's been going up there a lot."

"He has?" Fred asked, suddenly worried. "Is he okay? Is anything weird going on with him?"

The boy looked at her suspiciously. "You sure you're not Brenda?"

"Yeah," Fred sighed. "I'm sure."

"Look, I'll tell him his 'tutor' stopped by," the boy continued with a playful leer that made Fred aggravated. "Con's one lucky shit, man."

Fred turned away and headed down the hall. "Let's hope so."

When she found the library, she also found Connor exactly where his roommate had described, sitting at a large table in the arching amber light of half moon windows. Not taking her eyes off of him, she slipped into a nearby table, pulled out her leather-bound notebook and watched him from afar.

This section of the library, with its carved wooden banister and Deco window casings, looked so familiar. Fred almost cried out when she realized how much it reminded her of the upper floor of the Hyperion.

How she wished she could run over and grab hold of him, assure him that she'd keep him safe. Then she looked at him with his mussed hair and his pursed lips, deep in thought with some dusty volume. Connor looked perfectly safe, serene almost. What would he remember of her, if at all: the girl who called him "honey" and made him baloney sandwiches or the one who'd whipped out the taser and electrocuted him for his betrayal? With the sight of him swimming in her tears, she turned around and
headed out of the library.

No wonder Angel couldn't do this.

"He's fine," Fred said in a shaking voice on the phone to a private voicemail box on the way to the car. "I just wanted to let you know that he's fine. I'll – I'll come back, check on him again. Bye Angel."

Fred sobbed in the car all the way back to the apartment, all of the pains of loss rearing up and coming out to play. The slayer she killed who never would've been whole, the broken young man who his father erased and lost to keep him safe, the friends and co-workers who had abandoned Angel's crusade when they found how deeply he'd implicated them all.

Maybe the man she loved, too, would be heading for the same sunset.

She knew how Spike loved, had felt the glow of it all these months. He didn't turn that off. He wouldn't, not for her. So how could he for Buffy, after spending years together?

Fred ran upstairs, so sure that he would be gone, and took him by surprise in the kitchen as he bent over the refrigerator and sipped blood out of a mason jar. She pulled him close and kissed him, oblivious of the blood on her mouth and he recovered quickly, setting the jar on the counter so that he could wrap both arms around her.

"Go off like that more often, if that's the welcome home I get," he said.

She pulled back and looked at him. "I'm always happy to see you, aren't I? I mean, I don't take you for granted, do I?" She shook his waistband gently. "Well, do I?"

"Win, love. Slow down," he pushed the hair from her sweaty face. "What you on about? Couldn't ask for anyone more happy to see me than you."

She exhaled carefully. "Okay."

"Where'd you run off to?"

She avoided his eyes. "I - just an errand."

"Must've been a hell of a one," he took her hand and sat her at the tiny kitchen's café table. "Tell me all about it."

She shook her head. "I'm all right."

"Win," a surprised smile flashed on his face. "You sure? I wanna help."

"You can't," she choked. "I gotta do this for Angel. Just me. He doesn't want anyone else to know."

"I see." Spike stiffened next to her. "So Angel doesn't want, which means Spike doesn't get."

Her stomach took a sick nosedive. "Don't do that."

A stunned silence hung between them.

"Fuck, that was rotten," he said finally, kissing her on the forehead. "Forgive me, love. Ain't about you. Me 'n Peaches, you know we got a history."
“Well, Peaches, I mean, Angel and I have a history, too,” she replied stubbornly.

Spike looked down. “One I’m not respecting.”

“It’s me you’re not respecting. It’s not like I’m going off doing something awful.”

“Course you’re not,” he sighed. “Just feel like nothin’s been sorted since you all got your memories back. Not like I knew why he had the big forgetting spell done. Near about drove you over the edge with those migraines, if you recall. That’s all I cared about.”

“I know that.”

He looked up at her imploringly. "Then when you all gonna stop punishing me for it?"

“We’re not,” she insisted.

"You bloody well are! Time used to be that you'd never keep a thing from me. We past that already?"

“Spike…God, no…”

Fred couldn't explain, not even to herself, why she'd agreed to go after Connor for Angel and why she had to make such a secret out of it. How if she could save Connor on her own – perhaps to replace the life of that poor Slayer – how it would make everything else hurt a little less. Would it really be so bad to tell Spike? What damn difference would it make?

Suddenly, he wrapped her in a tight embrace and she felt like she’d been pulled back from the edge of a precipice.

“Sweet girl,” he whispered. “I trust you to the bloody moon and back. If makin’ the old sod happy makes you happy, then carry on.” He stroked her hair and she snuggled into his chest.

“Just promise me,” he continued. “You come to me if things go sideways, yeah?”

She smiled. “I’ll come to you all the ways.”

That deep purring rumble began in his chest then and Fred shivered to hear it, to feel it under her cheek.

“Show me then, pet.”

"Fret not, kumquat," Lorne said, patting the girl's head that rested on the back of her hand. In the hours since Buffy had woken him with not so gentle pounding on Caritas' front door, she had poured out her sob story while he poured the cocktails. “It may not look like it now but I’m sure everything's gonna work out.”

Buffy leveled a glare at him. "Right. So the Watcher’s Council is going to win the lottery. Slayers will never be seen as property. After that, both of my exes are gonna stroll in here any second, write my reports for me, and magically end this whole investigation. No trial, no blame, no harm, no foul.”

Lorne thought for a moment. "On second thought, you fret. I'll blend.” He headed back behind the bar and reached for the bottles to make another banana daiquiri.
"Okay, but this is the last one. The ability to hold vast amounts of rum does not come standard on 
this Slayer model." She slid her glass over to Lorne and tried a smile. "Thanks for listening. You're a 
good host. A good friend, too."

"Yeah, not so much like your buddy with the angelic features would notice." Lorne hit the power 
switch on the blender and soon filled her glass brimful with frothy banana foam.

"So you're never going to work with Angel again? Even after all those years?"

"Never's a long time, Chiquita. But you know, I couldn't play through any round of chess where I 
came out looking like a green horned pawn."

He held up his hands when Buffy began to protest.

"I know, I know, he did it for the love of his son. Save the chorus of violins. I can think of a boatload 
of other ways he could've gotten me on board The Good Ship Lollyvamp without the memory loss."

"Yeah," Buffy agreed glumly. "Also by not pulling into the most major port of all evil, Wolfram & 
Hart." She rolled her eyes. "Now you've got me doing it." She slugged back the daiquiri until it 
disappeared behind her lips.

He shook the chilled pitcher of the blender. "Whaddaya say the last round's on me? It's the least I can 
do."

"Hit me," Buffy sighed and then caught his eye. "Not really."

"No kidding," he snorted. "Empath demon versus Slayer? Even I'd bet against me in that match."

"Empath huh?" Buffy sipped this drink rather than guzzling it, imagining an evening of regurgitating 
bananas. "How's that work out?"

"Well, I'd be a mite better if your less-than-sane-Slayer never slipped me that joy juice," Lorne 
frowned as he poured vodka into his own glass. "My love for the Sea Breeze ain't just about 
chugging the classics. That slayer must have studied up on me and then switched out all my precious 
Stoli with some lethal home brew of her own. She wanted me pretty damn dead."

Buffy looked up at him in sympathy. "You're still feeling green, huh? Or, well, greener."

"It's not my color, toots, it's my radar. Reading into the hearts of others through the many off-key 
songs they sing, that's my special gift. Well," he sipped thoughtfully. "Was."

"You can read people when they sing?"

"People, demons, feisty blonde Slayers. Before I got sick, I would've heard you coming for miles, or 
picked up on some other demon that did. I would have greeted your little wakeup call this morning 
with a buffet breakfast built for two. Now all I've got to read with is a fairly shaky sense of 
Deathwock intuition that won't even help me out at Bingo night."

He smiled at her sadly. "Don't mind him; he's just the guy who lost the only way he could help his 
friends."

"And you blame Angel," Buffy realized.

"Look, you seem like a nice kid, so don't take this wrong. I can't help him anymore. My gift is gone. 
I've got nothing more to offer him than," he waved his hands around the bar. "Cocktails and
"Lorne, even I can tell you've got a lot more to offer than that, to Angel – to all of them. What about Wesley? Or Charles Gunn? Don't you see them anymore, either?"

"Gunn's taken the fight out of the boardroom and back to the streets where it can really do some good. I wouldn't think of getting in his way there. Wes..." Lorne paused, threw back a swallow. "Let's say that for as sick as I got, at least addiction wasn't part of it. He's been in rehab for weeks."

Buffy frowned, not at the drink in front of her but at Lorne's words. "See, and somehow I've got to show the Council that losing this lunatic Slayer was really some kind of crime."

"The only crime I see is that she got allowed to live as long as she did."

She sighed. "This investigation is never going to end."

"There just isn't a stake big enough, is there, hon?" Lorne smiled benevolently.

Buffy looked up at him. "Maybe it's just the rum talking but...wha-?"

"You're really taking a beating on your fellas moving on with all sorts of ladies not you, aren'tcha?"

She sulked and hung her head. "Thought you said you lost your powers of empathy," Buffy mumbled into her drink.

"Not all of them, sweets," Lorne sighed and patted her hand. "Not all of 'em."
"And this should be the last of it," the deliveryman said to Wesley. "Just need your signature here and here." Wesley signed the proffered clipboard and the man hesitated in the doorway, an uncomfortable silence between them.

"Oh, of course," Wesley stammered, reaching in his back pocket and pulling out a $20 bill.

The man held his hands up and shook his head. "Nah, it's taken care of, even the tip. Which got me to thinkin', what kind of company replaces everything in your house for free? This has gotta be the biggest one time haul we've done in a while."

"What can I say?" Wes smiled weakly. "They take care of their own."

"I'll say," the man agreed. "You ever need somebody on your maintenance crew, I'm your guy." Wesley took the man's business card and closed the door with a wave.

Wes leaned back against it. Not only had he earned a complimentary dry out at Palm Springs’ finest detox center, he’d also scored a newly redecorated flat. Leave it to Angel to overcompensate.

The insane Slayer had merely taken him hostage, beat him up, doped him up, tied him up, and trashed his apartment. She hadn’t intended that he continue to use the vials of the drug she’d left behind. Little did she know that she’d tapped into something Wes didn’t know he had even needed: an immediate and euphoric end to his pain.

The morphine, if that’s what it had even been (heroin would be more likely, Wesley knew, but somehow morphine addiction sounded more poetic and less like being a junkie) had not only taken the edge off in the days after his rescue - it became an absolute pain block. Pain from Leah’s beatings, pain from a sudden rush of memories he hadn’t known he’d lost, pain from seeing Fred, once again, with another inferior man. Wesley hadn’t known he had been in so much pain, really, until it had disappeared. The drug provided such utter relief it shocked Wes to his core how easy it was to administer a small injection and glide through what remained of his life as though on air, the usual aching pit in his stomach finally, blessedly gone.

Angel checked on him once and knew. Next Wes knew, the men in white jackets were escorting him to a black limousine for an all-expenses paid ticket to 28 days of recovery.

Now, here he stood in his clean, new life with his clean, new stuff but something about his fabulous parting gifts on the dime of Wolfram & Hart made Wesley feel uneasy.

He walked over to the glass topped side table with the cellophane wrap still entwined around its chrome legs and plugged in his new Vtech phone; the minute he did so, it rang. The caller ID read
UNKNOWN, but he answered anyway.

"I'm looking for a Mr. Wyndham Pryce," a thin, reedy male voice hissed on the other end.

"You've found him. How may I help you?"

A pause. "This the son of Roger Wyndham Pryce? The boy who's running the artifacts and antiquities research department?"

"Yes, the son – not the boy," he replied testily. "I've left Wolfram & Hart. I can provide you with the name of my replacement if you like."

"Replacement?" the man said with an annoyed snort. "I don't want some replacement. Your former employers have something that belongs to me and I want it back."

"Sir, Wolfram & Hart stores many things, I'm sure quite a few that aren't in the possession of their rightful owners. I'll be happy to walk you through the necessary paperwork to file a claim with them –"

"Nonsense!" the man snapped. "I won't file a claim. I was told to contact you and that you would be able to assist me."

"Well, I'm afraid that's impossible. I don't work for the company any longer and any clearance I once had to their facilities has been removed." Wesley hesitated. "Exactly who gave you my name?"

The man chuckled. "Interested parties, son. I assure you, I would be able to make it worth your while. You being unemployed at the present time."

"Thank you. I have a generous severance."

"But you don't have the girl, do you?"

Wesley's blood ran cold. It must be someone from the security team testing him to see if he would try to break into the vaults for a price, use the knowledge he had attained, become a renegade. Truthfully, he wanted nothing to do with the company or its CEO ever again, no matter what the price.

But Fred. To bring up Fred seemed impossibly cruel and unnecessary.

"Pity on her choice of companion," the man continued. "But that's not your fault. Perhaps a different outcome can still be arranged."

Wesley gripped the phone. "See here. I don't know who you are or what exactly you're suggesting, but you stay away from Ms. Burkle. She's an innocent and only remains employed at that place out of the kindness of her heart."

"I do not doubt her kindness. Her innocence, however?" the man laughed lowly. "I suppose it depends on your definition."

"You stay away from her," Wesley repeated through gritted teeth.

"Calm down, man. My interest lies with you. I merely wished to demonstrate how much I know,
how much I am capable of assisting you in return for the favor of a meeting."

Wesley had seen the vaults, knew only a fraction of what they held, the horrors that many of their contents could inflict given the right set of ingredients or magicks. He wouldn't think of turning over one of the artifacts to a threatening voice on the telephone while he was still employed with Wolfram & Hart, never mind now.

However, the man had brought a variable into the equation and despite Wesley's recent treatment for addiction, he still could not shake his compulsion to all things Fred.

"I am prepared to offer proof," the man added.

Wes sighed. What would be the harm in a meeting? If anything, he could warn Fred against a powerful new enemy that could be identified and eliminated with his help. He could finally have a reason to call her, something he hadn’t found until now.

"Where and when?"

"Ah, excellent. You are familiar with the sanctuary in downtown Los Angeles, I imagine? Another former colleague of yours is there?"

"Yes, Caritas," Wesley said with relief. No harm could befall him at Lorne's place.

"That's the name. Meet me at Caritas at six tonight. We'll have a nice chat you and I, and you can see if we may strike a mutually beneficial agreement."

“You’ll need to tell me how to find you?” Wes asked quickly, before the man could hang up.

"No need, son," the man replied with a chuckle. “I know who you are."

“Hey boss,” Eve knocked on Cordelia’s hospital room door. She tapped her wrist. “Tick tock.”

“Go away, Eve.”

She leaned against the doorjamb, hand on her hip. “How much longer are you going to be here?”

“As long as it takes for her to wake up again.”

“Angel, you’ve got a job, remember? There’s a case coming up, a big one. You are really going to want to know all about…”

“I don’t care about any cases!” he shouted. “All that matters is Cordelia!”

“If you say so,” she sighed and sauntered away.

Angel persuaded the doctors to let him take Cordelia to his penthouse by evening, rather than let her languish for another minute in that hospital room.

Well, as much as "persuading" could be called picking her up and taking her out to a chorus of protests.

Now in his bed - Cordy in his bed, though not like he'd ever imagined it - he thought she looked
more peaceful. Or perhaps he just wanted to assuage his guilt.

He pulled a chair next to the bedside and watched her critically. What the hell had she seen that had made her yell like that? Something about him needing to stay away from "it," how "it" would destroy them all. What "it?" Frustrated, he pushed himself out of the chair and walked over to the windows, gazing out helplessly as though they'd manifest some answers.

"And for my next trick…"

He heard a weak, but lovingly sardonic voice come from the bed.

He whipped around. "Cordelia?"

"That's me," she said, in a tone that tried to be breezy but failed miserably. "It's really me, Angel, I promise."

Relief washed over him and he crossed the room to her side, hugging her so close he practically pulled her out of the bed.

"Whoa," she mumbled. "Your hugging has so improved while I've been gone."

Angel drew her away from him so he could look at her dear face, her smile, and her eyes brimming with tears. "You just get the extra special ones now."

"Looks like I came back just in time," she said softly, and pulled him close as well.

They stayed like that for a few minutes until Cordy began to squirm.

"Uh, Angel."

"Yeah?"

"Still gotta breathe, big guy," she said from the depths of his chest.

"Oh, right, I'm sorry, here," he lay her back down and stepped backward. "What do you need? Are you hungry? Thirsty? Maybe you want a shower, there's a bathroom right around the corner, great water pressure."

"Angel, sit."

He obeyed.

"Okay, now stay," she added with a giggle. "Please stay. Although I guess you got that command down pat." Her expression turned serious. "I know you sat with me - a lot - during my mother of all dirt naps. That means everything to me."

"They said, that you were in pretty deep," he said, feeling all of sudden shy and nervous around her. "That you wouldn't be able to tell."

"Oh, I could tell," and from the look on her face and the tone of her voice, he didn't doubt it.

"So," he said, trying to be casual. "How do you feel?"

"Honestly? I'm a little woozy and..." She looked around, suddenly aware of her surroundings. "Hello plush bachelor pad! Wow, did we blow up the Hyperion one too many times and score some insurance money or something?"
"Uh, we aren't at the Hyperion."

"Well, even private hospitals aren't this swanky." Cordy looked at him warily. "So forgive the obvious post-coma routine, but where am I?"

Angel exhaled heavily, realizing that he couldn't dodge the truth from her.

"Wolfram & Hart."

Cordelia stared at him for a moment, her mouth half open in stunned surprise. Then slowly, the corners of her mouth twitched up and she began hooting with laughter.

"Right! Good one!" she giggled. "Way to mess with the Blackout Chick."

"Cordy."

"You're serious," she realized, her eyes growing wide. "Oh, my God, we're prisoners. They - they're forcing you to do their bidding! Angel!" She snapped her fingers and waved her hands in his face. "You can beat this! You're stronger than this!"

"Stop," he said calmly, taking her hands in his, glad to see that she hadn't lost her penchant for the dramatic. "We're not prisoners. Well," he considered that. "Not technically. I'm here - we're here - willingly."

Cordelia watched him doubtfully. "Yeah, sounds it."

"No, really," he said. "I took this place over and we're fighting it from the inside, doing some real good."

"Keep telling yourself that, champ," she winked. "It just might stick. Me, I've already seen what you've been up to. I just wanted to hear what you'd say about it."

Angel stared at her. "Wait, you know we're at Wolfram & Hart."

"Yup."

"You know why then."


"How do you know?"

"Kind of my bonus prize," Cordy mused. "I got the Cliff's Notes on everything I missed."

Then he realized. "I knew you had a vision!"

"Whoa, yeah. Can't say I really missed them."

Angel frowned. "Whatever you saw made you scream."

Cordy bit her lip. "Let's just say it was vivid."

"And Buffy…she's got something to do with this?"

Cordelia looked at him blankly.

"Cord, you screamed right in her face."
"Oh, that," she dismissed. "Nah, that's just my gut reaction to seeing you with Buffy again."

He smiled in spite of himself. "It is so good to have you back."

"Well, don't get too comfy, we've got a lot of ground to cover." She looked at him fondly. "Boy, the questions you must have brewing under that unplucked brow. It's broodier than usual."

"There's only one that's important," he said, hesitating before he asked. "Do you really remember everything?"

She grew quiet and shifted her head to one side, in obvious thought. Finally, she looked up at him, her eyes very bright and lucid.

"Yeah," she nodded. A small smile played on her lips. "It really worked then. That's wild."

"What's wild? Cordy," he grabbed her shoulders. "Talk to me."

"First things first." She plopped her hands in her lap as she sat up in the bed. "Angel, I am so sorry."

"For what?" he asked. "You have nothing to apologize for."

"No?" she raised her eyebrows. "The whole rise above, get my body hijacked, give magical birth to a Demi-god, and nearly cause an apocalypse joy ride we were on?"

"Cordy, that's not your fault."

She smiled wanly. "Really kind of was."

"No. No way," Angel shot back.

"Yeah way. This way: With me pretty much buckled down to the passenger seat of my own body, I had a lot of time for pondering. I realized that my big journey? My whole rise-to-a-higher being thing? So not a divine purpose gig," she shook her head. "I was so selfish."

"How can you say that? The visions? That pain you went through for us? For me?"

"For me," she corrected, looking at him. "I was so desperate to be anybody that didn't look like the PMS head cheerleader. Vision girl, whatever it took. But not for anyone besides myself and definitely not for the mission." She drew a shaking breath. "I would've become practically anything if it got you to keep me around - as long as it didn't mess with my perfect size six and flawless complexion."

Angel shook his head. "Cordy, this is nuts."

"Okay, you caught me, size eight," she grinned faintly. "But everything else is true, Angel." Her expression turned serious again. "The Powers That Be are definitely not down with the half-assed commitment phobes like me. So I got what I deserved."

"No one would deserve what happened to you," Angel muttered. "Especially not you."

"Yeah, I think around the evil yet realistically painful childbirth the Powers agreed with that," she said wryly. "That's when they inked my deal."

His brow furrowed. "Deal?"

"Call it a dream state," she shrugged. "Pretty-pretty voices from on high told me that if I just let go,
they'd cut you a break." Cordy reached up and touched his face with a loving hand. "So I did. First unselfish thing I ever really did, too."

"Cordy," he whispered, terrified that she'd evaporate into thin air.

"But what they didn't count on was you. All of you. None of you let me go. So thank you," she said softly.

"You mean you would've died? The Powers would've let that happen to you?"

"But - they - did - 'nt," she enunciated. "They couldn't. You tethered me here. Way to go, boss."

"So what happens now?"

Her trademark Cordy grin shone brightly. "In return, presto, voila," she looked around and waved her fingers to demonstrate a magic sleight of hand. "We get this."

"Uh," he looked around with her. "I don't see anything."

"Duh, you're living it. I think officially it's called a 'temporal stitch.' Unofficially, I call it 'if-we're-very-good-kids-and-don't-fuck-it-up-we-can-live-happily-ever-after-or-something-close-to it here.'"

"I run the LA branch of my worst enemies," Angel said evenly. "Buffy's investigating us nine ways to Sunday on behalf of the new Watcher's Council, Fred's sleeping with Spike, a young Slayer's dead, I'm a stranger to my own son, and three of my best friends have quit and aren't speaking to me," he finished. "This is your version of a happy ending?"

"Hey, not like we had much to work with before this, bucko," Cordy said warily. "I'd take it if I were you." She squinted at him. "Fred's really sleeping with Spike?"

"Yes," he sighed. "They're living together, actually."

"Wow," she marveled. "What frickin' bizarro world did I wake up in, anyway?"

"That's what I'd like to know. Cordy," Angel shook his head again. "I don't know what to do with any of this."

"You live it," she said softly. "Hopefully we all make better choices so we can keep on living it. Look Angel, the Powers That Be owed me one, and I didn't waste it. You can't either."

Angel looked at her wildly. "But - but what happens? If we don't make better choices?"

"Then like your favorite black shirt that got impaled and mended too many times, this fragile little stitched up reality unravels. All bets are off and whatever was supposed to be takes over."

"Well, what the hell is that?" Angel demanded, feeling hysterical.

Cordelia lifted her hands in the air. "At this point? Who knows? Hell, we could all be dead," she laughed nervously and immediately stopped. "Uh, yeah. Not really funny, sorry."

"So all we have to do is just wait," he said, trying to be reasonable. "You'll get a vision, see what's on the other side of this reality so we know what we're dealing with and why are you shaking your head at me now?"

"That's the other part of my deal. No more visions."
He swallowed with difficulty. "It doesn't matter. You're here, that's all I care about. Cordelia," he took her hands in his. "You have to know that I don't need you for what you can do, the powers you have or don't have. I need you - for you. The hell with the mission. I need you for me."

"Wow," she whispered and one hot tear splashed on her cheek. "You have so improved with the speeches, too. That's - I needed to hear that. Hopefully I'll remember exactly how good that made me feel."

He looked at her quizzically. "Cord, why wouldn't you remember?"

"You'll see," she glanced nervously at the clock on his bedside table. "As for now, this message is gonna self-destruct like thirty seconds ago. Angel, I wish..." She smiled through her tears. "God, there's so much more. Oh, the hell with it. One for the road?"

And without further hesitation, she pulled him forward and pressed her lips against his.

For a long moment, he couldn't move, couldn't register anything beyond the fact that he finally had the kiss from her that he'd always wanted. Full of love, passion… and the overriding twinge of desperation, which he tried with all his might to kiss away.

"Talk about being worth the wait," she murmured, breaking the kiss slowly. "Speaking of, you're going to have to wait a while to get one of those again. We will get back here, Angel, somehow. I swear not even the Powers can stop me. I'm gonna fight to come back to you."

"Cordy?"

She snubbed her nose against his and lay down again, her eyes dancing.

"By the way: you're welcome," she chirped before closing her eyes.

"No," he whispered, moving his hands wildly to her throat to check for a pulse. It pounded reassuringly against his fingers, strong and firm. Then what…

Her eyes opened again. "Well, hello salty goodness. You're gonna need some serious oxygen after I'm through with you."

A lump formed in his throat as he tried to smile at her.

"Thank you."
“What the hell you got Fred doing for you now? Slavin’ away at the lab ain’t enough, you gotta have her as your own personal errand girl? Fuck that. Let her be, for fuck’s sake.”

That’s what Spike wanted to say.

That’s what he’d picked up his cell phone to say at least six times since waking up from his nap with Fred.

Spike frowned. He loved the girl so damn much for many reasons, not the least of which was for how she made her own decisions, often stubbornly so. When she got her heart set on something (like getting his body back, for instance) she could dig her heels in but good. When it came to Angel, she would always respond to his requests and value his opinion. After all, Angel became her first savior when he plucked her out of Pylea.

“Long as we both know, I’m her last, boss man,” Spike told the closed phone and put it back on the nightstand.

The slender, naked length of Fred’s back tempted him as she lay sleeping on her side, the white sheet wrapped over the rest of her. Leaning in, he rested his forehead between her shoulder blades and drank in her scent, while gliding his hand along her side. Then he felt something that stopped him with a start.

Her hipbone. Always prominent, it seemed to jut out just a bit more than he recalled. Frowning, he ran his hand lightly underneath her buttocks and gently kneaded her firm bottom. Just as he had suspected: less of an inch to pinch. Not that she could really spare it, either.

Fred had lost another pound or two. That made, in his estimation, ten since she’d gotten back from hospital. Ten pounds gone tucking away at pizza and wings and French fries and milkshakes (although her hearty appetite had definitely waned as of late). Ten pounds gone and a shade of the bloom gone out of her cheeks, too, now that he really thought about it. Ten pounds gone since she’d returned to the lab after the deals they had both made with that damnable Wolfram & Hart.

He’d worked it, though, hadn’t he, that she’d be spared? He’d give up being human (no great loss there, really) in exchange for keeping Fred out of the fray.

Maybe gentleman’s agreements didn’t count between demons.

More likely, he had to be imagining things.

Shaking the negative thoughts away, he rolled out of bed, into jeans and out onto the sunset-lit outdoor balcony to smoke.

Fred needed to stretch her legs, after weeks of trying to work off the physical effects of sedation, the emotional effects of murder. He should be happy – thrilled even – that she could return to her daily habits so quickly.

Hell, if Fred could go running around at Angel’s behest, tinkering with god-knew-fuck-all in that bloody lab, what was his excuse?

“Hey,” she padded out to him barefoot and sleepy-eyed and wearing one of his t-shirts. “I can’t believe we slept so long.”
Spike tossed the cigarette. Solemnly, he walked toward her, took her face in his hands and kissed her soundly on the forehead. "You floor me, pet. Barely back on your feet and still thinking of the good fight."

"Huh?" she yawned.

"Dunno why I thought bein’ holed up here with me was enough."

"Wait, what?" she blinked.

"You never stop thinkin’ on others is all. I should take your lead - start patrolling again, catch up with Charlie, shake out a few nests. He's got to be up to his balls in vamp attacks on that side of town."

Fred struggled to wake up and focus. “Well, sure, if you want to.”

“I need to, don’t I?” He kissed her again and went straight to the kitchen.

“I guess?” she called after him.

“You got that number to the shelter he gave us?” He asked, opening and closing kitchen drawers. “Wait ‘til he hears I’m back on the streets. Aha,” he held up a business card. “Got it. Wonder if I’ve missed him. Well, there’s always tomorrow night, and the next.”

“Hey, slow down,” Fred told him as he picked up the receiver to the wall phone.

“Fred, he may’ve already left.”

“That would be okay.” She took the phone and hung it up.

“Why?”

“Cause what I have to say is more important. Spike, of all the things that have been happening here with you, being ‘holed up’ is not how I would describe any of ‘em.”

He stroked her hair back. “I keep you in the dark with me.”

“Not really, most of the time you’re awake before I am.”

“You know what I mean,” he chastised her gently. “You glow like the sun,” he whispered, running his knuckles along her jaw. “Only seems fair you should be out in it.”

“I get plenty of sun. Besides, I burn and freckle real easy. Spike, I love our life.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I love you. Don’t ever think any different. Patrol if you wanna. Call Charles and have a beer. But don’t do it because you think I want you to.”

Suddenly, right before his eyes, he watched all the color drain from her face.

“Oooof,” she groaned, pulling her arms from him to wrap around her middle.

“Win, what is it?” Spike gripped her shoulder.

“Just heartburn, extra spicy volcano style. I’m gonna get some Pepto - ” she nodded back toward the bathroom and headed that way.

Spike watched her helplessly, then shook his head and picked up the phone.
"It's just heartburn. She's fine, you dolt. You're just bloody whipped is all."

From the front-row seat his wheelchair afforded him, the withered old demon could not stop watching his own death.

He surveyed it with the rapt detachment of the spectator he truly was, feeling no ill effects from his on-screen demise. The image fascinated him, the grainy picture in the center of the Orlon Window, how the strange blue woman's fury and the force of her fist exploded his skull into flying fragments of pulp. He watched how his body slumped to join that of the already dead man lying on the floor - his six o'clock appointment in this current reality, one Wesley Wyndham Pryce.

Cyvus Vail smiled at the wonder of alternative realities. If he had his way, Pryce and the rest of his cohorts wouldn't be left alive in any of them.

"You're obsessed with that thing," a young woman's voice said behind him.

He frowned. "You might be well to share my obsession. Perhaps it would spark your flagging interest in what we're trying to accomplish."

"You know, funny thing about throwing the universe out of whack..." Eve sighed, flopping into his plush jacquard couch. "Not as fun as it sounds."

"The fun does not begin, my dear," he hissed. "Until we have earned it. You completed your visit, I take it?"

"Yeah, what was that about?" Eve frowned. "I found that Lindsay McDonald guy you showed me from that box? He didn't know me from Adam," she smirked a little at her pun. "Too busy playing Johnny Cowboy with his little pals all day. The guy's a rodeo clown, not a diabolical genius."

"Yes, well," Vail chuckled. "Some realities are more amusing than others."

"Well, amuse yourself with this," Eve said, her smile disappearing. "I want the Lindsay Mick-Dee you showed me." She pointed to the Orlon Window that Vail had been gazing into. "Big with the tattoos, the evil plan, and the getting fleshy with me."

"All in good time, my sweet," Vail wheezed. "We must put proper parameters in place first. You'd do well to remember that I contacted you - meaning my schedule, my plan." He stared hard at the glowing cube in front of him. "At least in this world."

"That's another thing I don't get," Eve said. She got up from the couch and walked over behind Vail, squinting warily at the screen on his table. "How is it that we can see all of this?"

"The Orlon Window is my creation. My work for Wolfram & Hart before their management changed. Unfortunately, without the amulet, its value is diminished."

He turned around and eyed her. "You do not know what Orlon stands for? Other Realities Lost on Nature. With only the application of a small amount of magic," he waved his hand over the cube and a picture of Eve with an apple, sitting on Angel's desk and grinning prettily, came into view. "I can view the variations of the reality we're currently residing in."

"Man, I have the best clothes in that reality," she sighed wistfully.

"In there, you die," Vail growled. "Wolfram & Hart collapses on you."
"I know, I know," she said with a roll of her eyes. "And you die and that Lindsay dude dies. I got it."

"I created this vessel when I created Connor’s new life, which led, of course, to Angel taking over Wolfram & Hart. If Angel had never changed his son's outcome, Wolfram & Hart would have continued unchecked. We would have continued, certainly. As underpaid lackeys!" Vail roared, slamming his fist on the desk. "You say I am obsessed for studying the millions of worlds in this window. Without that obsession, I never would have found our opportunity."

They watched together as Angel and Connor came on screen, struggling in the sporting goods store of a shopping mall.

"Angel dies in that one, his son kills him," Eve noted. "Dust to dust, baby."

"Yes," Vail murmured. "I have also learned that the one constant in every world in which we, too, exist is Connor. Here he's a criminal, a murderer. But he's acquitted, on account of his insanity. Even here, the son of the vampire with a soul lives."

Eve met his eyes. "So he's our key?"

"The amulet is our key. The amulet will allow us to move through the window's worlds at our bidding, extract individuals at our behest – such as the Lindsey I have enamored you of – and its destruction will seal whatever changes we make. No, Connor," Vail grinned evilly. "Connor is merely one of our pawns - along with the rest of them."

"So what do you say, boss," Eve whispered, working her hands into a strong massage of Vail's tight, thin shoulders. "I think it's time for our first move."

"Ah, yes. On to Wesley. You'll help me dress, won't you, dear?" he leaned back into her touch, closing his eyes. "I don't wish to keep our first player waiting."

Groggily, Buffy sat up on Lorne's velvet settee, cracking her stiff neck from side to side. Not the most comfortable nap in the world, but she'd slept off the afternoon's rum run to awaken refreshed and only slightly embarrassed.

Lorne came out of his bedroom dressed in a pink leopard skin printed tuxedo and clucking his tongue at her. "Thought for a minute you were going to miss the whole show. Come on, shake a leg and you can be first in line for the happy hour canapé buffet."

"Oh, no," Buffy said, shaking her head resolutely. "Drowned sorrows, check. Time to move on."

She glanced up at him. "What time does your hour get happy anyway?"

"Let's see, Wednesday night, so that makes it…" He checked his watch. "Yup, six o 'clock."

"Six!" Buffy shrieked. "Why did you let me sleep so long?"

"See this?" Lorne asked, walking over toward her and pointing to a swelling and discoloration on the tip of his green nose. "My blending skills with the miracle of food coloring and a good base aside – that hit's from you, Slugger."

"I hit you?" she asked in a small voice.

"I attempted to shift your siesta to the comfort of my boudoir but her ladyship wouldn't be moved,"
Lorne said wryly. "You think I was gonna chance a wake up call after that?"

"Oh, Lorne, I'm so sorry," Buffy said, eyes wide and plaintive. "What can I do to make it up to you? Need a bouncer? You got a preview on how good I am."

"Nah, my tender-hearted bruiser bouncer Bruno wouldn't hear the end of it," he chuckled. "This is nothing a little plaster and Spackle won't fix. I'll mend. Meanwhile, why don't you go out and make the streets safe for my less-demonic patrons tonight?"

She looked at him blankly. "Huh?"

"Uh, patrolling is what I think you crazy kids call it," he replied, matching her surprised look.

"Oh, right." She hiccuped bananas and grimaced. "I don’t really do that anymore."

He sat next to her on the settee. "The answer to the $25,000.00 question on why would be what? You're the Slayer."

“I’m one of many now.”

“So that makes your mission mean less?”

“Of course not,” she shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“Buffy, a sweet year or so ago, when the doo-doo hit the fan in the City of Angels, I had the 911 on ‘who you gonna call.’ He came, he saved, he could be ever so righteous about it.”

She smiled a little.

“Last I checked, he isn’t out there. Which means - who is?”

“I’m sure there are other Slayers…”

“Why, so it makes you feel better about sitting out a round?”

Buffy sat back. “I’m going to be a Watcher now, Lorne. My Slayer days - they’re not so much over, just buried. Under my whole town, actually.”

“Only if that’s where you want them,” Lorne replied, then patted her knee and walked to the door. “If you stick around for the buffet, I give five stars to the BBQ meatballs. Take care, doll.”

Patrolling. She didn’t know what was stranger - that he brought it up or that she hadn’t thought of it in so long.

After a few sluggish minutes, she peeled herself off the sofa and used Lorne's private exit. Buffy found herself on the street, down a block from the entrance of the club. The simple neon sign, Caritas, had just been lit and Buffy stood for a moment, reflecting on it.

Charity? Mercy. Whatever. How different life could've been with this kind of watering hole than one named for third place at the Olympics. Obviously, if Angel had guys like this in his corner, things couldn't be all bad here.

Then she remembered: Lorne had already sprung out of that corner. Along with Charles Gunn and Wesley…

"Who seems to have gotten out of rehab just in time to make happy hour," she murmured, craning
her neck down the street when she saw a familiar Wesley-esque figure about to descend the stairs to Caritas’ entrance.

"Wes!" she called, jogging down the street, suddenly enervated. The day wouldn't be a total loss. She could meet him in the bar, take his statement on his imprisonment by that Slayer…as much as he remembered of it. She halted in her steps. Too many drugs might mean too little memory.

Too late. He’d stopped and turned.

“Hey!” she waved.

_Buffy Summers, Wes thought wildly. What on earth are you doing here?_

“So you’re working for the Council now,” Wesley mused after catching up with Buffy at the entrance to Caritas. "That's interesting and…somehow terrifying.” He gave her a teasing grin.

“What, me doing anything close to the work you and Giles did? Yeah, right there with you,” Buffy sighed. “But beggars can’t be choosers. We need Watchers.” She elbowed Wes and raised her eyebrows hopefully. “I heard you need a job. We’d even give you an office.”

“Generous offer, but I’ll pass, thank you.”

“So what are you gonna do now?”

Wes rubbed his forehead tiredly. “I ask myself that question every day. At the moment, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other and not sticking a needle in my arm to do it.”

Buffy touched his shoulder. “Wes, I’m really sorry that happened to you.”

“Leah happened to me. The rest I accomplished all on my own.”

“Would you be willing to give a statement for the Council about her?”

“Of course, but…” he hesitated. “I don’t suppose this could be accomplished via email?”

“Yeah, sure,” Buffy fumbled in her briefcase and pulled out a business card. “I guess a formal in-person interview full of reliving and rehashing might not be your jam right now.”

He smiled gratefully and pocketed the card. “Thank you for understanding.” Then he pointed to the door. “Going in?”

“Oh, no, thanks, I’m…” She stopped, since she had no idea what to do next.

Wes didn’t wait for a response. “All right then. Good luck, Buffy.”

“Thanks,” she replied but the door had already closed.

At the green light signal on the corner, a small fleet of cabs hurried through the intersection. Buffy took advantage of their availability and hailed one down, feeling oddly guilty for going back to the hotel.

Of course she should patrol! Only one problem with that.

You couldn’t stake vampires with a briefcase.
"Hot showers, yes, absolutely. Separate rooms for boys and girls. I wouldn't have it any other way," Anne Steele told the voice on the phone. If she seemed more interested in the handsome man painting her walls, the caller had no way of knowing, or could see the dreamy way her eyes traveled up the back of her painter's impressive frame.

"We keep kids from all sorts of backgrounds, sure we can get them to court if they need to. We've actually got free legal counsel here at East Hills. Yeah," she winked at the man when he turned around on his ladder to look at her. "He's a new addition to our crew." Her smile turned fond and somber. "He doesn't care about making money. He wants to give something back to the kids."

When she hung up the phone, she walked over to the wall covered with fresh paint. "You missed a spot."

Gunn jumped down from the ladder and right in front of her, causing her to giggle. "You gonna show me?"

"Right here," she whispered, and gently wiped off the spatter of yellow paint on his nose with the corner of her sleeve.

Gunn glanced around the room. "You're gonna love this when it's done. This color will brighten up the whole place, give the kids something nice to wake up to."

"Lucky kids," she murmured. "What about me?"

He looked back down at her and smiled, wrapped his hand loosely around her waist. "You don't gotta worry 'bout a thing."

Anne leaned against him and breathed against his shirt. "That's good to know."

"One thing, though," he said, resting his head on hers. "You might wanna watch how you plug your new legal eagle, Annie."

Her arms slipped around him and snuggled into his back pockets. "You change your mind?"

"Nah, I don't know my mind, is all. Who knows how long until that speed-read education I got goes flying out of my head? I didn't earn it, got no reason to keep it."

Anne poked her head up. "Then you better use it in as many good ways as you can before it's gone."

Gunn pulled her close and grinned. "Yes, ma'am." He leaned in to kiss her on the lips when the phone rang noisily, effectively interrupting them.

"So goes the life of the public servant," she laughed and skipped over to the desk to answer the phone.

"East Hills Teen Center." She listened for a minute, then handed the receiver out to Gunn with a puzzled expression on her face. "Some guy wants to know if you still patrol."

Gunn wiped his hands on his jeans and fairly leapt for the phone. "Somebody forgot who he's calling."
"Well, ain't this old home week," Lorne said from behind the bar as Wesley entered the quickly-filling club. The buffet already had a line and tables were filling rapidly.

"Hello, Lorne," Wes greeted him with a grin. "I know it's been a while."

"I'll see your 'in a while' and raise you an 'in a dog's age,'" he said, holding out his hand for Wesley to shake. "Didn't know I'd be hosting the whole Sunnydale hit parade tonight."

Wes shook back. "Ah, you mean Buffy, I take it. She was in here?"

"Ms. Short Blonde and Punchy spent the better part of the day with me," he said, rubbing his nose gingerly. "Officially, for her Council, looking in to the dead nutjob who tried to kill us both."

"Yes," Wes nodded. "The Council of Watchers is required to investigate all Slayer-related activities. Especially their murders." He glanced at Lorne. "You said officially. Something unofficial about her business?"

Lorne hesitated. "I gotta say, I took a shine to the kid. Still, I think she took on the Council biz as a big ole means to what she hoped would be her vamp-happy-ending."

"Really?" Wes murmured. "You mean she came after Angel?" His heart quickened with hope. "Or Spike?"

"Buddy, can you spare a dime? I'll flip."

"Oh, dear," Wesley replied. "Sounds as though she hoped to make a connection with either of them. That must have made for a rather emotional visit. For all parties concerned." He looked over at Lorne with a detached interest. "Any idea how it turned out?"

"Well, she came in alone and unhappy and cleaned me out of coconut rum," Lorne said, mixing a Sea Breeze and holding up a toast to Wes. "You wanna drink to that?"

"No," he sighed glumly. "I suppose I'd rather not."

Wesley glanced at his watch. A minute before six o'clock. Still time to change his mind.

Instead, he drained his gratis pink cocktail in two quick gulps. He followed with a paid-for scotch on the rocks, merely to cleanse the palate, of course.

He stared forwards dully, past his tired eyes reflected in the wall of mirrors behind the bar and to the crowd behind him. In the reflection, he saw demons and humans dancing to the piped-in music, groups of friends carousing, milling around the buffet table, embracing, laughing, and enjoying themselves in a way that Wesley could not touch. Still, he could not help glancing at the reflection with a small smile. Lorne had returned to running his club without as much as a pause and had likewise returned to his former success, even without his gift of reading. If he missed his empath powers, he certainly put on a good show to prove otherwise.

Then again, Wes thought bitterly, haven't we all?

"It almost looks real, doesn't it?" said a familiar voice behind him: the mysterious stranger from the telephone call.

Wesley stared in the mirror and saw no one at his side. Likewise, he saw no one out of the corner of
his eye.

"It is real," Wes answered with a sigh. "All of that is happening in this room. It's just…beyond me."

He turned around and saw the pitifully shriveled and balding demon behind him. He tried not to draw back in revulsion when the man held out his hand – a scrawny, skeletal claw with skin like cracked leather and in the color of fresh blood.

Before Wes had a chance to react, the thing latched on to Wes' hand that rested by his side and Wes instantly felt his body lurch inside from the iciness of the man's grip. Then from his power. Wesley had rarely felt such a surge of magical energy from a mere touch. It hit him like the sudden rush of a drug, leaving him enervated and slightly sick. The release of the handshake brought him relief and disappointment both.

"Greetings, Mr. Pryce. I must say that it is a pleasure to meet you at last. Your reputation, as it is said, precedes you." He laughed, a vacant and dismal sound that echoed chillingly in Wesley's ears.

"You know me," Wes frowned. "How exactly?"

The two burly demons who served as bodyguards glared at Wesley menacingly, kept their hairy paws clutched to the handles of the old demon's wheelchair. The chair had been outfitted with a kind of intricate IV system, though the rusty and mustard-colored liquids looked nothing like the healing hospital fluids Wes had ever seen. Or, he shuddered internally, nothing like what Leah had administered to him.

The man waved his hand as though in dismissal. "It is the obligation of any decent sorcerer to know his competition. You've done the odd spell in your time, young man, with more success than you'll admit." One eye winked up at him.

Wes stiffened. "You're a sorcerer."

"Cyvus Vail, son, and don't bother with a pleasant lie that you've heard of me. You haven't. I have taken great pains to make sure of it."

Wesley clapped his mouth shut.

"Are you ready to discuss business?" Vail asked.

"I'm afraid we've met at a bad time," Wes murmured, feeling a bead of sweat form on his forehead. He hadn't been prepared for meeting someone like Vail. It would be like doing business with the devil.

He cleared his throat and gestured around the room. "It appears that this is Caritas' busiest hour. We'll never find a quiet corner, never mind a table."

Vail snorted. "Is that the greatest of your concerns? This is the ideal time for our meeting. Do you wish to see why?"

Without waiting for Wesley to answer, Vail lifted his hands in the air, palms to the ceiling. In a flash, one of the last empty chairs slid across the room to Wesley's side – right before an attractive brunette in a gray business suit was about to sit in it.

Her eyes narrowed at Wes and Vail. "Hey!" she began, in a petulant tone.

Wesley didn't hear the rest of what she had to say. In fact, he stopped hearing anything in the room at
all. Everyone and everything had come to a complete standstill.

"You still wish to have a table?" the old demon hissed.

Wes shook his head quickly.

"Please," Vail said, gesturing to the empty chair in front of him. "You see that we have all the privacy in the world now."

"What --" Wes stammered, easing himself carefully into the chair. "Whatever have you done?"

"A mere temporal disturbance. You'd be surprised how often they happen. Oh, the patrons are fine. But I needed their energy to bring about this little pause."

"Energy. You sought out this crowd."

"Yes," Vail nodded. "Humans especially buzz with all that your minds and bodies never accomplish, never knowing what you are capable of. You're living batteries." He did not smile. Wesley knew that Vail completely believed in his theory. His magic, strong enough to temporarily suspend Lorne's sanctuary spell, depended on it.

"What do you want?"

Vail snickered. "A man who gets right to the point. Not interested in the sorcery necessary to bring about a hiatus in time, are you? Very well. But it is not just a matter of what I want, but what you want. I believe her name is Winifred Burkle."

"Now see here," Wesley leaned over to the man, after first glancing upwards to make sure that Vail's bodyguards were likewise suspended in time. "I won't be party to any kind of blackmail. You threaten Miss Burkle or her safety in any way and you die now."

"You will perish here in this limbo with me then," Vail yawned. "Mr. Pryce, save your petty intimidation for the likes of Wolfram & Hart. What we will arrange here is an exchange."

He rustled in his thick maroon robes for a moment and produced a glowing cube, made of some kind of translucent material – something like frosted glass crossed with cotton sheeting.

"When I asked whether this looked real, I didn't mean the reflection. Unless to say, that we are the reflection even outside of the mirror. We are trapped in a living mirror, a reflection of reality that has almost been lost to us." His eyes glinted. "Almost. Take a look. See for yourself."

What Wesley saw next could have been downloaded from his deepest, most personal dreams. Fred, beautiful Fred, standing before him with eyes turned up at him – him at last! – wearing a look of utter infatuation.

"You're just going to go, aren't you?" she asked him, wide-eyed and full of obvious anguish at his apparent retreat toward a door. How the Wesley in that screen could not know what she laid bare before him, he couldn't fathom. Then again, the man in that world looked as stricken by Fred as he himself had felt in this world, so many times.

"Fred – " the Wesley-on-screen started, his voice full of sense and sensibility. Practicality. Fear.

"Haven't you been... sensing anything lately... about me... coming from me? Uh... didn't occur to you that... something might have changed? That—I'm looking at you in a different— Oh, screw it," she gasped finally and leaned into him with hands on his cheeks, drawing him toward what looked like
the sweetest kiss he'd ever felt. As he watched himself with Fred, he felt his lips tingle from the ghost lips of hers lingering on his...sometime, somewhere...

"Do you wish to see more?" Vail asked.

"Yes," Wesley breathed, unable to tear his eyes away.

He caught himself.

"I mean, no."

He shook his head and the images faded from the screen. He scowled at Vail. "What lovely magic you do."

Cyvus Vail laughed then – an utterance of horrifying amusement that quickly degenerated into a phlegm-lodged, choking cough.

"Oh, my boy," he wheezed. "You truly do not know the half of it. But I assure you, the only magic I perform on this cube is your ability to see what exists on the plane outside of our own. A plane where I am a respected employee of Wolfram & Hart and you are the beloved beau of Winifred Burkle. We've been shafted, you and I. We're living in a mirror world. A funhouse mirror at that. Or what else would you call her lover? That bleached blonde, faux-Cockney, nicotine-ridden, foul-mouthed vampire?"

"Spike," Wes muttered, all of his anger and disappointment poured into that one word.

A thought occurred to him. "What is he to her there?"

"A friend. A confidante. Nothing more." His voice dropped. "Much like you are here."

Wesley eyed the demon suspiciously. He had no reason to discount anything Vail said – and had no reason to believe him, either. He rubbed his eyes tiredly.

"How does this even exist?"

Vail smacked his lips with pleasure. "You remember Connor now, do you not? Angel's son."

Wes looked up at him with a sudden realization. "Yes, I do."

"His new life with new memories, concealing all that you knew of him and he of himself, that was my creation. Or should I say, my distortion. It was meant to be a simple glamour, a mere ripple in the fabric of time." He leveled Wesley with a chilling stare. "Now that all your memories of him have returned, the glamour has taken on a life of its own."

Vail gestured up to the bar, to the bottle of scotch that the bartender had placed next to Wesley's glass after refilling it.

"Go on. Drink."

Wesley obeyed.

"Any ordinary human or demon boy would have enjoyed his life in suburbia, ensconced with his replacement family, happily ever after, as they say. Never to give pause to his roots, to his true horrific nature," Vail continued. "Connor, as I think you recall, is not your ordinary boy."

"No," Wes said softly, draining his glass and filling it again. "He never was that." He sunk into the
"He is stronger than I – than any of us anticipated. His pretty mist of happy memories still lingers but not for long. When it lifts, I promise you, Mr. Pryce, the result will pour a flood of chaos upon us all, the likes of which you have not seen. Your tussles with the Beast," he chuckled, "will be a puppet show in comparison."

Wesley's lips turned dry. "You want—you're asking me to kill Connor?"

"No!" Vail croaked. "The die has been cast. Killing him will only seal the destruction. You see, Mr. Pryce, we all exist here but for him. When he remembers who – and what he is – this world ceases to hold purpose. We will bleed away into the worst sort of apocalypse. The end of a world that never should have been."

Wesley dragged his eyes to the now dim cube resting in Vail's lap.

"What about the world you showed me there?" he couldn't help himself from asking.

Vail met his gaze eagerly. "I can facilitate it for you to go back, back far enough to change Angel's mind. Back to the precise moment that he chose to whitewash his son's life and take over Wolfram & Hart. That is what you have seen: a world without Connor, a world in which Fred Burkle loves you. Without any need for this glamour, everything here as you see it will also revert to its true nature, the world I have shown you in that screen. What you are living today will disappear, as though a dream upon waking."

"You've shown me roughly thirty seconds of a kiss," Wesley said flatly. "I'm required to make a decision on the future of an entire dimension based on that?"

Vail winked at him. "Mere mortals have destroyed universes for less."

"You're very likely lying. Whatever could you want in exchange?"

"As I said to you on the telephone, what is mine, although it belongs to me as much as it belongs to you. Secreted in the vaults of Wolfram & Hart, Angel has hidden away the one gem that allows the average human demonologist or part-time wizard the ability to cross time and dimensions. Ask your dear friend, Ms. Burkle, if perhaps she has seen it. It is our key for ending this lie we are living."

"You're a sorcerer," Wesley spat out. "You're a former employee of Wolfram & Hart which means an untold propensity for evil."

"You see? We share so much in common."

Affronted, Wes jumped up and pushed his chair back.

"We have both done our share of evil deeds. This world," he nodded gravely, "is the whole of their parts. The ultimate forgery. The consummate fabrication. It will end, as surely as we speak here now. The question remains of how you wish it to end? Embracing the love of your life or listening to her screams of death?"

"Enough," Wesley held his hand up, watching it tremble. "I have heard quite enough from you."

"You have," Vail agreed. "Now you must hear from others. Listen to any hints from them that this
life and all in it has left them somewhat…betrayed. They may be eager to join you in your quest.”

He returned the glowing cube to the folds of his cloak. "Take all the time you wish, Mr. Pryce. That's all that you have to bargain with, is time."

Wesley heard the snap of fingers and in the next instant, the flood of sound and activity of the bar returned to him in a dizzying rush. He glanced at his watch to see it reading a minute past six o'clock, not a second more. The bottle of scotch still rested next to his glass, although his ice cubes were now dry. He glanced around him but Vail and his guards had disappeared.

Frowning, he wondered how much he had merely imagined of it all. Foolishly drinking following his morphine detox had to cause some side effects, hallucinations couldn't be the least of them. He'd get out of Caritas quickly before the real man on the telephone had a chance to arrive.

"Hey, jerk-off," an annoyed female voice came from across the room. A ticked-off brunette in a gray business suit strode toward him.

"No need to magic it up, Potter. You want a chair, all you have to do is ask."

Flustered, Wesley looked down to see the club chair at his knees, blocking his exit. The same chair that Vail had spirited over for him.

"Terribly sorry," Wes stammered. He pushed the chair out of his path and made his way to the door. "I'm afraid I've made a horrible mistake."

“You understand now why we ramped up your training, darling?” the clipped female British voice asked Willow on the phone. “What appears to be unfolding in Los Angeles is directly in your wheelhouse.”

“Yeah,” Willow looked at the magical map spread across her bed. “Sure looks like it.”

“So it’s clear why you’re the ideal witch for the job?”


“Then why the long face?”

Willow glanced at the phone. “How can you see my face?”

“I don’t have to see it, I can hear it. Should these signals be correct, you’re going to complete another curve of your redemptive arc. Why aren’t you looking forward to it?”

“Because of Buffy. I feel like I’m setting her up,” Willow admitted.

“Willow,” the voice chided her. “Your dear Slayer friend decided to go to Los Angeles at exactly the same time we began sensing initial disturbances. Do you really think that’s a coincidence?”

Willow chewed on a fingernail. “I don’t know. Buffy hasn’t even patrolled in a while. I didn’t think her Slayer senses were all that hot these days.”

“On the contrary, if she’s putting her physical abilities on the back burner, her psychic senses may be overcompensating and screaming for attention. Slayers aren’t meant to be idle.”
“Lysandra, I should have said something! Warned her - anything!” Willow cried.


“Darling, that would be akin to warning a city about an impending tornado based on a light breeze. We didn’t know - and we still don’t - the full impact of all that’s unfolding in Los Angeles. Buffy’s strong, has excellent instincts, and will, of course, inform you should trouble arise. Her ignorance is our greatest asset.”

“Is she okay?” Dawn’s face peeked into Willow’s room the minute Willow ended the call.

“Hey, Dawnie, go back to bed. That wasn’t Buffy.”

Dawn looked disappointed. “I wish we knew more, that we could help her.”

“I know. We will. Once we know how.”

Dawn’s face perked up. “If Buffy hasn’t sensed or seen anything, than maybe the coven is wrong.”

“Maybe,” Willow sighed. She thought of the map she had just put away with all the little glowing magical beads and how several of them pulsed continuously over the Los Angeles area.

“We should tell her to come back.”

“She’s not finished with her investigation. Besides, if something does come up, she needs to be there. They’ll need a Slayer.”

“Even one who isn’t actively slaying?”

“You know your sister can handle herself.”

Dawn shook her head. “Willow, this feels icky. Like we’re using her as bait. Can’t we tell her to be on the lookout?”

Willow couldn’t help but be reminded of the telephone conversation she’d just had, Dawn now playing Willow’s part and Willow now needing to be the steadying, calming voice of the witch, Lysandra.

“For what?” Willow asked and held up her hand to count on her fingers: “The alternate reality spell, the instability in its temporal fold, the dark entity fog that grows stronger by the day? Those are just the biggies. The coven said these disturbances may be incidental - not tied to anything specific and may clear up.”

“Or?”

“Or,” Willow winced. “They may all roll up and make an end of L.A. burrito.”

“Will!” Dawn cried.

“Look, Lysandra said - and I agree with her - that if we tell Buffy to go looking for something, that’s exactly what she’ll do - before we’re even ready to help her.”

“So we just wait?”
“That's it.”

“For the record? This still feels icky,” Dawn told her, walking out of the room.

Willow made sure she was out of earshot before she muttered, “Oh sweetie, you don’t know from icky.”
The dark-haired woman closed the door to the downstairs bedroom behind her with a soft click to the latch.

"She's resting now."

"Thank God," Angel breathed. "I'm sorry, for calling so early and on such short notice."

"Sorry?" she repeated as though the word puzzled her. "I suppose I should be flattered. What's a pre-dawn wakeup call when you haven't seen or heard from your only daughter in years?"

Angel winced. Truly, he hadn't known what else to do.

Cordy had tossed and turned in restless sleep, then woke up confused and talking erratically:

"Are you still grrr? But you're not evil? You’re not biting people, right? This is not my apartment. I am the girl from the projects. Of course this is just temporary - until my inevitable stardom takes effect. Don’t I have an audition? I’m sure I have an audition.” She slammed her hands down on the bed. “You’re going to make me miss my audition!” She looked up at him, so flustered and delirious that he would've given anything to comfort her.

“Angel? Where’s all my stuff? I think I left it at my mother’s. God, I so do not want to go to my mother’s.”

Feeling completely useless, he almost started a search using the resources of Wolfram & Hart, but suddenly stopped.

“I used to run a detective agency,” he muttered. “I can still detect.”

On his own, he found the former Mrs. Chase, a perfectly ordinary citizen with public, searchable records who worked at Nordstrom’s, ensconced in a converted ranch on the dead end cul-de-sac of suburban Reseda.

Now Cordy wasn’t speaking to him since he brought her exactly where she didn’t want to be. At least she was safe.

"We haven't been close the last few years," Mrs. Chase continued, crossing the hallway to the modest dining table where Angel sat. He could tell by her agitation that she wouldn't join him.

"Actually, that's a lie. We were never close. Until his arrest and fine for tax evasion, Cordelia had a better relationship with my ex-husband.”

Angel cleared his throat. “Do you think…do you know…I mean…I think it would mean a lot to Cordy if she could see Mr. Chase again.”

The woman nodded as she paced, a shaking hand retreating into a robe pocket and fingering a worn gilt case before tapping a cigarette free.

"Yes," she murmured. "I imagine that it would."

She lit the cigarette from the lighter imbedded into the side of the case and inhaled deeply. The other trembling hand pulled the gap of her purple silk bathrobe over the neck of her overly tanned and freckled chest. Angel imagined that he could see some of Cordy’s haughty good looks from this
woman: high cheekbones, flickering brown eyes, stubborn and regal chin. The woman clearly dyed her hair honey blonde, the same shade and even in a similar style that Cordy had worn when she’d gotten sucked into Pylea.

Yet where laugh lines and hard lessons learned had softened her daughter's face, Mrs. Chase's seemed pinched taut and wrinkled deep by the pains of life.

"When we divorced, I moved here. I bought as well as I could afford. I don't think Cordelia even unpacked before she set her sights on fame and fortune in Los Angeles," her mother laughed hollowly. "Mr. Chase couldn't afford to leave Sunnydale, given the many businesses he owed for financial services squandered." She blew out a puff of smoke. "If Cordelia ever went to visit him, I never knew about it."

"So he lived in Sunnydale, but I-I'm sure he got out before…” Angel coughed. "Before, you know. The earthquake."

Her glittering brown eyes rested on him for a moment. "I have no idea."

"I'd be happy to make some inquiries, do some investigation. It would, of course, be free of charge. It's what I –we – Cordy and me – used to do."

Cordelia's mother looked at him absentely. "I always wondered what exactly you two did together."

"Ah, Mrs. Chase –"

"I have every parent's dream, you know, an empty nest," she choked out. "I raised my child to be completely independent of me."

"Mrs. Chase…"

"Mr. Angel," she spat back. "Do you have children?"

He hesitated, thinking that the admission would cause more questions than his need to voice it would be worth.

"No."

"Well, then, you'll have to take my word for it that when your child abandons her only family in favor of her co-workers and a supervisor who has," she eyed him distastefully. "A rare and deadly sun allergy…” she took a shaking breath. "That it hurts like the worst kind of hell."

"I know," he said automatically. "I mean, I can understand. Cordy and I, we had a very special bond."

"Yet, this is the first time we’ve ever met," she smiled brittlely. "Doesn't that strike you as strange?"

Angel could not find his voice to respond.

"Your bond, as you call it, apparently overwrote the need for any blood relatives in her life," her mother said flatly. "You could say that this memory loss might be a blessing in disguise. Well," she smirked and in a voice chillingly like her daughter's, sneered, "Maybe you wouldn't, but I would."

Angel's throat went dry. "How do you figure?"

"Her memory is stuck in the summer after graduation when she moved to Los Angeles. Cordelia got mono and she had fever dreams, even hallucinations. That's where her mind has chosen to retreat to.
Not with you," she added bitterly. "But here, with me. Maybe the last time she ever felt safe."

She looked up at him with eyes full of tears. "My baby came back home to me. If you think I'm giving that up easily, you're in for a hell of a shock."

Angel looked down at his hands awkwardly. As much as he wanted – needed – to have Cordelia's steadying influence in his life again, he couldn't argue with this. As a parent estranged from his own child, he knew Mrs. Chase’s struggle too well.

Nodding shortly, he got up from the table.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card.

"If she ever...asks for me, for any of us, I'd consider it a huge favor if you'd please give her this. There's a private number she can call at any time." He eyed her warily. "You have every reason not to trust me. But you have to know that I only want the best for Cordy."

"Then that makes two of us." Mrs. Chase curled the card into her hand without looking at it. "I certainly won't stop her from seeing you if she wishes. It's hardly my intent to imprison her." She stubbed out her cigarette into a fancy crystal ashtray that, Angel thought, looked zip codes away from her current neighborhood.

"All I want is another chance to make things right."

He offered a smile. "It's not often that they come along, is it?"

He didn't wait for her to answer but headed for the front door.

"But the sun's almost up! What about your allergy?" Mrs. Chase called out.

But Angel only continued outside, welcoming the pain of a brief singe in the early daylight before reaching his car.

"Hello, Fred, how are you doing?" Wesley murmured, cradling the headset of the phone against his shoulder. "Yes, this is Wesley, I've just returned from Palm Springs and I've had the most interesting experience that I really must share with you as soon as possible. Are you free right now? Or tonight, perhaps? For what, you ask? Oh, merely the end of the world. Again. Those pesky apocalypses certainly don't get any easier, do they?"

He slammed the phone down. Nothing - not tossing and turning all night, not scribbling down and rejecting various scripts, nor practicing for the past hour in the bathroom mirror - could prepare him for talking to Fred.

Ridiculous to think that he could have a conversation like that with her – any conversation, actually, come to think of it. Their friendship had been strained since she'd begun working with Spike (it was easier, thinking of them as still working together) and he couldn't begin to think of how to approach her. But the information he'd received from Vail, questionable though it seemed, gave Wesley a convenient excuse to make a long-overdue contact. Certainly he'd give Fred all the details he could on this sorcerer and share with her the fantastic story about Angel's deal with Wolfram & Hart.

Perhaps she'd need his help – Spike couldn’t follow Fred at every hour of the day, could he? – and it certainly didn't hurt that they both had shared such intimate memories of Connor. Both Wes and Fred had in their own ways shaped the boy and his demise. An odd subject for old friends to bond over
but then what about anything that happened hadn't been odd?

"No," Wesley said aloud.

He'd be allowing himself to get used – only this time not by Angel but by Vail – and then using Fred right back. Oh, Vail wanted to make him think that it was the information that was being manipulated but Wesley knew better.

He'd still have to find out if Fred even knew about this amulet; then he had to convince her to get it, to give it to him without question, and for Wes to somehow get it to Vail. Then Wes and Fred would cross dimensions together - but how? Where would they wind up? It wouldn’t be like traveling to Pylea, to Lorne’s home world. The trip Vail suggested would be like stepping off a cliff in the dark.

Holtz had done it, with the tiny bundle of Connor in his arms; hadn’t even hesitated but grabbed the baby and jumped blindly. As much as Wesley wanted to believe in the lie of this world and all the pain he and his friends had suffered here, he couldn't shake its reality. It felt so true.

He ran his fingers over his dry lips that still held Fred's lost kiss - that had felt real, too, and he’d only been watching it on a small magical screen.

As though on schedule, his home phone began to ring.

Vail. It had to be. Wesley could feel it as surely as if the old demon had grabbed his hand again.

Running to his bedroom, Wes grabbed a leather duffel bag from the closet and tossed in a change of clothes, some blank notepads, and threw his computer bag over his shoulder for good measure. The phone stopped ringing and started immediately again.

Perhaps a sanctuary, even in the earliest morning hours, would welcome a weary and desperate seeker such as himself.

“Hey Spike, are you awake?”

“No.”

He opened one eye to see Fred bending over him, her hair in an elegant twist atop her head and smelling like a fresh shower.

“You're dressed,” he sulked.

Fred rolled her eyes in amusement. “Yeah, funny thing about scientists, they find clothes kinda necessary, especially around Bunsen burner flames and corrosive chemicals.”

“Suppose I should be thankful you ain’t workin’ in your altogether.” He grinned lazily. “That’s reserved for me.”


He pouted. “That’s all I get? You'll be gone all day.”

“You could get dressed real quick and come in with me,” she sang, batting her eyelashes.

“Don’t suppose we have more inventory waiting for us,” he asked, curling his tongue suggestively.
“No,” she blushed and tried not to smile. “Very sadly, not. I have to actually work with my lab today, seeing’s how I abandon them for days at a time.”

“You want me there to watch you bend over in that tiny skirt all day and not do a thing about it?” He shook his head crossly. “That’s just mean.”

“Well, you could think about all the things we’ll do later,” she teased.

“Started on that pretty picture roundabout the time you asked me if I was awake,” he told her. “I’m already promised to Charlie on patrol later. Plus, I’m not truly relishin’ the idea of seein’ broody boy behind his desk today.”

“You relax then,” she rubbed his bare shoulder and stood up. “We’ll catch up later.”

“You can count on it.”

“Why?” she asked innocently. “Whatever do you have planned?”

“Strippin’ every stitch off you like unwrappin’ my favorite present and licking you until you scream, for starters,” he replied, his voice deep and seductive.

“Oh,” she breathed faintly. “Is that all?”

“No, love. That’s not even the beginning of what I’m going to do to you.”

He sat up in the bed and let the sheet fall away, knitted the fingers of her left hand through those of his right and slowly, with infinite sureness, glided his thumb across her palm in measured, teasing strokes.

Fred panted out a quick breath of hot air and her body rocked closer to him at the edge of the bed.

“You like that?” he asked.

“I love that.”

“Maybe the thought of me on my knees, my mouth pressed between your thighs, lapping up every last drop of your want for me, might get you through your day, hmm?” he asked in a husky whisper, bringing their entwined hands to his mouth and sucking on her left thumb.

That delicious tongue of his made long, slow, sucking wet circles around the tip and pad of her sensitive finger. Then he grazed his teeth against her skin, which elicited an urgent moan from her lips.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered.

“Yes, pet? Tell me alllll about it…”

Fred ran her fingers through his hair, her short nails catching on his scalp in just the right way, digging in with a little sweet sting, enough to let him know that his kitten could play a bit rough when roused. Then he gave that purr, that growl that thrummed through his chest and set every nerve she had on fire.

Slowly, she ran her tongue over her dry lips, her chest beginning to rise and fall faster.

“Your tongue…just you sucking on my finger like that and, and, oh, licking it and then, with your teeth…”
“Like this?” He caught a thick morsel of her skin between his top and bottom incisors and ever so gently pressed down, the tiniest nibble that made her whole body shudder.

“God, yes, just that. How - how do you do that? How is every little thing you do, so, so good?” she asked, groaning, almost crying with the ache of wanting him so very badly.

“You’re mine,” he rumbled. “My good, sweet girl. Love to touch you, taste you, take you. Can barely stop. Your heart, right now,” he curled his hand to her breast, catching a sensitive, hard nipple with his palm as he moved, “can hear it pounding all through me, faster, harder, every beat tellin’ me you want me…”

“I do, so much, so, so much.”

“I can hear it, I can smell it, I can feel it right…ahh, there. So very wet for me. God, you’re already moving against my hand, can’t stop, can you, sweetheart? Then don’t, baby. Don’t stop getting yourself off on me. This is all we can have right now… me - I’ll have to grind myself into the mattress when you’re gone and think of more ways to have you tonight. That’s it, work yourself off, give yourself what you need, I’m right here. Just let it happen, think of how I’m going to fill you all up, stretch you to the hilt, and let yourself go…”

“Yes! Oh, please, yes!” she cried and threw her head back in absolute, throbbing release, rocking and jerking against him as those gifted, patient hands brought her up and over and through an explosion of excruciating pleasure.

Languidly, Fred brought her forehead to Spike’s and rubbed gently back and forth while trying to steady her breathing. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her deeply. His tongue plunged in and swooped around hers in a teasing loop once, twice, and then broke free, leaving her gasping for more.

“Oh, Win. Oh,” he lifted one finger as if remembering something, reached under her with lightning speed, and somehow relieved her of her panties.

“These stay here with me,” he smiled calmly. “Have a good day, love.”

“Uh-huh,” Fred gulped, her breathing starting to quicken again. “You, too.”

“Hurry now, don’t be late,” he teased, patted her bottom as he eased her away from him, then jumped up and walked off to the bathroom.

She stood for a moment, weighing her options, then sauntered over to the bathroom door.

“Going in by noon wouldn’t be the most terrible thing in the world,” she told herself and went to turn the handle.

“Locked?” she gaped. “Ohh, boy… just you wait,” she murmured, already thinking about all the fun ways she could later make him pay.

Angel shifted the papers on his desk. He hadn't been able to focus on anything besides Cordelia since he had dropped her at her mother’s.

Well, Cordelia, and how Fred was feeling, that perhaps he'd been wrong sending her to shadow Connor, how maybe she wasn't up for it yet.
And Spike, what trouble he'd managed to stir up.

And Gunn, how hopefully he was watching his back out there, that his broken leg wasn't slowing him down too much, say enough to get snagged by some vamp in an alley looking for an easy kill.

And Wes, that he was getting back on his feet again.

And Lorne…

Had any of them managed to forage a speck of good from Angel taking over Wolfram & Hart? Each one who flashed through his mind had suffered through some calamity or another, save for one, the whole reason for doing it all in the first place: Connor. Who even knew if the life Angel had tried to engineer for him was holding at all? Could he be sacrificing all of them for nothing?

"Hey Boss."

His head jerked up. “Harmony!” A somewhat friendly, familiar face at last. “It is so good to see you.”

She looked at him warily. “It is?”

He smiled broadly. “It definitely is.”

Of all the mistakes he had made, Harmony had not been one of them. Temporarily poisoned by Leah’s tainted blood, she’d made a full recovery and had been back to work within a week. A small victory, but a win nonetheless.

Angel jumped out of his seat.

"Hey, so come on in. Have a seat. Relax. Let me get you something for a change. Otter? Or muskrat? Dead-blood free, I promise."

She eyed him warily. "Uh, thanks, but no thanks. I just popped in to go over your calendar, 'kay?"

"Right, sure," Angel nodded and sat on the edge of his desk, rubbing his forehead. "What do you got?"

She held up her large, leather-bound steno pad. "Well, you have breakfast today with the Ano-Movic Clan, midnight golf outing with the Las Vegas vampire gamers union, tomorrow there’s coffee and muffins with the Vinji Clan, lunch with the Britzais, and then the memorial service on Saturday night."

"Memorial service?"

Harmony gaped at him. "For those lost. In the attack?"

"Leah's attack? Oh, you mean…people?"

"Hello, and vamps, too, thank you very much, Mr. I Hate My Own Kind Now. I could've been one of the ones who didn't make it, you know."

"Sorry, you're right. So what do they need from me? Flowers? A speech?"

She sighed theatrically, waving her hand in the air as she headed back out the door. "You can ask Fred. She's the one who organized the whole thing."
"Fred did? When? I mean, why…?"

Harmony spun around on a pink satin heel and leveled him with her fiercest vampire stare - which still made Angel want to sort of smile in spite of himself.

"You mean what would make a total human like Fred care about the lowly, the dead, the demonized, the vamped? Hmm, maybe because she lives with my ex who is one? It all started with, you know, Knox in the lab, when he got drained. I guess she felt bad and then it just took off from there."

She lifted her chin in defiance. "If you can't come and be supportive and pretend to be weepy, maybe you should just forget it."

"I'll be there, Harmony, thank you. I'll even try to weep, honest. Thanks for coming in."

He turned back to his desk and typed into his computer to see his calendar. Harmony had already booked his time in for the memorial service. What could he possibly say? "Hi, I'm Angel, your boss and the reason why all these humans, vampires, and other assorted former employees are dead…"

Yeah, that opener sure needed work.

Listening to Harmony's heels echo down the hall, they seemed to reverberate and loop and get closer to him like some staccato death beat until he realized that another set of heels were approaching him altogether.

Glancing toward his door, Angel's heart sank further. "Eve. What now?"

Hands clasped behind her back, she strode into the room slinkily.

"Hey champ, this is the case file for Monday." She dropped a folder on top of his pile. "Thought you'd like to be the first to know."

Angel frowned. "You're the delivery girl. So I'm hardly the first to know, am I?"

"Let's just say close enough." She folded her arms and waited. "Come on. You have to be a little curious. It's a biggie, could mean the future of this firm. Pretty much unprecedented."

"Gunn's gone," he said flatly.

"Lucky for you, we have a fleet of other lawyers."

"Not like him. He was one of mine. So yeah, I guess you could say without him in my corner, my interest in our cases is a little lacking these days."

Eve rolled her eyes dramatically. "That would be a mistake."

"Then it's my mistake."

She stared at him. "You're not even looking at the file?"

"Not now." He picked up his desk phone. "I need to make a call. Some privacy, please?"

As soon as she left, Angel hung up that phone and pulled out the private cell he kept in his jacket pocket.

"Hey, are you up? I need a huge favor."
Buffy blinked into her cell phone. “Angel? What time is it?”

“A little after eight.”

“In the morning?” Buffy whined.

“Buffy, would you check on Cordelia today?”

She sat up in the hotel room bed. “Isn’t she with you?”

“No. She woke up for real last night. I had to take her to her mother’s.”

“Whoa. Fully coma-free?”

“Yeah,” he hedged. “With a few…side effects.”

“Like?” Buffy encouraged, sitting on the edge of the bed now.

“Buffy, she came to and told me that what we’re living in is a temporal stitch. Ever hear of one of those before?”

“Nope. What does it mean?”

“Something like, we all have to make better choices with what we’ve been given here or what was meant to be will take over and overwrite this reality.”

“Which is something that made her scream when she first woke up, I’m guessing.”

“Exactly,” Angel replied.

“Couldn’t she tell you what that was?”

“There wasn’t time. The Powers That Be gave her only a few minutes and then - poof.”

“‘Poof?’” Buffy stared at the phone. “What kind of ‘poof?’”

“Her memory disappeared. She was all confused when she came to again. First she talked to me like we were back in Sunnydale. Then she started talking like we’d just met up in L.A. I thought about bringing her to her apartment but I didn’t trust her being there alone and I don’t want her anywhere near Wolfram & Hart,” he admitted softly.

“Angel…”

“I want to help her, you know? Like she helped me all those years. I should take her back to her place, move in with her until all of her memories come back. Right? I know that’s what I should do. Then Harmony comes in and I’ve got all these appointments and meetings and - ”

“Angel!” Buffy said louder. “I’ll go. Give me the address.”

“Thanks Buffy,” he said gratefully. “I owe you one.”

“I’ll put it on your tab,” she sighed and hung up the phone.
Visiting Hours

Buffy mentally tried and rejected several greetings in the span of time between ringing Cordy's doorbell and having the door opened. Not enough time, for really more than:

"Hey."

A pause. "Buffy?" The door opened wider. "Buffy Summers?"

"Hey," Buffy said again, attempting warmth.

"What are you doing in this neighborhood?" She surveyed Buffy critically. "I'm pretty sure that the guy next door who sold you that faux Louis Vuitton out of the back of his El Camino doesn't take returns or exchanges."

"I'm here for you, actually. Can I come in?"

Cordy, wrapped in a plush pink bathrobe, glanced around Buffy's back. "You bring your freak-show field trip with you? Because I'm not in the mood for any more Sunnydale surprises."

Buffy tried to smile. "Just me."

Cordy sighed and shrugged. "Whatever." She didn't so much invite her guest in as step away from the door.

Once inside, she first eyeballed then grabbed on to Buffy's bag.

"Wow. Genuine Louis. My bad. Guess we can say that's a score on the side of the future – you learned how to accessorize."

"The future?" Buffy glanced at her. "So you know."

"About five years of my life going sayonara? Yeah, Mom sort of had to fill me in. The jig was definitely up when I saw the dates on all the new Vogues." She tucked a loose curl behind her ear. "Although whoever Miss Clairoled me has got a pretty sick sense of humor. I feel like my mom's toy poodle." She frowned. "Late toy poodle, that is. So what brings you here? The overwhelming need to gloat?"

"Not even," Buffy said quickly. "Coming out of…what you came out of, well, I went through something kind of similar a while back and…I know how it takes a lot out of you."

"Yeah, that loud sucking sound you hear would be my life, as a matter of fact."

"If you need a friend, or a sort of, not really a friend at all, just somebody who gets the weirdness, I wanted to be here to listen. Before you needed to ask for it."

Cordelia watched Buffy warily. Her face relaxed, she even seemed to nod. "Listen, I - I'm still pretty woozy. You can come to my room if you want."

Buffy followed her down the narrow paneled hall and into a back bedroom, eyes darting around the lavender shrine to all things teenage and Cordy.

"Wow, your mom didn't change a thing, huh."
"I guess part of her always hoped that I would come back. Doesn't exactly fit. The lighting's kinda harsh." Cordy slumped into her vanity chair and flicked on her lighted mirror. "God. Who am I kidding. No bulb in the universe can save me now. I'm just old."

"You look great," Buffy assured her.

"Maybe to you. You're used to getting sucked into demon dimensions without a lick of moisturizer. But to wake up and have to see this?" She turned the mirror lights off, grimacing. "All thanks to Angel."

"I don't know what your mom's been telling you, but Angel wasn't exactly responsible."

"Mom said I went to work for him."

"That's true."

"Knowing your little Angel, wackiness must have ensued. How else do you explain me in Reseda of all places, living with my cosmetic-sample-peddling mother, and too busy recovering from my coma to do more than count the lines in my face with no memory of how they got there?"

Buffy took a deep breath. "I know it seems like a total mind tilt-a-hurl right now…"

"More like a complete nightmare…"

"But it will calm down. It will be who you are and…"

"I'll never get used to it," Cordy told her vehemently.

"Oh," Buffy's mouth dropped open. "I would never…"

"You would never what? You would never get me tied up with weird psycho half-fish frat guys trying to sacrifice me? You'd never get me locked in a high school janitor's closet praying for sunlight so I don't get drained by yet another thirsty gang of vampires? Or maybe you never meant for the mayor to become a giant snake on our graduation day and end up blowing up our high school, huh? Is that all of the stuff you would never?"

"You know, come to think of it, you're right. Angel had nothing to do with any of the batshit insanity my life has spiraled into. It's all thanks to you, Buffy Summers. I think I've had enough of your Slayer curse ruining my life. So if you'd be so kind as to get the hell out of my house, and my life and not ever…"

Buffy deflected all of the barbs thrown her way and instead blinked in surprise and realization. "Cordelia?"

Gasping, the girl licked her lips and then sunk to a sitting position on her bed, her complexion becoming even tighter and more drawn than the mirror's lighting had revealed.

"What did… what did I say?" she whispered.

"You gave me a full low-down on all you remember from Sunnydale. That means," Buffy smiled tentatively. "Your memory’s really coming back. All that time won't be lost to you after all."

"What?" Cordy snapped, her face flooded with indignation. "Then definitely hit replay on my original rant: Leave. Now."

She stood up and flounced toward the door.
Buffy grabbed her arm. "What do you mean?"

"You think I want a repeat in smellovision to the rest of what you and Angel did to me?" She rubbed her stomach absently. "God. That's right. Xander and Willow, too. Shit, I got impaled. Here I thought those funky spots were some old tanning bed scars."

"I know, all of these memories are so fresh and so hurtful…"

"And so completely and utterly your fault."

Buffy closed her eyes and swallowed back a litany of comebacks she wished she could throw at Cordelia. She gritted her teeth with all the patience she could muster.

"You're only remembering the bad stuff right now."

"Ye-es," Cordelia responded with faux sweetness and a bland smile to match, as though she were speaking to someone of very limited intelligence. "Because that's all there is with you and your geek friends, and especially your lame vampire boyfriend."

"He's not… we're not…"

Buffy took a breath and regrouped.

"Cordy. Your life - it wasn’t all bad. You haven't seen the rest of it. You – you were a hero. You helped a lot of people, and not even by accident. You chose it. You ended up becoming," Buffy bit her lip. "The most important person in Angel's life. You saved him, too. He still needs you."

Cordelia folded her arms and looked coolly at Buffy. "Tell Boss Angel that Cordy's off the clock."

"God," Buffy fumed, whipping away from Cordy's smug face. "Somewhere in that over-processed head of yours, is a Cordelia Chase that loved being a part of a team, loved doing her part – even if it meant pain, even if it meant visions you didn't want or understand."

Cordy drew back questioningly. "Visions?"

Buffy turned around to face her. "You had one yesterday before you lost your memory. Something about what could happen to Angel, to all of us, if we don't figure out how to stop whatever it is that's coming. Angel needs your help. Once upon a time, that meant something to you."

For an instant, Cordy's eyes met Buffy's and the Slayer could see a hint, a glimpse of Cordelia reaching out, trying to remember, trying to grasp…

It was gone.

"Once upon a time's just part of a fairy tale, Buffy. As you can see, I'm all grown up now. Show yourself and your fine Italian leather out," she added curtly, opening her bedroom door. "There's a youth-inducing collagen serum sample in the bathroom with my name on it."

Cordy stomped off to the bathroom and slammed the door.

"Cordelia!"

Mrs. Chase appeared at Cordelia's bedroom door. She was wearing a lab coat over a fitted black sheath dress with a Nordstrom nametag hanging askew off one white collar.

"I'll thank you to respect my daughter's wishes," she said quietly. "I really must have her stop
answering the door."

Buffy hung her head for a moment. "Of course. I’m sorry. But if I could talk to her again, you know, after she’s had some rest. I really think it could help if—"

Cordelia’s mother pulled Buffy quickly to the front door. "I may be speaking out of turn, but I don’t care. My daughter has been through a horrific experience. You and your friends parading over here to try and jog her very raw memory… well, it borders on the barbaric. Leave us alone. Leave her alone."

"I-I will." Buffy nodded, finally shamed. "But please let Cordy know - she can come to me or Angel or any of us, any time. We could help - "

"We’ve seen enough of your ‘help,’ so no thank you. Tell that other girl, too, Amy - whatever her name was. The cheerleader. None of you are welcome here.” She closed the door quietly but firmly and Buffy heard four locks click into place.

Amy…

Amy?

Buffy dialed Angel’s number and got voicemail. “I’m pretty sure I pissed Cordy off, which must mean she’s doing halfway okay. Now I’m going to try to interview your friend, Gunn. And hey - do you know about Cordelia talking to anyone from Sunnydale named Amy? Call me."

Anne hung up the phone with satisfaction. Not a bad interruption to a morning at the shelter sorting through boxes of clothing donations - an invitation for a night out with some of the volunteers. Now to convince her date. She heard the clatter of dishes and smelled the waft of strong hot coffee and cinnamony French Toast from the galley kitchen.

“So I got a furniture pick up, and then straight to the courthouse after, not that I’m good for much more than lookin’ like a heavy,” Gunn grumbled, setting plates and coffee mugs down on their scarred wooden kitchen table with a little more force than he had intended.

She looked up from one of the boxes with a start. “Lawyers the kids have. What they need is what you’re bringing them: a young, familiar face and yeah,” she smiled. “A little of that ‘don’t mess with me and mine’ street cred.”

“Baby,” he chuckled, setting down a bottle of maple syrup next to her plate. “You cannot say ‘cred.’”

She got up from her workspace on the floor. “Look, I want you to know: I’m not missing your lawspeak,” she insisted, grabbing his hand before he turned back to the stove. “But I’m guessing you are?”

“I lost more of it, Annie. Like, overnight,” he sighed, squeezing her fingers lightly, unable to meet her eyes. “When Wolfram & Hart made me that lawyer? I didn’t even want it. Then I had it and it was like, here’s something that can make a difference and I don’t have to throw stakes or fists to get it done.”

“What we do here is important, you are important. We make a difference every day - ”

“Annie,” he said quietly, and patted her arm. “You asked so I’m telling. My brains inchin’ further
away every day? It burns.”

She looked down awkwardly. “I know. I just don’t know how to fix it.”

“You can’t,” he leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. “It’s like a whole law library is right on the tip of my tongue, like I can almost get at it. Wish it would just leave me alone for good and I could move on. What I need,” he grinned. “Is a little howlin’ at the moon.”

“Hey,” she glanced up at him brightly. “Like maybe dancing tonight? Chris has got this new bartending gig through the weekend and can sneak us free shots.”

She couldn’t remember the last time they had gone out on a real date. Money was tight and his schedule even tighter. He had barely torn himself away from delivery pickups and court dates to finish the painting.

Then she saw the shadow cross his face. When he said, “howling,” he had meant patrolling, not going out with her.

“Already promised Spike, Annie. He wants to get out on patrol again and I know one of these nights, I’m gonna really need him.”

She nodded and tried not to look disappointed as she slid into one of the kitchen chairs.

“Hey, maybe we’ll go out this weekend, okay?” He flipped two pieces of French toast onto her plate and dropped a paper napkin in her lap. “Now dig in.”

“Charles…”

“Annie, you know the best thing about you and this place? It’s a million miles away from where I was and where I don’t wanna be ever again. I’ll do whatever I gotta do to keep it that way.”

“Oh, okay,” she said in a small voice, picking up her fork.

*Here I thought it was about love.*

Several sticky kisses goodbye later, Anne plunged herself into the many duties waiting her attention around the shelter - and then she didn’t even have to pretend to be busy. Three of her best college volunteers had shown up shortly after breakfast and none of them had stopped moving.

“We’ve got to get these boxes out of the living room,” she announced, waving in two more student volunteers. “There’s group later and no one will have any place to sit.”

Her arms full and her back aching, Anne glanced around at the chaos, barely noticing a young woman about her age and dressed all in black swing through the open door. The girl was dressed too nicely to be a prospective client, more likely another student looking to pick up service hours. Trial by fire, Anne shrugged to herself. Let her pitch in and see if she’ll stick, no time to shake hands and fill out paperwork with a hundred boxes to unpack before dinner time.

A voice called out, “Hello? I’m looking for Anne Steele.”

“Can’t talk right now,” Anne yelled back, hauling yet another box toward the dining room. “If you can lend a hand - hey, James, not those, we haven’t even sorted through them yet…”

Suddenly the girl was in front of her, smiling a little too calmly and sweetly. God, she looked familiar.
“Maybe I’d get a better response from Lily Houston. Chantarelle maybe? How about Sister Sunshine?”

Anne froze.

“You know, I’m really looking for Joan Appleby. Think she can talk to me?”

Slowly, her eyes never leaving the woman’s face, Anne knelt down and placed the box she was carrying on the floor. “I’ll be out back,” she managed to croak to her volunteers and ushered her visitor through the kitchen to the smell of dry rot and heat on the sagging back sun porch.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Someone who can mean a great deal to you, Ms. Appleby.”

“That’s not my name.”

“You can change it all you want, but you can’t change that you came from Sunnydale, California. You had family there, right?” The girl opened a oxblood-red folder from her shoulder bag and read, “Marion Appleby?”

“My aunt.”

“You know she died there, right? When Sunnydale went sinkhole, your beloved aunt got buried under several tons of town. Ever think about the pain and suffering she went through?”

“Doubt she went through any,” replied Anne flatly. “She cooked meth for a living and almost blew herself up three times by the time I was fourteen. Any nerve endings she once had were shot. So she got a great bargain with a concrete slab to the head, in my opinion.”

The girl looked truly surprised. “Wow. That’s harsh.”

“That’s truth. I may be from Sunnydale but it stopped being home to me a long time ago, for reasons you have no business ever understanding.”

The girl replaced the folder in her bag and leaned against the peeling yellow paint of the porch’s back door, a sinister little grin playing on her pretty features. “I’m sure the people here at East Hills would love to hear about your real attitude of sharing and caring - for your own family.”

“I let my work speak for itself,” Anne answered, folding her arms around her chest protectively.

“What about your vampire cult days - you gonna let them speak for you, too? Maybe to Mr. Charles Gunn?”

Anne’s lips went dry. “How could you possibly know -”

“Maybe he’s mentioned how his sister was turned and he had to kill her. Ever since, he’s dedicated his life to wiping L.A. clean of vamps or die trying. Well, him being your live-in boytoy, of course you know that whole story. Too bad he doesn’t seem to know one real tale about you.”

“What the…who are you?” Anne nearly shrieked.

The girl held up a hand as if in solidarity. “A victim, just like you. My name’s Amy and honestly, I am not here to hurt you. We’ve both been through enough of that. What I want is your cooperation and really, it’s going to be the best thing for you.”
“What are you talking about?”

“Too much has been taken from us. We need to get what we deserve.”

“Amy? Were you a cheerleader?”

Amy scowled. “The victims of Sunnydale need to be recognized for their sacrifice. Cash money compensation, leading to the end of a pesky little organization called The Council of Watchers.”

“Wait. Watchers? You mean like Rupert Giles?”

“And Buffy Summers and Willow Rosenberg and yeah, their whole murderous club. Who asked them to destroy a town? They made Sunnydale crumble and they were the last ones to get out alive. My God, the people they killed!” Amy looked bug-eyed and manic.

“The people they saved,” Anne cut in. “Buffy Summers is a hero. She’s the Slayer.”

Amy laughed, a sharp, menacing sound. “Maybe that used to mean something back when you lived in Sunnydale but these days, a Slayer’s just another kind of freak. They’re popping up like posies every day of the week now. How long before these Watchers and Slayers think they can shut down another town if they feel like it? They need to be stopped. Our group will do it.”

“Not with me,” Anne told her. “If your group is against Buffy, I want nothing to do with it.”

“That’s your choice,” Amy sniffed. “In the meantime, you might want to find a way to break it to Mr. Gunn about your vampy past.”

“What makes you think he doesn’t already know?” Anne shot back.

Amy giggled. “The fact that you had to ask that question. Here’s my card. I’ll be looking forward to working with you.”

With a twist to the dusty handle that Anne could’ve sworn had been rusted locked, Amy let herself off the back porch and seemingly into thin air.

“What?” Anne scrambled over to the door and leaning out, she craned her neck around the corner of the porch, desperate to see some scrap of the girl who’d so convincingly threatened her.

Gone. Jumped the fence, dodged traffic, hopped a cab - all in the span of seconds. As if by magic?

“Hello?”


She looked down at the blond girl at the foot of the porch stairs, squinting up at her through the bright morning sun. “Whoa, sorry to frighten you, I was looking for Charles Gunn, his old boss gave me this address and…wow, wait, do I know you?”

“Yeah,” Anne breathed, finally smiling. “Yeah, you do.” She reached her hand out to this new visitor before her.

“Hi Buffy.”
“So I’ve talked to Lorne and I’ve talked to Wes and Angel gave me this address the other day, so here I am. This - I can’t believe it. You’re with Gunn. That’s…great.”

Anne smiled. “I think so.” She cocked her head at Buffy doubtfully. “Except maybe it isn’t?”

“Oh no,” Buffy assured her, taking a last swig of coffee. “Of course it is. I’m just surprised is all. I’m really happy I caught up with you, too. I just…” Her face reddened.

“I get it. You need to talk to Charles for your investigation.”

“Right,” Buffy smiled. “Any idea when he might be back?”

“His day’s pretty jam-packed. Honestly? Probably the best place to corner him is out on patrol tonight,” Anne laughed.

“Gunn patrols?” Buffy blinked.

“Oh, yeah. Not as much as he wants to, he got a pretty bad leg injury a while back that hasn’t healed right but he’s out there,” Anne sighed.

“Any idea where?”

Anne shook her head. “Charles doesn’t talk about that stuff with me. Like, ever.”


“I’m sure you’re right. Still, it’d be nice to at least know - if he’s hurt, if he’s scared, how close he gets to…” She brought a shaking hand up to her mouth. “Anyway. Sorry I can’t be more help.”

“You can, though.”

“What?” Anne glanced at their empty, stained ceramic coffee mugs. “You want more coffee?”

“Sure, please, and some answers. Like, why you thought I was someone named Amy. That’s the second time I’ve heard that name today.”

“Oh, that,” Anne seemed to relax. She flipped a business card across the table to Buffy and got up to retrieve the coffee pot. “I was going to throw it out.”

Buffy scanned the card. “amy@sunnydalemail.com,” she read aloud. “Nothing else? No phone number?”

Anne shook her head. “Just the card.”

“I guess it’s a start.” Buffy looked up at Anne. “Can I ask what she wanted?”

“For me to join some group,” Anne frowned. “Something about survivors of Sunnydale getting what they deserve. Did you and your friends really make Sunnydale collapse?”

“Kind of,” Buffy hedged. “We had help. What did she say?”
“She pulled out my least favorite of a huge dead-beat pile of relatives as one of the ‘victims’ who ‘sacrificed’ themselves, then she promised cash money compensation. Believe me, my aunt being too wasted on drugs to walk out of a collapsing town is not a victim in my book.”

“So you told this Amy person to take a hike?”

Anne looked nervous. “In so many words. I’ve seen the good that you do and how you save people.” She filled Buffy’s coffee cup and glanced away guiltily.

“But she said something to you? Look, you can tell me, we can work it out.”

“She knows, Buffy. About Chantarelle, about all of the me’s. I’ve told Charles a little, about living on the streets. He even knows about me changing my name a bunch of times. He gets it, what you have to do when you’re out there. But the vampire wanna-be cult in Sunnydale?” She shook her head. “I don’t know how he’d connect with any of that.”

“You were a kid, we all do dumb things when we’re kids. Hey, get me, I blew up a gym once. Then a whole school.”

“You were saving people, not traipsing around begging for some sick, twisted fairy tale of immortality. I knew better, Buffy, and I still chose that life. How do I explain that to a sworn vampire hunter? His sister got turned for real and he dusted her - for real. No games. You know,” she paused. “Charles and I were friends for a long time before we started dating. Somehow I thought it would be better, but in a lot of ways, it’s even harder. You feel like you know them so well when you really don’t.”

“Let me guess,” Buffy sighed. “Amy’s holding this little nugget over your head. You don’t join her group, she finds a way to share your past with Gunn.”

Anne nodded.

“I’m in no place to be giving romantic advice, believe me. But blackmail or not, you have to tell this stuff to Gunn or it’s gonna get you. Keeping secrets just pushes you apart. Until secrets are all that are left.” Buffy fingered the business card. “Can I keep this?”

“Go ahead. You’re right. Maybe this is exactly what I need to come clean with Charles once and for all. Either we’ll move past it or… we won’t.”

Buffy put her hand over the troubled girl’s. “Anne… God, you have done so much more with that name than I ever could. All I did was wait tables and you,” she gestured around the room. “You built all of this.”

“With help,” Anne smiled wanly. “I’m still not great at taking care of myself but it turns out I’m pretty good at taking care of other people.”

“Like Gunn?”

Her eyes sparkled. “Especially Gunn.”

“Then keep on doing it. Let me know if there’s anything I can do. Or if Amy makes a repeat performance.” She got up from the table. “I’ll trade her card for mine.” Buffy reached into her back pocket and pulled out one of her last business cards.

“Hey, should I have Charles call you, about patrolling?”
Buffy shook her head. “I have a feeling I’ll bump into him. Patrols are like that.”

As Buffy wound her way through the maze of cardboard boxes to the front door of the shelter, she kept touching the card Anne had given her that felt large and foreboding in her pocket. She had to be missing something here.

More than that, though, her thoughts kept returning to Anne and her beau. Silly, really, when you got down to it. Yet Buffy couldn’t help but over-identify.

Why oh why, Charles Gunn, are you keeping the love of your life from this huge chunk of your life? Hunting lights you up as much as she does, it’s what you need to do, even if it’s dangerous, even if you’re scared. Can’t you see you’re pushing her away?

Grieving for Spike had peeled away Buffy’s layers of pretense and laid bare how having a true partner, especially one who understood her unique life, could be such a comfort. Gunn didn’t know how good he had it.

But, she sighed, those were their problems, not hers, and could not be solved with a stake or a scythe.

Patrolling, though, needed both a stake and a scythe, plus would be the ideal way to get a statement from a Mr. Charles Gunn that would move her investigation in the right direction.

Just like that, Buffy had a plan for the rest of her day.

“No,” Fred whispered, dumping the contents of her purse on her desk one more time. “No, no, no, no, no. Please no.”

Thanks to the notes she’d jotted down when visiting Connor, she had such a clear picture in mind of how to organize the memorial service she had arranged for Saturday night. Now she wanted to review her ideas so she could make a program and a schedule for Harmony to distribute. Only where could the notebook be?

Lipstick, compact, wallet, checkbook, keys, cell phone, empty prescription bottle, three gel ink pens…clearly, no notebook. No small leather-bound notebook that had been her constant companion these last few weeks. Its loss hit harder than she would have expected from some material object. Yet it had come to mean a great deal to her beyond its surface value. And she’d lost it. Just like everything else.

“Ohh, no,” she moaned softly, sinking to her knees on the floor. "It can't be gone. It just can't.”

For the past month, she'd kept what passed for a miniature version of formulas on walls in this notebook secreted in her purse. Spike had thought that she'd simply gotten better, hadn't needed the dry erase boards that he'd bought for her recovery. Gradually, she had stopped using them and started using the notebook instead. While the white boards became less scribbled upon, Spike brightened more every day. No coincidence, his happiness, no further testing necessary on that result. She told him to take them down and from the look of relief on his face, she knew she'd made the right decision.

Until now.
A small section of that same notebook had also held times, addresses, names and observations regarding one Connor Reilly and his daily whereabouts. With every covert visit, she'd gathered more information, more evidence that the selective amnesia they'd all suffered hadn't yet left Connor – the operative word here being "yet."

Any change to his systematic schedule-keeping bordering on the obsessive (laundry every Monday, library on Tuesday, groceries every Wednesday, beer run every Thursday, pizza every Friday, movies on Saturday, dinner with the family on Sunday), Fred would be the first to know. Or she would have been the first to know, had she not conveniently lost her notebook.

"I'll start over," she whispered. "This time I'll tell Spike. Maybe he can even help me. We'll go visit Connor together and he'll know all of the wonderful things about this beautiful boy that all of us were never supposed to remember."

The tears came hard and fast then for the whole cycle of loss that continued to spin them all like an out-of-control centrifuge. Connor had been erased from them all, even erased from himself. Would he, too, return or augur the arrival of someone else? Something worse, perhaps...

All at once, a wave of nausea swept over Fred and sent her careening to the lab’s unisex bathroom. For the first time since its appearance, the heartburn took on a life of its own and roared out as projectile vomit into the toilet. Heaving so hard, she felt as though her entire body cavity was turning inside out, she could barely catch her breath and imagined herself watching some particularly sick specimen going through this agony. Shaking violently, she rested her burning head against the cool porcelain of the toilet and fairly begged for relief.

Just as quickly, the sickness left her and with it, tapped out most of her energy. She slumped into a heap and rested against the tile wall, panting. The sickness had passed. She would get up. She would continue her day as though nothing had happened.

But not yet.

Under the sooty light of sunset, the men met each other halfway in the alley with arms extended for half-hugs and handshakes, a type of greeting recent enough to make them both smile self-consciously.

"How's the private sector these days?" Spike asked.

"They're all poor and so am I," Gunn chuckled. "But nothing beats the good night's sleep I get from a clear conscience."

"And Anne?"

Gunn grinned. "Yeah, she makes for a good night's sleep, too. How's our girl?"

"Good, I think," Spike said. "Yeah, better. I hope." He wondered how many times he had said or thought those exact words and the sentiment of worry and uneasiness behind them.

"She's goin' out on her own yet?"

"All over creation," he mumbled, thinking about Fred’s errands for Angel and her reticence about them. "Anyway, thanks for meeting up, Charlie. I know you don't need the muscle."

"Out on these streets, no such thing as too much muscle," Gunn replied, swinging the crossbow from
behind his back into his hands. "Though I gotta say, didn't expect on you getting out here again so soon."

"Doesn't seem soon."

"Married life getting you down?" Gunn joked, but Spike could see the warning in his eyes for anything that could be read as injury to Fred. *Good on him.*

Spike met his eyes. "Not me. Fred on the other hand…"

"Ah, she gave you the boot," Gunn nodded, understanding.

"Hey!" Spike choked. "We're still together! Not in need of your shelter yet!"

"Nah, man, I mean, she got sick of you bein' under her feet all the time. Don't sweat it, it means she's getting better, ready to take on her life again."

"Right," Spike said softly, keeping these thoughts to himself: that perhaps her life meant a longer time back than he'd been in the picture.

"Look, I know Fred Burkle, and as it is, longer than you - not better, just longer - so listen up," Gunn said, slapping a hand on Spike's shoulder. "You got nuthin' to worry about. That girl loves you and take it from me, that ain't a decision she makes overnight."

Spike glanced at him. "He speaketh from experience."

"Yeah," Gunn nodded. "It's no secret I carried the torch for Fred longer than she cared about it bein' lit."

Spike suddenly wanted to hear more about that. "When did you know?" he asked gruffly. "When it wasn't lit from her, that is. She come out and tell you?"

"Fred?" Gunn asked incredulously. "You gotta be kidding. Nah, she worked up to it quiet. On the surface, everything looked tight. But she just kept pulling away, you know? Until one day," he shook his head sadly. "One day, I saw her right next to me but I knew she was gone."

Spike blinked. "Jesus, I'm a selfish fuck. Whining to you of all people 'bout Fred."

"It's cool," Gunn shrugged. "I said I carried the torch, didn't say it still smoked."

Spike couldn't help glancing at him. "Does it?"

"Truth?" Gunn walked silently for a few moments. "I didn't like the sound of you from day one. Angel had plenty of stories to tell."

"As he does," Spike sighed.

"Hated it more when I found out how much time you were spending with Fred, even when you didn't have hands to keep to yourself. But you give that girl a problem and she works it. I remember talking to her on the phone and I could tell she had it in her head that there was no giving up on you."

Spike felt his chest puff a little at that admission.

"Since then," Gunn continued. "Well, shit. I don't have to tell you all that we've been through. Crazy Slayer, car crash, Angel and his memory spell," he shook his head. "One constant in all of it has
been you and Fred. You standing by each other. Gives a brother hope,” he grinned.

"So we're good?” Spike asked.

"Hell yeah,” Gunn nodded. "You carry your own in a fight and some of mine, plus you're always up for a beer and a round of sticks, and no,” he looked over at Spike. "I ain't still smokin' for Fred. Besides, can't say it went down bad lookin' at what I got."

"Annie's a keeper."

"She ain't the only one."

"I know it,” Spike muttered, turning the corner of the darkened alley and feeling a strange mixture of comfort and embarrassment.

"Now for fuck's sake, let's kill something while I've still got my balls intact."
After the cab skidded to the entrance of Buffy’s hotel, she flew out of the door and up to her room. She had to check if Wes’ email had come in, transfer Lorne’s notes about Leah into something resembling an official account, and fax everything to Giles. Plus, do some digging about the Amy individual and why she would be interested in visiting former Sunnydale residents.

Oh, and then patrol - while also looking for Charles Gunn.

“No wonder Giles had me for the muscle,” Buffy grumbled. “I think paperwork is worse.”

She stared at her desk to face her most recent and formidable opponent that might well and truly break her.

“Stupid computer.”

She’d give anything to not even open the laptop, and yet her investigation depended on it.

Or…

A thought occurred to her and she dialed her cell phone instead.

“Hey, who do you remember from home who was a cheerleader named Amy?”

“Buffy?” Dawn asked. Buffy heard movement in the background, like Dawn had gotten up and moved elsewhere.

“Yeah, it’s me.” Buffy glanced at the phone, pulling off her business-like interview ensemble in favor of something more patrol-friendly. “You’re not in bed?”

“Not exactly. Hi, by the way,” she added teasingly.

“Yes, sorry. Hi, hello, I love you. So - Amy?”


Buffy pulled a shirt over her head. “Shit, shit, shit. Not Willow’s bad influence witchy friend from high school, Amy. It can’t be. There has to be another Amy. This is supposed to be a cheerleader. Which Amy was, true, for like a millisecond…”

“What’s going on with Amy?”

“Not exactly sure. Both Cordelia Chase’s mother and Anne Steele, who used to live in Sunnydale, brought her up today. I have an email on a business card for her and that’s it.”

“Did you try Googling the email?”

Buffy stopped mid-leg in leather pants and stared at the phone. “How can you be younger, taller, and smarter than me all in the same, perfect, size four body?”

Buffy could hear her sister grin. “Come on, what’s the email? I’m right at my computer.”

Buffy smiled with gratitude. “Dawnie, you’re officially the best. It’s…” She dug the card out of the pocket of her business pants. “Amy@sunnydalemail.com.”
After a few keyboard taps, Dawn spoke. “Okay, let’s just… oh. OH.”

“Oh? What oh? What do you see?”

“Um, Buffy?” Dawn squeaked out in the kind of tiny voice she had used when she had to confess how she had stained her sister’s favorite silk tank top. “How hard would it be for you to get on your computer right now?”

“As hard as my computer wants to make it. Hold on.”

Padding over to the desk, Buffy pulled up the laptop screen and logged in.

“Mr. Dell, your ass is mine,” she grumbled. “Okay, hotel wifi, check. And…oh, my God.”

“Right? You’re seeing it, right?”

“I’m seeing it, all right,” Buffy muttered.

The email search led to a link for a website for some group called the Alliance of Sunnydale Survivors, with a black-clad, militantly-posed Amy Madison pictured prominently in the middle of the page. "WE FELL DIVIDED," the block letters over her photo claimed. "LET US RISE UP UNITED."

“Do you think she knew it spelled ‘A.S.S.’ when she chose it?” Dawn asked.

“I don’t think she cared. This website looks like she pieced it together on the fly. What is this, ‘the victims’ page? What victims? ‘Our Members,’ let’s see what…oh no she did not!” Buffy yelled.

“What? What did she not do?”

“She’s got Cordelia and Mrs. Chase and Anne Steele on here. Anne doesn’t even want to be a part of this group - or so she told me. Dawn, there must be over a hundred names listed.” Her eyes scanned the page.

“Buffy, I know these people,” Dawn said, obviously reading from her own computer screen an ocean away. “From Sunnydale.”

“Me, too,” Buffy replied, her throat suddenly dry.

“What do you think this page is even for?”

Buffy felt a chill go up her back. “Nothing good.”

“So what do we do?”

Buffy looked down at her half-complete outfit.

“I was going to patrol.”

A silence. “Really? But it’s been so long. Are you sure you’re ready?”

“Of course I’m ready,” Buffy scoffed. “I’ve also got to interview Angel’s guy, Charles Gunn out there. Kind of a two for one deal.”

“Buffy, why don’t you come back to Rome? We can work on this together from here.”
Both Buffy’s mouth and the boot she’d been trying to put on dropped to the floor.

“Wha-?”

“This feels dangerous,” Dawn said nervously.

“Pfft, what dangerous?” Buffy dismissed. “If we’re talking Amy Madison, I could snap the girl in two just by giving her a sharp look.”

“It feels…icky. Don’t you think?”

“No. Weird and kinda lame? Yes. Icky? Not really…” Buffy pulled first one and then the other boot on and jumped up.

“Are - are you going to look for her?”

“Since I didn’t see an actual physical address to scope out, I don’t see how I could.”

“What if she finds you? She’s out there! She’s obviously out there making all kinds of contacts, the names are listed right there and at least some of them have to be in the greater Los Angeles area,” Dawn fretted.

Buffy sat on the bed, suddenly itching to get out on the streets.

“You want me to look up all these people and what, visit them? Ask them what Amy’s told them and how to get in touch with her? In addition to all the interviews I’m not getting, the information I’m not faxing to Giles, and the headway I’m not making with this Slayer investigation?”

Dawn went silent. When she finally spoke, her voice was small and tight.

“That’s what Watchers do. And it just seems safer. That’s all.”

“Dawnie, I’m safe. Hey, you know what would be awesome? If you and Will and Xander could be my research buds, just like the old days. Find out what Amy’s really up to and gauge the threat. What do you think?”

“Yeah, I’ll get right on that,” Dawn answered sarcastically. “Because I’m not busy with my own life stuff or anything.”

“What stuff?” Buffy snorted - and then froze. Clearly, she’d chosen the absolute wrong thing to say at the absolute wrong time. “Dawn, I’m sorry, you know what I mean -”

“At the moment, I’m going out,” Dawn snapped.

Buffy raised her eyebrows and glanced at the clock while doing quick math. “At this hour? What, you’ve got some kind of hot date?” she joked.

“Bingo.”

Buffy’s smile froze. “Really. Anyone I know?”

“Look, I’ll get the gang started on our little research assignment, don’t worry,” Dawn said testily. “In the meantime, try not to get killed or hexed or anything else out there.”

Sensing the end of the call, Buffy threw in her own two cents for late night safety, “Don’t you stay out all night!” into the phone, adding, “Bring weapons!” for good measure. The line had gone dead.
Midnight Rome time. Where in the world could Dawn be going?

Was there someone special in Dawn’s life? Had she even mentioned a guy? Had Buffy perhaps, and she shuddered to think it, ignored Dawn’s attempts to talk to her about it? Not since her resurrection had Buffy felt so utterly disconnected from such important details that she’d obviously shrugged off. Here she didn’t even have a recent death to blame it on. She’d been alive and kicking the whole time, oblivious.

With any luck, she could work off all of these frustrations come sundown, as long as Los Angeles traffic would cooperate.

But first…she dragged herself into the desk chair. Paperwork.

Dawn flipped the phone closed and tried to catch her breath. Strong, warm hands squeezed her shoulders.

“Hey, you ready?”

“Grr, she makes me so mad sometimes!” Dawn exclaimed, squeezing the phone in her fist. “When I think about what we’re trying to do here…”

“Give Buff a pass, okay? You know she’s going through a thing. Plus, who knows what her Slayer Spidey Senses are picking up in good old Hell-A.? Dawn,” Xander turned her around to face him. “Remember why you started this in the first place.”

Dawn nodded, feeling her body unwind. “I know. You’re right.”

“As to my previous question: you ready?”

She chewed on her lip. “Would you think I’m a big wimp if I admitted I’m a little nervous?”

“With the crowd down there? I’d think you were a big crazy person if you weren’t. I also think you’re going to kick ass.” He kissed her forehead. “Which seems to be just a regular day in the life of Dawn Quixote.”

She puffed out a little breath like readying herself for a race. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

"Damn it!” Wesley exclaimed from the depths of his yellow ruled notebook, sending a couple about to sit next to him at the bar scurrying away instead.

"Another," he snapped to the bartender distractedly, shoving over a rocks glass full of melted ice cubes. A green hand replaced his drink in front him. Unseeing, Wes took a swig, staring at his scrawled pages, and made a face when the liquid hit his throat.

"Club soda?"

He looked up and saw a concerned Lorne staring back at him.

"Oodles-full. On the house. Twisted the lime myself. "

"My addiction was never alcohol," Wes said, lip curling.
"It might be, you keep swigging the hard stuff like it's going out of style." Lorne leaned across the bar. "Why don't you burn the midnight oil on your own lamp, huh? Go home. Maybe sip on that sweet nectar we night owls call sleep."

"If only I could," Wesley muttered. "There are far more important things than rest at this point. I can feel it, that I'm getting close to a breakthrough."

"That would be breakdown, my bookwormy pal. Frankly, your belfry's looking a little too full of batty at the moment. You're spooking my tourist customers all the way back to Pasadena."

"Don't you understand?" Wes fumed. "I can't be at home, alone, waiting for…" He rubbed his eyes. Vail didn't have his cell phone number, thankfully, or chose not to use it. Left by his home phone and his own devices, Wesley worried what his weakened condition might promise the dark magician.

"…waiting for change," he finished quietly, leaning into his glass and trying to ignore the disturbed glances of a few startled patrons. "I have to incite some myself. Starting with where we came from, how we got here."

Lorne looked at him quizzically, folded his arms as he leaned in. "By 'here,' you're not talking about a wrong turn at Albuquerque, are ya?"

"Lorne, what did we leave behind when we took our roles at Wolfram & Hart?"

"You mean besides our good sense and souls?"

"I can't help thinking about the Hyperion and all that we did before we left it. Defeating Jasmine. Losing Connor. All that Angel tried to wipe away from us." He sipped his teetotaling drink. "Say what you will about rehabilitation, it certainly gives you time to ponder."

"From the looks of it, a little too much." Lorne looked at Wesley's tattered legal pad and raised his eyebrows. "You're playing Boggle without a net there, Wink."

"Remember what Jasmine told us? Nothing that exists in this world can name itself. It's like a power source. When the keeper uttered Jasmine's true name, her façade decayed and broke her spell. Thus freeing us all."

"You rolling to a point sometime soon?"

Wesley leaned in to Lorne until they faced each other nose-to-nose. "Wolfram & Hart has another name. Its true name. In it, is the key on how to defeat it."

Lorne's face shifted into brief surprise, then into sympathy. "Geez, Wes. That sounds great and all, but how many saps besides us do you think the old wolf, ram, and hart have screwed over in the past millennia or so?" He held up his hands in apology. "I'm not saying your theory doesn't have legs. What I'm saying is, I don't think you're going to get to where you need to be on a few recycled pages."

"That's why I'm developing a computer program," Wes said excitedly, pulling out another notebook from a stack next to him. "The coding will eventually generate all available permutations of Wolfram & Hart's name in any archaic, demonic, or contemporary human language. Hopefully, then, unlocking the key to their demise."

"When did you add writing computer code to your bag of tricks?"
"I'm merely jotting down some equations. I can't actually do the necessary programming."

"So what are you waiting for?" Lorne nudged him. "Call her."

"Oh, well," Wesley coughed. "Uh, I'm sure I don't know who…"

"Who!" Lorne scoffed. "Yeah, right. Ms. Mac Momma herself, better known as the adorkable Winifred Burkle, you know who. She'll program you right and still respect you in the morning."

"Er, I'm sure she's busy," he mumbled, embarrassed. "No need to trouble her with my trifles. I'm sure this is all a long shot. It's merely something to keep my hands occupied."

"Wes, this is the first thing I've seen you jazzed about in months. That alone counts for something. Who knows? It may even work. But we'll never know unless you, you know," he winked. "Call Fred!" Lorne stood up.

"Geez, and add Gunn to the list, too, would ya? It'd do my heart good to see some fences patched up."

"Is she happy, Lorne?" Wes asked softly.

"Fred? Are you kidding? Larks fly by to get pointers from that kid." Lorne cleared his throat and began to croon: "'When you're in love, when you're in love there is no way on earth to hide it/when you're in love, really in love you simply let your heart decide it…' Hey there, welcome to Caritas, gents. What can I do you for?" Lorne grabbed two cocktail napkins and walked over his new customers.

"How nice for her," Wes whispered and buried his face further into his notebook.

Spike and Gunn lapsed into a comfortable silence as they patrolled Charles' usual route of back streets and blind alleys. Something, though, did not set well with Spike – not the company, but something amiss in the atmosphere.

"It's quiet," he said finally. "Too quiet."

"Been thinkin' the same thing," Gunn muttered. "I don't get it. Month or so back, I had a couple of close calls out here, the vamps were so thick."

Spike glanced at him. "You never told me that."

Gunn shrugged. "You had better things goin' on. But that's what makes it so off. Where are they all?"

Tipping his head back, Spike took a read on the air. "Something's here. Or well on its way."

"Thing like a demon?"

"Not a demon. Not a human either."

Spike rolled his eyes at the obviousness of the scent.

"Just a bird halfway in between with a taste for expensive Italian shampoo."

Heels clipped out of the shadows.
“Spike?”

“Slayer.”

“Whoa,” grunted Gunn.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Same as you, I reckon, makin’ the streets safe for bloody humanity,” Spike replied. “Thought you had riddle-solving to play on the Watchers’ dime.”

“I have been,” she said edgily. “I thought I’d stretch my legs. Then my Slay-dar went off like whoa.” Buffy eyed him cautiously. “I guess I know why.”

“Looks like you are the only vamp out tonight,” Gunn said, glancing around.

“Out here? You gotta be kidding,” Buffy said and then stuck out her hand. “Sorry. Buffy Summers.”

Their palms met. “Yeah, figured that out already or would’ve by your grip,” Gunn winced. “Charles Gunn.”

Buffy smiled. “I thought I might’ve picked up on something familiar. From the shelter,” she explained. “I talked to Anne earlier and she said you’d be out here and here you are.”

Gunn stared at her. “You sniffed me out?”

Buffy shrugged. “Only a little.”

“Helluva trick, Slayer,” Spike noted.

“So what’s the Slayer want with me?”

“You’re next in line to answer what has become the question of the week, that being: where were you on the afternoon of Leah Morgan’s murder?”

Gunn glanced at Spike before answering. “Laid up in a hospital bed with a leg broken in three places and a totaled company car.”

“God, the car accident, that’s right.” Buffy shook her head. “That could’ve been really harsh – not that a broken leg isn’t but…”

“Could’ve been worse,” Gunn nodded. “I heard it.”

“Whatever you heard about the death of that Slayer came second hand, I get that,” Buffy said. “But is there something you’d like to say for the record?”

Gunn’s expression eased into blankness. “I heard she got what was coming to her. Worked for me.”

“I can’t believe you people!” Buffy cried, throwing her hands up. “A Slayer dies, and no one thinks to ask for details?”

“Maybe we’re all a bit jaded on that subject, pet,” Spike said lowly.

“Yeah, well, this girl isn’t coming back,” Buffy snapped. She took a breath and swallowed. “Not that I necessarily think that’s a bad thing. Off the record.”
The three of them huddled together, the silence between them practically creaking with their shared discomfort. Buffy looked especially thrown, with her eyes flitting back and forth as though afraid to let her gaze settle on Spike for too long.

In one of these moments, in another time, he'd seek to comfort her, ply her with a joke or even a caress – never knowing, of course, how he'd be received. Sometimes he'd earn a shared smile, or maybe a bruising, forceful kiss. Other times still, she'd punch him in the face, wholly unprovoked except in his affection.

"Well," Buffy cleared her throat. "You guys can go. I'll take it from here." She looked over at Gunn. "Bones are still healing, right? Walking out here all night can't be a party."

"I manage," he frowned, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. "Thing is, there's no action tonight, 'cept for him."

"I can't believe that Spike's all I picked up on."

Spike glared at her. "Hey!"

"No offense. But from the little I remember of L.A., this part of town used to be vamp central."

"Not lately," Gunn said. "I switch my patrols, you know. Map 'em out, mix 'em up, different neighborhoods. Every night, I'm goin' out farther to get a kill. It's almost like what would be huntin' me is gettin' hunted, too. Only worse."

Buffy met Spike's eyes at that comment.

"You didn't tell me that part of the story, either, Charlie-boy."

"Didn't think about it before."

"Think about it now," Buffy said, her breath quickening. "What do we know that scares demons as much as they scare humans?"

Gunn drew himself up to his full height. "They know I've got it goin' on!"

"Besides that."

"A Slayer, that's the obvious," Spike said. "But you just got here. Think it's a baby Slayer troop makin' their first rounds?"

"I…" Buffy paused. "I have no idea."

 Spike cocked an eyebrow. "Really? Figured a big-time Watcher like you would at least have the skinny on her own former state."

"There just hasn't been time to catch up with all the Slayers out there, in California or anywhere else," Buffy explained, feeling guilty. "There aren't enough of us."

"Makes sense on how the crazy one fell through the cracks then," Spike said.

Buffy frowned, then shook her head. "I don't sense any Slayer juice, do you? So what else?"

Spike felt the inevitability of the situation descend on them like a fog.

"Only other thing I got, I know you don't want."
"No." She pressed her lips together and shook her head from side to side. "Don't. Don't say it."

Gunn looked wildly at each of them. "What? What is it?"

Buffy choked the words out. "The First."

"Oh, sure," Spike pointed at her. "you get to say it."

"The huh?" Gunn asked.

"The First, as in the original, primary, accept-no-substitutes Evil," Spike answered, producing a cigarette from his pocket and lighting up. "Which would mean a world of dead Slayers, old family ghosts on parade, and an apocalypse to cap the whole sodding shebang. If it's true."

"We're not saying it is," Buffy interjected quickly. "It's just a theory."

Spike smirked. "Seein' how those always work out so well..."

"You mean the thing you pulled a whole town on you to stop?" Gunn asked, nudging Spike. "That First Evil?"

"One and the same."

Gunn paced for a few nervous seconds. "I guess I'm not alone in thinkin' that L.A. topplin’ down might leave a bigger mark."

"Might singe a few more hairs," Spike muttered, running a hand over his scalp. "It crossed my mind, yeah."


"'Fraid your wishin' on it won't make it any less real."

"I refuse to count any chickens before they're rotisseried. This patrol ends now. We rally the gang, or however many are rallyable in this area code, and we strategize starting tomorrow."

"You always like this?" Gunn asked.

"Yes," Spike answered. "She is."

Buffy shot both men a sour look. "Let's just say I've had a lot of practice at this. Too much."

"All right," Gunn sighed. "Gotta side with the lady." He began to walk out of the alley. "We goin'?"

"You two go. I'll make a quick round." She turned on her heel and headed deeper into the alley.

It took Spike only a moment to glance at her retreating back.

"Like hell you will!"
“Buffy.” Spike walked quickly behind her.

"I told you I've got it."

"There's nothing here to get."

She stood still. "I'm not convinced of that."

For some reason, the resolute set of her stance in that alleyway made him burn with anger. It was as though she was trying to prove something to him – to herself, too – that she wouldn't be running away from this fight. Not the one from the First – God, it couldn't be all that again, could it?—but from him.

How many ways could he tell her no fight for him even existed? He loved Fred - no contest.

He stalked back up the alleyway and leaned into her face. "When I say there's nothing here, I mean no vamps, no reason for a hunt. Read between another set of lines, pet."

"I know what you meant," she said coolly.

"So where's the law office from here, then?"

Buffy looked around furtively. "What do you mean?"

"Or your hotel. Basic pointing will do. Which way?"

She stared at him, and then pointed a defiant finger over his shoulder.

He chuckled.

"Maybe from bloody Seattle, love. This city ain't yours and it shows. Despite your bloodhound routine with Gunn, you're out of practice. I'm not gonna leave you alone out here when simple sense of direction ain't in your Slayer package."

"Go home, Spike. Leave the Slaying to us."

"You think I've lost the fight, just 'cause I'd rather keep you safe? Not see you get torn to bits means I've gone soft? Or," he bit on the words, "you just looking to get a beating to spite me?"

"Just go."

"Not without you."

"Try me."

He grinned in spite of himself. "Gladly."

They traded quick blows, first lightly, both of them easing into their familiar physical banter and enjoying the game of it. Then each one began daring the other to play a little harder. The punches landed with more force, were blocked with more of a push, until finally he caught her in a mid-flip as she aimed her boots at his chest, spun her legs and threw them over his shoulder.
"Out we go!" he sang while she rained her fists on his back.

"Spike! Put me down!"

She struggled against him violently, thrashing against his legs and throwing him off balance, tumbling them both to the pavement.

"OW!"

They bumped heads to elbows and knees, winding up tangled together with her rolled on top of him and breathing heavily.

"I didn't plan this," he protested, gearing up for the next round of their fight.

"Neither did I."

Forget how she clung to him, how her body eased into his like the first clasp of a practiced waltz. Forget how she smelled, all angry and piquant, the subtle differences mixed with the familiar. The new splash of Europe on her wrists and in her hair, on the surface of her clothes could not mask the true core scent that he would always associate with her.

Forget her he had, but it all came rushing back with her arms and legs entwined with his.

They lay like that for several agonizing seconds. Finally, his senses clearing, he took her arms and gave her a small shove.

"Up you go," he said, averting his eyes from the pain in her face. "Patrol all night if you have a mind to."

"That's what you think this is about? Patrolling?" She stood up and swatted her hair back. "If we're up against the First again for real, I have to know, Spike. I have to know now and I have to do something about it because if it rises again, it's going to be me to beat it back into the ground. Not you."

"Right," he sneered. He pushed himself up with the flats of his palms, brushing the gravel off his pant legs as he stood up. "Slayer's privilege, she can't save the world without her bloody cheering section."

"No!" she cried. "Because I won't bury you again, Spike, okay? Not ever, ever again!" Buffy put her face in her hands and sobbed. "I can't lose you like that a second time. I won't."

Spike bent his head forward, cringing at her tears. If he put a hand on her shoulder at this moment, he'd get the kiss instead of the punch. That part of her, at least, was predictable.

"Buffy, I'm here. Maybe not the way you want, but here. I always seem to come back. Like a bad penny, yeah?"

"Me too," she sniffled.

"Whatever this is, we'll fight it like we've always done. Got Angel and his crew to rope in for this one, Winifred included."

Buffy stiffened and flashed an even stiffer smile. "Sure."

She turned away from him.
"Look away from it all you like. You need to know, Slayer," Spike said to her back, "that whatever's comin' down, Fred'll be by my side and she'll do her part."

"I know it seems that way now," Buffy said weakly.

"Seems to be because it is."


"Felt it on occasion as well," he said pointedly.

"Then you know…"

"I know Fred. Look, when I first came back, you could say I got my ideal sentence. All I ever had was me. Came back, didn't even have that. 'No-body,' no 'matter,'" he grinned ruefully at his puns. "No interaction. Win always saw me. Saw me clean through – not like that was hard. But she grounded me. Took me in before I had a body, before she even knew I'd have a soul. Took me exactly as I was. Then," he smiled in reflection. "Took me."

"God, Spike," Buffy grimaced. "I thought we were talking about life and death here."

"I love her!" he bellowed in sudden fury and frustration. "What's more life and death about that? Would you leave off at it? Stop making me bloody explain myself? Stop making me say things that come out wrong?"

Buffy's sudden steps spoke louder than any response, quick flicking heels that breezed by his side, carrying her away from him and out of the alley.

Spike trudged out of the maze of littered asphalt pathways, finally meeting Gunn back where they had parked their cars earlier that evening.

"We gone?"

"Yeah." Spike looked around. "Happen to see any brassed-off Slayers?"

Gunn pointed to Spike's car, to the female silhouette in the passenger's seat.

Spike passed a tired hand over his eyes. "Right."

"You want me to drive her instead?"

"More than you know. But she's here because of me. Or how she thinks on it anyway. Best own up to it." He paused at Gunn's quizzical look. "Buffy hasn't interviewed Fred yet and if I work it right, she never will."

Gunn's eyes widened briefly and then relaxed into grudging admiration. "You're gonna take the heat for that Slayer."

"That's the plan. In the meanwhile, do us a favor? Ring Fred, tell her to expect me home? She must be done with work by now."

Gunn grinned. "You got it."

Buffy did not speak when Spike entered the car, nor did she open her mouth when he started the engine and rolled the car onto the freeway.
He knew this routine: she had bared her all to him; it was his turn to give something back. Knowing all the moves didn't make it any less of a trial. Exhausting she was and oh, how he once had ached to be so tired.

Now he merely wanted rest.

"Where to?" he asked.

Buffy gave him a sidelong glance. "Where are you going?"

"Home. It's late."

"Fine. The hotel then. Next exit, then left."

He turned to look at her. "You're really going to go your hotel, not double back and go wandering about on your own?"

She held up two fingers in a mock peace sign. "Slayer Scout's honor. Which reminds me…"

He tried not to sigh. "Surprised you waited this long, Slayer."


"Right," he sighed. "We fought, she lost, she died. The end."

"That explanation never cuts it. Especially not now."

He glanced over at her, curiosity piqued. "What's any different about now?"

"Newsflash, Spike - new Watcher’s Council, new rules. Killing a Slayer for any reason brings with it a whole new set of consequences."

"She was psychotic," Spike argued. "She could have killed us all. Nearly bloody did."

"I know. That's why I'm interviewing everyone. To give you a real case."

Spike screeched to a halt in front of Buffy's Hilton.

"Case? You saying I'm on trial here?"

"I won't lie to you. There's a very good chance of that. Depending on what the results of my interviews are, what everyone has to say..."

"You were going to tell me this when?"

"I'm telling you now. That's why it's more important than ever that you talk to me- that everyone who was there does. The sooner they do, the sooner this will be all over."

"And the sooner you're gone," he added. Seeing her stricken expression, he attempted a smile. "Didn't mean that as it came out."

"Sure," she smiled awkwardly. "Talk to me tomorrow? We've got huge work to do." He nodded and she got out of the car. He floored the accelerator out of the driveway, his mind firmly fixed on the only place he wanted to be.
"Must…” Wesley murmured, tossing himself in restless throes of sleep. "Must finish."

Lorne placed a cool washcloth on his friend's sweating forehead and pulled the smooth sheets of his bedding up to Wesley's chin. Lorne would gladly bunk on his apartment's pull-out sofa to give Wes, who'd stayed working at Caritas all night and into the wee hours of the morning, a chance at sleep. Wes had barely been conscious and had not protested when Lorne and the bouncer demon, Bruno, carted Wes back to Lorne’s room.

In truth, it was the best solution. Lorne didn't want to let the guy out of his sights in this condition.

"Must…figure it out," Wes groaned.

"You will, buddy," Lorne muttered. "Even if I have to freeze hell over myself."
Their apartment at midnight. Dark, quiet, the whole space lying in wait for him and somewhere in its shadows, a girl - his girl - waiting, too. Involuntarily, he shivered at the thought.

"Win?"

Spike peeked into the living area, then the kitchen. The master bedroom door stood wide open with the bed still made. He pulled off the t-shirt that reeked of another woman, balled it up and threw it across the room.

A pair of slim, warm hands glided up his back and across his chest.

His breath caught and his eyes closed. The hands slid further down, unlatching his belt buckle, undoing the top button of his jeans, and pulling his zipper down with delicate ease.

"Did you hunt?" Fred whispered huskily.

"Yeah," he groaned. Her hands slipped beneath his jeans and began to stroke him.

"Did you catch?"

"No," he shuddered, leaning into the warm insistent kneading of her fingers against his flesh, already hardening and lengthening for her.

"Don't you want to catch?" she asked, her hushed voice turning girl-like and teasing.

He bent his head backwards, trying to feel for her mouth. "Oh, yeah, baby. I do."

"Let’s stay like this a minute. I want to touch you, I want to feel what I do to you. Lean back into me. That’s it. Mmm, you’re getting very hard,” the last word hushed ever so slightly, he could feel her blushing but pushing through it. “It feels so good to make you grow like this for me, right in my hand.”

He didn’t need the air but panted for her all the same. Something about how wholesome she was and in the same breath how she wasn’t drove him crazy - to talk to her, to keep her talking, keep her moving and breathing and kissing and stroking and loving him. Every day meant something new, something about her he couldn’t bear to miss.

“I waited a very long time,” she told him with soft scolding.

“How did you wait? Did you think about me?”

A pause. “Yes.”

“In the bed?”

“Yes.”

“Touching yourself?”

“Only a little.”

“So did you come again, crying out for me?”
“No, I told you - I waited a very long time.”

“What a good girl. So you’re aching for me then.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Thinking of my hands on you, my mouth, my tongue…”

“Yes and…”

He tilted his head in true wonder. “And?”

More silence, her holding her breath.

“You can tell me, baby,” he encouraged. “It’s all right.”

“How you hunt… what you really need besides to scream with me, to make me scream… how much you need to take… you never get all you really want, because I know what you must want, you must want to take something like, like this…”

As he’d done to her thumb earlier, so she did to his shoulder: an unhurried pinch of his skin between her teeth and he could’ve come in her hand if she didn’t also decide to stop squeezing his cock.

“Your bite,” she admitted so delicately, so shyly, and yet with such conviction that he turned around to face her and somehow resisted the overpowering urge to plunge himself into her right then.

His chest ached with it, this holding back, a moment he wanted to savor if he could get his body to behave. Fred had trained him to respond to her without even trying, she an integral catalyst and he her unbidden reaction. So the tension built and he relished the exquisite pain of delay, nuzzling her hair line and drinking her in. Tonight, she hadn’t bathed (for him, for them, for this) and the rich scent of her swam around his head like a fog.

“We haven’t since…” he began hoarsely. An entire history in three words.

Since their earliest days, those first explorations in the hotel room, when he’d had no fangs but she wanted him biting her neck just the same, begging for it, actually. Imagining him freshly corporeal and eager to feed, playing their first hunting game to make the fantasy complete. Neither of them had had any complaints about him using his human teeth and she hadn’t even worn makeup to hide the hickey, though no one but Spike could see it - run his tongue over it, press it with his lips, ask if it hurt too badly and hear her say it hurt just right. Then the awful time came with the shooting and the meds and the deals they both made with those horrible lawyers. Back to vamp he went, the hickey long faded, that particular incarnation of their game lost.

But now.

“…since…” he tried again.

“I know.”

“I didn’t think you wanted…”

“Oh, I wanted,” she laughed nervously, running her hand along his chest. “I really wanted. It kinda scared me, how much I wanted.”

“You don’t have to…”
“I know that.”

“Why you scared then?”

“Me wanting it…it-it’s like, it’s a thing, isn’t it?”

“A thing.” He puzzled over that word for a moment, wondering what it could be in Fred-speak. “You mean a kink?”

“I guess?”

“A fetish.”

“Sure?”

“Definitely more than a quirk.”

“It’s weird, right?” she winced.

“Really not,” he shook his head. “Makes perfect sense.”

“How do you figure?”

“You lived with Angel for years, now with me. Must be curious by now. I mean, you of all people’d be curious.”

She glared at him. “What do you mean, me of all people?”

“It’s the scientist in you, love. You live for the experiment. You’re not terribly fussed with keeping those experiments under controlled conditions, either,” he added, stroking her hair back. “How long this been brewing under here?”

Fred shrugged uncomfortably. “A while.”

“Tsk. Hate the thought of you wanting a thing and not getting it,” he murmured, reaching back to rub her shoulder blades. “Especially when I can so easily give it to you.”

“But do you want it?”

“Uh, you got me where I live, pet. ‘Course I want it. Just ain’t somethin’ I press anyone on is all. ‘Specially not you.”

“Why not me, if you’re supposed to love me and spend your life with me -”

“It’s exactly because of that! You’re the love of my life, not a bloody buffet.”

She giggled then. “Boy, can we kill a mood.”

“On the contrary,” he whispered, running his forefinger along her neck, “mood’s just gettin’ ripe. This is the best part, Win, how you talk to me, how I can talk to you. Diggin’ deep into the heart of a matter. I’m hungry for all you’ve got - every bit of you. Can’t wait for what you’ll do and say and think next. Sometimes I miss your voice in the night. I want you awake just to hear you say my name.”

“Spike…” she stroked his face, watching him fondly.
He grinned shyly and looked down. “Yeah, just like that.”

Fred leaned over and brushed her lips against his ear: “So would you like to taste me for real this time?”

Instantly, he stiffened against her and was hit with a desire for her so strong, he nearly felt faint.

“God, yes.”

“Good.”

She moved away from him with rustling in the shadows and he knew she stepped out of the thin t-shirt she had on, under which she wore nothing, but more than that she had something in her hands.

“Spike, how can you always find me in the dark?”

“Told you. I can feel your blood rush under my skin, hear your heart beat in my throat, smell how wet and open and dripping you are for me.”

“Can I try somethin’?”

“Anything.”

She appeared right before him, eyes dancing. “Trust me?”

He swallowed hard. “Completely.”

“C’mere.”

Strong, soft fingers caressed his cheek, rubbed his jaw, and wound back to the nape of his neck. Then her nails, filed but sharp, grazed through his scalp and raked upwards until she found his longer strands, winding them into her fist. Bound to her this way, his hair to the heel of her palm, she tightened her hold and tugged.

“Fucking hell, Win,” he gasped, all strangled and raw. Like a breeze tickling his skin, he felt the hairs rise on her arm and overcome, he sunk to his knees before her.

Yet Fred didn’t abandon him there, oh no, she dropped down on her knees with him and next thing he knew, tipped his head so she could wind fabric thick, cool, and slippery around his forehead and over his eyes.

One of the silk ties she had bought him in their first tentative weeks together, when only picking out his clothes and dressing him up could get her out of bed in the morning, now blocked his sight. The woven pattern of the lapis blue medallion print she’d chosen pressed against his eyelids - the first time he’d worn it and it hadn’t even made its way on to a shirt.

“Yesss,” he hissed through his teeth, balling his hands into fists to restrain himself from touching her as she secured the tie around his eyes. “Pull a bit tighter, pet. Harder. Ahh, there you go. No sense in giving me an unfair advantage.”

“Is that okay?”

“Hell, yes. You like what you see?”

With a little sighing moan, he could hear her smile. “Very much. You’re very pretty.”
A grunt of need began in the back of his throat and escaped in a barely controlled chuckle. “That cute noggin of yours has been busy. You ever done this before?”

“No. Never wanted to with anybody else.”

“Lucky me. ‘Course without my sight, all my other senses amp up.” He inhaled the air around her. “Not dinner at all, are you? You’re dessert, sweetness.”

“Then come and get me.”

The hands retreated from his body and her warmth disappeared.

Stepping out of his jeans, he turned around and sniffed the air. She'd just left the bedroom and his remaining senses prickled with suspense. He knew he'd catch her, only a question of when, of how long she'd let the game draw out.

Naked, her scent wafted past him hot and strong. Toeing open the closet door of their room, he leaned in and breathed the musk from her clothes, which had mixed with different extracts of her perfumes. Bathroom next, no steam. He lifted his nose to the air, opened his mouth for good measure and the tang of her lavender bath salts tinged with the hint of her sweat hit his tongue. No perfume tonight, no manufactured smells, just her.

“Gonna have all of you,” he whispered, locking her scent into his nostrils, into his head and letting it rock all the way down to his pelvis. He couldn't wait to take her.

Feeling his way around the apartment he’d come to know so well, he realized how it would be so like feeling his way blind across her body and letting instinct take over. Catsoft bare feet inched along the hallway. So little use for him to be stealthy these days, to exercise any of the talents his nature afforded him. Fred somehow knew this and created this excursion to satisfy those needs. She'd devised this art of prowl and capture, honed it, and made him wait for it and seek it out. One night, he'd found her on the roof, another night on the balcony. Each chase different in its variance, yet all shared the same explosive ending.

Tonight, though…tonight would end a little differently, by her request. The promise of all that waited for him had elevated their game to a new level of excitement.

Padding into the living room, he stopped and dropped down on hands and knees. She hadn't gone far. This is how she got what she wanted, too. The beauty of this being her experiment, she spun it into motion and let it go, let him react. How she wanted it - he knew it if he hadn't already heard it in her voice or seen it in her eyes. He could smell it, warm and thick; hear and feel her pulse in his veins, growing steady and fast.

He crawled around to the back of the couch, into the nook of where it bowed away from the wall. Couldn’t see her, hadn't yet touched her, but there she waited. He imagined her as he’d seen her before in this space, all curled up in a pretty ball as though making herself smaller could fool him. Licking his lips, he darted his hand out and found a toe first, then reached up further and encircled her ankle.

“There she is.”

Her body jumped at the sudden contact. Her breath caught and he could feel the sweat break out on her body. Then stretching, rolling on her back for him, she made a space for them on the cold, hardwood floor.

“I missed you.”
With that the game ended; it was real, she needed him. What a beautiful thing to be needed, for more than a cock or a fist or fangs.

“I’m here. Let me find the rest of you.”

Kiss, lick, kiss, lick - up the calf and over the knee, across the leg to the hip, snuffling his nose into the wiry damp hairs peeking between her thighs, over the smooth, flat expanse of her tummy, a dip of his tongue into the dry pool of her navel, then counting each rib with another lick, a nip and to her breasts at last - firm and swollen with nipples hard as cherries.

There he sucked, rolling first one nipple against the roof of his mouth and grazing it with his teeth, then the other. Her hands sunk into his hair again and she arched into him, telling him with moans and movement that she only needed more.

“That feels so good, oh please keep doing that, don’t stop, please don’t stop.”

“I could make you come for me, just like this,” he whispered, switching breasts and pinching the other wet nipple between thumb and forefinger. Tug, tug, tug, on that sensitive breast and her head rolled back in surprised pleasure.

“Please more.”

“Of course, love.”

“Like this…” and she hitched one thigh up and outward and curled her ankle around his hip. With only a squeeze of her hands under his buttocks, he slid right in.

“Oh, God,” he muttered and his forehead fell to her shoulder. She rocked under him in a desperate, urgent rhythm. Creak, creak, creak, the movement of their bodies nudging against each other pushed the couch away from the wall.

“You’re warm and wet and tight and so fucking perfect. Taking me, are you, right from the bottom? Giving it to me so good. You gonna drive for me, baby?”

In a flash she rolled him with her on top, first riding him so the whole length of him filled her up then rubbing up close to him, working her clit against him, relishing the friction of her nipples teasing against his, and letting him dig right in. Her body so light on his, she looked like a delicate wisp of a girl but he knew the strength that ran through her, a warm, tight band of it wrapped around his cock and pulling him inside her ever deeper.

Too good, too good. How to make this last?

“Like this, sweetheart. Nice and slow. Long and deep, and let it take you. Give it to me - ah, not so fast, easy now, let it build.”

Fred pressed into him close again, searching his mouth for kisses - him still blindfolded and her still enjoying it, he knew, from how she ran her hands over the fabric and clenched it in her hand.

With a firm pressure, he massaged his fingers into the very tip of her tailbone, urging her down and around, to pull him up and into her. Her heart hammered against his silent one, their chests slicked with sweat, a pounding so strong that every beat felt like one of his own.

No space between them, her hair damp and falling around his face, foreheads rubbing, he breathed in her hot breath while she sucked on his bottom lip. Moist skin softly smacking against skin and squeaking against hardwood as they pushed, and pumped, and twisted.
“Baby, you still want it?”

“Yes, please, please do it.”

“When?”

She ripped the blindfold off and met his eyes with her hungry ones.

“When we’re…”

“Say it.”

“Coming, please. Make me come and come with me. Then - then - God, Spike, please sink your teeth into me,” she begged, legs digging into his flank as though spurring him on.

“Gonna get you there. You’re so close, aren’t you, baby? You’re starting to shatter…love to feel you working on me like this, tightening around me, squeezing me - yeah, that’s it, Win - lock down on me, suck me with that sweet cunt of yours, yes, love - suck on my cock and make me come for you….”

Blinding, unyielding waves of pleasure sent them both up, up, up and she cried against him, bearing down on him hard and thrusting through a rocketing orgasm. With a roar of release, he flipped her under him and gave himself to her again and again with solid jerks of his hips. Coming, both of them still coming, still moving, still grasping one another, that tiny alarm in his brain saying “don’t” overridden as he pulled her left shoulder down and clamped his mouth on her skin.

Whatever pinnacle they’d already reached, the piercing of his fangs through the tender curve of her flesh where neck met shoulder, crashed far past that. With one fluid motion, they both reared up to meet each other, bodies pressed tight, suspended and quaking and lost in nothing but sensation. Time ceased to move, him buried inside of her two different ways and her arms and legs so entwined around him he felt physically bound - in the best possible way. She hadn’t stopped shuddering against him, nor he against her, and with a careful, measured suck, her blood flooded into his mouth and together they spasmed again.

For all the blood he had consumed over centuries, some given willingly (most not), it had never resulted in anything quite like this. From the coppery lush taste of her, he would know Fred in this way forever - plum wine and apples and clouds and sunshine and fresh air. He’d tasted nothing else like her. To drink, to swallow, to feel her blunt teeth buried in his own shoulder and her hands in his hair, he reveled in the gift she’d bestowed on him. He adjusted his jaw ever so slightly and drew back for one last sip to feel her pulse flutter against his mouth before sliding his fangs slowly, carefully out.

Eyes closed, they gradually stopped moving against each other and winding down from their shared bliss. Kisses long and deep and lazy passed between them and he knew she could taste her own blood in his mouth, wondered what she thought about it, if she regretted it, if she regretted him.

“I - I didn’t know,” she gasped against his cheek. “I had no idea it could be like that. I’ve never felt anything that good in my whole entire life.”

Without even realizing he’d been worrying, a nervous knot untied in his stomach.

He stroked her nose with his. “Same.”

“How can you say that? You’ve done this before.”
“Not with you. Made all the difference, love. It’s never been like that for me, either.”

She drew back a little and eyed him suspiciously. “Never ever?”

“Promise,” he whispered and leaned in to kiss her forehead. “You’ve got me, Win. All of me.”

The smile she gave him hit him so bright then - as sunny and light and full of life as her blood.

“You think I’d get tired of hearin’ that but you know what? Nope.”

“Good. You about tired of this floor yet?”

Fred bit her lip and moved almost imperceptibly around him. “Not exactly.”

He felt himself twitching back to life inside of her and reached around for the tie that she had left next to them on the floor.

Testing its tension, he yanked the unfurled silk between his hands with an audible snap.

“Then let’s see what else this is good for,” he whispered.
Best Laid Plans

Bed. At some point, they’d made it from the floor to the bed.

Reaching out, he ran his hand over the bare sheet where the covers had been thrown back. Not even lukewarm. She’d been gone for a while.

_She worked up to it quiet._

Then the scrap of a memory from near dawn hummed at the back of his brain: kisses, warm kisses, licks and one precious drop of sweet red nectar on his tongue.

Followed by a whisper: “Honey? It’s way early but I gotta go out. I’ll call ya later, okay?”

Spike, completely drunk on her taste, had merely grunted in deep sleep.

Now wide awake, he cursed himself for not giving her a proper goodbye. He flipped open the phone and dialed, but heard a sound from somewhere in the apartment. Jumping out of bed, he went to investigate and found her phone ringing on the kitchen counter next to a small plate that held only crumbs.

“Balls,” he muttered.

She could be anywhere.

His eyes wandered to the plastic box near the wall phone and he smiled fondly at the quaintness of his girl.

"Can MacGyver me back from the dead without so much as bloody duct tape but she still wants an answering machine to take calls."

A steady red "1" shone in the message window. Curiously, he pressed the play button.

“Hey, this is Daniel. Yeah, I found your physics notebook over in Jordan Quad today and it had this phone number with your name in it. I guess you're off-campus? I’ll try your cell.”

Off-campus? Physics notebook?

"Fucking hell," he breathed. "She's gone back to university?" The force of his shock sent him stumbling back into one of the bistro kitchen chairs.

Mind reeling, he considered it. What had he ever done to let her know that he supported her in whatever she wanted to do? (Besides follow her back like a puppy to Wolfram & Hart, which had he paid any attention to it at all, had to be the last place on earth she would've wanted to be.) He'd wanted her to get better – of course he wanted it.

Maybe too much.

Maybe she'd merely shown him what he wanted to see. She'd acquiesced; she'd capitulated and returned to what passed for her normal life with him in tow while secretly, she planned something else altogether. The thought of what her life could be like with her degree finished stretched out before him in his mind like a vast speeding thoroughfare.

"The hell with that!"
He stomped to the bedroom and began to dress wildly, shoving legs into jeans. He knew her car, knew her scent and he could meet her on her own turf and let her know that she didn't have to play games anymore. Scientist, physicist, student…whatever she wanted to be, she'd always be his and he'd be by her side, cheering her on every step of the way. He grabbed keys off the bureau, then turned around and grabbed sunglasses as well. The glare on the highway would blind him for sure.

He stopped. The glare.

"You stupid git."

Not to mention, how would he find out which school she attended? Steal this Daniel person’s number off her forgotten cell phone and force the wanker into telling him where they were?

“Right, that’s the recipe for a healthy relationship. Invade her privacy and threaten her classmate. Brilliant.”

Spike sat down on the edge of the bed.

His eyes lit on the pictures that they'd taken together at the Santa Monica Pier, framed and displayed on their walls with pride, but had Fred put them up because they showcased the two of them together? Or because they suspended that memory of his humanity that she couldn’t live without?

Oh, but last night…those fresh, delicious memories he could not stop replaying told a different story: a woman who loved him for exactly who and what he was - reveled in it, even. How she wanted him - not for all he could do for her and to her but for him; even if she had tried to hide it, he could feel it, taste it, smell it. Hear the love in her voice, bask in the warmth of her skin on his, drink the honey from her veins that she so willingly and purely granted him.

No, Fred surely loved him, he knew it. He couldn't quite bring himself to believe that she'd gotten worked up to give him the heave-ho just yet.

*On the surface, everything looked tight.*

_Until one day, I saw her right next to me but I knew she was gone._

His phone rang.

"There she is!" he mumbled in triumph, sprinting to answer it and snatching it up like a runner's baton. “Win, you gorgeous thing, get on home and tell me where you've been. I sussed out your secret, you naughty girl, and you deserve a spanking at the very least."

Silence.

"Uh, hi, it's me," Buffy said, with obvious discomfort. "Sorry to disappoint."

His guts plummeted.

"Hey," he said, recovering. "That's my line."

"So Fred's out?"

"Out and about. Why?"

"Well, I find that a little strange. That in light of looming apocalypses she decides to what, run out to stock up on bread and milk?"
Spike scowled. "She doesn't know. On account of me not telling her. Yet."

"Spike!" Buffy yelped, on the exact key that mimicked the pain in his head of the old chip firing off. "How could you not tell her? This is important, this is everything – everything that we've tried our damndest to rid the world of is crawling back out of the Hellmouth, hell-bent for another go."

_Ever so sorry, Slayer, we were a bit preoccupied with shagging each other into oblivion last night._

"I'm not so sure about that, Slayer," he said instead. "Didn't try to ward you off on it last night, on account of you having a fresh mission to occupy yourself with, but I don't think it's a repeat performance from the First."

He fished in his back pocket for cigarettes, lit up automatically before remembering how Fred encouraged him to smoke outside the apartment. Guiltily, he turned on the stove fan.

"You're the one who hinted at it," Buffy said testily.

"You cut through the meat of it," he corrected. "That being, what do we know that scares demons off? It's something _like_ the First, right? Something that wants demons to give a place a wide berth, seein' how the vamps are gettin' pushed out block by block."

He could practically hear her gears shifting. "Like a sentry. Securing a perimeter."

"Spoken like the former military mistress herself."

"If we're wrong, then we're really wrong. In the huge, not-good, town-swallowing kind of way."

"So what's your bright shining beacon of thought? You already get Angel on the line, start the charge of the Poof brigade?"

"No, Angel's doing his demony breakfasty thing for his so-called job. Harmony wouldn't dream of interrupting him for me. I didn't even know demons had business breakfasts."

Spike snorted. "I guarantee you wouldn't fancy what's on the menu. Charlie's always up for the grassroots sorts of fights. We can meet here if you've a notion, wait on Fred and make a charge come sunset."

"No."

"Then what, Slayer?" he rapped out. "Enough with the stalling."

When her voice came through finally, she spoke in a whisper: "I need to see it."

Instantly, that old instinct about her flared up like a phantom pain. He knew exactly where she meant.

He drew on the cigarette thoughtfully. "Why?"

"Because I do. Because it's been over a year and it's too easy for me to forget. How hard we fought and how we almost lost. How we did lose, so many good people."

"It's a dead place, Slayer, a cemetry without stones."

"Then I'll feel right at home."

"There's nothing there," he insisted, digging the cigarette butt into the bread plate littered with
crumbs. The remnants of Fred's breakfast.

"So you've been back there then?"

"No reason to go back."

"Then maybe you should see it, too."

"Where I burned to death? Why would I want to see that? If you're trying to drag me along for your trip down memory lane," he snorted. "You can forget it."

"Spike, I get it won't be exactly pleasant for you. But what if something's there? Something more than a big hole in the ground, like a big fresh evil?"

"There isn't."

"But you haven't even been there, so how would you know?"

"Dammit Buffy!" Spike slammed his fist on the counter causing the plate to clatter. "What the hell do you want from me?"

"Please come with me," she answered quickly. "Drive me there. Then you can rub my nose in it, how right you've been. Or we face what's there head-on, like we've done before. Either way, it's a win-win."

"More like a bugged-bugged," he mumbled. "You know I won't be able to leave the car at this hour."

"It's okay," she said gently. "I need you more inside the car than out."

"Right. Should I don the chauffeur's hat for you as well?"

"Spike," she whispered his name with a balm of regret. "That's not why I need you."

The tone of her voice made him wonder at her again. Here was Buffy - the girl who held up the "One" after Chosen like a placard - humbled and prostrate for his help in a way he once begged for.

Then again, perhaps this was Buffy's way of luring him in to confessing everything he knew about the dead Slayer and finally ending what had already become a very long visit. For that, he could be persuaded to drive nearly anywhere.

"Be there in ten," he said curtly and hung up the phone.

Fred pitched forward into the dust, the nausea twisting her guts like the ringing out of a towel. The motion forced out the bit of breakfast that she'd managed to choke down earlier: toast with peanut butter; no jam. Just the thought of it – the cloying thick richness of the Peter Pan with the nuggets of petrified peanut scraping her throat on the way back up – made her groan and heave anew, although nothing came out.

She knelt in the dirt and rested her head on the car's fender, wishing it were cool. How nice cool metal, cool anything would feel against her throbbing head. Especially cool skin. Especially Spike's.
Thinking of Spike made her shudder, the tender muscles of her thighs clenched for him reflexively. The guilt for leaving him behind again blended with the sickness to her stomach and a fresh burst of sweat broke out on her brow. Her whole body had become hot, feverish, and consumed in these last couple of weeks, as though some foreign and diligent laboratory busily multiplied with life under her skin and without her consent.

The flu. This had to be the flu. Please, God, just normal flu, not the Steven King kind of sweeping pandemic that an evil establishment like Wolfram & Hart might keep incubating in its tombs of laboratory refrigeration compartments. Not a demonic incubus of infection that would wear its hosts down into exhaustion so that they couldn't fight a worse plague that might be unleashed.

No. Just the flu.

If Spike had known, he never would've let her drive – certainly not the marathon trek to Stanford. She'd heard the young boy's call on her cell phone totally by accident on the way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. He'd called late, found her notebook (after barhopping perhaps) and never thought to look at a clock. His complete unawareness of adult time made her smile. She'd never not had that. Even in Pylea she forced herself to commit to a schedule: forage at night, sleep in the mornings, hide during the afternoons. It gave life a sense of normalcy and reality that even a hell dimension couldn't shake.

She would give anything for that routine now; being this sick, this unhinged from what usual people had that passed for daily living, had made her feel like she'd unknowingly crossed into another dimension. Or that everyone around her had, and inched away from her further every day. Besides being intermittently ill, Fred simply felt, well, peculiar. But that alone did not warrant a visit to a real medical professional.

She hadn't felt really ill until Buffy had shown up.

Buffy, she of the bouncing blonde mane and sunny California smile, who still believed that time held Spike suspended in wait for her and had simply heard some internal alarm go off in her bouncy noggin that stirred her back to him.

How she'd kissed him in the lab when she'd arrived, it had been so sure, so certain – as though they were already still together. Really, why wouldn't they be? Warrior with warrior, hero with hero. Hero with scientist didn't have quite the same ring.

Fred slumped to a sitting position by the side of the car, out of the harsh rays of the sun.

If Spike and Buffy did get back together (ohh, God, I think I'm gonna puke again), the practical scientist in Fred told her that there would really be nothing she could do. Who kept hydrogen bonding with oxygen, for heaven's sake? Shoot, it just happened and the energy used to break them apart would probably fuel cities someday…


One of her teachers had told her that the scientific world held no proof, only evidence. Well, Fred had lots about one thing: Spike loved her. Truly, completely loved her. She could sense it all the way here, an invisible tie that stretched from her heart to his no matter how far she roamed. See it in his eyes and his smile, hear it in his voice and his purr, feel it in his touch and in his doting on her, taste it in his kiss. Every sense, covered with evidence of his love.

While she couldn’t control, well, a lot, she could control how she presented him with the same sort of evidence of love in her every word, action, and deed.
To hell what Angel wanted, too - she’d either end this Connor experiment or bring Spike in on it – and not because she needed Spike out of weakness. Fred and Spike were simply stronger, together. She knew it - she’d make damn sure Spike knew it, too.

“We are one helluva polar covalent bond," Fred grumbled, “so take that!”

Standing up to a head rush, she got her footing and carefully eased her way back to the driver's side of the car to continue on her journey.
Buffy clasped the handles of her leather purse nervously, standing on the hotel's curb and glancing down the driveway with an anxious eye. Black, large-framed sunglasses shielded her eyes from the late morning sun and her black blouse heated uncomfortably. A few more minutes and she'd break into a sweat. She needed to be out here, though, to show Spike that she'd wait for him.

Buffy patted the back of her neck with a frown, feeling for the silver chopsticks that secured her upsweep. She should've worn her hair long – he'd loved it that way. Loved it so much she'd hacked it off to spite him, as though she could amputate his love with the beautician's shears. A desperate, rebellious move, it had only succeeded in a new haircut and further proof that Spike's love for her had run deeper than the length of her highlights. She had to keep reminding herself: "had run," "had loved," past tense. A past she dearly wished to revisit.

No, scratch that. She wanted Spike now, him with his soul, tempered and humbled after his struggle with incorporeality; him with somewhat of an amends with everything he'd seen and done. Especially with the low gleam of his sacrifice, his success, shining in his eyes. "See?" his stare seemed to mock her. "Told you I could do it. Knew I could be a champion." As much as he chastened her with his very existence, Buffy realized that she'd rather have this Spike, with his pride of accomplishment, than any previous incarnation.

"Although adding that madly-in-love-with-me accessory wouldn't hurt," she mumbled, blowing a cooling breath on her sweaty chest. She checked her watch. Almost fifteen minutes late. So much for him racing over to fetch her.

Just as she decided to turn back to the hotel and get out of the sun, Buffy was startled by the whine of a motor and crunch of tires on the driveway behind her. She looked over her shoulder and saw a lean, black sports car purring in wait. The car glimmered in the sunlight, its finish polished to a mirror shine and the glass tinted impossibly dark. She hesitated and took a curious step toward the car, bending over to squint through the passenger side window. Other than the motor, the car remained still.

Her hand reached out to touch the glass. "Spike?"

The window slid halfway down, causing her to spring back in surprise.

"Jumpy Slayer?"

Buffy caught her breath. "So it is you."

"Told you I'd be here."

"Almost on time, even," she added, hoping for lightness.

"Beggars can't be choosers, love," he said, with just the same lightness. "You want, I'll turn around and go back to my regularly scheduled program."

"No, I'm sorry," she implored. "Please don't leave."

"Might want to step in before the sun shifts and you're expecting a big pile of dust to drive you."

While the window buzzed upward, Buffy scrambled into the car and shut the door quickly. He'd squired himself again in black, now to match his vehicle: black t-shirt, jeans, and leather jacket. Not
the duster. A new, shorter and more fashionable style that she realized he'd never pick out on his own.

She smiled gratefully. "Thank you for doing this, Spike."

His expression behind his own black sunglasses remained impervious, and he grunted in return.

"Driving ain't that hard. It's the trip that's the bloody nuisance."

Her mouth dropped open in annoyance.

"Damn well take us all afternoon."

Chastened, her mouth clamped shut.

"I know," she answered instead. "Thanks for doing this."

"You said that."

Frowning, she aimed the car vents in the dashboard at the floor and tried not to shiver.

"You cold?"

"No, I'm good."

"You look cold."

"I'm not."

"Buffy, if you're cold, bloody well fix it. Fiddle with the knobs. Don't freeze to death on my account."

"I'm fine," she insisted, then took a breath. "Really. Thanks."

"Suit yourself," he muttered with a small shake to his head and turned the car on to the highway.

After a few quiet minutes, she reached over to the console, every movement closer to him like crossing a chasm.

"I guess maybe I could cut the AC down a little. You know, to save on gas."

His mouth twisted into a grin. "Might as well settle in, put on some background noise."

"What's in the CD player?"

"Nothing for you. Radio's yours if you can stay off the talk stations."

Flipping through the satellite feed's two hundred channels wasted a few more dragging minutes, though each "beep" from the receiver seemed to clench Spike's jaw tighter.

"This bothering you?"

"I've had worse."

Latin jazz – beep—classical – beep – the blues – beep. No one had prepared her for what would be the ideal soundtrack to return to the Hellmouth with Spike. Romantic love songs – BEEP…
"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Spike erupted at last. "Just bloody pick something!"

Buffy stopped on alternative rock and sat back in her seat. Spike took off his sunglasses and stabbed them on to the top of his head, then stared at the radio as though it had insulted him.

"That's what you want to listen to?"

"You said pick something."

"I meant something that wouldn't make my ears bleed."

Buffy sighed, resting her arm on the passenger door. "Put in a CD, Spike. I'll listen to anything."

"Can't."

"Why? Is the player broken?"

"No," he said evenly. "Just ain't your sort of music."

"Spike, I don't care. If you like it, then it's fine with me." Perhaps this is how they'd find their way back to each other, discovering shared tastes previously undiscovered. Over music! So simple and yet, so meaningful.

"You don't get it," he said tightly. "It ain't for you to hear, Slayer."

"What?" She turned in her seat to glare at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"They're not…I don't…they're only for…oh, balls. I don't play 'em for anyone else. They're for me. Me and Fred."

Buffy leaned back, deflated. "Oh."

His hands gripped the steering wheel tightly. "Wouldn't be fair to Win. One thing drivin' you all over creation. Start playin' our music for you, too, well, that's off the bend."

She chanced a look at him. "Is she mad you're driving me?"

"Doubt she will be. Ain't her style."

Buffy sat up. "So she doesn't know."

He leveled her with a reproachful glare. "She left her phone behind when she went out this morning or else she would."

They lapsed into quiet. He brought a hand to the breast pocket of his jacket, removed a cigarette, and stabbed the car's push button lighter in.

"Italians finally get you to smoke?"

"No." She waved a hand. "But they made me more used to it. Go ahead."

Every calm action from him told her that he would've regardless.

"Slayer," he puffed. "Why you off mission anyhow?"

She looked at him quickly, her eyebrows knitting together in puzzlement. "I'm not. I'm doing exactly what I'm supposed to be doing."
A Watcher who has no idea where Slayers even are or aren’t in this world, never mind the state, don’t sound like one on task to me.”

“It’s…complicated,” Buffy allowed glancing out the window.

Spike snorted. “You’re slaying or you’re not. You’re a Watcher or you’re not. Not too complicated.”

“I’ve been investigating, as you know. Total Watcher gig there. Now there’s this thing in Los Angeles that could be popping up in Sunnydale for all we know, so I’m checking that out, too,” she reminded him.

He shook his head. “Deep down, you know there ain’t a thing in Sunny-D. There’s somethin’ else at play. I’m just tryna suss out whether it involves me burnin’ up from the inside out again.”

“Hope not.” She smiled wistfully.

“Slayer, that wasn’t your fault.”

“What?” she started.

“Me as the unliving torch: I took it on m’ own. I asked for it. I wanted it,” he annunciated. “You don’t have to pull out the grand gesture just because I toppled your little town and then roared back to life.”

“That’s not what this is,” she argued.

“You’ve lost your footing in this world, Slayer, and you’re ready to leap to the first solid brick. It ain’t me you’re after.”

“How do you know?” Buffy replied, eyeing him. “Did you ever think I could be worried about you?”

His eyebrows shot up. “You about me? Why?”

“Well,” she began patiently. “You’re working at Wolfram & Hart and you’re with this person, who’s from Wolfram & Hart…”

“Her name’s Fred and I’m not working there, she’s not even really, she’s one of Angel’s crew, but don’t stop now, you’re on a roll,” he broke in sardonically.

“Look, I’m really very happy you’re with Fred.”

"Course you are."

"You deserve every happiness."

"Beyond the telling of it."

“She seems like a super person.”

"Here it comes."

Buffy bit her lip. “I just wonder if she’s right for you.”

"I knew it!” he crowed. He pointed an accusing finger at her from the steering wheel. "You think she's too brainy for me."
Her lips parted in surprise. "Uh, no, not even."

"I did actually read a book or two in that crypt. Poet here, remember?"

"Spike…"

"What about," he cleared his throat and began to hum, "'I died, so many years ago…' That song? The spell be buggered, I made up those words straight off!"

"Spike!" Buffy called out helplessly. "This doesn't have anything to do with you being smart! It doesn't have anything to do with Fred, either."

"What then?"

"Me, Spike! I'm here!" she cried. "I'm here for you!"

The silence hung in the air heavier than his smoke.

"Thanks ever so," he rumbled finally.

She couldn’t read him based on words; he’d made that impossible. So what did she hear: regret? Anger? Sadness? Resentfulness? Or, worst of them all, despair for that which had passed and could never be recaptured?

"What’s wrong with the big gesture?" she persisted, twisting in her seat and trying to will him to look at her. "Can’t I come back for you? What’s wrong with that?"

"What’s wrong with it?" he gaped at her, stunned. "For starters, one - you’re late. Two - I’m in love with Fred. Three - you say you’re here for me? Buffy, I died and came back to life. The man you’re here for’s dust. You don’t even know who I bloody am now."

"Maybe not," she agreed in a small voice. "but I want to."

Spike glowered at her in dark triumph. "There's the magic word! You want, so let's go about makin' it happen. Where’d I be without you, Buffy? You wanna know? Back home with Winifred, where I fucking belong, that's where.” He tried for fury but he sounded like he was pleading with her instead.

"Then why keep me in Los Angeles?" Buffy demanded, pleading right back. "Why drag this out when you know that your confession means that I leave? What the hell are you waiting for?"

"Not for you, Slayer. Put a right end to that notion."

These words ground right into her like he ground the cigarette butt mercilessly into the car’s ashtray. Buffy tried to close her eyes from the burning smoke, wishing that she could likewise shut out all he said.

"Means more than just a confession now, yeah?" he asked, more softly. "Means me on trial. Which means I got to take a kind of care with how I word things to you, don’t I? Or I'll find myself needin' to check on my last passport stamp."

"You won't need one, the Council will send a private plane," Buffy said automatically.

"There's a comfort," he snorted. "What I want to know is, who decides if my story passes muster or not?"
"Well, there's an inquiry committee…"

"There's a committee now?"

"I'm faxing Giles all of my notes. I'd add your confession and they'd let me know which witnesses they would need to come over for the hearing."

He looked over at her hopefully. "You're saying that there's a chance I could give you my run-down, you fax it in, and we're done?"

She nodded. "Sure, it's a definite possibility."

"All right then, pet," he smiled at her, his first real smile since they started driving. "Got paper and pen?"

"Oh. Lemme see." She picked up her purse and rummaged for a few moments. "I, uh. No."

"What do you mean 'no'⁈" he demanded. "Thought that was your whole diabolical plan: trap me in the car until you got your soddin' confession."

"There wasn't anything diabolical about it. I guess in light of where we were going, I sort of… let it slide." She shrugged and tried not to look at him. "Pretty lousy Watcher I'm gonna make, huh."

"Reckon you'll be sorted in the end," he muttered. "If that's what you really want. If you ever decide," he added.

She looked down, feeling utterly useless. "Thanks."

"Buffy…" he began and she managed to drag her eyes over to him, cringing at what she knew she'd see: that apologetic, appeasing, damnably peaceful look.

"About this trip. Only a handful of us who're left, yeah? Me being the only one in the city limits. Point is, we're gonna get there, you're gonna see there's an empty hole in the ground, and it's gonna hit you, where you really are. Don't let it blindside you, all right? Don't make more out of it than there is, love."

Spike reached out and clicked at the radio control, settling on a classic rock station with music sooth ing in its familiarity. Pointedly, he turned up the volume at a level not earsplitting but loud enough to bar conversation, leaving Buffy to mull what exactly she shouldn't make more out of: the Sunnydale crater or his presence by her side.

Fred wove through the maze of pavement paths and found her way to Jordan Quad, the meeting spot they’d arranged earlier. A young man stood waiting near the entrance, all red hair, freckles and gangly teenager. Easily a freshman. His head cocked around the heads of passersby and his fingers drummed anxiously on a familiar sight – Fred's notebook. She felt a wash of relief.

"Hey!" She lifted her hand in greeting. She sped up, waving, until the boy caught her eye. She watched as he appraised her and mentally rejected her, perhaps dismissing her for a potential love interest on account of her age. His hopeful face shifted into polite disappointment.

"So you're Winifred, hey. Here you go." The boy who called himself "Daniel" held out her book. "You must be psyched to get this back. You've got some fierce equations goin' on."

"Thanks, I guess I do." She took the book from his hands and her mouth dropped open. The back
cover had been completely ripped off, leaving the wire spiral stretched and bent around the leather cover and remaining pages. "This is it? I mean, what happened?"

"Yeah, sorry, this is how I found it," the boy shrugged.

Fred pictured what she had glued on the inside of the back cover, saved like the smallest touchstone that she could revisit whenever she chose: an ancient, yellowed postcard of the Hyperion's exterior.

She'd found it once when she still lived there and had kept it. She only glued it in her notebook after they left, at first as a gentle reminder of where they'd come from. Lately it had served more as a testament to all that they had lost.

"I knew it was more than trash," the boy continued. "I thought it was weird, you know, but whatever. Lot of random weirdness going around here these days."

She looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know," the kid shrugged again. "Full moon stuff, I guess."

"Like?" she prompted. Working with Angel had taught her that one person's "random full moon weirdness" could often signal another person's apocalypse.

Now Daniel was watching her continued interest with suspicion. "Uh, some break-ins, ransacking the cafeteria kitchen. Library books missing." He paused. "Attacks."

Her eyebrows shot skyward.

"Probably just frat pranks. But this guy I know got jumped last weekend from some wackjob hiding up in a tree. Said it was like getting mauled by a rabid Tarzan." Daniel shook his head in disgust. "Man, it's all in the Stanford Daily. You could pick it up once in a while, jeez."


When he nodded, she plowed on. "Think your friend might wanna share his story with…" She pawed through her bag until her hand lighted on a bent card. "A real live detective agency?"

Fred offered the wrinkled business card of the defunct Angel Investigations. "We'll pay him for his trouble," she hurriedly added.

Daniel squinted at the card. "You'll pay? No shit? What's the catch?"

"No catch. Let's just say we're looking to expand our business."

"Where are you going?"

"I thought we'd pull off so you could do some light shopping. Where do you think I'm going?"

"This isn't the way to Sunnydale."

"There ain't no Sunnydale, remember? The state had to detour all the main roads. We're not even supposed to be here. Highway crews made it so that no one has to see your old home town at all."

Buffy's lip twisted. "Isn't that thoughtful."

"Could be worse," he sighed. "They could've made it into a tourist trap and sold knick-knacks. Plus,
it's far enough out that any beastie would need to trek a hell of a ways to find civilization to feast upon."

"It's also far enough out that no one would know about it until it's too late," Buffy countered.

Spike's grim smile faded. "Right."

"How close can we get?"

"Route I'm going will take you right to the edge. They've fenced it off, you know."

"No," she shook her head. "I hadn't heard that."

"Saw it on telly. They're tryin' to get it labeled a wonder of the world or some rot. Largest sinkhole known to man. Or beast, for that matter."

Buffy turned to look at him. "How do you know where you're going if you've never even been there?"

Spike frowned and pointed to the built-in display of the car. "It's called 'Garmin,' look into it. The back road maps into the crater are plastered all over the Web. The X-files crowd loves it."

"What, do people think that it's a secret underground government lab or something?"

"With mutant monsters and conspiracy theories run amok."

She managed to smile weakly back. "God, if they only knew. That's so four years ago."

The car rolled and bumped them along the makeshift road of sand and gravel, finally hitting pitted pavement and rolling them forward. Buffy squinted through the tinted glass. What looked like a tollbooth waited dead ahead, the gatekeeper for an endless crisscross of glittering barbed steel jutting across the horizon.

Spike skidded to a stop. "Bugger."

"I'm guessing that the sentry guard and round-the-clock government surveillance wasn't mentioned on the website."

"Dunno when they added that," Spike sighed. "What now? Turn back?"

Buffy's laugh caught in her throat. "Are you kidding? After all this? No way!" She ran her hand along the side of the car's leather seat. "It feels like this thing's got some muscle to her. I say we plow through first, ask questions later."

Spike rested his hands on the wheel – and actually hesitated.

"You've got a sudden aversion to crashing into things that I don't know about?" she asked, eyebrows raised.

He shrugged. "I like this car."

"Angel's got, like, fifty bazillion."

"This one's mine."

"It's a car, Spike. No big!"
"I ruin it, where's our ride home, hmm? You thought of that? Still daylight, Slayer, which works out peachy for you as most things, but leaves me high and bloody dry." He tapped on the steering wheel with drumming thumbs. "As most things."

Buffy sat back. She felt as cursed as by the monkey's paw all over again, although instead of being doomed to relive the same sales exchange for a near-eternity, she was merely (merely!) furthering her loss of Spike with each wrong word and misdeed.

She bowed her head in defeat. "You're right. I picked the most flammable time of day for you. I don't know what I was thinking."

He pulled the car into gear and began to putter towards the gate.

She grabbed his wrist. "What are you doing?" she hissed. "You're going too slow to do any real damage!"

He yanked his arm away. "Let's try to get through one day without violence, hmm? Now hush. Lemme handle it."

His eyes flashed to hers briefly, reflecting only that maddening calm assurance. Just as quickly, he turned away, zipped the driver's side window down under the protective shade of the gate.

"Afternoon," he greeted the guard, a less-amiable Riley Finn clone, with a scar across his cheek and a grim expression.

"No admittance, sir. This is a restricted area."

"Kinda caught on to that, what with your spiffy guard post and all. Thing is, though," Spike leaned through the window and Buffy leaned over toward him to catch his words. "I know you're lettin' 'em in. The survivors, that is." He indicated the acre of fencing with a nod.

That's when Buffy's eyes adjusted and she turned her gaze, to see the crude memorials that had been forged in her absence.

Clipped on with tape, with staples, with rusting binder clips: pictures.

Photos of now-buried homes, of once-beloved pets, of smiling friends frozen in time. Also floating in the breeze were faded and wrinkled travel brochures from former motels, beckoning tourists to an arguably more hospitable destination than a mammoth hole in the ground ("Welcome to Sunnydale, California! Enjoy your stay!"). Strands of cheerleader pompons, sunbleached ribbons clutching deflated balloons, torn pages ripped out of yearbooks, notes (their words long bled out from rain) also twisted around the fence's wires, all fluttering in the flat desert wind.

Then there were the flowers.

So many flowers that they seemed to have sprouted from the chain link itself, most dried in varying stages of decay or death but some very much alive and straining up to the burning sun.

"Those little woven daisy chains didn't grow in by themselves. Fact is, most of 'em look right fresh."

The surly guard turned surlier. "Not on my watch. Now before I call security…"

"You'll need it, by the time I'm done with you."

Buffy heard the shift, the change in his voice, and saw the stunned reaction in the guard's eyes. Spike
had morphed into game face.

"This crater's the last home this girl knew." His voice slipped back to normal. "Give us a break or we'll give you several: arms, legs, skull. See how testy I'm feelin' and how long you take to let us in."

"Ten minutes," the guard growled finally and the electric gate slid open. Spike drove them through.

"Reckon ten minutes is the generous end of the deal," he told her. "They'll be runnin' my plates as we speak and one call to Angel, your jaunty little juggernaut ain't just between you and me. We'll get the whole of Wolfram & Hart involved so make it fast, Slayer."

Buffy couldn't move.

"Hope you're not holdin' your breath on the gentleman opening your door."

With a shaking hand, she indicated the fence in front of them, a scant fifty feet or so away.

"Who? Who did this?"

"Government, I told you."

"Not that," she choked. "Those." She indicated the fence's decorations.

"That'd be from the survivors. What," he chuckled low. "You think your troop made up the whole bloody town?"

"B-but there are pictures. Of people." She turned to look at Spike. "What people? Everyone was gone. Everyone but…"

"But me and a few ubernasties? Be pretty to think so, wouldn't it?"

He glanced at her stricken face and sighed.

"Buffy, if it's a comfort, I don't think the ones who stayed suffered much. A million tons of a town's charred rubble puts your lights out quick."

"Who?" she shrieked. "Who suffered? We did this so no one would suffer! No one was supposed to be left! No one except –"

Her mouth clamped shut.

"Me?" He grinned faintly. "Not everyone sticks around a doomed burg to collapse it and save the world, you know. People, bugger 'em, loved this town, couldn't bear to leave. Folks never thought it'd come to this or if they knew it, couldn't get out in time. Maybe some couldn't pry themselves away from the only place they knew as home."

Buffy squeezed the corners of her eyes as though she could will the tears back.

"How come no one told me? Not Xander, not Willow. God, not even Giles."

"Figured it made it easier on you, I'd suspect. Did it?"

"For a while," she whispered.

"Clock's tickin', Slayer."
"I know." Buffy breathed in deeply and swiped furtively at her eyes. She stepped out of the car and into blinding sunlight.
Dreams, Departures, and Decisions

Christ, don’t read anything. Don’t look at any of the damnable pictures, either.

Watching Buffy hug herself as she strolled pensively along the fence's perimeter made Spike cringe under the weight of her near overbearing sentimentality. He missed Sunnydale not a fig, nor most of its former inhabitants, save for Anya. Any grieving for felled young Slayers or faceless residents had been shoved aside for more pressing concerns like corporeality and hell and falling in love.

Buffy, he understood, was experiencing a thing several degrees sharper. While he felt for her, truly, he wished just as much that she'd hurry the hell up. Frowning, he reached in his pocket and dialed Fred’s office number. He didn't expect that she'd pick up, but he needed to hear her voice - even the canned version that told him to leave a message. Buffy's grief had opened up a cave of forlornness in him that only Fred's presence could fill.

"I'm on an errand, sweet Win, but you're not far from my thoughts. You can never be, you know that, don't you? Got some things..." He rubbed his forehead thinking about earlier – the notebook, the school, and the secrets between them grown wider with his trip today – and tried to focus instead on what lay at their core. "What I truly fancy is an old-fashioned heart-to-heart with you on m' arm, is all. I miss you. I love you."

The words had scarcely left his lips when the passenger side door inched open. Buffy slipped inside, her face pale and wan despite the heat. Her perfect bun had begun to unravel. She wouldn't even look at him, but instead faced stiffly forward.

"Let's go," she ordered.

Spike dropped the phone back into his pocket and whipped the car into reverse.

When Daniel introduced her to his attacked friend, Fred had to fight the urge to run directly back to her car. She would've, except for the crowded student lounge and the need to not cause a scene. One look at him and she received all of the information that she needed. In both looks and build, the young man with a black eye and cut lip turned out to be a dead ringer for a college-age Charles Gunn.

Fred faked her way through a brief interview, shook hands, passed the boy some cash and departed, shaking from the inside out.

Connor.

It had to be, the boy in the tree who jumped on Charles' look-alike without provocation. Connor who'd probably ripped her notebook cover off to get that picture of the Hyperion that he suddenly remembered. Connor on the loose, as he had been, fresh from his hell dimension: angry, vengeful, and completely wild.

Except...

Making an about face in the opposite direction, she marched back over to the library where she had seen him before, up the stairs to the second floor stacks. Again, she found him - in different clothes, thankfully, but otherwise the same boy she had seen before in all of his intent, ponderous study. Fuming, she stomped out of the library, clutching her keys and the remnants of her notebook in one tight grip.
What was she doing at Angel's behest? Stalking this poor defenseless boy at his home, at his local haunts, at his own college campus for God's sake, ready to charge him with the worst possible crimes that likely weren't even his doing. Connor was in the library studying like any well-meaning student, not running around crazed. This is what working with Angel did to a person, made her suspicious and jumpy and paranoid delusional.

"Screw this," she muttered under her breath as she started her engine. She'd stuck by Angel through this whole mess. That had to stop.

But when she went to pull out her phone from her purse to share her decision with her true partner in crime, she realized that she’d left it right where she’d last seen it - on the kitchen counter.

“Dammit!” she seethed. First the notebook, now this. When had she crossed over from scatterbrained to senile?

Home first? Or to do something she should have months ago?

With a determined shift into drive, Fred made up her mind.

The doors to the business she had grown to love had been closed for nearly a year, but as of that moment, her undercover work with Angel Investigations officially came to an end.

Buffy could feel herself being propelled forward, like through the end missile on a rocket, spiraling down a wormhole, only she had no way to stop it. She tried to yell, tried to move, but the images flashing behind her eyes held her bound. Only thing to do would be to buckle down and pay attention, wait until the madness passed.

Slayer dreams sucked.

This one sucked even worse because she hadn't had one to speak of, not since the last visit to the Hellmouth. In fact, the destruction of Sunnydale had resulted in a virtually nightmare-free Slayer. Dreams of showing up naked in the middle of the piazza at lunchtime and wearing the wrong kind of shoes didn't count. Those held no kind of portents of impending doom to the world, only her psyche. As for this latest dream? It sure was portenty.

She appeared to be in some kind of cheap theater with one lone, plush chair at the back – the one she sat in. The room had been divided vertically by stage curtains, creating narrow hallways with cheap movie screens at the end of each. At first glance, it reminded Buffy of that "all the world's a stage" mumbo jumbo with the first Slayer who tried to kill her in her dreams.

(And how adept was she at having these now that she could analyze them while she had them?)

Yet she did not wear the different costumes or portray different roles in this scenario. She saw many faces of those she'd come into contact with so far in L.A. Each of these frames played onto their own screens, each separated and often obfuscated by those thick maroon theater curtains.

Gunn – Gunn happy in one frame with Anne, clutching her around the waist and laughing hard. Then Buffy's chair jerked her over to the next scene; a rustle of maroon curtain fell and so did the projected image of Gunn, clutching his own waist and falling to his knees, bleeding heavily from his gut into a pavement in the dark and pouring rain.

Cordelia - first in her bathrobe in her purple bedroom, looking at Buffy so hard as though begging her own brain to remember what Buffy asked her to about Angel. Her adjoining screen showed only her gravestone.
Another shift and she saw Angel – sitting across from her over sushi, full of apology and hope – moving her to the next screen in time to witness an Angel who wielded a sword toward the wings and fire of an oncoming dragon.

Wesley next – nursing his drinks and his books at Lorne's bar – and then in a flash, being destroyed by some old devil's magic, a glowing force gutting her former Watcher from within.

The last screen showed Fred – sweet Fred smiling and laughing in her lab coat and glasses, whose next screen showed her being drained of all life-force and crammed into a blue steel mannequin of herself, smelling of cold, vicious power.

One other person appeared, not on a screen, but in person like herself. Yet unlike her, he could move, this fine young man with a knowing smirk and a glowing amulet. He did not walk down the hallways but walked across them, tearing curtains down while he moved with a conviction and purpose that chilled her. As he passed, each film ground to a halt, sputtering its distress in the last frozen frames before burning, melting the celluloid images onto the screens until the whole of the room filled with an acrid smoke stinking of death and char.

Buffy began to choke, her lungs began to fill…

"Buffy!" Spike yelled, grabbing her by her shoulders and heaving her forward.

With a strangled gasp, she came out of her restless sleep. "What?"

"You were dreamin'. Looked to be a helluva one at that."

Spike sat back down in the driver's seat, car quiet, surrounding area dark. A parking garage.

Groggily, Buffy glanced around. "Where are we?"

"Back at your hotel."

"I fell asleep?"

"More like passed out cold. I wasn't even a mile gone when I heard your not-so-gentle snore next to me. Otherwise, I would've been checking you for a pulse." He studied her. "You all right?"

"I…" she started helplessly. "It was weird."

"Do tell."

She shook her head. "I can't really put it into words."

He paused, looking pensive. "One of those dreams, eh?"

"You weren't in it," she assured him hurriedly.

"Good thing. Next apocalypse, I got my heart set on a bit part, not the lead, thanks."

He eased himself out of his seat, shut his door and walked around to her side of the car.

Leaning into the open passenger door window, he caught her eyes so urgently that she let herself lapse into the warm thought of what it would be like to simply catch his face in her hands again. Only not with the wild attack of a greeting she had given him a few days ago, but tender. Loving. Full of delicate touches and remembered soft spots, caressing aching skin with lips and tongue and teasing bites. Letting him know that she could be gentle, too, not only fire and pain.
As if reading her thoughts, he moved back away from her hastily and yanked her passenger door open.

"During your little detour into dreamland…"

"Oh yeah, sorry about that.” She blinked. "I didn't make the best passenger, huh."

"Matter of fact, you were stellar. Got a lot of thinking done."

"Was there smoke?" she grinned.

"Haha," he deadpanned back.

He paused then, turned serious. He crouched down low so that they were at eye level and bounced lightly on his heels.

"I figure, after hashing it out with myself for the better part of the day, that I might as well take my chances and ante up."

She eyed him. "With what?"

"What we were talking about earlier. Let's you and me, let's give it a go."

It had to be too good to be true.

*Spike?* Buffy could barely keep herself from crying out. *Oh, yes, oh, please, oh, thank you. At last!* She nearly sobbed with the relief that washed over her.

Upon hearing his heartfelt, simple words, Buffy had to reach under her arm and actually pinch herself to make sure that she wasn't still dreaming. Why, it must've been her sleeping next to him that had changed his mind so completely. He had watched her and thought of the last night they spent together in Sunnydale, their journey to the site of all their former battles and yes, even their love that she had denied for so long, had reawakened the feelings that had been simmering between them. He had tried valiantly, to be sure, to move on but given their history, he had finally given in to what she already knew: that they were meant to be. Certainly he had killed Leah in self-defense and with Buffy on his side, they would tackle whatever charges he might face and soldier through them together.

She tried to keep herself from beaming. "You really mean it?"

"Hell yes. We can start now, right upstairs." Spike stood up and held her door open for her. "You ready?"

"Oh, Spike," she sighed, aching to jump out of her seat and into his arms. "I've been way ready!"

She leaned down to retrieve her purse from where she'd shoved it under the seat.

"Record my voice, take notes, hell - give me the paper and pens m'self. I can jot down whatever you need and you can fax it to Giles before the ink's dried."

Buffy's head whipped up as she grabbed the handle of her bag. "Huh?"

"What we spoke on?" Spike stared at her. "You, me, my confession?"

His confession. Not the two of them at all. He had no intention of giving her a go, but giving the confession a go, instead. Of course.
Every thought, hope and dream she’d let herself entertain about him, crashed down around her with a thundering roar.

"Oh," she managed to croak. She felt her face collapse into disappointment. "That."

"I get what you said," he continued. "that I’m taking my chances, that I could be on trial but I figure, fuck it. I’ve been through worse. Don't know until we try, right?"

“Wow.” She smiled tightly. “You really wanna to get rid of me," she whispered.

"Hmm?"

"Nothing." She cleared her throat. "If that's what you want to do."

"Someone's gotta.” He shrugged. Suddenly suspicious, she glanced at him and something in her Slayer intuition prickled.

“Spike, you do have a way of...stepping in, when things need to get done, don't you?”

He met her eyes as though daring her to challenge him. "As long as confessing means I won't be on fire."

"You might be jailed," she warned him. “And - ”

"But you’d be done pokin’ around us in L.A.?"

"Yes," she agreed sadly, not knowing how to tell him about a possible death sentence. “Finished.”

"Buffy," his voice turned low and almost sinister. "What happened to Leah wasn't near the crime you’re fixing it to be. Maybe it gives you a cause to rally. Well, rally on, Slayer, but not here. There's nothin' more to it, love."

In spite of herself, she winced. "I can't make you not do this. But if there's anything else for me to know, you have to tell me now."

"Nah," he shook his head. "Reckon I can be the Big Bad for you one last time," he smirked. "Seein's how I do it so well."

That’s when it hit her as hard as he once had. She knew it as deep in her bones as she knew her own instincts: Spike hadn’t killed Leah at all. He’d only decided to play the Big Bad, like he said, to cover for someone else. But who?

They’d reached the lobby of the hotel and Buffy walked swiftly toward the elevators when a voice stopped her.

“Miss Summers? Yoo-hoo, Miss Summers?” The concierge from the front desk waved to her.

“Oh, yeah, hi!” Buffy waved back.

“Hiya, ma’am, I actually need to speak to you, pronto,” the blonde pony-tailed girl called over, her voice dripping with a honeyed Southern accent.

“You not paying your bills, Slayer?” Spike mumbled next to her.

“Ssh!” she hissed back and walked over to the desk.
“What can I do for you?” Buffy smiled.

“Weelll, there’s a couple eensy things. First of all, this came for you.” She handed Buffy an official-looking 8x14 manila envelope. “I signed for it so you didn’t have to. Second, we’re gonna need an alternate payment method for the remainder of your stay.”

Spike clucked his tongue behind her.

“I’m staying for work,” Buffy told her. “That’s my work expense card.”

“I realize that, ma’am. Do you happen to have that card?”

Buffy shrugged. “Sure.” She pulled it out of her purse and handed it to the woman, whose nametag read, “Winnie.”

Oh, cute.

“Thank you!” Winnie sang, plucked the card from between Buffy’s fingers, and promptly chopped it in two with a pair of shears.

“What - what are you doing?!” Buffy shrieked, trying to grab for the card over the desk.

Winnie’s eyes pleaded for Buffy’s understanding. “I am so sorry, that doesn’t happen much these days. I ran it and I ran it, and then I called and they told me to do this. Your company on this here card doesn’t exist.”


Winnie winced. “Usually means bankruptcy. Somethin’ ‘long those lines.”


“Don’t fret, we put all your luggage in our storage closet right behind me and locked it up tight as a drum, all your papers, your computer. Safe as houses in there, don’t worry. That way, if you can’t afford to stay, it’ll be real easy for you to check out. Once we get the rest of your bill settled, that is.” She smiled nervously.

“I…I’m sure I have another card,” Buffy stammered and flipped through her wallet.

She knew, though, that she didn’t. The only card she carried, the only one she ever thought she’d need, lay in pieces by Winnie’s hand.

“Here.”

Buffy still gazed hopelessly into her wallet but she heard Spike’s voice over her and saw his wallet flash out of his pocket. He’d handed his own card to Winnie.

“Aw, what a gentleman! Chivalry ain’t dead at all, not a lick! Now I’ll have to put the balance of last night on here, too, Mr. uh, Spike?” She looked up at him. “You only got one name? Like Cher?” Her eyes widened as though in the presence of a real celebrity.

“That’s right, love. Put whatever you need on there. Charge the whole mini-bar while you’re at it. Think Miss Summers will need it by the time this day’s through.”

Buffy could tell Spike was thoroughly enjoying himself.
“All right,” Winnie beamed and gave the card back to Spike. “You two are all set. Miss Summers, I’ll have all your things sent up to your new room and we can’t thank ya’ll enough for staying with us at the Hilton!”

Still reeling, Buffy managed to stumble away from the front desk with the envelope hanging loosely in her hand and made her way over to one of the lobby couches.

“Nice bird,” Spike noted.

“Spike.” Buffy flopped down. “This is bad.”

He snorted. “If you say so.”

“How can it not be?” she snapped.

“If it gets you off this bloody identity crisis you’re on, I say, let the rutting Council die,” he spat.

“What are you talking about?”

“Buffy.”

He crouched down before her, hands clasped together and looking at her earnestly like he had in the parking garage. “You’re a Watcher, then you’re not. You’re with the Scoobs, then you’re not. Giles is your right hand, then you’re takin’ off. A Slayer dies - over a month ago, mind - and you show up out of the clear blue to play Nancy fucking Drew. What are you doin’? You’re The Slayer. Bloody act like her.”

Stung, she sat back and eyed him.

“You so don’t get this. There’s lots of Slayers now, Spike.” She gave a rueful smile. “And they all love it.”

“Is that what this is about?” He scowled. “You think they’re all more locked in than you? ‘Course they are. They haven’t been tested. Easy to get jacked up on your own juice when the toughest fight you’ve faced is moving a dead heavy sofa.”

“I don’t see myself in one of these girls! Spike, when I became a Slayer, I resented it. Big time,” she recalled.

“With good reason. You were the only one. You knew the odds stacked against you.”

“They don’t.” Buffy shook her head. “They never will because they don’t have to. I have nothing to offer them.”

“Are you blind?” he asked her, his voice full of indignant annoyance. “Only you can offer what they really need. I’ll wager there’s at least one Slayer out there who hates what’s happening to her. Thing is, she’s hiding. She don’t want to be a part of your little cheerleaders any more than you do. You gotta go out and find her and all her sisters like her.”

She glanced at him. “That doesn’t sound much like being a Watcher. Or a Slayer, either.”

“That’s being Buffy Summers. Nobody else can be her but you. There’s a hole in the world without you in the fight, can’t you feel it?”

She sniffled. “No.”
“Pity then. ‘Cause the rest of us are gonna be the worse for wear.”

“You say ‘fight’ like there is one. There isn’t. Sunnydale’s gone and the First Evil with it. I saw that live and in color.”

He watched her critically, eyebrow cocked, head tilted, even a hint of the pout - the full Spike routine.

“You really think that means you’re done?”

“No, I was just - ” she hedged. “taking a break.”

“Break time’s over, Slayer. Allow me to punch you back in. Now if you’ll excuse me...” He tilted his head toward the hotel bar across the lobby, “I’m off to find a smoking section.” He stood up.

His words, damn it, lifted her as only his could. Murmurs of Hope and Encouragement from Spike, previously heard on the Hellmouth, take two.

Buffy snapped to attention.

“I gotta call Giles.”

She whipped out her phone, dialed, then frowned.

“Let me guess. Your phone doesn’t work.” He rolled his eyes. “Don’t suppose that’s paid for by the Watchers as well?”

She flipped it shut. “Uh-huh.”

“No worries, we’ll get you a burner.”

“I can’t get Giles at all, though. If my phone is disconnected, then so is his. So is Dawn’s, so is Xander’s, and Willow’s. Crap.”

“Maybe your mail might explain what’s to blame for all this, did you think of that?” Spike asked.

“What mail?”

“The envelope,” he enunciated, nodding at her hand. “Might as well look inside. You’ve got nothing else to do. Since it looks like my confession won’t be needed any time soon,” he added, with a cheeky grin.

Making a sour face, Buffy tore it open.

“Oh my God,” she exclaimed, looking at the documents inside. “You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

Spike looked genuinely shocked. “Language, Slayer. You kiss your little sister with that mouth?”

“Spike,” she fumed. “I need you to take me on yet another drive, please.”

“To?”

“First, I need one of those Bernie phones. Then, I need to physically assault the original vampire with a soul.”
“Nifty,” he sighed. “Can’t wait to see that play out. Why’s that necessary, again?”

Buffy showed him the top document of the pile and Spike’s eyes made quick work of the page.

“Oh, fucking hell. Angel’s toast.”

“You go in to see him first while I calm down,” Buffy seethed, stalking across the lobby toward the parking garage. “Or I may make that metaphor come true.”
“Angel!”

Pocketing the cell phone he held, he stood up to greet the figure walking into his office.

“Hey Fred, I was just going to give you a call! Great news, Cordy’s out of her coma. Bad news is, she got hit with a little memory loss. I kind of hoped if you weren’t doing anything tomorrow if you could possibly…”

“No. No, I can’t.”

“You can’t what? I haven’t asked you anything yet.” He tried to smile at her.

“Whatever it is, the answer is, no. Except,” she fidgeted, “it is super amazing good news about Cordy and I’m so thrilled and I probably will go over to visit her but it won’t be because you asked me to!”

“Okayyy,” he replied warily. “Did something happen today?”

He walked over to her and noticed how out of breath, how peaked and disheveled she looked.

"Are you all right?”

“No." She shook her head. "No, I'm not, I'm really, really not.”

"Come talk to me. You want some water? Something to eat? Harmony can get you whatever you want. Let's sit and – “

"No!" Fred yanked her arm away. "I'm not going to sit. I'm sick and tired of sitting and – and this!" She waved around the office wildly. "All of this! I hate it! I hate what we're doing! I hate that you brought us here.”

"A little late for that," Eve noted. She’d suddenly appeared, leaning on the doorjamb with an evil little smile twisting on her lips.

Fred reared towards her with a shaking, pointed finger. "Now you shut up!”

Angel grabbed her and pulled her back, turned her gently to face him. "What is it?”

"I'm done," she whispered. "I'm done here, with you. With everything that you've asked me to do.” Her eyes gleamed at him meaningfully.

He knew what she meant. No more recon missions, no more spying on Connor.

The loss of her stung him deeply and truly shocked him to his core. Even after all that she had gone through, he hadn’t expected for her to leave him.

His next words came out raw and full of emotion: "Fred, not you, too. Please. I need you.”

"Oh, I know you do," she smiled sadly. "But that's too bad. 'Cause what I need isn't anywhere near this place.”

"Win!” Spike exclaimed, hurrying through the door. "About bloody time! I was nearabout frantic.”
“Spike!” Fred burst into a huge smile. “You’re here! How did you know I was here?”

Spike eyed Fred and Angel standing so close together. "Somethin' goin' on?"

"Oh, terrific," Angel groaned.

“No, definitely not," Fred said, turning toward Spike. "Not anything, not anymore. I told him I'm done working here."

"That so? Then hands off, mate," Spike said tightly. "The lady said she wants to go.”

Angel squeezed her fingers even tighter, willing her to look at him. "Think about what we're trying to do…”

"That's all I do is think about it! There's more to life than this!” she cried.

She pulled away from Angel to wrap her arms around Spike's waist. Hugging him gratefully, she met his eyes. "I know you guys go way back. If you wanna stay…”

"Hey." He snubbed the underside of her chin with his thumb. "You say we're gone, the door won't bloody catch us on the way out. I only came here for you, love."

"Pretty typical, Spike," Angel said bitterly. "It's your mess, let everyone else clean it up.”

Spike glared at him. "How's that now?"

"You're the one that undid the mindwipe in the first place! If it weren't for you – "

"If it weren't for me, they'd all still be sufferin' from what you did to 'em. Let's not trust our people, right? Let's bury 'em under some fake memories and let their heads crack open from the strain. There's our leader."

Angel let his fists open helplessly at his sides. "I didn't know."

"You didn't want to know," Spike replied with a sneer. "That's pretty typical from my end."

Fred blinked up at him. "There actually is more to it."

"Don't tell him, Fred," Angel snapped.

Spike took a step forward. "Talk to my girl like that again and see how far you get.”

"I thought you said you were leaving," Angel taunted.

"Not fast enough," Spike shot back.

Eve cleared her throat as she leaned now on Angel's desk. "I wouldn't let them go too far if I were you, Boss. Seriously. You need all the help you can get. Even from these two."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

At that moment, Buffy burst into the room, forcing Fred and Spike to jump aside so that she could lunge straight for Angel.

"How could you?" she demanded, grabbing him by the shirt collar and shoving him against the wall.

"Buffy? What the hell?"
"Exactly what I said: 'What the hell does he think he's doing?' We broke bread together. Okay, well, it was sushi, so different carbs. But still." She slammed him again and the plaster of the wall cracked underneath Angel's grunting body. "How can you live with yourself keeping something like this from me? Oh, yeah, that’s right.” she squeezed his neck. "You don't exactly live, do you?”

"Buffy," Angel croaked, her strong fingers nearly debilitating his voicebox. "What – I have no idea what you're talking about."

“And this is her calmed down,” Spike noted.

"What happened?" Fred asked in alarm.

“I have no phone, no job, no company, no way of getting in touch with any of my friends, which is something I really need to do.” She stared hotly at Angel first and then glared over at a smirking Eve. “Since what I do have is a shit-ton of legal mumbo jumbo saying that they, me, and the entire Watcher’s Council are being sued.”

Fred's eyes popped wide. "Sued? Who's suing you?"

"The survivors of Sunnydale." Buffy let Angel go with one final disgusted shove. "Represented by Wolfram & Hart, Attorneys at Law, Los Angeles branch."

"What?" Angel slumped in shock against the wall. Then his eyes narrowed. "Eve."

The liaison had already headed for the door. “I tried to tell you, champ. Have a fun weekend.” She waggled her fingers in farewell as she beat a fast retreat. "See you in court, everybody."

Angel stumbled to his desk, to the top file, and opened it with shaking hands. Eve had tried to tell him, a couple of times, actually. He’d ignored her.

“Dammit,” he muttered, reading the documents inside. He looked up. “Buffy, you have to know I had no idea!”

“But it’s your firm!”

“It is not mine!”

Angel began to pace back and forth, running his fingers through his hair nervously.

"Everybody calm down. Let me think."

"That'll take a while," Spike said under his breath.

"Spike!" Angel yelled.

"You really didn't know anything about it?" Buffy asked, all her fight draining out, making her look confused and tired. She glanced around uncertainly and then settled on what Angel was holding.

She plucked the file from his hands. "May I?"

"Be my guest. First time I’ve even looked at it."

"That's different from all these other files because…?" Buffy indicated the small mountain of manila folders on his desk.

"I used to keep up on all the cases," he said glumly. "Since Gunn and Wes left, not so much.”
After thumbing through the thick paper for a few moments, Buffy tossed the file down on Angel's blotter. "I'm officially out of my league. Lawspeak is so far over my head, it breaks atmo."

Spike picked up the folder and flipped through. "'Pursuant to party of the first part…'"

"The party part I got. The 'Alliance of Sunnydale Survivors.'"

Spike looked up. "ASS? That about covers it." He continued to read. "…'party of the second part is negligible for damages heretofore…'" His eyes scanned and flipped through the pages. "Bloody hell. They're suing the whole Watcher's Council."

"For what? Saving lives?" Buffy demanded.

"Pain, suffering, loss of property, loss of livelihood, loss of whoever stuck around."

"But the whole Council?" Fred frowned.

"Of which there are, what, ten of us maybe? Thanks to crazy Father Caleb, we haven't had a chance to bulk up our numbers," Buffy said. "There's no way we can afford to replace a whole town."

"You can with your salary, Red's, whatever property the Watchers got left. Your aptly named little alliance wants to be your damage." Spike threw down the file. "Disband the Council and sell off the bones. There's the pay-out."

"Not all the Sunnydale survivors feel that way, I'm sure," said Fred.

"Enough to count." Buffy kept shaking her head. "I can’t believe this."

"You're really surprised?" Spike asked her skeptically. "You saw the memorial, Slayer. Should've figured a lawsuit wasn't far behind."

"What memorial?" Fred asked.

"At the Sunnydale crater," Buffy supplied.

"You went to Sunnydale?" Angel cut in. "Why would you go to Sunnydale?"

"Are you really in a place to be asking me what I'm doing with my time?" Buffy countered. "You were in demon meetings all day."

"Wait." Fred looked at Spike. "Did you go to Sunnydale, too?"

"She needed a ride," Spike said quietly. "If you'd been home, I could've explained…I couldn’t call you, on account of your phone…"

"No, I get it," she whispered back. "It’s just…"

"I did leave a message on your office line."

"I know, I listened to it…"

Buffy cleared her throat. "We thought we might be dealing with the First Evil again. I don’t drive, Spike agreed to go with me in case we had to fight something, but we didn’t, so totally no big." She paused, thinking. "Except for the hole. That was pretty big."

"Thanks," Fred replied archly, glancing at Spike. "Spike and I can talk about it later. Alone."
Spike glanced over. “To be clear, Slayer, this means what for your little investigation?”

Buffy met his eyes for a moment and then shrugged. “On the back burner indefinitely.”

"Investigation?" Fred repeated. “Here?"

“No!”

All eyes turned to Angel.

"You're not leaving. You can't. None of you can. Don't you see? This is exactly what they want to happen. I didn't have anything to do with this! They want us split up and at each other's throats. This is classic Wolfram & Hart.”

"You'd know," Buffy told him.

"I'm not one of them, I never have been.”

Buffy shook her head wistfully. "Never thought I'd get sued for saving the world.”

Fred slipped her hand in Spike’s. "Where do you fit in to all of this?"

He grinned. "One of the benefits of walkin' between the lines. I ain't been named, on accounting of not belonging to a side and having burned in fiery torment and all.”

She kissed his cheek. "Grey's a good color on you.”

"Who exactly is left here at Wolfram & Hart? Besides hell's stewardess who just sauntered out?" Buffy asked.

"My Fred here just quit their lot.”

Buffy concentrated on Angel. "Gunn, Wes, and Lorne are also no longer employees. Looks like Angel's the one against us." Buffy set her jaw. "Good to know.”

"The big cheese stands alone," Spike added.

"Buffy." Angel focused on her pleadingly. "You know I don't want this. I didn't make this happen.”

"But you are here and it is happening.”

"Stay with me and fight this. Don't hide under the Watchers Council as an excuse to get back at me.”

Buffy glared. “Don’t flatter yourself." In one pivot turn, she turned her back on him and headed out of the room.

"Wow," Fred said, with grudging respect. "She makes really good exits, too.”

"Mine're better.”

"Show me.” She smiled.

"Right. Let's eat.”

"Works for me,” Fred agreed cheerfully.

His arm left her hand only to wrap around her shoulder, and he glanced back at Angel.
"You head a bloody law firm. You know you'll win."

"No thanks to you." Angel stuffed his hands in his pockets and turned away from them. He stood still for several moments, feeling the empty space surround him. He didn't need to turn around to know he'd been left alone.

Winning. He didn't even want to win this case. He didn't want to end the Council and effectively ruin Buffy and her friends' lives. He could say “no” to this, couldn't he? What a relief, to finally be able to say “no” to something here.

Frowning, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed. A number he knew by heart, he wondered if after everything that had happened, if it had changed. But no. The voice he sought answered and for the first time, Angel thought maybe everything might be okay. He would at least make a better choice this time.

"Look, it's me, don't hang up. I need you. Could you come in? Whenever you can. Yeah, I understand. Good, see you then. Thanks."

***

Together, Spike and Fred recounted their day under the neon glow of a flashing cactus, courtesy of Fred's favorite Tex-Mex restaurant, opting for the privacy of Styrofoam containers in the car's front seat rather than facing the trilling mariachi band indoors.

“I still can’t believe we met at work together today pretty much by accident,” Fred mused. “Total kismet.”

“Didn’t think scientists believed in kismet.”

“I didn’t believe I’d ever be able to make a uncommon spectral entity become corporeal in my apartment by using heat and an amulet, so what the hell does science know, anyway?” She shrugged.

“How you feel? Any heartburn thus far?”

“Nope,” she replied with obvious delight. “While I may be paying for this tomorrow, tonight, I don’t even care.”

“Paying for what, your new unemployment?”

“More like the extra sour cream crossed with the green chile habanero sauce.” She paused momentarily to weigh the consequences on her newly-delicate constitution. “Eh, screw it,” she decided and dug into her dinner.

“Atta girl.”

She sat back and chewed. “I’m definitely not going to miss that place. Still, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Angel look so beat and that’s saying a lot. He’s not exactly what you’d call giddy on a good day.”

“He did it to himself, love. Look what he put you through. Christ,” Spike shook his head. “Can’t believe he had you runnin’ back and forth like a hired hand to babysit his damn kid. Angel as Daddy - there’s a point against a benevolent deity.”

“I wanted to help, though. That’s what I meant about us losing our memories, how there was more to
it than Angel being selfish. I guess, I mean, maybe when you’re a parent, even if you’re new at it, something else takes over that’s bigger than yourself.”

Spike took one look at her and then hugged her to him. Fred realized she had a huge lump in her throat to wash down with over-carbonated soda.

“You loved that kid,” he replied, kissing the top of her head before releasing her, stroking her hair back from her face. “And it’s all coming back in a rush, innit?”

She nodded quickly. “Take my word for it that the mindwipe wasn’t so much for Angel as it was for Connor, to protect his new life. Angel took over Wolfram & Hart and Connor was spared. That was the deal.”

“Raw as it was. Deals are made to be broken, as we both know. What sticks in my craw is the lack of bloody choice he gave you all. Me, I would’ve at least tried to reason with you thick-headed lot before I wiped your brains away.”

Fred touched his cheek fondly. “Aw, you’d be the most considerate tyrant of any evil law firm, honey.”

“Damn straight. Any sign the boy’s getting his own memories back and going feral?”

Fred bit her lip. “I can’t tell. I should be able to, for all the trips I made.” She elbowed him gently. “You really thought I could go back to school and not even tell you? Silly. You’re the first person I’d tell.”

Spike shrugged, a smile pulling at his lips. “What about my field trip to Sunnydale with the Slayer?”

“Pfff.” Fred waved his concern away. “How scary can a girl who can’t drive be?”

“Win.” He watched her and waited.

“Okay, I hate it,” she admitted in a rush. “I hate that she’s here. I hate that she wants you back.”

Spike hung his head. “I’m so sorry I hurt you, love. Never should’ve carted her to Sunnydale as I did.”

“No, that’s not it,” Fred maintained. “Someone needs somethin’ and you’re there. That’s what you do and who you are and I love you for that. She’s just tappin’ into it, is all. That’s what I hate. She shows up and all of a sudden, I’m wonderin’ things I never would - like if you really love me…”

His eyes flew to hers. “More than anything.”

“Or if this life isn’t too boring for you…”

“‘Boring?’” He echoed, his eyebrows arched. “A bit too caught up with you to be bored, pet.”

Fred took his hands in hers. “See, I know that. I do. I feel it and I know it. I dunno.” She frowned. “It’s like there’s a big dark cloud hanging over us and makin’ me feel bad about stuff. That probably sounds goofy - and very unscientific.”

Spike shook his head. “I felt it m’self this morning when I found you gone. My thoughts pole vaulted to a few nasty conclusions. All about you leavin’ me behind.”

“I will never.” She squeezed his hands and brought them to her lips. “Never ever.”
He leaned over and kissed her forehead. “Same, sweetness. Her bein’ here changes nothing.”

“Still, I know you care for her.”

“Yeah,” he snorted, reaching over to soak a tortilla chip into a plastic bowl of Fred’s hot sauce. “Care that she’s still swinging her axe in my neck of the woods.”

“No,” Fred answered patiently. “You have feelings for her.”

His head whipped to her. “Fred.”

“Spike. I’m not sayin’ like the ones you had,” she assured him quickly, seeing his stricken expression. “But I know you don’t want to see her hurt.”

“Much,” he grunted.

“Spike, she tore up your heart to hell and back but you still don’t want anything bad to happen to her. That says something.”

“That I’m an idiot?”

“No, that once someone’s in your heart, she stays there. Which is very good news for someone like me.”

Spike gazed down at her calm, generous smile and wondered again how in the world he’d been allowed to have Fred.

“There’s no one like you, Win. That’s the bloody beauty of it. I’m yours as long as you’ll have me.”

She kissed the tip of his nose. “You better get cozy then. You’re in for a long haul.”

He leaned in to kiss her and she pulled away ever so gently, glancing around the bustling parking lot. “Here?”

"You said get cozy. Don't forget about the wonders of tinted glass." He stacked the take-out containers into the back seat and eased his front seat back. "Got the notion to kiss you in front of the stars and the whole of Los Angeles.”

"Well, when you put it like that, okay then." She leaned into him for a peck on the lips that gradually turned more intense. "Whew," she whispered, snuggling in. "Talk about stars.”

Her whole body thrummed against his, reacting as it always did with electrifying need to Spike's every stroke and touch. Through the haze of desire, a thread of a lost thought wove up through Fred's buzzing brain as Spike's lips pressed into her throat and on the skin of her collarbone as he eased her blouse away: something Spike said to Buffy in Angel's office…an investigation? What was that all about?

It couldn't matter, not more than what Spike was doing to Fred at that moment and how he could make her feel so much, so good, and so completely loved. Nothing else mattered except the two of them. Everything else would sort itself out. She just knew it.

***

“Dammit!” Vail swore and slammed the receiver of the antique rotary phone back onto its cradle. “He refuses to answer.”
Eve paused between pouring bourbon into rocks glasses from a heavy leaded glass decanter. “You know where he lives.”

“Do you think I’m an imbecile? He’s not there. He’s avoiding his residence altogether.” Vail fumed. “I know where he is, the weakling.”

“You sidestepping the sanctuary spell at Caritas was a one-time deal. Next time…”

“There won’t be a next time,” Vail snapped. “He’s hiding but he won’t be able to hide for long.”

Eve slammed the bottle back down onto the bar. “This isn’t working! Look, you promised me that Angel’s little minions were supposed to be all tied up in their own messes so we could get to Connor and get back to the reality you know and love so well. In case you haven’t noticed… that isn’t happening!”

“Quiet,” Vail growled. “It’s a temporal stitch, I’d bet my soul on it if I had one.”

“Who managed that?”

“This has the sticky fingers of the Powers That Be all over it,” he grumbled. “Which makes this timeline fragile and unpredictable. It’s changing every second. Every deviation pushes our success further into the distance, with no help from you, surely. That lawsuit of yours?” Vail shook his head. “Poorly executed.”

Eve narrowed her eyes at him. “How else do you think I was going to get the witch on board to sustain your magic? She wants all the Sunnydale kids to pay and we’re a law firm - what better way to do it? Plus, it gets them here. We can tie them up with Angel’s crew, keeping all the Watchers and the Slayers and the Witches out of commission.”

“It’s only more pieces in play that you can’t control, my dear.”

“You said you could control anything! You said that with the amulet and with the Orlon Shield, we’d cross into whatever realities we wanted. You’d make Connor kill Sahjahn for you and we live happily ever after and seal these losers into apocalyptic chaos! You said — ”

“I said to be quiet!”

“Just remember,” Eve sneered. “I’m your tie to Wolfram & Hart. Without me - ”

“Don’t make me consider the positive aspects of that scenario. End the lawsuit and move on. In the meantime,” his lip curled. “About our magical Miss Madison on my payroll. Is she earning her keep?”

Eve tilted her head to the side. “Absolutely. Her little creation grows by the day and is well-protected.”

“Then let her wield her magic and trap our prey. You need to find the amulet, find Connor, and let this reality burn.”

Eve smiled. “With pleasure.”
Test Cases

The dramatic exit scene aside, Buffy had reached the curb outside Wolfram & Hart and stopped.

“How the hell am I going to get back to the hotel?”

Cursing under her breath, she dug though her purse to find the burner phone Spike had purchased and the envelope with her room key in it for the hotel phone number. One hour until the free shuttle could arrive but sure, they could charge a cab to the card on file for her hotel room, not a problem. Expect a ride in twenty minutes or less. Now she only had to wait with all of her thoughts.

Sued.

Of all the entities she’d faced, a lawsuit for avoiding an apocalypse seemed just as otherworldly. Hadn’t that been the point of a Council of Watchers, to protect their Slayers? Not only could she not help the many Slayers they’d brought into the fold, she couldn’t even help herself or her friends. She and Giles had been named in the suit, the paperwork told her, along with Xander and Willow. No Faith, no Robin, no other Slayers, or Andrew, and thankfully, no Dawn. The choice of defendants seemed particularly personal: the original Scooby Gang. Amy had picked them and only them clearly on purpose.

The Sunnydale crater and the memorials forged along its fence flashed in her mind and brought a sickening pit to her stomach as big as that hole itself.

Because of her and her gang, those people had died. Regardless of why they had stayed, Buffy caused innocent deaths - no way to shirk it - and therefore she’d failed that Slayer Mission. Not one resident should have died. Amy’s father must’ve died there as well. Poor Mr. Madison.

Willow had said that she had helped Amy cast a spell once, causing Amy’s dad to forget Amy hadn’t been around for three years when she went rat. Willow’s memory spell with her friends had gone seriously awry - maybe it had for Mr. Madison, too?

Hearing the squeal of tires, Buffy looked up and saw the cab idling in front of her. Her original gang. Her throat ached and her stomach felt empty with loneliness. How she’d give anything to talk to any one of them.
She dragged herself into the hotel and found all her belongings set up in her new, Spike-funded room as though she’d never left but had someone picking up behind her. Dejectedly, she slumped into the desk chair and set up her computer with the hopes of finding something, anything to get through this newest crisis.

After Googling, “what to do when you get sued,” Buffy saw her IM window buzzing in the bottom right hand corner. She popped it open and saw,

RedWicca81: Buffy R U there?

Hurriedly, she typed back:

OneB_Selected: Will yeah where R U?
RedWicca81: Still Rome
OneB_Selected: what is going on? I have no phone or $$?
RedWicca81: all watcher funds frozen from lawsuit
RedWicca81: :( 
OneB_Selected: I know :(
OneB_Selected: Can u call me?
RedWicca81: no phone yet :( u?
OneB_Selected: Spike bought me 1 but won’t dial internat’l
RedWicca81: wait Spike bought u 1
RedWicca81: RU hanging out with Spike?
RedWicca81: why RU hanging out with Spike?
RedWicca81: where’s Fred?!

“Sheesh, Will, jump on the Fredwagon much?” Buffy muttered.

OneB_Selected: she’s here
OneB_Selected: they R still together
OneB_Selected: :'( 
RedWicca81: why :’( ???
RedWicca81: Buffy R U trying 2 get back with Spike?
OneB_Chosen: I guess not
OneB_Chosen: unless he wants 2
RedWicca81: but he doesn’t. Right?
OneB_Chosen: doesn’t look like it.
RedWicca81: ←— is confused
RedWicca81: ???
OneB_Chosen: I guess I am confused 2
OneB_Chosen: ???
OneB_Chosen: I wish I could talk 2 u 4 real
RedWicca81: ????
OneB_Chosen: I went 2 SDale
RedWicca81: why?!?!
OneB_Chosen: worried about FE stuff
RedWicca81: there isn’t any
RedWicca81: you think I haven’t been watching???
RedWicca81: x(
OneB_Chosen: I didn’t know - I saw the memorial
RedWicca81: ok
OneB_Chosen: why didn’t u tell me?
RedWicca81: I’m sorry
RedWicca81: U never talked about Spike or about SDale
RedWicca81: thought U moved on
OneB_Chosen: hello it’s called mourning
RedWicca81: U were dancing with the IMM
OneB_Chosen: only sometimes
RedWicca81: a lot
OneB_Chosen: why didn’t U tell me about the victims
OneB_Chosen: ???:((
RedWicca81: like I said/typed I didn’t think it mattered 2 u
RedWicca81: like slaying
RedWicca81: like being a watcher

“Ouch.” Since she couldn’t hear Will’s voice, she had no idea the intention behind it but it felt harsh. No wonder Giles frowned on instant messages and texts as a reliable form of communication.

OneB_Chosen: Will r u mad at me
OneB_Chosen:???
RedWicca81: not mad
RedWicca81: just disappointed
OneB_Chosen: you sound like a mom
RedWicca81: Also Spike’s happy
RedWicca81: why mess with that
OneB_Chosen: he didn’t want U 2 tell me he was back????
RedWicca81: he said I could say hello 2 u
OneB_Chosen: BUT
RedWicca81: he said he would send a postcard
RedWicca81: I waited 4 it
RedWicca81: but he might have been kidding
RedWicca81: Buffy I meant 2
RedWicca81: but u hadn’t even said his name
RedWicca81: or that u missed him
RedWicca81: not once
OneB_Chosen: I know
RedWicca81: NOT ONE TIME
OneB_Chosen: I get it
RedWicca81: IN OVER A YEAR
Buffy typed her new phone number into the window but Willow had logged off.

One of the most important conversations she’d ever had with her best friend and she never even got to hear Will’s voice.

If she couldn’t even convince Willow, who knew her best, how much Spike meant to her, it seemed very unlikely Buffy could convince him. The pain of almost having him, of being ready for him at the exact time he had moved on, stung her so deeply in her core that she could taste it - the bitterest pill. How damning to get this close only to fail; not even fail, really, but crash and burn repeatedly. Just as he had done, when you got right down to it.

Spike had tried to show and tell and prove her of his love so many times it had become as predictable as rain and as easily dismissed when he didn’t have a soul. Souled, though, especially in those last weeks leading up to their final battle, he hadn’t only fought beside her but bolstered her. Maybe that’s all he had been meant to do: help the Slayer complete her ultimate mission of closing the Hellmouth and watch her walk out alive, their story complete with his crowning act of sacrifice. He saved the Slayer he vowed to kill, she made the vampire she had despised the most into a champion. Here endeth the lesson.
Buffy wiped at her eyes with the heel of her hand. Easier to think of it that way, at least for now, since she had a more pressing battle to fight. She knew what she really needed.

A lawyer.

“Sure, he’s right here,” said one of the East Hills volunteers who had answered the phone. “Hold on.”

“This is Charles Gunn.”

“Hey, what would it take to get some free legal advice?” Buffy asked, trying for levity. “This is Buffy Summers, by the way.”

“Yeah, I know. I been waitin’ on your call.”

She stopped short. “You have?”

“Uh, somethin’ about a First Evil goin’ down?”

“Oh, that,” Buffy replied, almost relieved. “No, that ended up not even being a thing. Sorry to get you all locked and loaded for nothing.”

“No, it’s cool. I’d rather be ready and not have to go. I still think there’s somethin’ out there, just doesn’t make sense with no vamps around.”

She tried to smile. “I promise that is next on my list of things to do.”

“So you really need legal advice or you just playin’?”

“I actually really do.”
“Look, I don’t know how much you know about me, so let me lay it out for you: I’m no lawyer. What I know I got from Wolfram & Hart and I don’t have much of it anymore.”

“You mean a degree or a license?” Buffy asked, puzzled.

“More like an implant,” Gunn sighed. “It’d be like you goin’ to sleep as Buffy Summers and wakin’ up as the Slayer, you got me?”

“Oh, yeah,” Buffy replied. “I remember it all too well. Your implant isn’t working since you left?”

“Dunno if me leaving had a thing to do with it. Makes me wonder if they set it up that I’d need to be recharged from time to time,” he grumbled. “To get me to stick around.”

“Wow. That place really is evil incarnate, isn’t it? It’s like a Hellmouth with suits and a pension plan.”

“Pretty much,” he chuckled. “What does a Slayer need with law advice anyway?”

Buffy opened her mouth, ready to spill all, but she stopped.

When she heard his voice, she’d been ready to hire him to represent the Watcher’s Council on the spot, thinking that for him to stick it to Wolfram & Hart would be an extra dollop of justice served. If his law smarts were fading, though, she would need a real lawyer.

She thought of Angel, too. As steamed as she still felt, what good would come of her telling Gunn that Wolfram & Hart represented the group suing her? Now that she’d calmed down, she didn’t blame Angel beyond him taking over the rotten firm in the first place and neglecting its cases.

But Gunn. Somehow Buffy knew Gunn would blame Angel directly and she couldn’t be responsible for causing a further rift between them.

“It’s a problem one of our new Slayer families is having,” she lied. “I had a couple general
questions, that’s all.”

“I might still have what you need rolling around up in here, who knows? Go on and ask.”

“Okay,” she said slowly, racking her brain to craft an impromptu and believable scenario. “So this girl’s dad got his business accounts frozen, like no email, no company credit card, no phone, because the business he works for is being sued for damages.”

“Whoa, okay. Must be class action type stuff goin’ down. That means,” she heard him grin, before she had a chance to ask, “that it’s a group of folks, like forty or more, all suing the same business for the same kind of injuries.”

“It’s legit, though,” Buffy winced, afraid of the answer. “That they can shut down all his stuff?”

“Most times, they gotta do a court order and let the defendant respond first. But I’ll tell you, Wolfram & Hart didn’t think a thing about strong-armin’ banks or blackmailin’ courts into pushing that kind of shit through.”

“Of course they didn’t,” she answered dismally. “One more thing: this guy is named in the suit with a few of his buddies. He can’t really afford the plane ticket to get over to the trial. What’s the worst thing if he doesn’t show up?”

Buffy thought of Giles, Willow, and Xander. Willow had gotten to London thanks to her coven, but what about the rest of them? The Watcher’s Council paid for everything, including their apartments, which…oh, my God, I can’t be homeless, too, can I???

Gunn grunted. “He better dig up some good friends with cash and quick. Not showing up would be bad news.”

“What kind?” she squeaked.

“He’s in contempt of court, first off. Judge could issue a bench warrant for your man, he could get slapped with a failure to appear, he could get arrested. The plaintiff - that’s whoever’s suing him - could ask the judge for a default judgment. That,” Gunn sighed, “means he’ll lose automatically since he didn’t show up to tell his side.”
“They’re counting on that,” Buffy couldn’t help murmuring into the phone.

“That he won’t show up?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “He has no money to travel. He wonders if it’s even worth it because there’s no way he can pay back what they say he owes.”

“He’s gotta show up. If he loses, even if he’s broke today, they could still dog him to get their money.”

Buffy’s heart began to pound. “For how long could they dog him?”

“Depends on the statute of limitations. I saw a case once set up for twenty years.”

“Twenty?” Buffy shouted a little too loudly. “That means whatever money he makes over twenty years would have to go to paying off that case?”

“Yup.”

Not only did Amy want to shut down the Council permanently to get her revenge, she wanted to make it so that the gang would have to slave away at paying jobs for the rest of their lives. Here Buffy had been so focused on finally living her “normal” life, she never thought of having a “real” job as a prison.

It would be.

She considered the unpleasant prospect of having no choice but to work in a place like the Doublemeat Palace for the rest of her life - no time to patrol, no way to build a savings, or travel, or do all the other things she’d tacked on to her bucket list when Sunnydale collapsed. All gone. By Monday, if they lost, she’d never be a Watcher or a Slayer or an independent person ever again. Not to mention that all the Slayers they’d managed to find would be left hanging and the ones they had yet to find would be abandoned.
She’d had over a year to bask in her freedom - and she’d wasted it.

“Hey, your girl’s dad got himself a lawyer yet?”

With a start, Buffy turned back to the phone. She didn’t even know - or have any idea how to find out.

“N-no, I don’t think so.”

“I don’t know where the hearing is, but I got a list of solid public defenders here that might help. You want some names and numbers?”

“Please,” Buffy answered and wrote down all the information he gave her. “I can’t thank you enough for all this.”

“I didn’t do a thing.”

“No, you really did. It’s super helpful. Hey,” she looked at the time. “You off to patrol tonight?”

He hesitated. “I’ll see how far I get on this leg. What about you?”

“You know,” she thought aloud. “I think I will. Maybe I’ll see you out there.”

“Why not, Buffy,” she told herself after hanging up. “Who knows how long you’ll be able to do it at all?”

***

“Lysandra, thank you so much for putting us up,” Willow told the voice on the hotel phone gratefully. “I don’t know how to repay you.”
“You will, darling. As soon as you get to California. As for your friends, are they sorted? Do they need anything?”

“Xander and Dawn are fine,” Willow said, glancing at them in the sitting room of their plush Royal Suite as they oohed and ahhed over the decor. “You didn’t have to do all this.”

“Of course I did,” Lysandra told her. “You’re a member of the Hightower Coven and this is how we treat our own. You’ll barely be at the Savoy long enough to enjoy it, you may as well have its finest room. Now, as for the next leg of your journey, you’ll receive a package with your new wireless phone, the rest of your plane tickets, credit card, and some spending money. The specifics of your itinerary in Los Angeles will be included as well.”

“I will pay you back,” Willow vowed. “Once we get this new Council going. Every dollar - or pound.”

“I’m hardly concerned. Your young Miss Summers has everything well in hand. She’s quite brilliant. Her plan couldn’t have come at a better time.”

“I know,” Willow smiled. “Dawnie’s pretty awesome. It’s like this was meant to be.”

“The best things usually are, darling. I’ll be in touch.”

***

“I feel like we’re in the brick house, at least.”

Seemingly apropos of nothing, Fred had uttered this little non-sequitur before drifting off. Now it made sense, perfect fucking utter, as did most things Fred said that he didn’t get at first - they would hit Spike like a ton of (yes) bricks later on, like now. While she slept, though, he couldn’t do a thing but watch her and remember all she’d said.

Nose to nose, he inhaled her sleepy smell, entwined in the center of unconsciousness. Fred smelled charred somehow; a blaze burning behind her eyelids. He could tell she experienced no pleasant dreams this night.

She told him once she still dreamed about Pylea. More recently, guns. Hearing his heartbeat die.
Even grocery shopping, which blurred into cataloguing the lab artifacts at Wolfram & Hart. Maybe Angel’s stricken expression at her departure had been thrown in for good measure, not to mention a certain blonde Slayer fixed in the same passenger seat of his car that Fred usually occupied.

No, Spike could imagine that her strongest nightmares tonight featured the figure of a young man whose genes borrowed from some mystical mixture of both Angel and Darla. A lethal sort of boy infused with an unknown magic and primeval anger that would rip apart these fragile lean-tos of lives they’d all rigged up, in spite of (or even because of) his absence.

Right on schedule, Spike thought bitterly. Huff and puff and blow us all to smithereens.

“Poor Connor,” Fred had sighed, on their drive back to their apartment the previous night. She had leaned her head on his shoulder and stroked his bicep with such exquisite tenderness, it was all Spike could do to not pull the car over, take her face in his hands again and kiss her senseless. Not taking his eyes off the road, he nuzzled her hair instead.

“I wish I knew what was going on with him for real. Maybe with a little more time, I could’ve figured it out.”

“Way I see it, you got all the time in the world now.”

She looked up at him eagerly. “Plus, you’re totally in the know about what I’m doing and there’s no pesky lab to take up my time.”

“Road trip then?”

Fred smiled. “You’d do it? You don’t even know Connor.”

“I know you. I can tell this means the world to you.”

Her smile fading, she nodded quickly. “It is, it’s just...if his memories, all of his memories came back, I’m not a person he’d want to see.” She met his eyes guiltily.

“Win, whatever it is...”
“I told you that when I picked up my notebook, I talked to a boy who’d been attacked at the campus.”

“Yeah, you said at dinner.”

“What I didn’t say is that the boy looked an awful lot like Charles. As for my notebook…” She leaned down into her brown suede sack and pulled out a handful of mangled paper and twisted spiral wire.

“Jesus, Fred!” he sputtered, staring first at the notebook and then at her. He shook his head. “That settles it, you won’t set a foot near him without me. Leave you on your own when the boy can do this to paper? Angel must’ve been out of his bloody mind. You could be the thing to get ripped apart next, love.”

“But what if I deserve it?”

This time, Spike did take his eyes off the road to stare at the woman he’d just held, made love to, smelled and tasted as though he could read every year of her life under his hands and tongue, so well did he feel he knew her. He felt jolted by a stark unfamiliarity.

“We all hurt him,” Fred continued. “Me? I called him ‘honey,’ like I knew anything about being a mother. One night, I made him a bologna sandwich…and then I tased the little bastard. I tased him to kingdom come for betraying his father. That’s what Connor remembers about me. So if he’s coming back, it’ll be for every single one of us. To make us pay.”

“He can try,” Spike growled. “If he thinks he’ll have a stone’s throw at you, he’ll have to bash his way through me or kill himself trying.”

He glanced at her.

“What? Your little story’s supposed to turn me off? Afraid you barked up the wrong vampire. Thought of you getting your revenge on with a taser’s a sight I won’t soon… oh, balls,” he muttered, seeing her sudden tears, and finally pulled the car over.
Spike gathered her against his chest and let her sob.

“Don’t you get it? There’s nothing you can do that’ll keep me from loving you. Me, on the other hand…”

“Just kiss me,” Fred whispered, so he did, before driving them home and tucking them both into bed. He had almost drifted off before her breath tickled his ear and her words sent his mind turning.

*I feel like we’re in the brick house, at least.*

At least there’d be a fight against some unknown force to contend with. He knew how to do that. Lately, his future stretched out as wide and empty as the clean white sheets Fred unfurled over the smooth surface of their bed. Whatever was he to do with himself?

He glanced at the lady he loved, her lips at last parted into a sleeping smile. Seeing’s how it wasn’t about only him anymore, Spike realized that he had best figure it out.
Sleep rarely offered comfort these days. Vail had not only invaded his waking life but Wesley's dreams as well. The past night's tableau had featured Fred burning to death by bunsen burners in her lab while Wes watched helplessly, paralyzed and clutching a screaming baby Connor. Sweating and shouting, Wes jolted himself awake.

He blinked, momentarily disoriented in the luxurious purple Egyptian cotton sheets and satin, medallion-print duvet. The gold-veneer walls gleamed cozily from the Moroccan glass candle globes that were placed around the room. Panting, Wes looked down at himself, naked except for his boxers and one of Lorne's more tropically printed silk kimonos. He groaned.

"Knock knock, chow train coming through," called Lorne's voice from the other side of the door. He opened it with a flourish and rolled in a portable breakfast cart that might have come from one of the city's finest hotels.

"You could've let me leave," grumbled Wesley, stumbling out of bed and feeling the nausea of too much whiskey and not enough sleep hit him in a dizzy rush. He sank back down and braced himself up to sitting instead.

"There was no letting, there was just your head hitting the bar. So rather than leave you to the not-so-delicate ministrations of my late-night bleach-obsessed cleaning crew, I brought you here instead." He paused, testing the heat of the waffle iron he'd brought with one licked green finger. "The word you're looking for is 'thanks,'"

Wes grunted and eyed the full mini-kitchen on wheels and Lorne behind it, replete in a vintage "Kiss the Cook" apron. "You're cooking now?"

"Turns out I'm only one burner shy of full cordon bleu. So there're benefits of losing the only gift I thought I had."

"No hint your empath powers are coming back, then."

"No hints, clues, or inklings. But hey, got sauté pan, will travel. So like Ms. Gaynor: 'I will survive.' Don't be shy, Wes, take advantage of the fresh squeezed goodness over here." He pointed to a full glass pitcher full of orange juice.
Gingerly, Wes stood up and approached the cart. Lorne had made a full fruit salad, had included a platter of various filled danishes, brewed a silver percolator pot of steaming coffee, and appeared to be in the process of constructing bacon, pancakes, sausage and eggs.

Wes opened his mouth to finally offer his thanks, but instead he blurted: "Does anything about this feel wrong to you?"

"What, you think the Sterno's too hot?"

"No, not breakfast. This. Here. Do you ever feel as though you were meant to live a different life?"

Lorne held up a spatula up to his cheek and gazed dreamily off into the distance. "You know, it was a boy's tender dream dashed that I didn't do more work in textiles…"

"Lorne!"

"Jeez, Wes, whaddaya want from me?" The demon shrugged, whipping a mixture into one of the pans with vigor and disgust. "Here's Lorne the walking wound; there's you, a salt and lemon juice cocktail looking to tango."

Wesley hung his head. "Of course. Truly, my apologies."

"Sure," Lorne continued in a softer voice. "Sure, everything about what's going on now feels wrong. I hate that Fred shot somebody dead. I hate that you got tortured; that Gunn got broken. I hate that I lost my powers, I hate that we went to work at Evil Inc. in the first place. I hate that Angel tried to wipe our minds away. But seeing's how I can't change it, I gotta channel all that hate into…" he looked down. "Crepes, it looks like. Bon appetit."

"But would you change it, if you could?" Wesley pressed, unable to stop himself from thinking about Vail. "What if a kind of magic could make it all go away?"

"You snap your sorcery fingers and poof, I'm back to my full-empath prowess? Seems like a no-brainer choice, huh? But there's no way of knowing what's on the other side of that shiny little dime, is there?"
Lorne’s words spoke to Wes’ own fears, and he lowered his eyes under the pressure of realization.

"No, definitely not," he agreed. "Any new reality would bring with it possibly even worse consequences."

"Now how do you want your eggs? I don't do coddled."

Wesley sighed and downed a glass of juice in a quick swallow. "I hate to waste your efforts but I'm afraid I don't have much of an appetite."

"I gotcha. What you really need isn't served on a plate at all."

Lorne walked soundlessly across the white shag carpet to the ornately carved nightstand and presented Wesley with what looked like a gold genie's lamp with a long plastic cord and push button numbers.

"Wes, lemme introduce you to one of the wonders of the technological world. It don't slice, dice or julienne but you let your fingers do the walking, and it'll lead you to the promised land we locals call sanity."

"I know what a phone is, Lorne."

"You say that but all signs point to you don't know jack. There's someone on the other end of this thing who can dig you out of this funkitude, if not your hangover. So what say. Help her, help you. Throw her a shovel and give our Fred a call."

He plopped the decorated phone into Wesley's lap and returned to his cooking station.

Wes considered it gravely. "She doesn't come alone."

"Nope, she doesn't. Don't think I don't know how much that burns. But if she's got a forever kind of love and you can't support that, what does that say about how much she really means to you?" He flipped a crepe onto a plate. "What if Fred and Spike do go kaput, huh? How are you ever gonna score as her lover when you ditched her as a friend? Ding-a-ling, Wes. Any of this ringing your
Lorne rolled his eyes at Wesley’s lack of a response, then fished in the pocket of his apron and whipped out his cell phone, dialing furiously.

"Freddles! How’s it hangin’, sweets? Huh? Wait - No, no…I haven’t noticed…no, I most certainly have not seen anything hanging off of you - no, honey, it's just a figure of speech, promise. Listen, the reason I called is we’re having a little soiree tonight at Caritas and I thought you and your mister… you would? You will! My horns just did the mambo. Only your dancing shoes. See you then, chiclet. Ta-ta.”

Shaking his head while dialing again, he glared at Wes. "That was a problem? You roped me into hosting a party tonight, and my champagne fountain's on the fritz. That's a problem.”

He paused and then brightened at hearing the voice of his next phone call: "Hey Annie-kins! Long time no cocktail, toots! What's shakin' with you and the Top Gunn these days?"

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“Win, love, if you ain’t gone down the drain in there, could you lend me an ear? Flip a coin for us: the catacombs under the Stanford mausoleum or the caves near Half Moon Bay? You listening, Fred? Fred?”

Fred clicked her phone shut. For the better part of the morning, she had been able to convince Spike that she wanted to take a long, hot bath. To shave her legs, paint her toenails and her fingernails, too, for good measure (even though she had only one bottle of clear nail polish to her name, she figured that guys- even undead ones - never noticed that stuff). Plus, she’d told him through the door, she decided to treat herself a home facial and a deep hair conditioning treatment. She thought she’d been pretty thorough, running water and letting it down the drain at realistic intervals. She’d even opened up that bottle of nail polish to let the fumes mingle in the air, although the smell sent her careening back to where she’d really been the entire time: headfirst in the toilet.

Spike, though, could hardly be kept at bay for long, as his insistent knocking on the bathroom door showed. Now she’d promised them to Lorne for the evening. Better get this day started. She heaved herself up to standing.
“Be right out!” she trilled weakly, except she ducked into the shower, not toward the door. She still hadn’t washed herself; honestly, she hadn’t felt up for doing even that, but she had no choice now. “I can do this,” she asserted quietly. A quick shampoo and sponge over, no biggie. Except…

“Oh God,” she whimpered and turned the shower spray on full blast to mask the sound of her vomiting once again. Unable to leap out toward the toilet, she turned her head into the water and watched even more bitter, tea-colored bile spew from her mouth and splash onto the shower floor.

“Gross, oh, gross” she muttered. “I guess there’s no better place for it.” She hurriedly scrubbed herself down, squeezing some extra coconut shower gel over the shower drain and swishing it around with her foot, hopefully washing the last of her sickness down with it.

Facing herself in the mirror would be an even bigger challenge. For although she had never figured herself for beauty pageant material, “rough” didn’t even begin to cover the image she saw there.

The shadows under her eyes were so dark and deep, not even the best Cordelia-approved concealer could hide them, yet Fred would try. Circles this profound begged the question: when had Fred’s sleepless nights actually started? She spun backwards in her mind to Buffy showing up, but it had begun way earlier. Shooting Leah and dealing with the emotional turmoil mixed with the anti-anxiety medications had impacted Fred profoundly, still, she could go further back. Living with Spike-as-a-spirit had caused a sleeplessness of a more pleasant, yet still anxious sort.

But no. She hadn’t truly slept peacefully since she’d become the reluctant laboratory head at Wolfram & Hart. Whatever had they done to her?

No - she checked herself. “What did I do?” To herself, to any of them?

Brushing her teeth hurriedly, she met her own sunken eyes and forced herself to assess the rest of the damage. Her complexion had gone to the sick extreme of pale, so milky, even translucent in its starkness that her veins seemed to stand out with an even starker contrast, crisscrossing over her chest and breasts in blue-tinged tattoos.

Hastily, she smeared the lightest of her foundations into her face and dotted her cheeks with apples of cream blush. Not to look painted, she persevered stubbornly, but to look, well, healthy. To resemble a fraction of the Fred that Spike had fallen in love with. Her eyes darted down to the rest of her body - knees knobbier, hips sharper, ribs beginning to assert themselves with more prominence. Her lack of appetite and all the vomiting had clearly taken its toll here as well.
“It can’t be helped,” she mumbled, and twisted a thick, white terrycloth bathrobe around herself with a shiver. She couldn’t look at herself anymore. If she couldn’t, however could Spike?

A surge of hopelessness and frustration overtook her then, and Fred hung her head with the weight of it. Fat, hot tears blurred her vision and threatened to wash away her careful makeup job so she managed a shaking breath and struggled to gain control. What a sweet luxury it would be to open the door right now and allow herself to utterly fall apart into the arms of the man she loved! To tell him, finally, how acutely, painfully ill she felt almost always, how concerned she had become about her nightmares, how frazzled she felt by her lack of restful sleep, how terrified to see the changes suddenly erupting all over her body. How deeply worried she felt about everything and nothing in particular, her indefinable fear like a constant beating pulse that had no source point.

Something (a virus, a parasite, a curse - maybe even a law liaison or, sure why not, yet another demon?) was getting its jollies rocking her to her core. Regardless of the cause, she wanted to cry her heart out to Spike, to feel the strength of his arms around her and hear him promise that he would make it all go away.

“I can’t do that to him. Not again.”

For that scared, trembling, sick girl had been the Fred that Spike had already lived with after she had pulled the trigger on Leah. Fred had fought against memories, emotions and drug side-effects with every scrap of force she could muster and for the past month, she and Spike had been living like a real, loving couple. With a job, a car, a home, and (blushing) a highly satisfactory private life. She’d recovered and he’d rejoiced, welcoming her health back with not a small amount of relief. How could she bring them both back to him wringing his hands over her again?

“I have to work this,” she realized with a frown. “Something could’ve been missed.”

It would mean returning to the lab at Wolfram & Hart - a place Spike hadn’t wanted her to go back to at all. A place from which she’d just resigned. However could she get back there now?

Fred opened the bathroom door and a cloud of steam followed her. Spike had been pacing with a notepad in one hand and a unfolded map in the other, clearly in the far stages of “mulling.” His face brightened into joy when he saw her.

“There she is! You’re the cleanest kitten in town.” He crossed the room to greet her and kissed her soundly on the mouth. “Mmm. Minty.” He nodded toward their kitchen. “Coffee’s ready.”
“Uh, no,” her hand brushed idly against her roiling stomach. “I think maybe I’ll start with water.”

“You sit. I’ll fetch.” He tossed down his paperwork to the coffee table and set off.

Fred eased herself into the couch, wishing that she could’ve gotten away with holding a cool, wet washcloth on her forehead. Spike had done that for her during her recuperation, when the meds had made her sweat. He always seemed to know what she needed before she did.

She glanced at his paperwork. “You’ve been busy.”

“I have you to thank for that. Our talk last night made me think,” he answered, striding toward her with an icy glass of water. “What’s tyin’ us here to Los Angeles anyhow? You want to keep your eye on Connor, let’s do it right. We’ll go where he is.”

“You wanna move away?”

He grinned and set the glass in her hand. “You look ‘bout ready to go now, eh? Your pretty face all done up.”

“What, I can’t wear makeup and not go somewhere?” Fred retorted, feeling crankiness rise up in her like a fever.

“Course you can,” he replied patiently. “You just don’t. You let me know when we’re ready to leave and -”

“Not today,” she cut in. She took a sip of water and set it down on top of his map. “Sorry.”

“No worries, this’ll keep. I looked up an old mate from Sunnydale bunking near Palo Alto. He can set us up sweet wherever we fancy. Say what you will about the floppy-eared, they got a nose for real estate.”

“A pretty benevolent sort, really. Think Lorne with less Vegas and more Pleasantville.” He peered at her. “You all right?”

Fred sighed. “Do you ever get a little sick and tired of having just about every sentence come out of your mouth with the word ‘demon’ in it?”

Spike leaned over and squeezed her. “It’s been a drain, hasn’t it, always up against some nasty or another? C’mere.” He pulled her onto his lap and as much as she tried to steel herself against him so she wouldn’t break down, it felt so good to give in to him and be exactly where her heart knew she belonged.

“Think it’s fair to say we played by the rules long enough. Now it’s time to make our own. I’m a master of livin’ off the grid. We did it your way, grinding down on the 9 to 5. How about we try mine?”

She held a hand up to his cheek. As much as she needed it, wanted it, something else nagged at her, something she could not ignore.

“Off the grid, huh?” she smiled at his hopeful grin. “Spike, you make it sound kinda magical. But,” she traced his bottom lip with the tip of her thumb. “Somehow it feels like we’re running away.”

“Now you’re gettin’ it!” He laughed. “Got plenty to run away from here.”

“You mean like Buffy?”

Spike’s back tightened under her. “I got no need to run from the Slayer.”

“From her investigation then, whatever that was? Spike, I heard her say it in Angel’s office, last night. I wanted to ask you about it but I kinda wanted to kiss you more.”

A smile tugged at the left corner of his mouth.

“You made the right choice, pet. Here.” He nudged Fred off of his lap so he could stand before her.
Tight black shirt and jeans, hands in his pockets, bare feet wearing a path through their carpet. So beautiful was Spike in his intensity that she imagined standing up, grabbing his hand, and leaving with him that instant. For Fred really wanted nothing more than to run far and fast with Spike, to forget all of them and never look back. No matter how right that felt, it also felt wrong, too. They would be leaving so much undone, so much that they were responsible for.

He stopped pacing and sat back down abruptly. He took her sweaty hands into his cool ones and bore his eyes deep into hers.

“Buffy’s here because she was investigating me, love. But now with the lawsuit, that’s off the table. No worries.”

“Investigating you for what?”

“I’m vamp with a soul suspected of killing a Slayer.”

“What? No!” Fred’s eyes flew to his face in alarm. “Oh, you mean…” She gulped hard and shook her head. “But you didn’t. Spike,” she grabbed his arm. “You can’t lie, to make Buffy think you killed Leah. I’ll talk to Buffy and I’ll tell her the truth.”

“No. Not ever. It’s none of her or any Council’s bloody business. I don’t want that lot anywhere near you.”

“But if it will make her go away…” she pleaded. “You do want her to go away, don’t you?”

“Fred!” he gasped. “Yeah, more than anything!” He stroked her cheek. “All that with me and the Slayer got buried with Sunnydale. You gotta know that.”

She leaned into his neck. “Then why? Why can’t I tell her?”

“Because they won’t ever be done with you,” he shot back. “I can’t let you do that, Fred. I can’t have you rehash over and over, you putting a bullet into that murderous bint, just to satisfy their sick curiosity. Tell me it wouldn’t kill you, hearing them try to make you doubt for even a second what you did or why you did it. Grilling you in their version of court not just once, but over hours…even
days. Fred,” he whispered, tears welling in his eyes. “My sweet love. I would lose you. I cannot ever lose you.”

“You don’t think I’m strong enough!” she muttered, pulling away from him. “I am not the damsel in distress! I am not some case.”

“I know that!”

“You don’t, though! You won’t even let me try! In the meantime, Buffy’s still here! She’s not leaving until she gets exactly what she wants: the person who killed that Slayer, or you.” Fred shook her head. “I saw how she kissed you in the lab, remember? I’m starting to think she wants you to be the killer, just so she can take you away with her.” Her eyes flew to his, feverish with frustration and panic. “Do you want that, too?”

“Never!” he roared, grabbing onto her shoulders. “Not since there’s been you, Win, and not ever after.”

“Let me tell her, Spike, please.” She rested her head on his chest. “You know it’s really what I want the most. To tell someone.”

“Thing is, Win, it may not even be necessary. After this lawsuit, there may not even be a Council to confess to.”

She met his eyes. “Then it’s really for me. Here I thought I wanted to forget,” she sobbed out a laugh. “But damn if I don’t need a good confession.”

He bit his lip and tried to match her attempt at a smile. “They’re good for the soul, I hear. And you’ve got more of it than anyone I’ve ever known.”

At that, he scooped her up easily into his arms and nuzzled her neck all the way toward their bedroom.

As he lay her on the bed, he gently eased his face up so she could look at him.
“Just, promise me, love. No gut spilling to the Slayer - of any kind - without me there, yeah? Reckon she means well enough but…” He shook his head. “I won’t take the chance with you.”

“You can’t protect me from everything, you know.”

“The hell I can’t.”

“This needs to be over, Spike. Council or no Council, this case needs to get closed fast.”

He flopped back on the bed and exhaled a huge sigh. “Ring her up now, then? That fast enough for you?”

Fred shivered with a sick chill of intense dread. Although she couldn’t wait for Buffy to be gone, Fred suddenly reeled from the thought of what exactly she would say, and how.

“Maybe that’s too fast,” she admitted. “How about…tomorrow?”

“Win, it’s all up to you, love, can be the day after never for all I —”

“Tomorrow,” she repeated, kissing him lingeringly. “I promised us to Lorne. He’s expecting us later at Caritas.”

“That so? Well, big night ahead of us, we need our rest.”

She met his dancing eyes. “Definitely.”

Spike brought her fingers up to his lips and kissed them. Stroking the beds of her nails, he cocked his head.

“Where’d it go?”
“What?”

“Your nails. The polish? You said —”

“Oh,” she shrugged nervously. “I-I changed my mind and took it off.” She leaned against him. “So you ready to tuck me in?”

“Well, I fixed your bed.”

“Us in,” he corrected her, smiling at her for all the world as though he couldn’t guess a thing was amiss. Maybe, Fred wondered wildly, if he believed it, she could, too - if only for a few precious hours.

Not even the delicate wash of Fred lingering over his hands, against his neck, could lull Spike into relaxation. When he sat up from the bed and eased his shirt back onto his shoulders, he found traces of her scent nestled in the folds of the collar. He inhaled deeply, every muscle tightening with that indelible need for her.

He frowned.

He closed the bedroom door quietly behind him. Hopefully, she’d be out for hours, seeing how the girl hadn’t been sleeping well lately, and that was only one of the changes he had seen in her of late. Changes not for the better.

“Can’t protect you from everything, eh? Watch me, love,” he muttered, as he whipped out his cell phone and dialed.
It was all wrong, Spike frowned, easing the leaded, sliding glass balcony door open enough to puff out a stream of cigarette smoke into the muggy air.

Tonight should’ve been reserved for him and Fred alone, not trouncing to Caritas of all places, filling the void between off-key songs with awkward conversation. Sure, Gunn had become an ally and Annie was a peach. Even Lorne could put him at a kind of an ease, as long as he didn’t try to hit too many falsettos. But Percy? About how many times would he cast meaningful, tight-lipped glances at Fred before Spike lost it completely? Lorne always promised to “work his magic” with his crowd to keep the mood light but with this group, that could have all the effect of pulling a fuzzy bunny out of a topper.

“Spike?” Fred called from the bedroom. “I need you.”

He scrambled to stub the cigarette out onto the cement floor of the covered balcony and slammed the door shut. “Coming!”

“I hope not yet,” she laughed, warm and teasing.

When he reached the room, whatever retort he’d prepared choked in his throat at the sight of her. Because it was her, wasn’t it? His own gorgeous, incredible girl in their room, of their place - bugger how sick she looked, what they had both done to get here - it all clicked into place when he saw her.

She had ironed her hair straight and pulled it away from her face with one thin, glittery black head band to tame the wisps down her back. Long, crystal mesh earrings shimmered against her skin in the muted light of the room. Her eyes popped large and curious in her sweet oval face, her lips shining with pink gloss and hitched up in a playful smirk. Her now-usual paleness had been masked with foundation and powder and blush, applied with such a careful hand that to anyone else, she would appear sleekly groomed for an evening out.

*But fuck, Win. Christ…*

The glistening chiffon tank dress she’d chosen, while it shone an ethereal, vibrant blue, accentuated the knobbiness of her shoulders, deepened to reveal the stark jut of her clavicle, and hung rather limply on her diminishing frame. Perhaps that was why she chose to pair it with charcoal jeans and
black heeled sandals, rather than wearing it alone.

Quickly, he swallowed hard and affected a bow. “You rang?”

“Zip me?”

He grinned in spite of himself. “Wrong verb, love.”

“Just get over here already.”

He crossed the room, made quick work of the tiny zipper at her lower back, and then it was on to far more enjoyable aspects of this task. Reaching out, trembling ever so slightly with the awe of her, he pressed his right hand between the taut wings of her shoulder blades and wound the heel of his palm into a steady, slow, familiar circle. The joints clicked back their relief and his fingers sunk in to drink in her warmth as she eased into his powerful caress. The delicate, imperceptible hairs of her smooth flesh almost electrified him with longing and her skin fairly jumped to his touch in response.

“Ah, that feels good,” she sighed. “You always know how to get that spot.”

“I know how to get all the spots.”

“Ohhhh, yes, you do…”

Spike reached in, eyes closed and pressed his lips across her bare back. She nearly vibrated with tension, muscles straining to relax and then tensing right back again.

“You’re wound tighter than an eight day clock, pet,” he murmured. “You sure you’re up for tonight?”

“Yes,” she whispered in response, her head leaning back, her arm reaching around and pressing into his hip, rubbing him even closer to her. “I mean, we have to. We promised.”

“Don’t have to do anything,” he rumbled. “And I didn’t promise fuck all. Blame me.”
“But then I wouldn’t get to wear this dress. You wanna know why I wore this dress? It’s so incredibly corny.”

“You?” Spike feigned surprise. “The hell you say.” He pressed another kiss, this time into her neck, as he sensed her turning around to face him.

“It’s a lovely frock,” he continued, catching a swath of the filmy material between his fingers. “Don’t remember pulling that off of you before.”

When he met her eyes, he saw that her perkiness had waned and in its wake, her nervousness and the tension of sleepless nights had begun to bleed through her makeup.

“It’s sort of new. It was something Cordy gave me, like forever ago. Never really had a chance to wear it and well, you know she only gave it to me ‘cause it was too small for her and she couldn’t return it, it’s not like we were super great friends or anything…” Fred stopped. “I called over there, you know.”

“To Cordelia’s? Her mum’s?”

She nodded. “I didn’t make the cut,” she smiled sadly. “I mean, she doesn’t remember me. So I couldn’t talk to her because it would’ve been all weird.” She paused. “And maybe we weren’t super great friends. But I still miss her. She reminds me of…kind of home, I guess. The Hyperion. Before we all went…”

“Corporate?” Spike finished.

“Exactly. So I put on this dress because this is the kind of thing Cordelia would want to wear and want me to wear, if she was still Angel Investigations-Cordy and not Amnesia-Cordy, and I might be on trial tomorrow in another country for something I’m not sorry for doing and you know, you need to see your friends when you can before they get mystical memory loss or whatever. Besides, it’s blue,” she added. “And I love blue because it always reminds me of your eyes.”

“Was that supposed to be the corny part?”
The beginnings of a smile twitched at her lips.

“’Cause last bit’s really all I’m on board with. Win, sweetheart, there will be other days - nights-maybe not exactly what you had with your gang, but you’ll get something else that might even be better. Promise. Even the endings, they still lead somewhere, believe me. Burning up in a fiery pit didn’t even end me.”

“And now here you are,” Fred smiled and squeezed his hands in hers.

“Now and forever,” he whispered and leaned his forehead in to rub against hers.

“Now who’s corny?”

“Love, we best leave now unless you want that dress in an even prettier pile next to the bed.”

“She’s here! And he’s here! And you’re both here! ‘Hail, hail, the gang’s all here!’ C’mon chickies, let me introduce you to the Electrovox 2K, my new karaoke machine d’jour. Fred, honey, be a lamb and help me work out the kinks on the opening number, hmm? New technology like this gives me all green thumbs. Boys, you’ll juggle the drink orders? You’ll know where to find us!”

Spike caught Gunn’s eye while the girls laughed with Lorne and the two men stepped over to a quiet corner of the bar.

“You still wanna do this?”

“And give up the chance to bollix Angel’s works? Charlie, it’s like you don’t even know me,” Spike blinked dramatically.

Gunn rolled his eyes. “You could try asking him, instead of sneakin’ around.”

“Yeah, ‘cause he’s stellar at keeping us in his loop,” Spike rolled his eyes. “Look, like I said earlier - I’m not sure that whatever’s happening doesn’t somehow revolve around Angel, whether he knows
it or not. I’m lookin’ in to him, too, as much as pokin’ into all the other nooks and crannies. And if he’s not behind Fred’s sickness, then he ain’t lyin’ when he says he knows nothin’ about what I’m doing there.”

“If you get caught,” Gunn frowned.

“Which I won’t,” Spike averred.

Gunn chewed on his lip. “I gotta say, until I saw Fred, I thought maybe you were… I dunno.”

“Exaggerating her condition for wont of being a besotted bastard?”

“Yeah, that,” Gunn grinned faintly. “But after seeing her tonight,” he shook his head. “You really think something in the lab’s making Fred sick?”

“Something, someone. Won’t know until I get there, now will I?” Spike paused. “What did Angel say he wanted to see you about anyhow?”

“Didn’t,” Gunn shrugged. “Just that he needed to talk.”

Spike sniffed. “That’s… new. How long ’til we head out?”

“Hey, Romeo. What gives with Fred, huh? You put her on vampire Atkins or something?”

Spike spun around to face a livid Lorne. “Oh, right, it’s me,” he sneered. “Right away you think this is my fault?”

Gunn held out a warning hand. “Lorne, look, listen..”

“To what? You mean there’s a story attached to why Night of the Living Dead extras look like they have more of a pulse than Fred? She’s pale, she’s gaunt, hell, she’s nearly blue.”
“She’s wearing blue,” Gunn muttered.

“Don’t bring fashion into this, Charles,” Lorne whispered hotly. “You know what I’m talking about.”

“You think I don’t see it everyday? Every second?” Spike dug a finger into Lorne’s chest, then, eying the two girls chatting by the karaoke machine at the stage, eased his hand back. He patted Lorne’s chest with a heavy hand and blinked into the angry red eyes searching his. “You think it isn’t tearing me apart seeing her waste the fuck away?”

“So what are you doing about it?”

“Tonight,” Gunn cut in. “Spike’s going to do some…recon.”

“Uh-huh,” Lorne replied, glancing at both of them suspiciously. “What you call ‘recon,’ most people report as a felony in progress.” He paused. “It’s the lab, isn’t it? You think it’s the lab?”

Spike raised his eyebrows. “Score one on the side of the former empath demon. This mean you getting your mojo back?”

Lorne shook his head, turning to stare sadly at Fred. “Call it my special Fred-quency, set to ‘love’ on my AM dial.” He turned back to them. “What can I do?”

“Keep our ladies occupied? Annie knows that Gunn’s going out on the hunt, but Fred’s expecting me by her side all night.” His mouth twisted ruefully. “No place I’d rather be. Think you can spirit me a way out?”

“Leave it to me,” Lorne nodded. “I didn’t spend a year in the entertainment department for nothin’. Bobby Redford, eat your heart out, get ready for a star performance from old Lorne here.”

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“Worst liar ever,” Anne muttered into her Cosmopolitan.
“Poor Lorne,” Fred sighed back, sipping her own drink with a grimace. For some reason, her cocktail tasted more sour than sweet. Or maybe it was the stark realization that Lorne had put on a private show for them of the worst kind. An obvious lie: claiming that he urgently needed Spike to be the heavy against some demon mafiosi with stolen Caritas liquor. When in reality, the men could be anywhere by now. “I wonder why he did it?”

“The ‘why’ I think is obvious: they’re protecting us. From what, is what I want to know.” Anne glanced at Fred. “Any ideas where they really went?”

“Charles told you earlier that he was leaving to do some work for a while. Did he say what he was doing?”

Anne raised her eyebrows. “Have you met Charles Gunn?”

“Okay,” Fred smiled. “Yeah, he’s protective of you for sure.”

“He was with you, too, right?”

“Not in the same way.”

“Because you worked together, you fought demons together. Sometimes I wish…”

Fred laid a quick hand on her friend’s arm. “Don’t. Honest. You end up making decisions based on love instead of the mission, which is probably the right thing to do, but then when you don’t choose the mission, it puts other people in danger and you don’t know if you’re a lover or a fighter or both or even if you can be both and you want to be part of something important but that can end up being the very thing that tears your love apart!”

Anne’s eyebrows raised higher. “Wow. I think we need another round for this conversation.”

“Don’t mind me,” Fred shook her head, laughing nervously. “Just some of a lot of what’s been on my mind lately, about Angel, about Wolfram and Hart, about what we were trying to do, about what’s never going to change.”
“About Charles,” Anne said quietly. It wasn’t a question.

“Annie, I love Charles Gunn, just not that way. And yeah,” Fred continued. “I regret how I hurt him when we were together, but it doesn’t mean I want to get back together. He’s a wonderful friend and I’m grateful for that.”

“He is,” Anne nodded, sipping her drink again. “I hope I can say that when we break up.”

Fred gaped. “What do you mean? You can’t! You’re not!”

“I don’t know. I’m getting really sick and tired of people who have actually fought with Gunn telling me that it’s not a big deal that I’m not fighting with Gunn.”

“He doesn’t want you out there where you could get hurt. It’s sweet, it means you’re special. Not like you need a reason to know that.”

“It doesn’t feel special. It feels left out. Don’t you feel it? When Spike doesn’t tell you where he’s going?”

“Usually he tells me,” Fred answered quietly. “Except for lately. All of a sudden, really. Ever since…” She swallowed. She wasn’t going to bring Buffy up, not tonight. “You know,” she added, starting to fume, “it’s pretty insulting when you get right down to it.”

Anne glanced at her. “I thought we were still on sweet and special.”

Fred began to fume. “Sure, they mean it that way, but it’s like, what, we don’t have a brain in our heads or something? Having Lorne lie to us? What, we can’t handle the big important work these big important men have to do? It’s degrading!”

“Or dangerous,” Anne sipped thoughtfully. “They could be doing something really dangerous.”

Fred deflated, her bravado wiped away with worry. “I know.”
Her mind played back Spike’s quick urgent kiss and his words - not really lies but not the truth, either: “I’ll only be gone only a tic, love, promise, then it’s right back to us and our night as it should be.” He hadn’t asked permission and she had none to grant; they weren’t that way and she knew it. Plus, she understood that part of the New and Improved Corporeal Spike meant helping the helpless as well as any other vampire with a soul. How could she ask that he stop?

“So what do you think? Ambush Lorne now or after his Madonna montage?”

Fred looked up in alarm. “Really?”

“You said it yourself: it’s degrading for any of them to treat us like we can’t handle what they know or what they’re doing. You know Lorne will fold like his Vegas suit if you put even the eentsiest bit of pressure on him.”

“Lorne wouldn’t have gone along with them if he didn’t think it was for a good reason.”

Anne looked down, sighed, and then emptied her glass in one swallow. “How about this: we give ‘em one hour of boys’ playtime. Ninety minutes tops. Then if they’re not back…”

“We push on Lorne,” Fred finished, nodding.

“Cheers,” Anne tapped her empty glass against Fred’s mostly full one. “And on that perky note —”

“Ladies, is this a private party or might a fellow interrupt?” an accented male voice asked behind them, one suddenly so familiar and so dear that Fred could not stop herself from whirling her barstool around to see the face behind that voice.

“Wesley?” Fred whispered.

“Hi,” Anne smiled to Wes. “Lorne said you might show up. Good to see you back.”

And it was, though he appeared rumpled, looking slightly gaunt, definitely tired, but not as furry as
in his crisis-of-conscience Connor days. More nervous, like the smooth-cheeked Sunnydale-Wes that Cordelia used to describe to Fred, and less fevered. Grounded, Fred hoped.

“Wes, it’s just so wonderful to see you!” she exclaimed, realizing how true it was.

But Wesley’s smile of greeting to Anne knit into immediate alarm as his eyes shifted to Fred. For a moment, she thought he was going to touch her brow for a fever, or maybe even catch her from a fall, although she was far from unsteady in her seat. Something in her had made Wesley react, his whole body on alert.

“My God, Fred,” he blurted. “Whatever in the world has he done to you?”

“Uh-oh,” Anne’s jaw dropped open a little and she glanced quickly at Fred. “You want backup?” Anne whispered. “Or do I have a sudden urge to pee?”

Fred set her jaw, glaring darkly at Wesley. Her expression was answer enough.

“Right,” Anne flashed a quick smile. “I’ll just freshen up.”

Fred, still blinking back the smart of surprise from Wesley’s words, could barely nod as Anne fled for the direction of the ladies’ room.

“Wow, Wes,” she mumbled. “Don’t hold back, tell me how you really feel. That’s what friends are for, right? Well, with friends like you, who needs enemies!”

Wes closed his eyes, raising a shaking hand to his forehead. “I didn’t mean…that is to say, I never intended,” he stammered, his face flooded with remorse. “Fred. I’m so sorry. I never should have expressed my concern that way. Please, please forgive me.”

Fred raised an eyebrow. “That was concern? As opposed to you being a massive jerk?”

“That, too, apparently,” he replied grimly.
She swallowed, choosing her next words carefully. “Concern for what, exactly?”

His eyes flew to hers, wide and wild. “For you, of course. How you look —” He clamped his mouth shut, either unwilling or unable to continue.

“Well?” Fred prompted, seeing his hesitation. “Don’t stop now, you’re on a roll. You were bound and determined to blame Spike on whatever you think is wrong with me, so don’t wimp out by —”

“You’re a shell, Fred,” he interrupted flatly, his face finally betraying the lack of sleep and stability that had plagued him. “Of the girl I knew, of the friend I once had. Your color is appalling, you’ve lost a gagging amount of weight. Quite simply, it’s as if you’re being hollowed out, and it occurs to me to wonder if soon there will be anything left of Winifred Burkle at all.”

He held her stare warily but with conviction, as though steeling himself for her next tirade.

Instead, she blew out a slow breath. “Is that it?”

Wesley’s face relaxed into surprise. “Yes.”

“In that case,” she pointed to an empty barstool next to her. “I guess I should thank you, Wes, for saying what no one else has had the guts to say to me. Tonight, drinks are on me.”

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