Switcheroony

by alicorn7

Summary

Buffy and Willow body swap. A rose by any other name, still has thorns

Notes

o Disclaimer: They’re not mine, I wish they were, but I know they’re not and nobody gets anything for writing or posting, except Wiffy goodness.
o Feedback : yes please
o Show & Pairing: Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Buffy and Willow)
o Authors Notes: After a brief relationship with Willow, Tara dropped out of college and went back to her family, so Willow is Out to the scoobies. Buffy & Willow sharing a College Dorm room. Giles & Anya (ex-demon & Xander’s girlfriend) run the Magic Box. Faith is post coma.
o Credits: Beta, translation into american and editing by Lilly.
Chapter 1:

Willow lay perfectly still, afraid to move. Okay she was a little … no, a lot confused. She was her … well, her - as in her personality and id. But she was in Buffy’s body! Metaphysics, Applied Mathematics, Psycho-Analysis, Advanced Magics and Drugs would all probably be required before long. And all because of Faith.

So now here she found herself trying to sleep … in Buffy’s body. Knowing that just across the room Buffy was trying to sleep in her body. Willow was sure that any moment now Scully and Mulder would burst through the door with the cigarette-smoking man in tow.

The Scoobies had met at the Magic Shop to help them figure out what had happened … how it had happened and how to fix it.

Giles had cleaned his glasses and then buried his head in his books and watchers’ journals. Willow and Buffy had just seemed to spend ages staring at each other but not making eye contact. Xander spent his time sneaking side glances at the pair of them when he thought they weren’t looking.

Anya’s attention, however, was focused on the cash register which wasn’t balancing and, therefore, endangering the money in some way that only she understood. The whole ‘we’ve swapped bodies’ thing did not rate above this since as she far as she was concerned they were still both alive and in no physical danger. Buffy and Willow didn’t really mind that her attention was not on them. They felt that they had enough to deal with.

Willow had never felt this uncomfortable in her best friend’s presence before. Well, with two exceptions. First, there was that whole Halloween thing when Buffy had got her into that “way too sexy for Willow’ outfit. She had just wanted to disappear. Then there was the time when her Vampy other dimension self had seemed all kinda Gay and come on to Buffy!

Buffy was going through her own private chastisement, recalling how Faith had so easily tricked her into this situation. Guilt filled her as she realized that she had yet again put her Willow in
danger. Willow now had her Slayer strength but not her training or experience, while she was now the guardian of Willow’s body.

Calling LA had proved fruitless. No one was answering except for the answer machine. It seemed that Angel was, indeed, occupied elsewhere.

Eventually at around 11pm, Buffy had decided that they all needed to eat and that munchies were required. She took Xander with her, knowing that just like her, he was starting to get book weary. They drove to his apartment which was nearest.

“So Xan, is it sandwiches or chips and dips?” Buffy asked.

“Sandwiches sound good. How about toasted? We can zap them in the micro when we get back to the Box.” Taking Buffy’s smile as agreement, he continued. “I’ll go do the manly burning of bread. You can check the sandwich makings. We need high calorie goodness.”

“Point well made. Color me a seeker of sugary goodness,” Buffy replied, glad that Xander had stopped the strange looks. She heard him find the bread and load the toaster. Rummaging through Xander’s fridge, she found cheese, ham, raspberry jam & some pickles. She grabbed three knives and started to open the jars, normally a total non-issue. But the lid to the pickles just would not budge, no matter how hard she twisted. Buffy’s mind raced ‘this is what it was like to have normal strength, to have Willow-strength’.

She was not impressed. Just when she was about to scream in frustration, a large hand reached past her taking the jar right out of her hand. As she turned, she saw Xander, a little too effortlessly, open the jar and place it back in front of her. He didn’t even look at her as he did it.

Buffy stared at the jar as if it was Xander. ‘He’s stronger than I am, right now. He just treated me like Anya! Like I was a little weak female who needed someone big and strong to do things for her. Oh my god! Did I used to do that?’ Buffy was lost in her thoughts, trying to remember if she had ever treated Anya or Willow as a weak and feeble female until the toaster pinged and ejected all but one slice of bread, which it appeared according to Xander, was the price you paid to the toaster demon so that it did not burn all the other slices too.

As if a bell had gone off in her head, Buffy suddenly thought, ‘I can’t patrol like this. I couldn’t dust a shelf.’ Shaking herself, she continued the making of toasted sandwiches.
When they returned to the Magic Box, everyone still had their heads down. Xander became Microwave man and soon everyone was diving into high calorie goodness. All, except Buffy who seemed to have lost her appetite.

As time went on, she realized that they were all waiting for her to mention her slayer duties. She was so not in the mood to own up to being just plain normal, non-slayer powered Buffy. ‘Faith you are so dead!’

But the more she thought about patrolling and who now had her power, the more she thought ‘Willow might have my slayer strength but one whole session in the training room will probably only prove that she really doesn’t have the physical coordination, experience or control to be sent out to dust vamps which means that patrolling will have to be cancelled.

With any luck Giles would then call it a night and they could all troop off to their relative beds and regroup tomorrow. ‘Yeah,’ she thought, ‘It’s set in stone that you need years of training to master my slayer strength.’ Summoning herself she launched into the untouchable subject.

“So when are you going to start Will’s training Giles?” asked Buffy, with all the innocence and ‘this doesn’t bother me’ attitude she could muster.

“Ahh, yes. Well, I suppose for all intents and purposes Willow is now our Slayer.” Giles cleared his throat. “It would therefore be prudent to instruct her in the skills that she will require to undertake your duties … that is … until we can resolve this … issue,” he finished lamely.

“Hey, Will. You get to feel the force,” Xander piped in. “Be careful not to be drawn to the dark side,” he added in his best ‘Obi-Wan’ voice.

“Please don’t turn out to be my brother,” Willow replied. “Do I really have to train?” she asked with obvious concern. “I’m not really big on the whole ‘staking and witty one-liner’ thing. I’m more backroom girl.”

Giles replied in his best Watcher’s voice, “It’s not really a ‘choice’ thing, Willow. With the Slayer strength goes a history of responsibility. It’s more of a calling really.”
“Oh cool, someone else gets the speech,” Buffy interjected, only to get an ‘over his spectacles’ look from Giles. “But it’s a very good speech,” she offered as an apology.

“Yes … well. Willow, we can’t let the vampires and other lower region dwellers think that the Slayer is on a break or incapacitated. That would put too many lives in danger. I think Buffy’s right. We need to start your training as soon as possible.”

With that he stood up and started to move toward the training room.

“Now?”

“When better?”

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Buffy watched in disbelief as Willow showed not only aptitude but a willingness to learn. Her slim and agile body took to the complex moves with little or no effort. Giles was in his element. He had a student who knew how to listen, digest new information, ask intelligent questions and take instruction. It was almost embarrassing to watch his pleasure.

It turned out that Willow was as apt a physical student as she was a cerebral one. ‘This is not going according to plan,’ thought Buffy, ‘Will’s learned in one hour what it took me four months to learn.’ Ashamed at her thoughts and the possibility of being surpassed, Buffy could do nothing but sit and watch. She should be happy that Willow was as good as she appeared to be. Yet fear was gripping her. But there was no one to fight, no one but herself.

So she just sat there, as Xander beamed proudly at his Willow who soaked up everything Giles gave her as the Watcher concentrated on his eager student. She felt as if she wasn’t needed. It was a hollow feeling. ‘What use am I now?’ she asked herself. ‘I don’t have any of Willow’s magic. I’m not book-wormy and no one even lets me drive car. I’ve become redundant.’

After two hours Giles called it a night. He thanked Willow for all her hard work and stressed that although she had done exceptionally well, he didn’t feel that tonight should be her first patrol.
They had walked in silence back to their dorm room. The night air cleared Buffy’s head. Willow was very conscious of every noise and didn’t really relax until they got back into their dorm.

Not much was said as they prepared for bed. The awkwardness had returned. Both had been unable to get over having to relieve themselves in each others bodies. Showering was totally out of the question. They had changed into their pajamas almost like 12 year-olds at camp. Both trying to not get caught looking at the body they now occupied.

Both got into their respective beds and lay very still, so very conscious of how difficult it was to sleep when you had to watch where your hands were.

Willow’s mind was babbling in response to the situation. All her thoughts seemed to be about the body she now occupied and how she had often had wondered if Buffy’s skin was as soft as it looked, what it would feel like to touch, caress, kiss … ‘Bad thoughts, bad, bad thoughts. ‘Cause feeling would be bad … wrong … bad, bad. Oh no … feeling… caressing… even worse. Naughty Willow, Bad Willow. No! No feeling.’ So she lay there staring at one spot on the ceiling, wishing for sleep to take her but concentrating too hard to let it.

**********************BtVS******************************

Early next morning, a ringing phone dragged Buffy into consciousness. Stumbling across the room she grabbed the handset from the cradle and grunted “Hi.”

“Hey B, missing your Goldie locks? Have you checked out your new equipment yet?” An all too familiar voice added “Is Red a natural red head?” Buffy could almost see Faith’s smirking face as her voice traveled down the phone line which Buffy now held in a clenched fist. She was suddenly very awake.

“Faith. I am going to put you in a world of pain when I catch you. Why did you do this to us?” Buffy almost whispered through clenched teeth as she felt herself going red faced.

“Ahh B, you know I really have done you both a favor. Let’s face it you were never going to get the courage to deal with how you feel. Let yourself loosen up, B. Just think of the possibilities.” When she got no reply from Buffy, Faith baited her. “Yeah, you know what I mean.”

Stealing herself not to respond, Buffy asked “What do you want Faith?”
“Just checking in on you guys. Gotta keep an eye on my little experiment,” Faith replied, laughing. “Believe me B, I’m doing this for your own good. Plus there’s a whole personal buzz from seeing you and Red so jittery. So how you doing without the Slayer power? Is it everything you hoped for?”

“Faith, I don’t know what your up to. But I will find out and then you will so pay,” Buffy stated. “When Angel said you were trying to change, I was right to think you just had him fooled”

“You really do get off on that high moral ground thing, don’t you? Singing the song of the chosen one, your ‘martyr to the cause’ lyrics are beginning to sound very old hat B. Do yourself and everyone else a favor – chill, B and get on with living life before it passes you by. Be honest with Red. Trust me, regrets are a bitch.” With those words the line went dead.

Buffy just stood there glaring at the handset and gripping it tightly as if it was Faith’s neck. ‘Why is this happening?’ she thought to herself, ‘Oh yeah. It’s my birthday. Why else? Can’t have a birthday without the whole world falling apart, can I?’ She slammed the receiver back into its cradle and glowered at it as if somehow her own will could make it tell her everything she needed to know.

“Buffy” she heard herself say. Why was she calling herself? No, not her. Willow. Willow was calling her name in her voice. She turned and saw herself sitting in Willow’s bed with a very worried expression on her face. “Buffy?” she questioned.

“Faith, our little wayward slayer just checking in on her … experiment.”

“What did she say?”

“Uhhh. Nothing really. Just big with the ‘hee hees’ and innuendos. Pure Faith. When I get hold of her, Will …” she clenched both fists in front of her and stared at them.

“Yeah, double that,” Willow added for good measure. “So why did she do it?”

“According to her, she’s actually doing us a favor,” Buffy replied. “Of all the favors she could do us like getting lost, she picks this one. Go figure.”
“What exactly did she say, Buffy?” Willow repeated. She had noticed the avoiding. “It might prove to be important.”

“Hey, what’s with the going all Gilesy on me, Will?” she pouted, hoping to put Willow off her question.

“Well, it might be useful to know exactly what she said … Hey, I did not go all Gilesy. Just asking a question. Hey, only me in here. No Giles! Well maybe I sounded a little Gilesy. But no … no more body swapping. This is me. Well … that is me in your body me.”

“Got it. The babbling proved it if nothing else … your definitely Will in the Buff Bod.” She paused and raising her eyebrows in mock horror, she added “Did I just say that … Buff bod?” She giggled, not just over her own misspeak but also having just listened to Willow-babble coming out of her mouth in her voice.

Soon they were both in fits of giggles. Buffy went back to her bed and flopped.

“So what did she say?” Willow repeated when the giggles subsided.

“Not letting me get away with the avoiding, are you Will?”

“Nope,” Willow said

“Somehow your ‘resolve face’ doesn’t quite work with my features. But I get it, Will,” Buffy sighed. She really had to figure out a way of saying this without letting Willow know that Faith knew about her feelings for the Wiccan. “Well, she said – sorry Will, but well …” Buffy picked a point on the carpet to stare at while she continued “She asked if you were a natural red head? How was I doing without my Slayer powers? Was it all I had hoped? Then she said she was doing us a favor and that I should loosen up; that I needed to get off my Chosen One high horse and get a life.” She finished still unwilling to look her friend in the eye. “Yep, that about sums it up.”

When no response came from Willow, she looked up. To see her face a terrible shade of white and her eyes beginning to change from hazel to brown, which according to her mother was never a good thing, Buffy knew that Willow was about to blow.

“Natural Red Head!! That coming from a natural Tramp.” A deep sigh followed. “After all we
did for her, all Angel’s done for her - how could she? Why? I don’t get it. And why call? To rub salt in I guess. How can she be such a bitch?”

“May I say - Meow re the Tramp line. But Will, don’t let her get to you. Please, Will. She’s just trying to get a reaction from us.” Buffy tried to calm her best friend down.

“I … Buffy … I …” Willow was at a loss to even babble. Not good. Buffy needed her focused. She could see tears in the near future if she couldn’t get her to focus.

“Yeah, with you all the way on that one, Will.” Buffy smiled reassuringly at her friend. “I think we need to get it together, get over to the Magic Box and into research mode. We’ll soon have Faith paying for this and things back to normal.” She looked her friend firmly in the eye. “Will. We’re good, right? I need you to focus Will. You with me? No wigging out. OK?” Staring at her friend intently, she asked again “OK?”

Willow looked at her and said “OK.” Then Willow began smirking. “I get the ‘resolve face’ now. Cool.” She was back, if still a little wigged out. ‘Note to self. No more Gilesy questions,’ Willow observed.

***********************************************************BtVS***********************************************************

They walked to the Magic Box in a little less than comfortable silence. When they arrived they found Giles already heavily into the books, Anya behind the counter and Xander eyeing the large box of doughnuts he had purchased along with a round of coffees. Everyone knew that this was major research mode and that it was going to be long day.

“Hey, anything new?” asked Xander.

“Nope,” replied Buffy. “Still in the wrong body. But Faith called this morning to rub salt in the wounds. So life’s good.”

“May I ask what she said?” asked Giles, causing Buffy to smirk at Willow, who knitted her brows in annoyance. “It might prove to be of relevance.”

“Mostly annoying stuff, and that she was doing us a favor, that I should get off my high horse and get on with my life. Basic, Nah nah na na nah.”
“She said she was doing you a favor?” Giles repeated.

“Yeah. Well, both of us actually. She asked if I was enjoying being normal … no Slayer strength and such,” Buffy replied, as nonchalantly as she could.

Xander considered for a moment “Mmmm, Willow the Vampire Slayer … missing the same punch.” Seeing Willow pout, he added “Sorry Will, but it is more Disney than independent but whacky low budget cult.” Seeing Buffy’s now pouting face, he further added. “Not that I mean low budget as in cheap, just not Titanic with a major CGI budget … I’ll be shutting up now.”

“Yes well, setting aside Xander’s ‘B’ movie title issues, I do think that we need to try and focus on how to undo what Faith has done,” Giles said. “I think we have several volumes that may prove useful.”

“You’re thinking spell? Couldn’t it be a curse?” asked Anya. “Curses. Now that’s where the real longevity is.”

“Well yes, Anya, you could be right. But I think researching spells is the best place to start. As you may know, the removal of a spell is far easier than fulfilling the requirements to remove a curse.”

“I think I speak for me when I say – Huhh?” interjected Buffy.

Sighing, Giles removed his glasses to explain. “If this was caused by a spell, then we simply have to find a counter spell. If, however, this is a curse, it is a bit like a contract and it has conditions.”

Anya interrupted “What he’s trying to say is every curse has a task that must be completed to get it to end.” She continued “But as Faith is hardly likely to tell us what the conditions of her curse were, we better hope it’s a spell.”

Buffy let what Anya said sink in and nodded. Turning to Xander she whispered, “It’s just like the more I know, the more confused I get.”

“I believe that’s called growing up.”
In a little voice Buffy replied, “I’d like to stop then. Okay?”

They settled down into research mode, cross-referencing anything even remotely related to body swapping. Nothing seemed to stand out as matching exactly what Faith had done or the end result. As the day went on Buffy grew more and more frustrated.

****************************BtVS***********************************

Finally at about seven in the evening, having long closed the shop and ordered pizza, they sat with no one wanting to say what had become apparent.

It was a curse.

In a not so stage whisper Anya asked Xander “When do we start looking at curses?”

“All?”

“What? Curses are not on the list you gave me of inappropriate public conversations. I checked. Okay. They’re not fun but last time I checked, they were option ‘b’”. She turned to Xander fully. “So when are we going to look up curses?”

“All!” Xander repeated, although a little half-heartedly.

“No Xander, Anya’s right,” Giles replied.

“I am?” Anya asked, then smiled broadly. “Curses. Now that’s an area I know something about. I have placed a few in my time, I can tell you, and not of that ‘beauty and the beast’ or ‘frog prince’ kind, either.”

“I never would have guessed,” muttered Willow.
Muffling her giggle at Willow’s sideswipe, Buffy spoke up. “This spell thing is obviously a bust. I didn’t know my head could hurt this much from just reading,” Buffy said as she placed her hand dramatically across her forehead, thus agreeing to the switch of focus.

“Me too. Big on the bored with spells here. And I’m the big old witch girl … well less of the ‘old’ and more of the Wicca. Not to say that I’m bored with doing spells or the looking up of spells. Its more bored with the whole not finding a spell, bored.” Looking around at the others Willow added, “Okay I know you’re all glad I cleared that up” and shrugged.

“Indeed,” replied Giles. “Well, I think we have to try and gather as much information from the actual event and your conversation with Faith as possible. Then it will be a matter of looking for clues.”

“Clues? You mean we go all CSI? Sorry G-man, I mean Sherlock Holmes. Is that really going to work? Isn’t it always the butler, of which we’re short one.”

“I think it’s the best point from which to begin. And Xander, would you please not call me by that infernal nickname?” he frowned at Xander who just smiled. “Right then, let’s start with the event itself.”
Chapter 2:

From her spot at their table, Buffy found herself gazing at Willow who was dancing with Xander. She wondered just how Oz could have walked out on her Will. She was an incredibly sweet woman, a fantastically loyal friend, a sympathetic shoulder to cry on and pocket fun genius. Imagining Willow the size of a pocket dictionary made her smile and Willow, of course, chose that moment to look her way and flash her a beautiful smile in response. Buffy’s glowed with pride.

She was enjoying a floaty, thank the goddesses for Willowy goodness, my life’s a good life feeling but it was squashed when she recognized the face that moved into her line of sight as that of Faith. Leaning across the table Faith smiled knowingly, as she blocked her view of the dance floor.

“Hey B, still checking out Red I see. What ‘s holding you back?” she asked with a leer. “Don’t get what you see in her, myself.”

“So not asking. What are you doing here, Faith? Gotta wish to die much?” Buffy asked, shooting Faith a steely gaze. “Didn’t I make it clear at our last meeting that you should stay away from me?”

“I’m on a job for Angel but I thought I’d just do some catching up. Touching base with my home girl. No hug for your long lost?” she asked carelessly. Changing tack and the tone of her voice she continued “So seriously, how you doing B? Scoobies look like they’re on a well-deserved break. How’s Giles?”

Buffy found herself suddenly very alert. Faith being chummy set her teeth on edge and her spider senses tingling. “Yeah, right. What’s with the noticing others all of a sudden?”

“B. You wanna learn to lay back, girlfriend. Go with the flow.” Faith threw her shoulders back and spread her arms in a ‘couldn’t care less’ gesture. “Just chill.”

“If I go with my flow, your gonna be lying flat on your back pretty damn soon,” replied Buffy through clenched teeth. This was getting unfunny real quick. Faith was making her nervous.

“Hey babe, whatever,” she replied, leaning forward to smirk at Buffy. “Not really here to push
your buttons, fun though that is. I have something to pass on from Cordy.” With that she perched on the stool to the left of Buffy. Faith’s brazen confidence in the fact that Buffy would not act on her instincts and punch her out until she knew why Angel was involved, grated on the Slayer’s nerves for different reasons. “You may wanna call in the Buffettes.”

As ever was the case, Willow and Xander appeared just as she thought of them. “Buff?” Xander asked, his eyes loaded with one question - what's up?

Buffy replied by moving her eyes to indicate that they sit. Xander took this as a sign to partially relax. Buffy’s explanation was brief. “Faith has a message from Cordy.” With that Xander sat opposite Faith and waited.

“So why not a call?” asked Willow, as she chose the stool opposite Buffy. “I mean, how do we know they sent you?”

“It’s more of a hand delivery item,” Faith interjected. When no one took the bait, she added “Okay. Angel said to tell Buffy that this is ‘from the one freaky thing in your freaky world that makes sense’. Look really not wanting to be here B but ‘Vision girl’ said it had to be done now … must be handed over to you two by midnight.” Everyone checked their watch - It was ten to. “Dead Boy is otherwise engaged … something to do with … aww hell, who cares? Angel said I had to do the delivery … protect it till it got to you. Got it? … Not wanting to be here. Clear? So back off with the attitude. Just tell me, are you taking delivery?” Faith waited for a response, Buffy said nothing, while Xander and Willow just continued to stare at Faith. Taking that as backing off, Faith waited.

Xander piped up “So hand it over.”

“Sorry stud,” Faith said looking at Xander. “Cordy said I had to give this to Willow and Buffy. I was to tell you girlies that … The goddess said … Hold on. I need a mo. Lot to remember. Gouchi girl wouldn’t let me write it down. So hang five.”

After several minutes of Faith staring at the table in silence, Buffy was losing it. “Faith? Midnight!”


“A choice says the Goddess,
Give into nothing but temptation
Let inner passions light a fire.

Flowing in the heart of a maiden,
Now arising without the dawn,
To find a home and free desire.

Walk in the shoes of another
The fate of two souls entwined
Or secrets that burden and fester.

For Luna will turn her back
Until the hidden truth is seen,
Returning to fix them forever.

Only then will there be release.
Or bind the lies like the first,
Unrequited soul mates left to die.

For if she withers from her roots
And a single season be forgotten,
Such lives will weep and cry.”

Finishing, Faith slowly extracted a globe from her jacket.

Buffy and Willow immediately ignored the really bizarre fact that they had just heard Faith reciting poetry as they both became mesmerized by the soft yellow and amber light that emanated from the globe. They were drawn to it and both reached for the globe as Faith placed it on the table and removed her own hand.
Willow’s hand touched it first and she smiled at Buffy, who was also reaching forward her hand. When Buffy touched the Globe, a surge of power shot between them and knocked Xander from his stool. From the floor he heard Faith say “Job done. I’m outta here.” Scrambling to his feet, he saw her exit stage left. Looking back at Buffy and Willow, he saw that they were out of it, their heads resting on the table, hands still outstretched but between them there was no globe!

Torn between chasing Faith and a possible, no make that almost certain thrashing, he decided that calling Giles and staying with the girls was probably the right thing to do.

********************BtVS********************

“I want you each to write down exactly what you each recall Faith having said. Word for word, please,” Giles said. “You will probably all remember it slightly differently and we need to have the exact wording if possible. So if I compare all three, I will probably be able to get as close to what was actually said as possible without having recorded it. The trick with unraveling a curse is in the wording. Deciphering the hidden meaning in words, etcetera.”

Having done their scripts, they handed them into Giles and a debate ensued as the differences in their recollections were set before them. Eventually about an hour and a half later, a large white board in the training room displayed what seemed to be the collective recollection of the curse.

“Okay questions first:
Which Goddess?
What temptation?
Who’s the Maiden?
What’s the hidden truth?
What was the first lie?
What does it mean by fix them forever?” Giles asked as he started writing on the right side of the white board.

“Then there are the obvious things. The two souls, shoes of another, the withered roots and the single season all seem to refer to Buffy and Willow. Luna is the moon. So that’s our timescale - a lunar month.” Having half filled the right side of the board, Giles stepped back to stare at it in the hope more would become evident.

Buffy sat numb. In her heart she thought she knew what it was all about but her fear of being
Wrong prevented her from speaking. Well not only her fear of being wrong but if she was honest it was her fear of being right. Instead her mind took over. ‘I’m just seeing what I want to see. There is no way that Faith could seriously have been trying to help. It wasn’t in her nature despite what Angel thought, and she was probably only seeing what she wanted to see. How would Faith ever know what’s best for Willow. She has never said a kind word to her. No, it can’t be me!’ She scanned the words, trying to find other meanings. It was referring to a big bad … Somehow Willow and she would be fixed this way forever. ‘Faith if you’re still on this planet, you are so dead.’

Willow, decided to dismiss Giles’ approach and was busy scribbling the sequential letters of each word, then the secondary sequences. Searching for a numeric, predictable pattern … a code. She liked the mathematical approach. She was also busy denying all the thoughts and feelings that the verse provoked in her emotionally. This was just another puzzle.

Any spoke “Did you say the globe had a yellow light?”

Willow and Buffy nodded.

“I think you’ll find the Goddess is Innana. She was a Sumerian High Goddess. In the days of the Christos when the sacrificial gods Tammuz/Dumuzi were consorts of the powerful Ishtar and Innana, men seeking to honor the Goddess entered the priesthood performing self castration as an act of contrition. To become closer to the Goddess they emasculated themselves in an attempt to be more like women, having a hole, instead of a penis. Then the church fathers emulated the attire of women by adopting robes as an emblem of their "holy" office. Seeking ritual debasement and submission to purge their day-to-day guilt at being male. Ahh those were the days, devout monks beating themselves into a frenzy of zealous ecstasy. I cursed quite a few men with the worship of Innana in my time, I can tell you,” Anya beamed, apparently still unrepentant. “Oh yeah. Their robes were always yellow. The same color as the hair of their Goddess”

Xander sat there too but unlike everyone else, he wasn’t looking at the board. He wasn’t really listening to Anya. He was looking at his two best friends. Slowly his mind dropped the pieces of another puzzle into place. Willow and Buffy were not as practiced at hiding their thoughts and feelings behind the faces they were now wearing. He had seen a few things that … well … didn’t sit as normal.

When what Anya was saying filtered into the puzzle, it all came together in Xander’s head and the light went on. He stopped breathing in a vain attempt to stop laughing. Excusing himself, he left the room and headed out into the alley. Where he laughed loud and long. Then realizing he had to say something, the funnies stopped. ‘How the hell do I tell those two that they’re in love?’ He so did not want to be the one to have that conversation with them.
'Maybe if I just nudge them. Hold on! That’s what Faith is doing! I’ll be damned. She really is trying to do them a favor! She’s pulling a Kiser Soseh. I need some time, thinking time. Anya, your gonna love this.'

**********BtVS**********

It was two o’clock when they finally returned to their dorm room. They were both dog-tired. Brains were pushing against skulls in protest. Buffy smiled a tired smile at Willow as she sighed before opening the main dorm door. No one greeted them. It seemed all but the twilight diehards in the TV lounge had gone to bed. That seemed the norm since at around Midnight, Xander and Anya had left Giles, Willow and Buffy to it. Anya had begun voicing needs and Xander hadn’t put up much of a fight.

They climbed the stairs to their first floor room, and unlocking their door both smiled at the thought of bed as Buffy put on the light.

Their thoughts were again on bed but this time for one and only one reason. There was only one bed in the room … one big queen size bed!! And on it was a single red rose?

They both stared at the bed, afraid to look at each other.

‘And how exactly did that happen?’ thought Buffy. ‘Not good, not good at all.’

‘It’s a spell. Someone is doing a spell,’ thought Willow.

“Faith!” they both said in unison.

“But why?” asked Willow, completely puzzled.

“Only she knows,” answered Buffy, hoping that she was right and that Willow had no idea how she felt about her. Faith was really pushing it.

“I … I think we should just get some sleep and tell Giles in the morning. He may find this new twist of interest. No point ringing now, though. He’s had a long day just like the rest of us.”
Willow walked to the right hand side of the bed and started to take her shoes off. “It’ll be like a
sleep over … like when we were kids.”

“Yes, cause we’re so the adults now,” she said grinning at Willow. “So is it Sushi pajamas
tonight?”

“Of course. All the best people wear them,” Willow replied grinning.

They changed with their backs to each other, which was odd as this meant they were avoiding
looking at the body they knew not the one they didn’t. But then again it avoided the possibility of
seeing each other undressing and dressing their own body.

Willow was feeling particularly uncomfortable for all her apparent calmness. She had not shared a
bed with her best friend since coming out to her. Somehow she felt she should be making this as
non-sexual and innocent as possible to help Buffy over any awkwardness. Not that she was
embarrassed about her sexuality but this was new territory to both of them.

“So Will, you want the left or the right?” Buffy asked, as she pulled up her pajama bottoms to leave
no visible skin between the top and bottoms. “Cause I have no preference. But … well … when
you were seeing Tara … I’m sure you had a preference and well …” Buffy dried up. She had
mentioned Tara, something she had been trying to avoid for months now.

“I was always a right hand girl myself. If that’s okay with you?” Willow replied quickly.

“Okay,” Buffy replied. Quickly she changed the subject. “Have you set your alarm? Giles was
pretty specific about meeting at the Magic Box by nine tomorrow. Don’t wanna be late.”

“Will do. How about half past seven? Give us time to shower, pick up Mochas and stroll in on
time.”

“Sounds great. Gotta go for the chocolaty goodness.”

Will smiled at her friend. Buffy wasn’t looking at her and she could hear the spooked tone in her
voice. Plus she had mentioned Tara, whose name had not passed her lips in months? “Buffy, are
you spooked that you’re going to have to share a bed with me? You know … what with the whole
‘I’m gay now’ thing.”
“What, Will? No, Will. Why would I be spooked, Will?”

“Buffy, that’s three Wills in as many sentences. You are spooked.”

“No, Will,” Buffy said, then pausing as she pulled herself together. “Trust me when I say that the thought of sleeping in the same bed with you does not freak me, spook me or otherwise cause any type of bad. You are by best friend. Okay, so you’re gay … so what? I love you and always will.” She made an effort to keep eye contact as she said “We’re good.”

Willow rewarded her little speech with a smile. And with nothing else said on the subject they prepared for bed.

****************************************BtVS****************************************

Buffy hovered in the land of not wanting to open her eyes. She knew it was too soon. The alarm hadn’t even gone off yet. Plus she felt warm and safe with her eyes shut. Slowly she began to recognize a new feeling - her rib cage felt heavy? She also felt warm all down her left side. She could feel breathing and it wasn’t hers. No. There was a weight on her chest. Slowly realization dawned.

Willow’s arm was across her chest and she was snuggled up to her side. It was her breathing Buffy could feel. A thousand feelings filled her - warmth, light headedness, fear, safety, rightness, wrongness, guilt, self consciousness and love among them. She had never felt so many feelings all at the same time before. Her thoughts were as conflicted and confusing as were her feelings. ‘Maybe if I just stay here very still, then … what? What do I want to happen? Do I want a sleepwalking Willow to make love to me so that only I would ever know that it had actually happened? Ok. not so crazy. That way I could keep her safe. Well, I could just maybe hold her hand … maybe guide it … Just how pathetic can I get? Let’s face it - if she wakes up holding me, she’s going to have major wiggins. I’ve got to move her.’

Buffy slowly tried to roll out of Willow’s hold but her movements just caused the arm to tighten around her, rising to just under her breasts. She could almost feel the latent Slayer power in her old body. ‘Oh, come on. Like this isn’t hard enough already’ her mind screamed. She tried rolling backward, in the hope that this would place Willow on her back and allow her to be released, but she found the wiccan an immovable object. Wishing for her previous Slayer strength, she cursed Faith not only for the body switch but for swapping their beds.
She sighed, frustrated. ‘C’mon think. There has to be a way to …’ Then she heard Willow ‘mmmm’ and felt her best friend gently squeeze her. ‘Oh, God. No.’ Feeling a slight stretch in the body behind her, she realized that her attempts to find release had only caused Willow to wake up.

Buffy had felt the instinct to flee or fight before but this feeling – ‘flee or kiss the woman holding you’ … these two choices no amount of Slayer training had ever prepared her for. Somehow she couldn’t imagine the Slayer Handbook having anything useful to say on this situation.

As Willow stretched awakening from the most wonderful dream, she felt warm and content. She could hear her own heart beating. ‘My goodness, it’s beating fast.’ Then she felt something soft brush against her face and partially opening her eyes, she saw red hair, smelled the faint scent of … and suddenly she was awake! Opening her eyes, she thought that she would never be able to close them again. She was holding herself … No she was holding Buffy! ‘How long have I been holding her? Oh God, please let her be asleep. Maybe I could just stay here for a little while … No. No. Bad, Willow.’

As she pulled herself away from Buffy, Willow was overcome with such guilt at her subconscious actions that it fed the speed of her now Slayer strength movement. However Buffy, still attempting to move away from that vice like arm, suddenly had nothing preventing her from rolling forward.

Two loud thumps preceded their joint babbling as they both landed on the floor on either side of the offending bed. Much apologizing, feigned surprise, cursing of Faith and blushing followed. Until they both fell into silence. As if by unspoken agreement, they rose from the floor, began to dress and prepare to leave their dorm.

******************************************BtVSS******************************************
“How are my two favorite ladies?” Xander greeted them as they entered the coffee shop, placing an arm around each. “I feel like a rose between two thorns,” Xander said waiting for the inevitable slaps but they didn’t come. Instead he could feel them both go rigid. Inside he was laughing his head off. This was going to be fun.

Xander turned to Willow with his patented lop sided grin. “Ready for the research fest? I am so ready to get doughnuts.” Turning back to Buffy he asked “So, are my favorite snuggle bunnies ready to face the books?”

Buffy blushed unable to look at Willow. She smiled weakly and nodded at Xander, not feeling that it was safe to speak and slightly unnerved by Xander’s greeting.

Willow was even more afraid of what she couldn’t say. She felt she knew that if she told Xander about last night, he would just go into fantasy mode; his eyes would glaze over and maybe even roll around a bit in his head. She could hardly have a meaningful discussion with her friends on the subject of the feelings that were crashing in around her; like something out of The Birds rather than the gaggle of Austin Powers’ a-go-go girls that Xander would have envisioned. It would take her too long to get his head back to earth. Re-entry was trickier than it looked with his imagination. She joined Buffy in the safe and silent nodding.

Buffy finally extricated herself from Xander’s hold and headed to the counter to order their coffees. Left alone with her other best friend, Willow still didn’t know what to say, instead remaining quietly and very uncomfortably beside her tall, slightly chuffed looking childhood friend.

Xander held in his inner laughter as he imagined that something more than just having to share a double bed had happened last night. And so his brain took a trip down his very own fantasy highway until Buffy’s return brought him back to reality but with a decidedly silly grin on his face - a grin that for once neither of his best friends questioned.

Walking along to the Magic Box in relative silence, the girls were oblivious to the somewhat smug smile on Xander’s face. His mind revelled in the possibilities before him. Having the upper hand was a whole new experience, something he wasn’t ready to give up just yet. ‘Ahhh, the way power just sucks you in. I’m learning to have sympathy for Darth Vader. Well, his outfit was way cooler, but the 3-pack a day voice? Nah’.
Xander yawned and turning to Buffy, said “Sorry. Bit of a sleepless night. Anya stayed at her place and even though I had all the covers, I missed her snoring. You’re female, right?” Xander added as if it had just occurred to him. “How do you tell a girl she snores and hogs the covers? Without getting demon slapped, of course. It’s a serious problem.” Suddenly, pretending to realize he had asked the wrong person, he turned to Willow. “Oops, guess it’s the real Will I should be asking that one. Buff’s not really with the sleeping with a woman thing, are you?” he threw over his shoulder, seemingly off the cuff.

“Yeah. Right,” Buffy acknowledged, hoping that her face hadn’t just gone blood red. She desperately wanted to look at Willow to gauge her expression. But she knew that, as lately happened whenever she tried to glance even briefly at Willow, she would find herself staring at the wonderful, beautiful woman who she was blessed to call her friend. So it was best not to give in to the desire to look at her. ‘When had this started?’ she asked herself.

“You’re on your own there, Xan. Never had that problem myself,” Willow replied as light heartedly she could manage. Buffy hadn’t exactly snored but her breathing did have a little cute mumbling noise when she was asleep. Realizing that she needed to take control of this conversation and quickly, she asked Xander “Want me to look up an anti-snoring spell?” putting as much eagerness as she could into her remark.

“They have those?” Xander asked, suddenly finding himself interested, just as he also realized that Willow was smirking ever so slightly. “Right,” he laughed. “Sounded too good to be true. But untapped market there, if you ask me.”

Turning the final corner they came upon the Magic Box. Buffy took a deep breath and steeled herself for all that she knew was coming. This was going to be one of those awkward question and answer sessions that both she and Giles preferred to avoid.

Xander noticed the ever so slight stiffening of Buffy’s back as well as the slight dipping of Willow’s head. He realized that they were planning to tell all to Giles. ‘Damn.’ His fun was going to abruptly end. He had hardly gotten into his stride.

Entering the Magic Box, Xander made a bee-line for Anya. He really had missed her last night; although in truth he had not suffered from a sleepless night – more a missing the possibilities of good hot sex.

“Any thing new?” asked Buffy, for once really hoping that overnight Giles had resolved everything and that a cure for the body swap was just awaiting their arrival. At least then the events of last night would become immaterial and there would be no need for quizzing. That would be really
okay with her.

“I’m afraid not. It seems our only option is to find a way to break the curse,” Giles replied. “Have you remembered anything new?” he asked hopefully.

“Nope, no remembering,” replied Buffy. “But something odd did happen when we got home last night,” Buffy added, suddenly feeling that the temperature had risen.

“Really?” Giles questioned.

“Yeah. When we got to the dorm room our two beds had been removed and replaced.” She paused and took a deep breath at the expectant look on his face. “With a double bed.”

Giles took in her words and then ‘Oh!’ He took the words in again. His eyes shot wide open. Unable to remove his glasses for cleaning quickly enough, he dropped them and fumbled on his hands and knees while mumbling “Ahh, I see. Very interesting.” Retrieving his glasses, which he frenetically cleaned, he added “Did anything else happen?”

Buffy suddenly went silent and a little red. She glared at him. ‘He couldn’t be asking what she thought he was – no’ but she glared a little harder just in case.

“A rose was on the bed,” Willow added, almost as a whisper.

“Indeed. Well we will have to consider all of this very carefully. I’m not sure where this fits into the curse. But I’m sure that it’s just a matter of applying our minds.” He turned his back and replaced his glasses, somewhat puzzled by the sheer wave of discomfort he had felt coming from Buffy. “So do you have any thoughts?”

“Faith wants them to be orgasm buddies,” Anya said, obviously sharing her immediate deduction. It seemed she had actually been listening. Then quietly, almost to herself, she added “That’s scary.”

“Anya,” Xander said, with as much surprise as he could muster.
“What? It’s as plain as the mouth on your face,” Anya responded, annoyed that everyone else seemed so blind to what was actually going on.

“Nose,” said Giles, turning before he could stop himself.

“What do you mean scary?” asked a very insulted Willow before she realized what she had said. “Not that I want to be Buffy’s … I mean, Buffy, your great and all, but we’re friends. But I’m kinda gay, kinda enjoy the orgas … buddy thing … So why did you say, scary?” Willow’s back was well and truly up. ‘Does she have to say everything she thinks? How does he cope?’

Xander suddenly wanted to be somewhere else. He hated it when they argued. No matter who eventually did win, he always managed to lose.

“Faith is evil. Right? So what she wants has to be evil or, at least, not nice. So if that’s for you two to become orgasm buddies, you can bet it won’t be enjoyable. Kinda gay or not,” Anya ended, pointedly looking Willow straight in the eye. ‘Maybe she’s gonna watch you two. I know Xander always wanted to watch.’

“Anya!” Xander yelled again, this time not acting.

“Well you do,” Anya glared at Xander. “Why is everyone pretending to be so upset by the idea? It’s just sex. And, at least, they don’t have to do it with a stranger. Plus Willow is on her own turf. That should make it easier. Right?”

Silence fell over the room.
Chapter 4

Chapter 4

The silence had been long and awkward. Buffy honestly began to wonder at one point, if she had gone deaf. She tried so hard not to look at Willow, who had finally stopped glaring at Anya and then Xander, and was now moving towards Giles' private book collection. She knew that they had to talk. Oh god, how she was dreading that. Where had all her self-confidence gone? Willow seemed so much more in control. She realized just how much her slayer power, had helped to form her self-confidence. Without it, without knowing that strength was there, she felt lost, unsure of herself, full of doubt.

Slowly she moved towards the entrance to the training area, at the back of the shop. Even though she knew that Giles would eventually follow her, she was grateful that she was getting away from the not too subtle eyes of the others. Anya’s words had laid her open, stripped away any camouflage she had felt was surrounding her feelings, hiding how she felt about Willow, so that anyone who really wanted to, could see her denial for what it was. Suddenly she felt herself wanting to cry but she swallowed and pushed it back down into her. ‘Now is not the time for this.’ She told herself.

‘How had this happened? When had it happened? Why?’ She shook her head, not ready to delve into the answers. Instead she moved towards the workout mat. She knew far too well that letting anything distract you from the battle could cause people to be killed.

Their faces suddenly filled her mind. Jenny Calendar, dead on a bed of rose petals; her gypsy uncle, butchered with his blood used to scrawl a taunting message. Kendra, her potential never to be realized; Theresa Klusmeyer, Doug Perren; too many. But the one that always made her question the cost of falling in love was a little salesgirl, whose beating heart Angelus had ripped out of her chest, as a Valentine's Day present for his beloved Drusilla. A life she had helped to end, because she had been so caught up in her love for Angel that she had lost sight of the battle while making that certain birthday decision. She couldn’t let her feelings distract her - people could die.

Attempting to stick her handstand, she found herself unable to hold and lock her arms. Falling, she suddenly remembered, she was no longer the Slayer. Her decisions, her effect on the battle had been diminished by Faith’s little game. Could she now take time? Take a risk? Sitting on the floor, where she had ended up, slightly winded by the fall, she stared at the wall, in sudden realization – I’m no longer the slayer – I can choose to have a life. Catching her breath, she began to smile.

‘I could tell Willow how I feel. We could – be together. But what if she isn’t interested?’ Remembering her reaction to Anya’s outburst, Willow had been quite clear that she had never thought of Buffy that way. Nerves got the better of her and she dropped her head, depressed at the thought of not having her feelings returned. ‘Why would Willow want to have me? I’m no longer the Slayer. She is. What do I have to offer her?’

Feeling like a fool she suddenly realized something awful. ‘Oh my god, now she’s the one who can’t take her eye off the battle ahead. I can’t be the one to distract her - people could die! Buffy Anne Summers, you’re a fool to think that ‘the powers that be’ could ever let you find Love.’
Willow reached out for Channings, Cristoller Garbentium, pulling the large leather bound book from its location. Opening it to the index, she quickly moved to the chapter on globes, even though she knew she had read it at least four times yesterday. She needed something to lose herself in. Something to make her forget what Anya had said.

Moving to the table, she sat and rested her chin on her left hand, pulling her hair back with her right. Slowly she began to read. But the words didn’t register and she found herself reading sentences again and again, unable to drink in their meaning, as her mind kept dragging her back to what Anya had said. ‘Could she be right? Why would Faith want to put Buffy, let alone her into such a situation?’ Suddenly she found herself wondering what it would be like to make love to Buffy. Heat built up inside her. Then embarrassment. She felt dirty. How could she be having such thoughts about her best friend? ‘Anya is just sex mad; she sees everything, as either about sex or money.’

“Will?”, Xander said as he carefully approached her. She lifted her head to glare at him. “So, you’re still angry?” he asked as he settled across the table from her, placing the donut box between them.

She glared at him again.

“I come bearing donut goodness. I’m not sure what the Goddess of ‘really pissed off with your girlfriend’ wants as a peace offering, but a guy’s gotta try. You know the kinda guy I am. Hey I’m your oldest friend, the one that doesn’t really do much of the planning stuff, but every now and again … I find the key to my brain, you know?”

Willow changed her expression to a half smile and closely followed it with a puzzled look.

“We had an idea.” he explained, careful not to name Anya as part of the – ‘we’. Taking a deep breath he sped on. “You know how Kendra once told Giles that her watcher had tried to get her to use a vision thingy.” Willow’s expression grew blank.

“You mean using a vision rod to give her dreams clarity … but you can move a vision when you use a rod … be time specific … it would … it could allow a Slayer to change the focus on events either side of her dreams.” Willow replied, slowly beginning to grin.

“Yeah, that’s it…” Xander enthused. “So, if the three of us try to focus on a vision of the cursing -- you know, what happened with Faith. Since we were there, that should make it crystal clear -- so then if we try to rewind the vision we might to see what she’s actually up to?

“The fact we are having vision based on an event we were actually part of, should make rewinding easier, the vision clearer.”

“Congratulations! You have just won a trip for three to ‘deja-vu’ land. It’s just like looking for a hidden ‘cookie’, not the one that fell in the back of the couch but the one on a DVD.

Willow shook her head at him and Xander grinned back. They had a plan.

At first Willow let her mind consider the possibilities of this idea working. Then something occurred to her. “Xander! Anya had this idea didn’t she? How does she even know about Kendra?”

“Hey, I talk about stuff, I think about stuff.” he protested. “What does it matter who had the idea? I
know a good plan when I see one. Well okay, I know a plan when I see one. We can call it good if it works.”

Willow raised a skeptical, but knowing eyebrow at him.

“The analogies were all mine.” he stated defensively. “She spends a lot of time with the G-man. She works for him. You can’t blame her for not coming out with it after your reaction to the last one”. And then he quietly added, “It was a tough room.”

Giles entered the training room, feeling that he had given Buffy long enough to pull herself together. He was slightly surprised to find her sitting on the workout mat, staring at the wall. So inactive. So still. He had somehow expected her to be pounding the punching bag.

Steeling himself, he approached her, concerned that he was about to enter into a conversation that no father ever wanted to have with his daughter. He had never really figured out exactly when their relationship had changed, when he had first realized his pride in her. His love for her went deeper than Slayer and Watcher. He just knew that he would give his own life to save her, without question, but also that he would do anything to see her grow up and grow old. The knowledge that another Slayer would be called should she die, that the world of the Watcher’s would continue, did nothing to remove his need to protect her, to nurture her.

He had watched her grow, observed her life change in so many ways, witnessed her strength and her generosity. He felt that he had helped to raise this wonderful young woman. Each time he saw pain fill her, he fought against his watcher self to shield her. Yet he had also learned the hard lesson that he had to let her grow up, let her work through her pain, that she was no longer the young girl he had first trained.

Willow was now the Slayer and so he had begun to train the young witch, just as he had the young Buffy. But, Buffy would forever be in his charge, even if she never regained her powers. He had seen her struggling with the loss, trying to find the new her. He had seen her looking so lost at times. And so he approached her with some apprehension and the very strong need to help this young woman travel through the loss of her powers and regain herself. Unsure how their relationship would change, if they couldn’t get her powers back and if he no longer had to think of her as his Slayer, he took a deep breath.

Coughing ever so slightly, he let Buffy know he was there.

The basement of the Magic shop was one of Willow’s favorite places; she loved all the packed shelves, the smells of witch hazel, basil, gorem root, rosemary, the latent energy of the carved totems, talismans and gemstones. This place was made to bring her Wiccan senses awake, to bring them to the surface. She felt so alive, so like her old self. Magic, wasn’t about physical strength; it was about nature, life, the earth, the sky. It made her feel a part of the world.

“Ouch.”, Xander cursed the box of large stone pedestals he had just stubbed his toe on. “So need to spend a little less time in basements. It’s not like I have the ‘burn up in daylight’ problem. Some large Xander-friendly windows are what’s needed.”
“The light switch is on your left.”

“Yeah, right.”

Xander turned on the light, and the dim half light from the quarter-size alley-level windows was replaced by the neon brightness of 100 watts. Now the basement looked more like the storeroom it was and less like the treasure trove Willow enjoyed thinking of it as.

“So what does a vision rod look like?”

“You have this whole plan, carefully worked out, but you don’t know what one looks like?” Willow smirked.

“Hey, I don’t know what this year’s Miss World looks like, but I know it won’t be anything like Aunt Maureen. Know what I mean?”

“Not really. And I’m not sure I want to.”

Xander smiled, knowing he was about to have fun. “I could happily plan to set up, say, a brainy wiccan friend on a blind date with the present Miss World, on the fairly good assumption that the view would be pleasant and that I would at least be able to guarantee the date would score in the high seven’s.” He gave her a goofy smile. “That’s how I could put together a good plan, without knowing what someone or something looked like.”

“Xander. You scare me sometimes.”

“So if I could, you know set you up? Interested?” Xander asked, arching one eyebrow suggestively.

“I’m a bit busy, kinda trying to get back into my own body.” Willow said, giving him a shake of her head. “Don’t think Buffy would take too kindly to me taking this one out on a blind date.” Willow replied, turning back to the shelf she was searching.

“Okay, so how about after we sort this?” Xander pushed on. “You need to get out there, Will, because alone is just that -- lonely. The only man in your life says you need to be set up. I know you’re not really out there with the ‘butch’, Will, let alone with the smooth pick up lines. I don’t see long lines of women smashing down your door -- their loss. You will need help.” He turned his back to her and bent over to look in a large dusty tea chest.

“All of a sudden you know a bevy of Gay women?”

“Will, I work in the building trade. Do you have any idea how many female plumbers, carpenters, electricians and architects I come across in my line of work, who play for the other side? There’s a whole customer base out there that prefers to have a woman working in their home, rather than some big burly sweaty guy. Can’t say I blame them.” He smirked. Giving up on the tea chest, he moved on.

“All of a sudden you know a bevy of Gay women?”

“Okay, so you know some Gay women. What makes you think you could pick someone I would like?”

“Good point.” Xander admitted. “So what kind of woman do you find attractive?” Inside he gave himself a slap on the back -- ‘smooth’. He knew she would describe Buffy. He just had to make her say it out loud.

“Oh you know.” Willow said, suddenly at a loss. Pulling back a large box blocking her access to
some shelves, she tried to think about what kind of woman she was attracted to.

“Nope I don’t, that’s the point..” Xander said.

Willow let her mind wander as she began to search the deep shelves in front of her, moving items out of the way, so that she could reach the back of each. “I guess I like the idea of being relaxed with someone, feeling safe with them, knowing I could be myself, not having to hide anything – a Willow safe zone. Someone who wasn’t afraid of my brain or embarrassed by it, who wouldn’t treat me like a geek. Someone who likes to spend an evening watching videos, curled up on a sofa, sharing the sugary goodness and the like. Someone who doesn’t mind whether I babbled or sat quietly. Not into the Magic - don’t think I could share that again.” Willow found her mind taking her back to some of her happiest moments.

“What little stuff would you like them to do for you? You know, Anya likes me to rub her shop feet.”

“Brings me Mocha early on Saturday mornings and buys me sweet things, like silly pj’s. Stands up for me when I’m at a loss for words. Someone who wouldn’t laugh if I cried at the sad or sappy parts in movies. Gives good back rubs. Doesn’t ask me every five minutes what I’m thinking – that’s so annoying. Likes my cooking, even when it goes wrong.”

“Personality?” He added.

“Likes to have her own interests, but respects and supports mine. Loyal, strong, funny, but also sensitive. Understands about my parents. Welcomes me into her home. Doesn’t feel she has to explain us to people. Considerate, compassionate and caring, but decisive and secure in herself. Wacky sense of humor, great at one liner’s and quips. Bigger with the actions than with the words.”

“Appearance?” asked Xander.

“Slightly shorter than me – I’ve tried taller, its okay, but now I know – shorter it is. Physically fit, but no Annie Schwarzenegger. Lithe and agile, but not butch. Sleek with eyes that can say everything. A mane of hair that flows when she moves – oh and can she move. But with a sweet youthful, almost naive face, that nearly hides her wisdom. Not afraid of anyone; brave, fearless, but not foolishly so. Someone who understands how I choose to live. Someone who fits into my life and accepts it. Someone who wouldn’t freak out about the bad guys. Someone who believes the good guys can win. Someone who would be a best friend too.”

“Good. Now just let me think if I know anyone that might remotely describe.” Xander said, smiling at Willow. Then he sighed as if having to think hurt and slowly turned away from her. But as he did he saw the beginnings of a worried expression starting to creep across her face. ‘Ah, the penny is dropping.’ He laughed to himself. How could his super intelligent best friend really be so dumb?

“I don’t think you know anyone that perfect. Besides, we’re rather busy right now. I mean we need to find that vision rod. Get my own body back first. So I wouldn’t waste your time for a while.” Staring at his back, Willow suddenly felt very silly. She had just described Buffy. Would Xander realize? Oh goddess, she hoped not.

Somewhat distracted, she moved to the next stack of shelves. ‘Buffy is your perfect woman and you know it. Why not talk to someone about it?’ Shaking her head, she almost laughed at the thought of talking to Xander about her feelings. He would just go into that male fantasy zone, that silly far away look would cross his face and she’d have to fight the desire to hit him – hard.
“Willow. I’ve got it!”, Xander exclaimed.

Panic washed over Willow. ‘Oh goddess! He knows.’ She didn’t want to turn around; she couldn’t face seeing that spaced-out male fantasy expression. ‘Come on Willow, you have nothing to be ashamed of.’ She turned to him and met his eyes, a very self satisfied grin filled them. ‘Oh yes he knows. Now what do I say?’

Then Xander raised his hand to show her the vision rod.

Giles replaced his glasses. “You have to admit that there is a very good possibility, all things considered, that Anya could be right. We have to consider that possibility and plan accordingly. This doesn’t mean we stop looking for other possible meanings or ways to resolve our present predicament.” He sighed. “I just feel that if we find no other alternative, Willow, she has … certain experience, ahh hmm.” He cleared his throat. “I mean knowledge that could… it could be helpful …you’re friends. That should help.”

“Oh, really? That’s why Willow, my best friend was so freaked out by Anya’s … theory. Being friends should help – yeah right! I’ll tell you why it doesn’t. This would change everything! Just think about it - if you and, say, your best friend at school, could only save the world by sleeping together and you had therefore slept together, do you think you would have remained friends? Would you still be talking to him say twenty years later? I don’t think so. And I plan on talking with my Willow till the day I die! Plus there’s the whole Freudian thing of being in each others bodies.”

“Buffy I never had a friend like that. I wish I had. Maybe then I would never have felt the need to waste so much time; I would never have needed to be Ripper.”, Giles said, opening up a part of his life he rarely talked about.

“I’m sorry Giles. I know you’re just trying to help here. But, how exactly do you ask your best friend to sleep with you? ‘Hey, let’s go to bed and hump so I can have my body and powers back.’ Nope? Too selfish? How about – ‘Hey, I think we need to have sex because being in your body is freaking me out and it’s really brain exploding that Anya’s right, but I won’t tell her if you don’t. Oh and when we’re back in our own bodies, none of our friends will know what we did.’”, Buffy finished.

“I can fully appreciate the weirdness that could ensue if you and Willow have se… It’s a very personal thing. But you girls truly care about each other. I see your loyalty. You are co-supportive - like sisters. You love each other far too much to ever let this end your friendship.”, He moved away slightly. “You would be sensible. You would talk it to death, take whatever precautions were necessary to ensure that you caused each other as little hurt as little as possible. You would fix this by talking until the early hours of the morning, probably over something containing far too much chocolate and glucose.” Coughing he added, “If it helps, I for one, never intend to mention this again, I can assure you. Xander however could probably be threatened with physical pain to such a degree that silence on the matter could be arranged and Anya … well, okay I’ll pay Anya.”

Buffy didn’t lift her head, but she smiled.

“I promise you that although Anya’s theory seems to fit the curse’s wording 90%, there is still the very good possibility, that Faith did not intend this as the ‘get out’ clause.” Giles coughed. “That little lady, may throw sex around like breakfast menus, but the purpose with most things is to be at
the center of them. I find it hard to believe that she would set a scene she couldn’t take center stage in. I personally believe the curse has another solution. But we have to, at least, take the current theory on board. You and Willow have to talk about this possibility and soon.” Giles looked with concern at the back of Buffy’s head.

She had realized about halfway through this conversation, possibly the most awkward conversation, she had ever had in her life, that it was easier if she and Giles didn’t actually look at each other. So she didn’t look his way, instead she turned towards the weapon’s board. “Okay, okay! So we say Anya could be right. Will’s gonna be so not happy with that.”

“Buffy, I didn’t say this would be easy. Let’s be realistic. Faith, the Faith we know, wouldn’t choose to make the way out easy. If this is the ‘get out’ clause…”

“I am so going to cause her pain; almost kill her to the point she wishes I would.” Buffy promised. “And then I’m gonna hold her down so Willow can do the same.”
Chapter 5

Willow had decided that Xander should explain the vision rod theory to Giles. She so wanted to see the Watcher’s eyes grow wide. But with Anya unable to stop herself from helping Xander explain, it took a while for the idea to become clear. Although Giles was wide eyed, it was more concentrating to take it all in rather than being amazed at Anya and Xander’s plan; that is until he realized just how good their idea sounded and how well thought out it was. He even managed to live with the several ‘G-man’ references that passed Xander’s lips.

During the explanation Buffy sat sideways to the group. Her mind taking in what was being said but her thoughts were still fixed on how to begin the conversation that she knew she and Willow had to have. As much as she wanted to think that Anya and Xander’s idea could help, she was more than a little sceptical. Somehow she just knew that lately fate was only interested in kicking her ass.

Giles listened, very impressed by the plan and a little overwhelmed by the sheer impact of all three talking almost at once. But when he realized how they excited were with the idea, he just had to let them go with it until they ran out of steam.

"So G-man, do we get the green light?" Xander asked after they concluded their explanation.

Giles looked in amazement - first at Anya and then at Xander. Oblivious to yet another ‘G-man’ reference, he turned to Willow and asked. "You didn't help with this?"

"Nope." She assured him, smiling the very proud smile of a best friend.

"Well, I really can't think why it shouldn't work. It seems fairly straightforward. Well done!" He said, “Yes, it could work. I see no reason why it shouldn’t. Although how effective it will prove - we will only know by trying.” He continued, a slightly amazed tone to his voice. "And there’s no time like the present. Anya, would you close for lunch please?"

A smug smile crossed Anya’s face and Xander gave such a whoop of joy that Willow thought he was going to break into the snoopy dance.

“Okay. ‘I’m ready for the dream sequence Mr. DeMille’.” Xander enthused, posing dramatically. “Have vision rod – will dream. Point me to the stage”

“I think the training room is best.” Giles said. He looked at Buffy and realized that she had only been half listening. There was something about Willow’s face that really couldn’t keep a secret as well as Buffy obviously thought it could. “Buffy?” Her eyes met his. “We’re adjourning to the back.”

“Right.” She replied and stood up to follow Willow and Xander into the training room.

Giles followed her. Concerned by what he had seen in her new face - self doubt.

The trio took up their places on the mat. Buffy sat crossed-legged holding the base of the vision rod with Willow and Xander, each, placing one of their hands above hers. Giles sat behind Willow and Buffy, a hand on each of their shoulders, while Anya sat behind Xander, her hand on his shoulder.
“We need to choose a point in time to concentrate on.” Giles said, expecting someone to respond.

“Buffy was watching us dance before Faith arrived.” Willow offered.

“All right. Buffy, concentrate on what you were thinking and doing as you watched Xander and Willow dance.”

Buffy felt a slight blush fill her cheeks. ‘Don’t be silly. You were just thinking that Oz was a fool. There’s nothing wrong with that.’ She concentrated on that night, trying to recall what Willow and Xander had been wearing. What song had been playing? How warm was it?

[Very good.] Giles prompted with his thoughts.

[My shirt was blue.] Added Xander helpfully, shouting his thoughts.

[Xander!] Giles hissed.

[Sorry.]

Buffy regained her focus. ‘I had a lemonade. The band had just broken into an upbeat number. I looked at Willow. She looked great. Oz is such a fool…’ The pictures in her mind suddenly became solid. She was there. She could almost smell the stale air of the Bronze. She looked towards the dance floor and there were Xander and Willow. Her view was suddenly obstructed but she recognized the face that moved into her line of sight as Faith’s. Leaning across the table, Faith smiled knowingly, as she blocked her view of the dance floor.

“Hey B, still checking out …“

[Okay Buffy, you've got us there. Now try to rewind slowly and follow Faith.] Giles instructed.

Glad for the interruption, Buffy tried to do just that. Suddenly she was watching everything back up. Inside she smiled as she saw Willow and Xander dancing – backwards!! [Hey!] She heard a female voice protest.

[Follow Faith.] Giles reminded her.

She concentrated and followed Faith back through her entrance into the Bronze. Somehow that leather clad swagger of Faith’s seemed almost hypnotic backwards.

[If I wear leather you get a rash.]

[Anya!]

[Well you do!]

[Buffy, ignore them. Follow Faith. And will you two shut up?] Giles spat in frustration.

[Sorry.] They replied.

Buffy drew herself back to Faith. But it was all so slow, too slow. She glanced at Willow on the dance floor, so happy, so safe and suddenly she remembered that this was why she was here. She hadn’t been able to save Willow from the pain of losing Tara or Oz or from the constant abandonment of her parents but she could fix this. She could give Willow back her body. She just had to concentrate. She focused all her thoughts on rewinding time. The world seemed to shoot past her, accelerating, speeding almost into a blur.
Buffy slow down.
She focused and time slowed. Faith was climbing onto a bus.
That’s Sunnydale bus station. She thought. [I need to go back further.] She focused and again time sped past. This time she seemed to almost lose control of it; her image went out of focus. She had no idea how fast she was rewinding. 

[Buffy!]
She tried desperately. Slow, slow, slow…. Gradually the image refocused.

As it did, a man appeared before her - below average height, wild hair, she tried to identify the slowly refocusing image and as she did - she realized that it was Oz.

[Oh No.] Buffy sighed.
He looked much the same as she remembered him, which couldn’t be right. He entered a bar and nodded at an older woman who was sitting on a stool in the now empty bar. He moved towards the smiling woman. Buffy didn’t recognize her.

“Cool set last night.” The woman offered as praise. “Your gear is out back. Greg didn’t seem happy with last night’s gig.”

“Greg thinks the base line on “cried out” needs adjusting. But I’m ok with it.” Oz replied. She passed him a can of beer and he moved to stand beside her. “You alone?”

Buffy couldn’t believe she had somehow focused her vision on Oz.

“Nope, that ended.” He replied, as a shadow seemed to cross his face.

“That sounds recent. I thought it was serious.” She smiled at him. “I’ve noticed you have a tendency to leave us mid sentence lately.” Reassuringly she added, “I don’t think your mother has spotted it yet. Was it serious?”

[She’s family?] Buffy asked.

[Ramona, his Aunt.] Willow replied

“It was for me.” Oz fell into silence and Buffy thought that was all he was going to say. The older woman also stayed silent. He turned to stare up at the stage and continued, “She was lying to herself about her feelings for someone else, someone I really like.” He huffed and grinned to himself. “I loved her and she cared for me, felt safe with me. But she was never in love with me.” He moved his gaze to the floor. “I didn’t want to compete, to fight for her.” He frowned. “Someone would have been hurt.” Buffy knew he really meant that. Oz’s fear of the wolf was real. “I’m not sure she realized but I knew. I had to give her the chance. Lets face it - once she figures out what she needs, guys like me – nada.”

[Buffy, we need to fast forward. You’ve gone too far back.] Willow interjected. She really didn’t want to visit where Oz was going.

“Sorry, sounds rough. Why?” Oz looked at her oddly. “Why didn’t you compete? Who’s that unbeatable?”
“A woman.” Oz replied, almost laughing.

[How could he have known about Tara?] Buffy asked.

Slowly complete understanding registered in the older woman’s eyes. She moved towards him, placing her arm across his shoulders. “You’re an original, Oz. Not many men I know would care more about someone’s future happiness than their own heart. Fighting the male ego stereotype.” She squeezed his shoulders. “An original.”

“Yeah. ‘Original Guy’; the t-shirts are on order.”

The vision began to blur as Buffy lost her focus, a thousand thoughts suddenly obliterating her concentration. Oz had only met Tara after he left Willow - so how could his liking her be part of his decision to leave?

[Buffy, focus!] Giles commanded.

She tried, but her mind was a mess.

[Buffy, follow Faith. We need to find Faith!] Giles again commanded.

Her mind somehow heard the voice of her Watcher, the voice of a man she trusted with her life, with Willow’s life and she collected herself.

Drawing her mind back to Faith, images began to form again. She concentrated and as the image cleared she saw a room, a sofa, sunlight, welcoming colors, Mexican tiles and a large picture window. Standing, outlined against the window, was a woman with long black hair – Faith? No, she’s wearing a dress. The woman turned and Buffy realized it was Cordelia.

“So Angel thinks he can help you, does he? Personally I think you’re just playing him, like you play all men.” Cordelia accused, raising her eyebrow to glare at the woman across the room.

“Yeah, figured that was your take on things.” Faith replied.

“So why you letting me crash here if you’re not with the program?”

“Listen honey, I may know you’re an evil, ‘don’t trust her as far as you can throw her’, low rent slut but Angel wants to keep you around. He thinks you can change.” She laughed. “So my choice was to either let you stay with him. Soooo not happening. All we need is you getting a slut itch and forgetting to care about the whole ‘one moment of true happiness’ thingy (not that you’re really into that and I doubt happiness is your gift but who cares – not taking the chance); or that you might start feeling the other ‘stake him, dust him’ urge; or I let you stay here.” She gave Faith a truly lacking in welcome smile and added. “There’s no sluttish leather in my closet, so don’t bother raiding it. The fridge is stocked – you go and get for yourself. Washing machine and dryer are in the back – don’t mix your stuff in with mine.” She turned her back to the Slayer. “I’m gonna take a bath.”

“Want some company? Or is that self service too?” Faith asked. Buffy could hear the sexual innuendo in her voice.

“If you’re gone when I get out? That’ll be fine by me. I’ll let Angel down gently.” Cordy replied, ignoring her comments. “He’ll get used to being betrayed by you, just like the rest of us.”

[Way to go Cordy.] Buffy cheered.

“Queen C, I’m gonna enjoy disappointing you - by proving you wrong.”

[Cordy cares about us.] Willow whispered in amazement.

[It’s scary but true.] Buffy added, laughing to herself.

[Buffy, keep your focus.]

Cordy replied. “I won’t wait till the end of the world for that one. Oh wait - been there.” And with that she walked into her bedroom, closing the door.

Nothing happened for a while, so Buffy slowly wound forward. She saw Cordy go to the fridge, then back to her bedroom. Faith grabbed a glass of water and settled on the sofa. She sped up the ‘fast forward’.

[Try and focus on the conversations about you and Willow.] Giles instructed.

[Can I do that?] Buffy asked, somewhat doubtful.

[Try.] Giles urged her.

Cordy reappeared from her bedroom. “I’m going out.”

“Go for it.” Faith responded, as if Cordy had asked for her okay. “I’ll be right here when you get back.”

“If the phone rings, don’t answer. I don’t want to have to explain to the Scoobies why you’re answering my phone.”

“You keep in touch?” Faith asked somewhat surprised. Buffy could see that Faith hadn’t really imagined Cordy keeping in touch with the old gang.

“When we need to. That’s what friends do. Not that you really stayed around long enough to learn that rule. Let alone anything else.” Cordy replied as she closed the front door.

Buffy tried to remember the last time she had spoken to Cordy, except to ask for Angel. That made her feel really bad. She hadn’t actually talked to Cordelia since her last visit to see Angel and that had only been in passing. [I should call her, catch up.]

[She called last week, needing help with a protection spell. We didn’t really chat.] Willow offered, feeling like a bad person.

[I mostly speak to Wesley.] Giles added.

Quietly, everyone resolved to catch up with their old friend, and soon.

Fast-forwarding again, Buffy noticed that Faith had opened what looked like a spell book. She focused and slowed down the image. Faith was leaning on the kitchen counter, running her finger across the line she was reading. Her face showed that not only was she concentrating but also she seemed to be … smiling?

[Buffy try another angle. Get behind her.] Xander suggested.

Buffy slowly changed her focus, like a camera on a boom. She slowly moved behind Faith and
lifted the image to look over her shoulder. Focusing on the text, she began to read. ‘Separate the whites and yolks of six eggs. Grease a baking tray, approximately 4” by 8”, then ...’

[No!] Buffy gasped.

Faith turned away from the book and opened the fridge, pulling out a carton of eggs and some butter.

[I’m in the twilight zone.] She stated, unable to believe her eyes.

Then she opened a cupboard. Reaching down she moved several pots and pans before emerging with a baking tray.

Buffy started to giggle at the ridiculous image before her; then she laughed; then she lost all control of her laughter as she realized that not only was Faith was looking at a cookbook and preparing to bake but she appeared to be enjoying it.

The vision blurred as Willow and Xander joined in the laughter.

[Buffy, concentrate.] Giles asked. [Please.]

[It’s too – hic – much.] Xander hiccupped. She could hear him gasping for air. [Do you- hic - think she’s making - hic - Angel Cakes?]

That was it. Buffy lost control and the image vanished. Slowly her hearing returned and she could hear the giggles and guffaws of her friends. She opened her eyes to find Willow and Xander rolling on the floor, no longer touching the vision rod, their hands clutching their stomachs as they laughed uncontrollably. Giles appeared to be trying to glare at them but his eyes were watering with the tears of held back laughter.

Anya simply looked confused by the whole thing. “I don’t understand. Why is Faith baking cakes for Angel funny? I would think that’s the least she could do.” She said, seemingly oblivious to the ridiculous sight of a Slayer ‘gone bad’ in the role of Betty Crocker!

Buffy looked at her and then at her friends. Laughter erupted from her very core and she joined them, rolling on the floor, feeling lighter and younger than she had in a very long time.
Chapter 6

Anya had re-opened the Magic Box because Giles had decided that the next ‘vision rod’ attempt would be made after five o’clock. Xander left promising to return at five with coffees, donuts and other sugary goodness.

Giles and Willow decided to use the time to concentrate on her training. Buffy had stayed for a while watching her dearest friend go through the exercises she knew so well but eventually she just felt so useless that she decided to leave them to it.

Walking through the shop she acknowledged Anya with a “See yah later.” She hadn’t really expected a response; so when Anya did speak she was only half listening.

“She’s really scared, you know. So are you.” Anya offered her insight to the back of the Witch’s body with Buffy’s brain.

“What?” Buffy said, more than a little unsure as to what Anya was going on about.

“You’re both scared. You’re both freaked but you’re not doing anything about it.” She made an exasperated noise. “I’ve wreaked vengeance on many a man for being just this thoughtless and inactive; for just letting things fester. After all these years…” She shook her head from side to side before adding, “Women are just as bad.” Anya thought she had explained matters quite clearly. But from Buffy’s expression it was obvious that she might as well have actually spoken in another language. ‘I have this same problem with Xander.’ She sighed.

“Well, there’s not really a lot we can do right now, is there?” Buffy replied.

“It’s a trust thing. You’re both pretending that everything is okay; that you’re coping. Well, it shouldn’t have to take a newly mortal and valuable member of society like me to tell you that you’re both lousy liars.” Anya huffed.

“We’re doing okay.” Buffy answered, defending both herself and her best friend.

“You are not. You’re lost without your Slayer powers. Being a normal mortal doesn’t sit well on you, Bullow. And Wiffy is riddled with guilt because she has your powers. But both of you are faking being fine with this. How honest is that?” Anya questioned. “Maybe Faith…”

“What did you just call us?” Buffy exploded at Anya.

This outburst shook the former vengeance demon a little. “Well you are Buffy in Willow – Bullow and she’s Willow in Buffy – Wiffy. Helps to keep it straight – remembering who’s in who. Xander thinks they’re cute names.” She added by way of defense. “He was gonna use name badges.”

Buffy glared at the ex-demon but then she found herself smiling. “Name badges?”

“I told him that ogling your breasts for a name badge, whenever he had to check who he was talking to, would very quickly get him into trouble. I like him looking at mine. Besides you two would just get a pained look on your faces and threaten to hit him.” Anya explained, somewhat relieved that Bullow was now smiling.

Buffy had to admit that Anya had a point. She often forgot that she didn’t look like herself. She
wondered how Giles was coping with remembering whom he was speaking to.

“Yes, well.” Buffy really had nothing left to say. “See yah later.” She moved swiftly to the door before Anya could return to her earlier topic.

***********************BtVS***********************

Buffy sat in the park. She’d needed some space and alone time. She had begun to feel as though the walls of the Magic shop were closing in around her. She was so aware of everyone’s eyes which felt so heavy upon both of them. And then there was Anya’s brutal honesty. Here she could feel the sun warming her back, breathe in, stretch and be ignored by just about everyone who passed her. But she knew that in just two more hours they would try again.

The faint voices of people laughing down by the lake washed over her. Looking across towards the lake she noticed an old couple walking hand in hand. Sadness filled her. She would never be like them. She would never find someone to be with her for the rest of her life. But knowing that if she didn’t get her powers back she could probably grow old made her feel suddenly very vulnerable. She hadn’t studied for this. She wasn’t ready for this. Surprise! Surprise! She had always lived with the fact that Slayers didn’t get old. She had realized a long time ago that she was now far older than most of the previous Slayers.

In her self-imposed solitude her mind was flooded with images of Willow; her Willow. Now she was the Slayer; doomed to die young; doomed to never know love or happiness; never to be able to plan too far ahead. Willow had gained such control of her new found strength. But did she realize what baggage would come with it if they couldn’t fix this body swap? Buffy’s physical strength and power had seemed easy for Willow to deal with. Leaving Buffy with what? – Slayer dreams. ‘Great all I get to keep is the title ‘weird dream girl’. I never thought Cordy and I would end up in the same club. Who would have thought?’

She couldn’t let Willow take on her very short life expectancy! She couldn’t let that happen! Not to her Willow! Willow had been hurt enough already by the thoughtlessness of others. ‘Oz’ Buffy suddenly remembered what he had said. He had left Willow because she was falling in love with another woman; someone he liked. It made no sense. He hadn’t even met Tara back then. She didn’t move to Sunnydale until the start of the College year. Was there someone else? Someone who had first opened Willow to the ‘I kinda like a girl, I’m kinda gay’ thing long before she had realized that she was.

Who had Willow been friendly with back then? Okay there was Anya, former vengeance demon Anya, for a while – Oh right, because that had ended so well and she likes her so much. Then there was Amy [whose mother had wanted her to be a cheerleader]. They had been chummy --- until she turned herself into a rat! But Willow still took care of her. Nah. In love with a rat? That’s not my Willow. Buffy’s brain ached as she tried to think of anyone that Willow had grown close to back then whom Oz had known and liked, and who Willow might care for.

How had Oz noticed while she hadn’t?

For short periods of time Cordelia would be nice to Willow, mostly when no one was looking. Nah, they hardly talk now. Willow said so herself. But Cordelia had been extra protective of Willow with Faith and she had really wigged out over the whole Xander/ Willow kissing incident. Maybe that had more to do with how she felt about Willow than Xander. Willow had tried so hard to apologize to both Oz and Cordy --- but she had always said that she didn’t care what Cordy thought of her. Maybe Willow had changed only after screwing things up so royally with Xander. She used to do homework for Cordy, put up with her nasty remarks and she had seemed really pissed with Xander when he started seeing Cordy. Ahh Hah!!
Buffy wasn’t sure if she had pinned it down but Cordy was the only person that made any sense. What really confused her was that this would mean that Oz had liked Cordy. Maybe he had seen something in her, something that the rest of them had missed, and something that would have indicated what she was capable of. After all she was now fighting the good fight with Angel --- being vision girl and all.

******************************************************************BtVS******************************************************************

Beyond the lake a truck approached an old building on the far side of the park. Pulling up, two men emerged in green overalls and proceeded to unload several large crates, carrying them up the broad steps to the main door of the building.

Nothing would have struck anyone as unusual about this scene – that is without the knowledge that each of the four large cases contained soil and a body….

******************************************************************BtVS******************************************************************

After two hours of training Willow and Giles moved to the table in the shop, where she now sat engrossed in her laptop. Giles had installed an Internet connection there just for Willow. She had thought that so sweet of him at the time but she had later realized that although Giles disliked modern technology with a passion - he was no fool to the resources it opened up to him.

Willow found her mind wondering from the screen of her laptop. Giles had asked her to get in touch with various cyber covens in the hope that someone could assist with the translation of the curse. They had all been very supportive and eager to help but so far no one seemed to have a different interpretation from the one that Anya had voiced only this morning. This really did nothing to lift her spirits.

She wondered what Buffy was doing. She had been concentrating on Giles’ instructions earlier and had failed to notice when Buffy had left. Buffy had seemed so distant today; lost in her own world. Willow missed connecting with her. A simple eye contact, a smile and they would be in each other’s minds. She was missing her best friend.

But this body swap had been hard on both of them. She had seen Buffy feeling frustrated and useless. She knew that having the Slayer’s powers on loan was a heavy responsibility; a responsibility that she wished had not been given to her. But she didn’t want to let Buffy or the gang down. She had played along with the training sessions, surprised at how much she had enjoyed them, hoping that if they could just keep everything normal -- that’s how everything would end, back to normal. But it wasn’t working.

She had read and re-read the curse and each time her fear had grown that Anya was right. She and Buffy would need to sleep together to get back into their own bodies. She wanted to scream; she wanted to hunt down Faith and put her in a world of badness, pain and then more badness. ‘That’s the Slayer stuff talking – right?’ What had she ever done to deserve this?

Fear gripped her at the thought of having to make love to Buffy. Okay in her dreams was one thing. There it had always gone well, beyond well, so blissfully. But reality - so much more with the scary, freaky cold shivers and stuff. In her dreams Buffy had wanted her; had needed her touch. She was welcomed.

But the real true-to-life Buffy liked guys, even dead guys and had never shown anything but friendly love and affection towards Willow - let alone any other woman. Plus Buffy wasn’t really into the ‘touchy feely’ thing. ‘Let’s face facts. You have shared a hug with Xander more times than
you have Buffy’. She had bandaged many a knee and shoulder over the years, but there had been no closeness. Nope, no physical closeness; let alone comfortable physical closeness. ‘You’re not even used to her touching you’.

She must have had a strange expression on her face because Giles gave her his old hairy eyeball look. ‘Anything?’

“Nope.” She replied, shrugging her shoulders. “Nothing yet.”

Giles sat waiting for Xander who, as usual, was late. The young man somehow felt that turning up with food always excused him. Buffy and Willow were already waiting in the back room while Anya took Xander’s delay as an opportunity to recheck her cash register receipts.

Meanwhile in the training room, Willow stretched her shoulders.

“Are you okay, Will?” Buffy asked her voice a little concerned.

“I’m okay. Too much laptop time I guess.” She grinned. “You know, I have this sneaking suspicion that this body is really not used to the recognized study positions.”

Buffy laughed. “I do most of my studying lying on my stomach or cross-legged on my bed. No desk-sitting for me.”

“You should definitely try it -- ergonomics and all that.” Willow responded, stretching herself once again. Although she could feel some slight tightness she was pleased that she was in Buffy’s body and not her own. She had serious doubts she would be anything more than a crumpled heap after just one of Giles’ training sessions. Moving to the mat, she smiled at Buffy, noticing the slight stiffness in her own shoulders.

“You okay?” She said giving Buffy her ‘serious face’.

Buffy looked confused. “Yeah.”

“That was my ‘serious, I know there’s something on your mind’ look.” Willow explained, realizing that with Buffy’s features she was unable to ‘look’ a thought. People just couldn’t recognize them.

“Oh yeah. Right.” Pausing, Buffy tilted her head down slightly. “It’s not that I’m not okay; though not exactly big on okay until we get our bodies back - but coping. But … well … actually it’s more something I know we really need to talk about. But now isn’t the time for theories. That’s what’s on my mind.” She raised her eyes to gauge Willow’s response. “Will?”

Willow took a moment and then it clicked. “Ah huh … I see … right … well yes … that would be … aahh hmmm … something we will need to talk about. I can just see … well now isn’t really the time to get into a discussion about … to talk about … private … yes it should be private … agreeing now.” Willow finished her babble.

“I thought maybe that after this ‘dream vision’ stuff is done, we could have some dorm chat time.” Buffy continued, hating herself for pushing to have a conversation that neither of them really wanted to have. But she knew that Giles was right. They couldn’t go on not talking about this possibility. Faith’s phone call, the bed, the rose, the wording of the curse left her in no doubt, no avoiding -- this was bad.

“Okay.” Willow replied her voice at least two octaves higher.
As if aware that their conversation needed to be interrupted and any possible awkward silence avoided, Giles entered the room.

“I see we’re still awaiting Xander.” Giles said with obvious annoyance. Looking outside Giles noticed that it had suddenly become very dark. He moved closer to the window. “Very strange. We seem to have somehow missed sundown and gone straight to night. Where was Xander coming from?”

“The Baristas Coffee Company near his apartment. He says they do great mochas. You don’t think he would be stupid enough to cut through the cemetery, do you?” Willow asked, already fearing the worse.

Buffy stared out into the night “When did this happen? He always cuts through it during the day.” Buffy confirmed. “But dark equals dinner bell. Will, we need to be out there now.”

Xander ducked across the cemetery, mocha tray in one hand and donut box in the other, safe in the knowledge it was at least half an hour until sundown. However he noticed that dark clouds seemed to be gathering overhead. ‘Great. It's going to rain.’ He thought at first until he realized how very dark the sky itself was also getting. By now he was only half way through the cemetery. Rain and cheap t-shirt dye jobs became the least of his worries. ‘Early for dinner time, something’s up.’ He began to run.

Buffy ran, her lungs bursting with her efforts to keep up with Willow. She could see Xander coming towards them and he wasn’t alone. Behind him were two new vamps, their clothes still layered in soil.

“Willow. Hurry.” She yelled somewhat unnecessarily.

Willow did, indeed, speed up and pushing off she flipped over Xander’s head to land behind him; between her friends and the approaching vampires. Her movement seemed to sufficiently surprise the vampires who slowed their approach, looking questioningly at each other as they proceeded more carefully towards her.

Willow could feel her blood pumping, totally adrenaline-wired. Suddenly she felt in control, her senses taking in every movement of the approaching ‘fangies’. ‘This feels so right, fits like a favorite coat.’ She mused to herself, wondering if she was becoming used to the role of Slayer.

Suddenly the vamps split to approach her from different flanks. “Watch out Willow!” She heard Buffy yell and her nerves said ‘hello’.

Buffy was still running towards Xander and Willow as she saw the two vamps split. They were hoping to double team Willow. She had to get there; had to help. She was concentrating so much on reaching Willow that she ran straight into Xander’s waiting arms. “Whoa there Buff. Will’s got it.” Xander said by way of explanation, as his other arm surrounded her, holding her back firmly. Both of her arms were pinned beneath Xander’s apparent tree trunk arms.

Buffy strained for release as she watched the two vampires approach Willow, her heart in her mouth. “Willow!” She called. Frustrated and mad, the desire to maim Xander built within her.
“Buffy.” Xander spoke into her ear, concern filling his voice, as if realizing how not happy his actions were making her. “Will has to do this herself. Stake her first - alone. Just like you.” Xander reminded her. “Giles said we have to let her do this. So that she can believe in herself, get her chi Slayer thing going and all that.”

Buffy could here the words but all she could see was her Willow. She knew that this was the way all Slayers were introduced to Slaying. But she hadn’t liked it then and she definitely didn’t like it now. That was her Willow, her dear sweet Willow, surrounded by two angry vamps. Again she tried to release herself. But Xander held her tight.

“Sorry Buffy. Orders from the G-man.” Xander felt like a miserable heel. He knew the G-man was probably right; hell he hated that he was. Will needed this but doubt nagged at him. Xander understood that Willow would never believe in herself, that she could be the Slayer, until she dusted her first alone with no aid from the Scoobies. It seemed strange now to have to think of Buffy as a Scooby. But he also knew that in the same position he would hold Willow back. ‘Okay so there are two vamps’, he considered as he began to plan for involvement if at anytime his little Witch looked in trouble. Looking down at Buffy, he saw the helplessness on her face, the desire to save her dear friend, the sheer desperation in her eyes. ‘Does she have any idea how she looks at Willow these days?’ He wondered.

Willow tried to focus on her lessons with Giles as the vampires circled her, waiting for the optimum moment to attack. ‘I need to concentrate. I can do this; no wiggin' out.’ Clearing her mind of all else, she dipped into her knees slightly forcing her center lower. The vampires took this as their moment and both moved in.

Xander watched wide-eyed with pride as Willow shot out her left leg and her right fist. As they collided with the approaching vamps, she pushed and retracted her limbs. Judging that the one she had punched needed to be removed from matters for a while, she swivelled bringing her left leg through in an arch and launched to jump-kick him. He flew a good eight feet landing on his back across a tombstone.

“We’re the back-up but only if she needs it.” Xander said, trying to soothe the ex-Slayer. He knew too well, that just as she had with the Mayor, Buffy would do absolutely anything if it meant she had any chance of saving Willow from danger. Xander sighed with relief since it seemed that for now Will was in control.

Willow smiled and turning she saw the other vamp approaching her. Launching from one foot he leapt towards her, his game face leering with the anticipation of a sure kill. Willow side stepped, brought out her stake, fell to her knees and plunged the weapon into the still airborne vamp’s chest just in time to see the shocked look on his face. Then dust rained.

“One down. Way to go Will.” Xander yelled, unable to stop himself.

Buffy ignored him as she focused on the remaining vamp. He moved with more caution eyeing Willow suspiciously. Buffy saw the blood lust fill his game face. He moved in; raining blows at Willow.

Willow found her arms moving almost independently of her, blocking his blows until she saw an opening and shot her left palm up, pushing his chin and head back. At the same time she drew back her right hand. Reversing her pose, she plunged the stake into her retreating foe’s chest area. ‘Damn, missed.’ The vamp smiled at her as if she was a silly child. Pulling her arm back she drove forward again but he had moved to her left.

“Will” Buffy called. “Duck roll.”
Willow reacted instinctively to Buffy’s instructions, ducking below his punch and rolling away from the vamp’s subsequent leg kick. Regaining her feet, she turned. The vamp moved to follow her but instead of moving away from him she reached and pulled him into her and the awaiting stake.

As he vanished into dust, Buffy and Xander got a clear look at their friend. The stunned look on her face indicated that she obviously couldn’t believe that she had just dusted two vamps. Her eyes grew wide as what had just happened sank in. She looked at her two friends questioningly.

Xander released Buffy, who left his arms with out a backward glance to run towards her Willow. Reaching Willow she cupped her face. “Will?” she questioned, searching her friend’s face.

Willow smiled at her friend’s concerned features. “I’m okay. Bit wired, but I’m good.” She said placing her hand on Buffy’s shoulder as further assurance of her ‘okay’ condition. “That was … different.” Seeing concern still in the face before her, she added. “Good different, not bad different. Kinda cool different. Kick ass, bad ass Witchy Slayer different … in a ‘hey look what I did’ sort of way. I did good. Right?”

“Right. You did very good.” Buffy replied. She was uncertain what else to say. She wanted to tell her best friend never to put herself in danger again; that she should have waited for her. But she felt foolish, selfish and lost as she realized Willow had done exactly what needed doing. Exactly what she would have done.

“Hey Will - dusting with ‘slayertude’. Way to go!” Xander congratulated her, planting a mock punch to her right shoulder.

Buffy turned to him, refocusing her frustrations. “You held me back.” She accused, anger rising within her again.

“Buff, You know Will had to dust her first alone. How many times have you pulled me back for putting myself in harm’s way? I couldn’t let you do it.” He said backing off, Buffy was way wrong but right this minute she had Willow’s really ‘pissed off’ face on and that scared him even at the best of times.

Buffy knew he was right but she had to vent. She moved towards him threateningly.

“Will’s gotta get with the Slaying. So the bad guys don’t think anything’s changed. You know what that calls for.” Xander said. Deciding to stand his ground he continued. “We would’ve been there if she needed us. But she didn’t.”

“Buffy.” Willow said, stepping between them. “Xander’s right. I had to do this alone; to know that I could.”

Buffy looked from Xander to Willow just in time to catch a movement out of the corner of her eye. Instinctively she pulled Willow behind her as a massing swirl of black smoke appeared on the main path.

“What the…?” Xander exclaimed, moving to the side of Buffy and Willow, their problems forgotten.

******************************************************************************************
Chapter 7

The smoke seemed to be forming into a figure and sure enough they were soon able to see the shape of a man. As the last of the smoke evaporated they gasped. Before them stood an incarnation straight out of an Anne Rice novel.

The pale faced male Vampire looked at first to Willow, evaluating her and then to Buffy, settling his gaze on her. In a deep mid-European accent he said, “A very impressive kill. I see that you are greatly missing your powers.”

Willow, unnerved that this Vampire appeared to know who was who, moved to step in front of Buffy. The Vampire dismissed her actions. “We are not going to fight.”

“You seem pretty sure of that.” Buffy challenged. “Considering my friend, the Slayer here, is going to prevent you from ever worrying about sunburn.” Buffy grinned.

“I apologize. Not for seeing through such simplistic magics, but for stating that I had. I see that you would have preferred to keep the game going; the illusion of a mystery. Interesting.” Dracula seemed to smile at Buffy with affection.

“Talking of mystery - what’s with the tall dark and mysterious?” Willow interjected. “Who are you?”

“I assumed you knew. I am Dracula.” He responded without a hint of humor in his voice or facial expression.

“Get out! Let me get this straight. You’re Dracula; ‘the guy’, the Count. He died … ?” Buffy stumbled in disbelief.

He bowed slightly in acknowledgement. “I came to meet the renowned killer.” He explained, casting a side glance a Willow who was still very much on edge.

Buffy responded “I prefer Slayer. Killer sounds so…”
“Naked? But that’s what you are. A Slayer is a killer.” Dracula said, the last word containing such intensity that she recoiled.

Willow moved forward sensing a threat to Buffy. Dracula vanished literally in a puff of smoke.

“We are not going to fight.” Dracula said, as he reappeared behind the stunned trio.

“Hey, how’d he do that?” Xander exclaimed. As they all turned and took a very defensive posture, separating slightly to allow each other room to maneuver.

“I felt I should introduce myself. But seeing your situation for what it is; a foolish use of magic. Perhaps you are not what I have been seeking.” He seemed to be re-thinking his plans. This unnerved the trio.

“Yeah, right. Searching the world for the Slayer - that’s normal blood sucking behavior.” Buffy said, hoping he would reveal more.

“Be still!” Dracula commanded gazing deep into the eyes of the trio. “I do not mean to harm you.”

The Trio found itself unable to move, needing to follow his command - the command of those deep eyes and sultry tones.

He moved towards Buffy. “I have much to show you.” He said surrounding her in his arms, he gazed into her eyes. “Be still.” Turning to Willow and Xander he repeated this phrase. Then he and Buffy vanished.

Willow and Xander charged into the Magic shop gasping for air, fighting through the need to catch their breaths to explain what had happened.
At first Willow had totally blamed herself for losing Buffy. After all she was now the Slayer, having already proved herself in training and in battle. Despite what Giles had told her - that against Dracula and his thrall there was little or nothing that a new Slayer [because that was indeed what she was – a new Slayer] could have done, she still felt she should have done something.

She had practically run to the security of her laptop when they reached the Magic shop. They had to explain, research, plan. Eventually they had kicked into research mode and she found herself reassuringly tapping keys, surfing the Net for anything she could find on Dracula. At first all she came across were the usual sites dedicated to vampire movies and books but then she discovered that some of the online covens kept archives of folklore, prophesies and myths. These proved far more useful.

She pushed the concerned face of her best friend, the way she had held her face, her touch, her eyes, to the back of her mind. They had looked so full of …’No!’ she needed to keep her mind on finding Buffy, not on her lovelorn wishes and hopes. ‘You can always see what you want to see if you look hard enough. That doesn’t make it real.’ She reminded herself.

*******************************BtVS*******************************

Xander stared at his friend. Sometime over all these years, a core of personal strength had grown within Willow; she had become a strong, caring woman - someone he was proud he could still count as his friend. He had often feared that Willow and Buffy would leave him behind. As Joe Normal he wondered why they kept him around. Most of the time he was next to useless and he knew it – the ‘Forest Gump’ feeling often overwhelmed him. But when they would come to him with the normal stuff he felt useful, part of the team. Maybe he was there to ground them, connect them to the world, a world they lived outside of most of the time these days.

He recalled the shy self-depreciating young Willow he had once known; as afraid of her own shadow as he had been of his. ‘I wonder if she would even recognize herself these days.’ He had seen the look on her face during the fight. She had seemed so in control, confident, complete and then when she realized that Buffy was gone, it was as if she had lost a part of her heart. Devastation had filled her eyes but the strength had remained.

It had amused him at first that this swap was allowing him to ‘read’ both of his dear friends so clearly. But he soon began to realize that the things he was seeing had always been there. Nothing he had discovered over the last three days had really been that much of a shock to him. Okay there had been a little fantasy fest. ‘Oz how could you walk away from this one, man.’ He laughed to himself.

Since before the approach of graduation day, Xander had accepted that Buffy would never be more than his friend. He had stood by her decision to save Willow from the Mayor at any the cost. He
had seen Will support Buffy, trust Buffy, forgive her for vanishing that first summer. He had been amazed and disappointed when Will, wounded and in hospital, fought to bring Angel back to Buffy, to make her happy. He had seen Buffy help Will when Oz left and then Tara, and support her when she had ‘come out’.

Maybe he had always known how they felt about each other. Just like he knew that the sun would rise; that he would always lose a sock to the god of the clothes dryer; that Giles would forever clean his glasses when they began to speak about sex. Yet he was still in awe of their ignorance; that they had managed to avoid realizing how they both felt for so long.

He still couldn’t get his head around the idea that Faith was good. It just didn’t ring true. He had seen what little was left of her soft side in that motel room and although he had hoped to see it again - he had not. What he had seen had killed any hope he had had for her. Angel was the other reason for his doubt. Some things he just couldn’t change and how he felt about Angel was one of them.

*****************************BtVS*****************************

“He likes to live in style. Modus operandi is different from other vampires. He never just kills to feed. He’d rather have a connection to his victims.” Willow summarized the results of her brief internet search. “He uses his mental powers to draw them in, to weaken their minds, to appear in their dreams. It makes sense. That stare … he just kinda … looked right through you …right?” She asked seeking confirmation from Xander.

“He wants an intimate seduction. It’s not enough that he has a connection. His victims must yearn for him, burn for him.” Giles explained.

“So he uses mind control? That’s why all the chicks in those black and whites just did as he said?” Xander stated. “I thought it was just bad acting.”

“ ‘Under the thrall of the dark prince’. ” Giles quoted, in full “B”-movie speak and then shook himself, ‘I’m spending way too much time with Xander!’

“He may be all ‘prince of the dark and mysterious’ guy. But thrall - Yech. He’s not that good looking.” Willow responded.

“But for the ‘tall, dark foreign accent and handsome’ thingy. Oh yeah … Yech.” Anya agreed
sarcastically. “How quickly the ‘kinda gay’ forget.”

Xander turned to Anya. “And how would you know?” He asked just as sarcastically as he could manage trying to prevent Willow from getting all pissed with Anya yet again.

“We hung out a few times back in my demon days. You know it was pretty cool from a whole evil thing point of view, which I’m not anymore.”

Giles ignored Anya’s comments, concentrating his gaze on Willow. “The trick to defeating him is separating the fact from the fiction. Vlad the Impaler research?” He finished looking at the gang expectantly. Willow and Xander nodded moving back towards the research area.

Anya lost in past glories continued to reminisce. “I don’t think he’d remember me, I was just a silly young thing, about 700 or so. But he did say that this guy I cursed was doomed forever, which was pretty sweet. I think…..”

“Xander. I know that I have a volume that may well be of use back at my apartment.” Giles said, stopping Xander before he could respond to Anya’s rant. “If you think you could make it there and back without visiting the cemetery and any dark alleys?”

“I could drive.” Xander said. He didn’t like being reminded of his part in losing Buffy but Giles had a point. He held out his hand and Giles somewhat reluctantly handed over his keys.

Emerging from Giles’ car Xander moved up the path and into the courtyard. As if he wasn’t feeling bad enough after getting caught in the cemetery after sunset … not that the sun had actually set … it had been more a case of clouds blocking the sun. When apparently to add insult to injury a familiar haze of black smoke gathered before him and Dracula materialized.

Stopping short, Xander shrugged in disbelief. “Great. Just perfect.” He exclaimed, glaring at the vampire as if he was to blame. Little did he know how accurate he was. “You know what? You’re not so big.” Xander quipped moving backwards a little. “I bet one round of old fashioned ‘fisty cuffs’ and you’d fold like an old lady.”
Dracula made no move towards Xander which unnerved the young man.

“Ok, let’s do it and no poofing.” Xander commanded as he started to hop from foot to foot in his best Mohammed Ali impersonation. “Come on ‘puffy’ shirt, you can pucker up and kiss your pale ass….”

“Silence!” Dracula ordered.

“Yes master….no that’s not…” Xander silenced himself.

“You will be my emissary, my eyes and ears in daylight.” Dracula commanded.

“Your emissary?” Xander questioned. Suddenly feeling the need to bow - he did.

“Serve me well and you will be rewarded. I will make you an immortal, a child of darkness, who feeds on life itself – blood.” Dracula explained.

“Blood.” Xander repeated, understanding. “Yes, yes, I will serve you.” Again he bowed, wondering exactly what pose you undertook to grovel. “Your excellent spookiness.” Lifting his bowing head again he saw the un-amused look on Dracula’s pale face so he quickly corrected himself. “Or Master. I’ll just stick with Master.” Casting his eyes to the floor in subservience he awaited punishment.

Dracula looked at Xander “You are strange and off putting. Go now.”

“But Master, how can I find…” Xander asked as he lifted his head, to see he was again alone. “Great. What an exit. Guy’s a genius. Hee hee – hee hee.”
Chapter 8

Entering her apartment earlier that day, Cordy had finally relaxed. Dennis, pleased to see her back safe and sound, had welcomed her back by drawing a bath for her and providing a good back rub. She had dressed and had moved back into her living room, collapsing onto the sofa.

“Dennis, any ‘Faith Cookies’ left?” Cordy asked. It had been such a ‘parallel world/Twilight Zone’ type surprise when, almost two months ago, she had returned home with Wesley and Angel to find Faith baking. The ‘Slayer gone bad’ had turned so many different shades of red that they had found it extremely hard to swallow their laughter but her ‘pain is coming’ facial expression had helped.

Cordy had become concerned a) that Faith didn’t need her buttons pushed just now, b) at what the cost would be to redecorate her apartment if the dark slayer lost it, and c) that they would all soon hyperventilate from either anger or laughter if someone didn’t break the ice. So she had risked her taste buds and picked up a cookie. The biggest surprise had been that it just melted into her mouth with buttery goodness and that then she found a blissful moan leaving her lips.

Faith, who had at first provided graphic instructions as to where she was going to stick her cookies, calmed down quite a bit (although her cheeks took several hours to return to their normal color) once Cordy had declared her cookies as “Well - Yummy”.

Much later when the guys had left and under much prodding from Cordy, Faith had explained that the housekeeper in one of the many foster homes she had lived in had introduced her to baking. At first she only did the cleaning up as a punishment. But later she had found that whenever she was really stressed and unable to focus her mind - she baked.

Knowing that baking didn’t really go with her hard-boiled image, she had often openly referred to such ‘housewifey’ and domestic skills with such disrespect that no one would have ever considered she could possibly be a closet baker.

Cordy had laughed at the idea of Faith making clandestine ‘drug style’ raids into her local grocery store, wondering where exactly she had hidden the bags of flour, sugar, eggs and pats of butter in her usual tight fitting outfit.

Faith admitted she had once considered baking for the mayor but had chickened out because he was such a fussy eater.
Lying back on her sofa with a well-earned cup of coffee and a cookie, Cordy closed her eyes. Somehow over those two months she had come to know a whole different Faith - quiet, considerate, a good listener and most surprising of all – neat. It had been quite a revelation for Cordy who had at first hated the idea of having a roommate.

However for each step forward Faith paid with bouts of depression. Cordy had really come to feel something for Faith; she almost began to care about her. Not in a ‘big caring for my best friend’ way but more of ‘wild stray’ pet who had wandered into her home. But Cordy still expected her to turn all psycho, and in the same way that she was ready to stake Angel if ‘Angelus’ ever returned, she was ready to so kill Faith if ‘Skank Bitch from Hell’ ever reappeared.

When she had her dreadful vision about Buffy she hadn’t even paused before telling Faith. And Faith had immediately wanted to help; something that Cordy was much less suspicious and more accepting of now, than she would have been had Faith expressed such an intention when she first appeared in LA. Much to Faith’s surprise, Cordy had even backed up Angel in his decision to send Faith to watch over Buffy.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the ringing of her phone.

“Hello,” Cordy said as she picked it up, wondering who would know she was back and could be calling her.

“Hi C. Back safe?” Faith greeted her. “Checking in as promised.”

“Faith, where are you?” Cordy asked.

“Right where I’m meant to be – ‘Glorious Sunnydale’,” Faith replied, obviously still somewhat uncomfortable with having to return to the scene of some of her greatest mistakes and worst offenses. “Are the guys with you?”

“Nope, it will take them another couple of days to tie things up. Any news on the Scoobies?” Cordy inquired. “Seen anything of Spike?”

“No sign of the peroxide wonder yet. But I’ve given some preventative medicine to the lovelorn duo; something that should stop him in his ‘bad hair day’ tracks when it takes hold” Faith laughed, obviously very pleased with herself. “So far everything is five by five.”
Cordy suddenly became very worried. Preventative medicine - what could she possibly mean by that? “Faith what have you done?” A cold shiver ran down her back as she felt that old fear fill her. ‘Has Faith lost it again? Is the Skank Bitch back?’

“Don’t freak out. It’s all of the good. No badness. I promise C, I’m not losing it,” Faith said suspicious of Cordelia’s silence. “I had to do something. The idea of Buffy ever allowing Spike to use her like that…” She ended, a shudder running through her.

“Faith,” Cordy said in her best ‘mom is listening’ voice. “I think you better tell me exactly what you mean by ‘of the good’. What you have done to Buffy and Willow?”

Faith proceeded to explain about the body swap curse, which she had found in one of Wesley’s books during a research fest last month, and how after hearing Cordy’s vision and then watching the witch and slayer she had decided that this was the probably the only way to stop Spike. She had quite early on realized that as long as the duo refused to acknowledge their feelings for each other, they would always be susceptible to blackmail.

Cordy tried very hard not to laugh at the images that filled her mind. How was she going to explain this to Angel? Wesley was so never going to let Faith near any of his books again. But much as she tried to be annoyed with Faith, she could see the strange kind of logic behind her actions. Maybe she really was just trying to help.

“I just figured I’d ‘end run’ the ‘Billy Idol’ wannabe by helping to turn the duo into a couple. His power comes from knowing something others don’t. A secret’s only useful if you’re scared of others knowing it. If you tell everyone then it’s not a secret anymore and then it has no power,” Faith said.

“Okay I get it. Kind of has a logic but Angel’s gonna flip when I tell him. He may be way old and trying to be modern guy; deep with the feelings, cool ex-boyfriend guy but…”

“But he’s male,” Faith supplied.

“Yeah,” Cordy agreed. “His Buffy choosing to replace him with a woman. I’m telling you there will be major brooding, much sitting in the dark and complete denial of ego issues,” she said, fighting to keep the smile out of her voice. “So, are you coming out the baking closet anytime soon? Secrets and their power … y’know?” Cordy teased.
“Funny. Yeah I’m pitching a cooking show to NBC as we speak,” Faith replied, the annoyance in her voice laced with a certain fondness for this woman who had the guts to tease her. “Could get you a couple of tickets if you can get a date who isn’t a ghost. By the way how is D?”

“He’s good. I think he’s been lonely with both of us gone. I found a stash of your beers in the back of the kitchen cabinet that he’s been hoarding for your return.”

“Yeah, I kinda miss the back rubs. Say Hi,” Faith said, somewhat touched that anyone even a ghost could actually be missing her. “Angel will cope,” she assured Cordelia. “Can’t be the first time in two hundred years he’s lost a woman to another woman. Darla, Spike and Drusilla - I’m telling you that was one kinky bone-banging bunch. Know what I mean?” She laughed.

“Gutter mind, much?” Cordy replied. She could almost see Faith’s leering look.

“Come on C, you gonna tell me you’ve never considered a visit to the other side of the velvet curtain,” Faith teased. “You’re bound to have had offers considering that hot ‘bod’ and all.”

“Faith, you may have been willing to serve it up to anyone who asked and some who didn’t. But I don’t feel the urge to share with just anyone who calls,” Cordy said evading the question.

Deciding not to call C on her avoidance, Faith changed the subject back to Angel. “C, if you get any trouble from Angel, you remind him of how well Doyle keeping his feelings from you helped. Heavy with the comparisons helps when talking to the big bad moody. Trust me.”

“Thanks,” Cordy said, surprised by Faith’s insight into her past. When had Faith started to take an interest in a past that wasn’t hers? Cordy wondered. “Hey by the way you didn’t say - how is the gang?”

“Five by five. Giles is heavy with the books and our boy toy’s gotta new babe.”

“Really. What’s she like?”

“Kinda weird, runs a magic shop, clings to him like a dog in heat,” Faith replied knowing what Cordy wanted to hear - that Xander was okay, but that her replacement was no competition.
“And the duffus is cool with that?” asked Cordy.

“Seems to be. Why?”

“Oh nothing,” Cordy replied, knowing that the one thing that Faith hadn’t counted on was Xander. If she knew anything about her ex, it was that not much got past him concerning his Buffy and Willow. She was pretty damn sure he had more than a clue that something was up. “You okay?”

“Five by five,” Faith said. “Gotta go. Pass on hellos when you see the guys.” She felt that if she stayed on the phone much longer C would only try to draw her emotions out again. Much as she appreciated Cordy, Faith sometimes found the late night chats and all of the opening up expected of her to be draining. Right now she needed her head focused. Faith felt that having something good to do was helping her more than chatting about her feelings ever could.

But she was damned if she was going to let the boy toy take the lead in the matchmaking stakes. It was time to nudge things along a bit.

*******************************************************************************BtVS*******************************************************************************

Giles looked up at the shop door as Xander entered. He gave him a questioning look and Xander pouted “Your car’s fine. Man, protective much.”

Giles ignored his comments and took the book and keys with a grateful nod.

“So, any progress?” Xander asked. Already feeling the anxiety of the group but not able to tell what it meant, he shook himself mentally.

“Nothing yet. We’ve exhausted most of our resources. Anya has asked some contacts in the demon world to keep their ears to the ground. But in the meantime Willow is going to try a location spell,” Giles said, the frustration in his voice telling Xander all he needed to know about how far they had gotten in his absence.
“Okay,” Xander acknowledged, hoping that ‘His Spookiness’ had been clever enough to shield himself from her magic’s. “But what are we gonna do if she finds them?”

“Willow really needs to put in some more training before we can even consider confronting Dracula,” Giles pointed out. He hated to point this out when all he really wanted to do was head out the door totally armed and find Buffy. But he knew that caution was required.

“Hey,” Willow protested. “It was the thrall. I dusted those two vamps okay but the ‘big bad with the thrall’ I wasn’t expecting.”

“I know, Willow. You did exceptionally well with your first,” Giles said offering the young witch his sincere praise. “I just feel that we need to focus more on your mental control. We need to be sure that you can overcome this mind control issue when you need to. We are beginning to collect a lot of information on Dracula that should help us to rescue Buffy. There’s really no excuse for going in unprepared.”

“You think knowledge and a positive mental attitude will be enough to fight the unholy master,” Xander commented but upon seeing Giles’ questioning look, he added. “bater.”

Giles raised his eyebrows at the infantile play on words.

“It seems that Dracula isn’t really into dark dank crypt real estate. He likes his mansions, bug eating minions and special soil,” Willow explained. She had spent the last hour, driving herself crazy on the Internet while her mind screamed at her - ‘Find Buffy. How can you just be sitting here? How could you let him take her?’ Meanwhile she tried to focus on gathering the information that could help to save Buffy’s life. She couldn’t let her mind loose to wonder, to guess, to speculate about just what Dracula was doing to Buffy.

“Therefore, we have to assume he’s going to be looking for an uptown residence,” Giles added.

“Right. But he’s smart enough to figure out we know that. So I’m guessing he’s lying low,” Xander chimed back.

“Dracula’s really not the kind to be lying low,” Willow replied, giving Dander an odd look.
“It’s not working” Giles stated.

“I know. He must be using a shielding spell,” Willow’s voice exhibited the frustration she was feeling. Her magic was what she had brought to the Scoobies, her unique contribution, and her special usefulness. But now it was letting her down, letting Buffy down.

Giles watched a worried frown crossing the face of the new Slayer that he knew so well [though not as a Slayer]. For a moment he had forgotten who he was actually looking at and every time he did he felt foolish.

Willow looked at him oddly and, unable to decipher his expression, decided he was just worried for Buffy; something she could totally understand. “We’ll get her back Giles,” Willow assured him, placing her hand on his arm, wanting to convince both of them.

“Yes, we will,” Giles agreed, patting the young woman’s hand before he released himself.

The shop phone rang and Anya jumped towards it. “Hello?” Everyone fell silent, eager for something that might help; hopeful that this call was that something “Rees, slow down. I’m not a tape recorder.” Covering the mouthpiece she commented to Giles “I think he’s overdone the Red Bull again.” She shook her head with annoyance.

Anya reached for a pen but found Giles had anticipated her need as he laid his notepad and pen before her.“Okay now say that again – slowly,” Anya began to nod as she wrote. “Rees if you don’t slow down, I’m gonna feel seriously forced to curse you with the wrath of strawberry jam,” She threatened. After pausing to listen, nodding she added, “That’s better.”

Xander found his mind distracted by her actions, wondering why people did that. The person on the other end of the phone couldn’t see them. They knew that and yet they still nodded. Even Anya, his strangely appealing ex-vengeance demon girlfriend, had picked up this silly human quirk. The world deserves to be fed upon by the dark prince and his minions. It would then make sense.

“Great. Okay. Stop now,” Anya finally stopped writing. “Yes, yes, I know. I would have thought that little help with the unwanted in-law would have put me in credit. A curse just doesn’t go as far
as it used to.” Huffing she ended, “Okay. Next Tuesday. Bye.” Anya placed the receiver down and turned to the waiting group. “1298 Parklands View. He moved in today - soil, sirens and all.”

“Is that all he said?” Willow asked. She felt that the conversation had lasted longer than two lines of information.

“Basically, yes. The rest was that annoying ‘look how clever I was to get you this info’ and payment confirming rubbish. Rees likes to blow his own horn. That’s what got him in so much trouble in the past. Never could just say things straight out,” Anya huffed again. The fact that she obviously had very little respect for her source concerned Giles.

“Is he reliable? As a source I mean,” Xander asked, hoping that he could somehow undermine Anya’s source.

“He knows he only gets paid if his info is sound. So I’d say we’re okay knowing how deep his greed runs,” Anya replied.

“Good. At last we have a plan,” Willow stated as she looked at her friends. Giles looked less than certain. ‘He’s not sure that we’re ready,’ Willow thought. This slightly annoyed her and undermined her newfound confidence. “Every second we leave Buffy under his thrall we risk losing her,” she said throwing the accusation and reminder out, hopefully preventing any further cautious stalling tactics. She wanted Buffy back. She wanted this hollow feeling in her chest to go away. She wanted her best friend back.

No one responded. Giles couldn’t really think of anything more that he could do to improve their chances, which were slim. Everyone knew what they were up against – Dracula but they also saw the look of sheer determination on the face of this new Slayer in front of them, perfectly reflecting how the witch inside her body was feeling. Willow’s thoughts really didn’t need translating.

“So we have a plan. Since when?” Xander asked, unable to hold the words in, somehow feeling braver than he normally would when faced with a determined slayer. “All I can see is a rag tag bunch of misfits hoping to beat the lord of all unholy darkness.” His loyalty to Dracula surfacing at the same time as his own doubts.

Willow laughed, assuming Xander was trying to relieve the tension and soon everyone joined her, if somewhat nervously.
Xander smirked but inside his fuzzy mind sulked. ‘The master is going to be mad. I’m pretty sure he hates uninvited guests.’

Faith watched the Magic shop comings and goings with much interest. The attic room above the dry cleaners had been cheap and it gave her a clear, if cramped, view of the Magic shop and side alley. The air that filled the room had a slightly musty smell to it, something to do with all that steam downstairs she presumed. But the place was clean, well lit and the skylight gave her a great view at night once the streetlights dimmed.

She hadn’t seen Buffy in a while and having just finished her ‘recon’ on their dorm room she was itching to know how they had reacted to Xander’s little bed swap. She laughed just knowing that she had gotten the blame for that one. It seemed the boy-toy was in on her game. She was slightly miffed that he had figured it out so quickly. But she had to give him points for the bed swap idea. She would have paid good money to see their faces last night.

Her Slayer senses had told her that although they had shared the bed, they had done nothing but sleep. This disappointed her; she really couldn’t understand what was holding them back. She had given them the perfect excuse to sort it out. ‘Was B really that dense?’, she wondered. Maybe that was why she wasn’t around - all the angst and such, plus not having her super human powers had to be getting to her.

She’d seen Xander and Willow return earlier after she’d called Cordy. Assuming that Buffy had also left the shop in her absence she now regretted keeping her promise to call. But D had rung her cell phone first twice, then four times to let her know that Queen C was home. She had longed for even Cordelia’s voice; for someone to talk to; someone who would listen without a Buffy’s ‘what is Faith’s hidden agenda’ in every sentence.

She had considered bugging the shop but knowing Willow’s fondness for protection spells she hadn’t - something she was now regretting.

Two hours later Willow, Xander, Anya and Giles left the shop and headed for the park. Faith grabbed her weapons bag and left her attic room to follow them.
Buffy sat at the far end of a long and well-polished wooden dining table. She was alone in the room. She had been since she had regained consciousness about half an hour ago. For some reason she couldn’t move. She had exerted all of her will but not a limb had moved.

She had no idea just how long she had been unconscious. There was no clock in the room and she had tried to lift her wrist to look at her own watch. She’d even tried just twisting her wrist slightly but it had been no use. She had never felt so helpless. She knew the gang would be trying to find her, wanting to rescue her but that knowledge still made her the victim - something she found very hard to deal with. Anger grew within her. She envisioned killing Dracula – slowly, painfully and then making Faith wish she was dead, making her beg to die, making her whimper with apologies. She could feel the urge to slay building within her and yet she was like a chained animal – impotent.

Giles had always advised her to practice some patience back in the days when she had her Slayer strength. Maybe that wouldn’t have been such a bad thing to learn. This sitting unable to do anything was like having an itch she couldn’t scratch. She had begun to believe she was going mad over the last few days. She had all the urges and instincts to fight building within her but was unable to use them or vent them. It seemed as though only the Slayer strength had transferred to her Witchy friend. She still had the dreams, the cramps when a vamp was near and the hardened aggressive mental attitude and training.

Buffy suddenly realized just how far Willow had been able to come without the mental training she had gone through, without the combat experience she had acquired. Giles had concluded that Faith had only swapped their physical bodies. All their mental skills had transferred with their minds resulting in the Witchy Slayer and the aggressive but frustrated woman she now found herself to be.

She had begun to wonder if maybe Dracula was right and that all she was - was a killer. Then into the room came the Lord of Darkness himself, seemingly graceful and aloof. She was reminded of a swan she had once seen last summer, gliding on a lake oblivious of everyone else, serene and seemingly immortal. ‘Where the hell did that come from?’ Buffy looked at Dracula suspiciously.

“Your mind is still strong I see,” Dracula said, his voice deep and inviting as he moved to her side.

Buffy glared at him. “I exercise everyday,” she replied, annoyed by his attempt to guide her thoughts. “You’re slowing down old man. Having to use magic to pull the ladies... Then again I guess surgery’s not really an option for you,” she smiled. “Just how old are you?”

Dracula tilted his head to one side. “So you dread birthdays,” he stated.
The statement unnerved Buffy but she chose to stay silent. As her mind began to remember every birthday since her awakening as the Slayer and how they had all been celebrated by a life or death event.

“Each brings you closer to the natural death of a Slayer,” he smiled. “It is our fate to never grow old.”

Her mind lurched but she pulled herself back. He was trying to guide her thoughts again. ‘Keep on your toes Buffy,’ she told herself.

“Mmm, you still have such fire. I like that,” Dracula said almost in a whisper. His words washed over her mind. Unexpectedly he moved away from her towards the middle of the table. He spoke again his voice even softer. “Stand and come to me. I wish to view you.”

Buffy found herself standing, leaving her chair and walking towards him.

“Turn!” he commanded.

She did. Her mid length skirt swirled slightly, revealing the bare skin above her boots.

“Beautiful,” He uttered in an appreciative tone.

As Buffy turned to face him again he gestured her to him. It was only a few steps but Buffy walked towards him, fighting every step in vain. He gestured again and she stopped, mere inches between them.

“You are indeed a wild creature, drawn to the darkness within, drawn to the music of the night,” Dracula whispered.

“Oh please! You gonna break into a song?” Buffy spat.

“I am going to introduce you to the fire within you. I can feel it burning inside you - the need to kill. It dances within you to music only those who kill for pleasure can know.”
“I do not kill for pleasure!” Buffy almost shouted. “It’s a calling, 'save the world, kill the Vamps, survive on four hours sleep a night, secret identity' kind of thing.”

Dracula gestured and she found herself unable to speak. He simply smiled at the annoyance in her eyes as he placed his cold hand upon her hip. Taking her other hand he began to slowly lead her in a waltz. There was no music and yet Buffy found it easy to feel the rhythm to which they were moving.

“I see you can feel it, sense the music,” Dracula said, his lips so close to Buffy’s ear that had he been human she would have felt his breath on her skin, on her neck. Buffy felt something building within her, something new and chilling. She felt fear. There was nothing she could do to prevent Dracula from killing her. Nothing.

Her mind swam with the sheer realization that she was powerless. She hadn’t felt so defenseless in years, so out of her depth. As Dracula swept her around the room like a mannequin, she almost wanted to laugh hysterically. How she wished she were able to fight him. She wished again and again to have some control. Never had she chosen to hand over her life. It wasn’t right she should be able to fight.

“Ow,” Buffy yelled as Dracula stood heavily on her left foot, which didn’t seem to be following instructions. “Watch it ‘lead foot’.” Buffy cheered her willpower on for this small victory – ‘Yay, my left foot.’

“You still fight me. How very foolish you are,” Dracula said, warning and desire in his eyes.

“Yeah and you - such a smooth dancer too,” Buffy quipped.

“Do not mock me Killer. I know you for what you are,” Dracula reminded her. “You deny yourself.”

“That’s me ‘denial girl’,” Buffy smiled. “So if I deny you exist you should poof – vanish in a puff of cheap smoke, right?”

“Did you forget to pay the thrall bill?” She asked, willing her hand to leave his.

“Be silent, woman,” He commanded this time with such intensity that Buffy could feel the power washing over her.

“Who died and made you king of the wo…..” Buffy made the shapes with her mouth but she just couldn’t get the words out. Frustrated that he had gagged her again she lashed out with all her will, lifting her all-powerful left foot to try and stomp on his damn foot in revenge.

But Dracula simply stepped back from her slow moving attack, released her hands and smiled at her. “You are not the ‘Killer’ I sought. You are simply a foolish little girl trying to anger me.”

Finally released Buffy raised her hand but unable to speak, made great play of biting her nails in fear. But inside she couldn’t help wondering if he was right. Had she never been the Slayer? Had she been nothing more than a mouthy scared little girl? ‘Is that all I really am?’ She asked herself.

“Sleep,” Dracula ordered, dramatically waving his arm with more apprehension than he normally showed. “Sleep little girl. For she will soon join us.”

“We will finish our dance before your playmate joins us. Then you will realize your place. Your destiny and hers,” He hissed. “Sleep, sleep, sleep.”

Buffy’s eyes grew wide with fear. ‘Willow!’ She fought to remain awake but Dracula’s eyes did not leave her until she fell to the floor, lost to the land of slumber.

*********************************************************************************************BtVS*********************************************************************************************

Moving across the park the group of four looked a very odd collection. Giles in his ‘oh so British’ attire, crossbow in hand; Willow in new age hippy student outfit, a nap sack on her back and stake in hand; Xander in blue jeans, Hawaiian shirt and his favorite axe; Anya in her shop girl gear, short sword and stake. They looked like escapees from a low budget horror movie as they wandered across the dark park, torches in hand. Thank goodness Sunnydale’s police were possibly the lowest profile force on the planet.
Anya looked across the lake. “I know I’ve only been mortal in Sunnydale for a short while now. But you know what I’ve never noticed?”

“A big castle sitting just across the lake?” Willow provided.

“A big castle,” Anya agreed


“Yes magnificent - for a tasteless pile,” Giles agreed. “I thought the era of the mock Gothic palace had passed.”

Trying to plan ahead, as she knew Buffy would, Willow spoke. “Okay we split up. Xander and I will take the front. Giles and Anya, you take the rear. We need to find Buffy and get her out of there,” Willow commanded no waver in her voice and sheer determination in her eyes.

Giles felt a certain growing respect for this young woman, thrust as she had been into the role of Slayer. Finding no fault with her division of their forces he stayed silent.

They moved rapidly around the lake, separating into pairs as they reached the front of the mock castle. As Willow and Xander reached the front of the castle she paused slightly before opening the front door. The hall way was poorly lit and very dark. Ahead of them was a large staircase. Turning to Xander she said, “You try upstairs. Be careful.”

Nodding Xander mounted the stairs. He was pleased that his master would not see him with this Witchy Slayer plus he knew he stood little or no chance against her. He would ambush Giles and distract his Anya, probably with sex, and seek out his dark master for further instruction. He would find his way to them. There had to be a rear staircase for staff, trades and such – he’s seen Chatsworth Park- Anya’s choices sometimes worried him.

As she watched him mount the staircase Willow removed her nap sack, pulling out a dark green crystal. Placing it in her palm she recited the enchantment she had researched earlier and hoped to the goddess that the failure of her earlier spell was only a fluke. She poured her very soul into her chant, pushing her will into the crystal.
Giles forced the garage door up and soon they were in. They found the door to the house unlocked so they proceeded into the castle and what appeared to be the dungeon! Their torches lit the way through a maze of corridors and stairs which soon had them completely disorientated.

Anya turned to Giles. “Well,” She said with distain. “Where we are?”

Giles looked at the woman as if she was mad until he saw the smirk on her face. She was enjoying his failure. “Could you do any better?” he asked.

“Sure,” she replied. “I could probably help us get even more lost.” Anya said, laughing at him.

Giles huffed and moved off. There was something about Anya that got under his skin. Her bluntness was just so uncalled for, so lacking in finesse. But most of all it was what she got away with saying that he wouldn’t even dream of saying, think it though he might.

His thoughts were broken as they reached a two-way split in the corridor and looking at each other; they shrugged as they each took a different corridor. He was somehow relieved to be separated from Anya.

Turning left he found a solid wooden door before him. He turned the handle, feeling the door move slightly and then stick. Instinctively he put his shoulder to the door and gave it another push, it moved a little further and stuck again. So this time he placed his whole weight behind the push.

The door flew open and Giles moved through it before he realized that there was no floor on its other side. He fell.

His landing was strangely soft and he looked about himself to see that the floor was covered in cushions. Looking behind him, he realized he had fallen at least 10 feet into a sort of pit. He could see the open door gaping, almost laughing down at him.

“Oh good stepping Giles. At least you didn’t get knocked out for a change,” he admonished himself.
Turning he caught a movement from the shadows of the pit. Three women appeared, each stunningly beautiful with tight firm bodies robed in almost see-through silk and smiling. In the half-light he could see their incisors, the greyness of their skin, their curves. Giles swallowed, “Ahhh yes – you would be the Three Sisters. Excellent. Yes. I heard you were a myth.”

They moved towards him with quick smiling ease, leaning down beside him and reaching out to undress him and they sighed.

“Obviously erroneous,” Giles added, as his skin became aflame at their touch.

They ripped his shirt open.

“Ahhh,” Giles uttered, strangely mesmerized by the three women surrounding him, yet knowing he should be doing something else. “Ahh – Oh! That tickles,” he pointed out as one of the women ran her tongue over his bare chest. “Ohh Ahhh.” Then he was kissed until breathing became an issue. Regaining air he let forth a plea. “Oh. Dear God?”

Willow had now checked five rooms on the ground floor. Most had been completely empty, although one appeared to be furnished in the European style of a large study turned library, complete with a raging fireplace. She moved to the last door off the main hall and holding her breath, she turned the handles of its double doors.

Entering the room she was at once pleased and disappointed by the scene that greeted her. She had found Buffy. But the blonde was frozen in Dracula’s embrace, their faces mere millimeters apart. Jealousy flared within Willow as she saw the way Buffy was staring deep into his eyes.

It took her a little while to control herself and realize from their pose that the two had been dancing when her spell had surrounded Buffy, slowing time. In their timeline they were still dancing. She now had to be very careful because unfreezing Buffy would also unfreeze Dracula.

Moving towards the eerily still couple Willow knew she was moving far too quickly for their eyes to see her. She considered her options. Should she try to disentangle Buffy from Dracula or try to stake him?
As she came to their side she realized that they were dancing so closely that she would have no way of piercing his heart from the front. Moving around to his back, the fall of his Bella Lugosi cape made it equally impossible to identify where to stake him. She moved back to their side, her mind racing. She had to think of something. She clutched the crystal within her hand as if wishing it would help her.

Willow suddenly realized that she must have stood still, in the same position, for too long because suddenly Dracula disappeared, leaving Buffy with her arms still in dancing pose but alone. Willow moved to her friend’s side, her eyes and ears alert for Dracula’s reappearance.

Buffy shook her head and gasped as she realized that Dracula was gone. But she could still feel a hand on her….Willow ….She was here. Oh no. She scanned the room and sure enough a column of black smoke at the far end of the room heralded his return.

“Willow,” she said.

Willow smiled realizing her friend was back in real time. Then she turned following Buffy’s concerned eyes to see Dracula reappear. She moved to the left of her friend, allowing them room to maneuver as Dracula moved towards them. Realizing the crystal was no longer of use she dropped it.

“I knew you would both be with me eventually. This is as it should be.”

“Oh yeah? Why?” Buffy asked.

“Cause we’re under your thrall?” Willow asked. “Guess what pally…” Willow smiled lifting her stake.

“Put the stake down.”

“Okay,” Willow responded laying the stake on the table at her side. “Right. That was not you – I did that because I wanted to. Slayer sneaky stuff you don’t yet know about.” ‘Maybe I should rethink that thrall thingy,’ she said to herself.
“Indeed. Be still,” he commanded as he approached.

They both found their minds unwilling to order their bodies to move.

“You are both magnificent,” Dracula said, appearing to breathe them in.

“I bet you say that to all the girls before you bite them,” Willow commented.

“No. You two are different – kindred.”

“Kindred?” they ask in unison.

“Pull back your hair,” Dracula ordered Buffy.

Buffy found herself following his bidding.

“This isn’t how I usually fight. You waft in with your music video wind and your hypno eyes…” Buffy explained.

“I have searched the world over for the Slayer. I have yearned for her, for the one - but now there are two whose darkness rivals my own,” he said his eyes falling upon Buffy’s neck.

Willow recoils at these words. “Hey. No darkness here. Just Willow. Well Buffy that is. Kindred goodness.”

Dracula turns his gaze upon Willow. “Do not fight. I can feel your hunger.” He moved towards her.

“Stay away from her,” Buffy ordered.
“Are you afraid I will bite her before you? Slayer, that’s why you came.” He stated glancing at Buffy as he moved towards Willow. “Stop me, stake me. Do you know why you can’t resist?”

“Because you’re famous – it’s over rated,” Buffy said hoping to distract his attention from Willow.

“Because you want it too.”

Buffy had no response.

“Others are coming.” Willow whispered.

“They are here. They will not find us. We are alone. Quite alone.” Moving in to whisper in Willow’s ear, he added, “There’s so much I have to teach you witch, your magic, what it is capable of. You have the potential for much darkness. Can you not sense it within you? Would you like me to show you?”

“Really don’t want to know,” Willow almost screamed. She felt the fear that he could be right rising within her.

“You want to know and you will have eternity to discover the depth of your magic’s. But first a little taste.”

“I won’t let you.” Willow fought his thrall with all her might, to no avail.

“I didn’t mean for me.” Dracula replied, a laugh shaping his mouth. Seeing the horror in her eyes he turned to Buffy.

Moving to circle behind her, he smiled. “All these years fighting us. With a power so near to our own and you never wanted to know what it is?” He finished coming to a stop in front of and between the two friends. Taking his left thumb he dragged his nail across his right wrist, smiling he did the same to his left wrist. Blood began to pool upon his wrists. “Time for a taste…” He said, offering his wrists to the lips of the two young women before him.

“If we drink that…..” Buffy whispered, unable to draw her eyes from the wrist before her.
“It’s not enough for you to change. You must be near death to become one of us…..and that comes only when you plead for it.”

“Not hungry,” Willow stated, firmly closing her mouth.

“The craving goes deeper than that,” Dracula explained. “You think you know, what you are, what’s to come – you haven’t even begun.” He pressed his wrists to closer to their lips. “Feel it, the darkness, the power, the magic; your need to be one with the darkness, with each other, with me. Find your true nature.”

Willow kept her lips firmly closed, although she could feel the warm wet blood against her lips, pushing, calling to her. She closed her eyes and focused on goodness, on love, but that just reminded her of her longing to be with Buffy. The way Buffy filled her heart, her life. Every fiber of her soul sought out the bedrock that supported her Wiccan beliefs. Her mind would have gone into meltdown had her eyes been open to see Buffy lean into Dracula’s wrist, opening her mouth to drink….

Buffy drank, feeding the need she had felt, the need he described. Her mind swam with memories of the Slayers that had preceded her. Visions of battles; victories and apparent losses; of her friends; her family; her Willow; and the many innocents who had been lost in the battle with darkness. Lifting her head she considered the taste in her mouth. Shaking her head she made a decision. “No. That was gross.” She said.

“You are resisting.”

“Looks like,” Buffy responded.


“You know what? I really think the thrall has gone out of our relationship – but I want to thank you for opening my eyes a little,” Buffy said smiling.

Dracula turned to find Willow had opened her eyes. She was staring at Buffy in disbelief; her lips firmly closed.
“What is this? No other man can give you what you both need,” He removed his wrist from before Willow, his face filling with exasperation at the behavior of these women.

“My true nature …,” Willow stated. “Well, Mr. ‘big, dark and mysterious’, you can trust me when I say that you have no chance of giving me what I need. Kinda Gay here.”

“Indeed?” Dracula smiled. “I have to admit that makes the possibilities somewhat more intriguing.” He leered at Willow, his eyes laughing. He moved his questioning gaze to Buffy. “I will very much enjoy watching you two perform for me.”

“Oh please. How unoriginal is that?” Buffy protested, a flush rising to her cheeks.

“No woman can resist the thrall of the dark prince. You will find your womanhood, your true natures. You will have no need to hide in the arms of another woman. This you will realize - what you really need, in my dark arms, a real ma…. Dracula halted his self-glorification at the sound of a window shattering and the feel of something against his – “No!” Looking down he realized that protruding from his chest was a stake.

Willow and Buffy released from his thrall instinctively threw themselves to the floor. Buffy glanced at the table as she dropped. Willow’s stake was still there. “Who?” she questioned as another crash heralded the arrival of yet one more stake, which clattered to the floor, falling into the pile of dust that had been Dracula. Looking at it Buffy realized that it had something wrapped around it. Hesitantly she reached for it.

“Wait,” Willow said pulling her back and bringing her close. “Giles?” she called out, assuming that it had been the watcher’s crossbow that had dispatched Dracula and wanting to assure him he had hit his mark - so that he would stop firing.

When no one responded, they both looked at each other with concern. Someone was firing a crossbow and they couldn’t be sure that Dracula had been the only target.

They lay on the floor, Willow holding Buffy to her side for what seemed like an age. Willow wasn’t that concerned about moving anytime soon as she enjoyed the warmth of Buffy’s body next to hers. Plus she wasn’t too keen on discovering they were also in the sights of their mysterious savior.

She had almost lost her; lost Buffy. “Are you okay?” she asked, for some reason whispering.
“Yeah. Just a little rattled,” Buffy replied. “Who do you think is out there?”

“I don’t know. I thought it was Giles,” Willow replied.

Buffy’s eyes grew wide, “Faith.”
“Buffy, Willow, are you okay?” Anya asked and seeing they were she added, “Dracula?”

“Euro-trashed,” Buffy explained. She stood watching a somewhat agitated Xander glare back and forth. Willow still had a protective arm on her and somehow that one small thing made her smile, made the fear of what could have happened less.

Xander had come careening into the hall, his eyes wide. “Where is he? Where is the creep who turned me into a spider-eating man-bitch?” Xander demanded.

“Apparently Xander was also under Dracula’s thrall,” Anya said attempting to explain his behavior. “Did I tell you that he’s always had excellent taste?” she added because she had seen both Buffy and Willow hold back smirks at the idea of Dracula placing Xander under his thrall.


“He’s gone,” Willow stated.

“Damn it. You know what? I’m sick of this crap. I’m sick of being the guy who eats insects and gets funny syphilis. From this moment, it’s over. I’m finished being everybody’s butt-monkey,” Xander said, his voice rising.

“Thrall. Told you,” Anya stage whispered.

“There was NO thrall!” Xander yelled, glaring at Anya.

“Check. No thrall and no butt-monkey,” Buffy interjected, trying very hard to ignore Anya and hoping he would too.

“Well, I was just saying I could have understood you choosing to give in to his thrall. At least you weren’t all weak-minded and making time with the Dracula babes, like Giles here,” Anya stated.
“I was just about to kill those loathsome creatures when – Anya interrupted me,” Giles protested, somehow wishing Anya would go back to embarrassing Xander.

“Right, you were going to nuzzle them to death,” Anya commented.

“Of course not. I was in complete – control.” Giles blushed, something rarely seen. Quickly changing the subject Giles asked. “Willow, did the ‘slowing time’ spell work?”

“For a while.” She replied, unsure if she wanted to let everyone know that she had found Buffy dancing with Dracula.

“Good, good. I was a little worried after the ‘location’ spell failed and considering your previous inability to resist his thrall. I mean, we never really had time to finish your mental training,” Giles said, rambling on in his attempt to change the subject until he realized he was doing little or nothing to increase Willow’s self-confidence.

“His thrall wasn’t that hard to overcome once I realized something pretty basic,” Willow explained, smiling slightly.

“Really?” Giles questioned. Curious at just how the young woman had managed to defend herself. “What?”

Buffy looked at her friend and a small smile played upon her lips.

“I’m ‘Kinda Gay’,” She said smiling.

Giles looked at her oddly and then he laughed. “Of course,” he shook his head and dropped his jaw. “How simple,” he stated somewhat annoyed that he had missed such a simple mental trigger. Then he smiled, wishing he had been there to see Dracula’s face when he realized that he was facing a Sapphic Slayer. Realizing that Buffy was looking at him oddly, he opened his mouth to explain further but Anya interrupted.

“So he’s dead,” Anya asked somewhat disappointed. “You staked him.”
Buffy and Willow fell into an awkward silence that was finally broken by Buffy. “We don’t really know who staked him.”

“Someone shot a stake through the window,” Willow explained. “We thought it was Giles but it can’t have been,” she added.

“It was Faith,” Buffy stated.

“How can you know that? And why would she be helping you?” Giles asked.

“The second stake had this wrapped around it,” Buffy explained and passed the rolled up piece of paper to Giles.

Opening it, Giles read it aloud.

“‘Babes in distress, in castle caught.
Standing sweetly, side by side.
New power, but no one fought?
Scared to deal, easier to hide.’”

“She’s starting to enjoy this,” Xander commented. Slightly disconcerted that Faith was still around, let alone watching them. There was the whole ‘is she crazy possibility’? But then there was the cheesy poetry. ‘Yep she’s enjoying this too much.’

“Faith’s still getting her jollies at my expense,” Buffy commented, real concern in her eyes. She felt Willow reassuringly squeeze her shoulder and suddenly whatever Faith had in store for them, she knew that they would handle - together.

Faith had followed the rag tag rescue party across the park; at first wondering where the hell they were going. But one look at the big old castle and she figured that it surely didn’t involve going on
a fun filled picnic in the park. Then she really became concerned when she realized that B wasn’t with the Scoobies. ‘Damn! It’s a rescue gig.’ Guilt ran through her and she didn’t like that much. This was meant to be her good deed, but it wasn’t going five by five and if Buffy ended up hurt…

Kicking into Slayer speed, she raced around and ahead of the Scoobies. Reaching the castle she climbed up to an upper floor window. When she gazed in she saw something that sent a cold chill to her very core. Lying on the floor was Buffy and she wasn’t moving. Faith jimmed the window and entered, moving swiftly to Buffy’s side she gazed at the woman she had so often resented and envied.

Suddenly feeling very small and inadequate she reached for her neck to check for a pulse. It was there. She watched her nostril flair – ‘She’s breathing.’ Relief washed over her and she beamed at the unconscious source of her happiness. She reached forward and brushed a stray hair from Buffy’s face. Then she heard a slight murmur – she was – ‘No?’ Buffy was asleep?

‘What the hell is going on?’ she asked as she looked around the room. Then she heard a noise. Unsure where it was coming from and knowing that the Scoobies could burst in at any moment she retreated back to her entry point. Being found by the side of an unconscious Buffy wouldn’t play very well with the Scoobies. She didn’t like leaving Buffy but she wasn’t going far. She lowered herself onto the balcony below the window and looking over her left shoulder she spotted just what she needed.

The tree gave her a clear view of the room. She retrieved her crossbow and bolts from her bag. She watched Dracula re-enter the room and keeping her bow trained on him, she watched as he danced with Buffy. ‘Where the hell are the Scoobies?’ She was beginning to think she had made a mistake when before her eyes the pair seemed to freeze and Willow entered the room. ‘Magics’, Faith determined. The witch was in the game.

She relaxed, watching Dracula perform before the pair, who seemed unmoved and unconcerned by his movements and then a small smile crossed her face she reached into her bag and pencilled a little message for the dumb duo. She was going to enjoy this. When she looked back up, she was dumbstruck. They both appeared to be drinking from him. This had gone far enough. She took aim and, once she had a clear shot, she fired.

‘Dusted! Some talents never fade.’ A smug smile washed over Faiths face. She had just saved the love-dumb duo. As she watched them drop to the floor and she wrapped her hastily scribbled message around the next bolt and fired it into the room. “Guys, you are the dimmest ‘love muppets’. EVER!” she quietly exclaimed.
Willow had insisted that she take Buffy home, leaving Giles, Xander and Anya to return their weapons to the Magic shop. The Slayer/Witch had informed Giles in no uncertain terms that there would be no further attempt at the ‘vision quest’ tonight, because of what Buffy had just been through.

As they walked back to the dorm across the campus grounds neither one of them spoke. Willow kept a protective arm around the ex-slayer as they walked. Crossing the car park Willow thought that she heard something and turned just in time to see the large stone that struck her forehead, knocking her out. When Buffy felt the arm that had been around her fall, she turned and her heart sank as she saw Willow crumple to the floor. Coming towards her were three female vampires, attired as if from the Hammer extra’s lot. ‘The Sirens.’ She focused all of her protective instincts and anger at the trio approaching her.

Instinct took over and Buffy took her familiar stance preparing for their attack. Then reality struck home. She had no slayer strength. She was no match for one vampire, let alone three. Glancing at her unconscious friend, fear washed over her, fear for Willow. ‘How can I protect her?’ Feeling the fear beginning to rise within in her, she shook it off with what remained of her will power. ‘Willow needs my protection’.

The approaching vampires hissed as they moved towards her. Recognizing her stance they seemed to laugh before they commenced their attack. In a blur of movement too fast to observe, Buffy was suddenly surrounded by the three female vampires who treated her like a kitten would a ball of string, cuffing away her attempted blows with smiles and laughter, tripping her, punching her, slapping her and finally throwing her to the floor where she lay gasping for breath, her body and ego, bruised and humiliated.

The three left her to regain her breath, and although eager to play further with the ex-slayer, they instead moved to surround Willow. But the sight of Willow, unconscious and vulnerable, surrounded by deaths minions simply helped to fire a fierce determination of will within Buffy. She felt a new unfamiliar power rising within her. It seemed to be building from her very core, aflame and yet it held an ice-like quality that centered and bound it to her will. She stilled herself and stared at Willow. Her very core seemed to re-align as if a magnet was focusing her will and drawing it out of her.

As the trio lowered themselves to Willow, Buffy knew they would not hurt her, they would not drink from her, they would not kill her. She would stop them. Buffy tried to move, to get to Willow, to protect her, all the while knowing that she would never reach her in time. She screamed within her very soul and involuntarily stretched out her hand as if to pass her help, her will, her strength, and her prayer to her secret love. A prayer that she, herself, should fall; that she should die - for that was her destiny, NOT WILLOW’S!
She felt her will leave her with such force, such ferocity that it seemed to burn her insides as it left her. She ignored the pain, forcing her anger, her rage, her will and the very soul of her need towards them. Towards those who threatened her Willow.

Somehow unsurprised, she saw a wall of fire rise to surround Willow, burning the trio of sirens where they stood. Their screams filled the air as they combusted, falling as dust to the ground. Then it died, its flames wilting, extinguishing itself, until all that lay before her was Willow. Her Willow. Safe.

Buffy felt something wet against her face, ‘I’m crying?’ She reached to her face to wipe the tears away but as she looked at her hand she saw not tears but blood, her blood. Her nose was bleeding? She became extremely light-headed as she tried to move towards Willow and thinking she had heard a noise, she lifted her eyes to look towards her dear, dear friend. Pleased, she smiled to see Willow’s questioning eyes open. ‘She’s safe. Willow’s safe. My Willow.’ She thought with relief as she gave into the exhaustin that engulfed her. ‘So tired. Just need to rest for a moment.’ Closing her eyes, she decided to just rest her head for a while on her outstretched arm.

As Buffy regained consciousness she thought she was floating. But no. She was being carried. She was in Willow’s arms, being carried with her own slayer powers. ‘How weird is that.’ And they were moving down a dorm corridor. She tried to raise her head to see exactly how much further Willow would have to carry her but she found herself unable to find the energy to do so. She murmured in frustration.

“We’re nearly there, Buffy. It’s okay, we’ll be there soon … it’s okay. Did I say that? As if getting pelted with stones could be okay.” She huffed in disgust. Then seeing that Buffy was trying to move she advised her friend. “Give it a while. Don’t try moving your head; its probably pounding. I know mine was. How many rocks did you get hit with anyway? You’re covered in bruises,” Willow stated, the concern obvious in her voice. She was certain that Buffy could have only been hit so many times if she had been trying to shield her. “If I ever get hold of those kids, those SOBs, those ignorant … I’ll turn them sixteen shades of black and blue. Stoning! Hello; not in the dark ages. For heaven’s sake we’ve landed on the moon, we have internet banking, female senators, cell phones, test tube babies, microwave pizza, bubble bath …. Stoning a witch?????? I’m so reporting this to the university board.”

Buffy, smiled at the absurdity of the conversation Willow was having with herself; well to be honest it was more of a tirade, a babbling tirade. But smiling just made her face ache; so she stopped, deciding it was enough to smile inside only.
Willow obviously had no idea what had happened, what Buffy had done – ‘Hey. I did magic!’ she recalled. ‘I did – oh my god, the switch – ohhh no.’ Shock took over and the world faded away again.

In Los Angeles, two weeks earlier Cordelia was talking to Wesley, Angel and Faith -describing her conversation with a D-list starlet who had been silly enough to cross her path in last season’s matador jacket.

“Any how, I told her… purple, so last season. If the cut didn’t … Ow … hell!” Cordy cursed as her balance went, her sight faded and the scene before her blurred. With little warning she was thrown into a sequence of short scenes, snap shots, moving so fast in real time yet so slowly in her head.

Spike is sitting in the shade on a loading bay, as Buffy leaves the back door of the magic shop. He announces his presence. “I was gonna go inside, but I overheard you and the Super-friends exchanging a special moment and I came over a bit queasy.”

Buffy wiped her hair out of her face but doesn’t appear to be listening to him.

Deciding to bait her, he adds “Say, aren't you leaving a hole in the middle of some soggy group hug? Joining the Wiccan love fest and all that.”

“I just wanted a little time alone,” Buffy explained, finally acknowledging him. She walks over and sits on a near-by packing crate.

“Oh right then,” Spike says standing. He starts to walk away but when he reaches the border of the shadow that had once given him
access to the loading bay, he realizes it has moved and that he can no longer leave the alley without waling into the sunlight. He stops and squints at the sky.

Watching him, Buffy removes his problem. “That’s okay. I can be alone with you here.”

“Thanks ever so,” Spike replies to the backhanded insult, passing her a rueful smile.

“Right.”


She looked up, realizing Spike was still there. Uncomfortably she gets up and walks to the same shadow and sunlight divide. Pausing she answers him, never turning to meet his gaze. “Everything I feel, everything I want to have ... this is Hell. Just getting through the next moment ... and the one after that ... Watching her ... being with her... knowing what I've lost... What I can never have.” Buffy fell into silence.

Spike gave her a very knowing look. Sadness, resignation and understanding seemed to fill his eyes. As she turned she must have recognized his thought because she spoke with such conviction, such determination... “She can never know. Never.”

**

Spike grinned and leered at Buffy. “We have to talk,” he told her as she moved away from him.

“About what?”Buffy spat.

“Oh god, don’t get all prim and proper on me. I know what kind of girl you really are,” Spike responded smirking at the Slayer. “ Don’t I?”

“I’ll just have to get my jollies fightin’ demons,” Buffy informed him in a very off hand manner.

Spike suggestively replied, “There are other ways ...”, presenting himself.

“And to that -- an extreme see you later,” Buffy responded, walking away.
“You’re a tease, you know that Slayer?” Spike yelled.

She rolled her eyes but continued.

“Get a fellow’s motor running with secret sexy knowledge, put kinky pictures in his head, let the sexual tension marinate a couple of days, all big with the sharing, then bam. Crown yourself the ice queen,” Spike added as she moved out of sight. “It’s only a matter of time before you realize I’m the only one here for you pet. We both got tensions that need releasing. You got no one else!”

**

Buffy entered a bedroom where Willow was relaxing on the double bed. “Hey,” She smiled. “How you doing?”

Willow sat up. “Oh. Uh … Okay.”

“Yeah?” Buffy questioned planting herself on the bed opposite Willow.

“Yeah,” Willow affirmed. “No parades and cotton candy but … okay.”

“Will, um … Can I talk to you about something?” Buffy asked somewhat nervously.

“Of course,” Willow replied.

“Right. Okay. Um … you know how we all make choices? And sometimes they’re easy, and … sometimes they’re …less easy,” Buffy said, uncharacteristically stumbling over her words.

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, lately, I, uh…that is, I’m finding one choice…less easy,” Buffy said, looking at Willow as if she should understand what she was talking about.

“Right… Slayer stuff?” Willow guessed. “Though not really a choice is it?”

“No well … “

**

“Look, I’m sorry, okay?” Buffy said sincerely to Spike.

“But...” Spike began to object.

“But … when I … you know I was thinking about Willow… Right?” Buffy said, trying to be as clear as she was able to be.

“You know, I always wondered about you two before you let on, ” Spike said smirking.

“What?” Buffy questioned, suspicion in her eyes. Realizing he was teasing her - her look quickly turned to hatred. “You’re a thing. An evil, disgusting thing.”

**

Buffy kicks Spike and he flies into the living room. Spike stands as she enters the room. “Poor little lost girl.” He taunts, jumping up to grab the chandelier. Swinging towards Buffy to plant both of his feet in her face. She goes down. “She doesn’t fit anywhere. She’s got no one to love her.”
Buffy gets up and grabs him, throwing him against the staircase leading upstairs, smashing it to bits. “Me, I’m lost? Look at you, you idiot! Poor Spikey. Can’t be human, can’t be a vampire. Where the hell do you fit in?” She laughs. “Your job is to kill the slayer. But all you can do is follow me around making moon eyes.”

“I wasn’t planning on hurting you.” Spike informed Buffy, as he lifted her up to look in her face. “Much.”

“You haven’t even come close to hurting me,” Buffy retorted.

“Afraid to give me a chance?” Spike jibbed.

Buffy broke his hold on her throat, throwing him against a wall with such force that plaster leaves it in chunks. She grabs him as he tries to gather himself, pushing him against the wall. “You afraid I’m gonna…tell?” Spike says laughing, ”Just what’s that worth?”

“You’re evil…” Buffy began.

“Hello. Vampire!” Spike reminded her.

***

Buffy is in her bathroom wearing only a bathrobe. Spike stands smiling in the doorway. She yells at him to “Get out.”

“We need to talk,” he tells her.

“No. We really don’t,” she responds.

“This isn’t just about you - - as much as you’d like it to be,” he reminds her. “You should never have told me … but I think you wanted me to know… wanted me to have this over you.”

“I wouldn’t. Why would I want this?”

“Why?” he asked hopefully. “This way you can let me do stuff and it’s not your fault. You like being treated like this.”

“No I don’t.”

“Why do you keep lying to her? To yourself?” He looked at her, willing her to agree to his next statement. “You won’t admit it but you need me … because you can’t have her.”

“I could never like or trust you enough.”

“Trust is for old marrieds, Buffy” Spike replied, laughing at her denial. “Your great secret love has done nothing but hurt you. I think you like the pain. We could have passion, danger, something that burns and consumes.”

“Until there’s nothing left. That kind of thing doesn’t last.”

Spike moved forward to try and kiss her. She gently pushed him away. “Let yourself feel it…” he urges her, becoming more forceful in his approach, touching, stroking her. “Just what would she think, if she knew…” he threatens.

At his words, fear fills Buffy’s face. He takes this opportunity to invade her robe with searching hands. “Stop it,” Buffy orders him, batting away his insistent hands.
“You need me to hurt you ... so you should fight just a little,” he states, reaching between her legs. “I know you better than you know yourself.”

“Don’t,” Buffy pleads, stumbling backwards. She reaches out and grabs the shower curtain to steady herself and stop herself from falling. But the curtain rings pop and its flimsy support is gone. She falls, hitting her back on the side of the bathtub. Gasping in pain she slides to the floor, hits her head on the edge of the bath and is dazed.

In that moment Spike is upon her, pinning her to the cold tile floor, oblivious to her pain. Forcing his kisses upon her. “Let it go.... admit you like it. When I’m inside, you feel it too,” he states.

“Stop it ... please ... stop.” Buffy begs. She seems unable to stop him. And Spike doesn’t appear to be listening to her pleas.

**

As she came back, Cordy couldn’t believe what she had just seen. ‘No! Oh my god.’ Opening her eyes she saw two concerned faces, Wesley and Angel. ‘Okay who caught me?’ she wondered.

From behind her Faith asked, “C, you okay?” The dark-haired slayer was more than a little unnerved by the vision-fainting Cordelia. Okay so Angel had brought her up to date on the whole vision thing, but somehow the reality of the situation was not at all the walk in the park she had pictured for the Queen C.

“Water?”

“There was water? Sea? Lake? River?” Wesley asked eager to help.

Looking at him as if he was a fool she clarified her question. “No. A drink of water. Geez,” Cordelia said irritably. Her head was still spinning and she was relieved that Faith was still holding onto her. She had no doubt that the moment Faith released her, her remaining upright body parts would simply join the rest of her on the floor.

“Ahh, yes. Sorry,” Wesley said as he rushed off to rectify his mistake.

“Who was it?” Angel asked, recognizing the look on her face as concern for someone she knew.

“Buffy,” Cordelia replied, pain and fear in her voice. She saw the immediate need to go to the Slayer in his eyes. “Some time in the future, not any time soon. I’m pretty sure about that. I think it was a warning of what could happen. We’ll need to send someone to warn her. It’s not the kind of thing you can talk about over the phone.” Angel looked at her questioningly. “Girl stuff,” She supplied, really hoping he’d let it go at that for now. She needed time to think about what she had
seen. Angel’s face relaxed somewhat but he didn’t back down.

‘Oh boy. Thanks. This is just what I need right now,’ Cordelia thought, willing her thoughts to the powers that be. ‘Tell broody his “ex” now bats for the other side. You couldn’t just give this one to me, when he was … oh I don’t know …somewhere else?’
Chapter 10

Buffy heard the call, the song, the laughter, the joy, the lure, the dream as well as the vain the fight to remain.

‘To hover over awareness, yet never want it to be.

Heavenly slumbering, in hazy, cloudy, spring thoughts.

Fluttering, eyes gasping at the air, like wings mid-flight.

No discrimination against, no organization within.

Sleep lingers a while, then attempts to leave you alone.

Like a beautiful drug, its scent is left, an elixir in bloom.

Defying time, in the faded corners of untold dreams.

A beautiful fairytale, an untold gem, its light filters away.

Under the sudden canopy of light bright awakening, noises are felt.

Rolling, denial, diving back in, hoping for more.

But it is ended; it goes, leaving a vulnerable mind naked.

It will not come again, till night is drawn, on the striking sky.’

And so the bright light and awakening scratched at Buffy’s eyelids but the silken warmth of her bed called her back to slumber. Buffy murmured in contentment, safety, peace and home, fighting its arrival. The warmth surrounding her seemed to reach into her heart and still its normally alert nature; thoughts of morning and waking up banished.

She felt so connected to the world. Everything around her seemed to be exuding some level of energy and she was bathing in it. The energy next to her seemed the strongest. It was welcoming, not overpowering, and somehow familiar to her.

Buffy didn't want to wake up. She liked this feeling of safety that surrounded her; the warmth and
the peace. But she knew it was time. She couldn’t hide any longer.

Memories of last night washed over her. She recalled saving Willow; the sheer force that left her; the drained feeling. And yet she had never felt so alive, so connected.

Moving into the waking world, she noted the weight of arms surrounding her - Willow’s arms. She had slept in Willow’s arms all night. A feeling of bliss came over her and more than ever she didn’t want to awaken, she didn’t want to move. She wanted to savor this feeling. Involuntarily she sighed and snuggled into the embrace, still half awake and, therefore, unaware of how her actions appeared. The arms tightened reassuringly around her. It felt so right.

Faith felt foolish; like a naughty child. The feeling amused her as she peeked down from her vantage point at the edge of the suspended ceiling. She had worked her body half way into the room with the center of her weight on the separating corridor wall, one tile slightly pulled back to give her the view she was now enjoying.

Anyone walking down the corridor would have seen her legs dangling from the ceiling tile she had removed to get to her vantage point. But she didn’t care about the risk she was taking. It was still before eight and the dorms residents were enjoying their Saturday ‘sleeping in’.

The sight before her was worth the risk. Willow was cradling Buffy in her arms; both asleep. She found herself smiling to herself with such satisfaction. But then she realized that they were still clothed. Nothing had happened!

‘What on earth is it going to take to bring these two together?’ Faith was stunned by how they could be so cowardly; so brave and yet so afraid. No wonder they were such an easy target for the underworld and all things evil. They wouldn’t even acknowledge to themselves that they were each other’s Achilles’ heels as well as each other’s ‘one and only’. It was amazing they had both stayed alive this long.

These two were meant to be together. Any fool could see that. Besides how perfectly at ease they were with each other right now, there was the emotional connection they had had for years. But Faith was at a loss. What more could she do? What would break this stalemate?
Willow felt Buffy stir and although she thought to release her, as the blonde snuggled into her and sighed, Willow lost all desire to let go. She had slept only intermittently, waking up at each movement, afraid the nose bleeds would start again -- or the ramblings. She felt stupid. How could she have thought stoning could have done this? It was magic; only magic and its use by an untrained witch, unchained magic could have caused this. She knew that from experience. She remembered how Tara had held her, soothed her, held tissues to her nose.

She knew that beside her lay a large pile of blood soaked tissues. Buffy had moved in and out of reality, sometimes speaking, sometimes just staring off into the distance and then the blood would fall from her nose. Willow couldn’t quite believe how terrifying this sight was to her. She had seen Buffy bleed before but never like this; never because of her.

It hadn’t occurred to her that some of her magics could have transferred, no, stayed with her body. She thought that they were part of her, of her soul, her spirit, her mind. How foolish she had been. So much of the magic was in the blood. Her blood remained with her body, as it appeared some of her magic had and Buffy, not realizing this, had somehow tapped into that magic.

She listened to the object of her affection hovering at the edges of sleep, her face so peaceful and content. ‘She belongs in my arms’

Buffy heard Willow sigh. Her half-awake disposition removed her natural instinct to stay silent. Without opening her eyes, she asked quietly, “What time is it?”

Willow stiffened at her words. The realization that she was awake and probably had been for some time disturbed Willow. “Around quarter to eight,” she replied, somewhat pleased that even in Buffy’s drowsy state she hadn’t pulled out of her arms. She felt such a high at the knowledge that Buffy obviously saw nothing wrong with Willow holding her.

“Good. No reason to get up yet,” Buffy said with obvious relief and then sighed re-settling into Willow’s arms. “Thanks. S’nice,” she mumbled.

“No problem,” Willow responded. She was desperate to ask questions, to find out what Buffy was thinking but she also feared losing the moment.
Faith saw their lips move but couldn’t quite make out the words. It was almost eight and the dorm would soon be awakening, Saturday or not. She wished she had packed a small camera. The fun she could have had with a photo of the dumb duo greatly amused her.

Pulling back the ceiling tile, she slowly maneuvered herself back over the separating wall and dropping down into the corridor. She stepped back up, using a well positioned trash can, and pulled back the ceiling tile.

As she moved off down the corridor, her mind planned and plotted, throwing out ideas as quickly as they occurred to her.

******************************************BtVS******************************************

When Buffy and Willow finally decided to move they smiled shyly at each other. Somehow comfortable and yet at the same time slightly uncomfortable. Buffy had made a run to the bathroom and when she returned she noticed that Willow had made coffee for them.

“Thanks,” she said taking her cup from Willow’s hand.

“How’re you feeling?” Willow asked.

“My head hurts; feels fuzzy and kind of heavy. But somehow I feel very alive,” she said, her face asking if it was the magics.

“The magics,” Willow agreed.

“Geez. You get this feeling every time?” Buffy wondered, somewhat envious.

“Nah. Well sometimes. Well usually only after a really big spell,” Willow explained.

“So that ‘far-away, happy with the world’ look you get now and again is a magic hangover?” Buffy asked, somewhat amused. “Don’t let Xander know. He would sooo wanna have a go.”
“He’d only end up with a bunny’s tail or ears or some such. Anya would be so not amused,” Willow said, smirking.

It occurred to Buffy that she was a novice herself and she turned to look at her own rear, then raised her hand to check her ears.

“You’re clear,” Willow assured her, laughing. “You’re in my body and it’s used to doing the magics.”

“Yeah, right,” Buffy acknowledged somewhat less than convinced that she wasn’t going to pay for using magic at some later time. “Phew, don’t need anymore body changing stuff right now.” If life with a witch had taught her anything it was that there was always a big price to pay for doing big magics. She put down her cup, pausing to smile in relief at Willow, and then moved to Willow’s closet to find something to wear.

Silence fell as Willow watched to see what she chose. She had been mentally noting Buffy’s choices, figuring Buffy was choosing the things that she liked to see Willow in; talk about a heads up. But once Buffy began to change she averted her eyes, allowing Buffy some privacy as usual. Having to wear each other’s clothes had at first seemed weird. But they seemed to have long forgotten that particular weirdness amid the many others that had crowded around them after Faith’s little visit.

Buffy thought about the night before -- her failure to protect Willow’s body against Dracula, her failure to protect it against the sirens and Faith’s silly little poem. She longed to return things to their normal order, to regain control of her body, to resolve the problem that Faith had raised before them. But to be able to protect Willow again; to be in control is what she wanted more than anything. She hated feeling like a dead weight.

Fully dressed Buffy returned to her cup of coffee. She knew that this was the perfect opportunity to talk to Willow but the words seemed to stick in her throat. She looked over at Willow, deep into the book she was reading. Strange though it was to be looking at herself she knew from the feeling within her whom she was gazing upon. She knew that she would lay down her life for this woman. One small, possibly uncomfortable, conversation was a small price to pay to keep her safe.

She knew the life of a Slayer and although she had to admit that Willow had more than risen to the challenge, she was not willing to let her best friend live with her life expectancy and the continual risk. To live with the constant typical challenges to have a normal life, to plan, to wish, to dream. She wanted all those things and more for her Willow.
"Willow, we need to talk," Buffy said, her voice somewhat shaky.

"I know," she replied automatically but none the less Willow didn’t have a clue of just where to begin. "It's just so … weird."

“ Weird?” Buffy said, trying to hide her hurt feelings.

“I mean … spooky weird … not icky weird … are we in the ‘twilight zone’ weird. I mean you were okay with the ‘ kinda gay’ thing … well eventually. For that I was kinda relieved … I’d heard of some bad things happening when girls came out to their friends. But we were okay … we just never really did … detail. Not as in detail but, you know, the telling, the sappy stuff,” Willow stumbled, unsure how she felt about even having this conversation. How could she keep from saying ‘I will make love to you, not because I must but because I love you’?

Willow was so scared that the longer this went on the more danger Buffy's life would be in. She had seen Xander having to hold her back, her instinct to fight so great that sooner or later her urge would prove fatal. Then there was her uncontrolled use of the magics. She was willing to do anything to prevent Buffy being hurt further or killed which meant getting this slayer power back where it belonged.

"I didn't wanna pry into your private … you know," Buffy explained. She couldn’t exactly say that just the thought of Tara being with Willow had driven her nuts; that she had only been nice to the girl to please Willow and from fear of losing her. Knowing that Tara was the detail to which Willow was referring made the old jealousy rise within her. She had avoided this talk for so long.

"You weren’t freaked into not asking? I did wonder if that was an issue remembering how we used to talk when I was going out with Oz," Willow said with a very goofy smile.

"No Will," Buffy said. And as if a window had opened she realized that this was where to begin. "Well maybe a bit. It was all so new for you. I didn’t have a frame of reference, no ‘kinda gay’ experience. Didn’t know if the whole first date marshmallow stuff still applied … you know … with a girl; how the whole wooing thing worked. I was afraid I wouldn't know what to say, trip over my own tongue and say something stupid," Buffy finished, feeling very foolish as she looked back at how their friendship had changed; how after that first talk she had avoided all relationship talks with Willow.

"Oh Buffy, I didn't have anything to base it on either. And I didn't know how you would react. I was a little afraid that you wouldn't cope; that the detail was just a step more than you could deal with. You know 'hey I'm okay with you being gay, but don't rub my nose in it’ kinda thing."
"Will!" Buffy exclaimed, shocked that she could have feared that response from her. "Nothing you could ever say or do could change how I feel about you. Honest. I am so not gonna judge … hello my scorecard."

"Thanks, I guess I know that now. Not the scorecard … I mean the … I understood yet still talking," She huffed, annoyed at her own babbling. "Back then I was as unsure of myself as I was of anyone else. I'd heard such horror stories. You know, about girls who came out … nasty stuff," Willow sighed. "It all seems pretty silly stuff now considering the ‘scarries’ we usually deal with but it … I was so afraid you guys would change."

"I'm sorry I didn't realize what you were going through. Maybe I could have been more supportive; asked possibly dumb but friendly questions."

"How could you have? I didn't give anyone an opening. I was busy winning an Oscar for the role of ‘strong gay, out and proud girl’ proving we're all pretty much the same. Not large with the pride marching and pretty much careful in public,” Willow blushed at the thought of her innocence, what a ‘walk all over me’ wall-flower she had been. “No one knew how hard I found it - not even Tara.”

Somehow that made Buffy felt much better as a friend but more sorry for Willow. "So what freaked you out the most?" She asked partially hoping to make up for her past failures as a friend and partially for herself. She needed to lighten the mood.

Willow laughed at Buffy's possibly dumb question and casting her mind back she replied, "Not being able to tell everyone I cared about … how great it felt to know what I wanted and yet how nervous I was. What it felt like, what I didn't enjoy, what I did. How unbelievably scary it was," She laughed. “How wonderful that first night felt.”

Buffy felt her heart tighten sharply. She was so terrified. Her fear of having to compete with Willow’s first night was tremendous. How could anyone hope to compete with a first night as obviously blissful as theirs had been? With a man she had been nervous enough about her abilities … but with a woman … with her best friend.

Gradually through much rambling and shy but careful questioning, they finally caught up and Buffy realized how hard it had been for her normally shy friend to live with so many people making assumptions, feeling that they knew who she was – that ‘newly gay’ girl. Having to find the strength to cope from within, feeling that it wouldn’t be fair to ask your friends for support on the issue of her choice of lifestyle. Hiding what she was going through from her parents.
Buffy knew there was very little she could do about the past. She couldn’t go back in time and fight that battle for Willow but she could listen and be there for her now and in the future. She made a vow to defend and stand by not only the body of her Willow but also her heart and soul. She would never let anyone make her beloved feel unwelcome, excluded or uncomfortable ever again. She would celebrate her Willow and all her choices and, dammit, so would the Scoobies.

Slowly the conversation moved to how different her new relationship with Tara had been to the one she had had with Oz. Buffy desperately wanted to ask about the vision but she felt sure that now was not the time. Needing to move the subject along before she let the question out Buffy asked, "So how different was it - sleeping with a woman?"

"It just … sort of flowed. No research, no books, you'll be pleased to know; though the books do exist. It just felt natural … to do what you felt. No strange other body to navigate. But pressure to know … what to do … ‘cause your female. That's big too. Like you know how yours works … so expert – not. I’ve still only slept with one woman … not like … no matter what Anya thinks … and then … you know, got well-read." Willow finished, needing to drop that landmine in plain sight as she remembered how Tara had reacted to the expectations she had had. There had been a long late night chat and she had left somewhat shame-faced.

Buffy laughed. She was kind of reassured by Willow's admission and replied, "I'm kinda relieved … not exactly large with the being well-read in that area … or the other … not my usual reading material. I’ve cleared that up right? Guess we'll just feel our way." Realizing how her choice of words sounded she blushed. "I meant take it easy … go with the flow … no pressure."

"Agreed," Willow said, greatly relieved. Angel was a 200 year-old man, well-read on the subject was a given. Competing was not her style. She didn't need the pressure. She'd had exactly two lovers from either side of the fence and she was now well-read enough to know that both had been pretty tame, even square.

"Will, I know that Anya's theory is just to do it. But talking and being honest - it helps," Buffy added very nervously. "Does the idea … of us … wig you out?" She could hardly look at Willow. ‘God, you just asked your best friend, your best gay girlfriend, if she finds the thought of making love to you repulsive.’ Freaking scared, let alone wiggled, didn’t even begin to cover how Buffy felt as she waited for Willow’s answer.

"I know that even the on-line covens agree with her," Willow paused, considering how best to respond to Buffy’s question. "Buff … many levels … you’re my best friend. So I guess that given that … feeling kinda odd is probably normal. Plus there's the whole being in the wrong body spell thing. Therapy could become an issue for both of us. But no. I wouldn't say wiggling. We have to fix this. Then we get to hurt Faith. Right?"
"Sooo Right," Buffy agreed, somewhat relieved by Willow’s response.

"Are you wigging?" Willow asked, as her Psych 101 kicked in.

"My wigging out also exists on many levels - wrong bodies, no book reading, everyone knowing what we must have done if it works, the possibility of losing my best friend ‘cause we get weird afterwards. Just your average stuff," Buffy ended and immediately wished she’d stayed silent.

Willow looked wide-eyed with fear. Something she had said had sent her into a 'deer caught in headlights' face. "Will?"

Willow’s mind raced. 'Everyone will know! Know what we did … what I did to Buffy! What if Buffy does go weird? What if I can't cope with just once? What if Anya asks me if Buffy was any good? Or if she asks Buffy if I was any good? Oh goddess,' she began to panic, fear of ‘the what ifs’ washing over her. Her breathing tightened and she began to gasp.

"Will?" Buffy, her voice filling with concern, "Talk to me. Will?" She could see that Willow was spooked by something she had said. ‘Breathe. Slowly.’ But what was it that she had said? She rewound her comments. 'Oh no,' she thought. “Will, I promise you that we will not go weird. Nothing will change between us. I wouldn’t let that happen.” Then something else occurred to her. “Not one stupid ‘I know what you did last night’ remark will be made. I promise.”

"How can you promise that?" Willow gasped, her fear evident as she fought to regain her breathing. "That could be just why Faith’s doing this. She must know it would change everything."

"Well then, she's wrong. You know how I feel about you. We have a bond. We have friendship and loyalty that binds us; closet contents and other ‘never tell upon pain of death’ secrets, you know. This would just be two dear friends, two very dear friends, helping each other as usual."

She almost said, she wanted to say that it would be like a gift but that would have been too close to home. "Why would we wig out about a best friend helping her best friend? Let’s face it – we’d get angrier if we couldn’t help each other."

Willow smiled at that, recalling how pissed Buffy had been with Xander for holding her back. Never mind how annoyed she herself had been when Buffy had left that summer; how she had felt at not even being given the chance to help her. And their arguments about the side-kick issue.

"See," Buffy said, as she saw Willow accepting her words. "We can do this and there will be little, if any, wigging."
"Yeah, okay. But how do we get around the being in each other’s bodies … not being funny … icky. The whole ‘hey I know my way around’ thing ‘cause its mine … useful, but freaky much? How do we cope with seeing who, what we're touching?’ Willow asked. She just knew this was going to get weird. She had dreamed of this, of making love to Buffy - but they had been in the right bodies, what belonged to who. This had not been an issue.

"No lights. We can't see if there's no light," Buffy suggested somewhat relieved that Willow had raised the issue. She had thought of the solution yesterday. Besides she was kinda way freaked at the idea of kissing herself.

"Okay, no lights. Yeah, that will help. What about, do's and don’ts?" Willows asked, feeling they were getting somewhere and suddenly wearing her ‘this is a math puzzle to be solved resolvo’ face.

"Like?" Buffy asked but Willows raised eyebrow answered her question. "Right … Yes, I see. Well, as I'm not sure exactly how … you know … what’s involved in ... Look, you tell me."

"Oh, yeah. Right. ‘Cause I took Anya, the mad sex originator of this theory, to one side and said ‘excuse me Anya but could you please describe in detail the sexual acts that you think we would have to perform to break this curse’," Willow said dryly.

Buffy tried not to laugh. "Yeah, okay that would have been way weird." She tried to get her mind away from the very funny image playing in her head - Anya as Dr Ruth detailing the sexual positions required to fulfill her definition of ‘orgasm buddies’ to Willow. She bit her lip to hold in the giggle that was trying to escape.

Willow glared at her. "Look, I could probably email Kira in the Gia coven. She's really nice and understanding, and I'm pretty sure she'd avoid making me feel like a fool for asking," she offered. "Best we know as much as possible."

"And you said no reading up was required," Buffy said, a more relaxed smile spreading across her face. She now knew that they could do this.

As their discussion progressed, do’s and don’ts were agreed upon, a time set and finally, with the use of Will's trusty laptop, a list of the ‘orgasm buddy’ top twenty qualifiers received. The sheer length and detail of Kira's list had made Willow blush. But Buffy had read it with a ‘matter of fact’ face that gave nothing away, identifying the items she could and asking for the explanation of those she didn't.
The nervous tension that this inevitably raised was somehow lightened when they came across two listed items that neither of them could identify or explain and Willow, somewhat relieved that the ignorance was not just hers, turned to the Internet to find the answers. This proved a big mistake because upon entering the words into Google and hitting "go" -- porn pop-up boxes filled her screen with images of naked women, posing and offering very private views of themselves. As Buffy leaned over her shoulder Willow panicked and slammed the laptop shut. "I'll email Kira. Later," Willow stated as her face became inflamed in blushes.

**************************BtVs**************************

Buffy had checked in with Giles and then left Willow to email Kira. She was pretty sure that without her in the room, Willow would be saved further blushes. Plus she was a little less than comfortable herself since both eagerness and fear were building. She realized that there were things that she needed to get clear in her head.

She headed to a place that would have put a broad smile to Willow’s face - the library. She needed peace, quiet and Internet access.

As she walked across the campus she saw Xander. He appeared to be heading towards the campus canteen. She prayed he wouldn’t see her but her luck was not with her.

“Buff. Hey,” Xander called, waving his whole arm at her. He lightly jogged towards her, hard hat in hand and his tool belt bouncing on his hips. She couldn’t help but smile.

“Hey,” She acknowledged.

“You okay?” he asked, coming to a stop in front of her. “Last night was a bit …” He spread his hands to display his loss for words.

“Yeah. You?” She asked eager to get him to talk rather than to question her.

“Yeah,” he responded shrugging with obvious embarrassment. “Lost it there for a bit. But what with the bug-eating and mind control crap, I reached my limit. Had to blow…” He grinned his goofy grin and shrugged. “There you headed?”

“Can’t say. ‘Cause if you told Willow, I’d have to kill you,” She replied.
He looked at her and then an amused grin crossed his face. “Library? Don’t worry I won’t tell. She just gets the marshmallow look when she thinks of all those books. How’s Willow doing?” he asked, a bit more seriously.

“She’s okay. Doing research,” she responded, really wishing she could think of how to avoid talking about Willow.

Xander started to walk towards the library and Buffy fell in beside him. She knew that Xander would want to talk until she reached her destination. Her heart sank. Much as she loved Xander, she just wanted to sort things out in her head.

“Anya didn’t mean to freak her out. She was just pointing out the obvious. You know that, right?”

Buffy simply nodded her head, unwilling to speak on the subject of his ex-demon girlfriend, afraid that she would just spill out her annoyance and hurt their good friend.

“Good. ‘Cause lets face it, half the guys in the dorm wish you and Willow had something going.’” He looked at her and that apology for being male face filled her vision. “It’s kind of a male college hormone requirement -- to wish that two hot girls were … Not having to draw the diagram here, am I?”

“Pretty much getting the mental flow,” Buffy responded somewhat annoyed and a little amused at the same time. If only those guys knew what they had planned for tonight.

“So you ever considered, you know, jumping the fence?” Xander asked.

“Xander I really hope your not trying to ask …” Buffy threatened.

“So you and Willow haven’t had the talk yet,” Xander said, interrupting her well before the threat he knew was on its way.

“Did Giles talk to you?” Buffy asked her tone changing. Spooked that Xander was asking her about a conversation she had just had with her Ex-Watcher...
“Giles hasn’t told me anything. It was right in front of my “Xander” face. Willow would do anything for you,” He said honestly. “So my guess is she’s waiting for the straight girl to raise the subject. Some kinda gay subject etiquette thing.”

“Well … it’s a bit beyond the normal best friend job description. It’s not like doing … this could leave her with more than just a nasty nose bleed. There’s … well … personal space … privacy … personal invasion stuff. It’s not like ‘hey can I borrow your jumper’. It’s like ‘hey can I borrow your lifestyle choice’,” she said recalling all the things they had just covered.

“So you’re gonna let her stay the Slayer. That could get her killed,” Xander reminded her.

“It’s not just my decision to make,” Buffy explained pointedly. She loved how worked up Xander was becoming. Her chest filled with pride at his concern for them.

“Of course it is. Willow’s not going to force you to walk into her realm. You gotta ask about borrowing the lifestyle choice,” he explained, a little frustrated that Buffy hadn’t seemed to realize this simple fact.

“Well, it’s not fair,” she pouted. She was really starting to enjoy this.

“Who cares if it’s fair? In about three days Willow’s going to be stuck with your calling, your life expectancy and all that entails for the rest of her life. Unless you, her best friend, do something to stop that from happening.”

“What am I supposed to do? Beg her to …” she couldn’t finish. Not telling Xander that they had already had the talk was getting harder as their talk continued. Holding back the laughter was becoming almost impossible.

“Why wouldn’t you? To keep her safe. You can put all our lives in danger to save Willow from the Mayor but you can’t put your pride in danger now?”

“I don’t even know if she could … if she’d want to. I mean what if I lose Willow over this? I can’t lose Willow. I’m not meant to be without Willow. I ...” she stumbled through her words, looking at the ground, to avoid having to look at the now somewhat worked-up Xander.

“Compared to her losing you, I think Will would risk a little pain. She’s not just your side-kick,
you know. I know how you feel about her. Lets face it Buffy, you got burned with Angel and then Parker showed up,” he reminded her.

“I know the story, Xander,” Buffy said suddenly not enjoying this so much.

“But you miss the point. You shut down, Buffy. You closed just about everyone out, your Mom, Giles, me – Okay we get to help with the Scooby stuff, college, the basic and general support,” he said, with no offense or accusation in his statement. “But, your heart and soul, you’ve only ever let Willow near them. We all know that. Have you ever considered that there’s probably a reason for that.”

Buffy raised her face to look questioningly at Xander.

“You were meant to. Trust her Buffy.”
That night sitting on the bed opposite each other in the darkened room, neither Willow nor Buffy knew what to say? What to do? How to begin? They found themselves sitting in silence. Finally Buffy reached forward and found Willow’s hand and with such sincerity she squeezed it before raising it to her lips to place a tender kiss upon the back of it. Kissing that was where they should begin.

Willow felt a small chill travel over the back of her hand as her skin reacted to the touch of Buffy’s lips. Looking at the vague outline of Buffy's face and she was sure she could sense the same hesitation she was feeling.

Shifting her hand she led Buffy’s hand towards her own lips to place a hesitant kiss on its palm. This elicited a slight intake of breath from Buffy. Willow was surprised that her palm was so sensitive.

The talk had been easy. The preparation of the room was much the same. Okay, the showering for what you knew was about to happen … that had felt, well … odd. Sensing that same awkward and lost feeling in Buffy was somehow soothing. Somehow it helped her.

Leaning forward Willow cupped her best friend’s face in her hands. Tonight they had no sight to guide them. She ran her thumb slowly down Buffy’s cheek and her friend leaned into her caress. Encouraged she leaned in to initiate their first kiss, unable to see the longing that would have set her heart aflame. ‘Keep it slow and simple. This is no time to let your heart run away with itself,’ she reminded herself as she leaned closer.

She recalled Buffy saying that Willow had tended to the Slayer’s many wounds over the years and that there wasn't much of the Slayer's body that she hadn't already touched or looked at over those years. This should be no different. Willow had taken great pains to point out that it wasn't Buffy's body she was going to have to look at or touch.

They had therefore agreed that complete darkness would definitely be required to avoid the wiggins. But even with the drapes drawn and all the lights off, she could still see outlines, some shadow and a little color. So Willow had closed her eyes as she traveled the few remaining millimeters.

She felt her lips reach Buffy’s; ‘so soft, so warm.’ Their contact was brief but electricity shot through Willow as she gently increased the pressure of her lips before withdrawing them.
After a brief breath, Buffy moved forward and brought her lips to meet Willow’s. As they gently kissed, brushing their lips, slowly getting to know each other’s style, they drew in the feelings, senses and emotions that poured over them. Buffy had placed her hands gently and carefully onto Willows shoulders to guide herself. Willow was still holding Buffy’s face.

‘Kissing is such a personal form of communication,’ thought Willow as she was again invited to meet her friend in a way she never had before. No barriers but vulnerable, open and true. As they deepened their kiss she felt such warmth and so much trust that she was in awe, blinded by the shear strength and awesome tenderness she felt.

‘This is going to be okay,’ Willow thought, 'I can do this.' Then she felt her passion begin to rise. A need filled her. She felt the tip of Buffy's tongue trying to gain access to her and suddenly it became about need. Needing to give everything she had to this wonderful woman.

But she had to be so very careful. It wasn’t that Willow was a screamer, but she liked to talk, sex babble, if you will. And much fear and angsty worry had been confronted this afternoon over this fear. But what terrified her more than the very weird position that she found herself in was the thought that she might say those three little words. Okay, they had agreed that any utterances or noises they might make were covered by the sisterhood act of ‘no one other that us will ever know upon pain of death’. But none the less she knew she had to be careful.

She felt Buffy's hand reaching to her neck, which made her shiver slightly before pulling her into another kiss as if she needed the added persuasion. Her lips felt full and alive with every brush, each change in pressure a new heavenly feeling. Then a slight lick, a taste and Willow felt herself falling into a dream.

Buffy was so lost in the bliss of kissing Willow that all the burdens she normally felt as well as the need to keep hold of herself and to be in control fell away. She felt so safe - as if she had found her home. All she wanted was more, more contact, more skin. She found her hands moving to run up and down Willow’s back. They pulled Willow to her as if of their own will.

She felt Willow’s breath as she sighed. It pleased her that she was doing something right and that she had made Willow sigh. Her heart filled with pleasure. She deepened the kiss, tasting her Will. She heard and felt the groan and soon found her mouth invaded by the soft and tender foray of her love. It was as if someone had turned on all the lights in her brain. She began to feel a heat rise within her. Desire filled her and her abdomen clenched as she tightened herself with excitement. She wanted skin, bare warm skin, touching her, pressing against her. She wanted to feel Willow, to know her completely. The intensity of her desire, her need washed over her and her hands involuntarily found their way beneath Willow’s flimsy top.
Willow swallowed, breathed, gasped deeply and very nearly choked as her back reacted to the very commanding hands that now touched it and seemed intent on traveling its sensitive land. Buffy had taken the lead. She had crossed the line, moving them beyond friendly but heated kissing into the land of touching and skin. Part of Willow was relieved another part anxious and finally a little miffed that she had to be led across that line.

Willow had wanted to control the pace; she needed to. But it appeared that Buffy wasn't going to play that game. 'She probably wants it over with as quickly as possible' she thought her mind suddenly flooded with insecurity.

Buffy realized that she had somehow shaken Willow but the need within her was so great, the touching such a relief. She knew Willow would take things slowly, gently, tenderly. But she wanted and needed to release her passion, the years of wanting, of dreaming.

"Will, are you okay?" she asked, releasing Willow's mouth. “Was that too soon? The touching?” Willow heard the concern and doubt in her voice. "No, it's okay," Willow reassured her friend, moving back to her lips to reassure her with a kiss. “Nice,” she added, feeling somewhat silly at having to admit that Buffy’s touch was welcome.

At Willow’s words Buffy relaxed. She felt almost as if a rhythm had been set and that the kissing, skin and touching hands could feel it as well. Willow’s now full-blooded lips seemed to be playing music in her head, pulsing with a beat that she couldn’t ignore.

All too soon many hands were traveling over and under clothing. Heavy breathing and need obvious. Clothes became an obstruction. They were shed with mutual help and desire until they lay together with only their undergarments between them. Somehow this last barrier seemed the hardest for them both to overcome as they kissed and caressed each other, seemingly trying to push their bodies into one. “Willow,” Buffy moaned with such a husky need in her voice that Willow’s mind flew to the very spires of her heart. She could hear the thumping of her own heart in her head.

Willow ran her thumb over Buffy's lacy bra and the proudly protruding nipple, eliciting a guttural sigh from Buffy who arched her body and ran her hand down to Willows rear, raising her leg slightly as she pulled Willow’s pelvis towards her.

Willow groaned and ground herself against Buffy, lost in a need so basic.
Realizing what she had done, Willow blushed a little. But a firm hand held her in place, letting her know this was okay, this was wanted. She felt empowered by Buffy's obvious excitement. Slowly she pulled back the lace covering from Buffy's left breast and ran her thumb again over the now exposed nipple. It rose to meet her as Buffy arched to her touch. ‘So hard,’ Willow thought as her mind shrieked in warning that things were moving too fast, that she was losing control.

Buffy placed her hand behind Willow’s neck and pulled her head down to her chest. She knew what she wanted - those lips, that mouth kissing, sucking, licking. Her head spun in anticipation.

Willow was amazed by her best friend’s open display of her desire. Buffy seemed to be comfortable with her need. This both pleased and scared her. She was still trying to control her own need and yet this was supposed to be her territory. Shaking her ego aside, she let Buffy lead her lips to the very hard nipple she could feel beneath her thumb.

Willow considered gently kissing Buffy’s excited nipple but upon reaching it she gave in to need, drawing the nipple fully into her mouth. She smiled at the sheer bliss of having such a wonderful gift given to her eager mouth and then the rage of passion filled her as Buffy arched forcing her breast into Willow’s face. Soft warm flesh, hard needy nipple. Willow felt as if she had found heaven. She lost all fear, doubt and uncertainty as this small, needy and proud piece of skin told her everything she needed to know about where her friend’s body and mind were. Finally she just let the beautiful madness take over.

Buffy pushed her thigh into Willow’s pelvis as her chest became ablaze with Willow’s passionate ministrations. ‘So good, oh god it feels so good,’ she thought as she felt Willow arch her pelvis towards her. ‘How did I ever talk myself out of doing this? What kind of fool have I been,’ Buffy gave into sheer instinct. For the first time in her life she knew what she was doing felt right - no doubts, no uncertainty. She let herself fall into the need, the want, the desire - accepting her feelings, her own body’s voice.

They began to battle back and forth as Buffy twisted to gain a better position to reach, touch and explore. Rolling about the large bed neither thought to offer thanks to its provider. A single bed would not have provided for their passion so well.

Releasing Buffy’s nipple, Willow turned her and with her left hand she undid the bra clasp, removing it effortlessly. The rush of air against her chest sent a thrill through Buffy. Realizing what she wanted to do Buffy moved her hands to do the same for Willow. But for some reason her fingers fumbled and failed in their task. A firm hand brushed hers aside and soon they were both topless.

Buffy took a deep breath as she felt Willow pull her forward. Surprised by each new level of pleasure as it washed over her, Buffy found herself calling out to her “Willow!” And then she
heard her own name.

“Buffy!”

The corners of her mind screamed with joy and she wrapped her arms around her Willow, pulling her close, needing her close. She showered kisses upon the face and mouth of her love. Wasting no time she pushed her demanding tongue between those hot lips. The groan she felt travel from the back of Willow’s throat only served to drive her on.

They became a medley of lips, hands, tongues, arms and legs … until only one boundary remained. As Buffy’s teeth gently pulled at Willow’s ear lobe, she felt hands traveling beneath her panties and a glint of anticipation lit her. Throwing her arms around Willow she rolled onto her back, pulling Willow to rest above her. ‘Just helping,’ she reasoned, ‘Can’t wait much longer’

Running her nails down Willow’s spine she enjoyed the push of her pelvis as she arched into her. Her hand reached the band of Willow’s panties. ‘What’s good for the goose …,’ she thought as she slid her hand beneath the flimsy lace. No thought of wrong or right, unknown or familiar crossed her mind. She knew what she wanted, what felt right.

Willow pushed her pelvis into the Buffy, one hand supporting herself and the other slowly working down the panties that were impeding her. She could feel a fire building within her. She had never known the need to be so great, so forceful, almost beyond her, leading her, driving her. Every moan, groan and sigh, every arch, curl and clench that Buffy’s body made simply stoked the fire, increasing the passionate blindness within her.

She felt the nails slightly digging into her back as Buffy’s hand traveled down her back. ‘Oh god, you are so gonna pay for that,’ she promised herself. Working the panties down, just far enough, she gained entry and her hand cupped the mound that had pressed so insistently against her. Then she increased the pressure of her palm, just enough.

“Oh God,” Buffy moaned unable to hold in her release as she felt Willow’s hand against her. She shuddered. It felt as if she had suddenly been reminded of a thousand forgotten nerve endings. She tried to pull Willow towards her but she failed. Willow seemed resolute. She liked where she was. Looking up, Buffy thought she saw a satisfied grin crossing the face above her. She felt as if she was dangling over the edge of an abyss. “Willow,” she pleaded.

Her mind rolled towards the abyss, blown away at the sheer control that Willow seemed to have over her. And yet she felt safe. She had never felt such a deep need to feel so secure in someone else’s ability. Her heart burst as she felt years of unrequited love flow, demanding release. She
had never wanted to give herself to anyone this much.

Willow battled to control the moment. She wanted this to be perfect. She could feel the need; the hunger within Buffy and her mind was ablaze with the knowledge that she was the object of this passion. She moved her fingers into the welcoming wet folds beneath her, seeking entrance just for a while. But as her fingers slid fully within, she felt her control waver, as muscles tightened to hold her within. “Buffy,” Willow called, a vain plea as the last foundation of her control crumbled and she fell into the fantasy turned reality.

As Willow, at first, moved slowly within her, Buffy could have sworn the sky was falling around her. The fever rose within her and she arched, trying to hold and open herself all at once. “Oh my God,” she groaned, “So good.” Her words seemed to intensify the fire in Willow, as she felt the tempo of her movements increase. “Oh. Yes.” She reached up to cup Willow’s face. “Yes.”

As Willow looked down at the outline of the woman below her, a swelling of pride and empowerment filled her. Her mind caught between the need to drown in the wet and warm heaven she had found and the many, many pleasures she needed to give her love. She pushed deeply within and held her hand. Then she raised her fingers slightly to stroke the red hot center of Buffy. She felt Buffy buck and writhe at her ministrations and she let out a groan of satisfaction.

As Willow plowed her wet center, Buffy could feel her climax building. At the same time her body seemed to turn to jelly as she fought to regain control of her muscles in vain. As Willow took control of her every movement, Buffy felt like a puppet, controlled by Willow’s hand. As if the very strings of her pleasure were hidden within and only her Willow had somehow found them. It felt so right, so good.

Willow brought up her knees and sat back slightly, releasing her other hand. She pulled the panties down further and entering Buffy fully at this new angle she watched the body before her, soaking in every movement as if she was discovering a new and wondrous language. As Buffy’s arch reached its height she brought the thumb of her now free hand into play, brushing it over the high and proud bud before her.

“Ahhhhhh … ,” Buffy screamed unable to cope with the sudden rush of electricity that had flown from between her legs to explode within her brain.

Again Willow ran her thumb over this sensitive bud of nerve endings, building a slow rhythm, a counterpoint to the faster rhythm of her invading fingers. “Oh yes,” she uttered as she felt Buffy tighten around her.
Buffy’s eyes flew to the back of her head as she felt herself approaching the edge of her climax. “Oh no! Please. Willow. Yes,” Buffy pleaded as she found herself begging for release. “I need … Oh God. You’re incredible. I can’t … Oh God.”

“Yes you can, baby,” Willow said encouraging her on and increasing the tempo.

“Oh Will, it’s too much. No don’t stop,” Buffy cried, her mind a mess. “Oh Yes!”

“Yes, that’s it. Come on,” Willow entreated, feeling her own wetness, her own need building with every stroke. “You’re nearly there. I can feel … Oh Goddess, you’re so wet. It’s beautiful,” Willow stated and then she lost it, diving into Buffy, plunging into the wet and welcoming warmth … her own wetness began to flow but she could feel nothing except the pulsing beat between Buffy’s legs, then the arch and … Oh God.

Buffy felt herself falling over the edge, her head seemed to explode and the warmth between her legs gushed. She came so hard, so powerfully. It was as if the full force of a passion beyond her experience had knocked her from her feet. She clenched her teeth growling, squeezing her eyes shut, trying to hold on to the peak. She had never felt so joined, so alive and yet so naked.

Willow felt the flood cover her hand and then the tightening, and then her own tightness and release and the hold, the trembling. The power of Buffy’s orgasm seemed to travel from her hands to her very core.

Slowly Buffy descended, regaining her breathing and control of her body.

Willow prepared to withdraw her hand, wanting to move to hold Buffy. But as she did she felt a slight tightening and a mischievous thought crossed her mind. She moved down to rest her head upon Buffy’s stomach. Having done so she again tried to remove her hand but this time she changed direction to move slowly inwards and Buffy’s hands suddenly clamped onto her head.

“Will, you have to be joking.”

“Trust me,” Willow said as she slowly moved her fingers in and out of the so wet entrance, this time hovering only at the beginning and edge of her.

“I don’t think I can …”
“Trust me, baby,” Willow repeated moving her head down, slowly kissing Buffy’s stomach as she descended.

“I never knew you were so evil,” Buffy accused.

“For evil. You’ll see. Besides, I have a list,” Willow said as an excuse. And then she slowly curled her forefinger to stroke the roof of Buffy’s entrance.

“Oh God! How did you …,” Buffy shook and surrendered, “the list? Oh my God. The rest of the list!!” She felt Willow’s facial muscles grin, as it traveled over her stomach, downwards, towards … ‘Oh!’ Buffy’s eyes flew wide as she realized exactly where her best friend’s face was heading and what she intended. ‘She’s gonna kill me,’ Buffy decided, ‘But what a way to go.’
They lay curled together in sweet exhaustion with Willow spooning Buffy. It was almost seven o’clock and neither had gotten any sleep, as Willow had approached her list with unwavering dedication. Buffy had never been so sated, so fuzzy and warm. The feel of Willow’s warm body at her back offered such completion. Again she struggled to stay in the dream.

Willow noticed the stillness in Buffy. “You okay?” she quietly asked, afraid the weirdness was already taking over.

Willow’s words drew Buffy back from the dream. “Yeah. Just coming back down to earth,” Buffy said, grinning at the memories of last night. She didn’t want Willow to let go of her just yet.

“Mmm. I know what you mean,” Willow said as she absentmindedly squeezed her dear friend tighter. “That was …” Willow’s mind searched for a word, a safe word to describe last night but none came to mind.

“Really … something,” Buffy offered, feeling a little foolish. She couldn’t remember the last time she had allowed herself to feel shy, vulnerable and nervous, yet it felt so right. “You knew … a lot more … than I was expecting,” she admitted, feeling more like a giddy love-struck young woman of her age rather than the ‘wise beyond her years’ Slayer that she had to be in order to survive.

Willow felt the heat filling her cheeks at this compliment. “I don’t think I was the only one – with the unexpected,” she replied as she fondly remembered when Buffy had taken her turn.

Buffy giggled at the thought of the things she had done and, if Willow’s reaction was anything to go by, had done well. “Yeah. Who’d have guessed?”

Buffy stared at the hand holding hers … her own hand. Suddenly her euphoria was drowned in cold water. She had been so caught up in the sheer pleasure of last night that it wasn’t until now, as dawn peeked in through the curtains, that the truth became evident to her. This wasn’t real, last night hadn’t been real. She wasn’t in her body and neither was Willow. A shiver of creepiness and sadness ran through her as she realized that the warm skin she had caressed last night, the body she had entered and tasted had been her own.

She so wanted to escape the image that was forming in her head, the memory of their actions. ‘I’ve just made love to my own body. That’s well like … Oh god!’ All she had wanted was to live the
dream … she tried to reclaim the dream for just a little longer. She loved the feel of Willow holding her but the knowledge of what they had both done last night and the danger they were still in overshadowed everything. Add on to that the realization that they had been in the wrong bodies during what had been a heavenly night and reality suddenly came into sharp cold focus.

Part of Buffy wanted to turn over and tell Willow how much last night had meant to her, how long she had dreamt of making love to her, how much she wanted to try to be what she needed. But the weirdness was kicking in. Willow had made love to her while Buffy was still in Will’s body and … and it had been making love! Yes she was pretty sure she would have known the difference. But it hadn’t really been her. She couldn’t allow herself to believe it was anything more than the love of a dear friend who was trying to make an ordeal easier, trying to help fix something that was wrong.

She couldn’t burden Willow with her needs, her wants, her fears, her wishes, her dreams. Willow had been so sweet, so wonderful, so giving because that was who Will was. That was her way and this was what they had to try … to do … to get their bodies back.

No matter how much she had wanted every touch and every moan to mean more, she couldn’t allow herself to take advantage of Willow’s giving nature. The possibility of telling Will how she felt and seeing that look of pity in her best friend’s eyes while she explained that she didn’t feel the same way … tore at her heart and courage. She wanted love not pity and she was far too scared to take the chance. “So how are we going to tell them?” Buffy asked, pulling reality back into their world.

“Tell them what?” Willow asked, concern evident in her voice. She suddenly had the very real fear that Buffy was expecting to debrief the Scoobies in detail. “Oh!” She had forgotten for a moment that this wasn’t real, that last night hadn’t been real. As that knowledge grew within her, she shook herself and thought ‘What did you expect? Buffy’s only letting you hold her like this because last night we had great sex last night. Nothing more.’ She couldn’t blame Buffy. She knew that her hopes for something more were her own problem. But that didn’t stop the tears from welling up in her eyes.

“That it didn’t work,” Buffy explained. She had known the morning after was going to be hard but this was like having a thousand paper cuts and sitting in a bath of lemon juice. She either wanted this over or a few moments return of the mind reading power she had once had in high school. Anything but this strained conversation and the desire to run.

“Right. Oh yeah. They’ll need to know. I mean Giles …” Willow said as she slowly removed her arms and released Buffy. “He’ll want to review … the curse.” She rolled away. The feel of Buffy’s warm body had now become a torture as the tears silently filling her eyes testified. ‘Last night was it’ she decided. It was all she could ever have. Drawing herself in she tried to find her center; controlling her breathing; forcing the tears back that she would shed later … alone, she
continued, “I mean we’ll need to … look over the wording again and see what we missed.” She stared at the ceiling and felt very small and alone. The desire to go and beat up something engulfed her. ‘This is so unfair, so cruel.’

“Will, I really don’t know … how to say this. I mean if there even is a right way to say this. So … you know … (gulp). Thanks … for last night,” Buffy ended somewhat uselessly. She wanted to say so much more but now that Willow’s arms had released her she didn’t seem able to form the words. Somehow she felt more monosyllabic than she normally did.

“Yeah. No prob,” Willow responded lamely, wondering how long the polite period was … before you could get up, get dressed and run away.

Buffy lay still admonishing herself. ‘What a lame way to say thanks for a night you will never forget.’

The shrill sound of their phone broke the need to speak further. Buffy shot from the bed, still naked and reached for the phone in desperate gratitude for the interruption. “Hi?”

“Oh Buffy, sorry if I woke you. I know it’s still early but I’ve just finished a telephone call from England and I believe that I should see you both immediately. It seems … we may have gravely misunderstood the curse,” Giles said, the gravity of the matter evident in his tone.

“Okay Giles. We’ll be there pronto,” Buffy promised and hung up the telephone. She turned towards the bed but she didn’t, she couldn’t raise her eyes to meet Willow’s. Her mind really wasn’t ready to see the woman she had slept with last night in her own body. “Giles needs us,” she explained, adding “Sorry.” And with that inadequate apology for ending their post-coital talk, she turned to get dressed.

Willow lay under the covers for a moment realizing she was going to have to hold back her tears for even longer. All she really wanted to do was curl up under the covers and hide for as long as it took to forget last night.

*******************************************************************************BtVS*******************************************************************************

Giles retrieved his cup of tea from the kitchenette counter, after having let in Buffy and Willow. Returning to his living room he saw that they had chosen to sit at either end of the sofa and so he moved towards his somewhat worn but favorite chair.
“It seems that either we have or Faith has (in her composition of the curse), misunderstood some of the references she was using and that if come the full moon we haven’t resolved this curse, the world could be placed in a very serious situation,” Giles explained to the two very silent and half-awake young women before him. “I received a rather unexpected call from a Watchers’ Council intermediary early this morning. It seems they have become aware of the curse.”

“Oh great - show and tell,” grumbled a very fidgety Willow, preoccupied by the pain Buffy’s words had caused this morning.

Giles looked at Willow, who appeared to be rubbing her fingers in vigorous aggravation.

“We’re listening,” Buffy declared attempting to distract Giles from Willow’s obvious wigging out at the outsiders having any idea that they had or intended to sleep together. Yet she couldn’t help but feel hurt that Willow was having such a bad time dealing with what they had done. She had thought it so special, so wonderful, a dream. It hurt to know that Willow didn’t feel the same way. She almost felt as if she was seeing someone else, someone other than the person who had loved her so completely last night.

“Implicit. What I now have to explain may take some time and I must ask that you let me complete what I have to say before you bombard me with your usual list of questions.” He paused for effect and then taking a deep breath he continued, “Fine then. As we know the Greek goddess of the moon was Selene, otherwise known as Diana, and she was worshipped by priests and priestesses with magical staffs made from willow. It is a matter of record that willow trees prefer to grow by running water and some believe that they are, therefore, influenced by the movement of that water and consequentially by the movements of the moon. Now interestingly Hecate who was the Irish goddess of both the moon and willow trees taught sorcery and witchcraft, and was a formidable divinity of the underworld. Again her priestesses used willow in their water magic and witchcraft.”

Buffy was only half-listening. She so knew from experience that what she actually needed to know would come at the very end. That was just how Giles worked. Meanwhile, the other half of her mind dwelled on Willow. She wished she could still read minds. Specifically Willow’s. Buffy was still somewhat freaked at the thought that last night she had caused her own body to orgasm, to writhe with pleasure, to flame with glowing heat. But in her own mind and deep in her soul, she knew that Willow was at the heart of that body and that it had been Willow to whom she had given pleasure. Surely Willow could realize that they hadn’t just had sex, that it had been something more. She drew her mind back to Giles and his longwinded lecture. For once eager to let him ramble on, his words filling her mind and drowning out her anguish over last night.

“Willow trees are widely thought to represent renewal, virility, growth and immortality. Their wood is most commonly used for wickerwork - be that magical or practical. This was originally a
The trade only practiced by the priestesses of Hecate and Selene. Hence, the origins of the words wicker and Wiccan. It may be of interest to note that the Willow tree has unisexual flowers,” he huffed slightly before continuing. “Willow trees are famous for their ease at surviving transplantation, fire, disease and pestilence. Many believe that this fact only served to add to ancient belief in the magical powers of this tree. Rosebay Willow, also known as Willow herb or Fireweed, rapidly colonizes burnt ground. During World War II and the bombing of London many of the derelict bomb sites were soon covered in fireweed, bringing color to an otherwise grim scene. The Greek goddess Selene was said to “exult in her heart over the radiant bright haired Horai, the feminine hours, climbing the heavens to scatter sparks of fire.”

Willow sat listening intently to Giles. She needed something to focus on, something to help hold back the tears. But uncalled for memories of the first time that Buffy had spoken to her invaded her mind. How the beautiful blonde had sat down beside her. The sheer buoyant feeling that had filled her when she realized that this wonderful, strong and lovely woman wanted her company. She had never thought she ever would regret the first spark of attraction that had lit within her that day. She wished she wasn’t in love with Buffy. Maybe then all of this wouldn’t hurt so much. She felt like a fool. She had known what last night would entail. She had promised herself that she wouldn’t let it be anything more than just sex. And yet she had allowed a large part of her to dream that it would be so much more. Then she had allowed that part to of herself to escape into all that had taken place last night.

Giles took a sip from his tea, glancing at the unusually silent young women before him and noting their frozen expressions he smiled questioningly before continuing. ‘The Horai were represented by the morning star and it was said that ‘The brightest of stars appeared, as most often heralds the light of early rising, whilst longing for the return of Luna, her partner in the night sky.’ She can only raise the morning star if the moon is setting. Now you may be surprised to learn that the Greeks didn’t recognize the season – Summer. They considered Spring and Summer as one season - Spring. They simply had three seasons, known as hours spring, autumn and winter. The guardians of these ‘hours’ were mortal. They were created by Zeus and called the Horai. For Winter, there was Irene or Carpo; for Autumn there was Eunomia or Auxo; for Spring there was Thallo or … Dike.” Giles stumbled over the word, and sighing with relief that Xander was absent, he hurried on. “Spring was placed on earth by Zeus and charged as the goddess of moral justice. She ruled over human justice whilst her mother (Themis) ruled over divine justice. Born mortal, she struggled for an age upon the earth, fighting to keep mankind just. But Zeus ever watchful, and having seen that she did not retreat at the enormity, and in his opinion futility, of her task soon brought her to his side upon Mount Olympus, ending her mortal existence and passing her task to another.”

Rising from his seat he moved away from Buffy and Willow, pleased that they were listening so intently for once. “Dawn, who was the Greek goddess of … well Dawn, heralds the arrival of Helios, the Sun. However she can only arise from her slumber at the heralding of the morning star. It seems that we are in danger of a lunar eclipse on the night of this coming full moon.” He picked up a pen and proceeded to the flip chart that Anya had presented him with last month. “If we re-examine the wording of the curse,” he said as he wrote the following:
“a single season forgotten” > Summer - forgotten by the Greeks; Spring the champion of justice, a short life on earth, then replaced. Source of the morning star.

“withers from her roots” > A willow tree that can not renew = a moon that can not be renewed once lost

“Luna will turn her back” > lunar eclipse = no moon = no morning star

“now arising without the dawn” > no moon = no morning star = no dawn = no sunrise.

Giles added, as if he needed to, “The Titans were all powerful Greek gods. They ruled and kept order in the ancient world. It was believed that without them the world would end. If the Moon and morning star do not follow each other, dawn will not arrive. If dawn does not arrive, the sun can not rise and if the sun can not rise …”

“End of the world as we know it … again,” finished Buffy. “How long ‘til the full moon?” she asked realizing that time may well be running out.

“Four days,” Giles responded nodding at Buffy’s statement. “Resolving your body swap has become of more import than we realized. I know that one possible solution … has been difficult for either of you to consider. But …”

“It didn’t work,” Buffy interrupted.

“I feel that we have to … it didn’t? … you’ve … how … are you sure you … well yes of course you are … when? No, I don’t need to know that,” Giles said taking in the ramifications of Buffy’s statement. He looked first to Buffy and then to Willow before asking for confirmation. “It didn’t work?”

Buffy simply shook her head while Willow stared at the floor. Silence filled the room, as they all took in the relevance of both Giles’ information and the failure of their most recent attempt to fix the body swap. Buffy looked at Giles with a fixed if apologetic stare as she said quietly, “I think we covered everything on the list. There was a list.”

“We must have missed something,” Giles stated, unwilling to comment, ask or even think about the kind of list to which Buffy could have been referring.
“You think?” Willow added her tone unusually sharp. She looked at Buffy’s face and seeing the hurt she added, “Sorry.” This was the first time she had really looked at Buffy since they had risen. Buffy had chosen her green jumper, the one that she usually picked when she felt like hiding. It covered her in a kind of baggy non-descript way. Willow couldn’t see any of the curves – the curves she had touched, licked and tasted last night; her own … ‘Oh my god … I did … to my own body … I dipped my fingers in my own wishing well.’ Her heart rate increased and she felt heat at first rise to her cheeks and then drain from her until she became light-headed. She raised her hands to hide her face. Shame washed over her. How could she be all big with the ‘why is Buffy acting so weird’? They had made love … done stuff to their own bodies. The reality hit hard. They had talked about it but somehow the creepiness of the reality was way bigger than she had expected.

“Will? Are you alright?” Buffy asked reaching over to place her hand on Will’s knee. The Witch jumped as if an electric charge had gone through her. “Willow?” her best friend asked again, the concern in her voice rising.

Willow took a deep breath and opening her eyes she looked at Buffy, unable to say anything at first, with her eyes full of sorrow, horror and shame. “Sorry … I’m just getting the … it was a … body swap,” she finally said gulping her way through the words in a very small voice as she looked at Buffy.

Seeing the sheer pained expression on Willow’s face and realizing just what she was referring to, Buffy turned to the questioning face of Giles and looking him square in the eye, she shook her head firmly to prevent him from questioning or speaking. Willow really didn’t need a Watcher’s inquisition right now. She had obviously just been hit with the reality of what they had done last night. If the color of her face was anything to go by she had just received the same ice cold shower that Buffy had so not enjoyed earlier that morning.

Giles, somewhat mystified, stared at the young women before him. His radar was telling him that he would regret asking what this was all about but his Watcher’s mind was eager to acquire any information that might help to extract them from their Faith-induced predicament.

**************************************************************************BtVS**************************************************************************

Faith rolled over in her bed. She had been tossing and turning all night. Although she had enjoyed saving the dumb duo, she couldn’t get past the realization that she had put B and Red in danger. The body swap had been her idea, her solution to getting the two to admit how they felt about each other -- not to getting them killed.
Her dreams (or rather nightmares) had been filled with images of Willow holding a dying Slayer in her arms. She had awakened in a cold sweat. Despite the urge to pick up the phone and ring Cordy, she had held back. She really didn’t want anyone to know how royally she had messed up, least of all Queen C.

Throwing back her covers, she smacked the mattress in frustration. How had this become so complicated? That guy had made it sound so easy; his instructions had been simple enough. Okay the poetry had been a pain at first but she had kinda started to like the whole punning and rhyming thing.

Maybe she should have given Cordy the ‘heads up’ on her plan. She didn’t regret not having told Angel. His whole vamp anger bordering on psycho ‘I’ll hunt him down and I’ll stake him into the next millennium’ kill Spike episode, which she had seen first hand in L.A. after Cordy had retold her vision to the group, left her in no doubt that when it came to the Slayer ‘the big bad’ didn’t keep a clear head. Angel’s face had looked just like you might imagine the God of thunder would look – pre-storm. She had sworn she could actually see his blood rising.

Cordy had been very careful to clearly point out that her vision was of distant future events, of possible events, of things that could be avoided, changed and that as far as everyone knew Spike and Drusilla were still in Mexico. But this hadn’t done much to temper Angel’s tirade. What it had prevented was the big broody guy from rushing back to Buffy’s side.

Faith had thought this a good thing --- until now. Maybe Angel could have handled things better. She wasn’t exactly able to talk to Buffy and Willow like he could have. As this thought percolated in her mind, she was caught between laughter and tears at the image of Angel as the Sapphic matchmaker. Maybe Cordy was right when she’d said “Guys, this one requires the feminine touch – girl chat.” Maybe she should have just talked to them. It might have taken a while before they actually listened to her but at least she’d be sleeping now and the world would still have one of the most experienced and capable Slayers ever on the job rather than a newly trained witch.

She searched her mind for ideas, for some glimmer of a solution. Then remembering Cordy’s reference to Xander obviously being aware of the situation, she could feel the gem of an idea forming.

**************************************************************************BtVS**************************************************************************
Xander really hated waking up this early. But being unable to settle back to sleep he dragged himself from a cozy bed filled with warm and welcoming Anya, which just didn’t seem right. He questioned the logic of the world with a half hazy mind.

He shuffled across the cold floor of his kitchen in Anya’s fuzzy bedroom slippers which were two sizes too small. This caused him to walk on the balls of his feet, like an escapee from Fantasia, to keep his heels from touching the freezing floor tiles. Taking the butter out of the refrigerator and moving toward the toaster, he happened to glance out of his apartment window and … “What the …” he dropped the butter and, moving instinctively towards his knife block, he pulled the largest knife free.

Turning to position himself between the balcony entrance and Anya who was still asleep in their bedroom, he forgot to look down. So fulfilling his role as the ‘funny Scooby’, he slipped on the fallen pat of butter. As if in slow motion he fell backwards, arms and legs flayed pointlessly in the air, wheeling around as if to gain traction upon the air itself. The resounding thump that was his body as it hit the floor was echoed in the “oooomph” he let out as any air left in his lungs escaped.

“Thank god. Some things never change,” muttered Faith as she raised her eyes to the heavens and smiled before pushing open the balcony door and entering the apartment. “Whoa there, danger boy. Not here for a fight, fun though it would be to whip your butt. Seems you don’t really need my help with that,” she advised him as she closed the door and moved into the apartment.

Xander picked himself up, keeping the knife firmly in his hand, while removing the now flat pat of butter that he had landed on and was now totally stuck to his butt.

Considering the need to keep Xander calm, Faith turned her face from him to hide her smile as he completed the delicate operation involved in removing the butter from his butt. “Nice … complimentary color scheme. Anya, I presume,” she commented as she looked around.

“Yeah, right. Your new job is interior decoration critic … I don’t think so. What do you want?” Xander asked eyeing the ex-slayer with distrust while desperately trying to regain his dignity.

“I thought you might be able to help,” she informed him. Suddenly not so sure that this had been such a good idea, she wondered if she had placed too much importance on Cordelia’s insight.
“Okay. Checking the side and rear view mirrors here cause … since when was the highway of good intentions your road of choice?” Xander asked as he moved between her and the bedroom door.

“Chill, fluffy slipper man,” Faith said, catching a glimpse of his footwear as Xander tiptoed out of the kitchen before moving into a very defensive position, blocking her possible access to the bedroom. “I’m not here to wake up your sugar and have an “ex” heart to heart. Good choice, by the way. The chick has balls,” she said smiling. “I like a girl who knows what she wants. Seem to remember that was one of the things about us Slayer’s that turned you on.”

“Oh wait let me see … Nope, a psycho ex-Slayer roaming my apartment doesn’t tend to bring out my ‘host with the most’ manners, let alone the need to walk down memory lane. So how about you say whatever you have to say and get gone,” Xander said, trying to sound as forceful as he could, his insides forming that familiar jelly belly feeling he hated. Right now his major concern was Anya. He didn’t want her to wake up and find Faith in their apartment … he just knew that these two meeting … would be nothing but bad.

Faith had a moment of clarity. “Listen, toy boy, I’m real impressed with the whole ‘I’ve grown a backbone’ thing. Guess I never brought that out in you but we don’t have to get big with the reminiscing for this to work,” she said, setting her shoulders back and opening her arms as a sign that she did not intend anything aggressive. “I just need for you to let the B and Red in on the whole big point. That it’s not about the sex,” she started to turn and leave, having said what she had come here to say.

“So you’re here to tell me you placed a curse on them so that they’ll figure out that it’s all about the love. Forgive me if I don’t get all ‘woo hoo’ and grateful. You want me to believe you’ve changed, with life-changing experiences? Then don’t sneak up and curse my friends. Let me clue you in. Angel as your choice of ‘Psycho’s Anonymous’ sponsor doesn’t really score big with me. This just isn’t really your style, is it Faith?” Xander said somewhat amazed at the calmness of the ex-Slayer. Faith wasn’t rising to any of his baitings. She wasn’t even glaring at him. And as she turned her back on him, he realized he had questions … many questions … well no, really just one. “So why?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Faith said as she opened the balcony door and turning back she offered Xander a small sincere smile before attempting to remove the frown that was now working its way to his forehead by adding, “Don’t fret lover boy. We’re five by five,” before she quietly closed the balcony door behind her.

Xander stood for a moment not quite believing he had just survived a personal visit from Faith, let alone that she had actually been polite. Giving in to his Scooby instincts, he headed for the bedroom to awaken Anya. They needed to get to the magic shop, to Giles – to Scooby Central.
It was still very early in the morning and although the shop wasn’t yet open for business, quite a lot of work had already occurred. As Xander and Anya entered they found Giles pouring over books but there was no sign of Buffy or Willow. Anya, unaware of Faith’s early morning visit, didn’t notice Xander’s somewhat quiet behavior as they approached the ex-Watcher.

Xander was anxious to tell Giles about Faith’s visit but couldn’t figure out how without alerting Anya to the fact that Faith had been in their apartment. The possibility of Anya insecure and fretting really didn’t appeal to him right now.

“Ahh, you’re here. Good. Something rather important has occurred,” Giles explained, in his usually vague manner. Gesturing them to sit, he proceeded to share the highlights of last night’s revelations.

Xander sat half-listening while Anya, somewhat more awake, persisted in interrupting the explanation much to Giles’ annoyance. Finally he reached the ‘something rather important’ part - “So no moon-set, no morning star; no morning star, no dawn; no dawn, no sunrise.”

“Oh, great. Another apocalypse. This really doesn’t help business, you know,” Anya pointed out. “It’s un-American. Why can’t they just have sex and get their bodies back? Why is everyone making such a big deal about this?”

“It’s not really that simple … ” Giles attempted to explain only to be interrupted again by Anya.

“Oh, but it is. Women have been, you know, doing it with other women since the beginning of time. I understand it’s quite fulfilling and produces many moments of bliss. I could help,” she offered. Seeing Giles’ eyebrows rise and Xander’s suddenly very awake and interested look, she added “Now that sounded far more Lesbian than I intended. There are books I could order.”

“Honey, this is kinda Willow’s thing. I don’t think she’s really gonna be needing an instruction manual. Though I’d like to see …,” Xander stopped remembering Giles was in the room. “Later.” However, mentally he made note of a little idea he would mention to Anya later. Much later and alone.

“What I meant to say,” Giles said, interrupting and throwing Xander his best headmaster glare,
“was that it appears that our original … interpretation of the curse, apart from being less than accurate … could possibly have led us to believe that certain acts… that is a certain theory … which required personal acts … appears to have been less than …” He floundered for the words and removing his glasses, he pressed his fingers to his forehead for inspiration. This was not a piece of news he really felt comfortable sharing. But judging from the reaction Willow had had once Buffy had told him, he felt that he couldn’t really expect them to go through it again with Xander and Anya.

“G-man, have you been overdoing the caffeine? Maybe you should stick to the tea,” Xander advised, grinning at the ex-Watcher with simple pleasure.

Giles glared at Xander for using the “G” word in addressing him yet again. “Thank you for your concern but my caffeine consumption is not at issue I can assure you. It’s just that having to have this whole conversation … somewhat less than comfortable,” he paused again, replacing his glasses. “It appears that Buffy and Willow’s attempt to … resolve the curse … That is to say …”

“Oh my god!” Xander exclaimed as it finally hit him. Unasked for mental images filled his head and a smile spread across his face. He found himself unable to hold back a rather high pitched giggle.

“They were unsuccessful,” Giles concluded, desperately wishing that the earth would open up and swallow him.

“Oh my god …” Xander repeated. His mouth fell open as he lost complete control of his mind and his eyes glazed over as he surrendered to the images filling his head. “Oh my…”

Anya looked from her fantasy-ridden boyfriend to the somewhat blushing Giles and shook her head, “Thank you very much. It will take me hours to get that smirk off his face.” She stood and moved towards the counter. Turning she asked, “Are you sure they did it right?”

Giles looked at her and for once he couldn’t think how to respond. He looked to Xander for help and then shook his head in amazement. Turning back to Anya he said the first thing that popped into his head, “Apparently there was a list.”

“There’s a list?” Xander piped up, coming out of his fantasy at break neck speed. “Oh this just gets keeps getting better and better. Heh heh heh. What kind of list?”
“Xander would like to see the list,” Anya said stating the obvious. “I would be interested to know if there are helpful diagrams. I foresee many nights of …”

Giles interrupted forcefully. “I really don’t think that’s going to happen and I would really appreciate it if this conversation could end now,” Giles said his voice becoming quite high pitched. As he stood and moved to the back of the shop, muttering, “No Watcher has ever had to put up with this … why me?”

Faith switched channels desperately trying to find something on early morning television to grab her attention but her mind just couldn’t seem to hold still. She’d followed Xander and Anya to the magic box, relieved and hopeful that maybe her decision to approach Xander hadn’t been such a bad idea after all. She hadn’t even attempted to go back to bed. What would have been the point? She watched the clock, waiting until it was a civilized enough hour to call Cordelia.

She found it a little unsettling that she was so eager to call Queen C to check in with someone who seemed to care … not the big mushy stuff but sorta trusting and who gave it to her straight. This was new.

If you’d asked her what she thought of Cordelia when she first met her that night years ago in the Bronze, she would have said that the girl was a cheerleader fashion bitch destined to join all the right clubs and do nothing more than spend her husband’s hard earned money on plastic surgery and shoes for the rest of her lypo-suctioned life. What the devil she was doing with the scoobies let alone Xander had escaped her at that time.

Yet now that she knew the woman Cordelia had become, she felt proud and protective. C had been through the ringer. Okay she had survived her early years on the hellmouth – no mean feat in it’s self. But the huge fall from financially secure grace … that had to have hurt. And with no Danielle Steele to write her comeback she’d had to redesign her own future. But what impressed Faith the most was that she hadn’t just decided to take a different route to collagen luxury heaven as just about everyone had a right to expect she would. Nope, she went and changed her goals and her life completely … and the visions! Faith really couldn’t understand how Cordy wasn’t a bitter, neurotic, paranoid depressive woman on valium. The girl had backbone.

Faith now knew that Queen C’s sharp tongue cleverly shielded her soft and sensitive hidden side and that she also had almost had much nerve as Faith herself. She really liked the girl and deep down inside she hoped, more than she thought she should, that Cordy liked her too. She knew that she didn’t deserve to have anyone in her corner although Angel had been a huge, if more than welcome, surprise. The guy had his own crosses and masses of guilt to bear. And, oh boy, could he brood. But she really understood where he was. Hell, she was there too.
But Cordy was … well she was mortal … fighting the fight but still laughing at life. Not always big with the self searching like Angel but so much more fun to banter with and a little easier on the eye. She could take on the role of buddy and yet never be a side kick. She didn’t make it easy for Faith but she did make it possible.

Faith had taken on this task to try to make it up to Buffy and Red because she owed them. But if she was honest with herself, there was a bonus. She could show Cordy that she was someone to be trusted, someone who finished what she started. She wanted Cordy to think well of her. It had become important.

Looking back up at the clock she saw it was just after eight. She rose, moved to the telephone, picked up the receiver and began to dial.

Giles had been hiding in the basement for about half an hour when he heard footsteps on the stairs and his heart dropped in fear that it was Anya. Turning, he saw Xander’s builder’s boots stomping their way down the wooden staircase. “Xander, I really don’t want to talk anymore about …”

“S’okay, G-man. I’m not here to quiz you on the failed frolickings of Bullow and Wiffy.”

“Of whom? Will you please stop calling me that?” Giles asked before he could stop himself. “Ahh yes I see. You mean Buffy in Willow and Willow in Buffy. Yes. It’s some rather crude and no doubt intended to be humorous way of keeping who’s in whom straight.”

“You could say that,” Xander agreed, although grinning he couldn’t help adding, “Although straight? Who’s in whom? That’s the subject we’re avoiding, right?”

“Exactly!” Giles commented, his temper rising at Xander’s infantile comment.

“Sorry. Too easy,” he apologized. “Seriously though, I had a visit from Faith this morning.”

Giles’ annoyance immediately vanished, “Really? Are you two okay?”
“Yeah, no blood shed. Anya was still asleep during my early morning nightmare so she doesn’t know. Hoping to keep it that way,” he added. ‘Faith wanted to get me to help her. Something to the effect of ‘tell Red and Buffy that it’s not about the sex’. At first I thought she was going on about something more important, you know. But I guess that was just me being hopeful guy.”

“Did she say anything else? Give any clue as to why she’s doing this?” Giles asked his brow furrowed.

“I did ask. All I got was some cryptic ‘You wouldn’t believe me if I told you’ response.”

Giles turned away from Xander and after a moment or two he began to ‘tutt’.

“Hey, you know your making that noise, right?” Xander asked, somewhat puzzled by Giles’ actions. He was used to the ‘head in hand’ pose, the running of fingers through thinning hair, even the continual glass cleaning, but ‘tutting’ … that was new. Years of scoobying had taught him one thing -- new normally meant bad.

“Yes, indeed. Xander, I need you to call Buffy and Willow. Get them here as soon as possible. I’m going to have to gather a few supplies.”

“Are we tooling up for a Faith hunt?” Xander asked. He really was looking forward to returning her early morning call … with some back up, of course.

“No. There’s no need for that. We have a far more powerful option available to us,” he ended cryptically.

Xander looked at him expectantly. “We do?”

**************************BtVS**************************

Buffy sat in Giles’ well-worn chair watching Willow meditate. Her stillness was impressive. She had calmed down a lot once Giles had left them alone. Buffy had decided it was probably best if they didn’t return to the dorm room so she had let Willow settle on the couch and moved to give her space. She hated that yet again she was the cause of pain for Willow. The guilt overwhelmed
her entire being. She hated that she was getting so use to the terrible feeling.

It had taken a while for Willow to stop hyperventilating and Buffy had, at first, feared that there was something more wrong than just the cold shower of reality hitting her. But with the calmness had also come a silence that neither one of them seemed prepared to break. What exactly was the right thing to say? Someone should write a book entitled ‘Awkward Morning-After Right Things To Say’ or ‘How To Avoid Being Stupid And Misunderstood’ Buffy thought. She really could have used such a book this morning. Somehow she knew that what little she had said this morning had not only been inadequate but had probably hurt her best friend.

Buffy had wanted to talk to Willow to let her know that she too had suffered the cold realization that the bodies they had made love to had been their own. That the things they had done, they way they had felt was somehow all mixed up and nightmarish in its complexity. But she had no idea where to begin. So she had shoved all her worries and fears to the back of her mind as she so often did. Willow, however, didn’t seem to be able to disconnect from things like she could.

She watched her Willow closely and did something she rarely did. She closed her eyes and quietly murmured “Please God, or maybe Willow’s Goddesses, if Willow can’t love me like I love her – I can live with that. But please, please don’t let what we did last night ruin our friendship. I really need her and couldn’t survive without her.”

She thought about how in many ways before last night they had been strangers even though they had also been best friends. But last night they had shown each other a side of themselves that you didn’t usually get to show your best friend or anyone else. She had been in Willow’s body and had experienced its urges, all of her sensitive areas, the quiet verbal instructions and demands they had whispered and sometimes begged each other to follow. Caught up in the circular sharing that had taken place, Buffy’s mind swirled at how much she had learned about her Willow last night, how much she had learned about herself. She imagined Freud sitting in the corner, busily scribbling down notes with sheer excitement, a thousand theories and explanations for female behavior flooding his over-sized brain.

The phone rang, breaking her rather strange train of thought. Willow didn’t move an inch at the noise so Buffy stood and moved quickly to answer the phone’s shrill demand.

“Buffy?” she heard Xander question.

“Hi Xan,” she responded. She really hoped this wasn’t going to be one of those long ‘I’m like your big brother’ phone calls Xander seemed to be specializing in lately.
“The G-man says that you and Will need to get over here. He thinks it’s time for another Slayer ‘Vision Rod’ session. I know that may be the last thing you’re in the mood for but I hear we have a clock ticking,” Xander explained.

“Tell him we’ll be over when we’re ready,” Buffy informed him, unsure if Willow was really prepared for another vision quest. “No deadlines okay.”

“Okay, will do. You guys okay?” Xander asked, suppressing the eagerness in his voice as much as he could, the concern that his friends were okay coming before his natural curiosity as to how they were coping with the ‘morning after’.

Realizing that by now Giles had probably informed the gang of their failed attempt to break the curse and that Xander had obviously moved past the male hormone fantasy zone he was sure to have visited, she kept her response brief. “We’re getting there. See you when we see you.”

Hanging up the telephone, Buffy took a deep breath. ‘We are so gonna be an Oprah special.’ She had hoped that they would have a little longer before a public appearance would be required. But Xander was right. The new development in the curse situation had set a clock ticking. This was no longer just about them.

Cordy pushed her empty yogurt carton into the practically overflowing garbage can and promised herself that she would do some spring cleaning this weekend. She’d been a bit of a slob lately. Having her apartment back to herself for the past few days had been great but having a roommate had made her tidier. She certainly hadn’t expected that she would miss Faith. ‘Go figure’.

As she placed her cup in the sink and reached to turn the hot tap on, her simple morning routine was interrupted by her telephone. She noticed the small wave of excited anticipation rising within her and it felt good as she dashed from the kitchen to the living room.

“Hi,” she said somewhat breathlessly as she picked up the receiver.

“C, you okay babe? Did I interrupt something?” Faith asked adding just enough sauce to her comment to make it clear what she was referring to.
“Yeah I’m fine! I was just on the wrong side of the apartment when the phone rang,” Cordy explained, now feeling somewhat foolish for running to the phone.

“Right. So … how you doing?” Faith asked lamely.

“Okay. How goes the matchmaking?” Cordy asked.

“Not too good,” Faith responded suddenly feeling somewhat a failure. “Wrinkles being ironed, if you get me.”

“I get you,” Cordy responded.

“Guess you do,” Faith commented before she could stop herself. ‘Damn this girl's too good to be true,’ she thought. “I knew it wasn’t going to be easy, C, but I didn’t realize how dumb the love struck duo was. It’s like everyone else knows how much they mean to each other but they missed the memo. So … any news on the mission impossible squad?”

“Nope, nothing yet,” Cordy informed her, adding “But I wasn’t really expecting to see them for a while” to ease any fears Faith might be having.

“Cool. Well, I was just thinking … if you were up for a field trip … you know revisit the beginning … a Sunnydale reunion type gig?” Faith asked. “If you’re getting fed up with the aloneness, that is.”

Concerned and a little touched by Faith’s invitation, Cordy asked “What’s up? Is there something you need my help with? Has something gone wrong?”

“No, it’s all five by five here,” Faith responded, a little less certain of what she was saying than she liked to be. She wasn’t really big with the idea of letting C know that smoothly didn’t really describe how the plan was going. “Body switch all in play. Closeness visible. Touching kinda. They’re on the road. The Orb thing was the hard part but that’s over.”

“Why do you think the Mayor left you that anyway?” Cordy asked.
“Guess he thought it would give me a new start. You know, steal someone else’s life and live it big. He was never really big into the morality stuff that would hit with stealing someone else’s body,” Faith said, her voice becoming a little wistful. “Guess the new and improved me wasn’t part of his plan.”

“You threw a few people with that one,” Cordelia confirmed, knowing that she too had been among the non-believers until quite recently.

“It’s real you know,” Faith said quietly, feeling the need to remind her.

“I know. I get it. Took me a while but do I get it,” Cordy assured her. “So you’re okay?”

“I’m dealing,” said Faith, touched by Cordy’s concern. It was nice having someone to worry about you.

“You sure? It’s not like you to want a side kick.” Cordy queried. She was still a little unnerved by Faith’s invitation.

“Don’t get all ‘big sis’ knickers in a twist’ on me. I just thought you might like a little … some down time. Kinda got used to having you around. Weird, huh?” Faith laughed, brushing her invitation aside. “No big if you’re not into going back to your roots.”

“Oh. Nice to be asked though. Sorta missing you too. Mega weird,” She stated feeling like she was back in high school all over again. “I had hot water this morning,” Cordelia quickly added, changing the topic.

“Right. Bet you’re pigging out on that yogurt crap instead of a proper breakfast. Don’t know why you bother. Demon fighting --- pretty much the best cardio you can get,” Faith said, lightening the mood of their conversation.

“Yeah, it’s all the running away. Great for the tone,” Cordy responded. “So you’re good?”

“My tone’s fine but thanks for asking,” Faith quipped. “How’s yours?”
“Good,” Cordy replied, laughing. Everything Faith said seemed to have two meanings lately. If she didn’t know better she would have sworn Faith was flirting but she knew that with Faith everything came down to sex eventually. The girl was a walking talking erogenous zone.

“Okay, catch you tomorrow,” Faith said, closing the call down on a light note.

“Cool. Thanks for checking in,” Cordy said, really meaning it.

“My pleasure,” Faith responded a little more sincerely than she had intended before she replaced the receiver.

Willow was in her ‘calm’ place. Tara had taught her how to find it and for that she had never been more grateful. Last night had come into such sharp focus that she had almost had a way big freak-out heart attack. Images had crowded into her head showing her who had been who, who had done what to whom and how. She’d never been really big with the viewing porn and the pictures in her head really had done nothing to change that. ‘How and when did it all go so wrong?’ she asked herself.

Calling on her peaceful place she slowly revisited yesterday morning’s conversation with Buffy. It had all seemed so logical, so safe. They had planned, talked about … well almost everything. She had even come back to read the list from Kira. Okay she’d been a bit quiet but that hadn’t really worried Will. They had discussed getting the ‘wiggins’ over sleeping with each other and had even talked about the body switch aspect of it, if only briefly. Willow had hoped for a night full of legendary and beautiful memories that she could run to in her darkest moments of unrequited love. But now instead of the sweet memories that had visited her this morning, all she had was a very wrong mix of who had done what to whom. She remembered the wonderful taste of Buffy, something like strawberries but it hadn’t been Buffy she tasted it had been … herself! She remembered so much, so many touches, licks, kisses but they had all been wrong … so very wrong. ‘I’m bad – so very bad. I don’t even think there’s a bad that’s bad enough to cover this.’

She felt her pulse beginning to race again. She reached for the core of her being, feeling like she was drowning. Holding on firmly to who she was, she was able to pull herself together. ‘We were both very stupid to think that just turning out the lights would make it less weird and freaky … would make everything alright.’ She had seen in Buffy’s eyes confirmation that these very same thoughts and realizations had hit her too. That sort of explained her sudden coldness this morning. Only she seemed to be handling it so much better. ‘I’m such a spaz. It’s not that big a deal. So deal with it. If Buffy can do it so can I’ she mentally yelled at herself suddenly feeling like a motivational speaker. She hadn’t thought of herself as naive and unworldly since leaving high school but it all came rushing back at the realization that having touched and tasted .. well …
herself ... was freaking her out the most.

Buffy had obviously anticipated the weirdness far more than she. But it suddenly occurred to her that maybe touching yourself wasn’t as wrong or as rare a thing as she believed. ‘Maybe Buffy’s already … you know … and that’s not what actual wigged her. What if it was the whole sleeping with a woman ‘wiggins’ … that was why she looked like so upset.’

She really wished she could just forget last night, wipe it from both of their minds.
Chapter 14

Giles sat, supposedly, engrossed in his journal but his mind was truly elsewhere. Xander’s early morning visit from Faith was weighing heavily on his mind. ‘What is that silly girl up to?’ he wondered. He rather wanted to believe that Faith had changed, that Angel’s guidance had indeed helped. That she had rediscovered her place in humanity and, with it, the value of each human life. That she was choosing to seek a path to redemption. But his Watcher instincts couldn’t allow him to take the risk of believing that the hidden curse within a curse wasn’t her damaged mind’s version of homage - possibly to the Mayor and his original plan for mankind. She wouldn’t be the first person to consider ending the world as the only solution to their problems. So here he was re-reading his very first year’s worth of entries.

He smiled at his some of his comments about Buffy having friends. ‘God what a Council cloned prig I was.’ He felt more than foolish that he had ever considered Willow and Xander as only an annoyance, distracting the Slayer from her calling. If he was to be asked today why Buffy had become the most successful and committed Slayer of her time, he would have no compunction in placing almost all of the credit on her decision to surround herself with strong, brave, big-hearted and faithful friends. They had, somewhere over the years, become a family and an army against darkness and evil. Acknowledging his love, pride and concern for his acquired family, he was also fully aware of the weaknesses that came with the strengths their group provided.

He had watched each member of the group grow and mature over years but he had to admit to himself, even though he never intended to say it out loud, that he had been the most surprised by Xander. Most people would have thought that was because he had seemed set to be a drop out and nothing more. But Giles had watched him becoming the big brother to both women, a role that fitted him like a glove. He had allowed them to remove him from part of their friendship with a chivalry beyond his years. Yet he was always within hearing when they needed him. Giles was amazed at how selfless Xander had been in his support of Buffy and, especially, Willow. He’d watched his childhood friend move from his side to become a potentially very powerful witch and sincere warrior in her own right. Giles was unsure he would have behaved as well had his peers surpassed him and left him behind in, oh, so many ways.

So it really shouldn’t have been such a surprise to him when he saw that Xander seemed to be accepting of this new twist in their friendship. To see his best friends literally walking in each other’s shoes, in fact in each other’s bodies, and be able to take it all in his stride was truly impressive. He even seemed to understand the myriad of dimensions involved. Giles almost wanted to start a journal on Xander to try and figure out how he seemed to have all the qualities of an immature male and yet at the same time have such great potential, strength and understanding.

Even Faith had chosen Xander to approach rather than coming to him. ‘Let’s be honest old chap,
you’ve never been really that comfortable talking about your feelings, let alone to pubescent teens. You set the tone years ago,’ he chastised himself, feeling that he had indeed become his father despite his best efforts not to.

“Okay G-man. Job done. Buffy said they’ll be here when their ready,” Xander said, interrupting his thoughts. “I figure there’s still mega post … you know … girl talk to be had.”

Giles nodded and then against his better judgment he asked, “Xander, is there something about Buffy and Willow … that I should know?”

“What d’you mean?” Xander asked cagily.

“I just have this irritating feeling that as usual I’ve been left out of the loop on something relating to … arrhmm … something important. It seems you may be aware of factors that I’m … missing,” Giles admitted, feeling somewhat uncomfortable but certain that there was something he needed to know. Staring at Xander’s stony features he continued, “Something that you know, something that I should take into consideration before I determine how best to direct our efforts. I know you all enjoy reminding me of the generation gap by leaving me out of certain parts of your lives and most of the time I have to admit I’m more than happy to be ignorant of the lurid details. But I can sense that on this occasion I’m missing something important. In this kind of situation I firmly believe that important decisions shouldn’t be made without all the facts or … mistakes may be made that we will all live to regret … or not,” he finished.

“It’s not so much a fact as kinda a ‘two weeks’ notice thing,” Xander said cryptically. “There’s a secret … sorta ‘true lies’ but without the airplane.”

“Xander! You know I don’t have a clue to what you are referring,” Giles stated, somewhat annoyed that Xander was being so evasive.

Just then Anya, realizing that she was missing something potentially interesting, decided to join them by sitting down beside Giles with her annoying ‘I know what Xander is going on about so let me bask here in my boyfriend’s amazing wonderfulness’ smile.

Xander smirked at the frustrated frown that he had raised on Giles’ brow. ‘This is fun.’ And the worship of his Anya was always of the good. “It’s kinda a big lie they’re both telling … to themselves and each other – that they’re just friends,” he raised his eyebrows as if his words had explained it all. But what he got back was a completely blank look. “That all they are -- is best friends. You know?” he tried again a little more slowly.
“Quite clearly, I do not,” Giles said, his tone becoming sharp.

“It’s like they’re all big with the denial and the blindness but from the outside it’s obvious. You know how when you get real close to the TV all you see is dots. Well they’re the dots. But I’m like TV-watching guy and I’m sitting far enough from the screen that I can see the picture the dots make,” Xander explained, again receiving nothing but a frown from the Watcher. “I see the way they are with each other, the looks they throw at each other when they think others can’t see them. But I see them. The little slips, the hidden thoughts on faces that don’t know how to hide their thoughts. It’s like subplot. It didn’t really come into sharp focus … the picture I mean … until this body swap. But then … geez, you had to blind not to see it.”

“Xander!” Giles interrupted in frustration. “Will you just get to the point? It must be patently obvious by now that I can not decipher your analogies. See what? What do you see?”

“They’re in love,” Anya stated unable to keep quiet any longer. But her words just seemed to make Giles’ sharply turn his head and stare at her until his eyes became inordinately large. So she added, “with each other.” Looking up at Xander she saw that oh too familiar ‘glare’. “What?”

“Stealing my thunder, much?” he commented irritably

“He was taking too long to get it,” Anya protested in her defense. Then turning back to Giles and she added, “Buffy doesn’t think Willow loves her … that way and Willow thinks Buffy’s straight.”

Giles stared back and forth at Anya and then Xander, trying to take in what he had just been told. “They’re … are you certain?” Giles asked before he could stop himself.

“As certain as I can be. Think about it,” Xander advised him.

“Yes think about it. Xander likes to think about it,” Anya advised. “But he knows he can only have sex with me.”

“Anya!” Xander yelled, although you could see he didn’t really expect her to understand why.

“What?”
“I … but when … how did this … how could I have missed this?” interrupted Giles, before falling into silence and dropping his eyes towards the floor.

“It’s not that surprising really. Remember when Willow was doing the slow ‘Ellen run’ up to her coming out scene? I mean no one guessed,” Xander piped up, trying to soothe the Watcher’s ego.

“I don’t know why Willow thinks Buffy’s straight. I mean in what twisted world would the “Powers That Be” make the good guys … okay good girls … a lesbian witch with a straight female who is more powerful than your strongest male best friend. I mean, professionally speaking, that sounds more like a curse to me,” Anya said, changing the subject back to her earlier comments. “Hello --- and Buffy … there’s all the black, and the way she loves her axe and the occasional leather. Oooh and stakes! Talk about a penis replacement. Talk about missing the sub plot here. I knew these two girls in Greece … back in the day … you wouldn’t believe how long it took them to get …”

At this point Giles stopped listening to Anya and Xander. Instead he took their theory, now knowledge, and weighed it in his mind. It seemed real. None of his usual “this is a load of old twaddle” radar was going off. ‘Oh my God.’ He suddenly wished he hadn’t asked. This was going to make matters more complicated than ever. It was as if he’d been watching a completely different story from everyone else. He’d managed with Buffy’s teenage fixations on boys. He’d even resigned himself to Angel. But this … well he was out of his depth and drowning seemed almost acceptable.

Buffy followed Willow into the Magic Box. Their journey having taken place in relative silence, she still had little or no idea exactly what Willow was feeling about last night. This freaked her out more than anything else; even the knowledge that everyone in this room now knew what they had tried last night.

“Ahh, you’re here. Good. We can get on with it,” Giles commented offering both women a small smile. “It is imperative, in my opinion, that we take advantage of all the additional information we can ostensibly by using the vision rod. We need to know the exact origins of this curse or, to be more precise, the curse within the curse. Now recent events … aarhmmm … may have proved our past interpretations to have been … a little off the mark. But I don’t think we can let this dissuade us from proceeding.”

“Okay. Back to the magic stick we go,” Buffy agreed, eager to do anything that involved not talking about last night. She watched Willow, out of the corner of her eye, sit on the stairs that led
up to the restricted book section. She seemed so vulnerable, so hurt. Pain filled her heart and she wished with all her soul that she could go back in time and knock Faith out before all of this began. ‘I’m gonna show you a world of hurt when I find you Faith. You will wish you were still in a coma,’ she mentally promised.

Xander couldn’t take his eyes off them. ‘What the hell’s going on here?’ Wiffy was half herself and half an injured little girl, a somewhat familiar little girl. He had a sudden flash back to kindergarten when Willow had broken the yellow crayon and had been far too scared to tell anyone. What he was seeing on Willow’s ‘Buffy’ face was that ‘yellow crayon’ look. However Bullow’s anger levels were off the scale. That look on Buffy’s ‘Willow’ face was just way too easy to read but she was holding something else in. He could feel it and even though she was at least six feet from Willow he could almost see the protective shield she was attempting to throw around her best friend.

Bullow’s protectiveness made him feel slightly ashamed as he knew that part of the reason she was being so protective was her fear of what he or Anya might say. After Giles had updated them, his first thought had been of this moment, anticipating much humor, practicing of puns and innuendos but eventually he’d realized that some cheap shots were just that and nothing more. His earlier call to Buffy had really brought things home to him as her tone had kinda yelled ‘I will not be bringing my sense of humor.’

He’d been so right to give Anya a very detailed social etiquette talk, especially emphasizing that there should be no questions, digs or side comments relating to last night’s failed attempt to end the curse. At first she had protested, pointing out that sex was a natural human act and that ‘to remove all sex talk or reference to it was un-American!’ Feeling brave he had actually asked – ‘why?’ Anya informed him that the desire for sex, conversations about acquiring sex and research into acquiring sex were the main reasons many of her customers came to their shop. Xander at first did nothing but pull his goldfish face on [opening and closing his mouth without anything coming out] until eventually he recovered and pointed out that neither Willow nor Buffy were customers. They were friends. Anya agreed since they never paid for anything.

Willow could feel the weight of the silence as she sat on the stairs. She noted that Anya was avoiding all eye contact and that Xander seemed lost in thought, thoughts that seemed to be making him smile. She suddenly felt really annoyed. ‘Couldn’t he have got all his fantasizing done before we turned up?’

“So when do we start?” Buffy asked.

“So when do we start?” Buffy asked.

“Now seems as good a time as any. Anya can you mind the store?” Giles asked, somewhat eager to remove the ex-demon and her bluntness from the now somewhat delicate mix.
Chapter 15

Buffy sat stiffly on the training room floor. Three hours in Giles’ arm chair seemed to have done something to her back. She cursed the swapping of bodies. Aches and pains usually only came after combat, not after something as simple as sitting quietly in a chair. She tried to maneuver herself into a more comfortable position with little or no success. ‘If this is what I feel like after just sitting still how on earth do Willow, Xander and Giles even move after a battle?’ she pondered.

“If everyone is sitting comfortably, I think we’ll begin,” Giles commented passing the vision rod to Buffy, who seemed wince slightly before taking the rod.

To her left was Xander and Willow to her right. She held the rod forward and slightly towards Xander so that his hand would be above hers. Remembering Willow’s earlier almost painful reaction to her touch with sadness, she thought this best. Willow stared at the rod for a moment and then reached out to hold it above Xander’s hand. Once the three were in place, Giles moved to sit on the other side of Willow and gently placed his hand on her shoulder.

“But Buffy, I want you to concentrate on Faith and the Orb,” Giles instructed.

Concentrating on her breathing Buffy began to meditate, forming the image of the Orb, remembering its distinct color, glow and size before she moved on to Faith. Anger filled her and the first image that came to her was of Faith with the knife she had used still firmly protruding from her gut.

(Oh … Oh god,) Willow thought.

(Sorry. Oh hell…) Buffy said as she was once more filled with regret at the thought that she had yet again failed and upset Willow.

(It’s fine. I expected that. You have to shake it off, Buffy. Concentrate,) Giles told her, breaking through her mild panic.

She concentrated on her breathing and finally an uninjured image of Faith formed. Satisfied that she had her control back, Buffy made Faith pick up the Orb. Concentrating on this she let the vision rod guide her. A vision of Faith began to clarify, clearing away the created images, washing them aside. She was slouching in a black leather chair in the middle of what looked like an office.
(Very good,) Giles encouraged, as an image of Faith and her surroundings began to clear.

Her left leg hitched over the arm of the chair as she listened to the Asian man behind the desk. His eyes seemed unwilling to meet hers as he spoke. To his left stood a short brunette woman in a grey suit and to his left a large lump of a man in blue.

“I am glad we were able to assist you. Mayor Wilkins was a valued client of this firm for many years. I trust your journey was comfortable.”


He didn’t seem to acknowledge her gibe or even miss a beat before responding. “I’m a lawyer, Ms. Lehane, and as my colleague will have explained, Mayor Wilkins was one of our most valued clients. Richard Wilkins the Third left very precise instructions should you ever regain consciousness. He seemed to feel that you could benefit greatly from our assistance and to that end our resources will be made at available to ensure the successful use of your inheritance,” he finished, his tone somehow lacking in any emotion.

Faith studied him for a moment before asking suspiciously, “So what’d I get?”

“I believe that it would be best if I leave it to the Mayor to explain,” he replied, and lifting a television remote control from the desk turned to his left.

His comments had obviously caught Faith by surprise as she sat up and turned expectantly.

(She thinks he’s still alive,) Buffy commented.

A TV screen lights up to her right and on it a familiar image appears --- Mayor Wilkins sitting behind his office desk.

“Hello, Faith. If you're watching this tape, it can only mean one thing. I'm dead. And our noble campaign to bring order to the town of Sunnydale has failed ... Utterly and completely.” He stands.
"But on the other hand, heck! Maybe we won," he laughs as he moves around the desk to stand in front of it. "And right now I'm on some jumbo monitor in the Richard Wilkins Museum surrounded by a bunch of kids sitting indian-style and looking up at me, their small faces filled with fear and wonder," he chuckles and leans forward. "Hi, kids!" Faith smiles knowingly at this. Wilkins’ voice takes on a serious tone as he leans on the edge of his desk. "But the realist in me tends to doubt it. Now, Faith, as I record this message you're … uh . . . sleeping. And the doctors tell me that you might never wake up. I don't believe that. Sooner or later you will wake up and when you do you'll find the world has gone and changed on you. I wish I could make the world a better place for you to wake up in but . . . tough as it is to accept we both have to understand that even my power to protect and watch over you has its limits. See, the hard pill to swallow here is that . . . once I'm gone . . . your days are just plain numbered." Faith blinks at his words. "Now I know, I know you're a . . . you're a smart and capable young woman in charge of her own life. But the problem, Faith, is that, uh, there won't be a place in the world for you anymore. Right now I bet you're feeling very much alone. But you're never alone. You'll always have me. And . . ." He picks up a small black box from his desk and holds it up for the camera. "You'll always have this," he chuckles. At this point Faith caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. Sitting up quickly she came face to face with the same small black box, held towards her by the woman. "Go ahead. Open the box," the mayor’s voice instructed her. Faith picks up the box and looks at it as the recording continues to play. "Don't worry. It's not gonna bite. That's my job." Looking back towards the screen, Faith sees him motion to her with his hand. "Go ahead! Open it!" Faith slides the panel of the box open and looks inside. "Surprise! See, you don't get these in any gumball machine. When you've been around as long as I have you make friends. And some of them can get neat little things like the one you're holding right now," Wilkins explained. Faith holds up the strange looking Orb to examine it. Then she glances at the screen. "And here's the good news -- just because it's over for me, doesn't mean my Faith can't go on with a clean slate," he smiles proudly at her as if he can see her. "These people will be able to help you find a new place in this world. I’m just sorry it can’t be the way we planned it."

(The world is really missing a big snake right now,) Xander commented.

Wilkins smiled at her one more time as the screen faded back to black.

Faith turned back to the Orb in her hand. "So how exactly are you supposed to help me with this?"

The Asian lawyer smiled, for the first time, before responding. "A felony arrest warrant from Sunnydale was issued in your name this morning. The physical description is quite accurate. The photograph, however, is . . . not flattering. You have a problem. Therefore we have a problem. This Orb will allow you to swap your body for another’s, either temporarily or permanently. But as you can imagine that in itself will not solve all your problems," he paused for effect before adding, "I had a perfectly good murder case go up in smoke yesterday and you seem to . . . have a certain expertise in that area. So to make a long story short, I think if a service is rendered we can be of use to each other."

The large man to his right added, "We’ll get you off."

Faith grinned before responding, "You don't know how many men have promised me that."

The grey suited woman interjected, "I'm certain you won't be disappointed in our performance."

"Who am I supposed to kill?" Faith asked cutting to the chase.
The Asian man leaned forward, "Please understand that we would never advocate the killing of another human being . . . His name is Angel. He's somewhat of a private . . . "

"No problem," Faith stated

The big man stepped forward, "Don't you want to know anything more?"

"Yeah. Besides getting me off, how much are you going to pay?"

The lawyer continued, "It might behoove you to know more about your intended. So, before we discuss remuneration . . . "

"Huh?"

"Payment," the big guy explained stepping forward yet again and laughing. "I want to make sure you understand that this firm is in no way connected to . . . anything you do. It's my ass on the line here. I don't want you to make me look bad."

Faith moved like lightning and grabbed him by the neck slamming his face on the table. "How do you look now?" she asked, as she kept pounding his face on the table.

The Asian man turns to the grey suited woman with a smile, "She shows initiative." He then turned to use his intercom. "Jesse, I think you better make it three for dinner instead of four."

The vision faded as Buffy lost hold of the slim thread that seemed to be all she could grasp, while her mind took in what she had seen. Something had seemed to take the thread.

As the vision cleared again, Angel appeared before them. He was sitting on a set of steps overlooking a large lobby with Cordelia by his side. Angel was staring at the floor, his brow furrowed with frown lines.

“You’re sure?” Angel asked without looking up.

“Yeah,” Cordelia replied, throwing him a concerned glance. “Sorry.”

Angel sighed and shook his head, “I can’t believe it. How could I not know?” He looked up to stare off silently, his face awash with deep thoughts. Whatever was going on, it wasn’t making him happy and there was something very personal about this in his expression. He looked like he had lost something very precious.

(Does the guy ever smile?) Xander asked.

(Shhh,) Giles hissed.
Cordelia remained silent. She didn’t seem to want to interrupt him. Buffy was rather impressed by her self-control.

“But at some point in time he’s going to hurt her if this isn’t resolved?” Angel asked, a certain desperation in his voice as if he didn’t want it to be true.

“Yes, at some point in the future. He’ll use it to hurt her, abuse and generally make her life hell,” Cordelia replied with such conviction that no one could have any doubt that she meant every word she was saying.

“I have to stop it from happening,” Angel replied, turning to look at Cordelia. “Just how do I . . .” he trailed off at a loss for words.

“Big guy, I don’t see this as an intervention that you’re really . . . you know, going to excel at. Maybe you should leave it to us girls. Not that we’re big on this kind of intervention but at least . . . you know,” Cordelia suggested, smiling warmly at him. “I think throwing you into the mix would pretty much rekindle stuff that would just get in the way.”


Cordelia gave him a very stern look which stopped him dead in his tracks before she raised an eyebrow and added, “Angel!” in her best school ma’am voice.

“Sorry. But I mean . . . how did I . . . not know? You’d think . . . I mean I thought we were . . . close. I should have known,” he rambled, almost muttering to himself raising one hand to place its palm to the side of his head. “You know how I feel about her.”

“Who doesn’t? But I’m pretty sure she’s never felt . . . this way before,” assured Cordelia before offering him a half smile in place of words she couldn’t find. “She may not even know it herself yet.”

(No!!) Buffy exclaimed, jealousy rising within her. Was Angel talking about Faith? The vision blurred as anger rose. How could he fall for . . . (No!!)
(Buffy?) questioned Giles.

(Faith! They’re talking about Faith,) Buffy almost screamed. Visions of the time she had seen the two of them at the mansion exploded in her mind. How could she ever have been so foolish?

(Buffy,) Giles called to her again, desperate to break her away from this train of thought.

(That Skanky Bitch,) Willow stated, speaking for the first time.

(Will?) Xander exclaimed, somewhat amused by Willow’s outburst.

(Will everyone just be quiet?) Giles almost boomed, before adding in a softer but strong tone (Buffy? Please listen to me. Will you try to concentrate? I know this is hard but we need to move past this vision. We need to move on.)

Buffy’s mind flew back to the balcony of Faith’s apartment. How had everything gone so wrong?

(Buffy,) Giles tried again. (You have to concentrate, take control. Concentrate on the Orb. Specifically how Faith got hold of the curse?) Suddenly inspiration came to him and he added (We need to know why she swapped you and Willow.)

(Willow?) Buffy asked, feeling herself drawn back, her mind slowly filling with the need, the desire and the promise to keep Willow safe. (Willow!)

(I’m right here,) Willow responded as if realizing that Buffy needed her to speak. (You need to concentrate on the curse and why she swapped us.)

At the sound of Willow’s calmer tones she regained her composure allowing her to concentrate and focus.

A room appeared before them. It looked dank and cold. Standing in the middle of the room was a somewhat short man slowly rolling up what looked like a large scroll.
“And this will throw the seer a view of the future? If a somewhat tailored view?” a voice asked from the darkness.

“Indeed,” confirmed the short man. “She will see just what you wish her to see and no more.”

“Thank you. Now I need to speak to you about one of our clients who will soon be visiting you for help,” the voice added.

“There is more? I was led to believe that this was all that would be required to secure the relic,” the short man complained, turning to look into the darkness as suddenly a tail seemed to swish from under his long coat when he turned.

(Did anyone else just see that?) Xander asked nervously.

(Shhh,) Giles instructed.

“Plans change. It will not be enough to just mislead them about him. We need to ensure that events develop before he regains his soul. That will require something more,” the voice explained.

“Has this been sanctioned by Holland Manners?” the short man questioned.

“This comes direct from the senior partner,” the voice advised as he emerged from the darkness. It was the same Asian man who had dealt with Faith.

(What the hell is going on? Who is this guy?) Buffy asked.

“Be very aware that unless the senior partner’s instructions are fully complied with, you will never see the relic,” the lawyer threatened in an uninterested even-toned manner.

(I think I know who they’re talking about – it’s Cordy,) Willow offered (they’re going to give her a false vision).

(Why?) Giles asked, (And what do Faith or the curse have to do with this?)
As their minds all flew to Cordy and Faith, the vision blurred and tilted. The colors seemed to lighten and soon a new scene unfolded before them.

Faith seemed to be carrying a pile of towels. Large white fluffy towels and a bottle full of bath oil. She was in Cordelia’s apartment, standing just outside her bedroom door. “Okay, are you ready yet?”

“Just tell me I have hot water,” Cordy replied.

“Yeah. Okay, all ready?” Faith asked, a slight annoyance in her tone. “Why do you feel you have to hide this from the guys?”

“Because it has nothing to do with them and you know it,” Cordy replied as she opened the door and gave Faith a raised eyebrow look. “Okay?”

Faith nodded, if a little begrudgingly. “So you ready?”

Cordelia looked away and nodded. “You sure you’re okay with this?”

“Babe, I’m five by five.”

Cordelia shrugged, “Okay then. Did you get the right one?”

“Will you just get in the bathtub and shut up?” Faith grinned.

Cordelia laughed and moved into the bathroom closely followed by Faith. As she entered, she removed her bathrobe -- to reveal that she was wearing only a thong. She stepped into the bathtub facing the tiled wall.

(Oh!) Willow and Buffy said in unison.
Oh, yes!!) Xander piped up, suddenly thankful that Anya was minding the shop.

(Xander!) Giles exclaimed, wondering exactly how you averted your eyes from a vision.

“Front or back first?” Faith asked, as she raised an aerosol can towards Cordelia.

(Front,) Xander pleaded.

(Xander!) exclaimed Willow and Buffy in unison.

“Back,” Cordelia replied.

“Okay.” Faith moved forward and raised the spray can. “How they haven’t noticed that despite working mostly nights you keep your tan up …,” Faith mumbled. “Detectives, my ass,” she added as she began to spray the tan over Cordelia’s back.

(Tan in a can!) Willow and Buffy yelped.

(What?) Giles asked.

(The faker!) Willow exploded. (Do you have any idea what I did to my freckles, trying to get a tan like that?) Willow moaned. (I looked like a giant “connect the dots” puzzle. I can’t believe … the big phony!)
Angel really wished he was anywhere else but in the middle of a dark damp swamp. He knew where he wanted to be, who he needed to see. But he also knew where he couldn’t be.

Recalling how he’d fallen in love with Buffy on that first day when he had seen her happily leaving her school. She had been innocent of her future, unaware of the world she now lived in or of her calling. A part of him wished it had never happened; that he had never seen her. Then all this pain would be gone.

She was leaving him. Her heart destined for another and his soul ached. Although he knew they had no future together, that he could never grow old with her, raise children, make plans, he had allowed himself to hope, to dream. Someday in the future he had seen them together, when all the practical barriers would miraculously be removed. But now …?

He stared sadly at the blue-grey insipid water that seemed to reflect his future. ‘Damn the Powers That Be. How could they allow this to happen? How could they let me feel about her the way I do? Knowing that she would only feel same way for a brief time? Knowing that she was destined to be with another? Wasn’t the gypsy curse enough?’

“Willow?” Could it be true? Surely he would have known, noticed somehow? He felt foolish and strangely naïve. There must have been something there, even then. How could he have missed it? When had he become so blind? Then again maybe Cordy was right. Maybe Buffy didn’t yet know how she felt.

He thought of Willow - quiet, self-contained, intelligent, caring, supportive and surprisingly strong. He tried to picture her holding Buffy, kissing her. He wanted the anger to rise within him, but it didn’t!

“Damn it!” He liked and trusted Willow. She’d fought to re-ensoul him. For Buffy. He would trust Willow with his own life and he had. She had done everything she could to give Buffy what she believed would bring the Slayer a chance at true happiness. She had tried to give Buffy the person she thought that her best friend loved above all others - him.

Had Willow suppressed her own longings just to make Buffy happy? Ignoring her own dreams and desires, pushing them aside to do what was right. How long had she denied herself for Buffy’s happiness? Wasn’t that what you did for someone you loved?

“Blast.” He knew the answer but he didn’t have to like it. He didn’t want to have to live up to it.

He recalled how Buffy had risked everything to rescue Willow from the Mayor against all their advice. And despite himself he knew that Willow would do the same for her. She had proved herself a loyal friend over the years. Who was he to doubt that Willow loved Buffy or that Buffy felt the same way? Looking back at events he wondered how it hadn’t occurred to him before.

After all he’d been the one that had left. He had removed himself from her for both their sakes. Had he actually believed she wouldn’t move on? He had told her to move on and he had honestly thought that he had been ready for her to do so.

Just not for a woman! He’d always thought it would be some boy; some juvenile college boy, immature and full of teen angst. Someone who could never hope to compete with a worldly wise vampire of his years; who could never share her battle with evil; who could never have their
connection.

But Willow! She’d been there fighting at Buffy’s side from the beginning. Supporting her, sharing the battle, the aftermath, the day to day living with Buffy’s calling. She, who had from the beginning been there to treat Buffy’s injuries, both physical and emotional, could always be by her side day and night. She’d become a powerful Witch, an ally. He respected her. How the hell was he supposed to compete with someone he respected? He wasn’t even sure that he could win if it came down to it and that shook him to his very core.

‘Oh God.’ Something terrible occurred to him. ‘What if Willow rejects her?’ All of his protective instincts rushed forward at the fear that anyone could reject and hurt his Buffy. But she wasn’t his any more! Cordy had said that they were soul mates. That Willow and Buffy were two old souls split apart by time, destined to seek each other out through every re-incarnation, every life time. She had used terms he had thought would only ever apply to Buffy and his love.

Okay this was the modern world; an era more open-minded than many of the eras he had lived through; than the era in which he had been raised. Buffy was hardly what you’d describe as a damsels, let alone a wench. As a young mortal he wouldn’t have known how to woo a woman such as Buffy. His centuries weighed heavily upon him, as a dusty coat, reminding him just how old-fashioned he was at heart, what little had changed within him.

True, he liked his women strong, confident, and even sassy but still very much in need of or attracted to his masculine strength. Darla, now there had been a wench of sass and fire, but she too had leaned upon him, deferred to him as he had come to expect his women would.

But modern women -- they expected so much more of him. Insight, thoughtfulness, emotion, support, equality among other things. And so he had learned their ways, opening himself up to a side of his nature he had never known, would never have known without them. He had lapped up their lives, their wants and needs so that he could be as close as he could ever be to touching them, knowing their bodies through their minds until it had all led him to this.

What did Buffy need from him anymore? She had been the one to pull him back from the edge, to make him face his humanity, to activate his link to the world and to challenge his place in that world. She had never needed his strength. She had needed his understanding of her calling and the life she had to lead, his support, his belief in her and her abilities. But Willow could give her all of that and more. Yes, she most definitely could.

‘Face it – you’re out of your depth.’

And who was he? What was he? How could he be other than what he was born to be? - A vampire. He tried to wear a mask, to give others an illusion of something that he was not. It should have sufficed that he could live with the mask but he knew what lay within, what he held within him, forever fighting to escape. He listened to it, almost reaching to it; he had lived with it for so long. What others considered his usual brooding was often nothing more than an internal conversation with his inner demon.

And as if he had called it, he heard its voice. ‘Don’t do yourself such an injustice, my dear boy, by forcing yourself into these shoes of humanity that do not belong to you and that can never fit. You live a lie. Feel the essence of who you really are. Live it and breathe it. Life is there to be taken as you and only you can. You try to live the life others wish you to live. Life is and should be a dreadful adventure - there for the tasting. Enjoy, savor each drop of life that crosses your path. You can walk my path firmly if you remain true to the essence of your being, true to me. Walk in my shoes. You know them so well,’ the voice suggested temptingly.

But Angel replied firmly, ‘This path that I am on will contain lessons and obstacles you are
incapable of appreciating but it is mine. My own life, without you, and the lessons I need the most can only be found by walking my own true path and not by walking in another's footsteps, especially not yours. Only I can find my truth. You cannot answer my questions for me.

The voice seemed to laugh! 'Even when you try another's shoes on for size, to sneak into their lives and find out who they are and why they are the way that they are, you know, dear boy, that the shoes will not be theirs as such. You will adapt them to your own feet by turning the situation and adjusting it so that you can see it from your point of view. For your feelings are never going to match theirs entirely and who would want them to? You'd have to drown in all that love,' it almost spat. 'Fine - walk in another's shoes, but remember who you really are. And just remember that I’m here – waiting. You have walked in my shoes before making them fit you, using them happily. Together we could make her ours.'

Angel let the truth of his demon’s words and the associated guilt sink in before he replied, 'Yours were a dead man’s shoes. I walked in them but I was never able to alter them. You are not who I am. This path, this life I may adapt to my feet and I will still have a better understanding of humanity than you ever did. My perspective will never be the same as yours. That’s what you’re afraid of; that I will learn to love humanity more than I already do and that I will be able to hold you in place forever. You only want to make them feel pain and to enjoy it, not to relieve their pain or make it easier to bear as I must,' he accused it before becoming reflective. ‘I used to think she felt exactly the same way that I still do, and I wish she still did but that’s not the way it is and nothing can make it so. I used to think I knew her but I would have had to get inside of her toes and crawl up inside her soul to know her the way you would want me to. But that would have stopped her from growing. She would have had to alter, change herself to suit me. I knew that it would have suffocated her very being, made her life impossible and burdened by my many crimes. I had to let her be who she was meant to be and what she was meant to become. By being true to herself, by walking her own path, growing and developing as she should even if that meant she would have to walk her life with another … she would have a life, her true life, instead of living one for me.'

It laughed at him, long and hard. ‘How stupid your pain is. It tastes like poison, sickly, selfless and sweet. You deny yourself what your very core wants.’

‘No, what I do is to allow what her very core needs. That’s how much I love her. You’ll never understand,’ he said shaking his head in despair.

Cordy was right. This was right. He finally understood. He accepted what had to be and his heart shattered as the tears flowed. Tears of sadness for what he had lost. Closely followed by tears of contentment at the knowledge that Buffy would now have what had always been missing from her life, what she needed to make her complete, what he could never provide. She would finally have the only person who could give all of this to her. And he allowed himself to be happy for her, because he knew that he would always love her and be grateful for what she had given him – love, humanity, friendship and trust.

As he let the tears fall, he accepted that he was ready to let her move on with her life and he felt content that it would be with the person he knew would always love her, would always take care of her and would always put her first - - Willow. He now knew that he would be ready, when the time came, to give them both his blessing and mean it. Then again, considering who and what he was maybe he would just give them his best wishes.

The demon retreated in the face of his newly found resolve.

**********************************************************BtVS**********************************************************

While the vision quest continued in the back room, Anya was relegated to the front of the Magic
Shop where she moved the cheaper candles further back and the pricier candles to the front of the shelf. She hated it when Giles tried to help with the displays since he seemed to completely ignore her frequent advice on product placement. He had no idea that it was all about appealing to the laziness of the customer, where and when ever possible.

Giles said he was listening and he even asked the odd intelligent question but he wasn’t really listening at all. He was doing that thing she had once seen a parent do to an annoying child – making noise in all the right places.

She’d told them that the curse was about sex but they had all tried to ignore her and even when they did get on board, no one said anything aloud. Xander had even given her a whole lecture on why talking about Willow and Buffy having had sex was another inappropriate topic of conversation. She was really getting pissed at the long list of things that she couldn’t talk about. She’d thought that Willow, with all her new found Lesbian knowledge and sexual experience, would loosen up about sex, talk about it, revel in its pleasures and joys, but oh no – it was all angst, shy, blushing, babbling and still with the shocked looks every time she mentioned the subject.

It seemed no one ever listened to her, except possibly about demons, curses, evil and such. It was like a weird kind of phobia that they just couldn’t get past. It really made her furious that everyone could forget or ignore the fact that Willow had been straight and was now gay, but oh no, they never forgot she had been a demon.

She occasionally wished she still had her powers, fondly recalling her first act as a full-fledged vengeance demon. Carloman, the King of Bavaria, was an old charmer who had little or no regard for the wife upon whom he so frequently cheated. D’Hoffryn had chosen her first charge perfectly. She recalled how the all-powerful king had whimpered and begged for her charge’s [his wife’s] forgiveness for his poor husbandry skills, for his dalliances. He had sought Anya’s advice, her counsel to better please his spouse. He had tried every trick he had ever used to keep from having to pay for his behavior.

Anya had watched in amused satisfaction at the familiar look that had filled her charge’s eyes. She had known he didn’t mean it. She had heard all these words before many, many times.

After an hour of pleading he had turned to accusation, blaming his wife for all his failings, accusing her of foul deeds until her charge had finally snapped and wished he would go fuck himself.

The shock killed him.

***************************BtVS***************************

Buffy watched the image before her in complete astonishment. ‘Cordy trusted Faith?’ She couldn’t get this obvious fact out of her head. Even with Willow still ranting over the fake tan, her mind was running at sixty miles an hour trying to make sense of what she was seeing. ‘I’m cool about my body but there’s a real short list of people I’d trust with a secret like that one. Let alone a job like that one,’ she stated to herself as she heard Xander calming Willow, as only he could. Suddenly her mind filled with images of her spray painting Willow. ‘Oh no! Not now!’

“We need to concentrate,” Giles said annoyance evident in his tone.

‘Oh no we don’t,’ thought Buffy as she desperately tried to chase the image from her mind. ‘Think Cordy. Think Faith. Think anything but this’

“Could we please try to focus? Thank you,” Giles stated as Xander and Willow attempted to reconnect with Buffy and the vision rod.
'Oh please, please,’ Buffy begged, her mind fearful of the vision that her thoughts could lead them to. ‘I wish I could just go back in time before I knew, before I felt like this.’

(Concentrate please,) Giles reminded all concerned.

Buffy threw her mind back to high school reaching out to the simple days. ‘Yeah, right!’

She saw a corridor begin to appear, a school corridor. Familiarity flooded over them as the corridor just outside the old Sunnydale high library came into focus. Peering in through the portholes of the library doors were two figures they immediately recognized -- Oz and Cordy, who seemed to be making no move to enter the library.

(Why are they staying outside?) Xander asked.

(Xander!) Giles said, his tone becoming more strained.

“Leave them to it,” Oz commented. Faint voices could be heard from beyond the doors.

“If it gets me out of the volunteer squad, I’m happy. My wardrobe is starting to suffer. Buffy should get a clothing allowance or something,” Cordelia responded, without turning to look at him. “I don’t know how she does it,” she added, her tone serious.

Oz seemed to stare at Cordelia for quite sometime before he turned and cast a look into the library. “It’s okay, you know,” he commented.

“Huh?” she responded with an absent-minded shrug of her shoulders.

“It’s easier here - on the outside. We’ll never really be in the in, you know. Much as they might try to make us feel like they are including us. And being jealous - that’s normal,” he explained.

“I just … I am not jealous,” Cordelia stated but as she looked at Oz she sighed. Turning back to the porthole for a brief moment she seemed to fix her gaze. “I see what she does … how much she gives up. But what can you do or say? She needs nothing that I can give her. Would I want to be her? No way. Do I look crazy? Who’d want to give up a future? Who’d want to have to hope that the friends and family you’ve got will stay with you … survive? Because that’s all you’ll ever have. And there’s nothing I can do to make it any easier. Like she’d ever let me.” Closing her eyes briefly she turned to look at Oz. “How do you cope? Hell, how do we cope? We’re always going to be second string, stepping aside so they can help her deal with the new big bad. And we know we’re doing it.” She shook her head at the futility of her annoyance.

“Yeah, but saving the world. That sorta makes stepping aside a given,” he pointed out.

“Well I think it sucks. Do you think they even realize? You know … how linked they are?”

“Nope … and I don’t intend to make them look too hard at it,” Oz replied in his casual manner. “I get to be close to her. That’s all I can ask. If I made her choose … I’m not sure …” Oz ended looking back into the room.

“Yeah …” Cordelia responded, returning her eyes to the group in the library. “Some choices should be ours.”

“But it will happen. Eventually we’ll leave because staying and always being on the outside will just hurt too much. They won’t mean to push us away but they will and we’ll let them,” he added.

“I’m not there yet,” Cordelia replied. “But sometimes when I see the way they are with each other
... you know. You don’t have to read minds to know …”

Oz gave Cordelia a side glance, his face briefly concerned. “So … we’ll leave them to it,” he said firmly, ending any further discussion on the topic.

“Yeah … I’m not really the hero type anyway. Anyone could tell you that. I don’t even know what I’m doing here,” Cordelia replied turning from the door and moving down the corridor. “Leave them to it.”

Oz watched her go and quietly he mumbled, “Walking away seems easy. But we never really will.” With that said, he briefly glanced into the library before turning to follow Cordelia down the corridor.
(He never said anything. I didn’t know,) Willow almost whispered her thoughts. (I wouldn’t have… I mean… I didn’t mean him to feel… Oh God! Did I do that to Tara too…?), the pain in her thoughts so acutely evident.

(Will. No, you can’t think like that,) Buffy interrupted, disturbed by the sadness and hurt in her best friend’s voice.

(But they left. They always seem to leave. Everyone leaves me…) Willow choked in response, forgetting that Xander and Giles were listening.

Buffy winced at the comment and the vein of truth that seemed to run through it. People did always seem to leave them. She responded quietly (I’m still here.) and then realizing who was listening she quickly added (We all are.)

(Too true. Let’s face it - the one time I tried to leave I didn’t get out of the state. Your stuck with me,) Xander piped up.

(Thanks guys, but you know what I mean,) Willow responded (Don’t you?)

(Indeed I do,) Giles acknowledged his thoughts injecting a tone of grief they all knew far too well and acknowledged as his loss of Miss Calendar. That he had voiced his feelings surprised the rest of the group.

They sat in silence for what seemed like ages staring at the fixed vision of the empty corridor that seemed to sum up their lives so far; the area just outside of the Library, where their journey had begun. Unable to see inside at the moment, they all remembered how it was to become a stage of sorts upon which they would play out the failures and successes of their early adolescent lives; their defeats and their victories; some of their saddest and some of their happiest moments.

(Hey, I’ve got Anya!) Xander suddenly exclaimed, slightly ashamed that it had taken him so long to think of her. (If I can find someone to put up with the weird and wacky B-movie feature that is “Scooby Ville” and me, you guys can’t give up hope. Can you?) Xander pointed out in a last ditch attempt to lift the ice cold feeling of despair that seemed to be overwhelming them.
Buffy found herself grinning. (He’s got a point,) she quipped. (I mean if someone, even Anya, is willing, despite everything, to take Xander on…)

(You mean… you know… the dress sense, the strangely large forearms and stuff. I mean if you’re into the construction type, sweat, hard hats…) Willow added, smirking and beginning to relax again.

Giles couldn’t help himself (And lest we forget the left over odor of… hmmm… hyena or is that soldier… No. Ahhh, it could be …)

(Hey!!! And I mean - Hey!) Xander spoke up indignantly.

The mood lifted as the three giggled and Xander growled. The image of the corridor began to fade.

(Oh, no! Everyone concentrate. Think of the Globe, about the curse before we lose the connection,) Giles urged them. (I know we’re all getting tired but we really must gather as much information as we can - now). He didn’t want to explain that he really only wanted one more thing made clear, that he pretty much had it all mapped out.

Before them the vision’s colors altered moving from the bright, clear tones that had filled the corridor to darker, colder, danker colors. As the image cleared, a dingy shop counter came into focus and behind it the short man they had seen earlier talking to that lawyer.

(What the…) Buffy muttered.

“Well my dear, you certainly seem to know all the right people,” the shopkeeper said appearing to look Buffy in the eye. Willow found herself staring at his eyes unable to put her finger on why they were different but knowing somehow that they were.

“Yeah, that’s me – know all the right people in all the low and wrong places. So can you do it?” Faith’s voice responded, so loud that it seemed she was at their shoulder.

(Jeeze…) Xander jumped. (She’s behind us, we’re between them, you need to…)
(I’m on it,) Buffy responded willing the vision to step to one side and turn to look back. Slowly the vision shifted until she was seeing the scene as it should have been. Faith was talking over the counter to the short man.

(Right, that’s better) Buffy said.

“Well it’s no easy matter but I guess you know that. The most difficult thing to acquire will be an Amber Orb of Ishtar. They are extremely rare and expensive,” he ended with a retailer’s glint in his eyes.

Faith looked at him, turning her head slightly to get the measure of the man, and then she scanned the dingy dark shop with its book-laden shelves and grey walls. “Yeah right, what’s so special about Izzy’s Orb?”

The short man managed to place a slim but tight smile of annoyance upon his face before replying, “The Amber Orb of Ishtar is a valuable object; greatly prized for it allows you to walk in another’s shoes. It is said that the Goddess Ishtar and her followers used it to punish her enemies by teaching them the joy, power and pleasure of being in a true woman’s body and then returning them to an inadequate male body. I could make a fortune on the internet...” he smiled wistfully before returning to business. “Of course I’m sure that I could acquire it for a very reasonable price.”

“No problemo. I already have Izzy’s Orb; great paper weight,” Faith stated smugly.

“Indeed,” he commented, holding back his desire to question her further as to just how a woman who looked like she did had managed acquire such a valuable item. Then it was as if he had remembered just who had sent her to him. “But of course. Well my dear, that will make things much simpler. I have been advised briefly regarding what you wish to achieve and I must say it is quite a novel way to use the Orb. A very generous, unconventional idea or, should I say, gift?”

“You could say that. I need to help two very important people get exactly what they deserve. I owe them on so many levels,” she stated with conviction. However the short man seemed unmoved by her words.

“And you feel that walking in each other’s shoes for a time will bring them what they deserve?” he questioned.

“It has other advantages, but yeah. That’s the general idea. I reckon a ‘get out’ clause that leaves no doubt would be good too,” Faith said smiling.
“And how long would you like the timescale to be? Say a deadline of a month?” he ventured.

“Jeeze! No way should it take that long. How dumb would they have to be to take that long?” she asked raising her eyebrows. Then looking to her left she did some considering. “Then again… when you look at how dumb they’ve been so far… Yeah, a month sounds good.”

“Okay. I can probably have something for you in about a day. I’ll need their names and any other details you have.”

Faith reached into her jacket and produced a folded piece of paper and handing it across the counter to the short man, she grabbed his outstretched hand. “Little man, this stink hole of a shop you have here doesn’t fill a girl with mega confidence and neither do you but some guys who should know what’s what pointed me your way. So I gotta figure you’re like the wolf-in-sheep’s clothing type, a rough diamond, you know,” she stated smiling. Then with threatening eyes she added, “But… if anything goes wrong and I mean if anything… even remotely iffy, let alone anything bad happens - I will be back to collect your head … just your head. You get me?” She held his hand very tightly, staring intently into his eyes waiting for his reply.

“Clear as a bell my dear. I assure you I have a very valid reputation to uphold,” he stammered, not quite looking her in the eye as he spoke.

“Getting this right means more to me than you can ever imagine, Pee Wee. Trust me when I say that this has to go five by five. I need to make it right. I owe them. Pissing me off with some half-assed curse will be a sure fire way to lose your head,” she threatened before finally releasing his hand. “I’ll be back. Have it ready,” she ordered before turning and walking out of the shop.

The short man watched her leave and as the door closed behind her, he leaned under the counter to bring his telephone onto the counter and dialed. Raising the hand set to his ear he waited, still staring at the door.

(So that’s how she came by the curse,) Giles commented.

(Why can’t she just let it go? What do I have to do to get her to leave me alone?) Buffy exclaimed. Her mind awash with Faith’s comments - her reference to giving them just what they deserved made a chill run through her entire being.
“Good, you’re in. I was beginning to wonder,” the small man commented. “She’s a little feistier than I normally like and the death threat wasn’t appreciated. I expect you to ensure that she will never able to deliver on it or the deal is off,” he paused listening to the voice on the other end of the telephone. “Yeah, I told her a day. I’ll have it camouflaged by then. I have enough detail to make her read just what she wants to read.” “I’m a professional and I’m not used to having the quality of my work questioned.” “You’ll just have to trust me. She won’t be able to see it.” “Yes exactly as specified. It should be quite something. I’ll await payment in the agreed fashion.” With that he replaced the receiver and turned to look back at the door. “Well my dear, it seems that you and your friends will come to pay for the disrespect you have shown Eoin Maclay this day.”

(What? What did he just say?) Willow asked, unsure if her ears had heard the shopkeeper correctly. A small part of her knew what he had said. But no! A larger part of her was sure that Tara would never have anything to do with this. She knew that they had parted as friends. ‘Hadn’t they?’

(His name seems familiar,) Giles commented and almost immediately realized why. Remorse filled him with the desire to crawl into a hole. (Ahh, yes well, I’m sure it’s coincidence,) he offered weakly.

(I don’t believe in coincidence,) Buffy pointed out.

(Okay, so there’s the whole butterfly theory. But I mean… guys… surely Tara would never… ) Xander commented hopefully. He was, however, becoming disturbed by the way all their exes just kept popping up in these visions. (Jeeze, is there anyone who doesn’t have an issue with us?)

The vision began to fade; colors bleeding away before them until another picture slowly formed. And suddenly before them stood the object of Willow’s ponderings -- Tara.

She appeared to be standing on the campus, behind a tree, looking across the grass. She was wearing a long blue skirt and light grey t-shirt, over her shoulder an old army style bag, bulging to its extremes. Her arms crossed as she cast her eye over a group sitting on the grass.

(That’s us,) Xander stated as if only he could see the vision.

(Will?) Buffy questioned, realizing that everyone knew roughly what was coming and rather annoyed that these visions seemed oblivious to the pain that they were going to cause her Willow.
(It’s okay,) Willow assured her. She couldn’t keep running away from this. She knew, on some unconscious level, that she had hurt Tara; that she had excluded her from part of her life, a very big and important part of her life, just as she had Oz. Ignoring this hadn’t really helped. It had only filled her with more guilt, unresolved issues and self-doubt than any Wiccan of her young years should have to carry. She had had enough of feeling like a disappointment to herself and others. Breathing deeply, she steeled herself to watch the vision unfold.

Tara’s face was so intense. All her energy seemed to be concentrated, as if she was bracing herself to watch. Then her eyes filled with such longing and pain until slowly tears seemed to form in the already red corners of her eyes. She took a deep breath, turning her eyes away from the scene before her, to swallow, wanting to push the tears down as if they could be held back. Raising her hand to her hair, she brushed a stray strand behind her ear before raising her eyes again.

Buffy was mesmerized by the woman before her. This was the first woman that her Willow had loved, the first person she had ever been jealous of. Buffy felt that she was nothing like Tara, who was soft, gentle, shy and yet quietly confident in her sexuality. She had an endearing stutter, the ample curves of a woman and a very feminine way about her. She recalled the first time she had met Tara; how easy she was to be with; how much she liked the girl. She searched for any small part of this woman that she could see in herself. Something about this woman had captured Willow’s heart; had attracted her Willow. It was this ‘something’ that she wanted so much to have.

There before Tara’s gaze sat Buffy, Willow, Xander and Giles; engrossed in their conversation and oblivious to all around them. Buffy steered the vision towards them, rather interested in what it was that Tara was watching. As she did so, Giles appeared to turn and glare at Xander and a giggle escaped from Xander’s mind, as he realized that he had probably just called him ‘G-man’. Meanwhile a glance of amusement passed between Willow and Buffy.

Xander seemed to be attempting calm Giles down as Buffy leaned into Willow to whisper something into her ear. As she did so she paused closing her eyes before she spoke. Whatever was said, Willow threw her head back and laughed, playfully pushing Buffy away from her.

Giles seemed to have moved his attention to the now giggling Willow and Buffy, who reacted to this by huddling together and raising their shoulders and palms in mock fear. With this Giles stood, delivered a parting shot and disapproving look before he moved off shaking his head.

Xander, opening his arms and turning his palms up, shrugged in an act of all innocence before standing and following Giles. Willow and Buffy watched him chase after the watcher, all the while leaning into each other and giggling.
The vision seemed to move back allowing them to see Tara’s face, as a single tear moved down her cheek and a look of longing and loss filled her eyes. Losing her rigid stance, she crumpled to the ground, never removing her gaze from the two figures on the grass. Shaking her head she nervously licked her lips, then breathing deeply she drew her bottom lip between her teeth.

Willow could see the sadness and despair filling her. She could see Tara was fighting it, refusing to give in. “Willow,” she uttered.

(I’m right here baby) Willow responded, forgetting for a moment that this Tara and this moment had passed.

“Oh Willow,” Tara mumbled as another tear fell, following the first on its slow journey down her face. “Goddess, how can she not know? Why do I have to know?” she asked in anguished tones, before pulling herself back to her feet. The tears were now flowing freely and her mouth had dropped open in sadness and resignation.

Taking one last look at the happy friends before her, she turned and ran blindly from the scene and almost into the path of some on-coming bicyclists. Swerving to avoid them, she collided with a tall male.

(Riley) Buffy said, identifying their Psych teacher’s assistant into whom Tara had run headlong.

“Whoa there! You nearly had me,” he stated, having gained a firm hold of her shoulders to prevent her from falling. Gazing at the tear stained face before him, he didn’t release her and instead he asked, “Hey, are you okay? Mmm, it’s... Sara, isn’t it? Willow’s friend?”

Riley’s misspeaking her name and his reference to Willow just seemed to set off the tears again. Tara vainly attempted to release herself from Riley but he didn’t seem to think that was a good idea. The concern in his face seemed genuine but none the less Willow felt the need to push him away from Tara.

“Hey. It’s okay. I’m not sure what I said but I seem to have added to your pain and that I have to fix. How about you let me find you somewhere a little less public to vent, chat or just plain cry if that’s what you need?” he asked quietly, smiling reassuringly at the tear stained woman before him. To everyone’s surprise Tara looked him in the eye and, after a short pause, she simply nodded.
(Who is that guy?) Xander asked.

(He’s a teacher’s assistant, a home-grown Iowa farm boy. He likes cheese,) Buffy explained, rambling as she realized how little she really knew about Riley. She recalled that he had seemed friendly and approachable but too good to be true and a tad square.

(What the hell is he doing?) she wondered out loud.

Willow watched as Riley placed a protective arm around Tara and moved her towards the edge of the Campus grounds to a little café that she knew the vegetarian students frequented. Guilt and fear filled her. She knew that she wanted to hear what Tara was thinking but she wasn’t sure that she wanted to know that someone who was still on Campus already knew. As much as Willow had grown to like Riley, she wished that he wasn’t here for this. She tried to remember if he had been any different towards her lately but nothing came to mind. This didn’t relieve her concerns since she knew she had been pretty self-obsessed after Tara left.

The vision began to fade as Buffy subconsciously released her grasp on it. (Buffy, hold on to the vision!) Giles exclaimed realizing, with embarrassment, that there was something about this that needed to be seen by both Buffy and Willow.

(Will, do you want me to go on with this?) she asked opening her eyes to look at her best friend, ignoring her Watcher’s instructions. Willow simply nodded. Buffy nudged the time line along and decided in that moment that this would be the last damn vision.

“You need a drink? Some water?” Riley asked as he placed Tara at a quiet table near the back of the almost empty café.

“W-w-w water,” she replied.

“Okay. I’ll be right back,” Riley stated reassuringly before he left her and headed to the café counter.

Returning to her with two glasses of water, he placed them on the table and took the seat opposite her. “So Sara…”

(Jeeze,) Xander exclaimed.
“T-t-t Tara,” she said, looking up briefly.

“Wha… Oh hell, sorry. I’ve no head for names,” he apologized, offering her an apologetic grin. “Sorta explains why I’m not majoring in History.”

Tara almost smiled.

“So, I’m guessing it’s not the Cubs losing by eight runs that brought you to tears,” he began. “I’ve seen you in Psych with Willow and Buffy. I know that you’re all friends. Do you want me to see if I can find one of them?”

“No!” Tara exclaimed, for once losing her stutter in her certainty. “No, I just… this is f-f-fine. I just… I let it all g-g-g get to me, that’s all.”

Riley’s face made it clear he didn’t have a clue what she was going on about. But he nodded none the less. “Yeah, that can happen,” he agreed before adding “Trouble is… it can keep happening if you don’t face it.”

“I know,” Tara responded.

(He’s like mini Professor Walsh,) Buffy commented before she could help herself.

“So what are you going to do?” Riley asked.

“I d-d-don’t know,” Tara responded with a lost look in her eyes.

(We could have talked,) Willow offered sadly.

“I almost have what I want, but I … there are just some things I can n-n-n never change,” Tara explained.
“I seem to remember some clever quote that says we should find the strength to change the things we can, the courage or something to know the things we can’t change, but… oh yeah… the wisdom to know the difference,” Riley responded.

Tara looked at him strangely and then she slowly nodded. “Yeah, I guess that’s why I was crying,” she explained. Seeing the questioning look on his face, she paused in thought before adding “I’ve just realized this is one of those ‘know the difference’ cases. Something I want to not to be true, so that I can keep what I have. But something that will always be true no matter what I do.”

“Sounds tough,” Riley commented. “So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t really know. I c-c-c could try and learn to live with knowing that they… w-w-w with the truth,” she said, her tone wavering with emotion.

“That doesn’t sound like the easy option,” Riley stated, apparently having picked up the change of tone in her voice.

“Yeah... But at least I’d have part of what I want,” she responded in her defense.

“Would just ‘part’ be enough?” Riley asked.

“I c-c-c could make it enough. I mean… I know the truth but I’m pretty sure they don… I m-m-m mean as long as… s-s-s she’s h-h-h happy,” Tara stumbled.

Riley raised an eyebrow at her slip but apparently realizing that discretion was the better part of valor, and that an inquisition was the last thing Tara needed, he didn’t comment except to ask “But would you be happy?”

Tara glanced at her still full glass of water in response and soon the tears were falling again as she silently shook her head.

Realizing that the answer to his question was no, Riley leaned forward. “The good things don’t usually make someone nice like you cry. So I have to ask if this is really the best thing for you. I don’t think you can cope with and I don’t think that you should have to settle for having … just part of what you need. No one should.”
Tara didn’t respond and realizing that she needed time to think, Riley sat back and let her have the room she needed.
Finally Tara spoke, mostly to herself and almost in a whisper. “But I see their auras. They m-m-m match,” she sighed. “How can I ignore t-t-t hat? Despite what people think… you can’t ignore how you feel about someone just because … others won’t approve… others won’t understand. Maybe they’ll figure that out one day?” She shook her head and sighed sadly, “But it’s not like either one of them has realized yet. They may never figure it out. I could be giving up everything for n-n-n no reason, couldn’t I?” she questioned herself.

Riley’s expression became strange as he realized she was talking about a relationship. His brow furrowed, as he appeared to be running back over the conversation, trying to spot clues that might indicate who she was talking about. He had never seen her with anyone but ‘Buffy, Willow and that non-student guy… Oh, and the older English man…’ His eyebrows shot up in concern at that last thought.

(Oh yeah, he’s in the zone. I feel for the guy. Talk about being out of your depth,) Xander commented, not realizing the actual object of Riley’s concern.

(Shh) Giles hissed, torn and wracked with guilt for wanting Tara to voice her fears, to say it out loud so that he wouldn’t have to do it himself. But also feeling for Tara as he had grown to like her quiet ways and understated intelligence. He wished her no discomfort or pain, and truly hoped that they were misjudging Riley’s reaction.

Tara fell into another momentary silence before adding, “But I’d know. It would be like cheating; stealing happiness that should not be mine but should belong to another; keeping something I should never really have had; that was never really m-m-mine. But Goddess, their auras… They tell me all I really need to know. Any half decent reader of auras could recognize it. Goddess, almost anyone could see it if they only bothered! But people just seem to close their eyes to this kind of love,” she exclaimed, her anger and frustration evident.

Riley stared at her for what seemed like an eternity before he bit the bullet and responded, “I’m not quite sure that you feeling that you know something is going to happen means it’s actually going to happen. Maybe this is more about your fear of it happening.”

“No it isn’t. I m-m-mean… okay I’m scared… of c-c-curse I am. I mean I could lose h… Loving someone is about wanting h-h-h happ-happiness, right?” she asked, staring at her glass of water. “And I’m m-m mostly happy. I know I am and I know I could go on being… m-m-mostly happy. It’s just that I know I’m not the Ying and that’s what I w-w-want to be, what I n-n-need to be. I want more.” She looked up at Riley briefly before dropping her eyes again. “You know… Ying and Yang, the natural blending of two souls, two opposites? Well, I know I’m not the Ying and I think I kn-kn-know who is. We… we’re like t-t-t two mostly Yangs. Oh, and it’s knowing who her Ying should be, who it is, who it h-h-has to b-b-be.”

Riley’s expressions showed that he was amused by her ramblings but his expression quickly changed as he picked up on the gender that had been mentioned in that last comment. As a thousand thoughts seemed to cross his face, his eyebrows became more mobile than Roger Moore’s during his entire incarnation as Bond. Finally his face froze as the pieces fell clearly into place – his eyes grew wide and a slight red tinge grew under his skin. He suddenly sat upright, his relaxed and welcoming posture gone. He simply nodded blankly in response to Tara’s last comment, unaware that she wasn’t even looking at him.

“I mean I was the foolish one who thought… you know, being the first meant… well, being the
first. How stupid was that?” Tara said her anger rising at the unfairness of the situation.

“You… you’re… Her? So you think… your…” Riley grappled for the right thing to say, “partner” almost whispering the word in case he had misheard her previous comment, “is cheating?” Seeing the look of anger that suddenly flashed across Tara’s face, he quickly retracted “NO… you think …” His face desperately trying to remember what she had said “You think your… partner could have feelings… for someone else!” he finished, as he finally understood.

Tara nodded, as an unhappy mix of the anger and sadness fought for control of her.

“And you think you know who … your partner has feelings for? But you’re not sure if it’s real?” Riley faltered.

Tara again nodded.

“If it isn’t …” he said moving on hesitantly, like a barefoot man walking on broken glass.

“Why can’t I be her Ying?” Tara pleaded plaintively, ignoring Riley, talking mostly to herself and the glass of water, dropping all gender avoidance and transposition, seemingly forgetting Riley was even there.

Riley stared intently at Tara as she continued to talk to herself and the glass. His expression partially bemused, he seemed to be fighting some inner confusion. He shook his head slightly, then squinting he stared at Tara again before allowing a slight small stupid smile to cross his face.

(Oh boy, he’s just hit oil,) Xander observed, complete understanding in his tone.

(Xander) Giles hissed again.

The smile turned to a smirk leaving no doubt in anyone’s mind that Xander was right.

(Oh no!) Buffy exclaimed as all her own fears threatened to engulf her. She wanted to close her eyes, she wanted to spare herself, to spare Willow from seeing some sexuality-challenged Neanderthal use his size twenty-five homophobic feet to stomp on Tara’s life choice. To subject her to his fantasy-riddled concepts of what two women together meant. She wanted to stop seeing herself as Tara; to stop hearing the words she knew would come her way from a thousand unsought advisors hell-bent on helping her to be normal. If only they knew.

“She doesn’t know… she can’t. She’d never do anything that cruel. No, no…” the blonde witch shook her head as she mumbled for a while, her voice below a whisper. “Oh goddess, please don’t let her have chosen me knowing… I don’t deserve this.” The tears flowed again.

In a moment of apparent maturity, more than welcomed by the group observing this vision, Riley wiped the silly grin from his face, as he observed the tear stained face of the woman before him, allowing the gravity of what he had been talking about to sink in.

“After everything… all her… am I… aren’t I… c-c-c could I be? S-s-s so left out of her life… the strange looks… awkward silences… unasked questions… chased by a werewolf…” Words failed her.

Riley’s face became unreadable until his expression slowly evolved into something akin to a deer caught in the headlights of an eighteen-wheeler.

“Tara?” Riley called, “I have the feeling that I’m… well, I’m… Look, I don’t exactly have a great relationship record myself,” he pointed out; still sitting well back from the table he had previously
been leaning across. He looked like he was ready to cut and run.

(Oh thank heavens,) Buffy said as she realized he’d got over the idiot smirk and mental fantasy attack that seemed to overcome any man the minute you mentioned two women.

“I love her. She w-w-w-would never… no… She c-c-can’t know. Because if she knew… that would be evil. I could never forgive…” she declared, falling into silence. “What did you say?” Tara asked foggily as she suddenly realized that Riley had spoken.

“Look it’s not like I have anything against… it’s just I don’t really know how… well I could guess ho…” He shook his head to remove the rest of that sentence. “Not that I’ve avoided or have any hang ups about… what two people choose to do in the privacy of their own…” he continued to ramble.

(Oh yeah, he’s gonna say it,) Xander stated, sadly shaking his head.

“Look, some of the guys I tutor are gay… and that’s fine by me. But I don’t… I mean… If you thought I was being nice because… not that it would be bad to be… but I’m… I’m straight,” Riley explained, his skin becoming paler and paler not to mention sweatier, as he spoke.

(Oh Jeese, he said it!) Xander exclaimed.

Tara looked at him as if he had grown a second head.

“I just think that maybe you need to find someone who… maybe has some experience in this field. You know…”

Tara’s face showed that she was unraveling his comments, momentarily leaving her own thoughts. As she stared at him the recognition flew across her face… “Oh!”

“You seem a really nice girl… I mean I like you… I’m just not sure that… if you just think about it… you probably have plenty of friends who could… help. You know, be more understanding. Do a better job than… me,” Riley offered.

“Sure. I’m sorry. I just n-n-n needed to unload a little,” she responded, her cheeks reddening. “You seemed kind… I mean you w-w-w were kind… to listen. Sorry,” Tara said, her shoulders sagging.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. I just… I don’t think I’m the right person to help you with this. If I was any help at all, but…” he responded apologetically. Standing, the relief at being let off the hook evident in his expression, he smiled at her, “You’ll be okay?” he asked, his shoulders stiff and his posture rigid. It was obvious he didn’t want to be told that he should stay.

“Yeah. It’s okay,” Tara replied, her tone flat and her eyes glazed.

Before turning and leaving her alone, Riley offered her another apologetic smile.

(Poor stupid schmuck,) Xander accused, understanding mixing with annoyance at the failure of a fellow male.

(How could he leave her like that?) Willow asked, hardly able to contain her anger.

(I think it’s probably best he did. I don’t believe that he was helping,) Giles commented sadly.

Willow wanted to scream at the scene before her. Tara was now sitting alone. At a table in a now practically empty café. No one to talk to… because of something she had done.
Lightning seemed to strike the vision as white became all they could see. They all flinched.

(Who the…? What the…? Tara?) Willow questioned, her voice filled with concern.

Buffy struggled to keep her hold of the vision so that as it slowly returned they saw him standing before Tara; a tall man in floor-length robes. Well, at least he looked male. Two horns atop his bald head and a whispy beard appearing from his jaw line, with two Japanese drops, plus the blue demon skin, which left no one with the feeling that his appearance was a good thing.

(Oh no,) Xander exclaimed as he recognized Anya’s ex-employer. (That’s D’Hoffryn.)

(Who?) Buffy asked, warily studying the ugly-faced tall man as he moved towards Tara.

(Anya’s ex-boss. She pointed him out in a book once,) Xander explained.

(Oh great. Just what we need,) Buffy observed.

Tara sat back abruptly in her chair as the demon moved to stand before her. “Wha… w-w-w-what do you want?” she asked nervously.

“You have much anger and pain. Your magic is strong, but your pain — it's like a scream that pierces dimensional walls. We heard your call,” he answered.

“I didn’t m-m-m mean to…” she apologized, inching away from him.

“Do not fear me, sister. Our intention is not to quash your demon potential — quite the contrary,” D’Hoffryn assured her.

“I… p-p-p potential?”

“Come now my dear. You must be aware that all in your family line have the potential that would allow them to join the lower realms. I have noted the pains you take to hide your demon potential; to fit into this realm,” he stated, sounding irritated at having to even mention the subject.

“But… I’m g-g-g good… I’m not… you’re wrong. I keep t-t-t that in check. No one knows… even she… I’ve n-n-n never… I would never…” Tara protested.

(She what? She’s what?) Willow jumped in.

(Will, calm down. I’m sure it’s not the way it sounds,) Buffy offered

“The pain and suffering you wish upon those you love, who have betrayed you, is inspiring. You have the potential to join us in Arash Ma’har,” he stated with quiet confidence.

“No! No wishing! T-t-t-there has been no wishing,” Tara assured him, a small amount of guilt and fear tarnishing the conviction of her words. “Oh, Goddess. But I didn't mean to! I didn’t… I only thought it once,” she admitted in a very small voice.

(Noooo!) Willow yelped in anguish. How could she have made sweet, caring Tara think…, let alone wish…? Bad Willow, she chastised herself internally.

“Indeed, you did. And your power brought that one painful thought to my ears. Quite a feat for one so young,” D’Hoffryn praised. “You will make a fine vengeance demon. I feel sure that your first act of vengeance will prove very… enlightening. It will be a pleasure to assist you in vanquishing the two who cause you such pain.”
“No, please!” Tara begged. “You can’t… you d-d-d don’t understand…”

“It is not my concern. You are my interest in this matter,” he stated dismissively.

“I-I-I don’t wish to… offend you. I mean, your offer is v-v-v very kind, but… I do not want you to hurt them,” Tara explained emphatically, steeling herself to look at him as he towered above her.

“My dear girl, I heard your thoughts,” he said, a patient tone entering his voice.

“That was just a moment’s m-m-m madness; a loss of the spatial awareness. But to h-h-h-harm them – NO! They don’t know,” Tara explained.

“Do you truly expect me to believe that these two souls, so perfectly matched, are ignorant of their linked karmas; of their natural attraction? I have not kept my position for over 200 years by believing that such innocence exists. Mankind is by nature duplicitous,” he protested. “If they have fooled you, then perhaps you are not the one I seek.”

“But they honestly don’t know. They may never know. They’re not trying to fool me. If anyone, they’re fooling themselves. I see the way they f-f-f fit, the lengths they go to, the things they risk, their choices, their commitment. The unspoken conversations,” her eyes saddened as she spoke, “the unconscious looks and glances, the joy at meeting, the d-d-d- discomfort at parting. I’ve accepted it, but she doesn’t know. Neither of them know.” Tara finished.

“But she shares your tastes, my dear. Do you believe her so honest that she would not be with another woman?” he asked.

(I didn’t, baby,) Willow whispered.

“Not in that way. N-n-n no. She would never… Willow… my Willow would never do that. I know her. I love her. I could never feel this way about her if I didn’t believe… if I didn’t know that,” Tara insisted, fighting back the tears.

“And the other? Do you know her that well also?” he questioned.

“I know her aura, her calling. I know her. I… like her. She’s… a… g-g-g good soul. And I know… she hasn’t realized… it escapes her. And if she knew…” Tara floundered momentarily, “her own fears and her sense of honor would prevent her…”

“I see,” D’Hoffryn said his tone somewhat disappointed. “It seems I have wasted my time.”

“I’m sorry… truly… I am. But I only want her to be happy… a-a-a and if that means I have to let her go… if t-t-t that means I have to feel like this…”

“It will, my dear. Be assured of that. Every great sacrifice is painful. To waste such pain… oh well. Here is my talisman, if you ever change your mind.” He held the talisman out to Tara who accepted it. “You can just give me a call.”

“Thanks,” she said nervously.

D’Hoffryn started to leave but paused and turned to ask, “Are you sure?”

“Willow’s in love with B-B-B Buffy… and I c-c-c can’t fight that,” Tara stated, in a hollow voice. (Well finally…) Xander exclaimed, losing control of his thoughts.

(Xander) Giles hissed, lashing out to hit him across the top of his head.
(Ha…) Xander protested before realizing his faux pas and shutting up.

(Huh?) was all that Buffy managed, as her mind seemed to explode.

“As I said, the offer will remain open my dear,” he offered, his tone sympathetic, as he turned and vanished into the pillar of smoke that had appeared to greet his exit. Leaving Tara alone again…

Willow released the vision rod as if it was a poisonous snake, jumping back from the group. Buffy had lost her already tenuous grip on the vision and, in her numbed state, made no attempt to regain it.

Xander gently removed the rod from Buffy loose grasp, placed it on the floor and turned to Giles. With the slight movement of his head, he indicated that they should leave.

Giles stared momentarily, still annoyed at Xander’s outburst, before he realized the wisdom of the young man’s suggestion. He nodded and stood to follow, the for once quiet and tactful, Xander back into the shop.
Chapter 19

After closing the door to the training room, Xander turned to Giles and said, “I didn’t see that coming.” Although part of him wanted to listen in on the conversation that would soon occur behind this very door, he resisted and returned his attention to the older man.

“Indeed,” Giles commented, recalling the shock, guilt and fear that had crossed Buffy’s… no Willow’s… what had Xander and Anya called her earlier… Ahh yes… Wiffy’s face. “Willow seemed… Hurt?” he questioned, a sadness filling him as he accepted his own guilt at wishing for someone else, anyone but him, to open this subject… to say the words. And Buffy… Bullow?... seemed so lost… upset… helpless… scared.

“Poor Tara. Seems once you fall for Willow, you stay fallen,” Xander reflected, briefly remembering his own lapse with the red-haired witch. “Oh boy, is Willow gonna go big on the guilt. She’s not good with even thinking she could hurt others. There was a whole six months of remorse and fasting when she found out about what happened to the cute dolphins, tunas and seals when they were caught. Even though she never liked eating fish to begin with,” he recalled.

Giles nodded ignoring Xander’s attempt at a little [very little] comic relief but accepting the truth of his earlier observation. He moved towards the study table and sat, resting his arms on its surface and losing himself in thought. Past images of Tara, smiling quietly in the corner as the group discussed and planned, filled his mind. He recalled how happy he had been that he never had to engage in post-teen polite conversation with the girl. She always seemed happy just to listen, something he wished the rest of his charges did more often, or even at all.

Xander sat opposite him and waited. He knew that the series of visions they had just endured were going to take more than a nano second to sort out. He watched as Giles took his glasses off, tapped them against the back of his hand and revisited the disturbing succession of visions that they had just witnessed. A half-smile crossed Giles’ face as he realized that once again he was taken aback by the intimacies of their lives and how events often led them to share these with each other.

“It would seem that we have an outside party who appears more than a little intent on affecting the natural order of events by distressing the Slayer and those closest to her. However, why is as yet to be determined,” Giles absentmindedly commented to no one in particular.

“Kinda got that. The whole lawyer and ‘curse within a curse’ thing, right? So we’re looking for a lawyer. Maybe some old pal of the Mayor’s with a grudge?” Xander suggested. “Great! All we want to do is move on but oh nooo - here comes another big snake.”

“I’m not sure that anything we have seen would infer another serpentine manifestation. However, there does appear to be a maleficent power at work. So the possibility of a connection to the Mayor should be investigated. Faith appears to have been central to their plan,” Giles commented recalling Faith’s visit to the law firm and the reappearance of that same lawyer with the shopkeeper that had provided the spell to the dark-haired slayer.

“I hate to be the one to point this out but it doesn’t seem that Faith is really part of the whole ‘curse within a curse’ thingy. I get the feeling there’s a mega evil subplot here that has nothing to do with her. And if every B-movie I’ve ever seen is anything to go by, it means that they are about to attack the intelligent but charming sidekick who figures out what’s going on,” Xander predicted nervously. “I think we need to call in reinforcements.”

“Xander? Indeed, it would seem that Faith might not be responsible for the ‘curse within a curse’.
The events we have witnessed would lead me to believe that possibly Faith was duped. Merely used as a delivery system. As a way of assuring that the curse, that is their hidden curse, would reach Buffy and Willow. It would seem we have two agendas in play, neither of which I am completely sure we understand,” Giles pointed out, as Anya joined them after the last customer had left the shop. “Perhaps we should consider the possibility that when Faith stated that she was sent here by Cordelia and Angel, there may actually have been some grain of truth to her statement.”

“You mean you think she was telling the truth?” Xander asked, raising his eyebrows in disbelief. “Oh boy, is that gonna suck.”

“Indeed. However I wouldn’t go that far just yet. It may be prudent to call LA again,” Giles pointed out.

“Great another expensive long-distance phone call,” Anya grumbled.

Acknowledging Giles’ reservations and ignoring Anya’s comment, Xander agreed that the ex-Watcher should call LA, even though his instincts [as well as Faith’s earlier secret visit] told him that Giles was probably correct about the dark-haired Slayer. “Cordy did seem… well… close to Faith,” Xander affirmed unable to stop his mind from wandering back to the tanning scene.

Anya looked at him oddly.

“Yes, she did. But what really concerns me was Cordelia’s reference to a future event that they had to prevent. Angel seemed angered by the vision to which Cordelia referred but he also seemed strangely loathed to become involved, which did concern me. I now believe that was mainly because of his feelings for Buffy. We have to seriously consider that Faith was, indeed, sent in his place. Cordelia seemed to infer it was… woman’s work?” Giles pointed out, somewhat relieved that he was talking to Xander and not the girls, who were sure to take offence at this interpretation of events. “And if, as I believe, the purpose of Faith’s curse was to assure that Buffy and Willow admit… how they feel, then that would explain Angel’s reluctance to be the messenger. However, the choice of Faith as the messenger somewhat puzzles me.”

“Yeah, she’s not exactly a cupid stereotype.” He recalled sensing a brief softness in Faith only once but his own lack of confidence and insecurity had given him no clue as to how to deal with the high walls she put up. He’d watched her defenses go up like lightning at his fumbling, youthful approach the morning-after. He had been unable to bring down her walls and clearly remembered his embarrassing exit. “I mean, I never really saw her as big on the whole true love thing, you know,” Xander explained. He could feel the sense of having missed a moment that morning when maybe he could have said something… done something to make a difference with Faith. Maybe if he had …

Out of the corner of his eye he caught Anya staring at him and a cold splash of reality shook his mind into the here and now.

“Agreed. Faith’s past would not lead any of us to believe that her true calling was that of a matchmaker. I believe that there is far more to her motive than meets the eye,” Giles stated, replacing his glasses and fixing Xander with a determined stare. “Before Buffy and Willow emerge, we must consider what our next move should be.”

“Where are they?” Anya asked, having had enough of quietly listening.

“They had to talk. Something sorta came up during the visions. It’s… well… a personal thing that needs discussing. You know, the kind of thing we talk about when we’re alone,” Xander explained.
“Oh, you mean they’re talking about sex,” Anya commented with a gleeful grin.

Xander sighed. “No. It’s a personal talky thing. About their feelings.”

“Oh, that’s great.” Anya exclaimed. “So how did it come up? What did they say? Who said it first? I bet it was Willow.”

Ignoring her questions he turned to Giles and agreed, “I’m thinking a call to LA while they’re still busy in there is the best way to go.”

“Agreed then.” Standing Giles moved towards the counter, only to find Xander following him. He halted and placed a hand on Xander’s shoulder. “While I do this,” he said indicating the phone, “I think you need to talk to Anya before… they emerge.” He gave Xander a stern warning look over his glasses.

“Gee thanks,” Xander grimaced, turning back to see Anya’s eagerly questioning face. Xander prepared himself to tell Anya about the vision quest and what she shouldn’t say to the two when they came out of the back room.

Buffy stared at the floor before her as a strange jelly belly thing seemed to come over her. She shivered as the feeling seemed to be spreading from the pit of her stomach to her extremities and goose bumps climbed up her arms in response. Her mind was numb with shock as she tried to formulate thoughts but none came. Fear stopped her from raising her head to look at Willow. If someone was to ask her how she felt – she would have no response – just a blank stare. She wanted to ask someone else to explain, someone else to order her thoughts, she wanted help but the one person she would normally ask was the one person she couldn’t.

‘Willow? Tara? Something important was said.’ She struggled to reclaim reality; regain control. Her hands lay palms up in her lap. She stared at them, willing movement but even blinking and concentrating didn’t help her. Her hands stayed as they were. She had felt like this once before - after that beer episode when she had found small insignificant things distracting.

Willow stared at the brick wall as yet another tear joined the now saturated route down her cheek. ‘She knew… Oh god I’m such a bad, bad person. Evil… to do that… But I didn’t know… I mean I cared but I didn’t know that I CARED. Oh Tara, my dear sweet Tara… I’m so s-sorry,’ Willow offered her thoughts up to the world, hoping that someone somewhere would interrupt or take over. She felt as if the whole world knew. She could feel the eyes of the world looking at her, their expressions saying that they didn’t believe her. ‘But I didn’t know. Not then… not for ages. I mean I cared, but there are many levels to caring. You can easily fool yourself… that it’s best friend love but you don’t know you’re fooling yourself. I can lie to myself quite convincingly. I’ve done it for years… and I’ve done it really well… not to say I knew I was doing it. Hello, I had a boyfriend. Oh I’m so bad… bad, bad, bad.’ She saw her grandmother, staring over those tortoise shell half-rim reading glasses that she seemed to have glued to her face whenever she used to visit, with that all too familiar look that said “I know you’ve been up to no good”. ‘B-b-b-b… but I…’. She had no comeback.

‘Tara said that Willow’s in love with me!’ The memory slammed into Buffy, roughly knocking her back into reality. Her jaw dropped and she finally turned to stare at her Willow. What she saw tore at her heart --- the tear-stained face, the guilt-wracked eyes, and the sorrow. And the thousand and one questions she had ready to ask suddenly dried up in Buffy’s mouth.
Giles dialed LA slowly still formulating what he was going to ask. Hitting the last digit, he turned to see Xander sit down next to Anya. ‘Now there’s a conversation I’m pleased to be missing,’ he thought.

The ring tone began and he waited. After four rings he heard a click and the unmistakable background noise of an answer machine recording. “You have reached Angel Investigations. We help the helpless. No one is available to take your call at the moment. But if you leave your name and number, we will get back to you as soon as possible,” Cordelia’s recorded voice advised him. He sighed in frustration and waited for the inevitable beep.

“Hello. This is Giles. Cordelia, I need you to ring me as soon as you get this message either at the Magic box or at home. I need to talk to you about Faith. Urgently! Thank you.” And with that he replaced the receiver. “I hate those damn things.”

Frustrated he turned back to Xander and Anya, only to be confronted by a customer with his purchase in hand. “Is this third or fourth dynasty?” the man asked, pushing a Takani figurine before him.

Buffy moved slowly towards Willow. She had to know - was Tara right? Fear gripped her and her stomach turned. Her mind raced as she inched towards Willow. Suddenly, the witch glanced towards her. Willow’s eyes filled with such sadness that Buffy was immediately lost in the need to ease her pain.

“Will?” she asked with concern.

“Buffy… Oh Goddess… I didn’t know,” she responded, lost in her thoughts of the pain she had inadvertently caused Tara.

“I know,” Buffy responded, reaching out and gently touching Willow’s arm. “I know,” she said, knowing that she herself had had no clear idea then. She hadn’t figured it all out back then. Suddenly feeling as if somehow she was to blame, she withdrew her hand from Willow’s arm. She had no right to expect anything. She was partly to blame for the pain Willow now felt… and for the pain Tara had felt then and might still be feeling. If she had only hidden her growing feelings better, Tara would never have known.

“I drove her away, just – just like Oz,” Willow stated. “We…”

“No, Will. I don’t believe that’s true. This wasn’t about… pushing her… or him… out. This was about…” Buffy tried to complete the statement but words escaped her.

“But we… we always drive them away. Didn’t you see?” Willow questioned, referring to the earlier vision of Cordy and Oz. She desperately wanted to move the conversation away from Tara’s last comment.

“Maybe we do… but unintentionally. We’re so caught up in each other and what we do. What I do…,” she said the last guiltily, angry at herself for once again being the cause of Willow’s pain. “We always have been. But I can’t believe Tara left just because she… felt that way,” she added.

“B-b-b but she said she never felt part of… the gang,” Willow said lamely. “I tried. I know I did. But I kept us to myself for so long. I so wanted her to be something that was separate… from… you know… all the badness, the danger. Was I wrong? Did I keep her from it for too long? Did she
get the idea that I was… hiding you… us... the scoobies… that part of my life from her?” she babbled.

“No, Will. It’s only natural to want to protect those you care for,” Buffy stated, knowing that she had done that herself. “I try to do it all the time and you guys rag on me every time I try.” she observed.

“I didn’t know… I honestly didn’t feel… She was wrong… I would never have… Oh Goddess,” Willow turned to look away.

“Will… was s-s-s she righ… did you f-feel… do y-you feel… that way about…?” Buffy stumbled and stammered (suddenly somewhat like Tara used to do when the blonde witch was very nervous) but she could wait no longer. ‘Why the hell is this so damn hard. What am I afraid of?’ she questioned herself, knowing damn well what frightened her. Either possible answer - ‘if she says Tara was right, you’ll have no idea what to do and if she says Tara was wrong, you’ll still have no idea what to do. You’re such a mess,’ she told herself.

Why the hell is this so damn hard. What am I afraid of?’ she questioned herself, knowing damn well what frightened her. Either possible answer - ‘if she says Tara was right, you’ll have no idea what to do and if she says Tara was wrong, you’ll still have no idea what to do. You’re such a mess,’ she told herself.

Buffy remembered the day that Willow told her that she was gay and with Tara. She had been totally surprised and happily stunned for a moment until she realized that her secret love was in love with someone else and lost to her. She had lost her façade for a moment but regrouped when Willow became upset.

Willow remembered how freaked out Buffy had been the day she told her that she was gay and with Tara. She had never seen the Slayer so stunned and almost speechless. She had thought that nothing would ever surprise Buffy; that Buffy would always support her no matter what. She suddenly feared that the revelation had been too much for her best friend; that she would pull away from her and that thought hurt terribly. Then Buffy had taken a deep breath and the best friend was back supporting her. But Willow had never forgotten…

Willow became very still. ‘Oh Goddess, I can’t tell her. Not now… not after… she’ll think that was why we… Oh Faith, why now? I could have been honest with her if we hadn’t … But now she’ll think… Oh Goddess, what will she think? That I’m some love sick, sex crazed stalker who took advantage of the situation to sleep with her. She’ll never believe how hard it was… how painful to love her just that once knowing that it would never happen again.’ As she slowly turned to face Buffy, she made a critical decision that pulled at her insides, tearing them from within. “I’ve always loved you guys. I always will, but… I would never have cheated on her. Never,” she responded sidestepping the issue.

“Of course you would never… I… I wasn’t suggesting that you would. I … well, I just wondered why… why Tara would say… ?” Buffy questioned, feeling really stupid for asking.

“I don’t know. She probably felt excluded from the Scoobies and… from… from our friendship. You know, we’ve known each other… umm… so well… long… aah… been through… so much… so close… we… ,” Willow responded casting her eyes down, in a glance that Buffy mistook for embarrassment.

“So you’ve never thought of me… as a possible… like that?” she mumbled.

“You’re straight!” Willow exclaimed but seeing the hurt look on Buffy’s face she quickly added, “I mean you’re gorgeous and sexy and all that… not blind, you know, and if you weren’t… you know… and I was looking… I’d totally be checking out your bod… Oh great, now I sound like Xander.” Realizing what she had just said Willow blushed, “But you… you’re Buffy,” she offered as if that statement explained everything. ‘Tara, I’m so sorry baby. But I can’t,’ she silently proclaimed to the heavens and Tara. To Buffy, she explained “I mean you’re straight… you’ve
never… I’m not really your type…”

“My type?” Buffy questioned a bit too loudly, unreasonable annoyance manifesting itself in her tone as her eyebrows rose.

Willow panicked for an instant as she tried to figure out what she had said that was so wrong, that had upset Buffy so much. “Female, I’m female…” she pointed out.

“Oh right. Because I Could Never Consider Sleeping With A Woman?” Buffy asked, her sarcasm rising as she began to release her frustration. She was annoyed, knowing that Willow wasn’t giving her a direct and honest answer. “What exactly did we do the other night? Exchange knitting patterns?” Buffy asked angrily.

“That… that was… there were reasons… circumstances…” Willow babbled, before falling into a stunned and very confused silence.

It was amazing how easily the hoping and longing for Willow to utter those three little words had built up within her. If Tara had never voiced her belief, Buffy could have moved on with her life; continue as she had until now. But oh no, now she had the opinion of someone who knew Willow almost as well as she did in many ways and knew her better in the ways she so wanted to. And then there was Faith… God help her, she hated to give the ex-slayer any credit… but... she seemed to know too. How could they both know? And yet Willow – her best friend, the one who had always stood by her, who always had her back and who she believed had always understood her so well – her Willow seemed to have no idea how she felt. Her mind was spinning. She had to say something… do something.

So here she was --- punching the hell out of a bag that was beginning to feel like a brick wall to her non-slayer fists. She was so frustrated by Willow's refusal to admit any impure thoughts, let alone feelings for her.

She wanted to shake her, to force her... 'Oh good God, what am I turning into? One night with her and I go all – “you have to want me”. She'll think I’ve lost it!' Her doubts did nothing to allay her frustration.

"Buffy? I didn't mean to upset you. I just… I never really thought… you know… What with Angel and Parker… that, you know… that women were something..." Willow stumbled to explain her confusion.

"That I could find a woman attractive? You wanted Xander. Then you had Oz. But then you found Tara and you decided… Well so could I! I mean… I never dismissed it. I just … I never… I didn't do anything about it," she rambled, annoyed at herself for starting this conversation.

"OK. So you were curious. That's natural," Willow said, attempting to understand where Buffy was going with this.

"No! It wasn't like – that!” Buffy responded quickly, recognizing the tone of Willow’s comment. Everyone knew Willow’s opinion of girls who made it known that they just wanted to experiment while at college but also made it very clear that marriage and kids -- ‘the acceptable’—was their real goal. "It isn't like an itch... a need to experiment… or to try it on for size!” Buffy stated angrily. "I know that I could... easily find a woman attractive. I'm not some ‘airhead, marry-the-quarterback
cheerleader type’ thinking about a little experimentation but planning on going back to the norm. Do you see anything normal about my life? I live the least normal life I know of… through choice. I can make choices… I consider options... and I don't like being stuffed into pigeon holes,” she finished, realizing that she had begun to raise her voice again.

"OKAY. I get it. No more holes,” Willow replied. "I... I mean of the pigeon variety."

"Don't you get it, Will?" Buffy asked, not really expecting a response. "I seem to spend most of my life as either Buffy the daughter or Buffy the Slayer or Buffy the student or Buffy the friend or... I just don't need another label --- Buffy the straight girl. No, I want to be… you know… just me --- Buffy. All and everything that I am… and can be. I thought you, of all people, got that."

Willow felt like a fool. She'd completely missed the point. "I do, Buffy. I do get you, honest. I just... Well, I guess that part of you… I mean, it never really came up… You possibly liking women… just never occurred to me," she finished lamely.

"Well, it seems like it occurred to Tara," Buffy stated, as she stopped hitting the bag and dropping her hands to her sides.

"I guess it did," Willow responded, still lost as to what all of this meant. Her eyes caught the movement of Buffy's hands and looking at them, she saw they were red; the knuckles almost raw. She stepped toward Buffy for the first time since her best friend had started punching the bag and reached for them. "Sometimes I think Tara had exceptional radar. I mean, after all, she did find ME,” she commented, as she grasped and raised Buffy's hands before her. Noting the damage done, she threw Buffy a disapproving look.

"Not as fast as you’re used to. If you’re going to inflict harm on that body, please remember it's only a loaner and you’re not Slayer-insured at the moment," Willow reminded her. She'd gotten used to having Buffy's strength and physical recuperative ability. Suddenly she considered what a shock and adjustment it must have been for Buffy to be stuck in her normal body.

"Sorry, Will. I forgot," Buffy replied, allowing her senses to briefly enjoy Willow's gentle touch and attention.

"Yeah, well we’d better see to those," Willow responded, moving Buffy towards the ever-present first-aid kit that lived in the far corner of the training room. "I do get you Buffy. You have to know I do. But I don't think I can honestly say, and I am being honest, that I know everything about you. I’m sure that I don’t. I probably never will. I don’t think you need to know everything about someone to get them, to understand them. I mean we all have secrets, things we keep to ourselves.” She paused to open the first-aid kit and search for the iodine and cotton balls. "It seems now that Tara figured out something about you that I just never thought to ask. Maybe I should have known but I didn’t. Maybe I should have asked but I thought a big part of getting you, understanding you, being your friend was just accepting. You know? Right now I’m feeling pretty stupid for not asking."

"It’s not like I handed out clues,” Buffy sighed, feeling silly for lashing out at Willow. This was so not going the way she had expected it to go if they ever got this far. She always pictured a quiet conversation - with Willow understanding everything even before she finished saying it and then falling into each other’s embrace. Her beautiful kindhearted best friend had always been so good at knowing what Buffy was thinking or needing almost before she did herself. More than once, their almost mental telepathy had saved the Slayer’s life. ‘Why wasn’t it working now?’ Buffy silently pleaded to anyone who would listen.
"Some gay-dar. Do you think I could get a refund?" Willow quipped as she gently worked on Buffy's knuckles. "Is that the real reason you had so much trouble asking me questions or even talking about it when I came out?"

"It was awkward. I didn’t know what to say… how to say it. It seemed like… you know… a copycat move to say ‘Gee, guess what? I think I like women too.’ Plus it wasn't… you know… all sorted out in my head back then," Buffy responded, recalling the shocked realization that had almost drowned her when she had first confronted her feelings; when she had finally realized that the love she felt for Willow was more than the best friend kind of love. "You… it was about you then. Will… and it… well…. it never really came up again,” she ended lamely.

"You could have talked to me… then… or maybe later. And now with all this going on, you don't think… oh, I don't know… to mention that you like women too," Willow declared, her annoyance evident as she recalled the nightmare gamut of emotion and guilt she had felt, not just over the past few days but ever since that night when she had told Buffy that she was gay.

"Sorry, Will" Buffy responded, her instincts telling her that now was not the best time to tell Willow the true reason for remaining silent. She couldn't even get Willow to talk about what Tara had said. The last thing she felt brave enough to do was admit her own feelings.

"Do you have any idea how stressed I was about... the switch… the solution… I mean the pressure... expectations... It would have helped, you know. I mean... I felt like I was leading a straight girl... But you... Why didn't you say anything?" Willow asked, her face a study in frustration, hurt and confusion. She felt so hurt even though a small voice told her it wouldn't have mattered.

"I was scared too, Will. It’s one thing to think you could be... But if I’d mentioned it… you'd have had expectations and I had nothing, just an idea, a belief... no clue what to say or do… Fixing a body switch… Not a great place to share that... Will, I was scared. What if... what if despite what I believed… I didn’t like… or I wasn't any goo…” Buffy rambled suddenly stopping, embarrassingly remembering where they were.

Willow followed Buffy's gaze to look at the door to the shop. She looked back at Buffy, let her words sink in and then she turned her gaze to the back door. It took only moments for her to decide that she really didn't want witnesses to this conversation; she didn't want any interruptions. So once she had finished treating and wrapping Buffy's knuckles, Willow moved towards the pommel horse and easily picked it up and moved it - placing it directly behind the door. "That should prevent any interruption," she said turning back to a grateful looking Buffy.

"You were just saying something about 'sorry'?”

*****************************************************************************BtVS*****************************************************************************

"Any, please. They may not want to share how they feel. That’s why you can't ask, no matter how much you and I may want to... " Xander pleaded, repeating himself for the third time.

"But Tara's already told them, and you and Giles saw her do that. They know you'll tell me," Anya pointed out.

"No they won't. I don't tell you everything," Xander protested before he could stop himself.

"You keep secrets from me?" Anya accused.
"Yes... I mean... No... I mean..." he sighed in frustration. "Anya, this... well it's a secret that isn't really mine," Xander concluded, feeling like the survivor of a near miss.

"Then why did you tell me? You tell me stuff and then I have to remember which stuff I can let people know I know, which stuff I can tell others, what I can ask, what I can't mention, what I have to remember but never say. It's just not fair. And you're always leaving me out," she added accusingly, quite pleased at the concerned expression that crossed Xander's face.

"It's not like that, Anya. We learned something very personal to both of them. They're probably feeling very vulnerable because of that and... Oh God, I wish I'd kept my mouth shut," Xander said looking towards the ceiling. "I was only telling you what happened so you wouldn't ask them."

"Don't you think they know you're telling me? I'm part of this too, you know? I should know what's going on," Anya insisted.

"Yes, you should. And you do. But there are certain things that while I can tell you, we shouldn't talk about with the others," Xander persisted.

"Like your fantasy about..."

"Exactly," Xander said quickly not really wanting to know what exactly Anya was going to say. He loved that he could talk to her about... well... anything. But there were times he wished she'd have amnesia or, at least, laryngitis.

"Do you tell everyone our secrets?" Anya asked, annoyed by his logic.

Xander threw his head back and laughed, "Anya, you tell everyone our secrets!"

**********************************************************************************BtVS**********************************************************************************

"Cordelia. Nice to hear your voice," Faith said as she rested her head against the wall.

"Right. Don't suppose you're getting much conversation at the moment," Cordelia commented, aware that Faith really didn't do small talk with strangers, let alone friends. 'When did we become friends?' she wondered.

"You could say that. Mostly I've had big huffiness and accusing looks. But that's five by five... as long as things work out," she responded, a slight hesitation in her voice. She wasn't sure if she should tell Cordelia she had spoken to Xander.

"You hanging around for the 'Thank You'?" Cordelia asked.

"Oh right. Somehow I don't see a big 'Thank You' scene in my future. Nope, I'm hanging on to see the finale - smoochies, hearts and flowers. But you tell anyone and all bets are off, gorgeous."

"I get it. My lips are sealed. No one would believe me anyhow," she laughed. "So how goes the matchmaking?"

"It's like watching two sloths trying to get it together on the natural history channel. Painfully boring," Faith joked. "I've done some pushing and there's now been some... movement."

"What makes you think that?" Cordelia asked.

"Surveillance. They're linked at the hip at the moment. Seems like they've made in-roads, if you
know what I mean,” Faith giggled, her laughter unmistakably dirty.

“In-roads? What do you mean? Oh! Oh!!” Cordelia jerked with surprise. “Really?”

“Yeah. But I don’t think that Red or B did anymore than… you know… go through the motions,” Faith said, suddenly embarrassed by a topic that would normally never faze her.

“Well... Really? Well, it should be pretty hard to ignore how they feel about each other after that,” Cordelia remarked, her mind awash with images that she found both enticing and inviting.

She was very glad that Faith couldn’t see her face, as she was damn sure she was flushed.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured. Shouldn’t be long now,” Faith agreed.

***********************BtVS***********************

They had fallen into a brief silence once Willow had blocked the door to the shop. Buffy had stared at her newly bandaged hands, as Willow stood waiting for an answer, until her mind inevitably wandered completely forgetting why she was standing there. It was as if they both realized that there was going to be no escaping this conversation and time had frozen in response.

Buffy tried very hard to recall why she was mad with Willow - the tender, loving friend who had yet again seen to her wounds. She couldn’t help thinking about the visions and how they had excluded others in the same way they were now excluding Xander and Giles, just like they had… she shook her head realizing that she had forgotten Anya. Guilt reared its head yet again, as she wondered if she’d ever just dismissed Tara like that. She hung her head in shame staring at her feet, wishing she could melt into the floor because she knew very well that she had. She had never felt so worthless of someone’s attention and consideration. Tara had thought of her, noticed her, helped her, understood her and sacrificed herself for Willow and her… and yet she had done nothing for this woman. She hadn’t even paid her more than passing attention and that had been sprinkled with jealousy, even though she actually liked the girl. Could she really be so unfeeling… so self-centered? Did she treat all of her friends, those that cared for and helped her, so... so… badly wasn’t a strong enough word - what would Giles say… without regard or thought to the impact she had on the lives of others…? Had she taken them all for granted… of course she had. Sometimes she just needed to, except, of course, for… Oh God?

Willow really did not want to be here at the Magic Shop right now. Part of her wanted to get away from Giles and Xander, to avoid the inquisition that she knew would follow the vision rod episode; another part of her wanted to get Buffy to herself and another part wanted to run away from all of them including her secret love. Panic was setting in. What if Tara was wrong? What if… what if Buffy didn’t feel that way about her? What if she wasn’t the kind of woman that Buffy… might find attractive? Buffy had only ever treated her as a friend… best friend, for sure, but never anything more. Her mind began computing seven or eight different excuses that Buffy might believe that would explain Tara’s belief that she was in love with Buffy, without her having to admit that she really was. Suddenly she decided she would rather face Giles, Xander and even Anya right now.

Buffy felt so foolish as she realized that her outburst had been nothing more than the fear that Tara was right and that her beautiful witch had to know or... how could she… no, she had to know. Raising her head and looking at Willow, who still stood just in front of the horse, Buffy said, “Willow, I’m really sorry. I don’t know why I expected you to know… It’s just that… well… Tara…” she gulped nervously. “I mean how would she… why would she think…?” She tried to look as calm as she was able to at her dear Willow, holding in all her fears and doubts as she asked,
“Why would she think that you were… in love… with me?”

Willow sighed. She had known this question was coming. It had been the most important thought on her mind from the moment Tara had said it and she finally realized what she had to do. She had to stay as close to the truth as possible. She couldn’t lie… not completely. Besides she was terrible at lying especially when it came to Buffy. So turning to her best friend, Willow saw the quiet question on her face and smiling weakly before responding, she mentally crossed her fingers and toes and silently prayed ‘Please let her believe me’.

“Will?” Buffy nudged.

“Buffy… I’ve been thinking about that. You know, when you first came to… Sunnydale…” Willow began, having committed to her course, “I… well that is… I had a… you were so nice and you talked to me. I couldn’t see why you wanted to be my friend. I was all big with the study and kinda the poster child for uncoolness… but you didn’t seem to mind…” Willow recalled.

“Willow. You were not. You’ve always been one of the coolest people I know,” Buffy interrupted.

Willow ignored the kind comment, wishing Buffy would just listen and not talk. This was hard enough with her just looking… Willow shook her head, trying to regain her thoughts. “Back then… you’d… you’d had the big invite… you know, to join the cool crowd. I mean Cordelia had pretty much given you the pass… you were in. But then you sat… with me…” Willow stumbled, trying to make her point. “You didn’t leave when… You… I’d… I only had Xander. I wasn’t at all popular. I didn’t make friends easily. I didn’t know how… I… babbling puts most people off,” She smirked self-deprecatingly, suddenly feeling like the awkward, awestruck teenager she had been back then. “When it turned out… after having asked for help with your homework… you… you didn’t leave… you didn’t just ask for help and leave… like the others… you wanted to… hang. We became friends… you defended me… you protected me… you saved my life. You were so brave… so kind,” she said gazing lovingly into Buffy’s eyes, lost in a thousand wishes, her thoughts scattered.

Buffy made a move to speak but the small shake of Willow’s head silenced her.

Regaining her thoughts Willow continued, ignoring the blood thumping against her temple as she approached the moment of truth. “It… it wasn’t just Xander… who… who had a… a… a c-c-c (gulp)… who had a crush on you…” she faltered, dropping her eyes unable to raise her head she plowed on. “I… I liked you… I know now… I know what it was now. I didn’t… then… honestly I didn’t, Buffy. It wasn’t… you know… all I’ve gotta jump her bones. Just sorta warm and soft… pleasing… innocent. I didn’t know back then that… that two women… well I knew, but I hadn’t… I just thought that was how you were meant to feel… about a best friend,” she explained, pausing before adding the ‘half lie’ that she hoped would explain Tara’s statement. “Years later I met Tara. It was only then… after I fell in love with… that I realized… I’d had… that once I’d felt… that what I’d felt… that I’d had a crush on you… back then,” she finished.

Buffy stared at her friend, unbearable pain filling her heart. She’d heard the past tense of Willow’s words that were like a sharp knife to her heart. Then her anger grew at the injustice that once Willow had felt something for her but that now… now… she was the one who felt… and it was too la…

“I guess Tara… picked up on how I… I mean I kept her away from you guys for so long. She was bound to wonder why. Maybe she picked up how… I used to feel,” Willow added, feeling as if lightning should strike her.

*************************************************************************BtVS*************************************************************************
Chapter 20

Giles heard a slight ‘thump’ and turned to look at the door to the training room. He truly hoped that the conversation was going the way he hoped. His mind suddenly filled with images - intimate and somewhat embarrassing. He shook his head, removed his glasses and mentally threw a cold bucket of water over his thoughts. As he did so the door opened and Buffy emerged, looking somewhat crestfallen. He made a move towards her only to be met with her hand raised to ward him off as she continued towards the front of the shop without pausing to acknowledge anyone. Then without a backward glance she opened the door, stepped through and slammed it behind her.

Giles turned with a questioning gaze towards Xander who met his eyes and simply shrugged. They both turned towards the training room door to see a somewhat upset Willow leaning against the doorframe, her eyes fixed on the recently slammed door.

Willow was lost in a thousand thoughts. Buffy hadn’t reacted as she had expected. Her words had seemed to accept Willow’s explanation but her eyes didn’t say the same. Then she had laughed in that awkward and self-conscious way that Willow knew all too well. Willow had expected Buffy to be complimented and relieved but she hadn’t expected her to… well… to run away.

“Will? You okay?” Xander asked, as he and Anya moved towards her.

“Yeah,” she acknowledged, barely paying any attention to him as her mind frantically searched for a clue as to why Buffy had reacted the way she had. Realizing that he was watching her, she smiled and repeated herself, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“So you guys talked?” he asked curiously.

“Yeah,” Willow responded, unsure how to explain what had just happened to her oldest friend. “I… ahh… explained … you know, how Tara… how she had… misunderstood… been wrong.”

“Really? And that obviously went well,” Xander commented, looking at the shop door. He couldn’t help himself from asking somewhat incredulously, “You told her Tara was wrong?”

“Xander. Not now,” Willow snapped. Seeing the wounded and puzzled look on his face she added, “I really don’t want to talk about it right now. OK?” She then moved away from him and towards the front of the shop.
“OK,” Xander responded. For a moment he thought she was going to run after Buffy. But as she stepped up into the main retail area, she turned left, away from the door and vanished from his view.

“OK?” Anya repeated. “She lies to Buffy and you say ‘OK.’”

“Anya, honey, I don’t think bashing her over the head with the ‘obvious to everyone but you’ stick is going to help any. She knows she lied. That’s what’s eating her up. But it’s like… you know… giving up something addictive… a secret. She’s spent so long hiding it that…” he stared toward the front of the shop. “She’s too scared to let it out.”

“Now? Now she’s scared? Why? This is a good thing. Doesn’t she know it’s a good thing? I mean she tells Buffy and the switch is fixed.” She looked at Xander in frustration. “In what dimension is getting your own body back as well as finally getting you true love not good?”

“It’s complicated. There’s also the big fear that Buffy doesn’t feel the same,” Xander explained.

“Oh right. They’re already orgasm buddies. Of course Buffy feels the same!” Anya stated.

“Anya, sex does not equal love. You know that right?” Xander asked his frustration evident.

“But… they… I mean how can they not know after… how can you have sex with someone who loves you and not know?” she asked plainly confused. “I mean… you would know if they didn’t love you… so you must be able to know when they do. How can you hide that?”

“Easily. I thought stuff like that was what kept you busy for decades,” he smirked.

Anya huffed at him and stormed away, leaving him to mull over how Willow had managed to keep her feelings hidden while she and Buffy… However at this point he lost complete control of his mind and entered a world of fantasy as visions unfolded before his now glazed eyes. Otherwise he would have seen Anya heading straight for Willow.
Buffy just walked but in her mind she was blindly running. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes as she felt her heart being squeezed by the disappointment and unfairness of it all. She had missed the window of opportunity; a window she didn’t think could have ever existed. But there had been a window. There had been a moment in time when Willow had thought of her that way and she had missed it. She drew her mind back, trying to see if there had been any clue, any hint. She was so upset that she had missed an obvious opening.

Nothing came into her mind and she felt like such a fool. Was she really so blind? How had she missed that Willow had once felt that way about her? She laughed out loud. “Could my life get more complicated?” she asked the world in general, not really expecting an answer.

“Gee, probably,” came the reply in an all too familiar voice that made her tense in anticipation. She turned to see a smirking Faith standing before her.

“Oh, and you’d know just how to do that. This is ALL YOUR FAULT!” she railed at Faith, all her frustration and anger suddenly finding a target. She instinctively took a fighting stance.

“You’ve got to be joking,” Faith said as she noted the change in her posture. A smile crossed her face as she realized that Buffy was working on instinct; that she’d obviously forgotten that she was no longer the slayer at the moment.

“What? You find this funny? You think what I’m going through is amusing?” Buffy demanded as she moved closer. “Let me show you amusing.” And with that she turned to launch a kick at Faith’s midsection only to find that instead of meeting her target, her leg flailed in mid air. Faith had moved. ‘But how?’

“Okay B, you obviously forgot so I’ll let that slide,” Faith commented, still amused by the actions of the woman before her. “You’re not the Slayer any more, at least not for now” she reminded her. “You couldn’t kick the broad side of a barn right now, let alone me.”

Buffy glared at Faith who was just feet from where she previously stood. She thought she heard quiet pity in her voice and her blood raged even more. Regaining her balance she charged at her nemesis, fists at the ready.

Faith couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Bearing down on her was an enraged ex-Slayer. It was Willow’s red hair flaming behind her and sparkling green eyes but it was Buffy’s rage that they displayed. She froze momentarily but quickly recovered. Instinctively she sidestepped and placed her hands on Buffy’s careering shoulders, gently pushing her to the ground.
“Ooomph,” Buffy felt like the wind had been knocked out of her as she hit the sidewalk.

“Will you just chill? I’m not here for this,” Faith explained, stepping back to give her plenty of room.

“What the hell are you here for? Is there a leather fetish convention I don’t know about?” She countered as she picked herself up. An ache in her knee made her wince as she did so. ‘Great, another bruise on Willow’s body.’

“Hey, so you don’t get the message. Don’t shoot the messenger, honey. And since when is that my fault?” Faith retorted.

She raised her head to glare at Faith and growled “You’re never good news.”

“Guess what, B? Turns out that leopards and spots… not that impossible a thing to change. You should try it. Get off that high horse and just admit it - you’ve forgotten how to be just plain Buffy,” Faith pointed out. “Just look at you right now. Your first instinct is to fight, so you give in to it. That’s the easy way out. Believe me, I should know. That’s what it’s like to be us; eager for the battle; hungry for conflict and afraid of the feelings and needs that make us human.”

“You’re not human! You don’t know a damn thing about being human!” Buffy yelled as she lashed out with her right fist, only to have it blocked easily by Faith. “You don’t know a damn thing about me.” She threw her left, which was again blocked.

“I know more than you realize. You’ve always kept her close but you never really let her in. Then you watched as…”

“Stop it! Shut up! How dare you… how dare you come here and… Just shut up!” She threw another punch with her right, then left - each easily blocked. At a loss for words, she threw a flurry of punches at Faith as all of her anger and frustration poured from her. Unwanted tears formed in her eyes and seeing them, Faith grabbed her wrists.

“B, just let her in. Then it’ll all be over… all taken care of,” Faith promised softly.
“It’s… It’s too late. You ‘re too late,” Buffy sobbed as the tears fell.

Faith looked at her dumbstruck. Before her stood the face and figure of Willow but the tear stained eyes belonged to Buffy and they showed such pain, such grief and such anger. ‘This isn’t working at all. What the hell is wrong with these two?’

“B, I think you…”

“What? Just what do you think? Oh, that I’m so eager to hear the thoughts and advice of a killer. Please, please offer me your wisdom,” Buffy spat out. Seeing a momentary hurt on Faith’s face filled her with such satisfaction that she kept on going. “You have nothing I want. Nothing!” She stated as she tried to pull herself free from Faith’s hold.

“I don’t need this,” Faith said releasing Buffy’s wrists and stepping away from her. “You and your sweetheart both know what the deal is. You must both be from the shallow end of the gene pool not to figure it out. Well, that’s not really a huge shock,” she laughed.

“Oh, because you’re all psycho brainiac bitch with some sort of evil plan, you get to throw rocks. Well, I don’t see you heading for Harvard or some high end corporate job or any job at all. Or did you forget your Lear Jet in the shop? And that Skanky Ho costume must be some new uber trendy rave gear, right?” Buffy taunted, now in full bitch mode. “Can’t wait until it hits the shops. I know a few lamebrains who would buy into that look - mostly they’re of the ‘party all night, can’t take the sun’ variety.”

Faith just smiled at her, part of her saddened to see that even without her Slayer powers, Buffy was still on the attack against her. She feared that she would never be able to break through Buffy’s anger and hatred against her. “Chill, B. Fact remains you wanna fight and I don’t. Cool though it would be to run rings around you… you’re not really in the game right now. Guess I’ll have to go see Red if I need to get a real work out,” she leered suggestively. “We’ll talk again… when you’re ready to listen.” With that she turned her back on Buffy and casually trotted away.

“You stay away from her!” Buffy yelled as she tried to follow. But the pain in her now inflamed knee soon brought her to a halt. At least that’s what she told herself. The fact remained that she couldn’t have kept up with Faith’s slayer stamina and speed even if she hadn’t been hurt.

Buffy stood panting in the middle of the road, one hand reaching down to her swelling knee. Staring at the back of Faith as she disappeared into the distance, frustration seemed to be her new best friend. She thought about what a pathetic sight she must be, standing there staring after the woman who had totally screwed up her life… having not been able to do anything to hurt her… having not been able to caused her any pain… having exacted no revenge greater than a bunch of
words; not even a few sticks and stones to break some of her bones.

Willow felt like a horrible human being. She had yet again hidden the truth to protect their friendship. And yet again she had somehow hurt Buffy. ‘I’m not meant to hurt the one I love, sappy song lyric or not. But it seems to be… well… it’s just… well, like a rule. And right now I seem to be extra good at it,’ she chastised herself, even though she couldn’t quite figure out what she’d done.

Her mind went back Buffy’s response to her explanation of Tara’s statement. Her best friend had stared at her, blinking several times and said, “Right… sure… ok… that explains why she… umm… right. All cleared up – we’re good. You did a good job hiding… I mean I missed it… ok, so… Everything’s fine, Will.” Then there was that awkward, self-conscious laugh as Willow had moved the pommel horse that barred the door. “Gotta go… need some air…” Buffy had declared as she bolted through the shop and out of the door.

Willow shook her head, trying to remember if she had ever seen Buffy at such as loss for words, unable to complete a sentence. Buffy was usually all about the words, even in the most dangerous situations. Oh, yes there was the time she had told her that she was gay.

Then it suddenly occurred to her, ‘Maybe she’s freaked because she told me… Oh goddess how did I miss that? She likes women! Well, she thinks she might,’ Willow’s mind spun at the idea of seeing Buffy with another woman. Her blood boiled, and suddenly panic and anger seemed to invade her very being at the thought. She was so preoccupied with her own thoughts that she didn’t hear footsteps or notice Anya’s approach.

“So you lied to her?” Anya demanded looking down at Willow, who was sitting with her knees hugged to her chest, resting her head on the end of the counter area.

“Wha…”

“You lied to her?” Anya asked, annoyance obvious in her tone.
“I didn’t… exactly… I… It was the truth,” she stated defensively.

“So you’re just going to lie? Why does everyone treat me like I’m not really here or like I’m an idiot? You all talk as if I don’t know what’s going on. Well, I do,” Anya pointed out. “You seem to forget that I was a vengeance demon.”

“I don’t see how we could ever forget that,” Willow commented sarcastically.

“Over the decades I’ve avenged thousands of broken hearts… sort of an expert. OK? As it turned out some were more pointless than others. But you… you leave me speechless,” Anya stated.

“All evidence to the contrary,” Willow sniped.

“You really don’t seem to care what Buffy needs - do you?” Anya continued her attack ignoring Willow’s gibe.

“Hey!” Willow objected, uncurling her legs.

“You’re hurting her. Talk about cruel. At least the vamps and demons don’t pretend to be her best friend. I can’t help thinking that you mean to cause her pain on purpose,” Anya stated rather angrily.

This time Willow stood, squaring off with Anya. “Hey! Where do you get off talking to me about causing pain, especially to Buffy? Flayed anyone alive lately? Isn’t that what you used to do?”

“It just doesn’t make any sense. You had sex for goodness sake,” Anya stated, still ignoring the pointed comments and moving in closer until her nose was almost touching Willow’s.

“It’s complicated,” Willow spat. “There’s more involved than just having sex.” She so did not want to be discussing this with Anya.

“You all say that … like sex is a dirty word; something to be ashamed of. If it was just sex, you
wouldn’t all crave it so much. What you hunger for is the closeness of another, of a very special person,” Anya explained, clearly annoyed by Willow’s inadequate response and obvious inability to understand. “And why do you? Because it’s the one place… that closeness… where you can’t avoid telling the truth; where you can’t be anyone but who you are whether you mean to be or not. You’re naked… really naked. If people would just stop trying to hide and bother to really look… It’s only then that you can see everything.”

Willow stood and for the first time she looked at Anya; really looked. She had never thought the day would come when she would want to crawl inside the head of an ex-demon, especially this one. But for a brief moment she seemed to be making sens….

“You’re both so busy hiding who you are and what you need. I mean you and your whole ‘I’m a big fat Lesbo Dyke and if you’re not then I have no time for you’. You don’t let anyone see what else you are other than that. Are you trying to scare the straight women away?” she asked in all seriousness.

“What the... Where the….?” Willow gaped, “You have to be joking.”

“Do I look like I’m joking? You use your ‘gay pride’ flag to intimidate a campus full of straight women who might just be interested in jumping the fence for a night to see if they like it… if they could do so discreetly, quietly. But if she’s not out there holding that rainbow banner with you, there’s no chance with you, is there?” Anya asked accusingly.

Willow couldn’t believe that Xander’s girlfriend was talking to her like this.

“But maybe that’s how you’re planning to keep them away,” Anya continued, laughing at Willow as she did. “You’re just hiding behind your gay badge of honor.”

“I am so not hiding. Hello! Out and proud. I just… I don’t have time for women who don’t know what they actually want,” she responded, feeling her blood rise. ‘How could she accuse her of hiding? It had been so hard to come out at first, especially to her friends, the people she cared about – Xander, Giles, Buffy’s mom, Dawn and… above all… Buffy, but now she would never hide again. She would never compromise her lifestyle just to make others comfortable.’

“So you’d rather be ‘Out and Proud’ than find someone you might have to work things out with… help along. You’re all ‘Look at me. I’m out and special, and if you’re not out and special with me – then good bye.’ And you’d never be interested in someone who was… oh, I don’t know… a little confused about what she wanted,” Anya replied with a self-satisfied smile. ‘If Tara had played by those rules, you’d still be sulking about Oz.’
The Slayer/Witch was getting angrier at the ex-demon’s words. She wanted to find Buffy, not listen to this. So she started to move toward the door but was stopped by the ex-demon.

“But I haven’t even seen you with any gay girls since Tara left either”, Anya continued. “Now why is that? Can’t you find anyone interesting or is that you want to be alone? What are you afraid of or do you think that no one good enough for you, not even Buffy?”

Willow could feel the hot blood rising to her neckline as she glared at Anya. ‘How could she think that I would let anything including my life choice push Buffy away’? “I am not afraid. I do not hide. And I am not any kind of gay snob,” Willow said quietly through gritted teeth.

“So what about the other night? Guess you were too busy hiding the other night, or just lost in getting your ‘big O’ jollies, to take a good look at Buffy… really naked Buffy, body and soul, to read how she moved, to hear the noises she made, to know what she really wanted and needed. Or do you even care ab…”

‘Who the hell did Anya think she was? What did she know about her? About Buffy?’ “Not everyone is like you, Anya. I’ve already told you… it’s not about just sex,” Willow snarled.

“OK. But if that’s true, then what’s the reason that you won’t be honest with … Ohhh! Of course!” Anya suddenly felt as if a light bulb had gone off in her head, “I never thought you were that devious. You really love being the Slayer, don’t you?”

“Anya,” Willow threatened.

“What was it? You get tired of being the sidekick, the number two? Is that it? Or is it the power you crave? And now that Buffy’s not special anymore, you’re not even interested? You must have secretly been so pleased when Faith pulled her little switcheroony on you two,” the former demon continued.

“Anya,” Willow growled as her eyes narrowed.

“Because you don’t seem to be able to give it up, do you? Not even for your best friend, the person who’s save your life so many times, for the woman you love… Not even for Buffy,” Anya concluded.
Willow lost her grip on clarity as rage overtook her, anger flaring like a volcano, a red haze forming before her eyes and she blew. The next thing she saw was Anya - flying across the shop towards the closed door, arms flaying and a scream starting to build. But before it could escape completely, she landed awkwardly with a resounding thud and a faint crack as her back slammed against the door causing the shop bell to ring in apparent surprise.

“Anya!” both men exclaimed before launching themselves towards her landing site. As they fell to their knees beside Anya, Giles turned and cast Willow such an accusing and deeply disappointed look that it cut to the very core of her anger. As the reality of what she had done washed away the hot blood of her rage, she seemed to shrink in all-consuming shame.

“Oh my go… I didn’t’… I didn’t mean to… Anya… she… I…” she mumbled, not sure what to say. She moved towards Anya who, seeing her coming, involuntarily flinched in anticipation of another attack. Willow froze, shocked by Anya’s reaction to her, and fell helplessly to her knees. “I’m sorry… I didn’t mean to… you shouldn’t have said…”

“Willow. I strongly recommend that for the next few minutes you remain silent,” Giles growled through clenched teeth, unable to look at her for fear of what he might say.

Hearing the thinly veiled anger in his voice, Willow held her tongue. She watched silently as they questioned and inspected Anya to determine the extent of her injuries. ‘I did that. I let the Slayer in me… take over. I couldn’t… a red fog… how could she say… I’d never… she pushed me. That’s no excuse…’ She had used her borrowed powers in anger. She’d lost control. She’d forgotten and as a result she’d injured Anya. ‘How does Buffy control the rage, the anger and the strength? I never imagined how hard it might be for her… to be her. She is such a good person. All I’m good for is hurting people.’

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Willow sat on the floor, a look of despair falling across her borrowed features. Giles stood over Anya as Xander carefully lifted her up onto her feet. The young man, then, gently turned his girlfriend so that he could lift up her top and look at her back. As he did so, Giles saw the deep imprint of the doorknob and inflamed skin, which convinced him, would surely mean both internal and external bruising.

Unable to hold his anger in any longer, he turned to glare at Willow. “You very stupid little girl! Do you have any idea what you have done? What you could very well have done? To use Slayer strength on a mortal is inexcusable,” Giles stormed. “This kind of behavior is what I would have expected from Faith – not you.”

“I… I’m sorry,” Willow whispered as her heart sank. She hated knowing that she had disappointed Giles. “I don’t know where it came from… I’m so sorry. Anya, I’m really sorry,” she repeated as the tears of guilt began to form within her apologetic eyes.
“Indeed you should be. As you very well know there are rules…” Giles added, about to remind the Slayer of an often-repeated lecture. However the overwhelming remorse and welling tears he saw in Buffy’s face stopped him. ‘Oh goodness. This isn’t Buffy. It’s Willow!’ his mind raced to regain its balance. He sighed in frustration. He knew that Willow was probably in the grip of the subliminal rage that many previous watchers had observed in their slayers and she had never been prepared, never trained to be a slayer. But he couldn’t let excuses fill this moment. To do so would be far too dangerous right now. “Yes well, I’m sure we all realize that you are dealing with the very new power and urges of a Slayer. But I do not believe that being unfamiliar with the Slayer within can totally excuse such a lapse of control.”

Willow nodded and cast her eyes towards Anya, hopeful to at least make eye contact so that she could offer a visual apology, but the ex-demon would not look at her. She felt as if she had become a bully - one of those girls she had feared in kindergarten because they knew how to fight and would take advantage of those who could not.

“I understand that you and Buffy may both be experiencing an extremely emotional and stressful time but that is exactly when control is most important. It is possible that Anya may have been somewhat misguided in her comments but one truth rings through,” Giles paused, hesitant to open a conversation that he had so far been successful in avoiding. Although both he and Xander had done nothing to stop the conversation between Anya and Willow, they could do very little to avoid hearing all of it. Dropping his eye contact, he took a shallow breath and said in a voice so quiet that Willow almost didn’t hear him. “You lied to Buffy.”

“I… I told her the tru…” Willow couldn’t finish as she caught the sideways look from Xander.

“It is very possible that you two are destined to be together,” Giles commented ignoring her partial statement of denial. “Our visions have led me to what I believe to be a quite justifiable conclusion. When viewed with the translation of the original curse as well as recent events, I think it is only prudent to believe that unless you and Buffy are able to resolve the… various emotional aspects of your relationship… not only will there be dire consequences for mankind… there may well be a dire consequence for Buffy. I feel fairly safe in asserting that Buffy will be put into the kind of danger… that is to say… what I must believe it to be - a grave danger… considering the extreme chance that both Angel and Cordelia chose to undertake in asking Faith to help prevent this possible future occurrence.”

“But… you… you think that Faith is here to help?” Willow asked, her face a study in disbelief.

“Unlikely though that may seem, and I grant you that I would be the first to agree that Faith would not have been my first or even sixteenth choice, yes I do believe that all things considered probability dictates that in nearly all of the possible scenarios that I have considered, she is actually here to help,” Giles clarified as only he could.

Willow was dumbfounded. Her mouth moved as she desperately attempted to express herself. She very much wanted to question what Giles had said but she couldn’t find the words.

Faced with a silent Willow, who seemed to be stuck in goldfish mode as she repeatedly opened and closed her mouth with no sound escaping, Giles decided to reiterate what he considered to be the pertinent and pivotal issue at hand. “At the risk of repeating myself to deaf ears… I… I feel that unless your relationship is resolved, Buffy will be placed in grave danger at a future point in time. Do you understand? There is a distinct possibility…”

“Giles, she heard you the first time,” Xander interrupted, somewhat irritated at the older man.

“How can you be certain?” Giles asked, throwing his eyes towards Willow, who still appeared
“Trust me. That’s the face of a Willow unable to resolve the dreadfully possible with her own fear of a wonderfully possible. It was the same when she got her college acceptance letters,” Xander explained, through a resigned grin. “Are you sure she needed to... you know... hear about that? Maybe... you know... a bit over the top with the drama... Talk about packing in the Thelma and Louise option. Could you be any more... you know... do this or badness is coming? I thought you were... you know... obscure, subtle English guy.”

“Xander whilst I am grateful for your occasionally helpful input, I think the time for discretion has passed. Willow’s loss of control just highlights the dangers present in allowing the Slayer power to reside with one who is untrained and not chosen to bear its unique weight,” Giles argued. “I accede that to you it may seem somewhat harsh to voice our, as yet unproved theories, but I believe that were I to allow things to continue...” Giles was halted in mid sentence by an ear splitting screech from Anya.

“Eeeaaooow,” Anya bellowed, as Xander inadvertently placed his arm against her midriff to support her. “Are you mad at me too?”

**************************************************************************BtVS**************************************************************************

“I assure you, Sir, that there is no possibility of a positive resolution to the matter at hand. Either eventuality allows for an outcome beneficial to our interests,” the lawyer confirmed, his concentration evident as he listened intently to the response, the telephone handset grasped firmly to his ear.

His free hand played with a chain, weaving its length between his fingers, as he nodded silently.

“Indeed should they succeed in voiding the curse by the removal of the initial curse, we will have prevented the inclusion of a major player in future events. However should they fail, the inner curse will quickly bring forward events dramatically.”

He smiled, his eyes like steel and ice, as he lifted his free hand pulling the chain and it’s amulet from the desk to hang before him. “I’m grateful for your guidance in this matter and I trust that I have proved your attention warranted, Sir. I trust that when my efforts prove beneficial to the firm and senior partners, that I will be considered valuable within this division,” he stated.

Whatever the party on the phone said in response caused him to drop the amulet and cough apprehensively. “Sir, I assure you that is not my intention.”

He unwound the chain and quickly pulled out his desk drawer to place the amulet within it. “I quite agree that to allow matters to continue unmonitored would be ill advised. I assure you, Sir, that I had considered the possibility that you may wish to intercede,” he acquiesced, as small beads of sweat began to form on his upper lip.

“Yes, Sir. Immediately. Sir. Thank you for your guidance on this... ” He suddenly stopped pulling the phone from his ear, to glare at it in annoyance, before placing it back onto its cradle.

**************************************************************************BtVS**************************************************************************

Willow watched as Giles gently moved Anya towards the training room. It seemed that everyone who talked to her today ended up getting hurt in some way or another. ‘I’m not handling this well. Geez, that’s the understatement of the year. I couldn’t handle a door, let alone ... Oh Tara honey, why did you...’
“Willow. I think we need to talk,” Xander interrupted her internal conversation, turning his gaze from Giles and Anya. “And I’d much appreciate it if when we do, I could… well… walk away in one piece afterwards.”

“Xander!” Willow yelped, hurt by the suggestion that she would harm him.

“Just thought I’d make the suggestion… you know in case… well… you know… you go all big bad and bruisey on me,” Xander said.

“Xander?” Willow pleaded.

“Will, I know you’re in a way confused place right now. But I need you to understand something. We get it. Okay? So maybe I get it more than Anya does but, if you’re honest, she wasn’t that far off,” Xander assured her. “You’re afraid. I understand that you’re scared that this is just pushing Buffy to do or say something she won’t really mean; Something that she’ll regret later, leaving you hurt and heartbroken. I don’t think you’re giving her enough credit.”

Willow couldn’t look at him as he voiced her innermost fears. “You have no idea what’s going on.”

Xander smiled before responding, “Take this, for instance. You don’t wanna deal. So you hide? You’re so scared that you lash out at someone who tells you what you don’t want to hear.”

Willow stared at him and, with all the sincerity she could muster, said “I’m sorry. Really I am. I didn’t mean to hurt her like that. I forgot. Maybe you should just leave me alone, Xander…”

“No. So you and Buffy aren’t imploding?” Xander felt a wry satisfaction as Willow turned to face him in surprise. “It doesn't take a genius. What I can't figure out is how you never saw it coming.”

“What? How do you know? How can you understand…? Has Buffy talked to you?” Willow asked, fearful that Xander knew something she didn’t.

Xander sighed, “Buffy hasn’t told me anything, Will. She didn’t have to. It was right in front of my Xander-face. She would do anything for you. Always has. Always will”

“There are limits to what a friend should have to do,” Willow stated, a resigned sadness in her voice, as her anger at the situation they were in began to fill her once again.

“So… You just gonna let your chance to be with her get away from you?” Xander challenged.

“It's not my decision to make,” Willow exclaimed, frustrated that Xander still didn’t seem to get it.

“Geez, Will. Of course it is,” He stated so evenly and with such certainty that Willow paused momentarily before replying.

“Well, it's not fair,” she stated, all her confusion and fear surfacing. “I didn’t ask for this. I was happy to just… It’s not fair.”

“Were you really happy? Was she? And who cares if it's fair? In the not too distant future, if the G-man is right - which he has a really nasty habit of being - this world as we know it is gonna disappear, explode, do the big nova, closing your opportunity window. Maybe forever… unless you do something to stop it,” Xander reminded her.

“What am I supposed to do? Beg her to love me?” Willow challenged him.
“If that’s what it takes, why wouldn't you?” he asked in disbelief. “To keep Buffy safe and alive? Yeah! And then there’s the whole saving-the-world bonus. What wouldn’t you do for her? She’d do anything for you and you know it.”

“I not even sure who she is any more… or how… what she thinks of me. I mean I thought she was... well I learned stuff… things I never knew and it… well... I think it’s too late. I mean we… there was… I mean we had to… but there was…” Willow babbled to a complete stop trying to form the thoughts to explain all that had happened in the past few days and how she truly feared she was losing her best friend despite all her efforts to keep things in a safe mode. “Things were so safe,” she mumbled.

Xander was stunned that Willow could describe anything having to do with Buffy as safe. “Safe? What is she? A safety belt? A baby?”

“You know what I mean,” Willow responded dismissing his annoyance at her choice of words.

“Yeah, I think you meant exactly what you said. I think you took it for granted that Buffy was always gonna be there for you. Available whenever you wanted her company or support but with no demands, no expectations, nothing dangerous, no commitment --- just a friend. The safe option,” Xander accused.

Willow turned on him with anger blazing in her eyes. “Look who's talking. Look who has Anya following him around like a lovesick puppy.”

“Oh boy, is this so not about me,” he commented.

“Is she anything more than a safe bet? 'Cause that would kinda be a surprise,” Willow’s nostrils flared as she desperately tried to control her new Slayer temper.

Xander retaliated with an ultimatum. “If you don't wanna hear what I have to say, I'll shut up right now.”

Willow released the air she had been holding in, “Good. ‘Cause I don't.” She turned as if to leave, her body language dismissing him.

“I lied,” Xander informed her, refusing to let Willow walk away from this. “What I think is -- you got burned with Oz and then Tara. And then all this happens.”

“I know the story that is my life, Xander,” Willow stated, refusing to turn and face him as she felt the red haze of anger rise within her again. ‘Buffy, where are you? I need your help to control this.’

“But you seem to have missed the point. You shut down, Willow. You’re afraid to take any risks especially with Buffy,” he informed her. Then lowering his voice, as he closed the distance between them and moved behind her, to almost whisper in her ear “Because she's the one and you know she is. That someone who comes along just once in your lifetime and you know she is. Because she can creep into your soul and hang a string of lights around your heart and you know that only she can.”

Willow heard the words and her heart ached, filling the void that had burned red with rage. Her legs seemed to shake as she tried to breathe. Xander was too close, too near the truth.

“She's always there for you,” he continued quietly. “She's risked everything for you… so many times. And you're about to let your chance with her fly by because you don't like deadlines…
taking chances? My god Will, we live on the Hellmouth. Life here is a chance... a risk. But it’s one worth taking. You’re about to let her slip away, letting her think so much less of you than she ever has. You really think you’ll be happy to just wish that she knew the truth. Believing you can never talk about that night.”

Willow’s eyes began to water as Xander’s words finally broke through her defenses as she recalled the longing, the pain and the emptiness.

“If she’s not the one... if what she needs from you just isn’t there, then let her go. Let the world end. Break your heart and make it a clean break. But if you really think you can tell her that you love her... I’m talking scary, messy, no-emotions-barred love her... if you’re ready for that... and the possibility, the very great possibility that she loves you too... then think about what you could be about to lose.”

Willow turned to look at him over her shoulder, the tears in her eyes telling him all he needed to know about the effect his words had had.

“Save her Willow. Save yourself. You know Giles is right... and we both know, even though we’re never telling Anya, that she was kinda right too,” Xander stated, smiling as he placed his hands on Willow’s shoulders to turn her into him and pull her in close for a fierce hug. “Will, secrets... never a good thing... especially from the one you love... especially from Buffy.”

Willow allowed herself to be drawn into his arms, suddenly feeling like the little girl she once was, knee scraped and so relieved to have found a friend who didn’t seem to find her tears something to run away from.

“Yeah. It’s unfair. But I know you, Will. You’re far stronger than you believe you are,” Xander assured her, resting his chin atop Willow’s head as he held his best friend closely. He found it weird to reconcile the fact that this same small shaking frame in his arms; currently contained the power that had so recently sent Anya flying. But as he closed his eyes he recognized the familiar sound of Willow’s sobs and tears. “When she realizes what she can gain... how incredibly lucky she is to have you... when she realizes what’s at risk for all of us, including herself...”

“NO!!” Willow protested into his chest, unwilling to raise her head. She couldn’t risk that Buffy would only declare her love to save the world, or worse to save her or Buffy herself. She felt like such a selfish individual as she tried to voice her fears, between sobs and gulps for air, “I have to know... it has to be... to be because...” Willow whispered, all her insecurity and anxiety flooding forward, only secure in part because she didn’t have to look Xander in the eye. “If... if she says she... if she feels this way too... She has to say it because...” Doubt filled her mind, remembering Xander’s words. She shook it away. “It has to be because she does feel... not because she has to say she does... I couldn’t hear it... I couldn’t take it... I couldn’t bear... if she knew... oh Xander, it would... How would I ever know? I have to be sure... I have to know. I know it’s selfish... I’m probably an evil woman for wanting to know... for not seeming to care about everyone else... because I do care... really I do... but... to hear her say... but to know she might be... lying??? Please, don’t tell her,” she begged as she began to tremble, clinging to her Xander as the reality of how badly she had screwed this all up sank in.

“Hey. Easy there, Will. Right now I’m fairly sure Giles would agree we don’t need to tell Buffy what we suspect.”

Willow let the tears fall as she tried to hide herself, her relief and her fear in Xander’s arms. She had a thousand questions, a thousand objections but mostly she had a heartbreaking sadness as she finally realized that she had lied, not to protect Buffy but, selfishly, to protect herself.
Chapter 21

Giles walked into the training room feeling the weight of a thousand misgivings. He knew, that as a Watcher, there were obligations and standards he should try to instill into his new slayer. But before him was a very scared young woman who had just lost her first inner battle with the slayer’s powers.

He was unsure exactly how to move forward on that subject as well as the major issue at hand. Right now he would rather be standing in front of his father being lectured or being eaten alive by his maternal great aunt Amelia’s constant criticisms than have to consider a conversation with Willow about her feelings for Buffy. Willow had little or no control… ‘Ahh, that’s it! How obviously appropriate. She needs training in control, mental focus and emotional balance.’ He grinned to himself in satisfaction. Now he had a plan, something he knew he could handle, something he knew he could fix.

He had sent Anya to Sunnydale Memorial with Xander, suspecting at least a bruised if not a broken rib. He had attempted to look at her injuries but she had exhausted even his patience, with her constant references to Willow and Buffy, as well as sex and mankind’s inability to understand why they craved sex. She had decided that his obvious discomfort at having to look beneath her clothing was nothing but a manifestation of all the pent-up emotions and taboos that mankind had placed between itself and its very real need for closeness to another.

He was sure that for most young males a woman of Anya’s obvious enthusiasm and addiction to sexual closeness would seem like a dream come true. Yet he found himself wondering at the price paid for such a woman and in a small corner of his mind, that had no concept of how wrong it was to think such things, he wished it had been Anya’s tongue that Willow had bruised or even broken.

Giles wanted to believe that Anya’s displeasure and annoyance with mankind was really nothing more than the manifestation of her discomfort at being once again reminded that she was now mortal as well as the inevitable truth that she therefore could have died at Willow’s hand. He wanted to believe that since she had long ago lost the experience, understanding and even memory of human frailties - the fear of the possibilities that her own recently rediscovered mortality invited into her mind knew no scale. But the multiple perspectives and sheer conviction of her argument had led him to doubt this.

He reflected quietly on his own manner; well, in public at least. Most women had found his public reserve a challenge or old world charming. This allowed him to display his passionate side only privately. But no one had ever accused him of using it as a defense mechanism.

Now he considered whether his manner might not, indeed, be designed to dismiss women unwilling to take on a challenge; those seeking clarity. Was not his manner, in reality, a less than
He looked up from his ponderings to find Willow waiting expectantly before him. Although the body and face was that of Buffy, the stance and eyes told him all he needed to know. Willow was scared, full of self-doubt and remorse. It didn’t take a genius to figure out why. Everyone had been talking to her as if she had changed. As if she could suddenly change the rules by which she had chosen to live for so long simply because of her newly acquired slayer powers. Even with her recently self-accepted lifestyle choice Willow, the essential Willow, had not really changed. She had merely assumed an attitude and manner that better sheltered her from the harshness of the world. At the very core she was and always would be the sweet, brave and eager young woman he had first met.

“Giles, I’m sorry. I really am. I didn’t mean to... hurt her, to lose control like that,” Willow mumbled barely lifting her eyes to meet his.

“Willow, I know that you are truly sorry and for that reason I feel nothing more needs to be said on the subject. Although I somehow doubt Anya will be as accommodating when she returns,” Giles commented, a slight smile raising the corners of his mouth. As he looked at Willow, he realized that neither his nor her manner nor appearance really mattered in the ‘great scheme of things’. Humanity was about seeing the heart and soul, despite the individual’s bearing or appearance. However Anya was partially correct that some members of mankind had stopped bothering to care enough about each other to really look at a person, and that bothered him.

Willow nodded in acceptance of the fact that Anya would return to make her pay big time. She resigned herself to accept her punishment. “Seems only fair,” she mumbled.

“Indeed. But setting that matter aside for the time being, I feel we must continue with our normal routine. It is almost four thirty and the sun will set in just over two hours. I intend to accompany you on patrol tonight but in the meantime I feel that some training may be of benefit… specifically in the area of emotional control,” Giles suggested.

Willow smiled sheepishly, “Thank you.”

Willow found her left arm was beginning to rebel against the weight it was carrying - her weight.
She had been in this handstand position for almost half an hour and the pile of crystals she was supposed to be focusing on seemed to actually be laughing at her.

Giles had been very precise in his instruction over the past two-hour session. She had never been so mentally and physically challenged but she was now exhausted. Years of late night study hadn’t prepared her for the strain of focusing your mind on just one thing. She was used to multitasking, looking for patterns, groupings, and associations - not the single line purpose of one act.

She had found her mind wandering, making the single focus almost impossible. Images of Buffy’s face filled her mind and the strong desire to go to her beckoned. ‘She needs me. I should be with her.’ The comments Tara had made… ‘had she really meant them? Did she actually believe what she said?’ Memories of her kindergarten days and a certain bully snuck into her mind as well. ‘Betcha she would’ve wished she’d have never met me if I’d have had the slayer strength th…’ Willow suddenly felt ashamed at her thoughts.

“Concentrate. Focus. Focus,” Giles instructed, aware from the slight movements he observed that Willow had become distracted.

Willow had believed that her mental control was good… maybe not perfect but, hey, for sure above average. She had needed it for spell casting. She had needed to focus but, as she was now discovering, that had been mainly an emotional focus, a willing, a wanting, a desire. This was something else - mental and physical - the removal of emotional instincts allowing trained instincts to rule supreme.

Giles had explained that a slayer fought against her natural human and emotional instinct of fight or flight. That to control a battle one had to depend on instinctual training using patterns of concentration and action that only practice could make second nature, allowing her to control the great power and rage that resided within; allowing her to replace her emotional instincts with practiced instincts, as and when needed.

She had discovered a newfound respect for the focus required of a slayer. ‘How on earth did Buffy switch from the single layer focus and instinct required of a slayer to the multiple requirements of a normal everyday life.’ Okay there was the subliminal awareness of all that surrounds you but that still had only the one purpose - to slay. ‘How did she know when joy or sadness could be allowed to surface; when fear or doubt would not be her enemy.’

“Remain focused. Concentrate on the form, its shadow and shape. View the crystals and find yourself within their form,” Giles instructed.
Willow mentally shook herself, regaining her focus and casting aside the thoughts that had once again momentarily distracted her. As she drew her mind back to the crystals, their shape and their shadows, she found her vision blurring. The light pinks and blues of the crystals forming a clash of color and shade until finally she thought she saw… a column… no, it was more a shape… it was a figure.

Faith sat on the wall, casting her eyes over the graveyard before her. It was still bathed in the warm sunlight of late afternoon. The sun would be setting soon and the tranquil landscape before her would change. Its warm tones replaced by the harsh shadows and gray tones of night.

She had tried to talk to Buffy but as usual their history had come between them. Even after all these years she still felt jealous of the senior slayer. She still felt the need to compete, to beat her. ‘Why?’ she asked herself. What was it that she now needed?

Hadn’t she accepted that she had made choices; that she was the only one to blame for the way things had gone? Apparently not. Faith now knew that she wasn’t as sorted out as she thought she was. She had come here for resolution, for closure but all that seemed to have happened was the reopening of old wounds. Demands for retribution had been made by the very person she was trying to help.

She tightened her mouth in frustration. “C’mon buddy, it’s almost wakey wakey time and I need to royally kick your ass,” she stated, staring at the freshly dug grave before her.

She had to release the anger welling up within her. How she had managed to calmly walk away from Buffy still amazed her. She had felt the blood rising, the hunger for a fight growing but she had held it at bay. She had recognized that the confusion and pain behind Buffy’s words had nothing to do with her and so she had walked away. From that moment she had felt both pride and frustration building within her, conflicting to such a degree that she almost wanted to laugh at the insanity of the situation.

And so here she sat, a study in contradictions - the regained humanity and the slayer. Each part of her fighting for control. But today, as had been the case for many days now, the ‘keeper’ was present watching both parts of her, accepting the needs of each and helping her to find the balance. She wished she had known how to achieve the balance long ago.

But now she had found a place in the world. She was no longer disconnected, no longer the outsider. In LA she had a home, friends and… yeah, she really did have a home, a purpose. She
smiled as memories of the LA gang filled her mind. She couldn’t have explained, not that anyone would have thought to ask, how she had felt on that day when Cordelia had asked her to move in. But she had realized then, on that day, at that moment that she had finally found a home.

Giles walked towards the graveyard, his charge by his side. Their journey had been in silence since Willow had made it quite clear that she did not want to indulge in light and meaningless conversation. Willow’s contented silence had often been his companion during many a late night of research. Unlike Buffy and Xander, she had never felt the need to fill silences with inane chatter. He had always liked the girl very much – her loyalty, intelligence, research ability, bravery – and he had often been particularly grateful for this part of her personality. However today something about her silence unnerved him.

Somehow right now he wished she would talk, wished she would 'natter'. The deafening silence only made it harder for his mind to concentrate on how he was going to begin what he felt he had to say. Strangely he had become used to deep and meaningful thoughts while the lives of these young people practically exploded around him. But this silence was oppressive. He needed her to talk.

“So how are your studies going?” Giles asked, throwing out the first question he could think of.

“Huh?” Willow mumbled. She hadn’t really been expecting a question as her mind was totally occupied with preparation for the Slayage and she was all big with the focus.

“Your studies. How are they going?” Giles repeated.

“Umm. Great. I’m behind on a few preparative notes and I have some sub indexing cards outstanding but I’m good,” Willow responded on autopilot. Realizing what she had just said, she quickly added “But you don’t need to tell anyone about the sub indexing cards.”

“Indeed,” said Giles, a warm smile pulling at the corners of his mouth at the familiar book-loving “geek” that was and would always be Willow no matter how talented a witch she became. “I’m sure you’ll catch up and I can assure you that, as I have no idea what exactly they are, I’m fairly certain that I will never need to refer to them.”

“Thanks,” Willow said appreciatively, offering a smile to Giles. “I guess I never realized how
much of Buffy’s time was taken up with her Slayer duties.”

“It is true to say that normally a Slayer is allowed no time for a life outside of her calling. That’s one of the things that, at first, I had difficulty reconciling myself to. Watcher training didn’t really prepare me for a Slayer who had more than Slaying as a priority in her life. But despite my early misgivings, I believe those very choices, although distracting at times, have made Buffy the grounded and balanced woman that she is,” he stated unable to hide the pride in his voice. He considered the eagerness to please of the young woman beside him. Had she been under his charge in his early years, he would have tried to mold her to fit the Council’s accepted program; quite possibly destroying her in the process.

Willow heard the fatherly pride and realized that Giles was missing Buffy. She, somehow, felt both guilty and inadequate. “I know I’m not… you know, I’m not Buffy… I mean I could never fill her shoes. I know that… I’m sorry…” Willow stumbled.

“No. Willow, that’s not what I meant by… You are a wonderful young woman in your own right. You have taken on so much in such a short time. Any watcher would be proud to have you as his charge. What I was trying to say… rather badly it seems… was that it was through Buffy that I learned not to ignore the other needs of … that to forget that your charge is also a human being is something that no watcher can ever afford to do,” Giles responded, suddenly feeling as if he was walking on eggshells. He did want Buffy back. She was a more competent Slayer. Her years of experience had made her a formidable force for good. But having his true wish to return things to normal, when voiced out loud, seemed unnecessarily harsh and selfish in the face of all the hard work Willow had put in.

‘Huh?’ Willow said, somewhat lost. She tried to see where Giles was heading with his…. ‘Ohh! … Oh Noooo’.

“Normally I would simply sit quietly and let the matters that… ”, a sudden heat filled Giles, drying his throat and intensifying his sudden desire for a glass of water as he coughed, “… are central to events resolve themselves. But it would seem that should I allow that… they may never be… resolved,” he stated, glancing at Willow who was staring directly ahead of her as they approached the graveyard. Taking a deep breath, he continued, “Willow, I have watched you both grow up into the extraordinary women you now are, and I… I think you know that… I have a deep affection for both of you.”

Willow couldn’t help a slight smile rising at Giles’ stilted declaration of fatherly love. She’d heard the words from her parents; the actual “we love you” words, normally thrown over a shoulder as they left on one trip or another something. Having Giles around had often made Willow relieved that her mom wasn’t interested in her extra-curricular activities. She hadn’t exactly reacted well that one time she had taken an interest during that whole MOO incident which almost got her, Buffy and Amy burned as witches. How Giles felt about her, reserved and understated though it
may be, somehow felt more honest than anything she had ever felt from her own parents. “We’re fond of you too,” she said warmly. “Yes, well… ahh… hmm… thank you,” Giles responded awkwardly. “I know that I don’t often interfere in your private lives but… Willow, why do you find it so difficult to admit how you feel about Buffy?” “I… I…” Willow suddenly wished the ground would open up and… but she never got to finish her wish as a figure threw itself into their path. “Hello there sweetheart, isn’t he a bit old for you?” the vampire leered. Willow blushed and anger flamed within her. “He’s not…” “Willow, emotional control,” Giles gently reminded her. “I’m workin’ on it,” she replied, suddenly feeling very foolish. She’d risen to the bait so quickly. Willow reached within herself to find the core she had created, her calm center. “So granddad, where’d you pick her up?” the vampire asked, flashing his teeth. “She looks like a tasty little nugget; fit and pert too. I like it when they run; all bouncy if you know what I mean. This is gonna be fun.” Willow resisted the urge to glare as she moved forward, taking up a fighting stance. The vampire was slightly taken aback when he realized she wasn’t going to run. “Honey, I prefer to chase my prey.” “Life’s tough. Get used to it,” Willow retorted as she moved forward. Giles stood silent, his attention focused on Willow and her opponent. He felt that familiar butterfly take up residence within the pit of his stomach. Years of watching had never really removed the worry that filled him for his charge on these occasions. The vampire smiled his toothy smile and tilted his head to one side. “That’s okay. I love self service too,” he stated as he lunged towards Willow. Seeing his move telegraphed by his weight distribution, Willow prepared to block his advance by raising her left leg at the last moment as she grabbed his shoulders firmly, bending her right leg to allow the force of his lunge to let her drop onto her back and throw him over her. Giles smiled at the ease of the movements. Willow had been a fast learner. Her focus was in place. Then something occurred to him - right now she was in control of her emotions. “What were you afraid she would say?” he asked. Willow half heard Giles but she didn’t respond. Regaining her feet she turned to greet the vampire as he too stood up and roared at her. “Gee haven’t you told mommy about your new boyfriend?” he asked, moving closer; this time more cautiously. “I was sure that you would take the opportunity to tell her after what Tara said,” Giles commented. Willow couldn’t believe that Giles was trying to continue their conversation. She allowed a small amount of frustration to surface as she forced her open palm into the chest of the approaching vampire, throwing him backwards with such force that he landed at least eighteen feet away. “Tara… She… I couldn’t…” “The guilt just pours of you guys,” the vampire noted as he again approached his prey. “Willow, you have nothing to be afraid of,” Giles stated. “How can you know that?” Willow asked. ******************************BtVS****************************** Buffy sat on the floor of their dorm room refusing to acknowledge the existence of their bed and all the memories that it would bring to mind. Staring at Willow’s small shelf of Wiccan books, she wished there was some way she could just forget how she was feeling, some way she could just go back in time and make it all right. The thought that Willow had once felt, if only subconsciously, if only for a moment, attracted to her and that she had missed it was messing with her head big time. Added to that everyone seemed to have an opinion about the two of them. Even Faith. Buffy had never really felt the need to run and hide. Well, okay there was that one time after killing Angel but that was different. That had been about losing something she had had… to save the world. This was about wanting something she couldn’t have, something that was supposedly a good thing for the world. ‘My life really sucks.’ So here she sat alone in their dorm room. While her Willow was out there in the night patrolling, fighting vampires and God knows what else. Willow doing the job she should be doing but couldn’t. She felt so useless, so helpless. And her Willow was out there in danger. Giles would be with her. He would help her, protect her. But she should be the one out there, the damned Chosen One who should be out there fighting the vampires and other evil, who should be protecting her beautiful redhead. If she could get her hands on Faith for doing this she would… she would… Damn it she couldn’t do anything! Actually what she seemed to be able to do was put the love of her life in danger… yet again. Buffy shook her head, trying to clear it. ‘OK. I have to deal with this. If Willow is going to be Slayer, I have to find a way to help her.’
She remembered how she felt when she used magic against the vamps that were threatening Willow the other day. ‘That’s how I’ll help her, protect her.’ She crawled over to the bookshelf causing her injured knee to complain. As she adjusted her position she caught her knee again and this time the pain reminded her that she needed to treat it. This was Willow’s body and she was really racking up the injuries and bruises. She seemed to be causing her Willow nothing but pain and discomfort. She had seen the look of embarrassment on Willow’s face as she had explained Tara’s mistake. She had heard the stumbling and babbling that she had long understood to represent ‘an uncomfortable and wanting to be elsewhere’ Willow. She had been so full of hope. She had almost wished to regain her aspect of the demon; the horns would have been worth it… to know exactly what Willow was thinking. Anger again raged within her at the cause of all this – Faith. She had gloated; amused at the mess she had created. Gone had been the ‘this world’s only out to screw me’ ex-slayer she had known and in her place had been some ‘know it all’ bitch who had simply walked away from her. She made herself stand up and walk towards the cabinet that she had seen Willow remove a first aid kit from more times than she cared to remember. Opening each drawer in turn she searched it until she found an unusually large first aid kit. She thought about all the times that Willow had taken care of her; had tenderly treated all of her injuries. Sometimes, Buffy felt that she didn’t mind the painful injuries she often suffered while fighting evil because she knew that her best friend would be there to help her feel better physically and emotionally. The slayer healing would eventually help the physical injuries but only Willow could help her feel human again, like herself again. Moving towards the bed, she fought to stop the mental images of their night together, that one wonderful, beautiful night. Sadness called at the realization that she would never again know that happiness, that passion, that closeness with her Willow again.

Willow moved towards the mouthy vampire taking out her stake as she flexed her shoulders in preparation for her attack. “I wouldn’t be a very good watcher if I hadn’t noticed how… Buffy… the way she looks at yo… I mean there have been occasions when… it has occurred to me that she might feel more. I know… I mean I think that she has been feeling…” Giles coughed, trying to swallow the sheer awkwardness of this conversation. He really wasn’t very good at this. He hated stumbling over his words, especially over something as important as this. “You’re wrong. I mean… sure she kinda loves me. But that’s in the whole best friend way, you know. Not the big burning passion kinda way…” Willow stated. “And that’s okay. I told Xander… I said I’d…” Willow stopped talking long enough to block the vampires several punches, allowing her instincts to take over as she tried to formulate a valid response. The sight before him filled Giles with pride as Willow blocked the vampire’s attack and centered her balance. He had always had so much respect for her but he found that level rising as he watched her almost play with her opponent; so like Buffy would have done. He could see it coming but the vampire seemed oblivious as Willow raised the level of her attack through her defense and the vampire left his chest more and more vulnerable until… Ash exploded around her as she plunged stake directly into its heart. Willow stood perfectly still for a moment as the reality of what she had done sank in. She had been so distracted and yet so focused that her instincts had taken over. It had been the easiest slay so far. She hadn’t even broken a sweat. She briefly allowed herself to bask in the satisfaction of a job well done, and ever so briefly imagined about how proud of her Buffy would have been, before turning back to Giles. “I’ve had this conversation already. Xander gave me the big old lecture on the ‘she who hesitates is lost’ theory. I get it. I get that if I don’t take the leap without looking the world ends, bad stuff follows.” “I’m sure you do. I just wanted to assure you that it’s not so much a leap as a blind corner. Certain things I can assure you can be predicted,” Giles commented as his desire to both stress the gravity of the situation and encourage her fought for primary position. “I know that no matter what happens Buffy will never allow your friendship to change.” “You can’t know that. And it will change. Maybe not in the big ‘hey we’re never going to speak again’ type of way. But in that when we go for mochas or dance together, we’ll need to define boundaries. Things will change, Giles. Everything does. Look at me. I was a shy, wallflower bookworm. Well, I still am… that is to say I liked the books and I still do. I did the computer stuff so I was just one of her
two sidekicks. The geeky one. But now I have the witch thing. Yeah, things change,” Willow declared. Buffy lay back on the bed, clenching her teeth as the antiseptic brought tears to her eyes. ‘Maybe I’ve just put a bit too much on.’ she thought as the stinging refused to go away. She felt sure that it was actually cutting into her very bone. Throwing her hands over her head, she grabbed fists full of pillow and let out a silent scream. ‘Oh hell, Willow where are you?’ She couldn’t remember the last time she had tended to her own wounds let alone someone else’s. Willow had always been there, like some Doogie Howser clone, seeing to all their needs, especially hers. Having opened the oversized first aid kit, she had found a multitude of first aid supplies, most of which were a mystery to her. But the sheer quantity only served to remind her that Willow planned ahead, thought of others, provided care and support to all of them, especially her. She tried to remember a time when Willow had ever been selfish, when she had ever put her own needs before others. She couldn’t because there had never been such a time. Pride welled within her; that she knew such a woman, such a giving and caring creature and that this woman was her best friend. But could they still be friends after last night? Her mind was drawn back to the feel of Willow touching her, caressing her, tasting her, sending her beyond her earth bound existence into new glories and pleasures. Willow had opened her up, like no one else had ever done or would probably ever be able to again. How could they just go on after last night? The feeling of Willow’s body on her, the taste of her lips… ‘ohhh god!’ Again she remembered the shock of the next morning’s light and the realization that they had been in each other’s bodies and still were. And then she had seen it. Then she had seen the sheer panic that filled Willow as that same realization hit her. And then to have this all followed by the vision quest. Buffy couldn’t rationalize her need, the hope that had risen within her. She had stood there on the edge of the precipice, only to be pulled back by Willow’s denial, her gentle explanation and the deafening silence as she heard her own heart breaking. How could their friendship ever survive this? Giles stared at the young woman before him, almost constantly having to remind himself that this was Willow and not Buffy. The resolute look on the face before him momentarily distracted him from who he knew her to be. “Absolutely. Of course, I agree. All things change and maybe now is just the time for a new change, for possibly the biggest and most important change in both of your young lives. You have to take the chance.” “Well it’s not fair. Why… why do I have to be the one to… why can’t she…? Hello, I’m not the one with the hero gene. Buffy’s used to facing danger, facing failure… taking chances. I’m more the academic back up. You know… just part of the supporting cast,” Willow’s frustration at being placed in this position was more than apparent. “My dear girl, you have never been just supporting cast,” Giles responded as he smiled at her. “You have been central to all our lives - to mine, to Xander’s but most importantly you’ve always been essential to Buffy.” Giles lowered his eyes, as he felt the blush beginning to rise within his cheeks, “I realize that considering all that you two went through… had to try… the other night… (cough) may have only helped to make things more… awkward between you…” “You can’t imagine,” Willow declared, as she put her stake back into her coat pocket and turned to continue their patrol. “Okay, we are most definitely not having this conversation! Way too freaky,” she growled through
gritted teeth. “So it would seem. But just who are you going to have this talk with?” Giles asked. “No one. I don’t need to talk about… it’s too personal. You have no right to… you can’t really expect me to talk about…” she clenched her fists as the anger began to rise. She breathed deeply, trying to center herself. “I don’t mean to… Believe me when I say that having to have this conversation… is more disturbing for me than you could possibly realize. But I have an obligation to… to help. Willow, you need to take a step back and look at what’s happened. You need to view events with dispassionate eyes, with somewhat less emotional eyes,” Giles stated, being careful to keep a safe distance between himself and the now somewhat emotionally overwrought young woman before him. “You need to exercise the emotional control we practiced earlier. You need to stop letting fear and emotion control your actions.” Losing her temper and control of her center she snapped, “Really? Life techniques from the Watcher with the full and well-rounded personal life? How can a girl refuse?” Willow asked sarcastically. Immediately regretting her outburst, she said “Sorry.” “Willow, you have a keen analytical mind. What amazes me is that you only ever choose to use it academically,” he said. “Maybe it’s time you started to use it in your personal life.” She looked at him as if he had just grown horns. “You want me to look at Buffy like a chem experiment? How can you… why would that…” “Willow, you’re so caught up in how you feel about… about Buffy and how she will react to you when she finds out, that you can’t see her. You don’t seem able to see outside yourself,” Giles pointed out. “Oh great. Another ‘you’re so big and selfish’ speech. Just what I need right now,” Willow responded, her anger beginning to rise yet again. She felt the need to go, to run, because she was becoming sure that if she stayed much longer Giles was going to be the next victim of her rage. “Willow, I really am not trying to anger you. I’m just trying to get you to step back and take a really good look at how Buffy has behaved lately,” Giles pointed out, very aware of how Willow’s breathing seemed to have quickened. “Just so you know, anger is kinda winning right now. Where’s supportive Watcher guy, big with the cleaning of the glasses whenever we talk about our private lives?” she asked. “If you must know, cowering in a corner wondering what the devil I think I’m doing,” Giles responded. “Well I’d like him to come back. Please,” Willow requested. Giles sighed and took a deep breath, “Much as I’d like to return to my usual non-commentary role, in respect to your personal lives, this is far too important an issue for me to do so. Willow you have known Buffy… in a way that should have… that should have provided you with an insight into how she feels. And yet despite that, despite last night you… you do not appear to have come to the same conclusions as others who are close to the two of you. I would be a fool not to tell you that this worries me and the only explanation I am able to come to is that you are letting your own feelings and fears obscure your vision.” Willow stared at him in wonder and shock. He wasn’t going to let the subject go. She turned her back to continue their patrol, which would hopefully give her time to think. “I understand how you may find it difficult to look beyond your emotions… your feelings for… your memories of the night… with… Buffy,” Giles stumbled as unwanted and disturbing images filled his mind. “You think?” Willow grumbled. “You also seem to be denying even the existence of your own feelings. I strongly believe that Tara was correct,” Giles acknowledged, in as firm a tone as he could. “Yet you choose to deny not just to yourself but to Buffy as well, that she may have been correct. I find it quite astonishing…” “Giles! This really is none of your business,” Willow snapped. “The end of the world as we know it. A viable threat to the Slayer. None of this is my business? Young woman, you really couldn’t be more wrong,” Giles stated, staring at Willow’s back over the rim of his spectacles. Willow couldn’t hold it in any longer. She turned and, glaring at Giles, exploded “Oh right that’s your thing isn’t it? Saving the world. Well really, it’s more like you watching from the sidelines while Buffy puts her life on the line and does the dirty work over and over again. And now… now you expect me to just take over, put myself on the line. So tell me - is the view good from the cheap seats?” Willow yelled. “You’re wrong… Buffy and I don’t have a future. How could we? I’m gay and she’s straight. All you guys keep seeing is a way to save your world. You really don’t care about us. The curse requires that we… So you guys want to see us that way. But trust me… I know. No matter how much you may want something to be a certain way… Wanting doesn’t make it so.” She glared at a momentarily silenced Giles before deciding
that it was time for her exit. “You know your way home right?” she asked sarcastically, before turning and running with all her newfound Slayer strength towards the college campus. Giles stood dumbfounded, his mouth hanging open. Willow had run away from him. She had yelled at him, told him off and then run away.

Willow stood outside of their door for what seemed like an eternity. She had never really looked at their door, not that it was any different from any other door on that floor. But behind this door – much awkwardness and weirdness resided. Buffy was in there. Willow could hear her moving around inside. She decided that slayer hearing was really cool, except for that very disturbing conversation between Charmers and his mother that she had overheard on her way here.

She reached for the handle before pausing again to collect herself. What was she going to say? What was Buffy going to say? Why had she run away from Giles? A thousand answers for all her questions rattled through her brain. Vainly she tried to push them all to the back of her mind when suddenly a distressed moan from behind the door caught her attention. ‘Buffy’. She turned the handle and pushed the door open, prepared to see Buffy under attack.

However, the sight that greeted her was one straight out of a cheap sitcom. Buffy was standing on top of their waist high chest of drawers with one leg raised and bent so that her knee was outside their window as she poured a bottle of water over it. Hearing the door open, Buffy quickly turned and her other leg twisted and gave way as she lost her balance. An arc of water flew from the bottle as Buffy toppled backwards towards the floor. She landed on the open first aid kit with a resounding thump and “Oooomph,” which only served to emphasize how much the impact of her landing must have hurt.

“Buffy!” Willow shot across the room to Buffy’s side, all of her protective instincts coming through, only to find Buffy’s face beginning to contort. “Buffy!”

The face before her seemed to move through many unfamiliar expressions before she heard the unmistakable sounds of laughter. Eyes filled with self-deprecating humor met hers. “Willow to the rescue,” Buffy giggled as Willow reached down to her.

“At your service my lady,” Willow responded in a mock gentlemanly manner, tilting her head in reverence, which just seemed to increase Buffy’s giggling. Willow liked the sound of her best friend’s laughter. It had been far too long since she had heard laughter, let alone felt like joining in.

While fighting the urge to laugh, Willow carefully tried to find some part of Buffy’s body that she could take hold of to help lift her back to her feet but it seemed as if the very thought of touching Buffy was sending her mind into sensory over drive. ‘I’m a bad, bad person. My best friend is lying hurt and all I can think about is how wonderful touching her would be. I’m a bad, bad, evil
person.’ All thoughts of laughter left her.

Finally gripping Buffy’s forearms she pulled the ex-slayer up, shifting her grasp to Buffy’s waist as she rose to her feet. Buffy felt her knee begin to give way and instinctively she held onto Willow’s shoulders to steady herself. Finding her balance, she looked forward to find herself just mere inches from Willow’s face. The closeness stopped her laughter and in its place a heavy silence and stillness overcame them.

***********************BtVS****************************************

Giles couldn’t quite believe that Willow had run away from him. He had known that talking to her would be hard but the sheer denial and fear prevalent in her responses had prevented him from really getting out all he had wanted to say and what he had managed to say had been twisted or ignored by his young charge. When had conversation become the clashing battle of two languages, his and theirs? He often felt that he was in some strange world where he knew that he was speaking English and that the language he could hear others speaking sounded like English. But time and experience had proved that although the words appeared the same, these young people had apparently been tutored from a dictionary with a multitude of new meanings to which he was not privy.

He pondered his failures, wondering if his own father had found it just as hard to talk to him when he was younger and riddled with youthful hormones. He smiled slightly remembering how he thought his father’s generation was stuffy, square and generally lacking in understanding when it came to what he wanted from life.

As he moved through the graveyard back towards the magic box and his car, he heard an all too familiar noise – battle. Had Willow come across another vampire? He moved slowly towards the noise, fearful that without him there to help center her, Willow would allow her emotions to affect her recently acquired fighting abilities.

As he watched from behind a mausoleum, he was forced to blink to check that his eyes weren’t lying to him. There, not ten feet from him, was Faith being attacked by two vampires, both fresh from the ground if the soil falling from their clothing and the fashions evident in their attire were any indication. He shook his head as he realized that Buffy’s obsession with clothing and fashion had invaded his observation skills.

Faith appeared to be toying with the vampires, drawing them in, dodging, weaving and laughing at their attempts to capture her. She was more than a match for two newbies and yet she continually allowed them to regroup and attack, stalling their inevitable end. ‘Some things never change,’ he thought. ‘Faith still enjoys the fight just as much as the kill.’ A part of him felt a familiar disappointment. He had held out such hope for Faith when she had first joined them. But then the
story behind her arrival had caused him worry, followed by her brash sexual innuendo, her overly-arrogant attitude and concluded by her... ‘walk to the dark side’ in the company of the Mayor. How had so much disappointment come from one with so much potential?

But then he began to evaluate her performance with a Watcher’s eyes. Good balance, anticipation, awareness of her surroundings, accuracy he concluded before taking in her overall approach - over confidence, reliance on strength, poor emotional focus. Then he saw it, or rather he didn’t it. Where was the arrogance? the anger? the… flashiness? This was something new… Faith wasn’t fighting with the same lust for life and death he was used to seeing from her. She was playing with the vampires but she wasn’t taking the risks he had seen her take a thousand times before. He had been wrong. She wasn’t just playing - she was venting. He’d seen Buffy do it more times than he could count. These vampires were paying for something. They were her release for something else that had occurred.

Buffy stared at the collar bone of her best friend afraid to raise her eyes, as she experienced distinct sparkage. They hadn’t been this close since last night. In fact she hadn’t touched Willow since they were at Giles’ when she had jerked away from her best friend. She felt a strange emptiness in the pit of her stomach and a light headedness that made coherent thought formation impossible.

She didn’t want to move, to break contact. Buffy allowed herself to soak in the feeling of Willows hands on her hips. The urge to move her hands from Willow’s shoulders to her neck and draw those enticing lips towards her filled her mind. But she feared that any movement would end this moment, shattering it and returning her to reality. So she kept perfectly still.

Faith tried to allow all her frustration and anger to release but these newbies really weren’t much of a challenge. She kept the fight going for as long as she could before annoyance took over and almost simultaneously she ended it, dusting them with two well placed stakes. As she watched the night wind disperse their dust she thought she heard a sigh.

Refocusing her attention, she glanced around her, hoping that a more challenging opponent would present itself. But instead the form and face of the Watcher slowly rose from behind a low bush. “Faith.”

“Giles. Still with the watching, huh?” she asked, slightly unnerved that she hadn’t realized that he had been observing her. “Lose your new slayer already?” she commented looking around to see if
Red would emerge. She didn’t really fancy the idea of taking her on. As far as she was concerned, ‘Hell had no fury like a ticked-off witch’.

Giles faltered for a moment, realizing that once Willow had run off he actually had in effect lost her. “Why are you here?”

“Ahhh, the sixty four thousand dollar question,” grinned Faith, leaning back on a gravestone. “And why do you think I’m here?”

“Well at first glance, I’d have to say that you were here to slay. But having watched your... umm... battle, I’d have to correct that assumption by adding, to release your demons,” Giles commented as he slowly moved from behind the bush, knowing that it offered him little or no protection should the ex-slayer choose to attack him. Although the open ground would at least give him room in which to maneuver.

“Yeah, definitely up with releasing the demon... from this world anyway. So what can I do you for? I’m all outta teabags but I think the corner store is still open,” Faith responded, not moving an inch either towards or away from him. She didn’t want to scare him off. This could prove to be a lucky break.

“Thank you. You must be staying near by to have taken note of the opening hours of our local convenience stores. I hope you’ve found somewhere with a good view?” Giles queried.

“You could say that,” Faith responded with a smile, “The Council really lost a Watcher 007 stud when they let you go, didn’t they?” she added sincerely.

Gils smiled. He had never really been a James Bond fan but he found the comparison somewhat of an ego boost. “Kind of you to say.” Having reached open ground, some six feet from Faith, Giles stopped and stood still. He wanted a chance to talk to Faith and definitely did not want to take the chance of causing another young woman, let alone another slayer, to run away from him. Faith could have the answers he needed. “Faith I would appreciate being able to ask you some, well, rather important questions.”

“Fire away,” Faith responded, although she was a little unsure exactly how much she should give away if anything. But she was tired of hiding, of knowing that just about everyone she was trying to help thought of her as the enemy. The idea of a few civilized words from one of that group was somehow more pleasing a thought than she could have imagined it would be. ‘Just when did I begin to care what others think of me?’ she wondered.
Willow stood transfixed. She could hear both of their hearts. The beats quickening and leveling off as their breathing caught up. She didn’t want to let go. She had Buffy close, so very close. She could almost feel her breath against the bare skin of her… ‘oh my god she’s looking at my… no not looking. Why would Buffy be looking at…? Where else can she look? It’s just the way her head’s hanging.’

The thought of Buffy staring down her cleavage made her swallow as she felt a familiar heat rise within her. ‘It’s because I’m not moving. I mean if I moved, if I just let her go… but she feels so good. I like holding… there’s nothing wrong with just looking. I’m looking…’

Willow then realized that she was, in fact, staring… staring at Buffy’s right ear. ‘Why on earth am I looking at her ear? Great, now I have an ear fetish! My life’s not complicated enough with the whole recently gay; crush on my straight or maybe not so straight best friend; only six weeks to my mid term exams; body-switched slayer fill-in duties and dealing with a curse that might end the world. I get a new kinky fixation – ears?’ She was unable to drag her eyes from the ear. ‘Ears. I mean they’re for hearing. Okay, there can be nibbling, occasional licking… Yuck, I’m… yuck, how can I be… This is not the time or the place to be thinking of licking, of tasting, of nibbling…’ And so the inner babbling continued.
Chapter 22

Willow, having recovered a little and gotten her inner babbling somewhat under control, shifted slightly and moved her gaze to the two small scars still visible on Buffy’s neck. They were testaments to the sacrifice she had once made to save Angel’s life. Buffy had loved him and lost him but somehow she had survived. Sure their relationship had changed and the loss had left visible scars on her dear friend but her life hadn’t ended.

Willow winced at the knowledge that now their relationship, their friendship would never be the same again and she sincerely hoped that she too could survive what they were going through.

They would never return to who they were. They could never regain what they once had. Willow now knew that the things they had shared and learned about each other last night would make that impossible despite all of their planning and promises. A sorrow filled her for what they had both lost and what she would soon have to risk.

Maybe if she’d never fallen in love with Buffy. Maybe if she’d hidden her feelings better. If Faith, or had it been Cordelia, hadn’t been able to pick up on her feelings… maybe she would still be in her own body and none of this … It had all happened because of her feelings. She was the magnet … drawing the lightning towards them … towards Buffy. Willow wondered if Buffy felt something. She wondered if she could pick up on what everyone else was talking about … could sense … If she thought Buffy had a clue… But how could she tell her? What if she just ran away from her again?

But right now, right here - Buffy wasn’t moving to leave her light embrace. This puzzled her. ‘Could Anya be right?’ Had she missed something? Was there a part of that night that … was there … had there been something? Had she been so absorbed in the moment, in her ‘dream come true’? But how could she not have been? It was a dream, her dream. Wasn’t it? No, it had been real, weird, wonderful, awkward and mind blowing. But it had definitely been real.

Could she have missed something? Was it possible that in the heat and the passion of last night … ‘No, if Buffy had said something … I mean she would have said something, wouldn’t she? Right … but what? Just what would she have said? “That was really great. Wanna be the love of my life?” Yeah, right.’

‘But she did seem to enjoy herself” Willow recalled. Renewed surprise filled her as she remembered just how open, how receptive and how accepting a sexual partner Buffy had been. She had seemed to delight in the pleasure that Willow had offered her. But what if Willow had missed something? What if she had only seen what Buffy wanted her to see? What if she had just been making it easier for Willow? ‘What if she was faking? Oh goddess, NO! I don’t want to know if she was. How could I ever look her in … I’d have to leave town or turn back time … or
it’ll slip out one day and I’ll just die.’

Giles was now at a loss. Faith had agreed to answer his questions. He couldn’t believe it. He knew he had some questions. Indeed, he had a book full of them but for a brief moment not one of them came to mind. He had been so thrown at Willow running from him and then seeing Faith that his mind had locked its gears.

“With questions like these a girl could talk herself to death,” Faith finally commented impatiently.

“Sorry, sorry. I’m just trying to gather my thoughts and put them in some sort of order,” Giles explained apologetically, frustrated that he couldn’t seem to organize his own mind.

“Yeah, right. Well time is money, Giles old man. So let’s cut to it,” Faith responded sarcastically. “What do you wanna know?”

“Ideally absolutely everything,” Giles replied ignoring her reference to his age, hoping against hope that Faith would just disclose everything to him.

Faith laughed. “And here I always thought older guys were meant to … you know … have finesse or patience or something. So if you want to dance, the least you could do is ask nicely,” Faith responded, unwilling to just be so easily milked of information like some stool pigeon. She wanted to be treated with some respect, some courtesy. ‘Where the hell did that come from?’ She smiled at the ridiculous thought that any of these guys would ever treat her like a person.

Giles smiled, acknowledging that his request had been somewhat impolite. “Indeed. I apologize. I regret that recent events have robbed me of my manners.”

“Yeah, figured you guys would get spooked but I thought by now you’d all be down with the research,” Faith commented.

“There has been research. And I’m sure I wouldn’t be giving too much away to say that our results still border on nothing more than hypothesis,” Giles stated, unsure that he wanted to reveal anything about the vision quest. “Mainly dealing with nothing more than the summations and inferences we have drawn from the wording of the curse. It would be nice to clarify … actually
“So you come to the source. Smart.”

“Possibly. However I am still somewhat unsure that I can take anything you tell me, or choose to tell me as the tr …,” he faltered, unsure how to say that he feared that she might lie to him.

“So you want a polygraph test? Sorry but I don’t seem to have one on me. Guess you just have to work the fact that I haven’t been trying to kill anyone into the mix,” Faith stated spreading her arms apologetically. “So how are Thelma and Louise doing?”

she asked.

Giles frowned momentarily before grasping hold of the pop reference. “As well as can be expected,” he responded evasively. “You seemed to be venting when I came across you. Is there something on your mind?” he asked, hoping to move the subject away from Buffy and Willow.


“She has proved an apt pupil,” Giles affirmed before he could really help himself. “Faith, I must ask -- what are your intentions?”

“Aw hell, I’m not asking for the hand of your first born. But that’s it, isn’t it? The sixty four thousand dollar question. Guess you could say my intentions are honorable. I was even hoping to score some points and clear some IOU’s,” Faith grinned. “But surprise, surprise - my credit isn’t what it used to be.”

**********************************************************************BtVS**********************************************************************

Buffy had never known time to stand still in quite this way. It was neither scary nor comfortable as the silence was weighing down on her. Conversation was coming -- she could feel it, like an approaching thunderstorm.

Talking would mean more lying to Willow and she was getting fed up with that -- big time. But in this moment, in this brief yet seemingly endless moment of contact with her beloved it was all so
simple, so uncomplicated. Why did words just seem to make things harder? Last night there had been no words. Well okay there had been words but no conversation.

Buffy felt a slight shift in Willow and sensing a threat to the moment she lifted her eyes to meet those of her secret love. Catching a look of sorrow on the face before her, Buffy was momentarily puzzled. Willow quickly altered her expression to thoughtfulness but that too slipped and an expression of sheer panic took over.

Buffy’s eyes grew wide as she tried to make sense of just what she had seen and what it could mean. But another shift from Willow and their embrace was broken. Buffy felt Willow remove her hands from her waist, leaving a warm echo at their loss. She self-consciously removed her hands from Willow’s shoulders, dropping her gaze to the floor. “Thanks,” she almost whispered, remembering that Willow had been helping her up.

“No problem,” came the very flat response, as Willow turned to bend down and pick up the now somewhat dented first aid kit. Rising again she moved it onto the bed. Buffy watched her cautiously, not sure what to say or what to do next.

**********************************************************************BtVS**********************************************************************

Giles stood very still, his mind a rambling plethora of questions. Faith had not given him very much to go on. She had made it clear that she was here at the behest of Cordelia and Angel; that Cordelia had received a message from the “Powers That Be” and that the curse was intended as a good thing; a helpful thing that was necessary.

But it wasn’t that which had caused him to lapse into deep thought in the middle of a graveyard. It was the very obvious fact that Faith had absolutely no idea about the curse within the curse. She hadn’t even flinched when he had made references to the upcoming eclipse. He truly believed that she wasn’t involved in this part of it at all. Lost in his own thoughts for a moment, he missed Faith’s sudden alertness and warily searching eyes.

Faith yelling “GILES!” was the last thing he heard before a sharp pain between his shoulder blades made him fall to his knees. Shaking his head, he tried to clear the fuzziness and spreading numbness. Realizing that he was no longer on all fours but face down on the grass, his mind scrambled to recall details. How had he arrived here? What was happening?

Then his watcher instincts took over and he looked about him for Faith. Where was the Slayer? Relief settled over him as he saw her battling a group of … ‘what the devil? Men?’ He shook his head again and focused. Well, they definitely looked like men although dressed in what appeared to be black combat uniforms. He felt his vision getting fuzzy and concentrating very hard, he focused on the scene blurring before him, but his eyelids seemed so very heavy. He was so tired.
How? When had he become so fatigued? No, he was … where did they … ground so cold … Faith, must help Faith … So tired … Druggg…

Faith hadn’t sensed them. She’d caught a movement, a noise just before they appeared. Then the dart had hit Giles in the back and he’d dropped to the floor like a rock. They were human. She was pretty damn sure of that; trained, fit and deliberate, but human. The second dart had only just missed her.

Instinct took over and she moved to protect Giles. Not sure what these men were after but positive that she wasn’t going to let them do anything more to hurt the man now lying unconscious behind her, she watched two of them exchange a brief glance before charging her, keeping some two or three feet between them. They obviously intended to reach her at the same time hoping to force her to take them on individually. Faith smiled “Gee, this is gonna be fun.”

Waiting until the last possible moment to drop, she rolled between them. Quickly regaining her feet, Faith launched herself onto her hands to kick out behind her, planting her feet powerfully into the small of each attacker's back. Their momentum now being used against them, the pair stumbled forward flailing in their vain attempts to keep upright. They traveled some six or seven feet before the pain from her well planted kicks traveled to their legs causing them to fall flat on their faces.

Turning to confront the duo, she felt a giant pair of arms dropping around her from behind. Again Faith dropped, this time into the splits turning her head to look with evil glee at the crotch of her attacker. At first Faith dropped her fist to the floor and looked up thoughtfully. But then the decision made, she ferociously launched her fist upwards towards that ‘oh so tender’ male zone.

A muffled high pitched curse escaped from her would-be attacker as he quickly dropped his arms in a belated attempt to defend himself. Seeing that he was severely distracted, Faith threw her torso away from him to allow her to fiercely bring her legs together, effectively chopping his ankles out from under him and hurling him backwards.

Regaining her feet, she heard a groan. Giles? Faith moved quickly towards the Watcher, all the while alert and preparing for another attack. Glancing down at the fallen man before her, Faith satisfied herself that he was still breathing. “Damn it,” Faith cursed as she attempted to figure out why every Watcher she really liked and trusted had to get hurt on her shift? Recalling how her first watcher had died, anger rose within her but she quickly took a moment to swallow the growing blind fury that would come if she allowed this rage to take her over. Turning her back to Giles, she prepared to confront their attackers … “Hey?” she yelled in surprise as she realized they were not where she had expected them to be.

A movement caught her eye. Some twenty feet away four men were helping their three injured
associates towards a black transit van. Her instinct was to follow them but the sound of another
groan from behind her caused her to pause and reconsider her options. ‘Giles needs help – now.’

She watched the men load themselves into the van with several backwards glances. “Yeah, I’m
letting you go … for now … and you know it.” Faith watched only briefly as the sliding door
closed on the huddled group, and the van sped away.

Dropping to the side of her second Watcher, she glared accusingly at the dart that still protruded
from between Giles’ shoulder blades. “Hey Giles, don’t you know it’s rude to fall asleep on a
date?” Faith gibed as she removed the dart and rolled him over.

Giles forced his way through the fog, willing his eyes open. There was something that he needed
to know.

Faith saw his eyelids flutter. He was still fighting the drug. Then briefly his eyes opened and he
fixed his gaze on her. “Are you oka…” he mumbled.

Stunned, she nodded.

Giles smiled briefly before falling unconscious again.

A feeling rose within the ex-slayer, so unfamiliar and yet so welcome. She took a deep breath,
blinking away a little moisture from her eyes in disbelief. “Damn it! I will not … cry. Christ, what
the hell am I turning into?” Faith berated herself, shaking her head vigorously. “Get over it, girl.”

Looking at the fallen Watcher, she reached down and gently lifted him up and over her shoulder.
“I got your back, Watcher,” she commented as she slowly headed across the cemetery towards the
Magic Box.

*************************BtVS*************************

Opening her emails, Willow sighed – Nothing. She’d been hoping that Kira would have left her a
message, if only to fire a thousand questions at her about the last night. Her shoulders sagged as
she realized she had no one to talk to, no one to confide in or bounce ideas off of.
The one person she would normally run to, was the one person she couldn’t talk to – not about this. Even though she was right there - in the same room, just a few feet away, sitting on the window sill, trying to look like watching the world go by was a full time job.

Normally she would have pulled Buffy; called her on her silence; made her talk it out - But not tonight. Everything that had happened between them sat like a big pink elephant in the middle of the room and neither one of them seemed able to maneuver their way around it. ‘Elephants - why would anyone invent an elephant? Huge ears – never a good look, a hose for a nose and four knees - I mean four!! Makes jumping impossible. Good thing they don’t need to jump’, Willow’s mind rambled as she continued her rant against the inventor of the elephant.

Sitting up at her PC, she opened an internet connection and, pulling down her favorites, she located the online coven. She mentally crossed her fingers as she entered the coven’s forum. ‘Please let someone be on-line’, she quietly prayed.

The first topic that caught her eye caused her to mentally gulp – “Curse or Blessing?” It seemed that their predicament was a hot topic. ‘Oh Kira, how could you?’ She hesitated for a moment before she decided to click and open the topic.

She began to read with dread and disbelief.

Cassy:

< Believe it or not I was discussing Kira’s idea for breaking the curse in question with my mother. We were talking about the various ways a relationship can begin over dinner tonight. Of course B & W came up. She loves tuning in to their souls - they’re so old.

Anyway, she asked me if there was any one optimum moment that I could pick from the list where I could almost guarantee the coming together of these two souls.

Whether it be a kiss, an intimate moment or just plain rocking each other’s worlds. It took me quite a while to go over all the different choices in my head. To the point that my mother got annoyed and went on to extol the wonderful virtues of massage and oils, and to blast the fact that massage wasn’t on the list!!

So how about you guys, what one moment would you pick? >

Ang:
< I really like this post. You actually discuss this stuff over the dinner table with your mother?? Cause that is really cool!

Anyway, getting back to the topic. My one moment would be “post-list”. Lying quietly in bed together in the after-glow. They are so connected and at that moment I’m sure they really would have shared something that could only serve to bring them closer together. >

Hammy:

< Okay. And what flights of fancy have robbed you both of your reason? I feel duty bound to pull you back to earth, you romantic sodden wenches. You both seem to have overlooked the one really important thing Cassy’s admittedly really cool mother said. Or have you both thrown away your reason?

“Massage wasn’t on the list!!”

Which I thought would surely lead even the weakest witted of us to ask – what else is missing? But instead what do I see – romantic avarice run wild. Try to keep it together girls.

So suggestions required. All ideas that you feel were missing from the list will be taken under consideration.

Anything goes. >

“Oh goddess,” Willow exclaimed as she stared wide-eyed at the multitude of suggestions that flowed in response to Hammy’s new question. Until finally Hammy took great pleasure at posting - the ‘New List’. Hearing movement behind her, Willow quickly dragged her cursor over the list, copying it. Closing her forum session, she opened Microsoft word and pasted in the New List. There was just no way in this twisted dimension, she could let Buffy read the coven’s topic postings in full – the ‘New List’ was bad enough.

“Is that what I think it is?” Buffy asked disbelief apparent in her voice.

“Nu – huh,” Willow responded.
“New?”

“Yep,” Willow agreed, hitting <print>.

Confused, Buffy couldn’t keep herself from asking, “Why?”

“Stuff … stuff was … there were … things … you know… missing … things left out. When Kira wrote…” Willow really didn’t want to be explaining this. She had hoped that this topic was closed, finished, gone, no more. After everything that they had been through, after all that had happened - the pleasure, the pain, the joy, the loss. Now there was going to be more.

“But we followed … we did everything on the … If they missed … if they left things out … then we …” Buffy struggled to voice her thoughts. “We missed them when we …”

“I’m right there with you. It seems we didn’t do it … right … o-o-or completely,” Willow stated unable to turn her head and look at Buffy. She had never really wanted to fall down a deep, dark hole quite as much as she did at this moment. Instead she watched the paper slowly emerge from her printer.

“Well, you could have fooled me. I thought we did it mega right,” Buffy commented, a small smile beginning to form before she could stop herself. “I mean … are they sure? I mean, what the hell didn’t we …” Buffy began to feel heat rising in her cheeks. ‘This is ridiculous. Of course we did it right. If that wasn’t right … if we didn’t … My god, what else is there?’ she unconsciously licked her lips as she recalled the many new, wonderful and intoxicating experiences Willow had blessed her with last night - her mind almost imploding at the thought that there was more.

Willow reached down and pulled the still warm hard copy from the printer tray. Lifting her arm without turning, she raised it within reach of Buffy. “Here.”

Buffy took the sheet of paper as she stared at Willow’s beautiful profile. Then she shook her head and looked at the piece of paper. Realizing what she was looking at, she raised the sheet and began to read. Running her eyes down the list, she mentally ticked off the items they had … experienced until she was about half way down.

If Willow had been watching her, she would have seen a smile cross Buffy’s face as she continued to read the list. However, the last two items quickly removed her smile, as her jaw dropped and her slight blush blossomed into a flaming red mask. Buffy, let her hand drop as she felt the heat
beginning to rise within her, mainly because of the images now crowding into her mind but also
because of the conversation she knew could no longer be avoided.

“You see they … missed stuff …” Willow reiterated.

“Kinda!” Buffy exclaimed acknowledging the truth of that statement while fighting to regain her
self-control. Her mind seemed to be spinning off … ‘What did this mean? Would they have to …
would she get to hold and kiss … would they … could they?’

Willow finally shifted in her seat and raised her face to look at Buffy. What she saw wasn’t really
unexpected. ‘She embarrassed. Goodness, I can’t think why … oh yeah – the New List. Was she
trying to figure out what it meant? Was she going to say it or would she … oh no. She’s going to
make me say it.’

“We did it wrong,” Buffy whispered. “Anya is so gonna love that,” she commented, despair
covering her still red features.

Willow suddenly felt nervous. ‘Why did she say that? Anya said this was my area of expertise …
Oh no, she thinks it’s my fault … that I did it … No! She couldn’t think that I … I would never …
not on purpose. She has to know I would never …’

Buffy looked down at Willow and seeing the wrinkled brow and concerned look, she thought ‘Oh
great she’s freaked. The idea of doing it … of making … it freaks her out. Was I really that bad?
Was it really so hard for her to …’ Such pain filled her chest, her heart.

Willow saw the switch from amused embarrassment to fear and shrank back. “Buffy, I know you
think it’s my fault …”

Buffy shook her head, not quite sure what Willow had just said. “What?”

Taking a deep breath Willow prepared herself but a resounding ping from her PC made her turn her
head. <You’ve got Mail> the disembodied voice advised her. Before her flashed her new mail
notifier identifying the source of the email: <Kira>

*******************************************************************************BiVS*******************************************************************************
Faith lowered Giles gently to the pavement, resting his head against the door jam of the Magic Box. She looked around nervously as she searched his pockets. ‘Great, I look like I’m mugging him.’ Finding his keys, she unlocked the shop door and quickly moved him inside. Faith was overwhelmed with the feeling that she was invading some inner sanctum. The Magic shop was, after all, the center of the Scooby gang’s universe.

Resting Giles on a pile of Moroccan cushions, she returned to lock the shop door. Having secured their hiding place, she finally relaxed and took a good look at Scooby central. It was larger than she had realized. Much larger. “Some square footage you have here, Watcher,” she commented, noting the split level and roomy feel of the shop. Moving forward she searched for somewhere safer to leave Giles. She really didn’t want to meet up with any of the Scoobies right now, which was why she had chosen to leave Giles in the shop. The fact that they would never believe that she’d had nothing to do with the Watcher’s present condition made that decision easy.

As she searched she made mental notes and dismissed the basement and the counter area behind the cash register. Then she came across the training room. Faith looked around the room with both envy and respect. The Watcher and his charge obviously took their calling as seriously as ever. She’d have loved to have a place like th – ‘Who am I kidding? I’d take a lease on this right now. Wonder why Angel hasn’t ever invested in a real training room like this? Isn’t LA supposed to be “gym” and “workout” central?’

Moving to the door at the rear she checked the bolt locks and, giving the door a good kick, she satisfied herself that it was secure. Spotting the training mats and the high frosted windows, she decided that this was probably the safest area in the shop.

----------------------------------BtVSBtVSBtVSBtVSBtVSBtVSBtVSBtVS----------------------------------

<Hello my dear,

I hate to be the bringer of bad news but it appears that the list I initially gave you was incomplete. I really should have referred to the coven before sending it to you. I’m ever so sorry and I hope I’m not too late. I’ve attached the amended list.

Discussion has been had and it has been generally agreed that even if you have already undertaken the larger portion of the list, the remaining items may be enacted within the same lunar cycle to the same effect.

I really am very sorry my dear, I assure you. I know some of the newer items may appear somewhat extreme but it is the knowledge of the whole, the joining of the two into the one whole that should create the link needed.
If you have any questions, because I most definitely did, let me know. I have no idea of your knowledge or experience in this arena but it seems my own was more conventional than I had imagined.

Regards

Kira>

Willow stared at the screen both relieved and embarrassed. Many of the new items were well out of her realm of knowledge, let alone experience. And if, as it seemed they were out of Kira’s, what help did she hope to be?

Buffy stared at Willow as the witch seemed engrossed in her PC. She’d read Kira’s email over Willow’s shoulder and suddenly realized that the New List she had just read hadn’t come from Kira. Where had Willow got it from? She wanted to ask but Willow didn’t really appear to feel all open and ready for a Q and A session.

Anyway she wasn’t in any condition to ask questions since she felt like she was actually buzzing at the thought of another hot and steamy night with her beloved. But it didn’t seem as though Willow felt the same way if their argument in the training room, which had led to her own sudden exit, was any indication. She had hoped that Willow would have had time, by now, to realize how much her words had hurt her; had time to realize that Buffy hadn’t wanted rejection; had time to realize that what she had wanted was for Tara’s words to be true. But Willow hadn’t spoken more than dozen words to her, let alone looked her in the eye since she’d finally come home.

‘Am I pushing? Did I make it too obvious? Am I freaking her out? Is that why she’s hardly looking at me?’ Buffy wondered, remembering Faith’s smug face as the other slayer had tried to bait her. It was as if she had known that Buffy was screwing up. She’d never felt so lost, so unable to see what had to be done. ‘What should I do? What would be best? For Willow? For me? For us?’ She just couldn’t seem to get out of this awkward and uncomfortable corner she had boxed herself into. And she couldn’t go to the one person she always knew that she could go to when she felt at a loss.

She wanted Willow. Her very being ached to cross the distance between them and take what she wanted; what she needed. But as she had begun to realize that Willow was pulling away from her, and that she didn’t know why, all her usual self-confidence seemed to leave her. Buffy’s innate knowledge that she, herself, was easy on the eyes; her belief in her ability to attract others to her faded away before the intensity of her need and just how vulnerable that made her feel.

Okay. She hadn’t always chosen wisely but, as a rule, anyone Buffy had set her ex-cheerleader, ex-prom queen sights on, she had gotten. What was she doing wrong? All she seemed able to get from Willow was dutiful friendship and support when she wanted so much more. It seemed that the one person that she thought she knew best and wanted so much was the one person she now
couldn’t figure out how to reach.

Xander placed the last spoonful of Ben & Jerry’s into his mouth and sighed as the cold ice-cream melted, assaulting his taste buds with Phish Food heaven. Life was good.

“You’ve got it all over your face,” Anya pointed out from her prone position.

“If you don’t get some on your face you’re not really enjoying it,” Xander explained, licking his tongue as far around his lips as he could. Inexplicably his mind skipped and the image of Willow between Buffy’s … ‘Where the hell did that co … OH!’ Shaking his head he tried to get rid of the image. But instead a large dollop of Phish Food suddenly plopped between them … ‘OH! Bad. Bad.’

“Xander?” Anya scolded with the almost certainty of a girlfriend who knew her man too well.

“Wha … Oh yeah. Sorry,” Xander said, shaking his head again as he removed the dessert spoon and can of whipped cream from the bed, and tried to rid himself of the erotic pictures in his mind.

“Good. Because I have an itch,” Anya informed him.

Xander raised his eyebrow in rakish hope. ‘It’s not like Anya to use an innuendo? She usually comes just right out with … but hey,’ he thought turning expectantly towards her. Immediately he saw his mistake. Anya’s face was not that of a woman in need of sex; it was the look of a woman with a very distracting and annoying itch. Dropping his silly grin, he patiently took instruction as Anya led his fingers to the cause of her itchy distraction. Finally he was rewarded with a contented sigh. Dismissing him, Anya repositioned herself to sleep and Xander turned to set his alarm.

“You’re working tomorrow?” Anya questioned. “But I’m not well. I’ve been wounded.”

“Yes honey, I know. But that’s where the money comes from. The money that pays the rent, buys the food and all the pretty things,” Xander pointed out.
“Good. I will need many nice things to distract me from the pain ... and the itch,” Anya stated. Then something else seemed to occur to her. “But if the world is going to end - why bother?”

“Thank you, harbinger of doom. Please deposit your perishable items in the green box at the door. The world is not going to end, Anya. Buffy will stop it. She always does. Remember? We save the world. Then we get to party. But we can’t tell anyone that we’ve saved the world – again,” Xander reminds her.

“You don’t save the world. We don’t save the world. Buffy does that. We just stand on the side lines, occasionally getting injured or amusingly taken over by some evil being,” Anya reminded him. “We’re like the guys in the red suits.”

Xander’s brow furrowed; his face a picture of confusion. Too slow to stop himself, he responded to her statement with a “Huh?”

“You know, the guys in the red suits who never survive an away mission, or who get changed into aliens or rocks or small furry annoying bunny-like creatures. We’re like them ... only we don’t die,” Anya explained. But upon glancing at the still confused look on Xander’s face, she continued “Instead we – the sidekicks - get injured, insulted, forced to have virginal sex with insect women, get attacked by troll ex-boyfriends, get taken over by Hyenas. We never get to save the world. See it’s like the guys in the red suits ... everyone knows we’re going to get hurt and need saving. We need to be like the girls in the short skirts. They get to moon over the captain and hold clip boards.”

Xander’s eyes opened wide as he realized that she’s going on about “Star Trek! Red shirts!” he exclaimed. ‘Geez, how did I not get that?’ he wondered. Smirking he gave thanks to the Powers That Be for a woman who made Star Trek references. Now if only he could get her into Babylon Five. Grabbing the bull by the horns, he smiled before responding “Okay, so we always survive? Then by your argument we always return for more – hence the world can not end because if the world ends we die and since we don’t die and we always come back for more – the world will not end,” Xander pointed out, satisfied that his logic was flawless.

Anya glared at him and he could almost see her searching for a hole in his logic. Then it occurred to him that although there might not be a hole in his logic at the moment, their vulnerability and mortality – including Buffy’s – might be not always assure their survival.

******************************************BtVS******************************************

Willow wanted to be sucked into her PC, to vanish into the world of chips, megabytes and logic.
Then she could allow programming to replace the fear she could feel rising within her. She wanted pure logic right now, to control her emotions and prevent her from making any foolish decisions or voicing the cause of her heartache and true feelings. She didn’t think she could do it again. It would be like … torture. Slowly the images she had stored of Buffy from last night filled her head. She gulped as the desire began to rise within her - the feel of her, the taste, the way she moved, ‘Oh goddess!’ She felt the hunger fill her, the heat begin to rise, the fear, the longing … Bad, bad.

“Will, I know this won’t be easy … for either of us. But if it works …,” Buffy stated, her voice breaking through the panic that had started to wash over Willow.

Buffy was at her side, reading the PC over her shoulder. She had forgotten that her best friend was standing near her reading the Forum’s list. Concentrating on what Buffy had actually said, she realized that the decision had been taken from her and she was inwardly relieved.

“What else can we do?” Buffy asked.

She glanced at the resolve she saw before her and thought ‘Oh goddess, why is she asking me … Get a grip, will you? She’s only suggesting what she hopes will end this,’ she told herself

Willow involuntarily shook her head, “I don’t know.”

“You know we have to try. Please, Will? Don’t make me …” Buffy paused, her voice a little shaken. ‘Is she going to make me beg?’ Buffy discarded the thought. “I don’t want to force you to … Will, you must realize how hard this is for me. If we don’t try … Life as we know it … pretty much a goner,” Buffy stated. Taking a deep breath, she continued “I’ve gotten used to us … our lives. I’m not really willing to give them up just yet. Let’s face facts, they may be crazy but our lives are never dull.”

Willow couldn’t help smirking at the truth of Buffy’s statement. “I’m just… worried. We’ve … well kinda imploded today, after … You’re my best friend. I don’t want to lose … What if it doesn’t work?” Willow stumbled, almost choking as she dropped her head and tried to hold back the tears.

“Hey,” Buffy said, reaching out to lift her chin and looking deep into Willow’s beautiful eyes. Although it was like looking into her own eyes, she felt as if she could see into her best friend’s soul. “Never gonna happen,” she said allowing some of how she felt to show. “I would never let anything break us up. Never!” she stated with such conviction that Willow had no doubt that she meant every word.
A sharp shrill ringing broke into Xander’s mind. ‘No – too soon,’ he thought, certain he had only just put his head on the pillow. Reaching out he hit his alarm. But the annoying ringing didn’t stop. ‘Telephone,’ he reasoned.

Forcing himself up, he moved out of the bedroom closing the door behind him. Lifting the receiver, he ran his free hand through his hair in a vain attempt to wake up. “Hello.”

“Hey there, boy toy,” an all too-familiar voice greeted him. “Giles is okay. He’s been drugged. But he’s okay. I’ve left him in the Magic shop and locked it up behind me. He should be safe. I’ve just popped the keys into your mailbox. Someone needs to check on him and get him home.”

Xander tried to take the words in but his mind was simply a jumble of questions. ‘Why the hell is Faith calling me? Where did she get my number? What has she done to Giles?’ However “What?” was all he could manage.

“Okay Dweeb Boy, listen up. Giles has been drugged – he’s unconscious but okay. I’ve locked him in the magic box for his own safety. The keys are in your mailbox. Go check on him and get him home. OK?” Faith asked, the frustrated amusement clear in her tone. She really wasn’t a fan of having to repeat herself.

“How … ?” Xander began to ask when the line went dead. It seemed that telephone etiquette was one of the many things Faith had considered a waste of her time. Now completely awake he stared at the receiver and tried to fully grasp what she had said. ‘Giles! I’ve got to get dressed.’ Replacing the receiver he moved towards the bedroom door. Suddenly stopping he stared at the door. ‘What the hell do I tell Anya?’

Somehow starting was harder this time. They had agreed to use darkness again. And hoping to make things easier, Kira had suggested they take advantage of the darkness to undress this time. But scooting under the covers, they had both found that traveling those last two feet was harder to handle and more embarrassing than the lengthy email conversation they had only recently finished with Kira.

Buffy had disappeared to have a shower once most of information had been clarified with Kira.
She’d needed to collect herself but all that seemed a waste of time as she now lie not quite sure how to move forward.

‘Oh goddess, I’m here again,’ Willow’s brain screamed as she felt the rush of air when Buffy scooted under the bedcovers and quickly lowered them. The knowledge that Buffy was … well … not dressed and so close … caused a nervous giggle to escape from the wiccan.

Buffy couldn’t help giggling in relief and mutual agreement at the awkward silliness of this. Why were they both holding back? Why couldn’t they just relax and let go? It wasn’t as if they hadn’t done this before. And then she recalled the new list. ‘Oh yeah!’ Willow had made it very clear she was now out of her depth, out of her “knowledge base”. ‘She’s nervous and upset.’ Buffy realized, allowing her natural instinct to protect her best friend take over, she forced herself to make the first move.

Moving slowly towards Willow, she reminded herself that ‘if this is it … if this is the last time I’ll ever get to be with her … I’m not going to waste so much as a second. I’m going to show her just how she makes me feel … how much she means to me. How can that be bad? Nope, no one could ever take that as a bad. I know I wouldn’t,’ she slowly convinced herself. A newfound confidence filled her. She had a plan. Not her favorite kind of plan because this could very well be a hopeless cause. But they had been through so many other hopeless situations together and had come through them somehow. She had to hope that maybe she could seduce the love of her life. At the very least she had to try. But whatever happened she was going to hold and kiss and taste and caress her Willow and remember every last moment. And hopefully make Willow remember every single moment too.

Hearing a sharp intake of breath from Willow as their skin met, she instinctively reached out to calm her beloved. “Will, it’s just me,” she whispered with a trace of uncertainty and nervousness still evident in her tone, despite having steeled herself to take that first step. Swallowing Buffy took a chance. “It’s just us … and I … I … I know what you said earlier but … I …” She took a deep breath before finally voicing her true feelings. “I really liked the us that I met last night.”

Willow’s mind seemed to explode as she caught the meaning of the words Buffy had stumbled over as her hand had slowly stroked Willow’s shoulder. They sounded like the most beautiful words she had ever heard. ‘Did she just say … Oh! … she did … she wasn’t … faking.’ Her fear melted and she found herself smirking before she realized that Buffy had stopped moving. ‘She’s waiting for me to respond.’ “M … me t … too,” she whispered not trusting herself to say anything more.

“I’m glad,” Buffy sighed. It was going to be okay. ‘I can do this.’ She moved her hand, placing it gently behind Willow and drawing herself closer with each contact sending warmth and heat up and down her entire body … her entire being.
Tentatively, Willow ran her hands down Buffy’s back causing her to arch, pushing her firm breasts forward into Willow’s. ‘Oh … so soft.’ Reaching down, she paused before running her nails over Buffy’s bottom causing their hips to meet. ‘Please let her be mine,’ Willow chanted to herself. She needed to believe; she needed to hope that this was more --- more than just … sex.

Sensing a hesitation as Willow’s hands stilled, Buffy ran hers hand up to the nape of Willow’s neck. Running her fingers up through Willow’s hair she closed her eyes before whispering with all the emotion that she was feeling, “Willow?”

Willow felt her heart stop and then explode in happiness. She had never heard anyone say her name like that. So full of … desire. Willow, in that moment, wished more than anything that she had left the lights on so that she could see; so that she could know if what she had heard in that one word … her own name … was true. She could almost feel Buffy’s breath as she continued to graze her nails over Buffy’s back. Moving slowly forward their noses met … rubbing … Eskimo-style kissing. Oh, so gently.

Willow licked her lips in anticipation of their kiss but Buffy didn’t move forward. It seemed to be her turn again. So searching gently, she moved closer so that she could run the tip of her tongue against Buffy’s soft lower lip. Buffy’s eyes flew open at the touch of Willow’s warm tongue and her attention immediately focused. She needed to kiss Willow. She needed to. Right now!

As their lips met, the events of the day evaporated. This was where Buffy was meant to be … losing herself in the warm welcome of her Willow. How had she ever doubted that this was who she was meant to be with? That this was how she was meant to be. ‘No way am I giving this woman up.’ A guttural sigh left her as she gently pushed Willow onto her back. Ignoring the pain in her knee, Buffy rolled atop the woman she had been in love with for so long, as she made a decision. Willow had led the way last night. ‘Wow, had she ever.’ But tonight, tonight Buffy would take the reins. She had sensed the nervousness in her secret sweetheart and she knew that there was no way that Willow, her sweet gentle Willow, could initiate some of the … items they had to explore. But her mind had exploded at the idea of knowing Willow in ways that no one else had ever known her. She would be the first. She would take what Willow had taught her. She would bewitch her beautiful witch and take her Willow to places she had only imagined.

“Tonight you’re mine,” she stated, her voice low … almost a growl.

Willow shook her head in disbelief. Her mouth agape, she stared above her. Buffy was … ‘She seems to … want … me?’ Buffy took advantage of the moment and stole her way into Willow’s open mouth.
Willow could feel her head spinning as the sweet ecstasy of the moment, the feelings and sensations flooded over her. Buffy had come to her – again. She had been the one to touch first last night as well. Why had she forgotten that? ‘Oh … she feels so good.’ Feeling heat explode between her legs, she broke the kiss to gasp as she felt Buffy’s thigh graze her, sending a shot of excitement to the back of her brain. ‘Oh … too soon … too sensitive.’

Willow tried to steady the pace … to keep control but she was underneath. Somehow Buffy was … she was … in control. How … when had she become so …? The urgency of her kisses … Willow tried to slow the kisses down, to still the sexual heat that was rising … filling her but Buffy wasn’t so easily stopped. She seemed determined to devour Willow, to strip away all sense with those soft, hot lips and that tongue. She needed to slow this down, she tried to roll, but Buffy dropped to her elbows … preventing that and pinning Willow beneath her. ‘What the … what have I created?’ she wondered as again she felt Buffy’s thigh touch her … ‘Oh no! Oo … ooohgoddess … so good.’ She had never felt the heat rise between her legs so quickly … so intensely. She had to … breathe.

She tried to keep hold of the thought but Buffy was above her … pressing her hips down, slowly gyrating, pressing against her … invading her mouth, skillfully plunging her tongue back and forth as she slowly moved her shoulders to massage their breasts together, keeping a rhythm that was driving Willow up and down against her. It was all too much … too soon. ‘Where had she learned how to … Oh. Oh! Leg … legs were moving … rubbing.’ Willow could feel the wetness beginning to trickle between her … ‘so good, it feels so good.’

Buffy could feel a hunger rising within her as she moved to the rhythm of her need. She might not have her slayer strength at the moment but she certainly had the slayer lust. She could feel Willow rising to meet her, struggling to hold back. “Oh no you don’t, my red-haired beauty.” She dropped her thigh between her love’s legs. They had been slow and careful last night. Tonight she wanted to have passion, hunger … insatiable thirst and then the quenching of that thirst. Moving her thigh up, she thought she felt … Oh yeah! Her mind exploded in the knowledge that Willow was becoming wet. Wet because of her - for her.

Dragging her mouth from Willow’s, Buffy arched to press her thigh firmly against Willow’s wet centre.

“Ahhhh,” Willow exclaimed as she felt a wonderful ache rise within her.

Buffy moved up and down, her thigh brushing firmly against Willow, slowly covering her thigh with the wetness that was now oozing from between Willow’s legs. The sensation spurred her to pick up the rhythm, pushing, rubbing, faster, harder until … “Oh Yes.” She felt her thigh slide and Willow clench to trap it and stop its upward rise. ‘Yes.’ Breathing deeply, Buffy moved down Willow’s body to get herself between Willow’s legs. She needed to know …
Willow’s head was spinning. She’d never … not so quickly. Trying to collect her thoughts and regain her breath, she realized that Buffy was no longer on top of her. Then she felt … ‘Oh my … If she … Ohh goddess, I’ve died and gone to heaven.’ A thousand dreams had led her here but she’d never dreamed or hoped they would ever come true.

Slowly Buffy took in the sweet scent around her. Hesitantly, she settled herself. She wanted to do this well. She wanted to show Willow what she had learned, what she could offer. Buffy wanted to shatter her hold, just as Willow had done for her the night before. Slowly she brushed her tongue over the wet folds before her. ‘Beautiful. So wet, like silk, so soft, so warm.’ She was glad that they were in the dark, not all thoughts that they were still in each other’s bodies had been dismissed from her mind. But she wanted to see Willow beneath her in her mind’s eye. She ventured into every fold, listening with satisfaction to the change in Willow’s breathing, the rise and fall of her hips, the thrusting of her hips, the noises she was making. She drank, attempting to quench the fire rising within her.

Willow threw her hands down to hold Buffy’s head, unsure what she wanted - to pull her away or pull her closer. Sweet madness seemed to have robbed her of the ability to think as a thousand sweet shocks rocked her world. She tried vainly to hold herself back, to save something, but each touch stripped away her resolve until she found herself willingly climbing, rising, arching and aching for release.

“Oh please, I can’t …” Willow wanted to so badly, but …

Buffy opened her mouth, “Mmmm, mmmmm”, taking in the now prominent bud before her, taking and holding it gently between her teeth, she furiously ran her tongue over it.

“Ahhhh … noooooo.” Willow arched and tried to close her legs. But Buffy didn’t stop - instead she moved her hand to run her fingers up and down Willow’s wetness. Then slowly she ran it down between her cheeks, gently working her way towards Willows virgin entrance, causing another sharp attempt to close her legs.

Lifting her mouth, she gently pulled at the now gorged bud.

“OOOOOhhhhh…….” Willow felt herself lose all control as her body seemed to spasm and shudder. Buffy chose that moment to gently push her lubricated finger into Willow’s forbidden entrance - at first only one knuckle deep. “Ooooohhh ahhh.” Willow’s brain broke into a light show she had never imagined possible.
As she felt Willow relax into her orgasm, Buffy moved another knuckle in and then another until her entire finger was inside. Slowly she curled it towards her, dragging it in and out slowly as she dropped her mouth back over Willow’s bud. Buffy ran her tongue over her beloved’s folds savoring each ejaculation as she moved down to run her tongue around the juices now flowing from Willow. Then she plunged her tongue in lapping, drinking, and swallowing the sweet essence that was the core of her beloved.

Willow’s world had become a feast of pleasure - sensual and mind blowing passion, her logic nonexistent, her control shattered. All she could see were the waves of pleasure as they swept over her. Buffy was opening her up, laying her wide, removing all that she could hide behind … seeing her, loving her. Fear should have been her first reaction but it was lost, drowned under the need, the hunger that Buffy had shown her.

Passion threw forward arms, thighs, lips, tongues. Willow a willing and complaint guest as Buffy led her into new erotic worlds and sinfully blissful feelings, teasing feeding and expanding her desire in ways she had never thought possible. Willow became wanton, greedy and verbally demanding, leaving Buffy in no doubt that tonight she was not alone in her insatiable need.

Having retrieved the magic shop key from his mail box, Xander had left his ‘too wounded to move’ and ‘is this another custom you’re going to need to explain to me? Ex-girlfriends can ring you at unearthly hours, drop curses into the middle of our lives and you go running?’ Anya to her own devices.

Driving to the magic shop (let’s face it walking at this time of night was like turning yourself into a traveling buffet for any Vamp on the prowl), Xander thought about Anya’s comments; it was like all his chickens - good and bad were coming home to roost! Cordelia, Faith, Willow & Buffy and memories of the disastrous love spell he had forced Amy to cast washed over him, sending a cold chill down his spine.

Slamming the car door and locking it, he moved quickly to the shop door - opening, closing and locking it with more concentration than usual. After a brief pause to satisfy himself that he was safe, he wandered through the shop fully prepared to see an unconscious and possibly injured Giles leaning against a wall but upon opening the training room door, he stopped in his tracks. He stood and stared in disbelief at the scene before him.

Giles was comfortably curled up on one of the training mats, his head on what looked like one of the Moroccan cushions that Anya kept wanting to bring home. The older man appeared to be
covered with an old dust sheet and the wizard’s cape he had used during the Magic shop’s grand opening sale! He looked like a cast-off from some Merlin ‘B’-movie with his hair tussled, in sleepy repose, beneath his wizard garb.

Xander spotted that Giles’ glasses had been neatly placed inside one of his shoes, which were tidily positioned on the floor beside him, along with a glass of water. “Well I’ll be. Looks like Faith had a ‘Florence Nightingale nurse’ moment.” Quickly he stored the image of Faith in a skimpy nurse’s uniform for later use.

A smirk crossed Xander’s face as he heard the faint snoring coming from the unconscious Watcher. He was tempted to go and find the big Wizard’s pointy hat that he had seen Giles wear that first day at the Magic Shop, and then find a camera to save the scene for posterity. But damn it he was getting too old for that.

But he suddenly realized that after receiving Faith’s call, he hadn’t really expected to find Giles harmed at all. Strangely he had trusted that if Faith said the Watcher was okay, then he was. This puzzled him. He had never been really big with the trust and Faith … well hey, not even small on the trust when it came to the dark-haired Slayer. Not the Faith he used to know anyway.

Kneeling down next to Giles, Xander attempted to wake him. “Giles, Hey G-man?” He called poking at the Watcher’s shoulder. A muffled moan was all the response he got. “Giles! C’mon. Buffy’s waiting,” he tried. Nothing.

Standing up he looked around and seeing the glass of water, a thought took shape and a smirk appear on his face. “You’re really not gonna like this much G-man. But there’s no way I can carry you home.” Reaching down he lifted the glass while at the same time noticing that protruding from the other shoe was a dart! Ignoring this, Xander dipped his fingers into the water and flicked droplets at Giles, causing a slight reaction. But still no eye movement. “Aww hell.” He placed the glass above Giles’ head and tipped it.

****************************BtVS**************************

Willow lay in total wonder over what had happened. She couldn’t believe Buffy had spread her sooo … made her sooo wet. The new list had been a revelation but what had shocked her to the core was that she had revealed in it, allowing Buffy to take her … in oh so many ways -- and so completely. Yet she didn’t feel dirty or evil or bad. She felt alive, more alive than she had in a very long time.
She had always trusted Buffy but this had been different. It had been as if her very soul had been in the Slayer’s hands. It was as if there was nothing about her that Buffy didn’t know, hadn’t touched or caressed. The things she had yelled, the way she had begged!! She hadn't known she could be so wanton, so demanding, so vocal.

She could almost still feel Buffy inside her, filling her, feeding her need. But in reality Buffy was beside her, letting out short breaths and still holding her as if she was stopping one of them from floating away.

Willow’s head was so light, her mind so open and yet so filled. Feelings bursting from her heart, leaking, exploding. She was so filled with emotions, pushing so hard against her skin. She needed to release. She needed to sing, scream; to somehow let it out. Slowly she felt tears of bliss, of joy beginning to escape, 'Oh my.' She couldn't hold them back. Instead a whimper escaped, then a stifled sob as the longing and release came together.

Buffy heard Willow’s quiet sobs. She was crying? Tightening her hold, remorse filled the Slayer with dread. Had she gone too far? Had she hurt her Willow? She felt shame and guilt wash over her. She was terrified that she had been so caught up in exploring the new and wonderful pleasures that had she missed something. She’d thought ‘Oh goddess’. "Will, what’s wrong?" Pain shot through her heart at the sound of another muffled sob. "Did I hurt you? Oh Will, I'm so sorry. Oh Baby, I wouldn’t hurt you for the world."

"No ... <SOB> you didn't, <sniff> I'm just … " Willow couldn't find the words.

"Will?" Buffy prompted; still not sure she could believe her.

"It was … I've never … <SOB> felt so open, so <SOB> … no one. I didn't think I could stop …” she said, recalling how often she had come, how wet, the way she had flooded. Her voice was unable to keep up with her thoughts and emotions.

"It's okay. I'm here," Buffy assured her, hugging her tightly, realizing and relieved that she hadn't hurt her beloved. Willow was in shock but it was a good shock. It was fed by the wonder of what they had done. "It was new for me too but baby … it was amazing, wonderful. You were fantastic. And you are so beautiful."

Willow smiled and closed her eyes forcing herself to enjoy the compliments. Her instinct was to turn away, not sure how to respond. How could she say …? She so wanted to tell her … to let her
know. "I ... you were incredible. It was <SOB> unforgettable ... I will never ... <SOB> oh Buffy ..." Suddenly she collapsed into full blown tears and racking sobs as she realized that this wouldn't happen again ... unless she ... the fear returned.

"Will, I know. I will ... it was so special. The way you let me ... I could stay like this forever. I wish the world would just stop," Buffy said, her heart reaching out to the love of her life. Tightening her embrace she gently brushed her lips against Willow's shoulder.

"M...m...me too," Willow responded as she treasured Buffy's words and the tingles from her light kiss. 'Oh please mean that ... I so want it to be true.' If only she could know ... if only she could be sure.

***************************************************************************BtVS***************************************************************************
"Okay now?" Buffy had asked softly, still holding her Willow tightly and gently rocking her.

"Okay now," Willow had whispered, her eyes still closed in an attempt to keep back any remaining tears. She thought their lips had touched with the barest feather-light contact.

"I'll hold you until you fall asleep, okay?"

"Yes," Willow said, drowning in the gentleness of her Buffy.

Her body felt almost inconsequentially slender in Buffy’s arms. Willow held her face against Buffy’s throat, feeling strands of hair brush against her cheek. As she calmed her breathing, she was surrounded by the intricate and delicate fragrance of their lovemaking, exuding from their very hair and skin.

Buffy lay quietly, aware of pliant breasts that pressed softly against her with every breath from her beloved Willow. This had been the last thing she could remember as she drifted of into a dreamless sleep.

Giles came to with a jolt. Harsh bright light assaulted his senses. Quickly closing his eyes he tried to center himself. A myriad of memories flooded his mind. He had been talking to someone? Yes … Faith. She’d been helpful, answering questions. They were attacked …

He mentally reached back to retrieve more information. He’d felt a sharp pain … been drugged. Faith had been fighting vampires … no men … she was protecting him? Xander? Water … stumbling … a car drive. Xander, helping him to bed … something about Anya and Faith??

Shaking his head, he reached for his glasses but his hand found a bare bedside table. His mind was still very foggy, thick making every mental step laborious. Slowly he began to piece together last night. He realized that it must have been well after midnight when Xander had helped him to bed so that neither of them had noticed that the curtains had been left open. That explained why his bedroom was now blindingly bright.
Throwing back the covers, he placed his bare feet into his slippers but they wouldn’t fit! Standing he slipped, suddenly realizing he had stepped into his cold shoes with no socks which were still bunched inside them, stopping him from actually wearing his shoes. Where the hell were his slippers? “Xander!” he bellowed. It was bad enough that he had needed Xander to help him to bed, taking every opportunity to remind him of just how much older he was but the boy could be such a disorganized, if well intentioned, jackass. “And where the hell are my glasses?” he yelled.

As he made his way downstairs, carefully feeling his way, Giles recalled the occasion when Willow had inadvertently removed his sight with a magic spell. He had walked into so many pieces of furniture that his thighs and toes had complained for a week afterwards. Carefully making his way to the kitchen, he put the teakettle on.

Opening his cookie tin, Giles reached in but a frown crossed his brow. Retracting his arm, he held the piece of paper he had found before him. Bringing it in and out of focus, he read <Sorry, you had nothing in the fridge. Xander>. “Cheeky beggar,” Giles muttered, crumpling up the paper and throwing it into the trash.

Willow could feel the fresh grass beneath her bare feet as she ran towards their picnic basket. Plopping onto the blanket, she laughed out loud.

“No fair,” Buffy called to her as she caught up and collapsed beside her. “You go on three … not two.”


Buffy laughed and gently placed her forefinger onto the tip of the Wiccan’s nose. “I think I’m teaching you some bad habits.”

“Oh goody,” she replied wiggling her nose beneath the Slayer’s finger.

Buffy smiled and gazed lovingly into her eyes. Then leaning forward she replaced her finger with her lips. “Teacher’s pet.”
“What can I say? I love learning,” Willow replied, reaching to draw Buffy back to her. She loved this kind of dream world.

Giles pushed his glasses up onto his nose as he turned the page of Bolton’s Celestial Emporium. He had finally found his glasses beside the telephone along with another note explaining that Faith had called Xander and directed him to the keys and the Magic Box. This had surprised him and filled him with a strange form of pride.

But his main concern this morning was to find a backup plan. The attack last night had left him in no doubt that they had an unknown factor to deal with and he could no longer risk placing all their eggs in one basket. If Willow and Buffy couldn’t break the original curse, which appeared to be what their mysterious opponent was counting on, then he had to find another way to stop the eclipse.

He had been wracking his brains for the past hour searching every text he had on heavenly bodies, trying to find some glimmer of how he could prevent the eclipse that was due in just three days time. What little he had learned only made him more and more concerned.

Buffy was sure that, for a moment, she had felt lips touching her neck. A melting softness washed over her, drawing her from her slumber. She tightened her arms and tilted her face down, brushing her lips over Willow’s forehead; brushing her cheek against the silky smooth softness of her hair. As she felt Willow’s gentle breath against the hollow of her throat, her pulse seemed to rise. How did Willow do this to her? How could she wake up and immediately be aroused by the nearness of her?

Last night should have been more than enough for her but it appeared that the Slayer lust had not switched with her body as her strength had. As she basked in the warmth of Willow against her, Buffy regretted the darkness of their room last night. She quickly glanced at the closed drapes. She had wanted so much to look down and see her secret love. She had wanted to watch those beautiful green eyes open and that unforgettable smile shine up at her. She had wanted to watch her Willow - the one she had been picturing all night. Sighing, she made a promise - ‘we will do this again my sweet darling. In the light of day, in our own bodies and then I will know that tonight was real.’

A small sigh escaped from Willow and Buffy broke into a smile. Then it seemed so very easy …
so natural for her to lift the chin of her slumbering Willow … to raise her face and by doing so offer her lips.

She could see the shadowed outline of her beloved, a thousand memories filling her mind. Unable to help herself … giving in to the swell of emotions that she felt, Buffy lowered her lips, allowing the warm softness of Willow’s mouth to melt against her own. ‘Heaven.’ She felt Willow stir and her mind vibrated with alarm. ‘Oh no.’ She started to pulled away. But Willow's mouth moved to meet hers, tenderly searching and reaching for her, causing her heart to dance in joy.

Their lips met again and again with such tender brief kisses; then lingering and still more tender ones as Buffy gently held her dearest close. Willow felt so warm in her arms, her body so soft as she melted into Buffy’s morning caress.

Willow yielded as in a dream, her lips parting as Buffy’s mouth became her wakening world, the most exquisite velvet, as they kissed deeply … slowly … endlessly … tenderly.

The shrill ring of the telephone broke into the minds and hearts of the two women. It felt like the warmth they had been sharing was being doused by a cold shower, causing them both to pull out of their embrace and fully open their eyes. The harsh reality of day shattered the tender moment they had shared.

Buffy’s eyes were full of apology and sorrow as she left their warm bed and threw on her nightgown, moving towards the ringing phone. “What?” she almost yelled as she answered the phone.

“Sorry, grumpy head. Did I wake you?” Xander’s almost apologetic voice asked.

“Yes. Yes, you did. So is the sky falling?” Buffy replied.


“Oh hell! Is he okay?” Buffy demanded, suddenly filled with the urge to track down Faith and give her exactly what she deserved.
“Nothing that a large pot of his stinky tea won’t cure,” Xander assured her. “It seems they were attacked by some Commando type guys … and Faith rescued him.”

“She what?” Buffy exclaimed incredulously.

“I know. I’m big with the unbelievable too. But from what I can make out, that’s exactly what happened,” Xander assured her. “She got him back to the Magic Box, made him comfortable and then she phoned me. Really didn’t enjoy explaining that call to Anya.”

“I’ll bet. So he’s home? And safe?” Buffy inquired, not really wanting to break into her time with Willow, after last night, unless absolutely necessary.

“Yup. He’s gonna be fine. I’ll ring him in a bit and check up on the old chap,” Xander said breaking out into his best ‘British’ accent.

“Cool. Well, I’ll leave ‘Giles watcher duty’ to you. Let me know if anything changes,” Buffy instructed Xander.

“I’m on it,” Xander agreed, although somewhat surprised that Buffy wasn’t heading out immediately to check on her Watcher. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. Why?” Buffy asked before she could stop herself.

“Oh, I just figured you’d be on the fast train to Gilesville, especially with Faith being involved. That’s all,” Xander commented.

Buffy sighed; she should have so seen that one coming. “You got him home safe and you’ll check on him – Right?”

“You bet. I just thought …” Xander trailed off, not sure what else to say.

“I trust you, Xander. If you say he’s okay…”
“Ahhh …” Xander exclaimed as he realized what was going on. “You don’t want to leave your dorm room right now, do you? Willow’s there too, isn’t she? Why didn’t you just say so? I’m cool. You guys have stuff to … discuss … You know … have your whole … ‘Beaches’ moment …” Xander blathered on.

“Thank you for understanding, Xander,” Buffy replied through gritted teeth. ‘Could Xander be any more foot-in-mouth guy?’ She took a deep breath and cut his chatter short with “I’m thrilled that Giles is safe and I am grateful that you’ll keep an eye on him for me. Goodbye Xander,” Buffy stated as she resisted the urge to slam the receiver down.

Turning back towards Willow, she shrugged. “Xander,” she said simply as if that alone would explain everything.

Meanwhile, Xander smirked at the phone. He really loved it when he hit the mark. The gooey and icky buzz of knowing that right now his two favorite little love bunnies were finally sorting this stuff out was just a little more than his manly persona could cover up as a silly puppy dog smirk crawled across his face.

****************************BTVS****************************

There was still a slight chill in the air as Cordelia had walked to Angel Investigations. She’d put off coming in for the past two days. Without the guys around it seemed pretty pointless. Besides, she’d figured she was due some vacation time. But the pile of mail and number of telephone messages had almost made her wish she hadn’t held off coming in.

Cordelia stared at the telephone. She was somewhat uneasy at the thought of speaking to Giles before she could talk to Faith. But his message had been very insistent and she really had put off calling as long as she dared. If she wasn’t careful this could go very wrong. She wanted to speak to Faith. She’d hoped for a phone call today, as she had begun to everyday. It unnerved her that when Faith did call she could feel a swelling of happiness. She’d never really needed a female friend before but Faith had somehow become important to her. Cordy’s high school clique had had a purpose. They’d been her buffer but she’d never been really close to any of them. She’d never cared about any of them.

The concern and worry that was beginning to build within her was new. She worried about the guys all the time. But this … this was different. It wasn’t fear for Faith’s life. It was fear for her very soul, for the precarious cliff edge the woman walked everyday, for all the future hopes and dreams that the brunette slayer had chosen to tie up and risk in doing this thing for Buffy and Willow.
These feelings disconcerted her and so she shook them aside. Now was not the time to get all ‘Thelma and Louise’. She just needed to think clearly. She needed to concentrate on finding out what Giles wanted and then work out what best to do or say to Faith the next time she called. Just like Angel, Faith hadn’t liked modern technology much, let alone cell phones, so Cordelia had been happy to let the dark slayer do the calling. She was beginning to wish she’d insisted on at least a beeper.

*************BtVS*************

Buffy stood staring at herself. Well, not her self so much as her body. At Willow. It always took her a moment in the mornings to remember that her body was no longer her own. ‘You’d think by now I’d be over what she looks like.’ She knew that she should say something. But what? This was some kind of weird ‘morning after’ block. The ‘morning after’ with a stranger was one thing but this wasn’t a stranger. This was her Willow.

With Willow she couldn’t reinvent herself. She couldn’t present her best foot because Willow knew both her best and worst feet equally well. She opened her mouth … but nothing came out. So she closed it again. ‘Oh, get a grip, will you? She’ll think your brain damaged,’ she scolded herself. Taking a deep breath she dove in. “Are you hungry?”

“Sure,” Willow replied. ‘Oh goddess I’m staring at her.’ Dropping her eyes, she collected herself, grateful that Buffy had begun their ‘morning after’ conversation in a familiar area that she could cope with. After that good morning kiss she was fairly certain that she couldn’t have recited her two times tables. “Wha’d you have in mind?” Willow asked unable to lift her eyes and look at the woman and the lips she hungered for, knowing they were her own. ‘Today’s weirdness exists on so many levels.’

Buffy also broke her stare. Dragging her mind back to the memory of how she had awakened Willow and how eagerly Willow had responded … she needed to remember that it had been Willow … that the body before her was but a shell. Seeing herself clutching the sheet to cover her nakedness was really throwing Buffy. She shook her head as she struggled to remember what she had asked. “Oh right. How about mochas, danish and donuts?” Buffy smiled to herself as she recalled the many mornings that they had gone through this very conversation. It was so familiar … so comfortable.

“Why change a good thing?” Willow automatically responded, beginning to sit up pulling the bed sheet up with her. “So shall I do the run or…”

“No way. I’m already up. You stay put,” Buffy responded heading for her clothes. “You’re all
warm and comfy. How about we do breakfast in bed? I love eating in bed . . .,” she commented before she could stop herself, freezing as the words left her mouth. ‘Geez! Why did I say that? Okay, do I have to say everything I’m thinking when I’m around her?’

“Oh … I … That sounds . . .” <gulp> Willow dried up, suddenly feeling as if someone had taken all of the air out of the room. ‘Did she just … yes, she … ’

Buffy let out the lung full of air she had been holding. “Okay … <swallow> I won’t be long,” she said throwing off her nightgown and climbing into a pair of sweats and a t-shirt. “Chocolate sprinkles?” she threw in, as her mind filled with images of sharing breakfast in bed with … ‘Oh, I’ve died and gone to heaven.’

“Oh huh,” Willow confirmed as she watched Buffy rush for the door. “Buffy?”

“Yes,” she replied, turning back nervously, her still tousled hair falling over one eye.

Willow laughed quietly before asking “Shoes?”

Buffy looked down at her feet and immediately felt a rush of heat to her cheeks.

“What? … oh … aaah . . .” She searched around her and, seeing Willow’s loosely tied sneakers, slipped her feet into them. “Not awake yet, I guess. Won’t be long.” She offered by way of excuse as she bolted out of their dorm with urgent intent and purpose.

***********************************************************************************************BtVs***********************************************************************************************

Willow had become a complete coward and within just a few minutes of Buffy heading out on the breakfast run, she’d pulled on a large t-shirt. So now she sat back under the covers wondering why the hell this morning was so different from yesterday.

Yesterday she’d been in a strange kind of denial for most of the morning and then the shock of what they had done had hit her like a sledgehammer. But this morning none of that seemed to matter. What concerned her was how different Buffy had been. The way she had kissed her awake. Her mind was lost in the need to ask a thousand questions, and yet the same very real fear of the answers prevented her from asking them.
She could have put last night down to need, desire, sex, curiosity or all of the above. But that kiss … It had been so tender, so sweet, so without motive. Buffy had taken her time; tasting and caressing … She had seemed so assured, so still, so with her. No one had ever kissed Willow like that. It was as if a thousand words had been spoken without a sound. And yet here she sat trying to translate a language she had never heard before.

Her thoughts were broken by the sound of the door handle being turned. Buffy burst through the door, kicking it shut behind her. As she gazed at the bed and Willow, her face momentarily dropped. ‘She’s disappointed … because I’m dressed?’ Willow wondered and a flutter coursed its way through her heart.

“Breakfast has arrived,” Buffy announced, quick to hide her disappointment in the fact that Willow had dressed. She kicked her shoes off and placed the tray of mochas and danish onto the bed.

“Looks yummy,” Willow noted, as she saw that Buffy had practically crammed the tray full of all of the Wiccan’s favorite pastries. Carefully she pulled the tray towards her to allow Buffy to get back into bed without creating a mocha shower.

Lifting the covers Buffy noticed flesh … bare legs … ‘It’s only a t-shirt.’ A smile crossed her face and a tingle shot down her spine. She quickly scooted out of her sweats and under the sheet. Pulling it back she scooted closer to Willow and breakfast.

“Hey,” Willow yelped as she felt Buffy’s cold leg brush hers. Surprised by the alarmed look that had crossed Buffy’s face, she quickly added, “You’re … legs … they’re cold.”

“Sorry,” Buffy apologized, moving back slightly and feeling somewhat foolish for rushing to be close to Willow. Putting her hands under the covers she began to rub her thighs vigorously, not sure how she would manage to reach her feet.

Willow smiled at her efforts and moved the breakfast tray to the floor.

Buffy tried so hard not to turn and look at the small of Willow’s back and rear as she moved the tray but the evil eye took over. ‘Ohhhh! Shouldn’t have looked,’ she realized dragging her eyes back. ‘I’m staring at my own ass. What kind of freak have I turned into?’

Willow turned back to help Buffy. Unable to make eye contact, she moved her own hands under
the covers and firmly began rubbing Buffy’s cold lower legs and feet. “There you go. We’ll have you all warmed up in no time. Then we can get back to the hot pastries.”

Buffy felt herself freeze as Willow’s hands suddenly ran over her inner thighs - so close, so warm. Buffy closed her eyes. ‘Ohh Willow … You’re killing me here,’ she screamed to herself. But reopening her eyes, she caught a small smile at the corners of Willow’s mouth and she realized that Willow, her shy sweet Willow knew exactly what she was doing … ‘Oh! The little vixen! Willow Rosenberg, you’re so gonna pay.’

Leaning into Willow slightly, she lowered her voice and moaned in appreciation, “Mmmm … Willow … I think I’m ready for something warm and wet … if you are?” Buffy stated in her sultriest tone while slowly pulling back a loose strand of hair from Willow’s cheek.

<GULP> “What?” Willow squeaked, quickly bringing her hands back above the covers as panic washed over her … ‘she … oh my …’ and slowly she turned to stare questioningly at Buffy, her heart in her mouth.

Buffy plastered a saintly and innocent smile upon her features and replied “I’m all warm now. Thanks. Time for breakfast. Chocolaty mochas and sweet goodies?”

Giles perused the chapter on celestial transits, frustration building with every new ‘this won’t help’ piece of information he came across. Suddenly the telephone burst into life, making him jump slightly. Reaching for the handset, he expected to hear Xander’s voice. The young man had already called him twice to check on his condition. The Watcher was really becoming most irritated by the distractions that were plaguing him today. All he wanted was to fix this and get everything back to normal.

“Hello?”

“Hi Giles, I’m returning your call,” Cordelia announced.

“Ah yes, Cordelia,” he acknowledged. “Thank you. I was beginning to think no one was ever going to ring back.”
“Sorry. The guys are out of town and I just got back myself,” she stated, stretching the truth a bit.

“Ahh I see,” Giles noted, realizing he was being put off with a somewhat less than truthful response. “Well in any case, I appreciate you getting back to me. I need some answers, which it would seem only you can provide,” Giles explained, drawing his mind back to the several questions he had been waiting to have answered.

“Gee, when did I become miss ‘know-it-all’?” Cordelia asked, trying to make herself sound, at least, a little surprised by his call. “So … What’s up?”

“Faith.” Giles stated, seeing no reason to beat around the bush especially as he was able to hear the slight hesitation in Cordelia’s tone. He really didn’t have the patience or the time to deal with a prima donna right now. His frustration at events and his inability to do anything or find anything to help matters was rising to the surface. “It would seem that you were, at least, partially responsible for her current visit to us.”

“Ahh huh,” Cordelia non-committally responded, so casually that Giles could almost see her ‘so what’ posture.

“She appears to be trying to get Willow and Buffy together,” he stated.

Cordelia swallowed, “Really?” Her feigned surprise fooled neither one of them.

“Indeed,” he stated, his tone harsh and brokering no argument. “She has placed a curse on Buffy and Willow, effectively swapping their bodies. It would seem that the only way they can return to their own bodies is to … declare their mutual … to show their … to say they are in love,” Giles summarized.

“Aww, how cute. Who knew Faith was so into ‘lonely hearts’? Personally, I think she should have picked a less socially challenged couple to practice on,” Cordelia giggled.

“Young lady, this is no laughing matter,” Giles responded in an annoyed tone. “Events have somewhat … escalated to a dangerous situation.”
“Well, fire away and I’ll see what I can do to help,” Cordelia advised him.

“Where to begin … let me see … oh yes. Why did you send Faith here? Why not send Angel or Wesley? Why, on earth, was a curse was necessary? Why didn’t you contact me first? I refuse to believe there wasn’t a better way of dealing with this. WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING?” Giles barked into the phone, unable to hold himself back any longer.

“Oh boy, that English reserve really is only a cover, isn’t it? Underneath you’re just a rude old man,” Cordelia proclaimed. “Listen up Giles, you may be the mega-hot watcher of the demonology library or whatever, but when it comes to dating – I’m the slayer … the total expert. So trust me when I say that sending some lame-brained guy to sort out two women in love – so not an option! Despite what you may think, we thought this through … and Faith was the best choice.”

“I find that somewhat hard to believe,” Giles commented, if with a little less certainty than he would have had just a few days ago. Faith had really surprised him last night. Hearing the lack of conviction behind his assertion, Cordelia laughed. “Oh right, you really think sending some love sick vampire or a sexually immature British guy … Geez, get real. This is about women … two women … two very special women. I didn’t need some fantasy-ridden guy screwing it up. Faith has no sexual hang ups about two women. She’s honest … a straight talker, pun most definitely intended. PLUS … she really wanted to help,” she stated with complete certainty.

Giles fell silent, not quite sure how to respond to Cordelia’s comments. He tried to picture Angel or Wesley talking to Buffy about her feelings. ‘Awkward, ridiculous, painful’ were the only words that came to mind as he recalled his own stumbling efforts. “You may be right that a man … though I’d like to know where your absolute certainty on this subject originates. But really, a curse?”

“Talking just wasn’t going to do it. Trust me on this. Big hidden love - not gonna be dragged out of the closet by a late night chat over hot milk and cookies. Those two are so totally screwed up about what they mean to each other. They always have been. Something major was needed, something that could shake them up and force them together. They hold it all in everyday. They’re really very good at the hiding, Giles. But the mutual attraction, the affection, loyalty, devotion and the love are all there. You’ve seen it, we all have. That’s why any relationship that tries to overshadow or interfere with their friendship implodes sooner or later.”

“But, and I hate to repeat myself, … a curse?” Giles questioned, still unable to see how and/or why they had chosen to use a curse.

“Oh right. I remember now --- you’re the guy who’s always against any one but you doing the magics. How does Willow put up with you anyway? So go on then. Had you even noticed what
was going on? Would you even know what to look for?”

“I’m sure that had I been looking … I mean … had someone raised it as an issue … I would have noticed … probably that they were … that the classic symptoms … of unrequited … secret …” Giles struggled mightily to recall what the symptoms of unrequited love were. It had been so long since he had made himself vulnerable by investing his heart in the unknown. “Eating too much chocolate … impulsive retail therapy … driving too fast …” Giles dryly commented, realizing he was struggling and clearly out of his depth.

“Are you kidding? That just about describes the perfect day for everyone I know,” Cordelia smirked. “You’ve just proved my point. Unless someone had pointed it out to you, you’d have brushed over the signs. And considering your damn English reserve, you probably would’ve ignored them or more likely kept your thoughts to yourself.”

Giles was getting just a little sick of women telling him that his English reserve was a bad thing. “A little reserve from your end and I wouldn’t have to be ringing you, let alone be forced to trawl my books for solutions to the additional problem you’ve created,” Giles irritably advised her. “I know that your ‘Vision’ of the future really scared you but to run to magic for a solution … well, that shows a level of shortsightedness that I find incredible to believe.”

Cordelia’s world was suddenly very focused. ‘How the hell does he know about the ‘Vision’? However, all she could say was “Huh?”

Giles continued, “With Magic, there are always consequences …”

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Willow had never been so nervous and yet happy all at once. She’d felt like a kid, all giddy and almost sick - like she had eaten too much of her favorite candy and cake. Every sweet consideration or kind word from Buffy plunged her into excited confusion until they had run down a bit and fallen into a nervous silence.

Willow’s mind was a babbling mess. ‘What’s going on exactly? Is she just being kind or trying to avoid the wiggins we had last time? No. I mean there was that … kiss. The way she … oh heavens … I need to just slow down … stop analyzing. Don’t over-think this. She’s just being nice, Buffy-nice. I’m just wanting this to mean more. That’s my fault. I mean we had a … we had to … Oh god, what we did last night!! She thinks I have the cutest giggle. Wait. When,
when did I giggle? Oh, OH! No, she can’t have meant …’

“I suppose we should get up,” Buffy said finally, breaking into Willow’s thoughts. She had run out of small talk, the delicious mochas were finished and she just couldn’t face another donut. “I’m sure I could do with a shower,” Buffy reluctantly admitted, all the while wishing that she could think of a way to delay the inevitable. She was enjoying her time alone with Willow - there had been so little of it this semester.

“There’s one thing I’d love to change about dorm life,” Willow said wistfully.

“What?” Buffy asked, as she started to leave their bed.

“A private bathroom,” Willow declared longingly. “What I’d give for a long hot soak right now.”

“Deal!” Buffy almost snapped, as her brain kicked into high gear. “Mom’s at an exhibition in Seattle this week. The house is empty. We could enjoy a real bath …” Buffy froze as she realized what she had said. ‘Oh no, not again … Quick, fix it. Fix it.’ “I mean we could get out of here and you could … have first dibs,” Buffy explained falling over her words.

Willow beamed. “Great idea.” She felt herself flushing slightly and her breath catching at the thought of sharing a bath with Buffy, whose slip of the tongue had presented Willow with several images and the wish that she had been brave enough to jump at the idea. ‘Shouldn’t I have … like … Slayer courage or something?’

**************************************************BtVS**************************************************

“What?” Cordelia was clearly shocked.

“I am fairly certain you heard me, Cordelia,” Giles chided. “I need to know. What will happen to Buffy? What did you see happen to her … in your vision?”

“I … I …” Cordelia stumbled. “How did you…?”

“That isn’t really relevant right now. Cordelia, what did you see?” Giles insisted. “I need to
know. What could happen if they are not able to work through Faith’s curse?” he asked in a quieter tone.

“I … Okay. But your not gonna … Are you sitting down?” Cordelia asked trying to delay having to remember, let alone recount one of the most disturbing visions she had ever had to Giles of all people. “I’m not sure you …”

“Cordelia,” Giles said gently yet firmly in his most reassuring manner. “I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t feel that it was vital, absolutely necessary that I know exactly what you saw.”

“Okay,” Cordelia agreed, sighing and taking deep breath before she began. “Spike - remember that sweet, oh so helpful, guy? Well Spike was … he was using her … forcing her to … to … to be intimate with him. Buffy was being blackmailed by him. He was using his knowledge about how she felt about … Willow … to make her … He … he raped her, Giles … and she let him.” Cordelia finished, as a sob escaped her lips.

***********************************************************************BtVS***********************************************************************

Now at the Summers house, Buffy had very quickly excused herself and headed downstairs as Willow prepared for her bath. There had been a brief moment when their eyes had met but even though she could have sworn she could see straight into Willow’s soul, the sudden realization that she was staring into her own eyes connected to her own body made her pull back yet again.

And so Buffy found herself standing in the kitchen when the totally irrational thought struck her. “I’ll cook lunch”, she said aloud to herself. “That’s a ‘what good friends, best friends do for each other’ kind of thing that can’t be misunderstood as … I mean she should be able to cope with that.” Buffy was trying so hard to make Willow comfortable with her. She didn’t want to scare her. She didn’t want to rush headlong into how she felt, throwing everything at her Willow. She had to be very careful.

‘Just take it easy. Woo her. Did I just say woo her? Just let her warm to the idea that … this could work … that we … Oh please let her … I mean after last night and this morning … I thought … I was so sure … She kissed me back, didn’t she?’ Buffy asked herself, as self-doubt began to rear its head yet again. This self-doubt was so unlike her. But this was just too important and she had to get it right.

She shook her head to clear it and moved to the fridge, opening it to search the contents for a clue as to what she could make. Deciding to allow her heart to revel in the joy at having Willow all to herself, she thought ‘This is what it could be like. Always … just us … Willow and me.’
“What difficulty?” Cordelia asked.

“The difficulty being that it … Buffy and Willow haven’t … that is they … ahh humm <cough> what has been tried didn’t work and I’m not sure that … In any case, let’s set that issue to one side, shall we? It has become evident during the course of our investigations that hidden within the curse, apparently without the knowledge of Faith … and I am now quite certain that it was indeed done without Faith’s knowledge,” Giles added, uncertain why he felt the need to assure Cordelia of this. “There appears to be another curse embedded within her curse which could bring about an apocalypse, to be triggered by the upcoming eclipse, unless the original curse is broken.”

“And this became evident how?” Cordelia asked suspiciously.

“During our own vision quest. Thanks to a moment of Xander’s inspiration, we managed to use a vision rod to focus the Slayer’s … that is to say Buffy’s … natural ability to have visions,” Giles explained.

“Xander? Well I never would have believed it,” Cordelia commented.

“I agree it was something of a surprise,” Giles agreed. “But the results were very enlightening. That’s how we found out that you had a vision about possible future events and that Faith was, indeed, sent here at your behest.”

“And these … ‘vision rod’ visions … they told you that there’s a curse hidden within our curse?” Cordelia demanded, “How? What did you see? Who was it? How did they do it and when?”

Giles sighed, realizing that this call could take far longer than he had expected. “Cordelia, I really don’t have time to go into the detail that I am sure you deserve. Trust me when I say that the visions were detailed enough to assure me that this is the case. If I may ask - were you aware that Faith was using a firm of lawyers to help her acquire the elements necessary to place the curse?”

“No. She said that she knew a contact that could provide what she would need. I hadn’t realized she was dealing with – ‘Suits’,” Cordelia stated, somewhat surprised that Faith even knew a
lawyer. She stopped mid-thought as her memory suddenly opened a door. “Why?”

“One of the visions showed her talking with a firm of lawyers who wanted her to kill Angel. Then we saw the same lawyer requesting the hidden curse and organizing the specifications of the curse with the wizard,” Giles explained.

“Geez,” she sighed in exasperation. ‘What kind of idiot would take a curse from … Oh hell. Why didn’t she say that was where she’d gotten it? Because I didn’t ask! Angel will blow a fuse when I tell him,’ she mentally cursed herself for not having quizzed Faith over the acquisition of the curse. She should have realized that Faith still hadn’t quite sorted out where certain lines existed. And she had been so caught up in how to prevent the events in her vision that she had dropped the ball. She hadn’t followed up. She should have taken more time to talk to Faith about this … about other things as well. “We’ve come across a group of lawyers but only briefly,” she advised Giles. “They’re into the … you know … the representation of the big and bad of the underworld, so to speak. And I don’t mean human criminals.”

Giles couldn’t prevent a laugh from escaping as he asked, “Are you serious? Demons need lawyers!? Only in LA.”

Willow lay happily in the tub, her mind drifting back to last night until she heard movement downstairs and then a beaming smile swept its way across her face as she recalled the last thing Buffy had said as she had headed into her bath. “While you’re in there turning all prune-like, I think I’ll scrape together a nice lunch for us.”

Down there in the kitchen was a Slayer with the cooking talent of … well … of Snoopy. Her rock hard cookies and burnt popcorn were almost legendary, only to be surpassed by Xander’s sheer acting ability when it had come to eating Buffy-fare with gusto. ‘Geez, what he would do in the hopes of winning her heart,’ Willow recalled. ‘Would I try that hard? Just watch me.’

She sank back, lowering her ears below the bath water, blocking out the sounds of the world. She needed to find her center, her courage and confront the fear that was beginning to build once again. Last night had been so wonderful, as had this morning, but knowing that at some point she had to keep her promise to Xander and risk ruining everything … that just plain invited the fear in.

Hearing a movement upstairs, Buffy jumped guiltily. Then looking back at the sink, she realized
that her furious scrapings of the burnt toast had turned everything in the sink a motley brown. At least the pile of un-toasted bread was greater than the pile of toast still waiting to be scraped.

Buffy grimaced. She’d thought that since the bread was still partially frozen, it would take a lot longer to brown. As she surveyed the sink, she took a deep breath “I know I’m cursed but give me break,” she pleaded. Then collecting herself, she glared at the toast and stated “Damn it, I can do this.” Picking up her burnt offerings, she unceremoniously tossed them in the trash and moved back to the remainder of the thawing loaf. “Okay, second time lucky.” She took four more slices and moved them into the still warm toaster. “You guys just thaw for a bit,” she instructed them.

Glancing at her watch, urgency filled her as she focused on the bacon, turning each strip. “Bacon and Eggs,” she continued aloud. “Who can’t cook bacon and eggs? – EGGS!” She hadn’t done the eggs. The bacon was almost half cooked but the eggs were still standing totally untouched by the side of the toaster. “Oh, great! How much more ‘not potential girlfriend’ material can I be? Cereal. I should have done cereal. Nice and simple. Cereal and milk. Maybe a little fruit. But Oh, No. I had to try to be little ‘miss apprentice homemaker’. I should have applied for the position of ‘girl least likely to get a second date with a certain gorgeous red-head’!”

She turned the last of the bacon and focused her attention on breaking the eggs into a bowl. Miraculously, she didn’t have to extract the usual shell fragments. Sighing in relief she seasoned the eggs and proceeded to whip them together. ‘Okay. That wasn’t so hard. Now I just need to fry … A pan? I need another pan!’ she realized. Turning back to the counter, she was relieved to see that she had already taken out two pans.

Willow could smell cooking and it … well it smelled good? She reemerged from her prone position, a slightly puzzled look forming. “Buffy?”

Realizing that her toes were starting to crinkle up, Willow began to wash her hair, rubbing the shampoo in with renewed vigor. She had made up her mind. Today she would say something. She would find a way … make a moment. It was worth the risk and this morning had to be a sign! Didn’t it?

Buffy found herself shaking as she placed the plates of food next to the coffee and juice that she had already added to the large tray she had prepared. She surveyed her handy work unable to believe that she had made the food she was looking at. She had really done it.

An idea occurred to her as she heard the bath water emptying and grabbing a pair of scissors she
quickly rushed to the back door. Opening it, she reached out and cut one of her mother’s lovely red roses. Closing the door she moved to the nearby cupboard and removed a single stem vase and, filling it carefully with water, she placed the rose into it and carried it back to place on the corner of her tray. “Perfect.”

Buffy picked up the overloaded tray and carried it uneasily as she made her way to the stairs. She hated not having her usual slayer balance and coordination. But that wasn’t important. What was important was that she really wanted to revisit their early morning togetherness and just maybe her little gift of a home cooked meal would result in that.

Willow wrapped a towel around her hair and stepped out of the bath. Reaching for the bath towel, she caught her reflection in the mirror. Momentarily she lost her center as anger threatened to fill her. ‘Why? What did I ever do to her?’ Willow demanded, focusing her thoughts on Faith, the cause of all her woes. Pulling the bath towel about her, Willow moved to open the bathroom door. As she did so the aroma of bacon and eggs wafted up to her, removing all thoughts of Faith and her revenge. She smiled and secured the towel about her as she moved down the hallway.

Buffy was nearly at the top of the stairs when Willow appeared before her in nothing but a bath towel. Their eyes met and Buffy stared transfixed by the warm feeling that those eyes brought to her heart. Losing her concentration, she missed the last step and, as if in slow motion, she saw the landing quickly moving up towards her.

Willow was about to speak … to say something when she saw Buffy start to fall. The cups of hot coffee flew towards Willow who instinctively reached out to stop Buffy’s fall, dropping her bath towel.

Buffy continued to fall forward, her face turning into a picture of horror. “No!” She had prepared it all. And it was edible! But her train of thought was broken by the sight of Willow’s bath towel falling to the floor!!

Buffy, who had been vainly trying to catch up with the falling tray, froze in her tracks. But its contents hurtled towards Willow as she headed towards Buffy oblivious to her nakedness and the distress she was causing. The hot coffee landed first followed by the juice, bacon and eggs … and a single rose in a bud vase.

“Woahhh. Ahhhh…. What th… Ooowwww,” Willow screamed as her skin was assaulted by the myriad of temperatures.

***********************************************************************BiVs***********************************************************************
Xander had taken his lunch break early, concerned that he hadn’t been able to reach Buffy or Willow. He had telephoned them four times in the past hour. He just knew that something was wrong. Giles had been fairly insistent that they needed to get together this evening. As he walked towards their dorm room it occurred to him that it was probably best that he knock first. Just in case.

Stopping just outside of the door he did his best to wipe what he was sure was a silly grin from his face as he raised his hand and knocked on the door firmly. Hearing no response he tried again. “Oh well, can’t say I didn’t try to warn them,” he stated as he reached for the handle. “It’s Xander,” he said loudly as a last courtesy before pushing the door open.

Suddenly he was pushed from behind and falling forward he thought he heard the sound of several feet following him. Turning he was confronted by two masked men, with several more right behind them.

****************************BtVS****************************

On all fours at the top of the stairs Buffy couldn’t move. She knew she should be rushing to Willow’s aid but the vision before her was her own naked flesh, even though it was on her best friend. Somehow she just couldn’t get past the thought that Willow had just washed that body … her body. She had probably run her soapy hands over every inch. She dropped her head embarrassed by the thoughts filling her mind.

Willow finally reached Buffy and fell to her knees. “Buffy, are you okay?” she asked, trying to make eye contact.

Hearing her own voice, Buffy raised her head. Mistake!
‘Damn I look good with wet hair,’ she mused as she stared at the naked figure before her. Buffy gulped, her eyes suddenly drawn to the softly swaying breasts before her. A strange chill ran over her but she wasn’t sure why. The body before her was her own. She’d seen it a thousand times. The hand now touching her shoulder was her own. Yet the warmth was unfamiliar. The eyes that were looking at her with such concern were … No … There … she was … that look. Those half thoughts … that was Willow … her Willow. She was on her knees before the woman she loved and the only thought she could come up with was – I look good with wet hair??? She shook herself mentally as those intently caring eyes searched her face.

Then her eye caught the distinct yellow of scrambled egg perched within the still damp hair of her beloved, and flame rushed to her skin, reflecting the intense confusion, embarrassment and wracking knowledge that she had let them both down again. ‘Wrong! Again! I did it wrong again. Oh, why can’t the Hellmouth just open up and swallow me?’ Buffy silently screamed to herself as she closed her eyes and shook her head in despair.

“Buffy?” Willow questioned. “Are you okay?” Her mind was unable to translate the look she had just seen. ‘Is she okay? Has she hurt something? Why won’t she look at me … I’m standing right in front of her and she can’t even look me in the ey … OH MY GO …!!! … NAKED … I’m NAKED.’ Willow’s hands flew to cover, to hide, moving like windmills unsure what to cover first. ‘Need bigger hands or smaller body or just not to be … Towel! Where is that … how did … NAKED …’ Dropping to her knees, she felt a squelch and then a crack as she landed knee-first on half a plate of scrambled eggs.

Buffy’s eyes flew open at the sound and before her she saw Willow vainly attempting to cover herself with her hands, turning herself away from her. Concern for Willow immediately overrode her own discomfort and she raised herself up, stepping past the now almost frantic body of her best friend. She retrieved the bath towel. Turning back towards her best friend, she was presented with the unforgettable image of a single piece of bacon attached firmly to Willow’s ass.

Xander lay on the floor, blood pouring from his nose, as he listened to the footsteps of his attackers. The fist had appeared from nowhere. One minute he was staring at a pair of piercing blue eyes, the next minute he felt as if he had been shot in the face. If he’d seen it maybe he could have – ‘who am I kidding!’ he berated himself as he stayed crouched on the floor holding his nose and listening intently.

“Where is she?” one man asked, his voice like cold steel.
“Well, she’s not here,” another sarcastically responded. “So much for ‘under surveillance.’ What happened? You get distracted by the College short skirts again?”

“She was here, I tell you,” a quieter voice responded in self-defense.

Xander began to move slowly towards the door, inching ever so slowly although his mind was screaming at him to run. But from years of avoiding vampires and demons as well as his parents, he knew that quick movements just caught the eye. He had to just let them forget he was there, blend into the carpet. He could feel his nerves crawling around inside him, scratching at him, pushing him to hurry up before they noticed him.

“Sure,” the sarcastic voice noted. “Well, she’s not here now. So where is she?”

Silence followed and Xander stopped his movements. He could see the corner of Willow’s desk before him; he knew that the door was not far now.

“Why don’t we ask him?” the hard voiced man suggested, sending panic through Xander’s entire body.

Realizing he had to go and go now, Xander pushed off with his feet and stood, making a lurching attempt to reach the door and freedom. But his collar suddenly tightened around his throat as he was pulled back towards the group. “Going somewhere?”

Coughing as he tried to regain his breath, Xander shook his head, dropped his hands from his nose to his throat and, in an attempt to loosen the stranglehold on his collar, pushed his fingers beneath the fabric to stop it from cutting into his throat. But whoever had hold of him simply lifted his collar, causing him to stretch onto his toes. Fighting to get a breath and hanging like a rag doll, Xander tried to reach behind him.

The man behind him laughed at his attempts to release himself. “Looks like I got me a live one.”

“Reminds me of a flapping flounder out of water,” laughed the man to his right.

“So flounder, where is she?” the man behind him asked, shaking him by the collar before
“W … who?” Xander managed as he fought to regain his natural breathing pattern. Glancing around, he began to make out more detail, his eyes having become accustomed to the dim light. There were six of them, all dressed in black. ‘These are the guys who attacked Giles,’ he suddenly realized.

“Awww, he wants to play games,” the sarcastic man commented.

“Sweet, but I’m not in the mood for 20 questions. Where is she?” the steel voiced man demanded.

“Who?” Xander asked in his best ‘I haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about’ voice.

“The Slayer, num nuts. I’ve seen you hanging around with her. You’re one of the Slayer’s groupies. In fact, you’re the Slayer’s boy. So, where is she?” the man holding him demanded.

Xander felt a cold chill run through him, but he pushed away the urge to tremble. These guys were ex-military - he was sure of it. What could they want with Buffy? “Why?” he asked before he could stop himself. Suddenly he was pulled back up onto his toes and a knee was jammed up between his legs. “Heeeyyy, god daaaaaaaaa!”

“We’re asking the questions here, boy. Where is she?” the steel voice asked, just inches from his now streaming eyes.

Xander gasped for breath and dropped one hand to the now inflamed area between his legs, desperate to just curl up on the floor. “I thought she was here … you heard me calling … for her. Why would I call … out if I knew she … wasn’t here? I don’t know … where she is,” he gasped as he began to feel a red hot throbbing, replace the numb pain of the initial assault on Anya’s private play zone.

“He could be telling the truth,” the quiet guy noted.

“Yeah, right,” Mr. ‘Sarcastic’ responded. “He has to have an idea of where she could be. I say we make him tell us.”
Xander swallowed his fear as he braced himself for the onslaught he knew was coming. These guys were just looking for an excuse to beat him up, to make him pay for the fact that they hadn’t found Buffy. He had to do something, make an opening. Then he could run … well, ‘okay maybe crawl’ out of here … What the hell did these guys want Buffy for? He was damned if he’d be the one to let these maniacs anywhere near her, especially in her current condition. “Well, since you asked so nicely …” he threw at them. “I think there’s a shoe sale at the Mall.” At the same moment he raised his left arm, throwing his elbow backwards with all the force he could summon.

He felt bristle meet the back of his upper arm as he connected with the throat of the man holding him, closely followed by a guttural wretch and gasp as his upper arm assaulted his keeper’s windpipe. Suddenly his collar was released, allowing him to drop onto his feet. But the momentum of his attack sent him forward, directly towards the closed door. His heart leapt in relief, then alarm and then surprise as without warning – it opened. Unable to halt his progress towards the silhouetted figure that now stood before him, Xander resigned himself to the collision, dropping his head instinctively.

Strong arms prevented him from toppling them both over and his cheek came to rest on a somewhat familiar pert bosom.

“Gee lover, did you bring all these guys here just for little ole me? Remind me to thank you later,” Faith commented as she moved Xander to one side, patting him on the head, before dropping him gently to the floor. Xander collapsed with relief, all pretence at preserving his dignity abandoned, as he curled up into the fetal position and cupped his crown jewels.

******************************BtVS******************************

Willow returned to the bathroom to start cleaning herself up. Buffy followed closely behind her, apologizing with every breath. But Willow couldn’t hear a word. All she could think was ‘I dropped the towel … I flashed Buffy … I flashed at her … her naked body … at her. Is that even possible? Well I did it. What must she be thinking? I don’t even undress in front of her … let alone … Ohh Goddess!’ She was positive that her cheeks were aflame as she could almost feel the heat radiating from her skin.

She found herself in front of the mirror, watching herself gently removing fragments of egg and bacon from her Buffy-hair. Then turning, she found the shower curtain pulled open and the water running. “I’m so sorry” she heard herself … no as she heard Buffy with her voice say as she was purposefully maneuvered towards the shower. It was as if she was watching it all happen to someone else.

Buffy was so full of guilt as she could see the sheer embarrassment emanating from Willow. Her dear friend had reverted to her old shy, self-conscious persona. And all because she didn’t have her
usual Slayer control of her limbs. Why had she tripped? How could she have tripped? She had forgotten about her injured Willow-knee. Why had the sight of Willow in a bath towel ... NO ... the sight of herself in a bath towel caused her to lose control of her legs ... to stumble and throw her lovingly-made offerings all over Willow. Was there some evil invisible force determined to make her feel clumsy and awkward whenever Willow was around?

Is this what true love did to you? Did it turn you into a bumbling fool, incapable of the most common normal everyday functions? Did it prevent you from saying anything that made any sense at all? Did it make you paranoid about everything you did manage to say or do? Or was this just more of Faith's idea of a joke? Was she watching them somehow, laughing at them? She, herself, wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of the whole situation but one look at Willow and she knew that laughter right now was the last thing her dearest friend needed to hear.

She needed to get Willow cleaned up. She needed to remove all evidence of her 'stumble and drop' episode. She had decided to run the shower rather than another bath. Otherwise they'd be here forever. As much as she was enjoying having Willow to herself, she really didn't like the idea of spending the next few hours in awkward silence very much.

Moving Willow towards the shower, Buffy turned her and made gentle eye contact. “It's okay, Willow. Honestly, I've seen myself naked a thousand times and that's all I saw, me – no big. Okay?” she advised her best friend, smiling as encouragingly as she could. Then instinctively her hand moved to gently cup Willow’s cheek, her thumb brushing absently as she held eye contact for just a moment longer and for a brief moment she lost herself.

There before her, she could see Willow, her beautiful Willow. She had often heard people say that a person’s eyes were the windows to their souls. And right here and now she truly believed that, she knew exactly what they meant as she stared at the insecurity and questioning in those eyes.

Nothing else seemed to matter but the need to soothe her beloved. Slowly Buffy removed her hand and leaned forward and to place a soft and fleeting kiss of assurance upon the lips of the woman she loved. “I'll be downstairs when you're ready,” she informed her before turning and leaving Willow to stare after her.

The gentle tender touch of Buffy’s hand so simply followed by that all too brief kiss did nothing to calm Willow. Instead she was filled with guilt at the sudden flash of desire that swept over her while she watched Buffy leave. ‘What am I? Some kind of flasher sex freak?’ She needed to get a handle on this and she needed to talk to Buffy.
Giles stared at the fragments of the broken plate as his mind continued racing to control his anger and the outburst that had sent the offending dish crashing to his kitchen floor. He clenched and unclenched his fists in an attempt to lessen his urge to batter someone, anyone to within an inch of his life. Ideas ran through his head as the veins at his temples pulsed; each idea more impossible than the last and yet each seeming to promise him the revenge he sought.

Irrational though it was, he would have given anything, in that instant, to have Spike before him; to be nose to nose with that twisted sod. He’d take his chances. His mind searched for the tricks and maneuvers he could use to succeed in such a mismatched contest. He needed to know, he needed to believe that he could do what was expected of him, what he expected of himself. His fatherly feelings outweighed his Watcher instincts, telling him that it was his right, his duty to avenge Buffy and that he was prepared to die trying if necessary. She had risked her life so often, given up so much to protect the world as well as her friends and him. It was time for him to protect her. After all, Cordelia and Faith were already trying to do just that.

Giles shook his head as he tried to work out if it was reasonable or even possible to need revenge for something that hadn’t happened yet and that wouldn’t happen now that he knew about the possibility of it happening. But his mind had no place for logic. The old Ripper seemed to have surfaced and his primitive need to protect what was his told him that what he was feeling was natural, honorable and that Spike’s second death would simply be natural justice.

Cordelia hadn’t wanted to tell him and now he realized why. It had taken him quite a while to calm down before their conversation was finally able to move beyond the content of her vision and foolishly he had thought his anger gone. However once he ended the call, the only thoughts running through his mind were of those of the vision she had described.

And then there was Willow. He smiled as he thought about his favorite young protégé - so shy and sensitive as well as intelligent and talented. But his smile vanished as he thought about how devastated she would be if the vision ever came to pass. Who knows what she might do? She was like a daughter to him as was Buffy. His family was being threatened.

He needed to do something, hit something. Suddenly the light in his head came on. Grabbing his coat he headed out of the door, pulling it closed behind him. Turning left he headed for the Magic Box and its training room where a punching bag with Spike’s name on it was probably going to make him pull a few muscles.

**********************************************************************************BtVS**********************************************************************************

‘Oh my goddess … Buffy kissed me!! On the lips!! She …and we’re not even … you know … doing … Why??? I mean … Was she feeling sorry for me? She’s felt sorry for me before and she’s never … Was she trying to … it didn’t feel like a ‘sorry’ kiss. What if she meant it as …?
Who am I kidding? I just want it to mean she … that she feels something … that she just gave in to the urge to kiss me. Oh, please! What urge? Who am I fooling? I’m standing here splattered in breakfast, with coffee nose and eggy hair, and she gets the inexplicable big ole urge to kiss me? Which dimension am I living in?’ Willow argued with herself as she stepped into the shower.

Reaching for the shampoo, she couldn’t help laughing at herself. ‘Who the heck do I think I am? Buffy is wonderful, sexy, beautiful, loving, strong, powerful, brave and full of life. And she’s straight … isn’t she? Of course, she is. She makes me a wonderful breakfast … hey it really did look pretty good too. Then she kisses me … because I look so pitiful? But it was such a sweet kiss. And it wasn’t on the cheek. Heck, after the last two nights, I guess kissing me on the cheek would be a bit … The things we’ve done would make a kiss on the cheek … Right, it’s because she felt comfortable kissing me … I mean, she kissed me this morning and that … Oh … OH!!’ She froze as the inescapable fact that Buffy had kissed her thoroughly this morning and then sweetly just now sank into her brain. ‘OH, MY! Is it possible? Am I just letting myself hope … duh! No … no, she … There was feeling … I felt a connection…’

“I kissed her!” Buffy reminded herself as she headed down the stairs, her arms weighed down with the remnants of her failed attempt at a romantic meal. ‘Way to go, Buffy. That’s not what they mean by taking it slow. But she looked so lost … and she didn’t pull away, did she? Maybe she was still in shock. First I drop food at her feet and all over her because she’s wearing a bath towel and, then I make a pass at her when she’s feeling vulnerable and upset. Really showed the self-control there, didn’t I?’ she thought, growing angry with herself as frustration mingled with the need to get this right. Buffy had never had to charm and woo anyone. She was beginning to think that it was a good thing she’d never had to before because so far all she had managed to do was confuse her best friend and turn herself into a gibbering fool.

As she placed the proof of her physical limitations into the sink, her shoulders drooped and her knee ached again. Hanging her head, she tried to figure out how to fix things. She needed to make it clear that she found Willow attractive and that she wanted more than their current “best friends who have sex because it was necessary to prevent yet another apocalypse” relationship. It was becoming obvious that when it came to romantic gestures, she was like a mime artist trying to perform in a straight jacket.

Giles had no idea why or how he found himself standing outside Buffy’s mother’s house. He had walked for what seemed like an age, trying to pull himself together, trying to figure out how best to deal with the anger he felt and the fact he had nowhere left to direct it.

Somehow in the last half hour his mind had wandered to Joyce. The woman had raised the
extraordinary daughter he often thought of as his own. He had always admired Joyce. Maybe she, as the only person with an unhindered parental link to Buffy (who he knew would always put Buffy first) would know what he should do with the knowledge he now had. He cringed at the thought of telling her about the vision but Giles had learned through bitter experience that Joyce was far stronger than she looked. When it came to her daughter, the woman was formidable.

As he stared at the house, he realized that it was past midday and the curtains were still drawn? He wondered if Joyce was ill. It was so unlike her to leave the curtains closed. Moving up to the front door, he experienced a moment of doubt but shaking it off, he raised his hand to knock on the all too familiar front door.

***************************BtVS********************

“Sir, I assure you that we will find her,” the man’s steely voice guaranteed him.

He liked hearing the underlying dread in his subordinate’s voice. He took that as a sign that he was being taken seriously and feared as well. “I certainly hope so. I am sure it will not come as a shock to you that it is not in my nature to tolerate failure.”

“There will be no need for tolerance, sir. The operational failures inherent in dealing with this particular target will be resolved. We will adapt and overcome as we always do,” the other man replied, attempting to infuse a level of certainty into his words.

Standing up, the lawyer smiled knowing he had made his point. He liked instilling fear and he especially liked doing it to tall, physically fit, ‘jock’ types. “I’m sure you will. I will be very pleased to relay your personal assurance to the Senior Partner.” He could almost hear the mental gulp.

“Thank you, sir,” the steely voiced man responded. The more than distinct coldness coating his words indicated that he was well aware that he had just been forced to guarantee this mission with his own life.

***************************BtVS********************

Xander had always enjoyed watching Faith kick ass and take down the bad guys but today had been more fun than he had ever remembered. As the last of his battered and bloody attackers ran past him, his wicked side took over and with an evil grin he stuck out his leg. He was extremely
pleased by the sheer slapstick moment as the escaping man tripped with all the grace of sumo wrestler walking on marbles. Watching his victim stumble onto his face before clambering back up to follow his comrades, Xander smiled with childish satisfaction.

“Great party. How can I ever thank you?” Faith’s sultry tone licked at Xander’s mind, suddenly making him very nervous. He had heard that tone before and it hadn’t ended well. The memory of that cold night standing outside her motel room in his boxer shorts reminded him exactly with whom he was dealing. He had always been out of his league with this woman.

Raising himself up, he leaned against the door frame and wiped the latest drops of blood from his nose. “No problem. So you saving the knights in distress now too?” he asked.

“Certainly seems that way,” Faith commented as she moved towards him, feeling the surprising need to check that he was okay. She couldn’t believe that yet again she had found herself in the position of having to save another Scooby from the guys in black. This seemed to be turning into a habit. But somehow she couldn’t help but feel that this payback was long overdue. If she was honest, she owed Xander and Giles at least this much. Maybe now she was beginning to make it up to them and maybe someday she might even be able to move on with all of them as she had with the group in LA.

“You okay?” she asked sincerely.

Xander furrowed his brows and stared at the ex-Slayer. “Okay, who the hell are you? And what have you done with Faith?” he asked, trying to gauge her level of sincerity. The half smile and raised eyebrow that he received in response was, however, again quickly replaced by a look of genuine concern. He was surprised but his manners and common sense took over and he replied to her initial inquiry. “Yeah, I’ll live,” he replied, offering her a small smile before adding a sincere “Thanks.”

The moment’s awkwardness was broken by the shrill ringing of the telephone. Faith turned from Xander, having taken his assurance of well-being at face value only, and reached for the handset. Raising it to her ear, she smiled a bit wickedly before answering. “Hello. Buffy and Willow aren’t home at present but if you leave your message after the moan, I’ll make sure they get back to you … Aaarrrhhhh.”

**********************************************************************************BiVS**********************************************************************************

Willow sat on a stool in the kitchen, her still damp hair refusing to stay behind her ear as she tried to concentrate on what Giles was telling them. But concentrate as she might, she just couldn’t
seem to pull her eyes away from Buffy. Yet each time she looked she could swear that Buffy had just looked away.

‘Why can’t she look at me?’ her mind screamed, again missing something Giles was saying.

“… and it would appear that our original belief that this was all some ill-conceived plan on Faith’s behalf, some vengeance-satisfying fest was indeed way off the mark. It would seem that Faith was, indeed, attempting to act in the best interest of … That is … it would seem, from what Cordelia has led me to believe, that Faith is actually trying to help,” he stated awaiting the expected barrage of assaulting exclamations that did not occur. “However,” he continued, somewhat unnerved by their silence, “doubt has been cast upon her judgment concerning certain facets of the plan and I have to say that Cordelia did not appear to be fully aware of the contacts that Faith had chosen to use to acquire the curse. And so I now truly believe she was duped into delivering the curse within the original curse,” Giles concluded.

“Cool. Faith, the dupe. Now she knows what it feels like. I still don’t believe that she has done any of this because she’s trying to help,” Buffy observed, as she leaned back against the sink, feeling that she should be saying something more. But for the last few minutes all she had been thinking about was how to get Giles to leave. She wanted to talk to Willow; she needed to talk to Willow. She knew that they had unfinished business. A nagging feeling was telling her this was their time. And Giles was invading it.

She cast another quick glance at her beloved, wishing she could talk to her, wishing she could whisper how special today … no, last night and today … no, how special every day with her was and how many more she wanted.

Buffy had never felt so strongly about anything. She was in love and she knew it. She wanted to scream it from the hill tops. She wanted to drag her beloved away from the world and hold her close forever. It had never been like this with Angel. But Giles was still talking … still filling their time with stuff about Faith and Cordelia.

“So Xander went to look for you at your dorm and I came hear in the hope of speaking to your mother,” Giles explained, now very unnerved by the girls’ continued silence. “Are you listening to me?” he asked, staring Buffy in the eye, forgetting that it was actually Willow to whom he was giving his best ‘I know you are not’ look.

“Sorry,” Willow mumbled, breaking eye contact. She felt like she used to when her mother caught her daydreaming. But this time it wasn’t a lecture on the importance of networking with those who might be useful in the future or her appearance and manner. No. This time it was Giles talking about the fix they were in. “You said something about Xander going to our dorm…” she offered.
“Yes but that was some half an hour ago,” Giles commented glancing at his watch.

Buffy stood. “How about I give him a ring and get him to come over here? Then he can give you a lift home.”

“I’ll do it,” Willow said swiveling on her stool and reaching for the phone.

Cordelia stared at the telephone before her - willing it to ring. She needed to speak to Faith. She didn’t want to believe she had been so stupid, so reckless. She also wanted to tell her off for leaving it so long between calls.

‘Angel’s going to blow’ she realized. She really didn’t want to be the one to tell him that his apprentice had royally screwed up especially after she, herself, had convinced him that Faith was the best person to help Buffy and Willow. She could just see that pained and angry but ‘holding it back’ look, hear the sigh and see the disappointment in his eyes. Faith didn’t need to disappoint someone else besides herself. She needed a kick. A good hard stiff kick … and a hug….

‘A hug??? Where the hell did that come from? What am I? Dr Ruth?’ Cordelia shook her head. ‘Yeah, right. I can just see me giving Faith advice on … Heck, I can’t even recall … Has it been that long?’

“Will … Will … WILL! Breathe,” Xander instructed, hearing the tone of his best friend’s voice, which was quickly turning into gasping whispers.

“But how … I mean when … how could you? That woman! I thought you had more self-control, more sense … Anya will be so … Xander I can’t believe you’re …What is she doing th … did you two …? When …”

Xander caught a movement from the corner of his eye and turned his head to see Faith shrug smugly and move towards the door. He nodded acknowledging that she was ready to leave and,
though he really couldn’t blame her, he did want to talk to her. As she passed him, he turned around to see her swaying hips swing with that devil may care Faith-swagger as she moved towards the doorway. A smile crossed his face as he couldn’t deny the admiration he had for the sight of her retreating form.

“Giles said you had gone to look for us. How could you take … how could you bring that woman to our …? You let her into our room, Xander!”

“If it helps any, to be honest, I didn’t let her into your room, and it wasn’t just me, there were six other guys,” Xander replied, a dozen images flashing across his mind, all of which would probably require knowledge of Yoga, which he clearly didn’t have.

“What!!! You had an ORGY in our dorm …” Willow’s mind scrambled to catch up.

“More of a rumble, really. Where are you any way?” he asked, changing the subject. “I’ve been trying to get hold of you all day!”

“We’re at Buffy’s. Giles came by and found us here. So I … you, Faith and six guys?” Willow cried out, obviously unable to get past the images now swimming in her head.

“I’ll be right over,” Xander advised her, eager to end this call and talk to Faith, who he could see from the corner of his eye, was slowly inching out of the door, even though she was clearly enjoying his end of the conversation with Willow.

“Damn right, you will!” Willow exclaimed, as she heard the receiver drop.

Cordelia stared at the notes she had been writing. Wolfram and Hart? How on earth had Faith imagined that she could pull the wool over a firm like Wolfram and Hart? Did Faith think she was like a magic tree, walking ninja or something? Was she really that cocky? ‘Huh, yeah,’ she assured herself with dry sarcasm, realizing that Faith was probably just as cocky and self-confident as she was. She was surprised at the disappointment that rose to meet her thoughts. She hated feeling like this. Being made to feel like an unobservant fool was so not on her list of favorite pastimes.
She had begun to think of Faith as a friend, as someone who would be honest with her, who would let her help and help in return, someone she could rely on. Not that she ever intended to ask for help. She had never anticipated needing help with anything, especially from Faith. But as it turned out, it had just kinda happened. They had seemed to fit - so Faith had her help with no agenda, nothing asked in return and she had accepted. Faith didn’t get on her nerves like most other women did. Cordelia knew that she’d pretty much shunned the friendship of women, even Fred, dear sweet Fred.

The fact was that men were just plain easier. She knew their agenda pretty much of the time and steered her course accordingly. She didn’t want to be responsible for anyone’s self esteem ever again, to have things expected of her, to be a surrogate sister. Oh hell, why couldn’t she just leave the “queen bitch” behind her? Because that’s exactly what most women brought out in her.
Mainly because she knew that if she gave them half a chance, they’d read through her armor and then she’d have no where to hide. She’d have no power. So there was only one way to protect herself - she’d hit out first and hardest.

But Faith. Well, she was the same. That is kinda the same but not. Actually, she was really different from the rest of them. Cordelia so knew that the dark-haired slayer was way up the ladder on the feminine looking and acting flirty temptress thing. Plus hello, she had way better social skills and, oh yeah, there was the fashion thing. But Faith – well, she had the “don’t mess with me, I’m more than you can handle” sex thing going on, the “dark and bad to know, but you’ll never forget me” thing, the “no one really knows or can understand me” …

Cordelia sighed. She’d thought she was getting to know her. She’d thought … ‘Damn it all to hell. Face it, you haven’t got a clue.’

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“**What is it honey? You wanna hug?**” Faith suggestively offered as Xander moved to block the door way. “**Shouldn’t you be running to hide behind the skirts of your women? It must be tying your cherry stalk into a knot to have to stop yourself from asking if you can watch, imagining Willow teaching Buffy how to … you know … KISS and … well, you can imagine what all… woman on woman. You guys just get all hot and bothered over that …” she smirked briefly lowering her eyes to just below his waist before grinning at Xander while raising one eyebrow in challenge. The adrenalin was still running through her veins and she was really itching to let loose. She’d taken it easy on those guys and she knew it.

Xander winced at the comment, immediately regretting his instinct to talk to her. ‘Why don’t I just let her go? What good is talking going to do?’ He had tried talking before and, well … let’s just say - not the most encouraging memories came to mind. If there was one thing he knew about her - it was that Faith was definitely not into sharing her feelings. But years of Anya’s sharing was beginning to make him wonder if maybe that was such a bad deal. “I thought you’d want to … you
know - gloat, savor the moment. Make me say ‘Thank you’ again. But hey, if you have a big old ‘more fun place to be’ - don’t let me get in your way,” he ended stepping aside.

“Right,” Faith said, suddenly feeling more than a little silly for pulling at his chain. ‘What do I expected him to say?’ But as she moved to step through the doorway, he leaned forward to say “No problem. It was fun. We must do it again some time.”

“Felt good didn’t it?” he continued.

“What?” Faith responded.

“It felt good, didn’t it? Getting back in the game, the Slayer groove … here at the Hellmouth?” he ventured, this time leaning back against the door frame to place a little distance between himself and the now glaring ex-Slayer. “Figured.”

“Just what do you mean by that?” Faith asked, leaning towards him.

“Nothing,” Xander assured her innocently. “I mean, you do the big reform act for Angel. He stands up for you against the woman he loves, and then he lets you come back to good old Sunnydale, a place full of so many good memories for you, to save the very same woman he loves.”

“It’s all good,” Faith threw out as she turned her back on him beginning to stride down the corridor, now suddenly eager to make her self scarce.

“Then you disarm the woman he loves … for her own good -- I understand --inadvertently placing her and her best friend in danger,” he sighed dramatically, for effect as he saw Faith pause. “You know, anyone who didn’t really know you would be, could be forgiven for assuming that you simply cursed the woman because she put you in a coma. Not that I’m saying that you understand,” he commented as Faith slowly began to turn. “I mean, I hear you singing ‘I’m really here to be save the girl … to help them both’. Honest, I do. But people … that is some people not standing within striking distance … they’re gonna figure now that you’re officially the only big bad real Slayer in town, reaping all the glories … well, it has to feel good.”

Faith stilled, pushing down the disappointment and anger, attempting to drown out the blood pumping into her ears. She wanted to turn and hurt him, to pummel him and every accusation he’d just made into next week.
“And who could really blame you? Anyone with half a brain can see you still have issues …” Xander continued. “But you say it’s all intended to help them and, hey, I’m big with the great, if that’s true …”

Faith turned fully to glare at him. “If ???” she questioned threateningly.

“I’m just saying …” Xander stated, raising his hands in imaginary defense.

“You talk too much,” she commented.

“So I’m told,” he agreed. “I’m just wondering why, if you are only here to help, why are you so big with hiding in the shadows?”

She glared and then broke into a grin. “Works for me.”

******************************************************************************BtVS******************************************************************************
Chapter 25

“There is no way around this. We need to speak to Faith and we need her to tell us everything she knows,” Giles stated firmly.

Buffy nodded, pleased with this answer. “Oh, I’ll make her talk. Trust me,” Buffy stated, before annoyingly recalling that right at this moment she couldn’t seem to make herself tell Willow how she was feeling, let alone get her best friend to admit to any feelings of her own. With that in mind, what hope did she have of getting Faith to tell her anything the other slayer didn’t want to? Surely she couldn’t do it physically – at least not yet. Glancing at a still angry Willow for support, she received a shy but supportive smile and nod. Smiling back, she wished she could impart the thousand and one things she wanted to say into just such a smile but somehow she knew that given her current apparent inability to verbalize her real feelings and thoughts and the fact that Giles was still there and Xander was on his way, she didn’t hold out much hope that she had just invented the new ‘smiley’ language of love or gained the power of telepathy.

Willow could see that the wheels in Buffy’s mind were turning. The expression on her best friend’s face was somewhat familiar but she hadn’t quite gotten the hang of seeing Buffy’s thoughts on her own facial features. The nagging feeling that she was missing something important crept up her spine like an unwelcome admirer. She really wished that everyone would just go away so that she … no, so that they could talk. She really missed the talking, the being, the way they were. Would they ever be that way again? She was so afraid that they would not. And that possibility really upset her. It seemed that her life had just become one great big confusing mess. Here she was feeling as if no one would ever understand what she was going through or how brave she was about to become. But all everyone was talking about was Faith; interfering, back-from-the-past Faith. Maybe she would just help Buffy make her talk … hurt her just a bit … well, more than a bit … maybe a lot. The now-familiar rage began to rise within her and she allowed the frustration she felt with herself to pour into it. Maybe she could hold the dark-haired slayer down and let Buffy … ‘Whoa! Where the hell did that come from?’ Willow thought, pulling herself back.

“Whilst I agree that I would like to learn far more from Faith, I’m not sure that an aggressive approach will be necessary,” Giles continued.

“Oh yeah, because she’s been so straightforward and easy to reach so far. You have her number right? You know where she’s staying?” Buffy asked sarcastically.

“Well, no. I mean, she has been keeping a somewhat low profile. What I meant to say is that we could catch more bees with honey. Although I can understand that you might be tempted to derive a certain satisfaction from causing her pain …”
“You think?”

“I don’t feel that allowing your natural desire to reap revenge on Faith to take priority would be a good thing for you, or any of us, right now. I know you don’t want to hear this but right now you wouldn’t be much of a match for her,” Giles declared apologetically.

Xander gingerly touched his eye socket. He could feel the puffiness starting to form. It was going to be a wonderfully rich dark shiner. He smirked slightly in satisfaction and a little pain. ‘Yep, Faith hasn’t changed. She still thinks she can win any argument with her fists.’ Maybe he had baited her. But, hey, she had been pretty big with the baiting herself. He reassured himself that he hadn’t said anything that someone somewhere wasn’t probably thinking.

Faith did seem to be enjoying the whole “I’m back being a Slayer” scenario, what with the whole “I’ll save Giles and Xander” thing. Did she really think she could come back? That she could play the big heroine and all would be forgiven? She’d killed a man and then she’d tried to help the mayor kill them all after trying to convince Giles that Buffy had killed the mayor’s assistant. How could they ever forget that? How could Cordelia have forgotten that? Did she really believe Faith had changed? That was just plain weird. The Cordy he knew didn’t do “gray”. It wasn’t one of her colors. His two ex-girlfriends, if you could consider Faith as an “ex”, seeming to be friends just set his nerves on edge. It was like being in a room where the only thing the other people have in common is you.

Okay, Faith did seem different. But all people change. It didn’t necessarily follow that she had actually changed for the good. And, oh boy, had he hit a sore spot when he had asked if there was something more going on between her and Cordy than just friendship. That really seemed to upset her. She had become awkward, defensive and … he could have sworn she blushed. He didn’t think he had ever seen her blush before.

He still couldn’t decide if he believed Faith was really trying to help just because Cordelia was involved or because of the way she had been when she visited his apartment. He thought testing her would give him some answers but all it seemed to leave him with was more questions and a black eye.

Speaking of questions, he was about to go eighteen rounds with the quiz master general. He didn’t relish having to explain how Faith had saved his butt, let alone how he had then caused her to give him a black eye. Stepping up to Buffy’s front door, he took a deep breath he opened it.
The frustration just wouldn’t go away. She’d lost it. And she’d lost it over something … no, over someone she didn’t have the right to lose it over. ‘What had he meant by that? Why had he said that? Cordelia was just a friend nothing more. Wasn’t she? She was just like any other friend. Okay, so I don’t have any other friends but if I did she’d be just … she’d be my first friend. No. There’s Angel. Well, he’s kinda like a friend, isn’t he? In a kinda sponsor-type killers anonymous way’.

She crushed the now empty can in her hand and threw it across her room in total frustration. Did it really matter what other people thought of their friendship? Wasn’t she just being protective of a friend? Wasn’t this how you were supposed to feel about your friends? She wracked her brain for a memory, any memory that she could compare this too. She’d kinda been friends with Buffy. Well, she’d tried but it had been hard to break into their gang – the Scoobies. She’d felt protective of Buffy even back then, hadn’t she? She still did and sometimes thought that she always would.

“Xander!” Willow exclaimed in concern as she saw the puffiness around his left eye. Her irritation at their earlier telephone conversation was momentarily forgotten as she guided him towards the sofa. “Are you okay?” she asked, reaching towards his swollen eye with her hand, only to have Xander pull away from her.

“Yeah, I’ll live,” he said smiling as reassuringly as he could manage and slowly lowering his aching body into the sofa.

“What happened?” asked Buffy, folding her arms before her.

“I was trying to find you guys. Giles said you weren’t answering your phone,” Xander grinned devilishly, only to receive a glare in return. “Anyway, I was going into your dorm room when of bunch of guys jumped me. I’m guessing it was the same bunch who jumped Giles,” Xander explained. “They were all in black fatigues and big with the military lingo.”

“What did they want?” Giles queried, moving forward in his seat.

“Same as me - to know where you guys were,” Xander replied looking at Buffy and then Willow.
“Why?” Willow asked. “What do they want with us?”

“Funny, I never really got the chance to ask,” he replied, recalling how just keeping upright had been almost impossible. “Too busy getting beaten up. Something to do with you being the Slayer, I guess. Same as always.”

“Yeah,” Buffy grinned momentarily, before sobering again and asking “But military types though? Not used to the big bad employing mercenaries … not of the human variety anyhow.”

“It would seem to imply that on this occasion ‘the big bad’, to use your own terminology, may not actually be a demon,” Giles reasoned.

“No. It couldn’t be. You killed him. I saw you,” Willow mumbled absently. “And last time we thought she was on our side too. Well, some of us did. Others of us became personally involved … Gee and that’s not happening again, is it? … Then there’s the lawyer working for him … The wanting to believe she wouldn’t do that. I never realized how it’s all so familiar. Don’t you see?

“I think I speak for everyone, Will, when I say – No. Not really getting where you’re going … or even where you are,” Buffy commented.

“Faith! Don’t you see?? She’s doing it again. She’s setting us up for a fall. It’s revenge … or the Mayor’s not dead … or this was his dying wish … or …” Willow finally took a breath before continuing. “She tries to make us think she’s helping us … that she’s gotten past killing someone … just like last time. She has us running around every which way. She suckers Xander in,” she throws him an apologetic look, “… just like last time …”

Xander jumped in, unable to stop himself, “And then it turns out that all along she was working for some human evil sick-o magic freak/wanna-be a god.”

“I think we’re in a time looping story loop thingy.” Willow stated, recapturing her point, “sort of repeating the same thing with the same people … well some of the same people … the major players. Like bad Karma or a bad penny coming back to make us learn something we didn’t know or a curs …” She stopped dead in her tracks, as she realized what she was about to say.

Glances were shared and frowns quickly followed. Giles pushed his glasses up in concern at Willow’s ramblings and the thoughts they provoked. And for a moment, he was seriously
considering that maybe he had misread the curse. Rising he coughed nervously.

Buffy saved him from having to say it. “Giles, you hit the books and take another look at that curse. Willow and I are going to track down Faith. We need to get some answers. Xander, I need you to tell me everything you can remember about your encounter with Faith and then I need you to go home and rest so that you can heal.”

**********BtVS**********

‘Since when do I hit and run?’ Faith asked herself as she stormed through the graveyard, eager for some big bad, or even moderate-sized bad, to kick the crap out of. How had Xander managed to bait her so easily? When had her buttons become so easy for people to see and push? ‘What am I? Some kid playing games? I’m a Slayer! A fighter against evil! And hello - I finally have a gig doing the good stuff.’

She lashed out at a drooping branch, tearing it from its tree and tossing it behind her in disgust when it offered little or no resistance to her attack. Her forceful steps sent out a signal to anyone who bothered to notice, or who hadn’t already left the area, that this was a mightily pissed off female, carrying toxic mojo. So Faith continued her internal rant, crossing paths with nothing that could distract her mind from its inner debate.

‘Okay. “Sunnyhell” was supposed to have been my town but B didn’t really die so I became a spare wheel and got kicked out of Oz. But only after I deserved it. But that’s old hat … water under the bridge … I’m through with going out of control. All I want to do is make up for my mistakes, especially here in this town with all of them, especially B and Red. So where does any of that give Xander the right to get all “you’re just the understudy to her Royal Buffy-ness. Careful your head doesn’t swell too much.” And “what’s the deal between you and Cordy? You two more that just friends?” Where the hell does he get the stones for that?’

‘Like he gets me … like anyone really gets what I’m about … gets why I have to do this. None of them ever got me. Okay, so I wasn’t exactly big with the clues and sharing and stuff. But did they ever try? Did I ever give them a chance?’ she berated herself. ‘Willow tried to tell me … she told me that B wanted to be my friend … but I blew her off … there’s a shocker. Hell, I tried to kill her.’

Shaking her head to clear it, she got back to Xander. ‘But why would he say … What the hell did Cordelia ever see in him? Jeez!’ She paused, taking a moment to measure the discomfort that Xander’s words had created. ‘Could he be right? Am I enjoying myself? Has sliding back into Slayer mode felt good? Duh … sure. And why shouldn’t it? I am a Slayer. What’s wrong with it feeling good especially if you’re trying to do some good?’
“So she saved you?” Giles asked.

“You could say that ...” Xander hedged.

“And after you thanked her, you tried to ask her some questions but she hit you and ran away?” Giles queried, his eyes doing that ‘I know there’s something missing here’ frown.

Xander nodded sheepishly. “That’s pretty much how I remember it. She wasn’t real big on the curtain call.”


“Strange? What’s strange? She’s lost it again. Whatever Angel may have thought and hoped would happen to his protégée, she’ll never reform. A leopard can’t change its spots,” Buffy stated, somewhat irritated by Giles’ apparent inability to just see things for what they were. “Faith still doesn’t mix well with others.”

“I just meant that I didn’t find her at all unreceptive when I asked her questions. She was reserved but not reticent,” he recalled. “Are you sure you didn’t say something that could have triggered that kind of response?” he asked Xander.

“Hey, do I look like foot-in-mouth guy? Don’t answer that!” Xander said, throwing Willow a goofy grin. “I mean, what is it G-man? Since when is Faith suddenly the new knight in shining armor? Did I miss a plot twist somewhere along the line?”

“No, I didn’t mean to imply…” Giles fell silent as he became aware of the disapproving glances from Buffy and Willow.

“Right.”, Xander responded taking advantage of the Watcher’s hesitation, “Because you were in no way trying to justify the way she’s been behaving. Look, I’m right with you on the ‘she’s not her crazy-assed’ former self but she’s not the poster child for total sanity either. The girl has major issues and her biggest hasn’t changed in my opinion. She’s still not dealing with playing second
There had to be a thousand and one really good reasons why Faith found herself staring into her own reflection outside the Magic Box but she just couldn’t put her finger on any of them. Her apartment was just across the street but here she stood.

Ever since she had lost her temper with Xander over those silly remarks, she had been unable to think about anything but Cordelia … unable to drag her mind into the here and now. Even at the height of her slayer anger stomp across the graveyard, the only lucid thought had been about how Cordelia would have gently laughed at her and pulled her out of her anger with one well-aimed quip.

So here she stood, mere inches from the Magic Shop window, trying to see something in her own face but she had no idea what or why.

This had been … was supposed to be … her turf, her town. This had been where she thought she was meant to be … what she thought she was meant to have. She had battled for it, had clung on to it, had almost lost herself for it. But now all she really wanted was to leave here … to go back … back to see a friendly face … share a smile and stare into the beautiful face of a woman with dark hair and piercing eyes, not unlike her own and yet so very different.

Willow nervously settled herself into the back seat of Xander’s car. She was careful not to gaze longingly at the back of Buffy’s head because she knew that Xander was covertly checking her out in his rear view mirror, just as the true Slayer settled into his passenger seat.

Willow wondered why she had accepted Xander’s explanation of events far more readily than Giles. She suspected that she was allowing her instinctual animosity towards Faith and what the other Slayer had done to them to cloud her judgment. ‘Oh yeah, I so know I am. But she hit him! No matter how much of a pain in the neck, runaway-hormone train with a brain he’s being, no one hits my Xander. Well, when I say no one I mean no one but us … that being an “us” without Anya in it. So that means no one but Buffy, Giles and I - who can hit him when he’s being a pest or total nut. No matter how you slice it, Faith is so not on the list’, she reasoned. ‘And why would she want to be on that kind of list anyway? You have to really care to be on that kind of list and she’s never worried about anyone but herself … never cared about anyone but herself … never been obligated to anyone but herself. Oh why does he always attract women who are always nothing but
trouble?’ She paused in her internal babble and considered ‘But he used to be attracted to Buffy too, didn’t he?’ She shook her head to clear her mind of that thought.

Buffy was really thankful that Xander had agreed to leave this to them, that he wasn’t joining their ‘Faith hunt’. He was going to drop them off on campus, where Faith had been last sighted. ‘Then he’s going home and following orders’, she smiled momentarily satisfied with herself for having protected him, at least him from further harm. She frowned at the thought that she had let him get hurt at all by the mystery men in black, as well as by Faith.

“Need any help there, little lady?” Xander asked, as Buffy struggled to fasten her seat belt.

“No. I’ll get it,” Buffy said, looking up at him. As she did so the clip fell between their seats. Turning, she saw Willow reach forward to rescue the clip in one swift ‘slayer-like’ movement, and move to hand it back to Buffy, with a gentle smile upon her lips. Their hands touched for only a moment but it was as if she had been hit by lightning. “Thanks,” Buffy managed in a partially strangled tone, before then dropping the clasp.

Xander smiled in amusement at his two favorite friends before taking the clip, retrieving the clasp and ramming them together with a satisfying click. “There you go. And if you’re a good little girl, I’ll let you out too,” he smirked, tightening the belt.

Buffy threw an angry glare at Xander and then smiled weakly at Willow before turning to sit back in her seat. ‘Jeez, get a grip!’ she demanded of herself, closing her eyes in despair. ‘This is about catching Faith and keeping Xander out of it. Talking with Willow will just have to wait,’ she told herself, as the car pulled away allowing Xander to hit the main thoroughfare before Buffy opened her eyes. She forced herself to quietly stare at the road before them.

‘Somehow I don’t think getting Faith to tell me what we need to know is going to be as easy as getting Xander to follow orders,’ she decided. Soon Xander would be home safe and sound in the arms of his beloved Anya - she’d long given up trying to figure that one out – but he’d be out of harm’s way.

Suddenly three unbidden thoughts immediately flooded into her mind – Orders; Anya; and for some reason a black silk scarf! Buffy went from smile to gape in only seconds.
She mentally shook her head and closed her eyes, only to find the damned woman before her. ‘What the hell would Anya need a scarf for … Oh! … why on earth would I be thinking about … Oh, OH! The woman before her wasn’t Anya. This woman was leather-clad … flame-haired … standing by a pile of books and a leather chair … a black scarf swinging from her hand as she glared at Buffy … Telling her off for something she … hadn’t done … No … something she hadn’t said! She could feel the excitement rising within her and her inner muscles clenched as a thousand images flew through her mind.

“Buffy, you OK?” asked Xander, puzzled by the strange look that he saw crossing her face. “Should I slow down?”

“Nope,” she replied in a high pitched tone. “No, I’m fine. Just get us there.”

“No problemo. Your wish is my command,” he smirked, throwing her a wink with his uninjured eye before accelerating.

Buffy forced a tight smile across her face, sinking back into the passenger seat as the car leapt forward. She really needed to keep her mind out of the gutter. She needed to get herself under control.

********************************************************************BtVS********************************************************************

Buffy knew she was working on instinct alone. She knew that she had nothing else left as she moved through the campus with all the determination she could summon. She needed to do this, she needed to find Faith, she needed to get this resolved before she had to … ‘What? Before I have to what?’ she asked herself. ‘Before I have to take the bull by the horns and ask Willow how she feels about me? Tell her how I feel about her? See if she thinks we could have a future together? Or if she hates me after I’m finished talking? If she’ll ever talk to me again? And what if I end up losing my best friend? I guess I haven’t just lost my Slayer strength, I’ve lost my nerve as well.’

Shaking her head, she tried to throw off her innermost fears. Those days and nights – ‘oh god, the nights’ – those nights they had spent together. They were something she would never forget, something she didn’t want to lose -- not now, not ever. But now was not the time to sink back into her far too intense feelings. She needed to focus, to concentrate; she needed to forget that the beautiful woman following her actually meant more to her than anyone in her life, especially a wayward and quite possibly insane ex-slaver with a grudge.

As Willow silently followed Buffy, she struggled to suppress her need to speak, her desire to voice the fears and hopes swelling within her, the need to touch. ‘I could just reach out, thread my
fingers into hers, touch her.’ Every moment that she had shared with Buffy over the last few days was indelibly seared into her mind and her soul. But now the wonderful woman before her seemed to have only one purpose and talking wasn’t it. Now was about trust, about backing her up. And that’s exactly what she would do.

Buffy could feel something pulling within her. It was as if her very core had become a compass of some sort. The harder she focused her will on finding Faith, the stronger the pull became. “This way,” Buffy stated, turning off the main drag and into the cemetery.

“Ahh, the cemetery. Can I just say how totally shocked I am – NOT!” Willow mumbled as they moved across the Slayer’s main arena. She never, for even a moment, doubted one turn or change of direction, somehow knowing that Buffy was right, mainly because she usually was. But also because she, herself, instinctively felt that Faith had come this way. Willow didn’t even find it strange that Buffy was acting as if she was on a scent, somehow tracking the ex-slayer down. She knew that, although she might have Buffy’s Slayer powers on loan, Buffy still seemed to be able to tune herself into Faith on another level. You might be able to take the powers out of the Slayer, but it seemed the Slayer still remained. Many years of following her beloved had taught her when to question and when to accept -- this was definitely a time for the latter.

As they emerged from the other side of the cemetery, Willow drew in a sharp breath because standing before them was the Magic Box and on the ground before it lay most of the display window. They had no doubt who had broken it. The ‘why’ wasn’t important; the fact that they were on Faith’s trail was.

“Oh is she so going to pay for that,” Buffy vowed, flexing her shoulders and setting her jaw.

‘Why did I let my jealousy blind me to what I was losing back then? Why have I been … hell, why can’t I ever ask for help when I really need it? I can’t even bring myself to call Cordelia and she never offers unasked for advice.’ Faith laughed. ‘I guess I’m hoping that she wouldn’t consider helping me a waste of her breath. But hell, the girl can really ask a question.’ Faith had found all of Cordy’s questions irritating at first. However, although some of the answers had proved unsettling, others had helped her to figure a lot of things out. Faith smiled as she fondly recalled their last late night chat. She really missed her friend. She missed having someone who actually listened and cared.

Faith couldn’t help herself as she blew hot air onto the cold glass of the shop’s window and, with her finger, drew a heart pierced by a stake. While she stared at the image before her, a memory dragged her back to that hot summer day not so long ago when she had been standing outside Buffy’s class and had drawn the same image on the window pane and lured Buffy out to play
hooky … and stake some vamps. It had all seemed so right, so comfortable. She has thought back then that the blonde Slayer would care and listen and be a real friend and… That had been how they were, how two slayers were meant to be, but now … ‘Hell, I wonder how it all went so wrong? How did we manage to screw it all up so bad?’

Faith felt such frustration at having lost so much. She had let it slip through her fingers while she stupidly craved more, unable to be content with what she had, the companionship and friendship of the other Slayer, something unheard of, rare and, therefore, precious. And, who knows, maybe even her eventual acceptance by Buffy’s Scoobies. Faith would give anything to go back and give herself a good shake; let her younger self know just how much she had given up, how much she could have had.

As anger flooded her mind, Faith swayed and lost her balance in her attempt to regain control of her emotions, pitching violently against the shop window which surrendered to the sudden impact of her body weight, shattering at her feet. She felt the inane desire to laugh but instead she simply turned and walked away, crunching broken glass beneath her boots.

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“Do I want to ask how our other project is progressing?” Angel mumbled, his tone implying that he’d rather not know but that if there was something he needed to know he’d be able to deal with it. He couldn’t begin his return trip to LA until sundown but had felt the need to check in on Cordelia, especially since she had seemed unusually reserved the last time he had spoken to her.

“No. Everything’s okay,” Cordelia responded, swallowing the lie down with far less guilt than she had expected and coating it in a matter-of-fact and dismissive tone. “So how’d it go there? How did Mr Escolatti feel about our… service?”

Angel laughed, as he knew exactly what she was really asking. “We got paid. Wesley has the cashier’s check for our set fee plus a healthy bonus.”

“Bonus! Ooh, I love that word … just how big a bonus? Are we talking ‘take-out’ or a ‘new three-piece ensemble’? Because I could go for the take-out, but you know and I know that nothing quite says ‘thank you’ like a new outfit,” Cordelia piped up, her spirits lifted at the thought of some much needed retail therapy.

“More like maybe … a new coffee machine,” Angel suggested, relieved to hear the Cordelia he knew so well, although he hated to send her crashing back down to earth with what the true size of their bonus would be when their costs were taken out.
“Great. I saw one on sale over on Beverly Blvd. last week,” Cordelia gushed.

“Good. Maybe you could take Fred with you.” He really had dropped Faith on Cordy without warning or discussion, but she’d done a great job. He’d seen such an improvement over the past few weeks. So maybe he’d throw Cordy a little … what did she call it … ‘retail pleasure’ … no … ‘retail escapism’ … no, that wasn’t it … ‘retail orgas’ … oh, what did it matter? “Fred needs to get out more and so do you. I’m not really big on the whole shopping for office supplies thing but I know you women like it.”

“ ‘Us women’? And just what do you mean by that?” Cordelia fumed, even though she knew she was being teased. It was a strange, affectionate kind of teasing; the kind she’d seen brothers and sisters doing a lot of in school and, although she would never admit it, she’d been slightly envious.

Angel smiled to himself in satisfaction as he was sure that Cordelia was about to happily make him the gift of one of her ‘I’m telling you for your own good … you’re so out of date, so out of touch and I can’t believe you don’t know it’ lectures. It always amused him that the woman who had fallen for that Iron Age oaf, ‘Groo’ was in reality a modern woman, a closet feminist, and he thoroughly enjoyed reminding her of it whenever he got the opportunity. Preparing himself for an ear full, he sighed in satisfaction, deciding that all was right in his world.

“I’ll have you know that ‘us women’ have been holding this world together for far longer than you ‘spotlight-stealing’ men realize, and another thing …”

****************************BtVS****************************

Suddenly looking up, Faith glanced about her, realizing exactly where she was. It was Angel’s old stomping grounds. ‘Figures. Even here he’s trying to get in on the action,’ Faith thought to herself, smiling for the first time. ‘When did this all get so complicated? It was supposed to be so easy. Get them to walk in each other’s shoes … in each other’s bodies and they would realize how they felt about each other … stop lying to themselves and each other … finally really be happy. They would see how much they need each other … see how good they are for each other. So why was everything so complicated?’

****************************BtVS****************************

Buffy caught a glimpse, just a flash … there. She sped up, only to fall over her own feet and straight into the arms of her beloved.
“Buffy! I’ve got you,” Willow said, stating the obvious, for want of words that escaped her.

“Thanks,” Buffy grumbled, feeling suddenly vulnerable and off-balanced. The arms lifting her back to her feet were so tempting, so warm, so … ‘NO! Damn it, woman, you need to keep your mind focused … not to be going off on some starry-eyed detour. You had your chance this morning and you blew it,’ she firmly reminded herself, as she regained her footing and reluctantly moved out of Willow’s arms.

Having Buffy pull away from her sent a shot of insecurity and doubt through the young witch/temporary slayer, shaking her recent determination to talk to Buffy and open her heart. ‘Maybe now isn’t the best time,’ she reasoned, stepping back and giving Buffy even more room.

“I think I saw her,” Buffy explained, gesturing towards a wall beyond a group of trees.

“I don’t believe it!” Willow exclaimed.

“What?”

“That’s the side entrance to Angel’s old mansion. You don’t think this could be where she’s being staying, do you?” Willow absently questioned, caught up by the somehow circular pattern of recent events.

“Okay, that would be just a little too weird,” Buffy agreed. She had been concentrating so much on her pursuit of Faith that she hadn’t realize where they had ended up. Moving towards the side entrance that she had used a thousand times to visit Angel, she was reminded of all that had occurred here between her, Angel and Faith. Her memories disturbed her.

“Buffy? Are you okay?” Willow asked quietly. She didn’t like the distant and troubled expression that had just crossed her true love’s face one bit. It reminded her of someone and something that she had never really come to terms with – Angel. ‘Why did I have to mention him? Why did we have to end up here? Is he ever going to be out of her life?’
“Giles, are you sure this is necessary? Angel and the guys will be back tonight. I could wait and leave in the morning,” Cordelia reasoned.

“I do not believe that we can really wait. Every hour that passes just brings the eclipse closer and closer. I wouldn’t be asking if I didn’t consider it prudent to act quickly,” Giles assured her. He wanted someone here who had been in at the inception of the curse, and someone with a direct route to TPTB was an additional bonus he could not afford to ignore.

“Kinda figured that. I mean, asking for my help - not normally in your repertoire; let alone doing it twice in one day,” Cordelia declared. “Okay,” she relented. “Angel has the car, so I’ll pack light and get my indispensable self on a bus. Can you have someone pick me up? I don’t really like the idea of being single white female returning to ‘fangy’ town. Been there, seen it, done it and have the T-shirt.”

“Just let me know what time you expect to arrive and I’ll make sure you’re safely picked up,” Giles agreed, eager to get Cordelia to Sunnydale as soon as possible. He was very keen to have her help them track down Faith and have a reasonable, extended, informative and civil conversation. He needed answers and his investigations so far had led him to believe that answers would be best served by having all parties to this mess in one room, talking as honestly as possible.

It had taken him almost half an hour to persuade Cordelia that returning to Sunnydale was in everyone’s best interests. He found it somewhat amusing that no one who actually left Sunnydale ever seemed to want to return.

******************************************BrVS******************************************

Faith heard the all too familiar footsteps behind her. She smiled ‘So finally the scene we’ve all been waiting for.’ As she turned, the faces of the two women before her did nothing to surprise her. “So, here we are, eh B? You and the super-charged girlfriend, all stony-silent and wicked disapproving. Shucks honey, the more things change … the more they stay the same.”

“I wish I knew where to start. But it feels like I’ve said it all before,” Buffy exclaimed, raising her eyebrow in an attempt to mimic the look her mother often threw her.

“I would’ve thought so B, but you can’t forgive let alone not forget, can you? Oh no, not you. Too way out on a limb for you. Careful you don’t throw that cold, cold shoulder out. Remember, you can’t heal like you used to. Still ‘Better-than-Thou Buffy’ … even after all this time,” Faith commented. Seeing a flicker of doubt momentarily cross the features of the now red-headed former slayer, she paused. “Only now I guess something’s finally knocked you off your high
Buffy stood in icy silence, unable to believe that after all she had put them through, Faith was still the cocky-mouthed, major league bitch she had always been. Nothing had changed. She really shouldn’t have been surprised, let alone allowed the unexpected growing disappointment she could sense building.

“Is the view good from the cheap seats?” Willow piped in, unnerved by Buffy’s silence.

“Awww sweet cheeks, I paid plenty for my Front Row seat to this one,” Faith noted, winking before stepping back to let them come all the way into the mansion and to give herself a little more room for maneuvering.

“You really have no idea just how much trouble you’re in, do you?” Buffy asked, moving forward carefully while keeping Willow just within her line of sight. She was more than aware of her present limitations but she needed to take the lead with Faith. She needed her to know … to believe that she was more than just her Slayer powers, even though it might not be really true.

“B, did I go and make you mad?” Faith asked, leaning against the fireplace with a nonchalance she really didn’t feel. ‘Why the hell am I feeling like I’ve done something wrong? I’m the good guy this time. Step it up girl.’ She took a slight breath. “So how’s your willpower holding up? I mean, now that you have a taste for gingerbread girl?” Faith asked, raising a questioning eyebrow and tilting her head towards Willow.

“What?” Buffy demanded, her cheeks flaming.

“You know. What with the undercurrent you two have, I just wondered how you were managing to hold yourselves back,” Faith smirked. “All the ‘wicked hot and spicy’ tempting you?” she taunted, as Buffy grew crimson. “Guess this whole sitch is beginning to show that Red has more of a dark side than I figured. And we all know how hard you find it to avoid the dark and wicked. Pity she’s not a reformed sinner too. That would just float your boat.”

“If you kissed your mother with that mouth, I’m not really surprised she left. Hell, I’m not surprised that you have no one at all,” Willow stated rather nastily, stepping in front of Buffy and squaring her shoulders, as anger and the need to hit someone … no, make that the need to hurt Faith quickly built within her.
Buffy stared at her dearest friend in surprise. Not a week ago, Willow would have been unable to form any response to such a remark, let alone prevent herself from turning bright red and going into full babble mode. But today she was standing up to Faith and, ‘oh my goddess’, actually threatening her. While Buffy stood crippled by her inability to say and do what she actually wanted to, instead blushing furiously.

Buffy moved slowly around Faith and towards the back of the mansion. Although silent, she never removed her fixed gaze from Faith, while drawing the dark-slayer’s eyes to herself as she traveled. Meanwhile, Willow stood very still, taking a page from Xander’s book and trying to make Faith forget she was there.

Willow’s eyes were drawn to the bag over Buffy’s shoulder. She wondered when she was going to produce any of her weapons, how long would she continue to toy with Faith. It was like watching two cats, with their strange preparatory dance. Each sizing the other up as they prepared to launch a short but sharp and vicious attack.

The strange thing was that Faith seemed to have accepted her fate. She was watching Buffy with an almost fatalistic, dispassionate attitude. Not her usual devil-may-care, I-can-get-out-of-anything, damn-the-world arrogant air. No, this was almost disconnected, as if she knew what was coming, as if nothing could surprise her, as if she was resigned to whatever was about to happen. Willow couldn’t help finding this change in Faith’s manner just a little disturbing. She had been prepared for venting, anger, bravado, some kind of show, some kind of spectacle. She wasn’t sure if her uneasy feeling was nerves or just a strange sort of disappointment.

“Looking good there, B,” Faith commented, as she changed her relaxed her position to lean on the fireplace and spread both her arms along its almost neck-high ledge. “You been working out?” she asked raising an amused eyebrow.

Buffy clenched her teeth, biting back her response as she continued to silently glare at her nemesis. Lowering her shoulder bag onto the stone table to the right of the fireplace, she smiled slightly.

“You had to know this would end here,” Buffy stated.

Faith laughed, “Can’t say I’m suffering from shock and awe.”
“So why begin it?” Buffy asked, watching Willow slowly inch to place Faith firmly between them.

“Something needed fixing and I guess I’m just a fix-it girl at heart,” Faith replied.

“I thought destruction was more your style,” Buffy commented.

“You really need to take your blinders off, B. Not everyone and everything in this world rotates around your opinion of who or what they are,” Faith commented, almost sighing in frustration. “Other stuff happens while you’re busy saving the world, you know. Things change. People change.”

“Good verses evil, black verses white, Hagen-Dazs verses ben&jerry’s. Some things just don’t change,” Buffy stated, feeling just slightly disconcerted by the fact that Faith was continuing to talk to her. She had expected the violence to have begun long before now but not a discussion.

Faith felt as if she had been here before, so many times that ‘deja vous’ just didn’t cover it. “Whatever, B. You’re right. I mean you’re always right, aren’t you? When are YOU ever wrong? When have you ever taken a wrong turn? When have you ever chickened out or taken the easy option? OH! OH!” Faith turned meaningfully to glance at Willow, “Let me think.” Then shaking her head she turned back to Buffy. “Nope you’ve never taken the easy option. You’ve never run away from something rather than face it head on... have you?”

“You don’t know anything about me,” Buffy declared, anger welling within her. She stepped forward. “And why would you? All you’re interested in is dishing out your revenge, getting some payback and reclaiming what you think should have been yours,” she spat, a bit of guilt flashing within her, as she recalled plunging the blade into Faith. “But you don’t have what it takes. Maybe you never did. You certainly don’t know what sacrifice is,” Buffy stated, unable to look at Willow as she attempted to justify her actions. She stepped forward to subconsciously allow Faith’s body to block Willow from her line of sight. “Do you even know what an obligation, what a duty, what a responsibility it is to be the chosen one? All you’ve ever been interested in is kicks and cheap highs.”

“Oh yeah, I’m getting a way wicked high from saving slayer tweedle dee and tweedle dum, and playing your little gay cupid. Kinda always had my heart set on becoming a fruit fly to the two biggest closet oral gymnasts ever,” Faith stated sarcastically, turning to face Buffy.

Willow chose this exact moment to make her move, throwing her arms out as she prepared to surround Faith from behind and capture her upper arms in one swift motion. But her timing was off and as she propelled herself forward, she saw Faith begin to drop to the ground. Following her
target down, Willow missed seeing the small pale white fist that then proceeded to hit her square in the face. “OOOOAwwwww,” she screamed, more from shock than anything else, as Buffy’s upwardly moving fist caught the tip of her nose before bouncing into her right eye socket.

Faith stepped to her right, under the outstretched arm of the now mostly powerless slayer. She had seen the punch coming and avoiding it was child’s play. The yelp of pain from Willow had surprised her though. Faith hadn’t heard Willow move, let alone come up behind her. ‘Damn the girl’s good. I’ll have to keep an eye on her.’

Moving quickly she took advantage of Buffy’s shock and concern for Willow to step behind the former slayer and pull her left arm behind her back, locking it in a vice-like grip before throwing her right arm around Buffy’s throat. “Whoa there B, you’re gonna get some one hurt,” Faith stated. Glancing at Willow’s now eye-watering face, she checked out the new Slayer. “You okay there, Red?” she asked.

“Let her go!” Willow commanded, shaking her head to clear the slight fog that the punch had caused in her right eye, as she moved towards them.

Faith tightened her grip on Buffy’s left arm to produce a grunt of pain. “Back off now. We don’t want anyone getting hurt here, do we?” Faith teased.

“Oh, I think there’s going to be a bit more than hurt happening if you lay another hand on her,” Willow stated, moving forward again.

This time Faith gave Buffy’s arm a stiffer jolt, pulling her neck back as she did. The yelp elicited just the response she was after as Willow froze. “That’s better. Pity Giles’ training appears to have made you deaf. I said Back Off!..... Nice move though, coming up behind me. Shame Buffy, the retired Slayer, messed it up for you.”

“Why are you doing this?” Willow asked, fighting the desire to just rush forward. All she could see through the red haze that was beginning to overtake her was Faith hurting her Buffy. Swallowing and taking a deep breath she tried to focus on the best course of action, rather than allowing her new Slayer instincts to take over.

“Oh, like you’re interested. You’ve both made your minds up,” Faith stated, the resignation evident in her tone.
Buffy was momentarily caught by the tone of Faith’s voice, before the pain in her arm returned to remind her just who was holding and hurting her once again. “Yeah, because your behavior is doing so much to prove us wrong,” she managed to gasp.

Faith swallowed as something inside wished they would just give her a chance. “Like you’d listen.”

“We might,” Willow offered.

“Yeah right, because you snuck up behind me to hear better,” Faith sarcastically commented. “Do I look like an idiot?”

“I plead the 5th,” Buffy commented under her breath.

Faith couldn’t help tightening her grip a little bit to elicit the sharp intake of breath from Buffy that she needed to feel vindicated. But that was all it took to make Willow lose her resolve and snap. Before Faith could smile in satisfaction, Willow was upon her, like a crazy woman, reigning blows down on the somewhat stunned Slayer.

Buffy was tossed to one side as Faith tried to remove herself from Willow’s reach. ‘Where the hell did she learn to… Oaaawwww… Jeez, that really hurt… Red, you’re gonna be in a world of pain when I… Oooowwww,’ Faith stumbled, unable to predict where the next blow was coming from; she threw her arms over her head, suddenly feeling like a child. She had seen that look before and it had scared her then. It was pure undiluted rage. There was no artistry or strategy to Willow’s attack so she couldn’t defend herself from it. Faith needed to get some distance between them.

*********************BtVS*********************

Giles turned the key again, offering his prayers to the god of car engines. But his reward was a single whine and nothing else. “Oh, blast it,” he exclaimed, slumping back in his now immobile period piece. He knew what he had to do and he hated it.

Xander’s many comments about how it was quicker to walk than it was to take Giles’ car flew into his mind. It seemed that today he was doomed to walk to Xander’s and then go through the humiliation of having to ask to borrow his car.
He wracked his brain to think of another way out of his present predicament, when he saw the pay phone.

Buffy quickly moved towards her bag, realizing that this was her chance to level the playing field as she had planned. Reaching into her larger than usual weapons shoulder bag, she pulled out an old friend.

Faith, threw her leg out hoping to catch Willow’s legs and knock her over. All she wanted was to do was to get away from the mad, infuriated woman, not hurt her but what she succeeded in achieving was pain as Willow stomped down on her knee. “Owww!” Instead the dark-haired slayer curled her leg up beneath her as her temper snapped. “Okay now, Red, can’t say you didn’t ask for it,” she stated as she threw her elbow into the newbie Slayer’s gut, causing her to double over before following her elbow with an open-palmed push at Willow’s now lowered head.

As Willow felt the air rush from her lungs and then her neck suddenly trying to collapse into her shoulders, she reeled back instinctively. She was able to put aside her rage long enough to search the room for Buffy, her concern for her best friend overpowering her desire to harm Faith. Seeing her, Willow smiled slightly but then she saw what Buffy was holding and fear quickly replaced her concern.

Faith stretched her shoulders before attempting to stand. “Oh boy Red, you really let the inner Slayer out there, didn’t ya?” Faith taunted – ready, willing and able to teach this newbie upstart just what a Slayer could actually do. When she felt a sharp jabbing pain in her neck, ‘Bitten?’ she thought. But no. Reaching up she felt and pulled at her offending attacker, bringing the cause of her confusion forward… she found herself having to blink before she could see… ‘a dart? A Dart! … oh… Oh… Clever.’ She looked up to see Willow gazing behind her, with a look of relief on her borrowed features. Natural curiosity taking over, Faith struggled to turn so that she could see where Willow was looking, but the world seemed to rush ahead of her, causing her head to spin.

Falling to one side, Faith watched as her sight began to blur. She tried to prevent her fall, but her arms seemed slow, languid. She hit the floor like a crumpled old woman. Looking up, she saw a face move towards her, a smiling face.

“Welcome to MY inner Slayer,” Buffy declared smugly, as her hand still holding the tranquilizer gun dropped to her side.
“Well I never thought I’d have to use this again. But I’m glad we kept it handy,” Buffy commented as she returned Oz’s old tranquilizer gun to her handy carry-all weapons bag, patting it in silent praise as she closed the shoulder bag. Turning, she found Willow roughly dragging the now unconscious Faith towards some very familiar chains. A chill ran over her as she remembered her own experience in those very chains, and thought ‘things really do come full circle, don’t they?’

But her mental wanderings stopped as she saw the expression on Willow’s face. Gone was her loving friend. Instead Buffy saw the rage of a slayer, simmering not far below the self-control and gritted jaw. The new Slayer’s eyes held a murderous glare that sent a chill down Buffy’s spine. As she harshly clamped the irons around Faith’s wrists, a satisfied smile crossed Willow’s face, and for a moment Buffy thought she saw something darker.

“Willow?” Buffy questioned apprehensively. “Are you okay?”

The voice of her beloved drew the new Slayer back from her thoughts of revenge. Turning, she saw her own concerned features and reality crashed into her fast and hard. ‘Oh my god I was going to… What’s wrong with me? How could I even think of …’ Willow shook her head as if trying to shake away the anger and rage she still felt. ‘How could I let myself give in to… that’s just what she would have done,’ she thought as she looked down at the unconscious dark slayer. ‘I’m better than that… aren’t I? I knew she was hurting Buffy and I… I just wanted to… she needed to know that pain… no… I needed to hurt…’ The contradiction between her natural need for measured justification of her actions battled with the need to protect Buffy and punish Faith. ‘Punish? Why would I feel I have the right to punish her?’

“Willow?” Buffy called to her again, even more concerned than before.

“Buffy, I… I just wanted to hurt her. I could have… I saw her hurting you and I… Oh God! Buffy, how do you do it?” Willow asked with sheer desperation in her eyes. “How do you hold it in… all I could think about… so much… anger.”

“I don’t always manage to keep it in. You’re stronger than you realize. That’s why I love… one of the… things I love about you,” Buffy stumbled in her eagerness to console Willow. She looked away in embarrassment as she realized what she had nearly said.

“Right. Because I was so in control back there. Everything Giles taught me just disappeared… flew right out of my head,” Willow responded sadly, momentarily missing what Buffy had said.
Then delayed realization of Buffy’s statement suddenly hit Willow and she felt warmth wash over her.

“You held it in. You know you did. That’s why you’re so wigged. Trust me, I know,” Buffy stated, ashamed to admit that she had not always succeeded in keeping the rage at bay.

“Th… Thanks,” Willow replied, her voice suddenly small and awkward.

********************************BtVS********************************

“Yes, I did fill her up. Yes, she has oil and water,” Giles quietly growled between clenched teeth, as he glared into the handset of the payphone. “As I said, the starter motor appears to have given up the ghost.”

He was a grown man of above average intelligence, with a lifetime of experience and yet these young adults, supposedly under his care, treated him as if he was a bumbling old fool, lost in the dark ages.

“Xander!” He barked, before regaining his external composure. “Whilst I appreciate your attempts at clairvoyant mechanics, what I actually require is a lift to the bus station.”

Giles recalled how his own father had always treated him like a child, commenting on his every action with long drawn out pauses of tired desperation at his choices and decisions. Each sigh would make his heart sink and his inner self rail at the fact that this man just didn’t have a clue who he was or what he was capable of.

“Thank you for your assistance, Xander.”

Giles replaced the handset and sighed with a sense of regret. Why did everything have to be so uncomfortable, so difficult? It galled him beyond belief.

Stomping back to his car, he took several deep breaths. “It seems old chap, that you are destined to be misunderstood and underappreciated in your own lifetime,” he stated aloud to himself, “Well if it was good enough for William Blake, then who am I to complain?”
Opening his car door, he settled down to wait for Xander. Returning to the serious matter at hand, his mind raced ahead to the many things he needed to know and the hundreds of variables he just couldn’t seem to pin down.

“How long is she going to be out?” Willow asked impatiently.

“Not too long, I guess. I mean those darts used to knock Oz out for a good hour or more but she is a Slayer,” Buffy commented, immediately wishing she hadn’t mentioned Oz.

“Right,” Willow agreed, her nerves taking over. Buffy was standing a good ten feet from her and yet she felt as if the walls were crowding in on her. “The gun was a good idea.”

“Couldn’t think of any other way to take her down,” Buffy said, shrugging her shoulders as she knelt to check the restraints that Willow had placed around Faith’s wrists. Somehow this whole ‘full circle’ thing had her fearing that she might later find out that Faith wasn’t chained up at all and it was just some elaborate plan to fool her into letting her guard down.

“Good thinking. I mean, I don’t think I could have b…” Willow hesitated, realizing that she was about to admit that Faith would have beaten her. Faith would have beaten her and then there would have been no one to protect Buffy. She had lost it! She had attacked Faith… given into a moment’s anger… forgetting their plan and putting Buffy in danger. If Faith had knocked her out, there would have been no way that Buffy could have...

“That’s why we plan ahead,” Buffy stated, oblivious to Willow’s internal mental self-recriminations.

Willow nodded, unable to drag her eyes from the stone floor, wishing it would just open up and swallow her. “So what are we going to do with her when she comes around?” she asked, passing the decision-making baton to the one woman she trusted with her life.

“I guess we should get hold of Giles. He’s going to want to question her,” Buffy responded, standing and turning to face Willow. “Do you want me to go out and try to find a payphone?”

A thousand possible dangers filled Willow’s head and she almost yelled “No! I’ll go.” Realizing
her eagerness sounded strange, she added “I’m not sure that I can trust myself around her when she wakes up unless we’re together. It’s probably better if I go.”

“Will, you didn’t do anything wrong,” Buffy affirmed, needing to remove that look of failure from her beloved’s eyes. “You gave me the opening I needed.”

“Yeah, sure. That’s me, stick-to-the-plan girl,” Willow sarcastically replied.

“Some things… Will,” Buffy responded, her voice gentle and whimsical as she attempted to smile reassuringly at her dearest friend. “Some thing’s you just can’t plan for.”

The newbie Slayer was momentarily lost in the eyes that fixed hers and led to a soul she knew too well. Realizing that she was staring, Willow gulped, shyly smiling briefly in reply as she added, “I guess so.”

**************************************************************************************BtVSS************

Cordelia stared out of the bus window into pitch-blackness, waiting for the occasional pair of headlights that would break into the darkness. Knowing that she was heading back to Sunnydale, to a place she had promised herself she would only return to in glory as the well-established movie star or TV actress, she mused at how her life had changed. Had they been right? ‘You can take the girl out of Sunnydale, but you can never take Sunnydale out of the girl.’

She felt a slight knot forming in her stomach as she realized that not only was she returning to Sunnydale, but to a group of people that she had more history with than she cared to admit and whose lifestyle she appeared to have now chosen. Her father would have had a fit if he’d known… or if he’d cared. She’d wanted to be so independent, to make it so no one could ever take her happiness away again but instead she lived a life where her happiness was completely dependent on the success of other people’s lives.

A smile, uncalled for, spread itself across her face closely followed by a small laugh of self-derision. Turning her head back to stare between the seats in front of her, she met a pair of interested, dark brown eyes peering at her from the well-tanned handsome male face of the passenger seated a couple of rows in front of her. Years of watching men, of knowing how they thought, what they wanted, how they often reacted to her looks, told her that his body would be tight, fit and well groomed. His conversation would be obvious in its intent, confident and full of flattery and promise. Yet all she considered at that moment was that she didn’t have time for this, added to her sure knowledge that his mind and morals would be as shallow as the smallest kiddie pool in Sunnydale.
The man smiled, an inviting smile filled with the white teeth and the arrogant overconfidence of a man who never found it hard to attract a woman. He could have been just her type, not that long ago. But now --- she turned away, breaking eye contact, while allowing her peripheral vision to confirm that he had accepted her refusal to engage and turned back into his seat.

As it dawned on her what she had just done, Cordelia threw her eyes to the ceiling. ‘Great, now I’m returning to Sunnydale a born-again virgin. Would it have been so hard to just flirt with the guy?’ she thought, shaking her head. ‘Okay, so I’m a little out of practice, but he was reasonably cute. What am I looking for? A saint with a degree in demonology? And a great wardrobe? Like they’re all lining up to date vision-girl.’ It kind of bothered and confused her that she didn’t care about him and what he thought about her. All she cared about was getting to Sunnydale, the Scoobies … and of course, having a long talk with Faith.

******************BtVS******************

Buffy stared at the woman chained before her. They had so much history - too much. Maybe things would have been different if their relationship hadn’t begun with so many expectations, and then ended with so much disappointment. Was that why Faith hated her? Had she, somehow, failed to live up to Faith’s expectations? Maybe she hadn’t understood what this younger slayer needed from her? She’d felt a connection to Kendra even though they had been so different, from such different cultures - they had shared the same view of what being a slayer meant. But no matter how much she had tried, all her attempts to connect with Faith had ended badly. Why? How had it all gone so wrong between them?

Now here she was making sure that the chains securely held the supposedly reformed Slayer. She found her mind wandering from distrust to the vain hope that maybe, just maybe Faith was trying to help. ‘Giles, I just hope you’re right.’ After all, Faith had been the catalyst. Without the dark slayer’s actions, she would never have known what it was like to kiss Willow, let alone make love to her. ‘Oh right and that’s going so well,’ she thought, as negativity quickly swept over her. ‘Well I’m not falling for it. All I’m going to be left with are painful memories of something I can never have again.’

She moved closer to take in the features of the woman who had become the source of so much guilt, pain, hatred and anger. Faith just wouldn’t, couldn’t seem to leave her alone. Even unconscious she continued to torment Buffy.

******************BtVS******************

“I tried Giles at his apartment. I was wondering if you’d heard from him,” Willow explained to
“Yes,” Anya responded in clipped tones. Unwilling to engage in anything but the briefest of conversations with Willow, as she unconsciously massaged her injured ribs.

“Do you know where he was calling from when you spoke to him?” Willow questioned with more patience than she was feeling.

“I didn’t speak to him,” Anya replied unhelpfully.

“Anya, I need to get hold of him. We’ve captured Faith,” Willow said slowly. “Do you know where he is?”

“No. He called asking Xander to pick him up. His junk heap broke down and he needed a lift. So, of course, Xander has left me alone to help him,” the ex-demon stated, her dissatisfaction at events more than a little apparent. “He should be here with me,” she complained adding, as an afterthought, “resting.”

“Well, when they get back, could you tell him to come to Angel’s old mansion?” Willow asked. “That’s where we have Faith.”

“He should be resting,” Anya repeated.

“Anya! I mean Giles, not Xander. Will you please tell Giles?” Willow asked again, beginning to lose her patience.

“Okay. But I don’t think they’re coming back here. Xander said something about someone arriving from LA. I don’t know why Angel couldn’t drive himself. Xander should be resting and looking after me,” Anya declared yet again.

“Okay, thanks,” Willow responded placing the handset back onto its cradle. “Angel?” She asked the world in general. “Just the one we need! Angel! Can this get any more complicated?”
It was so dark … it felt so heavy … something holding her down … holding her in … keeping her safe from the world. She could feel the sleepy fingers that had invaded her blood stream … her muscles … her head, dragging her mind into dark hidden corners, stopping her from reaching for the faint glimmer that she hoped was daylight.

But she could feel something welling from below … its heat rising towards her … calling to the calm chill within her mind … trying to reach her.

How had she come here? Should she stay? Should she leave? How could she leave? Would the sleepy, heavy fingers let her? She could feel the heat from below becoming tangible … she could almost sense movement, pressure, surging action coming towards her dark corner.

Then a surge of action caused noise … only a slight distant noise … no, a voice … washing over her mind with its familiar tone and sound. Faith strained her mind towards it … reaching to grab all of the sounds … all of the depth and tone … all of the … words.

“You really should have left us alone. Now everything’s changed and we can’t go back,” Buffy mumbled from the stone table where she now sat crossed legged, glaring at the cause of her pain and heart-felt dilemma. She wanted to sing of her love to the world. But she also wanted to protect her beloved because she knew that if her enemies, who were always coming after her, looking for a way of hurting her or stopping her from carrying out her responsibilities … her duty to protect the world … ever found out about her beloved … She didn’t want to think of the danger her love would be in. How could she risk putting Willow in harm’s way? How could she risk ever losing her?

Faith struggled to pull together the sounds … to understand the words. BUFFY! ‘I’m listening to Buffy,’ Faith’s mind screamed as she strained towards the waking world with little or no ceremony, each step closer a rude awakening from the dark corner she had hidden in … No, the darkness that she had been forced into.

“I can’t believe you had the nerve to turn up here again. What do I have to do to get you to leave us alone? A knife in your gut wasn’t enough?” Buffy questioned, her mind swinging from anger to left-over guilt, with the dexterity of a card shark dealing a winning hand. “We were fine the way we were. Why did you have to interfere?”

She couldn’t conceive of never holding Willow again, never feeling her arms, her lips, never tasting her honeyed center again. She could almost feel Willow within her … even now … body switch or not. How could she just deny the longing … the need?
Faith strained against the sleepy fingers … the remaining darkness. She could almost feel them against her flesh, cold and intractable.

Buffy could not pull her eyes from Faith’s unmoving form. There was so much anger … so much regret about what could have been. She knew that they could have made such a great team in the fight against evil … she had eventually warmed to the idea of having someone with her, protecting the world. Instead they had spent their time fighting each other. She had been so happy when she knew that she was not alone in her life as a slayer. Granted she knew that she had her mother, Giles, Xander … and, of course, Willow. But to have been able to have Faith, the only person who knew … really knew … what it was like to be the slayer. She thought that she hated Faith most for ruining that.

But she also knew, deep down in her soul, that she had some responsibility for the fact that what it could have been… had been lost. It should have been a strong friendship and collaboration, beneficial to both Faith and herself, as well as to everyone else, but she had allowed it to somehow go horribly, terribly wrong.

Shaking her head from the pointless land of ‘what if’, Buffy acknowledged that she didn’t need that anymore. Willow now knew. Her dearest now knew and understood the one aspect of her life that she had not been fully able to fathom before. Even though obtaining that knowledge had been accidental and had put her beloved in danger … NO, Faith had put her in danger. It always went back to Faith.

“What do you want from us? Don’t you think if I had the choice I’d go back and change things?” Buffy yelled at the still unconscious woman before her. “But you and I both know that it would all still have ended up the same. You and I are like the ingredients for TNT or worse.”

Giles sat beside Xander in stony silence. He had finally managed to quiet Xander down by telling him just who they were picking up. Giles would be lying if he didn’t admit how much he was enjoying Xander’s stunned silence and goofy expression at the news that he was about to see Cordelia. ‘Ahhh, life’s small pleasures.’

Xander’s mind was full of questions. The predominant one being ‘Why me? All of my failures seemed to be coming home to haunt me. Have I made a wish? No. Have I picked up an amulet? Nope. So what gives?’ The idea of seeing Cordelia again after all this time caused him to feel a certain heady anticipation … followed immediately by the ‘I’m in a relationship’ guilt and associated fear. ‘Oh boy! Anya’s so not going to like this when she finds out.’ She had had a
major wig-out when she had found out about his encounters with Faith. The fact that he had slipped up and admitted that the dark-hair Slayer, another ex, had already visited their apartment had not helped matters at all. Anya had become certain that he had invited the Faith to meet him. Why else would she have been at the dorm room at the same time as he had been? It had taken him a good hour to calm her down. Thankfully Giles had rescued him from the payback lecture that the so-called calmer and more accepting Anya had been about to deliver.

‘How do people do it? How do they deal with ex-es when they just keep turning up in your life? It drove Buffy nuts whenever Angel reappeared. Why can’t your ex just go and stay gone?’ Xander wondered as he headed around the park towards the bus station. ‘What did I ever do to deserve this?’

Giles was still aglow with his small victory over Xander’s prattle as they turned into Park Drive. Absently watching the world go by, a small figure caught his eye. The familiar form took a moment to register – ‘Buffy … no … no … Willow’. “Xander stop the car,” Giles ordered.

“What?” Xander asked, still lost in his own thoughts.

“Stop the car!” Giles repeated forcefully. “Now would be good.”

“Okay, okay,” Xander responded, somewhat hurt by his tone. “No need to get all repeato on me. I heard y … Willow?” He blurted out as he too recognized the familiar figure standing by a payphone, looking more than a little lost. As she turned in response to the sound of his breaks, he clearly saw her Buffy-face and … her EYE!

“I mean, it’s not like I actually believed Angel when he said that you had changed. You had to know that. So why would you come back here? Why would you believe that I would ever trust you? I almost killed you. It just doesn’t make sense,” Buffy puzzled, staring at the top of Faith’s head.

“Honey, you and me - we never made sense. Even ‘Dead Boy’ got that,” Faith whispered, her head still hanging down, as she began to regain her mental equilibrium.

Shocked to have her question answered, Buffy’s legs dropped to the floor. Even though Faith’s apparently disembodied voice had given her a major freak out, her first concern was just how much
“What the hell did you hit me with? An elephant tranquilizer?” Faith asked quietly as she tried to lift her arms.

“Nope, I think it was a cow tranquilizer - for the interfering kind,” Buffy stated.

“Sure kicked ass, whatever it was,” Faith said, trying to shake the heaviness that held her limbs like lead weights.

“If you’re expecting an apology, you’ll be waiting a very long time,” Buffy declared as she stood and slowly moved around to get a better look at her.

“Five by five,” Faith acknowledged. Suddenly realizing they were alone she became defensive and asked, “So why’d you send Red away?” instinctively knowing that Willow wouldn’t have left unless Buffy had told her to go. “If you were after some one on one time with me, you could have just asked. ‘Course you’re not really my type.”

“Thanks,” Buffy retorted, holding back her natural instinct to reach forward and slug her. “That’s one group I won’t cry about being excluded from.”

Faith couldn’t keep herself from laughing out loud at the futility of their conversation. The idea that she and Buffy could have a civilized conversation just wasn’t a possibility in this dimension. They were like fire and oil, the only thing they were good for was creating a blaze.

Buffy was thrown by the sound of Faith laughing, “And just what’s so funny?” she demanded in annoyance.

“We are … it’s always the same,” Faith commented, “I just can’t seem to help myself trying to knock you off your All-American Slayer pedestal. Then you throw a holier than thou one-liner back down on me. Then I retort and vice versa until either the fists fly or something breaks us up,” Faith explained.

“Still kinda missing why that’s so funny,” Buffy responded, a little unnerved by Faith’s rather accurate description of just about every encounter they had ever had since the Mayor had come into their lives.
“Its funny cuz I know, and you know, I’m not going anywhere. Plus getting physical - that other way - just isn’t gonna to happen between us. So sorry to be the party pooper,” she added facetiously. “But you’re not really up to kicking my ass right now and we both know it. But we still follow the script anyway. Bitching funny, if you ask me.”

“And just why would I ask you anything,” Buffy snapped, now irritated and annoyed at Faith’s quiet resignation and acceptance. She had expected more of a fight from her. She really had wanted an excuse … a reason … something to justify her need to beat living hell out of this other slayer.

“Oh, I think you have a lot of things you want to ask me. But you’re not gonna, are you?” Faith asked. “You’ll leave that for someone else. It would fuck with your head to have to ask me for anything, wouldn’t it?” Faith continued “Too bad. But I guess some things never change”

“You should know,” Buffy spat.

“Give it up, B. You’re up to your neck in learning to live with how you really feel and what that really means. Buffy, the all-action-hero, is just plain scared … of how she really feels,” Faith challenged.

Buffy stared at her momentarily thrown off by Faith’s clear understanding of the situation and her fears. “Right this is me quaking in my really expensive boots.”

“Passport to ‘denial’ much. You know I’m right. The thought of talking to me about Willow just freaks you out,” Faith observed. “Seems red isn’t just the color of your true love’s hair; it’s the color you go whenever someone asks about her.”

“You just leave Willow out of this,” Buffy yelled, wishing she could just knock her out again.

“Glad you know who I’m talking about B;” She smirked, “But as this is all about the two of you, leaving her out of it - not really an option. Mind if I skip past the ‘your dad never loved you’ and ‘Red’s mom never loved her’ part and get right to it? So what’s the big problemo?” Faith asked, finally managing to lift her arms, reaching up and brushing back her hair, as a thought occurred to her. “Don’t tell me she was bad in bed … or maybe you…”
“Ma’am, would you like a hand with your bags?” a young pimply-faced man asked.

Cordelia looked at him with an icy stare. ‘Ma’am! When the hell did I become a Ma’am?’ Glancing at her reflection in the bus station doors, she noted her tied up hair, still slightly lopsided from leaning against the bus window. Add to that her makeup free features as her eyes traveled down to her overnight bus trip brown ‘Eddie Bauer’ quilted coat and ‘Prada’ purple scarf. Glaring again at the young man, she sharply advised him “No, I’m fine.”

‘Good god, I can’t return to Sunnydale looking like some quilt stitching, tree hugging fruit loop escapee from the softer side of Sears.’ Why did that sound familiar? ‘How did this happen?’ she asked, puzzled that two of her pricier purchases could, when combined, produce such a bad fashion visual. Heading for the restroom, Cordelia missed the obvious attention her arrival had attracted as she pulled her overflowing bag behind her, thankful that she had packed more than one ensemble in the rush to make her bus.

The dark haired man standing by the payphones, watched her intently, glancing occasionally at the small black and white photo nestled into the palm of his hand. Nodding his head, he turned and made his call. “She’s here,” he stated, glancing at her receding form. “No one that I can see,” he affirmed, as he saw her enter the ladies’ restroom. “Affirmative. No contact. Just surveillance.”

*******************************************************************************BtVS*******************************************************************************

“Chill, B. It was just a question. It’s not like I’m after details,” Faith assured the now somewhat red-faced Slayer. “…unless you’d like to share …” she quickly added with a smirk. ‘I really shouldn’t be enjoying Buffy’s discomfort so much but I just can’t help myself.’

“Like you give a damn about us,” Buffy shouted. “This is all just some sicko and twisted way to get payback. Some lame brain scheme you’ve cooked up to get what you’ve always considered your right - Sunnydale and yourself as its one true Slayer. Add in the bonus jollies you must be getting from taking away my power, embarrassing Willow, forcing us to … You’re sick, do you know that? Can you even guess how sick … using Xander, messing with Giles … Why did you think I would fall for your ‘I’m here to help you guys’ act? That’s all you’ve ever been - an act. Pretending to be the Slayer … pretending to be our friend … pretending to help us defeat the Mayor … pretending you’ve changed … pretending you care …” Buffy’s accusing torrent was halted by the look she’d caught, if only briefly, as she glanced into Faith’s eyes. Sorrow, remorse and, no, it couldn’t have been … regret … apology?

“You really do have your panties in a twist about this. You know someone once told me that I worry too much for a girl for my age. I’d hate to check your blood pressure right now,” Faith
commented, attempting to hide her pain at the truth in Buffy’s accusations and at the pain she heard in her sister slayer’s accusations. “It’s so right in-your-face obvious. You need help, B. You’re in a tailspin over Red and if you don’t get a handle on your ass soon - Hello dirt!”

“Buffy what?” Xander exclaimed, fighting the urge to laugh.

“It wasn’t her fault. Faith ducked,” Willow explained, gently touching the puffiness below her eye. “Is it really obvious?”

“Uh huh. Will, you have a real shiner there,” Xander chuckled, his face full of the amusement.

“Ohhhhh,” Willow wailed. ‘I marked Buffy … no Buffy marked … well her fist … but Buffy had been in control of … my fist … my eye … no Buffy’s eye. Ohhhh, body-switching headache stuff again!’

“I wouldn’t worry. In three or maybe four hours, it should be gone. Slayer healing, you know,” Giles reminded her, “Regrettably it also means instead of it taking hours for an eye to go black … But as I said it will be gone, for all intents and purposes, before morning,” Giles assured her, realizing that despite Willow being an eager student, she was not a Slayer. It took years of training, experience and honed instinct to anticipate a situation and avoid … Oh my. He couldn’t hold it in - a small smile spread, first, across his eyes and then his face as his mind surrendered to the comedy of the sight before him.

“Giles!” Willow accused, as she saw his smile begin. “Oh great, I’m so pleased that you both find my eye … her eye … so amusing. But can we get back to the issue at hand?” Willow asked, her disapproval of their reaction to her injury very self-evident.

“Yes, yes, of course. (cough) Faith,” Giles stated, trying regaining his control.

“Right. Faith,” Willow affirmed. “Well, we followed her to Angel’s old mansion and Buffy eventually knocked her out with the tranquilizer gun. We chained her up and Buffy sent me to call you,” Willow informed them, confident that this knowledge would prompt some action other than laughter.
As expected, her news had a sobering effect on both men, as they both turned to gaze wide eyed at each other before turning back to Willow. “You mean that you left them together? Alone?”

Buffy turned and walked away from Faith, as far as she dared. The anger continued to build inside her, momentarily tempered by the knowledge that she didn’t have the strength it would take to knock Faith around as she really wanted. ‘Where does she get off telling me how I feel? She wouldn’t know an emotion if it walked up and slapped her in the face,’ Buffy fumed, trying to ignore the momentary sadness she had seen in the chained Slayer’s face.

‘Tailspin? I am so not in a tailspin. That’s what a pilot does when she loses any idea which way is up. I know exactly which way is up. Don’t I? I love my Willow. What’s so tricky about that?’ Buffy affirmed ‘Nothing. Except that I’ll probably end up flying solo.’

Faith watched her, seeing no need to add to what she had said. She had obviously given Buffy a lot to think about. But somehow she felt she was still missing something. She’d seen the way they were together from the moment she had met them when she first arrived in Sunnydale. Faith had noticed the searching glances, nervous body language and the continual unconditional support - something she used to be so jealous of. ‘Where’s the jealousy gone?’ She asked herself fleetingly, before acknowledging what she now knew to be true. ‘Cordelia … I need to have a long sit down talk with that woman. Not now, though.’ She reminded herself, bringing her thoughts back to the matter at hand. Something had been missing when she’d watched them, something she had expected to see. Willow had been too careful … ‘Oh damn it! I don’t believe it - they’re both scared!’ “Buffy you need to listen to me.”

Buffy paused as her doubt almost took over, but it was quickly replaced by her permanently targeted anger. “You’re so full of the good advice, aren’t you? Remind me when was the last time you gave me good advice?” she asked, turning to glare at Faith. “Mmmm, let me think. Oh wait! That would be the time we skipped school and you almost got me arrested. So pardon me if I don’t fall for you as cupid’s little helper,” Buffy smiled. “Maybe you should take your own advice … get rid of your non-working lesbian radar and stop getting in your own tailspin about something that you can’t … you don’t know anything about and that has absolutely nothing to do with YOU!”

“B, don’t shoot the messenger. Remember … this wasn’t my message,” Faith reminded her. “Cordelia saw you two being …” Faith stopped suddenly, realizing that why Cordelia had sent her wasn’t really the issue so much as … “Okay so maybe that’s not really the point either …”

“Do you have one?” Buffy asked sarcastically, tilting her head to one side.
“Chill B, I’m getting to the point. The fact remains that you two have a destiny. Anyone can see it. So, maybe two nights of doing the horizontal lambada with Red didn’t shake your passion trees. And then again maybe they did. Maybe you just couldn’t take it … couldn’t accept it for some reason?” Faith queried, just as she caught a movement with the corner of her eye. “I mean, last I recall you were so big in love with the look-but-can’t-touch dead guy,” Faith paused. “Hey, maybe that’s what you’re into! Maybe you like wanting what you can’t have, can’t touch. Maybe you enjoy the ‘will we … won’t we … we could but we can’t’ … Never took you as being into that kinda kink.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Buffy stated dismissively, despite having a pretty good idea exactly where Faith was heading.

“Well, if this is your kink, having an itch you know you can never scratch must turn you on. Umm, ring a bell?” Faith asked. “Angel seemed to be into the same thing. If you ask me, you two made quite a match.”

“No one asked you. Angel and I are over,” Buffy stated emphatically. “As if his taking you in didn’t help to end it, the fact is, unlike you, I grew up.”

“Right. Little Miss I’m-the-center-of-the-Slayer-Universe grew up. I don’t think so. How, exactly, did you two end up under Dracula’s thrall?” Faith retorted. “Was that your mature Slayer head taking the lead or your injured pride ignoring the warning signs. Let’s face it, having a big ole flame for Red … that was cool. It rang your bells - can’t say, can’t do, can’t touch, forbidden fruit - which we now know you dig. Plus she was all straight and boyfriend attached … so she was unavailable.”

Buffy clenched her teeth and moved towards Faith. “So is this the moment, you know, when we have a big old heart to heart? Gee, thought we’d already done that. You decided to leave as I recall.”

Ignoring Buffy, Faith continued “But then what does Red go and do? She up and jumped the fence, didn’t she? Bet that threw you for a loop. I mean, how can you safely be having those juicy naughty forbidden thoughts that you shouldn’t be having and getting your jollies off if your secret flame is now having the same naughty thoughts? Kinda bettin’ that was one hell of a cold shower for you, wasn’t it?” Faith smirked.

Willow stood frozen, with her two companions equally immobile. ‘What did Faith just say? No. She couldn’t have … oh! OH! Why? Why did she … how did she …? Swallow me up! Why doesn’t the earth just swallow me up? Or …’ But nothing else came to mind that could help her
escape, as her mouth opened and no noise came out.

“I remember you two as so mega with the sharing and supporting each other that it made me sick but then the moment you find out that Red’s also got a little secret she’s been keeping … It spoiled the whole thing, didn’t it? Why can’t you two just talk? Just be honest with each other for a change. What are you afraid she’ll say?”

Giles couldn’t move. It was like walking into a church just as the priest asked that all-important question. He felt compelled to stay still … compelled to await the answer … afraid to break the moment … afraid his mere movements, a slight noise would prevent Buffy from responding. His nerves ran within him as he waited for her to speak, honestly unsure what she would say, if she would say anything at all.

Buffy smiled as she walked past Faith towards the stone table where her weapons bag still rested. “So this is when I share how I feel? When I’m supposed to open up and spill my deepest secrets to you,” she smirked as she withdrew the tranquilizer gun and raised it to point at the no longer smiling Faith. “I don’t think so.”

“She’s in love with you,” Faith stated firmly. “And you … you must know how you feel about her. What are you going to do about it?”

Buffy froze, her face emotionless, staring at Faith. For what seemed like an eon she considered answering the question but then she recalled why she was here … why Faith was in chains … why they were all in danger. As she slowly raised the gun, she smiled.

Willow had never felt so mortified, so small, so naked. ‘Buffy’s not saying anything. Why isn’t she saying anything? Goddess, what is she doing?’

Xander’s mind was screaming, ‘Say it, you fool. Say it!’ As he almost willed himself into Buffy’s mind. Glancing to his side, he caught a movement – Willow. She was shaking. Turning slightly, he noticed the paleness of Buffy’s … no Willow’s … ‘Oh hell, she was terrified.’ His heart reached out to her, wishing he could hurry time, wishing he could make her deaf, wishing any wish that would lessen the pain for her.

Willow could almost feel herself shrinking, her self-confidence ebbing away with each excruciating second, each breath, each blink … each millisecond of Buffy’s silence. ‘Why doesn’t she say … something?’
Giles could hold himself back no longer. “Buffy!?”

Looking up, Buffy saw the huddled group by the patio doors. Willow. ‘Oh goddess, she heard. What did she hear? What did I say?’ Faith momentarily forgotten as Buffy saw the pained and pallid face of her beloved.
Chapter 27

Cordelia stared at her reflection, wondering when the slight darkness under her eyes had begun. No one had said anything to her about her looks in so long that she'd almost forgotten about them. She merely assumed that, as always, they were simply there. She examined her face with the self-realization of a woman. Somehow, she had gotten older. So here she stood wishing for the skin tone and youthfulness that she remembered. Pulling at her skin and leaning closer to the mirror to scrutinize her face at a level no one else ever would.

When had she become a woman? When had she stopped being a girl on the verge of womanhood? With everything that had happened to her over the years, she seemed to have missed the transition.

She recalled how essential it had been for her to look healthy and toned. She remembered how clothes had loved to hang off her tight pert body compared to the careful shopping it now took to accentuate her maturing figure. Life had slowly caught up with her. The visions and the pain that accompanied them, the fighting, the irregular eating and sleeping patterns had all taken their toll on her.

Yet Faith still looked as she had back then. Probably Buffy did too. Damn slayer genes! She smirked at herself. Then sighing, Cordelia began to carefully re-apply her makeup, as she wondered why there was such a heady excitement at seeing Faith. She could almost feel butterflies building in her now hungry stomach. What was it about the ex-Slayer that had so gotten under her skin?

Okay, so she missed her baking, their late night chats and shared comfortable silences. But what she was really missing was just having someone there, wasn't it? Or was it truly Faith that she missed?

Shaking her head to free herself of these thoughts, she brought her mind back to the mission she had sent Faith on. And that mission was to bring two women together; two women so in love and yet so blind to their love. She always knew those two "best friends" weren't as smart as everyone thought they were.

She had been viewing it as any other mission, any other puzzle that the Powers That Be asked her to solve. Just another vision. But it had become so much more. It had touched those she now realized she cared about personally. You can take the girl out of Sunnydale, but you can never take Sunnydale out of the girl.

And the fact that bringing these two women together had become so important for Faith, so important that she'd almost leapt at the opportunity, had led Cordelia to believe that the dark-haired slayer had indeed changed and grown. And this was why she, herself, had backed Faith in her insistence that she should be the one to go on this mission. The seer could have gone herself; things might have been simpler if she had. But she had seen such determination and need in Faith's eyes that she had been unable to take this opportunity away from her.

BtVS

"I really think that tranquilizing Faith once should be enough fun for today," Giles commented as lightly as he could, stepping forward placing himself protectively between Willow and Buffy. He had caught the look of pain in Willow's face and realized that she needed a moment to collect herself without Buffy staring at her. "Please put the gun away," he requested, and seeing the equally anguished look on Buffy's face, he resisted the urge to take her to one side and give her a
piece of his mind.

Buffy automatically followed his instructions, as her mind raced trying to recall what Willow could have overheard. 'Why is this happening? What have I ever done to the world except save it? Why is this happening to me?' she mentally screamed to the Powers That Be. 'If I'd known she was listening I would have ... I could have ...' She smiled sadly at her sheer cowardice. 'You wouldn't have said a damn thing, you big coward. But the way she looked ... she was so hurt. Why? Why? What did I say? What did Faith say that could have hurt her so much?' she asked herself. Drawing a blank, she stuffed the gun back into the carry-all and stood staring at the bag in total confusion.

"Hi guys," Faith smiled half-heartedly. "So, who needs saving today?" Faith asked, avoiding all eye contact with Red. She didn't need to look at the Wiccan to know that, right at this moment, the woman was in pain. Buffy had avoided her question. She had been so sure that she could provoke some kind of admission, some acknowledgement from the other "real" slayer of her feelings for Willow but instead she'd only made things worse.

Giles smirked slightly at the bravado of the chained ex-slayer before him. "It would seem that at this moment my dear, you are the one most in need of saving," he stated inclining his head towards Buffy.

"Trust me, Watcher man. I'm exactly where I should be ... where I need to be," Faith affirmed with a sadness that surprised him.

Meanwhile, Xander placed his arm gently around the small shoulders of his body-switched oldest and closest pal and guided her out of the mansion to the stone seat in the courtyard. He could still feel slight trembling from her and, glancing at Buffy, he felt the urge to go over and knock some sense into his other dear friend. And, truth be told, knowing that right now he probably could do so certainly didn't help him to resist the urge. 'How can two people so much in love cause each other so much pain?'

BtVS

Angel slowly slumped into his favorite 'brooding chair' as Cordelia would often call it. He had missed its comforting support and solitude these last few weeks. As he gazed into the dark shadows of his home, he allowed his mind to wander over recent events.

Akvan had been a challenging foe, with sharp fangs, horns, claw-like toenails and deadly tail; he had been quite a sight roaming the Central Cascades of Washington State. Reports of the "monster" by hikers from Seattle and forest rangers had not been at all exaggerated. Unlike with Angel, daylight hadn't prevented his travels and capturing him had proved a lengthy and somewhat difficult job. God, Angel hated the great outdoors.

It had taken Wesley quite some time to uncover that the Persian divinity really only had one weakness. According to the epic poem Shah-Nameh, which he had insisted on reading at length to Angel, Akvan's unique characteristic was that he always did the opposite of what was asked of him.

However, this trait had been quite difficult to use, as word games were not really something that Angel had ever had to consider during a battle and so his first few attempts had proved to be somewhat embarrassing. But he'd finally got the hang of it and now Akvan was chained and being prepared for his journey back to the appropriate era of Persian history, courtesy of a powerful coven in Ventura.

Wesley had finally got them home and left him alone. Angel had his first truly sweet taste of solitude in weeks. So here he sat, staring into the darkness, wishing his mind was blank. But, still
there in a corner of his mind, remained his initial reaction to the news that Cordelia had gone to Sunnydale, to help Faith. He'd felt disappointed. He'd expected her to be here when he returned. He wouldn't admit it out loud but Angel missed her.

He'd missed her no-nonsense approach to him. She wasn't scared of him. Wesley still had a kind of awe/competition thing going on where Angel was concerned. But Cordelia just saw him for what he was. He enjoyed her continual attempts to drag him into the modern world, just as Buffy had. According to Cordy, he was a semi-human being in transit, and Cordy's own personal project. During his battle, he had also thought of Faith, and her apparent need to disobey orders and go against the grain. Angel resigned himself to the fact that Cordelia had a new project.

And so also thinking fondly of the sweet and loyal Willow, he realized that tonight all the women he loved, respected and cared for were in Sunnydale. He felt truly alone and for once it wasn't as comfortable as he had expected.

BtVS

Giles crouched down and ran his eyes over Faith, checking for injuries. Apart from a few slight bruises, he saw nothing to greatly concern him. What he did see was a serious young woman, a tired young woman, not at all the same delinquent girl that had left Sunnydale not that long ago. He couldn't get her to make eye contact with him at this close range and he thought he could almost feel her trying to calm herself in response to his invasion of her space. Acknowledging her discomfort at having him so close, he stood again and moved away. "It would seem that you'll live," he stated, passing his judgment on her condition to the room in general as well.

"Figures," Faith responded, still avoiding any eye contact.

'What is this girl trying to do?' he wondered. He had been struck by the absence of any sign that she considered the events they had just witnessed as a victory. The Faith he recalled would have been crowing at having almost made Buffy lose it. 'There's far more to going on here than meets the eye,' he thought, turning his head to stare at the arched back of his disabled charge. 'Much more.'

Stepping toward Buffy's unmoving form, he took a deep breath. Swallowing his earlier desire to reprimand her for her actions, he simply called to her. "Buffy?" He detected a faint twitch. 'Well, at least she heard me.' "Buffy?" he tried again just a little louder. This time the slight raising of her head acknowledged his call. "Are you all right?"

Buffy slowly turned to face him, unsure what to say, how to respond. She had never felt so lost, so confused, so vulnerable. Mostly because she knew that this situation was somehow mostly her own fault but she couldn't figure out how to fix it. Glancing into Giles' sympathetic eyes, she felt the urge to do something she had very rarely if ever done - she wanted to run into his arms and find the safety, the refuge that she hadn't felt since her father had left. That childish belief that your parent or guardian could make it all better, make the pain go away, with a hug or a kiss, sorely tempted her. She wanted to be small and carefree, to have none of these heart wrenching concerns and fears, none of the responsibilities. But she held back, as she always did, stifling her self-serving desire and need for comfort and solace. Instead she smiled at him weakly before nodding in response to his inquiry.

BtVS

Xander tried to calm Willow by offering her a hug but, resolutely, she twisted away from him and stood up from the stone bench. Holding her hand up, Willow effectively prevented him from either speaking or attempting to hug her again. His stomach clenched in knots. 'My brave little Willow,
why are you being so guarded and unresponsive?’ he wondered, so sure that after hearing what she had just heard she would now finally let it all out and ask for his help.

But Willow stood staring into the mansion at the shadowed figures of Faith, Giles and Buffy, trying to make sense in her mind of what she had heard. What everyone had heard and why Buffy had said nothing? She was sure, as she thought about it, that Faith had been trying to bait Buffy. Why else would she say all that? Faith has no way of knowing how I feel and she probably cares even less. Hell, even I'm not sure what to do with how I feel, I mean I know I love her but what does that mean? Loving someone doesn't make them love you. Xander taught me that. What was I expecting Buffy to say? But Faith saying it out loud. Why? What's Faith after? What's she got to gain?’ She pushed aside the pain of having her feelings made public as she fought to use her logic rather than her emotions. Emotions would not help her at all right now. Although the urge to vanish into Xander's offered hug was tempting, both she and Buffy needed her to figure out what was going on. She could not afford to allow herself to wallow in some teen angst moment fueled by unrequited love and low self-esteem.

As Xander watched her begin to pace around the courtyard, from the corner of his eye, he saw Buffy approaching. His natural instincts led him to stand and prepare to stop her from disturbing Willow. But as his eyes met hers, he saw such confusion, pain and such an earnest silent plea to leave them alone that he backed down. Nodding, he passed her and re-entered the mansion, mentally crossing every finger and toe he possessed.

"Will," Buffy called out hesitantly as she moved towards the pacing figure of the woman who owned her heart, unsure what exactly she was going to say.

Willow froze. She had been in mid-analysis, lost in her own thoughts and feelings. She had just about managed to convince herself that what she had seen was about Buffy and Faith, even though the topic had been her and Buffy. She understood that her pain was simply the result of the knowledge that this was all going to end soon. What she still couldn't figure out was what Faith had been fishing for.

"Will, I'm sorry," Buffy sincerely offered, not at all sure exactly what she was apologizing for but clever enough to know that an apology was needed. She only wished any of her former boyfriends had learned this simple rule.

"Its okay," Willow replied, remaining with her back to her beloved, not sure that she could hold her emotions together, not sure that the sight of Buffy's soul wouldn't cause her momentary clarity and logic to crumble. And then she was so afraid that all of her pain would come tumbling out.

"Will, you have to believe me! I would never do anything to hurt you or put you in harm's way. You know that, right?" Buffy asked, seeking the reassurance that she hadn't just made everything worse. At the same time she re-affirmed her promise to herself that she would always keep Willow as safe as she possibly could. She cared too much to ever let how she felt or what she wanted cause her beloved injury or put her at risk.

"Yeah, I know," Willow assured her, feeling that part of her was lying. She believed that Buffy had to know that she was breaking her heart. Surely the woman she loved couldn't be that blind? How could she not know that what Faith had said was true?

"You're forgiven. Okay?" Willow stated, part of her just wanting Buffy to leave her alone to figure everything out. But part of her knowing that everything she was going through was Faith's fault, not Buffy's. "Look, I know for a fact that talking to Faith is like being in an alternate reality," she offered.
"Tell me about it," Buffy agreed. But she was still concerned that Willow wouldn't turn around to face her, and so quietly she gave in to the need to explain her own confusion. "This whole thing has me … What we shared … was so much more than I … I mean, we know so much about each other now … and it scares me, Will. I don't want things to change. I can't risk losing you."

Willow's heart ached at the emotion in Buffy's voice and she involuntarily turned to gaze into the soul of her best friend. She realized immediately that she'd made a mistake as soon as she saw the raw desperation in Buffy's eyes.

Buffy was lost for a moment as she tried to readjust herself to the sight of Willow's soul in her own eyes. Nothing about this body-switch was getting easier. She wanted to reach out and take Willow into her arms, whisper promises into her ear and kiss all the pain she had caused away, removing her guilty feelings. But she shook her selfish needs aside and she pushed on. "With all this weirdness I'm constantly worried that I'm going to say or do something that will convince you that being my best friend just isn't worth it," she explained weakly. "I need you to trust me, Will. I'm scared that one day you're just going to realize we have nothing in common and that I'm not worth your time and trouble, then you'll decide to get on with your life and leave me," Buffy babbled almost Willow-like.

"That will never happen. You're m … this is my life," Willow assured her, with no doubt in her heart that she meant it. She would be beside this woman for the rest of her life, no matter how this situation ended. "I don't want to lose you either," Willow said momentarily pulling her eyes away.

Buffy smiled shyly. "Gee, this mushy stuff is kinda awkward." Then she gave into her feelings, reaching out to gently take Willow's hand in hers and squeezing it. "Why is this so difficult?"

"What?" Willow asked, not sure what Buffy was referring to and unnerved by the unexpected physical contact. Buffy's skin so warm against her own. She felt so good. Buffy wasn't normally a touchy feely person, especially lately, so that even brief moments of friendly contact had become precious to Willow.

"Saying what I mean ..." Buffy remarked, before quickly clarifying her words, "It's always been so easy for us to talk about anything. But now ... being able to talk to you about, how all of this is making us feel is ... just so hard."

"Unfamiliar territory I guess," Willow commented, throwing a slight grin at her dear friend and squeezing her hand in an attempt to offer comfort. "I mean we've had to cope with ... what's ... happened," she began to gulp, refusing to expand on what she had started to say. "And all that's being thrown at us ... what people will think ... what people will say. And as much as we may want to think it doesn't make and won't make our friendship any different ..." She paused, gathering her courage before quietly adding "the fact remains, Buffy – that it has, it does and it will."

Nodding in quiet acceptance of Willow's wise words, Buffy sighed "Guess we were a bit dumb to think it wouldn't."

"Yeah. Pretty dumb," Willow agreed smirking. "So as right now I'm the natural blond, what's your excuse?"

BtVS

Seeing smiles followed by shy laughter, Giles was lost for a moment in relief. Taking a deep breath, however, he returned to the business at hand and turning towards Xander, he saw fit to remind the young man that he need to be elsewhere, "I believe you still have someone to pick up."
Xander looked at him momentarily confused before recalling that they had been on their way to pick up Cordelia. "Oh yeah. Right," he muttered looking around the mansion in the vain hope that something might rescue him from his fate but nothing materialized to save him from his 'you will re-live your failures with all your ex-es now' destiny. Sighing, he nodded towards Giles and glancing only briefly at Faith, he allowed himself one last look at his two favorite people in the courtyard before heading sheepishly towards them.

As he reached the doorway, he tried to think of something appropriate to say. Thankfully where these two women were concerned, his instinct for self-preservation took over and he reached the conclusion that had escaped many a man over the years - the best option was to say nothing at all. So he passed them, resisting the urge to stare; instead allowing his mind to wander into the realm of utter fear that filled him when he thought about seeing Cordy again after all this time.

BtVS

Buffy laughed out loud as she gazed at her dearest friend and suddenly found herself smiling broadly. Just being this close to Willow, just holding her hand made Buffy feeling like a giddy school girl, full of anticipation, nervousness, her heart a-flutter. It felt wonderful, exhilarating, so sweet and intoxicating. Dear Goddess, how could she give this up? How could she ever think that just having Willow as a friend would ever be enough again? But, how could she put Willow in the danger she knew would come from letting her mean that much to her … from letting others know how she felt?

Willow giggled and sighed, both relieved that her attempt to lighten the moment had worked so well and yet saddened that she couldn't give into the urge to lean forward, to pull this woman that she loved so much into her arms and kiss her. She would have given anything to let her know that Faith had been right on the mark, but fear of rejection held her back as it always seemed to.

As their laughter subsided, neither one seemed ready to separate and Buffy found her eyes drawn to their joined hands. As she gazed down she couldn't help thinking that letting go of Willow's hand would mean accepting that they had to part, and she just couldn't give in to the loss and dull ache that she knew would follow. She absently allowed her thumb to gently move over Willow's skin.

Giles coughed loudly before stepping out onto the courtyard, holding his glasses before him as if some offending smudge was preventing him from putting them back on his face. "Umm … I apologize for interrupting but I felt I should let you know that Cordelia will be here shortly. It would be prudent to try and get a few things cleared up before she arrives."

"Cordelia?" both women questioned, letting their hands fall apart, as Giles' news had the effect of throwing cold water on their gentle moment together.

BtVS

The silence was deafening as Cordelia sat next to Xander. Their brief reunion chat had lasted to the parking lot, coming to a complete stop as Xander pulled onto the highway. Each so lost in the sheer awkwardness of being in each other's company that they didn't notice the black sedan carefully following them at a safe distance.

"So Anya … a demon?" Cordelia asked, eager to talk about anything that would break the tension, even Xander's latest ill-fated romance.

"Ex-demon," Xander stated before he could help himself, only to hear what he thought was a slight laugh from Cordelia. "I'll have you know that some demons are considered valued members of
"Preaching to the choir here," Cordelia stated, recalling her reaction to the revelation that Doyle was a demon. She'd been so angered at his secrecy and his unspoken belief that she would never accept him, that it had taken her quite some time to forgive him for dying on her, let alone giving her his visions.

Xander's eyes grew wide as he realized that Cordy had just agreed with him.

"I just can't figure out how on earth you got a street-smart man-hating vengeance demon to put up with you. I mean, considering your well-known obsession with Buffy and Willow, I'm surprised you haven't been flayed alive yet," she commented unable to resist teasing him. "Maybe I should have a word with her."

Xander mentally shrank at the thought of Anya and Cordelia meeting to discuss him. 'It's like some twilight zone episode - A man walks down a street … it's a strange … Oh my god, I'm gonna die. They're gonna kill me.' He found himself in a full-blown panic as he realized that the women he was bringing together – Anya, Cordelia, Faith, Buffy and Willow; combined they knew more about him than he could really face. Needing to get the upper hand here, he said to his dark-haired passenger "Then again maybe I should ask Faith to help Anya with her tan? I understand she's become quite an expert in that area, hasn't she?"

BtVS

"I'll tell you what you've done. You've taken away my strength, my abilities. You're keeping me from doing my job," Buffy angrily informed her chained counterpart. "You've put everyone, the whole world at risk, especially Willow, with this damned switch. But then again, maybe you're trying to finish what you started when you threatened to kill her."

"That was in the past, B. Let it go. You're so not interested that I'm sorry, so let's move past it," Faith sighed, "You have to believe me, B, when I tell you that I'm here to help."

"Oh, so now you want to be friends, to help" Buffy laughed bitterly. "I tried to be your friend. I welcomed you into my life, into my home. Then you turned on me … on us," Buffy spat accusingly. "But I kept trying, even after you tried to frame me for a murder you committed. The others, they all thought I was crazy to keep trying. Cuz each and every time I tried, you kicked me in the face. You tried to kill me. You tried to take over the world with the Mayor and you even tried to hurt Willow. You tried to kill her and now you've put her in danger again," she stated, clenching her jaw and her fists. "And you want me to trust you?"

Faith turned to look at Red, winking at her before replying to Buffy "Seems to me that Red here's been taking pretty good care of herself as your sidekick. She's been doing it for years, B. Plus now she has insider Slayer know-how and, ooowwweee, let's not forget the Wiccan-fiddling and computer smarts. B, you really should have more confidence in Red."

"You don't understand the danger you're putting her … us in. Let's face it, you probably don't care," Buffy shot at her, more than a little unnerved by Faith's apparent praising of Willow. "This isn't about doing us a favor. This is about something else entirely and we both know it." She glared before turning her back on Faith and stepping away from the woman who always managed to get under her skin.

"Remember when you said I helped you end it with Angel?" Faith asked, desperately searching for a way of getting through to Buffy. "Well, it turns out I did both of you … hell, all three of you a
favor. Only you're running so scared you can't or won't see it. I get it, B. I understand; honest, I do."

Buffy turned to glare at Faith, "You don't understand anything about me. You never did."

"I may understand you better than Red or, even, you do," Faith commented. "B, don't you see what not admitting your true feelings is doing to her ... and to you?"

BtVS

Keeping his car back far enough so that he could the safely watch the dark-haired couple ahead of him, the mysterious stalker felt that their meeting hadn't been as he had expected. He had presumed from the amount of time the woman had taken in the ladies' room that she was meeting someone special but from the minute the guy from the slayer's dorm had arrived, they had really done nothing but keep a very awkward distance ... other than ... well ... he could only describe it as bickering.

He could see their heads moving in high animation as they drove towards the less populated area of Sunnydale north of the park. He wondered where they were going since the Slayer's home was to the south of the park and the magic shop to the east.

All this watching was giving him a headache. His limbs ached for some action, some payback for the large bruise on his right cheek and his mind screamed for something to keep his first visit to the Hellmouth from being a complete failure.

BtVS

"You know, for the longest time I was angry with you," Faith commented in response to Buffy's accusations that this was all about revenge. "It started out as something small, like most things do. Sunnyhell was supposed to be my town, with my demons, my Watcher, my time to shine. The whole thing should've been mine, maybe even my own Scoobies. Except the resident Slayer wasn't dead like she was supposed to be. Nope. Saint Buffy, mistress of all she surveyed, had beaten death and I was just supposed to join the fawning masses. Not my usual style but I gave it a try. I was just warming up to Sunnydale, to being number two of the Chosen Two, to the synchronized slaying. But I was having trouble dealing, I was bummed out always having to step aside and play second fiddle to you, to Red and the Scoobies. And then I ... I accidentally killed the Mayor's assistant," she said quickly and quietly. "And it all fell apart. I really and truly screwed everything up, didn't I?" she laughed sadly, glancing at Buffy. "Everything just got so messed up, so wrong. And then you, little Miss Perfect Slayer, you stabbed me. Turns out Saint Buffy had a pair of cajones after all. Who would've 'thunk' it ... hmm? I still can't believe you really stabbed me," Faith commented, losing her train of thought momentarily. She smiled sadly and shook her head as she recalled that fateful day.

Buffy found she couldn't drag her eyes from Faith, her eyes drawn, by the resignation in the other slayer's voice, to the chained woman's abdomen where she remembered that damn blade just sticking out. It had seemed so unreal, as if a dream. But it hadn't been. Like Faith, she still couldn't believe that she had actually stabbed the other slayer either.

Willow stared at her beloved, willing her to say something but all Buffy seemed to be able to do was to stare at Faith. "You were trying to kill Angel," Willow offered in Buffy's moral defense, stepping closer to the Slayer to add her physical support.

A noise caught Giles' attention and turning his head, he saw Xander and Cordelia quietly entering from the courtyard. Catching their eyes, he motioned them to stay where they were. Xander put a
Yeah, maybe I shouldn't have messed with Dead Boy. But by that time I was doin' whatever the Mayor wanted. I thought he was making me part of something important," she admitted, almost childishly embarrassed. "You know, from the moment I met you I've always wondered if you had the same dark trigger inside you that, if pushed, would make you kill someone. And you did… didn't you, B? I sure found it. Seems slaying isn't all we shared," Faith sighed, her eyes drooping as she recalled how she used to love letting the darkness overtake her. "We all know I'm no hairy-armpit, tree-hugging feminist, so when I say that I have only ever met four women with the kind of courage you have or used to have, you'll know I mean it," she stated, as her mind drifted briefly back to LA.

"That was meant to be a compliment, right?" Buffy asked, subconsciously wondering who the other four women were.

"Yes and no," Faith smirked, tilting her head. "Cuz now, you've been knocked down a peg. But maybe not just a peg though, hmmm…? You've pretty much had your safe little world pulled right out from under you and instead of sucking it up and doing what you know is right, you're just letting yourself fall all the way into Achy-Breaky-Heart-Hell, like some dumb-ass starry-eyed school girl. Damn it, B," Faith accused "You know better. How can you two be such cowards? You let this happen and the scar won't ever heal. Red, you're the brains of the outfit. Work it out!" she demanded of Willow. "I can't believe you're both being so dumb. If you let this slip through your fingers, it'll stay with you forever, like a great big ugly tear in your soul. We all get what we deserve, B. YOU let this go wrong and you're gonna be paying forever. You'll always be trying to put it right, never knowing if you can and always wondering what your life would have been like if you had. And what's worse – you won't be the only one who'll be paying the price forever."

"So you're here to save me from myself? How sweet," Buffy stated, trying to inject disbelief and annoyance into her words. But somehow she couldn't quite manage it. Something about what Faith had said, the way she had said it, had hit where she lived, where she loved. Buffy found herself checking where Willow was, wondering what she was making of all this. Somehow knowing that there was a clock ticking out there, that with each moment of hesitation it was crawling towards her midnight … towards 'too late', the thought made her waver. But as she stared at Faith, she couldn't get past her instinctual distrust. "Picturing you as the hopeless romantic best friend to the lovelorn, as our own personal cupid is almost as weird as watching you bake cookies for Cordy. Where's all this coming from Faith? What's this really about?"

"You may not be able to believe it, but I'm here to save you from something far worse than just yourselves, from someone who could hurt you in a way I never could. Trust me, you don't want to end up the way everybody said I would," Faith stated quietly, "Alone, a loser, dead. Maybe it's too late for me, B. God knows I deserve it. But that's no reason for you two to be so scared. You can do this. You still have a chance. You still have choices. You still have a way out."

Cordelia's heart ached for the chained dark-haired woman. She longed to move forward and make her presence known; fulfilling the need she felt to let Faith know she was there for her, that she wasn't alone in this. But she could see that Faith was getting through to them. So as difficult as it was, she held herself back.

"I have to say that I, for one, am a little uncertain how a curse which appears to have only one way out, can be seen as a choice?" Giles absentely questioned, immediately regretting speaking aloud and breaking into their conversation.

"Yeah. What's with the curse?" Willow demanded, jumping into the fray. "The body-switch! Why
push this whole thing on us? What made you think that we … how could Angel know … how could they think … that I feel … that Buffy could feel … that we … feelings for each other … like that? Where did that come from … what? Why?" Willow babbled, immediately wishing she hadn't started as she caught Buffy's sharp intake of breath.

"Honey, anyone visiting the planet of 'Buffy and Willow' feels like they've been watching Brokeback Mountain meets Beaches. It's like watching a train wreck for God's sake. What you two need is to sit down for a truth or dare with Dr Ruth," Faith gibed, relieved that Willow was finally talking to her. "You're stuck in a rut, ankle-deep and safe. Both of you are so afraid to change anything, risk anything. You've gotten too comfortable. And friendly advice from your favorite Queen C and delivered by yours truly, the slayer you love to hate, just wasn't going to do it," she stated, unsure that even now she was getting anywhere. "You're not that big on the listening to your Watcher. So what chance did we have?" Faith commented nodding slightly towards Giles, who swallowed and looked away. "Let's see, if talking isn't enough to get you two lust bunnies together – then I don't know what is. Oh wait. But I do - what about making you two repressed Ellens walk in each other's sexually bottled-up hot little bods for a bit and watch the fireworks?"

"You watched?" Willow screeched, before she could stop herself, unable to believe what she had just heard, her mind a red haze of fury and embarrassment. Willow stepped towards Faith, yelling at the chained and obviously amused slayer, as she felt the heat beginning to rise both in her cheeks and, more frighteningly, in her current slayer blood. "How could you … that's sick … SICK! When did you … even …? Even Xander wouldn't … okay – he'd think about it, but he wouldn't dare do it … PRIVATE! Sooooo not for watching. There was … there were … circumstances. We were … it was about…" She paused trying vainly to remember what those two wonderful nights had been about. 'OH, yeah'. "Trying to break the curse … circumstances. Private! And did I say - NOT FOR WATCHING." she finished, now almost within punching distance.

Cordelia just couldn't hold her laughter in and she howled as five pairs of eyes flew to her.

BtVS

The mysterious stalker had watched Cordelia and Xander enter the mansion, somewhat bemused to discover their destination. The last place he had expected the pair that he had followed from the bus station to end up had been at some run down mansion, which looked like it had been left over from the Rocky Horror Show.

He had carefully followed them around to the back of the manor and into the courtyard. Glancing in, he could hardly believe his luck. They were all there, the entire group from Sunnydale, in a nicely deserted part of town. But then he saw Faith chained to the fireplace and he beat a hasty retreat back to the street.

Glancing around, he recalled that as he'd driven down the road earlier he'd noticed a payphone. Rushing towards it, he lifted the receiver and dialed, dropping his coins into the slot. "Sir, I have their final location. But we may have a bigger problem."

BtVS

Cordelia strode forward, throwing a quick reassuring smile at Faith as she turned to Giles. "Are those really necessary?" she asked, gesturing towards Faith's chains.

"For the present, I would have to say yes," Giles concluded, glancing at Buffy. "Thank you for coming. Maybe now we can get a few things cleared up."

"I'm sure that's exactly what you'd like," Cordelia said, raising her hand to him. "But I want some
time alone with Faith first," she stated, meeting Giles' questioning look with one of sheer
determination. "I need to talk to her. **Now.**"

He sighed, considering his options. It was probably a good idea to give Buffy and Willow a break,
some time to think. Maybe some of what Faith had said would finally sink in. He had been quite
impressed and had felt a sort of pride at the observations Faith had made, but her use of a curse to
bring them together still bothered him greatly. Maybe Cordelia was the person she would talk to;
explain why she had used the curse, where it had come from and why. Going on instinct, he
nodded his agreement before turning to the all too-quiet duo and gesturing that they should move
towards the back of the mansion.

Buffy gave him a questioning look of protest but the sight of Willow quietly doing as Giles had
requested broke her objection before it began and she followed the woman she was far more
concerned about.

"You'll excuse me if I don't go far," Giles commented, but Cordelia ignored him as she moved
towards her chained friend.

Xander stood awkwardly, not quite sure where he should go. He really wanted to give Buffy and
Willow some space but aside from hiding in the courtyard he couldn't think where he could go.
Giles, seeing Xander's predicament, gestured for him to follow and headed towards the old
entrance hall of the mansion's large living area. The Watcher was positive that in doing so they
would be giving both pairs of women more than enough privacy without letting the dark Slayer out
of their view. The sight of the door to his left and the memory of all that had happened to him in the
room beyond caused a chill to run down the watcher's back, making him question his choice of
relocation.

As they reached the back of the living area, Buffy reached for Willow and turning her, she placed
her hand gently under the slightly red-faced chin of her beloved. Lifting Willow's slightly red face
she smiled into her eyes. "We'll be fine," she reassured her before doing something she had been
longing to do. Buffy pulled her beloved into a warm and tender embrace, closing her eyes and
allowing herself to feel the warmth of their bodies.

Willow gave into the need for Buffy's warmth, her closeness, her breathing and, gasping in relief,
she threw her arms tightly around the woman she loved so much that it was beginning to hurt.
Everything had been brought up to the surface. She had seen what she thought was pity in Faith's
eyes. She pitied them. The idea that anyone, especially Faith, could feel like that about them had
thrown her. And then she'd gone and opened her mouth and asked or tried to ask the one question
she had promised herself she wouldn't ask. The answer had been … too … she couldn't deal with
what it might mean. But, if they'd been watched … Cordelia's laughter had washed over her like
ice, numbing her mind.

**BiVS**

**BiVS**

*Any* glared at the mansion, somehow believing that just the right thought, just the right phrase
would make it crumble around its current inconsiderate occupants, leaving them standing in the
ruins and knowing exactly how pissed off she was with them. Where did they get off treating her
like she was a nobody? She missed the respect and recognition her powers had once brought her.
People had sought her advice. She had often been admired and envied by lesser demons. But
Xander's little group – the Scoobies. Bah! They treated her as an annoyance. Even Giles who, okay,
had a little more class than most, often dismissed her very helpful insights.

They had allowed Willow to injure her and then, having promised to care for her, they had left her
alone. Giles had taken Xander away from her. She'd sat stewing at first but Willow's telephone call
had just pushed her over the edge. 'What am I - his answer machine? I don't think so. I have rights. Xander had explained about rights during Planet of the Apes. If guys dressed in really bad fur coats can have them so can I’ she had decided before storming out of their apartment and heading across a part of town she would normally have avoided. Her anger was so evident in her striding form that those who had noticed her had given her a wide berth.

Taking a deep breath, she scrunched up her lips and squinted at the mansion in anticipation that she was about to let off some major steam and make them realize that she was a real person … that her needs were just as important as Buffy's or Willow's. Xander had stopped seeing to her needs because of Buffy and Willow, and the ex-demon was starting to get pretty irritable. Anya squared her shoulders and strode forward, her eyes so fixed on the heavy front door that she didn't notice the agile black shapes of men moving swiftly from both her right and left.

"What is it with you guys and bondage?" Cordelia quipped, shaking her head in mock shock as she locked relieved eyes with Faith.

"Wicked thrills, C. You should try it some time," Faith responded breaking into a beaming smile, unable to hide the sheer joy at seeing Cordelia.

"Yeah, that and letting someone drop hot wax on me are so not on my list of things to do before I die," Cordelia responded, feeling a slight warmth beginning in her cheeks at some of the thoughts that had momentarily nudged at the edges of her mind as she kneeled down in front of Faith. "So is this part of your cunning plan then?" she asked reaching forward and touching the manacles clamped around Faith's wrists.

"Not so much. But it has its upside. As long as I'm like this, they have to listen to me. I think I'm kinda getting through as long as B doesn't tranq me again," she noted.

"Tranq you?" Cordelia questioned, raising a confused eyebrow.

"There was a whole 'let's use a tranquilizer gun on Faith' episode. Kinda clever really … the downside being a totally fuzzed-up head and just getting the feeling back in my toes." Then seeing the concerned look on Cordy's face, she added "I'm five by five."

"Sure," Cordelia commented, giving Faith a look that said 'who do you think you're fooling'. "So exactly how far along are we?"

"Ooooh, still pretty much a three-ring circus but they're definitely not in the stands anymore … I can't think why they thought it was about sex, not my fault – honest," she grinned. "Well, let's just say that it all opened an unexpected door. They've played the pelvic duet, if you know what I mean," Faith said winking at Cordelia suggestively. "But damn it, C, that bitching denial fest of theirs is still in play – Go figure," Faith sighed. "You'd think that finally sleeping together would have set off some bells and whistles for the dumb duo. You know, a couple of orgasmic moments of clarity. I mean, I always had Red figured as kinda a closet sex kitten. With all that bottled up reserve and shyness, I was sure that she would be wild in bed. But hell, maybe it is B and her damn 'I can't do anything simple; everything has to be difficult' way of doing things."

"Okay, I think I know what you're saying. That is, I hope I do and I'm afraid to ask about the rest," Cordelia sighed in mock school teacher mode. "It seems that there's something wrong with the curse."

"You think?" Faith responded laughing.
"No, Faith. I really mean it", the Seer added more seriously. "Giles thinks there's something wrong with it. That's why he called and asked me to come."

"Giles called you?" Faith asked.

"Yeah, he seems to think there's more to the curse than we think," she stated, hating herself for holding back what little she knew and for doubting that Faith wasn't being completely honest with her.

"Like what?" Faith asked deeply concerned, her light-hearted tone gone.

"I don't know. Where was it you said you got it?" Cordelia asked as nonchalantly as she dared.

"The guy came highly recommended," Faith responded defensively, suddenly feeling as if Cordelia was quizzing her. "Why?"

"By who?" Cordelia fished.

Faith sighed before breaking eye contact and almost whispering "You're so not gonna like it."

"Faith!" Cordy pleaded, willing her to tell her the truth. She needed to know that Faith would tell her the truth. She needed to know that they could trust each other; that the friendship she had felt building over the past month wasn't just a fake, like so many before had been.

"A lawyer, the guy who … the guy who worked on … aah … the Mayor's estate," Faith whispered, cringing in anticipation of the screaming she was sure was coming.

Cordelia took a deep breath and held her temper. Now was not the time to go ballistic. She'd have to save that for later. "Would that be the same lawyer who tried to get you to kill Angel?" she asked, much too quietly for Faith's liking.

Faith nodded, dropping her head even further and scrunching her face up in anticipation of the blow-up.

"And why would you think that a recommendation from … That Firm would be a good thing. Just what part of your 'I wannabe blond brain' were you using to make that leap?" she spat, unable to hold her anger back.

"Hey …" Faith retaliated, in automatic indignation. "I used them to get what we needed. No one else had a contact who could help. I made sure. I watched that backwoods hick. He only cursed them to swap bodies for a month or until they confessed their love for each other. I read the wording … I checked. I was in control of the situation. That's all there was."

"Oh, so now you're a Lit major with a minor in Curses. Faith, he messed around with the wording. You read what he wanted you to read," Cordelia explained in exasperation. Then seeing the confusion in Faith's eyes, she gently added "Honey, they played you."

BtVS

There has to have been a time when Buffy didn't look at Willow like that but Xander couldn't recall when it was. He remembered the sheer panic in Buffy's face when the Mayor and Faith had taken Willow or the look of loss he'd seen when Tara had come into their lives. But, exactly when he'd figured it out escaped him.

Listening to Cordy and Faith, (mainly because he couldn't help himself) he was less shocked than
he thought he would be at Faith's observations regarding his two best friends. And a lot of what she was saying kinda made sense. Damn it. Cordelia's acceptance of it all was a real eye opener for him, though, and he was more than a little suspicious of the way she was talking to Faith, and the way they were looking at each other as well. He'd expected Cordy to throw around some sarcastic put down about his friends, some lame play on words but she'd actually seemed concerned for them. It all gave him the heebie-jeebies.

But, what really bothered him was why - if they'd all had these suspicions, why had no one had ever raised the subject. Maybe just like him, they had doubted what they thought they were seeing or like him they'd put it down to hormone fueled fantasies. But why would Cordy be … No. He shook his head to rid himself of that fleeting thought. It must have happened so gradually that the realization had been mostly subconscious - that had to be the 'why'. He had to face it – even he had needed the curse and Faith to open his eyes to his subconscious suspicions.

Glancing over at Willow and Buffy, his heart sighed to see them hugging. Lately they tended to keep such a respectable distance from each other, much more than usual, currently all big on the no personal space invasion. But things were changing and he liked it. And Xander couldn't help allowing a moment's concern to surface - that this would somehow change their relationship with him.

Recognizing a brief moment of jealousy, he grinned only to have his thoughts interrupted by the sound of loud knocking and a familiar voice yelling his name.

"Xander! I know you're in there. Xander!" Anya yelled from the other side of the mansion's front door, long ago sealed shut.

Giles stared at him in amusement, annoyance and expectation.

"Xander, answer me. Let me in," Anya called, her voice raising an octave. If he could have seen through the door, he would have seen that she was stamping her foot in irritation.

"I can't. It's sealed shut," he replied, annoyed that she had tracked him down. What did she think he was up to?

"Well unseal it. Now! I need you to come home. You left me," she stated plaintively, causing Xander to sigh in resignation.

"Okay, okay. Go left and 'round to the back, there's a lane that leads to some stone steps," he explained, unwilling to leave and give up his ringside seat.

"Why can't you just come out?" she asked, aggravated that he wasn't rushing to her side

"Anya, just come around back, and I'll explain everything," he responded, certain he'd heard her huff in frustration.

"Okay, but it better be good. You should be at home resting and looking after me," she reminded him as she moved from the front door.

Giles smirked, not an expression that often ran across his controlled features. But watching Anya and Xander often made him more than grateful he was still single.

BtVS

Buffy couldn't let go. She didn't want to ever let go. They had been holding each other for what seemed like an eternity but an awkward stillness had come over them and the warmth of the
"This feels a little strange," Willow confessed, suddenly feeling very shy and uncomfortable.

Buffy sighed and gave Willow a quick squeeze, her mind overflowing with all that Faith had said. "I know. But ever since … I mean with all that's happened … all we've experienced … I've thought about … us … so much that … it's begun to feel real to me, Will. More real than I ever dreamed …"

"It has?" Willow asked, finally pulling herself from their embrace as she babbled to herself 'she's thought of me? Dreamed of me? How has she thought of me? What has she dreamed? Ever since we … Oh! … THAT made her think of me!' She mentally blushed and continued to babble unable to comprehend why this information made her even more nervous and shy. "Really?"

"Really," Buffy assured her, trying to ignore the empty feeling in her arms. Lifting her head, she smiled to find Willow also gazing at her with eyes as big as saucers. "Do you know," she asked tilting her head, to gaze at Willow's face "that you look totally petrified in my face?"

Willow rolled her eyes, wishing she wasn't so transparent. "Yeah, I guess I am," she acknowledged.

"Me too," Buffy stated laughing nervously. "Downright terrified," she explained gulping as, despite all her misgivings, she stumbled towards what she knew she wanted to say … what she needed to say. All the while screaming at herself to 'take it slow, don't scare her off. You can do this.'

Willow raised her head, touched by the sheer sincerity in Buffy's voice. She allowed relief to flood over her.

"This isn't about Faith. I need you to know that, Will," Buffy began, uncertain why talking to Willow was suddenly more frightening than any fangy night crawler she'd ever met. "This isn't about the damn curse or the end of the world, Will. Hell, I don't know … maybe all that's happened has helped me get here sooner than … I would have. But you repeat that to Faith or Cordy and I'll throw you into a bucket of tadpoles," she threatened smirking.

"Okay," Willow responded, unsure where Buffy was going with this. "I think I've got it. Not about the curse, the end of the world or Faith. Never breathe a word, especially to Cordy or Faith," Willow repeated. "No tadpoles, please," she pleaded in a vain attempt at light relief, her voice almost breaking as her stomach began Olympic somersaults. Her mind had finally pulled the conversation together and what Buffy was talking about suddenly became scarily and wonderfully obvious! She didn't dare wish for what she thought Buffy was going to say. She just waited for Buffy to continue.

Buffy took a deep breath and began "I would really like the chance to … for us to … for me to get to … being so close to you … I mean, what we've shared … I think maybe there's a possibility that we could … I'd really like to … Not in that way! I mean that way was nice…" Buffy blushed and coughed. "More than nice … Mind blowing." Buffy gulped again, wondering if she'd ever get it out. She couldn't believe that now that she had finally decided what to do, finally decided to be honest – that she couldn't find the words.

Willow stood stony still, afraid to move. She'd considered not breathing but air had become an issue.

"What I mean is … I never thought that I would stand a chance … I mean you're so clever and smart, so beautiful, so brave… and if you don't want to … I'll understand … I'm probably not your type…. but I … I'd like to get to know you better … that is … not in a friends' way but in a … Not
that we're not friends … because we are … and always will be best friends", Buffy continued her Willow-like babble. "But in that … well, in this way," she said and giving up on words for a moment she reached forward to gently stroke Willow's cheek with the back of her hand, before leaning in and quietly adding "You know…. like da … Dating?"

"Dating?" Willow whispered awkwardly, unable to stop herself from nervously laughing at Buffy's choice of words, as soft flames burned her caressed cheek, only to see her own face blanch in an all too familiar way. Willow's hand instinctively went to her beloved's, cupping it gently against her face. "You want to … date me?" Willow asked, her tone as bewildered as she. All she could do was blink, her mind in total disbelief. It did not compute. Those weren't exactly the words she had been hoping for, but heck … not bad … no, not bad at all …

"Yeah. Is that the wrong word or something? Is there some special word or terminology that I'm supposed to be using?" Buffy asked, her face now completely red. She tried to recall if Willow had ever used another word to describe the relationship she had had with Tara. She had never felt so like a fish out of water. Why wasn't there a book or a class? Yes, she could have taken a class – 'Lesbian speak for the clueless', something idiot-proof.

"No," Willow assured her, smiling as her heart seemed ready to burst at the meaning behind Buffy's words. "Dating is just fine. I just can't believe I'm … that you're asking … I mean you are asking, right? … You want to date me?"

"Yes, please" Buffy replied in a very small voice.

Willow's heart soared at the look she saw in the eyes of the woman she loved, and then the world seemed to explode before her, a blinding white light that screamed at her. Then she heard the explosion, so loud, so deafening, that throwing her hands up to her ears she closed her eyes. The pain was so sharp and falling to the floor she thought that her slayer-sensitive eardrums might shatter.

BtVS
Faith could still hear and feel the ringing in her ears as the explosion assaulted her senses. She’d caught sight of a figure dressed in black by the courtyard doors mere seconds before the world had been drowned out by a blinding white light and deafening sound. Straining at the chains, her slayer instincts told her that bad stuff was about to hit the fan and she needed to get free.

Deep male voices broke into her mind as the slayer healing allowed her to recover from the traumatic effects of the blast. “She’s at the back” Faith heard one of them say and then the sound of many feet on the mansion’s stone floor.

Feeling Cordelia’s hand tighten around her wrist, she suddenly recalled that she wasn’t alone. “C, you okay?” Hearing a grunt, she added “They’re after B. Where is she?”

“What?” Cordelia yelled, trying to regain her hearing.


“At the back … I think,” Cordelia replied shaking her head in the hope of removing the pain in her ears and the camera-flash effect that was fogging her eyesight.

Faith saw more dark shapes passing by her, moving towards the rear of the mansion. She strained at her chains, the need to do something overwhelming her. This was her party and she hadn’t invited anyone else. “Buffy!” she called out, somehow feeling that by yelling out her counterpart’s name she could at least warn her and help matters. “Someone, get me out of these fucking chains!!” she screamed in frustration, just as she noticed someone moving in front of her. Throwing out her leg, she heard that satisfying sound of him falling.

Xander had closed his eyes in frustration at Anya’s behavior just as the flash and bang had hit. Having been deafened, instinct had kept his eyes closed until he heard the sound of running feet. Realizing something was terribly wrong, he pushed himself forward, only to be grabbed by a strong pair of hands and thrown backwards. Glancing up, he saw the familiar black uniform of his earlier attackers. ‘Where had they come from? The courtyard … oh god, Anya?’ but just as he was about to anxiously search for his girlfriend, he heard Faith call out, in what sounded like fear, “Someone, get me out of these fucking chains!!” he screamed in frustration, just as he noticed someone moving in front of her. Turning towards the fireplace, he saw Cordy crumpled in front of Faith, still holding her ears and vainly shaking her head.
For some strange reason he’d expected to see the dark Slayer gazing down at Cordelia but Faith was pulling and struggling with her chains, eyes fixed firmly on the back of the mansion. Turning to follow her gaze, he saw three big men moving towards Buffy and Willow.

Although Buffy was on her knees, he was reassured when he saw her lift her head, as they came towards her. But then Xander saw the expression of sheer confusion and panic on her face. ‘Oh God, NOoooo’ his mind screamed as he remembered that he was actually looking at Willow.

Willow gazed straight ahead, trying frantically to comprehend what had just happened. One minute Buffy was asking her out and the next she had been blinded and deafened. As her eyes cleared, she saw three men heading towards her. Fear overtook her, as she heard Faith’s desperate voice calling out to Buffy. She glanced to her side to see the crouching form of Buffy and her intense need to protect what she had only just found overpowered her fears.

Buffy’s world had been turned inside out. Her nervous anticipation of Willow’s response to her request for a date had been shattered as she was first blinded and then deafened. Instinct made her drop to the ground, all romantic thoughts driven from her mind, as her senses were assaulted. As she’d buckled, her knees had hit the ground with such force that she was certain there would be yet more bruising. ‘How does Willow cope? WILLOW!!’

Ignoring the searing pain in her ears and her temporary blindness, she tried to reach out and find Willow as her hands fumbled in search of her beloved. “Willow!” Shaking her head she tried to clear her vision before attempting to open her eyes. She needed to know what was going on, where Willow was, that she was safe.

Faith saw that the guys moving towards Buffy and Red were splitting up as another three positioned themselves around the room to secure their retreat.

Glancing towards the old hallway, she saw Xander turning his head towards Buffy and Willow but what caught her attention was the sudden look of concern and intensity that crossed his features. Knowing that he was about to throw himself into the fray with little or no hope of winning, she was filled with both jealousy at her inability to do the same and concern for him. And somewhere inside, she was unable to stop herself from resenting the fact that no one had ever done that for her.

A slight moan caught her attention and she looked down to see Cordy beginning to raise herself up from her partly fetal position.

What followed was chaos, as Faith watched Willow trying to regain her feet as two of the three men launched themselves at Buffy. Hearing a scream, the dark-haired slayer glanced to her right to
see Xander being thrown to the ground.

She saw Giles was still huddled on the floor as Xander tried to get up again. A body flew past her and, turning back, she saw Willow, having dispatched one of her assailants, turning on the two men now trying to manhandle Buffy to her feet. “Go, Red!!”

Although both Slayers had the intense desire and almost physical need to fight these intruders and protect the others, each ached at her inability to do so. And so Faith physically prevented by her chains and Buffy magically removed from their usual Slayer strength by the curse, found themselves in the same uncomfortable position. Their eyes met in silent but mutual understanding across the room. This sucked big time. But neither one was going down without a fight!

Faith’s jaw dropped with guilt as she saw Buffy giving her all as she tried to fight them off even though she no longer had her slayer abilities. Her attempts were nothing but an annoyance to the men. The dark-haired slayer yanked at her chains again as Willow grabbed one attacker by the scruff of his neck and simply pulled him off her best friend, kicking out at his partner’s knees. She then launched into them with the same ferocity Faith had recently experienced herself. There was no technique, no style, just brute force. She could almost taste the raw anger in Willow.

Cordelia slowly stood up and glanced to her left, checking on Faith and having done so she took in the scene. Instinctively evaluating how best to help, she realized that they needed to get Faith unchained. Glancing back towards Giles, she made the assumption that the Watcher would have the keys and she launched herself towards him. However an arm appeared from nowhere and yanked her back by the neck of her blouse. Clutching her throat, she fell to the ground.

Xander saw Cordy being thrown to the floor and his male instinct to protect took over as he stood and yelled at the curled-up Watcher. “GILES! Get up damn it!” Ducking beneath the fists he knew were heading his way, he stepped forward dropping his head to barrel into his attacker.

Faith noticed Cordelia starting to regain her breathing when a thought occurred to her. “Cordy,” she called out. “Get Buffy’s weapons bag.”

Cordelia glanced at her in confusion. “What?”

“The bag on the table. Get it to Buffy!” she instructed, nodding her head vigorously towards the stone table on her left.
Finally understanding, Cordelia slipped slightly as she regained her footing and she half-crawled and half-walked towards the table, still trying to recover her breath and stay out of their attackers’ way.

Xander watched Cordelia’s progress, and realizing where she was heading, he swerved to his right, just missing an upper cut intended for his chin. He embraced the first positive thought he had had since the attack had started -- ‘The tranquilizer gun.’

Buffy was furious and still a little dazed as she watched the battle before her. Willow was busy pounding the stuffing out of two black ops guys but through their arms and legs she saw two more men heading towards her Willow. Instinct took over and she moved behind Willow, momentarily forgetting her powerless situation. Finally past her initial attackers and closer to her weapons bag, she screamed “Here Cordy, to me.”

Cordy shot a glance to her left as she reached the table and summoning her remaining energy she grabbed the bag and not having time to gauge its weight, she threw it towards Buffy. It fell short, twisting around as it skidded across the ground.

Xander realized he could probably reach it so he launched himself towards it. Sliding across the floor on his side and reaching out, he pulled the bag towards him. Glancing up, he realized he was now facing Willow and her attackers. He began to open the bag and, plunging his hand in, grabbed the stock of the gun pulling it out barrel first.

Buffy was almost there when she saw Xander slide to the bag. He didn’t seem to see her as he glanced past her towards Willow. She fell to her still sore knees and reached for the gun, sliding her left hand into the trigger guard as Xander continued to raise the barrel. The next sound she heard was the whoosh of air as something shot past her left ear.

Buffy and Xander’s eyes met in surprise as they realized what they had done and both looked back towards Willow just in time to see her freeze, stare back at them in shock and then fall to the floor. “Willow!!” they both screamed.

“No!” Faith exclaimed, seeing what had occurred. She gave a final, mighty yank at her chains but she only succeeded in causing her wrists to bleed.

Their attackers took a moment to realize what had happened but upon seeing that their only serious opposition had been taken out, they went right back to their mission. Turning towards Buffy, they moved in. Xander tried to get up but a kick to his gut came out of nowhere.
“Get off her, you limp mothers,” Faith screamed as she saw them shove Buffy to her feet before placing a chloroform-soaked rag over her mouth. Then she saw Cordy launch herself at the man holding Buffy’s right arm, only to be swatted aside by him with an elbow to her face.

“Cordy!” Faith screamed, hating how helpless she felt in the midst of the chaos and the injuries her friends [yes, friends] were sustaining.

Giles suddenly appeared out of nowhere, slamming his fist into the side of one attacker’s face. ‘Way to go,’ thought Faith, as Xander positioned himself at the feet of the same man and threw his weight at him. “Knock his lights out,” Faith yelled as she saw him fall over Xander. But when she saw the assailant careening towards her, she thought ‘Oh hell.’

Buffy couldn’t get free. Her only thought was that she needed to get to Willow but no matter how hard she fought, she couldn’t seem to get away from the strong hands holding her. She could hear voices yelling and she knew she was in a fight that she probably couldn’t win but for once in her life she didn’t care. Then a hand covered her mouth and the strange sweet and yet bitter smell brought the darkness.

**************************BtVS**************************

She had seen a flash of light and heard a loud bang as she reached the top of the stone steps. Not sure what was going on, as well as hesitant and nervous, Anya cautiously made her way down the steps. Looking around for a weapon, she cursed herself for not bringing something with her. ‘This is Sunnydale for goodness sake. I should always carry around an arsenal.’

Clutching her still sore ribs, she moved around the back of the courtyard to get a better look. Anya could hear yelling and shouting coming from inside. But decades of watching mankind and their petty squabbles, as well as her own current uncomfortable mortality, had taught her that charging in when you didn’t know what was going on usually resulted in pain, and she’d had just about enough of that – thank you very much. Why everyone always had to refuse to run away when the odds were against them escaped her. Still, even she usually followed the crowd - most of the time unless no one was looking - like now. Although she did so love it when Xander looked sweaty, bruised and manly - she was pretty damn sure that this look was a macho thing, not at all an appealing unisex characteristic.

Anya stared at the two men before her. They were dressed in black from head to toe, loaded down with weaponry and watching events unfolding inside just as she was, perhaps about to join their accomplices. They were dressed just like Xander had last month when they’d enjoyed his new game - ‘how ever can I thank you for saving me, Sergeant’.
She caught sight of Xander sliding across the floor and fear filled her as she spotted the three men surrounding Willow. Xander and Buffy seemed to be fighting over something ... ‘What the ...? Oh hell!!! They’ve shot Willow!’

Anya’s open-mouthed amazement was tempered with more than a little bit of satisfaction as she saw the shocked expression on Willow’s face. ‘See, that’s what it feels like,’ Anya couldn’t stop herself from thinking before Willow crumpled to the floor.

Despite the obstacles in her way, she saw Xander move towards ‘his Willow’ and Anya again felt jealous, wondering if he’d ever really told her the whole truth about his relationship with his childhood friend. He’d slept once with Faith and snuck around with Cordelia. He had always had the ‘hots’ for Buffy, with whom he spent most of his time getting sweaty and bruised in some battle or another. Now Willow was getting all sweaty and bruised. ‘I have bruises. He should be at home finding me sexy’, she reasoned.

But her thinking about fairness, truthfulness and what constituted sexy was rudely interrupted when she saw the men pile on Buffy and kick her Xander! Unable to restrain herself, but slowed down by her aching ribs, she forced herself to move towards the doorway. “HEY! Leave him alone,” she yelled at the attackers, not one of whom turned to look at her.

Then Anya made a split second decision. Her physical presence wasn’t going to prevent a bunch of muscle bound men from leaving the mansion, and in her present condition, there was no way she would be able to help get Buffy away from them. ‘But, what if I follow them?’

Her decision made, Anya threw Xander an apologetic glance before stepping back into the courtyard and making her way towards the stone steps. Behind her, she could still hear the fighting inside. ‘I should have time,’ she decided. Anya headed for Xander’s car, shuffling as fast as she dared, holding her ribs at every step, and glad that she had brought her car keys.

Giles shook his head, trying desperately to clear the effects of the attack from his mind and body. He watched as Xander lifted Buffy’s … no … Willow’s head gently and raised her into his lap, rocking her like a small child and calling her name. "Willow? Willow? Oh god!"

"She'll be unconscious for a while," Giles stated unnecessarily. Still reeling from the attack and having trouble focusing on the fact that they had just lost Buffy, he sat motionless staring at
Willow, lying limp and unconscious in Buffy’s body. His mind ran through every possible ‘could have, should have’ scenario. ‘I should have sent them home. No. I should have kept Buffy with me. No. I should have released Faith as soon as Cordelia arrived. I should have been expecting something like this. The attack at the cemetery. The attack at Buffy and Willow’s dorm room. How stupid could I be?’ He was supposed to be the adult, their Watcher. He was supposed to prevent them from making mistakes, help them plan … Giles felt like a fraud, he felt so guilty. He’d been so wrapped up in solving this damn curse that he had ignored the very real threat posed by the unknown men in black, who had repeatedly appeared to them.

Cordelia groaned as she rolled onto her back, feeling like a train had run her over. “Okay, did someone get the number of the truck that hit me?” But when no one answered, she was forced to look around her. What she saw filled her with dread. Willow lay unconscious on Xander’s lap. Faith was barely conscious and still chained. And Buffy was gone. They’d taken the Slayer. “Faith?” she asked fearfully.

*****************************BtVS*****************************

“She kicked like a mule! Are you sure she wasn’t the Slayer?” Slim asked holding and rubbing his injured leg. Payback hadn’t gone completely as expected, but they got who they’d come for. So even if the score was Sunnydale 2, because of that damn dark-haired Slayer, Black Ops 1, they had ended up with the prize.

“No, she was just filling in for this one,” the driver assured him.

“She doesn’t look like much to me,” he observed, looking back at the unconscious Buffy.

“Fully charged up, she’d eat us for breakfast,” the driver stated. “If you’d ever been on the receiving end of a real Slayer you wouldn’t be making stupid comments like that.”

“Are you sure you tied her up properly?” the guy to his left asked.

“She’s trussed up like a turkey. She’s not going anywhere – especially in her condition,” he responded, smiling in satisfaction at the hog-tied form that was curled up against the vehicle’s rear.

Listening to their chatter, the driver responded “I’ll call it in when we get back to base.” A feeling of relief washed over him, ‘about time I got to deliver a positive report.’ He had the distinct impression that one more failure to separate the Slayer from the Witch, would have led to his
taking quite a fall. Wolfram & Hart didn’t really understand or tolerate continued failure from any of their employees; too many screw-ups and you were retired, permanently just as his predecessor had been.

Giles had unchained Faith at Cordelia’s insistence. His hesitation lasted only a moment as he recalled the way she had baited Buffy and Willow, but also how intent she had been trying to get loose to help them. Although his instincts were telling him she was on their side, he was doubtful that his cognitive abilities had recovered completely from the battle and so he kept a watchful eye on Faith as Cordelia helped her to stand. Faith had been knocked out again. This time by the man who had landed heavily on her during his and Xander’s vain attempts to protect Buffy. He could tell that having been rendered unconscious again had done nothing to improve Faith’s disposition.

“Christ. Next time can you guys just let Buffy use the tranq gun?” Faith asked as her head continued to spin and her bones ached. She was feeling far more unsteady on her feet than she really wanted to admit and uncharacteristically she was letting Cordy take a good part of her weight as she moved away from the fireplace and those damn chains.

Cordelia smiled at her comments but noticing Faith’s tendency to sag slightly at her knees, she realized that the dark Slayer was still trying to recuperate. Helping her towards the stone table where Buffy’s weapons bag had been, Cordy helped her to sit. Assuring herself that Faith was not going to just lean forward and fall off, she let go of her and reached down to take a look at her bruised and bloodied wrists.

Ignoring Cordelia’s interest in her wrists, Faith swallowed her feelings of failure at having been unable to help them keep Buffy and Willow safe. Glancing at Xander and his unconscious childhood friend, she asked “How’s Red?” When no one responded she added, “C, I’m five by five. See to Red.”

“There’s nothing I can do for her until the tranquilizer wears off,” Cordelia stated, glancing at Xander and Willow. The affectionate sight before her seemed to open old wounds and she quickly returned her attention to Faith’s injured wrists.

Anya stayed as far back as she dared. She had seen this done on TV. She knew that every time the rookie cop followed too close - a high-speed chase resulted. Anya didn’t do high speeds anymore. She’d promised Xander after that very rude traffic cop had explained that the sign reading 110
she’d seen when getting onto the highway wasn’t a speed limit.

The van had shot off at first and she’d almost lost it twice. But now that they’d left downtown Sunnydale and were headed towards the docks she’d found it much easier to follow. Her side still ached and all this concentrating was starting to make her head hurt as well. Anya wasn’t exactly sure where she was but what she was sure about was that she needed to do this. She hadn’t been able to fight but she could think. She was an intelligent ex-demon and it was about time they realized how useful she could be. She’d show them all that her way was best. Anya smiled to herself in the certain knowledge that Xander would be pleased she had helped rescue his Buffy.

‘There will be lots of celebratory sex,’ she assured herself.

*****************************BtVS**************************

Cordelia was right. Damn her! As frustrating as it was, there was nothing that Xander could do but wait for Willow to come out of it in her own time. But that just left him even more time to feel totally guilty. ‘How the hell did they get passed us?’ he wondered. ‘We used to be a pretty tight team. And I’m a main member of the team. Okay, I was more GI Joe than Action Man but, hey, I kill vamps … well, I help kill vamps. Hey, Willow and I staked four last month.’ His mind went into meltdown as he realized that he wasn’t going to find a good reason for believing he could have stopped those guys. And, worst of all, that by shooting Willow with the tranquilizer gun, he’d actually helped them take Buffy.

He glanced around him and saw the same mortified look on Giles’ face. As their eyes locked, each acknowledged their mutual pain and what was now required - action. Glancing at his body-switched best friend, Xander sighed and released his last self-indulgent thought before slowly removing her head from his lap and gently laying it onto the hastily improvised pillow that Giles had placed below her head. Looking up at Giles, he nodded “Okay G-man, what do we do first?”

Giles stared at him, momentarily at a loss. He knew that something needed doing and for a split second when Xander had looked at him he’d known what it was. But looking at his Slayer … no … his temporary Willow-slayer, he was drawn back to his failures.

“I’d say getting Willow the hell out of here before they come back for another round of ‘please wup my ass’ would be tops on the list,” Faith chimed in.

“Agreed,” Giles responded before he could help himself. Faith was a Slayer, her instincts seemed good and her thinking seemed a little clearer than his. Maybe if they … ‘What the hell am I doing? She’s not my Slayer – Buffy’s my Slayer. Faith is at least one of the reasons we’re all in
this mess,’ he reprimanded himself. Fighting the sudden urge to take out his frustration at the recent events on the dark Slayer, he internally shook himself. “I mean … it would seem that relocating would be the best option. We will need to regroup, gather what we need and let Willow recover before we can do anything else. Cordelia, I need you to get Angel to find out where the devil those guys may have taken Bu … Buffy. I suggest we move Willow to …” But he couldn’t think of where to move everyone.

Xander stared at Giles and his rather unnerving goldfish impersonation, as the Watcher unsuccessfully open and closed his mouth but remained uncharacteristically wordless, before jumping in. “Back to my place,” the young man suggested. “So far, they’ve visited the dorm, cornered Giles on his way to the magic shop and now attacked us here. They must know where Buffy lives, so it’s either my place or over to Willow’s mom,” he explained in response to their puzzled looks.

“Yours it is,” Cordelia decided, a cold shiver running down her spine as she recalled her one and only meeting with Mrs. Rosenberg during that weird MOO incident.

“You had better let Anya know …” Giles mumbled, before recalling that Anya had been in the area and Xander had been speaking to her when all hell had broken out. “Anya?”

“Anya!!” Xander roared as he shot to his feet and launched himself at full speed towards the courtyard, afraid of what he might find.

**********************************************************BtVS**********************************************************

Willow couldn’t get the heaviness to lift from her mind and body. She felt as if she was being dragged down into the depths. Something was disabling her sense of up and down, left and right. She couldn’t open her eyes. She didn’t seem to be able to get her mind under control, let alone her senses. But one single image was burned into her brain - the pained and apologetic eyes of … herself? … no … her beloved.

Why had Buffy looked at her that way? What had she done? How had she …? No. Maybe it wasn’t that she’d done anything. Had Buffy said something? Something important … something … bright … blinding … black? Her thoughts became jumbled as she tried to catch hold of the answer but it seemed to fly around her, just out of reach, as hands reached out for her … pulling at her.

**********************************************************BtVS**********************************************************
Xander stood at the front of the mansion, his heart pounding and his breath sharp. He’d looked everywhere but there was no sign of Anya. Staring up and down the road he ran through everywhere he’d looked, checking each place off in his mind. ‘Oh god, she’s gonna kill me,’ he thought as he pictured her lying somewhere hurt, bleeding, calling for him. ‘They’ve taken her too! No. Wait. Why would they want Anya? But where is she?’

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his car keys. Turning towards – ‘where the hell is my car?’ Xander glanced back up the street in case he hadn’t parked where he’d remembered parking but nope. His car was gone. Why would my car – ‘Anya? She’s taken my car. She’s run away. But why would she need my … car! OH!! Oh my god! Anya, you clever little bunny.’ He stood staring at the now vacant spot where his car had been, a stupid smirk of satisfaction and pride plastered across his face.

Buffy opened her eyes - at least she thought she had but all she could see was the same blackness as before and the distant murmur of voices and machinery. Taking a deep breath, she attempted to stretch only to find herself bound. Taking in her situation - her thirst and the strange taste in her mouth, she realized that she’d been drugged … no chloroformed. They’d used chloroform.

Her attempts to move had been in vain and she realized that her arms were tied wrist to elbow behind her back. She’d felt a mutual and very uncomfortable pulling when she’d tried to move. From her straining, she deduced that her ankles although tied together were somehow connected to her arms. ‘Looks like they want me to stay around,’ she thought angrily.

They had her hog-tied and blindfolded, and she had no idea where she was. ‘Just your average, everyday gig in the life of a slayer. Only I’m not the Slayer … well not really, not right now anyway. I’ve been neutered. Willow’s the Slayer now … Oh God, Willow! Did they get her too?’ She dragged her mind back trying to recall what had happened just before – oh Goddess – Willow had fallen. She had seen her go down. She had shot her!

“NO,” Buffy screamed. “Where is she? What have you done with her? If you harm just one hair on her head I’m going to introduce you to a world of pain. You’re going to beg me to kill you,” she screamed as a thousand horrifying images filled her mind. Could Willow be bleeding in a dark cell like this one … alone … tied and bound? ‘OH Goddess!’
Willow could hear noises … no … voices. But what were they saying? She strained through the fog that filled her head. Giles … that was Giles. What was he saying? He sounded so far away.

“Anya must have seen them come in,” Giles reasoned.

“I didn’t see her,” Faith commented, recalling that she’d glanced at the courtyard more than once to check on the two guys keeping their exit covered. “What was she doing hiding?”

“Knowing Anya, I’m not sure that she wasn’t doing just that. Willow broke two of her ribs the other day and I somehow doubt she would have been much use in a fight nor in the mood to throw herself in harm’s way again,” Giles explained, partly understanding and yet partly resenting Anya for probably just watching.

“Can’t say I blame her,” Xander stated. “None of us were injured before and look how much use we were,” he said, sharing his dismal opinion of their performance.

“So she’s taken your car, which you believe means she’s trying to follow them?” Giles queried doubtfully, not sure that Anya would be that clear thinking in a crisis.

Faith stared at Xander as if he was crazy. She’d been watching them all for a while now and there was nothing she’d seen that could make her believe that Xander’s new squeeze was someone to have around in a fight. All she had concluded was that the ex-demon liked money and sex - not that she could really fault her logic on either score, but that didn’t really give you a basis for believing the woman had the balls to follow the guys who had just creamed them all. But she kept her thoughts to herself and her mind open.

Cordelia raised an eyebrow in the direction of Giles before changing the subject. “So let me get this straight. We’ve lost Buffy, Xander’s wheels are – elsewhere, Faith’s running on fumes and Willow’s still unconscious after getting ‘tranqed’ by Buffy and Xander. And our best hope is that Xander’s ex-demon girlfriend is following the bad guys,” she summed up for everyone before turning back to Giles and asking “Okay, so where did you park?”

Giles grimaced, thinking of his poor Citroen.
Buffy wallowed in her misery. She had shouted herself hoarse, and now found herself with the time to wonder how she could have been so close to what she had dreamt about and hoped for only to have it all taken away. The attack had prevented her from hearing Willow’s response to her request for a date; indeed, it had been a request for a new future. It was like a sick joke was being played on her, on them both. She’d seen the surprise and what she had thought and hoped was joy in her best friend’s eyes. And then all hell had broken loose. Sometimes she just wished for a dull, normal life; where nothing unexpected ever happened and no one ever got hurt because of her.

She’d had that life once or so she’d thought. Her parents had still been happily married, she was popular, she was one of the star cheerleaders and she was a girl whom all the people she had believed were the best and right people wanted to be with. Her life was full of achievement, praise, enjoyment, and everything had seemed to come so easily to her. But then he had arrived … her first watcher, turning everything in her life upside down. And no matter how hard she tried to keep it all together, everything had fallen apart. Somehow she had become one of those people that others talked about in hushed voices, nudging each other as she went past and never daring to meet her gaze. Then they’d just ignored her, something that hurt her more than she cared to admit.

Her mother had moved them after the divorce and her expulsion from Hemery High School, which had resulted due to the fact that she couldn’t explain that she’d only burned down the school gym because it housed a large nest of vampires. She’d held out hope that here, well away from her past she could start again with a normal life. But the first day at her new school proved that Sunnydale would be worse than Los Angeles had ever been - her mother had moved them to the Hellmouth.

When she’d met Willow, she found someone she understood and who understood her, someone who deserved more, someone kind and intelligent. Heck, Willow was the resident genius. Willow was someone so special that it constantly amazed her that the girl seemed to be willing to be around her, let alone help her.

Over the years she’d come to think of herself as lucky to have had the experience she’d had of falling from grace in Los Angeles before moving to Sunnydale. Otherwise she would have just slid into the elite world of the popular and overlooked Willow, just as so many others had.

Willow had filled her world with magic and yet with a kind of stability, making what she had to do worthwhile and even enjoyable. She would have given up or been killed long ago if it had not been for her best friend. Willow had stayed when she could have gone. Colleges from all over this and many other countries were falling over themselves to offer Willow admission. She could have moved on with her life, gone to a safer place and left Buffy behind. But she’d chosen to stay, to help her ‘with the good fight’. That decision had produced the one moment when Buffy came the closest she’d ever gotten to telling Willow how much she meant to her by blurting out ‘I kinda love you’ in a moment of relief and exuberance that had been easily misunderstood as a declaration of true friendship.
And then finally, after all that Faith had put them through or maybe because of it, she’d found the courage she had always lacked. She’d overcome her fears, her nightmares. Maybe her eyes had been opened by the body-switch, maybe the sweet taste of heaven in Willow’s embrace had pushed her there.

Damn it! How could she be expected to give that up, the feelings, the knowledge of how they could be? Hadn’t she given enough up already?

She felt helpless and weak - two things she hated feeling. The last time she’d felt like this - the damned Council had forced Giles to help inflict that sick Cruciamhelm test on her. And she and her mother had almost died because of it. But they hadn’t died. And she’d learned that being a slayer was about more than her strength, more than her healing powers, more than her training. It was a calling and obligation. ‘Oh hell, now I’m starting to sound like Giles.’

But today despite her so-called slayer inner strength, she’d been captured and brought here against her will; wherever the hell here was. And she still didn’t have any answers. She still didn’t know what was really going on and all she could think of was Willow. What had they done to her? Would she ever see her best friend … her true love again? Why hadn’t she been more forceful, straightforward? ‘Damn it! Why didn’t I just tell her I’m hopelessly in love with her, and always have been?’

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Anya turned off her lights and engine as she coasted to a stop by the beginning of the wire fence. Glancing to her left, she could just see them. They were struggling with something – ‘Oh god that’s Buffy.’

She glanced around looking for a sign, anything that might give her a clue as to where the she’d ended up. Then she saw it. The faded blue lettering - ‘Aries Holdings’ – okay, that’s a start. But now she needed a street name or something. What was it with the docks, poor lighting and no street signs? A movement caught her eye and she realized that one of the men was heading towards the gate, towards her. Her heart jumped into her throat and she dropped down behind the steering wheel. ‘Why the hell am I doing this? I never had to go through any of this crap with D’Hoffran. He knew I was special.’

She heard the sound of steel wheels moving across concrete and sighed. ‘He’s just closing the gate.’ Slowly she lifted her head, to make sure that she was right, peeking through the upper arch of the steering wheel. Relief washed over her as she saw him padlock the now closed gate and turn back to the warehouse. “Okay, now where the hell am I? I am so making Xander buy a ‘sat nav’.”
Giles paid the cabdriver as Xander carried Willow up the stairs to his apartment. The journey had been somewhat stressful and agitating. Giles had been quite forceful with the semi-conscious Willow, who had wanted to head out to look for Buffy there and then. He’d noted that Faith had almost smiled to see her own usual reaction at having to wait in someone else – in Willow.

Cordelia stood by the cab, still supporting Faith as they glanced at each other, both unsure what was coming next. But now that they had arrived at Xander’s, they both knew that some serious discussions were about to happen.

“And shall we?” Giles encouraged, his instincts still kicking in where Faith was concerned.

Cordelia turned to Faith and smiled reassuringly. “Trust me, it’ll be okay.”

“Sure,” Faith muttered without much confidence as they made their way towards the stairs.

“Listen. Trust me. Xander may think he’s a major player now but even he’s not dumb enough to get on the wrong side of the two of us. We know too much,” Cordelia pointed out.

“Yeah. Cool,” Faith responded, a small grin spreading across her face. She nodded behind them towards Giles, “If granddad gets out of line, I’ll take his left leg, you take his right,” she suggested raising a wicked eyebrow. “Pretty soon he won’t have a leg to stand on.”

Giles was slightly disconcerted by Cordelia’s sudden laughter and the backward glance of amusement she threw over her shoulder at him. But what had really caught his eye was the way that Cordelia, a woman he’d always known to be more interested in her own reflection than anyone else, appeared to be going out of her way to look after Faith. Hearing her defend the dark slayer was one thing but watching her offer comfort and support was quite another.

There was more to these two than met the eye and Giles wondered if he could really trust Cordelia’s loyalty to them to override her apparent loyalty to Faith. Things could get tricky if he was going to have to watch both of them.
“Yes sir. We have her secured at the agreed location,” the leader of the attack squad assured his boss.

“Good. It’s about time. I was beginning to wonder if you were up to the job.” the lawyer commented, not trying to conceal his threat at all. He had never felt that praise worked as an incentive with these damn Rambo types. He wanted to make sure that they didn’t slacken off and relax. The last thing he needed right now was to lose the advantage he had worked so hard to achieve. “Check in every eight hours and be prepared for anything.”

“Sir, our exit was ‘text book’. They have no idea where we are,” he was assured.

“Trust me when I say that not knowing where you are will not last for long. Do not underestimate this group. They are resourceful. We only have tonight and tomorrow to get through. Tomorrow night the lunar eclipse takes place. Remember all you need to do is keep her away from the Witch. Keeping them apart until sunrise - that’s your job,” he stated, laughing to himself because he knew that if everything went according to plan there would be no sunrise.

“I’m aware of my orders sir,” he almost snapped. God, he hated sucking up to the suits. He’d like to get them all out on just one of his training gigs and see how they coped.

“I’m sure you are. But be assured that should you lose control of the situation again, I will have to carefully reconsider your future with the firm,” the lawyer threatened one last time, just for fun as he began to feel success approaching. This had taken a lot of planning, and at first it had almost seemed improbable that it would succeed. But then the dark slayer had fallen into his lap. His standing with the senior partners would be assured, as long as everything went according to plan. And for that, he needed his men motivated.

“Yes sir,” the attack leader responded, feeling the beads of sweat beginning to form on his forehead as he tried to recall if he had set up the sentries.

******************************************************************************BtVS******************************************************************************

Cordelia had settled Faith on the wrap-around sofa and made her call to LA. Giles had tried to listen to what she’d said but Willow had been pretty much ranting for action through most of it. Only when Xander stepped in to remind her that if the attackers had wanted Buffy dead they’d have just killed her back at the mansion, did Willow finally relent long enough for the Watcher to catch Cordelia’s parting instructions.
“Okay. Well, get back to me as soon as you can,” she directed. “No, no. We’ll call if we need you.” Hanging up the phone, she stared at it, deep in thought for a moment before turning to Giles and seeing his concerned expression, offered him assurance. “We should hear something soon.”

“Right then. Well, in the meantime and without interruptions,” he stated glancing meaningfully at Willow, “I think it would be useful if Cordelia and Faith ran us through the events that led to the body-swap.”

Cordelia looked at him with concern and throwing a very slight glance towards Willow she asked him “All the events?”

“Buffy’s been captured. I really think the time for keeping certain things to ourselves, not matter what the reason, has passed,” Giles stated firmly.

“Keeping what things?” Willow asked, before realizing what he was referring to. “OH!” she muttered, no longer sure that she wanted to find out in detail what the future events were that Cordelia had seen.

**************************************************************************BtVS**************************************************************************

Anya slowly made her way back to town; at least she thought she was heading towards town. She could make out some very bright lights ahead of her. Turning left, she almost plowed into a parked construction crane before slamming on her breaks. “Where on earth did that come from?”

Getting back into downtown Sunnydale was not going to be as easy as she had thought. Cursing herself for going against her instincts and trying to be helpful, she reversed the car back into the road she had just left, and this time she went to the right. “Ma Jun, where are you when I need you?” She fondly recalled her time in the three kingdoms of China. “Those were the days; honored and feared, not forced to go on senseless, dangerous missions to ensure sex.” Ma Lun had offered her all of his nephew’s inventions to prevent her from exacting the terrible revenge his wife had called for – “A south pointing chariot that’s what I need. No, no, that’s not what they call it now. A compass, that’s it! People navigate using a compass. I could learn how to … but I don’t have a …” She glanced up at the darkening sky. “Where the hell am I?” she yelled, pulling the car to a stop.

Then she heard it. An engine and music! Glancing in her rearview mirror, she was almost blinded by two bright headlights and what appeared to be a halo of blue lights in the shape of cow horns.
As the eighteen-wheeler whooshed its air brakes and pulled along side, she glanced up to find a large hairy-armed man staring down at her. “Well hello darling,” he greeted her with a Texan twang. Anya was struck by how much like Olaf he looked - large, dim and easily distracted by a friendly female. Anya smiled, ‘Thank goodness men are so stupid.’

Faith hadn’t been able to look at Willow as Cordelia had recounted her vision. She knew the pain that she would see in Willow’s eyes; the kind of pain she had often brought people in what she fervently hoped was and would remain her prior life. She shrank into herself, recalling how she’d once captured Willow, how badly she had treated her. Only now did she realize the kind of pain Buffy must have experienced not knowing, having to decide what to risk to get her back.

“I’ll kill him,” Xander exclaimed, unable to drown out the boiling anger that welled within him as his mind visualized all that Cordelia had described.

Giles, however, merely nodded before adding “I see. Well, that certainly explains your somewhat eager and unorthodox approach to bringing Willow and Buffy together.” He had long since removed his glasses and now he found himself staring at them blankly.

“You think?” Cordelia responded. “We couldn’t risk letting that happen. Okay, maybe our plan was somewhat extreme,” Cordelia noted, glancing at Faith, “But the general feeling was that only drastic action would drag these two out of their respective closets.”

“Not in a closet,” Willow grumbled, her brain scattered into fragments. It was one thing to suspect what Cordelia had seen. It was quite another to know exactly what the powers that be had shown her. She found herself numbed and enraged, swinging from disbelief to anger to guilt.

Cordelia ignored her comment; pretty sure that it didn’t need a response. “The switch was meant to end at the lunar eclipse and Faith came here to keep the vamps at bay in the meantime.”

“I thought by now … something would have … happened’, Faith commented.

Giles looked towards Willow whose face was frozen. “I believe that something did,” he stated. “However, it appears that events have overtaken your wishes on this subject.” He glanced outside into the dark night, ‘where had the day gone?’ “We now have only one day in which to find Buffy.”
“One day?” Cordelia questioned.

“The lunar eclipse will occur tomorrow night and our understanding of the subtext within the curse is that unless we find Buffy, and she and Willow deal with the curse before then, the sun will not rise again,” Giles explained.

“We’ll find her,” Willow declared, raising her chin in grim determination.

Xander sighed, “It’s not just finding her though, is it? Will, you need to tell her.”

Willow glanced into his concerned face and bit her lip, “I know. I almost did. She … she asked me … Before we were attacked Buffy asked me … for a date.”

“Buffy did the asking?” Cordelia jumped in, almost unable to believe that the straight-laced blonde had found the guts to ask.

“Oh Will! That’s great, that’s wonderful. Then you two … Hold on if you two had … You’re still Willow right …” Xander rambled before turning to Giles in confusion and asking, “Why didn’t they swap?”

“I didn’t get a chance to say … Yes,” Willow explained, her head dropping in sheer embarrassment and guilt. If only she’d spoken … if only she hadn’t made that silly quip about Buffy’s choice of words.

**********************************BtVS**********************************

“Have you checked on her yet?” the attack leader asked, his memory of the lawyer’s threat still fresh.

“Like she’s going anywhere soon,” Slim cracked in amusement.

“Just do as you’re told. Check on her now,” he growled in frustration.
“Okay, okay, no problem,” the other replied in an annoyed fashion, before trudging off.

Picking up his radio, he hit the ALL button and ordered, “Guys I need you to keep focused. We cannot afford to underestimate this group. Hell, we’ve already had our butts handed to us twice by one of them. Keep it together,” he ordered.

Turning the radio off, he sighed. ‘It shouldn’t be this hard.’

Willow had made her way onto the balcony in need of some night air. Everyone was talking as if she wasn’t there anyway.

The room was hemming her in and all she wanted to do was go, search and find her beloved. And tell her YES. Tell Buffy that she’d been waiting most of her life in the vain hope that she would one day want her, need her, care for her. To let her know that she would happily spend the rest of her life loving her, supporting her, keeping her safe … ‘Oh, and you did such a bang up job of that, didn’t you?’ she berated herself.

‘I’m a joke as a slayer. I’m all book learning, research and no experience. I’m surprised Giles let me out at all. I could’ve got us all killed. Who the hell did I think I was - Sylvia Stallone? I should have stuck to what I know – Magic.’ “MAGIC, why the hell didn’t I think of that before?” she shouted to the world in general before gathering her thoughts.

‘There has to be a way to combine them.’ Giles once explained how magics had been used to create the slayer. Therefore, she reasoned some residual magic must exist within the line. Maybe that was what laid dormant in potentials?
Chapter 29

Giles recalled watching the sun setting as they had waited for the cab to take them to Xander’s apartment. Despite being sure that a slayer would be of better use out there, he hadn’t wanted to let Faith out of his sight just yet. However, merely an hour later, sitting here debating how to approach their problem and waiting for Wesley to call back, Giles found that he was now questioning his very own motives.

Cordelia’s description of the vision and Faith’s recollection of the man that had sold her the curse matched everything they had seen in their joined visions or had subsequently surmised. Nothing remained to make him doubt that Cordelia and Faith’s motives were honest and well meaning, although they may have been a little extreme in their actions.

“Whilst I can understand your hesitation at asking Angel for help, we do have Faith; and another slayer could prove to be beneficial in the long run. I know that you’ve had some training, Willow. But your powers are borrowed. A fully-trained and experienced slayer may be just what we need to get Buffy back safely,” he explained, responding to Willow’s insistence that they wouldn’t need any help from LA.

“Count me in,” Faith responded quickly, before turning to Willow and adding a little more quietly, “If that’s okay with Red?”

Willow ignored her offer and turned to Giles. “I’ve been thinking about that. I know I’m not a … a real slayer but I am a real witch. There must be some way of using my other abilities. I mean … wasn’t the original Slayer brought about by the use of magics?”

“Yes. There was an element of magic involved but I don’t see how … Oh, you mean that within the slayer powers there may be reside enough residual magic ability to allow you to channel a spell! Interesting. Although I’m not sure if this far down the line … Well, it’s certainly worth investigating,” Giles concluded, clearly impressed by Willow’s theory.

******************************BtVS******************************

The folder was titled Special Projects Division but try as he might, Wesley couldn’t get the file to open. He’d tried every hacking code Willow had ever passed on to Cordy. In desperation he had tried typing in Wolf, Ram & Hart in Hebrew, Latin and even ancient Babylonian to no avail. “Damn it.” He tried to download the file unopened but it just wouldn’t copy.
“Wesley! We need to be leaving,” Angel pointed out, glancing through the crack in the door. Breaking in had been just a little too easy and he couldn’t shake the nagging feeling they were being watched.

“I know, but there’s something good here. I just can’t seem get to at it,” the former watcher whined in frustration.

“We’ll take what we’ve got. It’s time to go,” Angel declared as he saw a guard once again turn into their corridor, check a couple of doors and then turn back long before reaching theirs. He knew there was a stairwell at the end of this corridor and that it just didn’t make sense to only check the first few doors. Something stank and he wanted out. “Now!” he insisted, watching the guard turn left and out of his sight.

“Okay, okay,” Wesley replied, his hand catching the floppy disk as it ejected and placing it into his inner jacket pocket. “I’m done.”

__________________________________________________

“Anya!” Xander exclaimed moving towards her. “Are you okay?”

“Like you care,” she spat. “You let me walk into a slaughter. Okay, not a real slaughter. Nobody does slaughter properly any more. Besides you’re still alive and there were no dead babies sitting on spikes,” Anya commented. Then her pitch rising as she recalled his behavior, she continued “But there you were risking your already wounded body, for her – again,” she said throwing Willow an accusing glare. “For both of them.”

Xander ignored the glare, knowing he didn’t want to open that can of worms again. “Okay, kinda losing me on the dead babies front, but I get it. Anya, I get it,” he assured her, realizing that he had scared her again. “I went looking for you, but you’d already taken the car,” he explained.

“I followed them to their poorly lit, badly sign-posted place of hiding and then I asked a truck
driver for directions …”

“A truck driver?” Xander interrupted, raising an eyebrow in concern. “You followed a bunch of mercenaries, not knowing where they were going or if they’d seen you. And then you ask a complete stranger …” Xander ran out of words.

“He was very helpful,” Anya quietly explained, soothed by Xander’s concern.

“I’m sure he was but, Anya, he could have been working for them. How did you know he wasn’t part of the gang? He could have dragged you off and … Okay; we are so recapping the ‘not talking to strangers’ lesson.”

Irritated, Anya replied, “I have a brain you know. I can completely lie to the health inspector when I have to,” she said looking at Giles for support before turning back to Xander. “I distracted the truck driver with the untrue possibility I might provide him with sex. He was very accommodating. He seemed to have no problem realizing that I shouldn’t be left all alone,” she pointed out; hurt that Xander didn’t trust her judgment.

Watching Anya begin to throw back her shoulders and extend her chin, Giles interrupted, eager to prevent bloodshed. “Xander, I’m sure Anya was very careful and Anya, I’m sure we are all very thankful to you for putting yourself in such danger,” he stated, knowing that the ex-demon had probably just been very lucky. Throwing Xander a look that said ‘shut up, you’re only making it worse’ he proceeded “So where did they take her?”

“To a dingy old warehouse just off Lanning Street … near the docks,” Anya replied satisfied that someone realized how selfless her actions had been. “The sign said Aries Holdings but I don’t know how much use that will be. It looked disused to me. There was no night watchman and the framework seemed in serious need of repair. There were many holes and patched-up areas. I saw four more men greet them, but I have no idea how many more were inside.”

“Thank you Anya,” Giles said, feeling that maybe he had underestimated the ex-demon after all.

“My pleasure. Oh, I told Hank I was staying with my elderly uncle,” Anya absently advised Giles. “Please let him down gently when he calls. He said I was priceless.”

“And that you are,” Xander agreed, wide-eyed and not at all sure if or how Anya was still as naïve as she appeared.
Giles glared at her and, refusing to honor her comment regarding his age with a response, he changed the subject back their present concern. “It would appear that they are going to hold onto Buffy until after the lunar eclipse tomorrow night,” Giles pointed out. “We appear to be running out of time.”

Buffy couldn’t believe that she was crying. She wasn’t even sure why but she had felt the welling and then the thin stream of tears as they began to run down her cheeks. Thankful that no one could see her, she let the tears fall. Visions of Willow hurt, scared and injured filled her mind. Was this the end? Was what they had, what they had shared all they would ever have? Was Willow now lost to her forever?

She recalled the sweet tenderness with which they had made love … oh and it had been making love. Of that she was now sure. Parker had shown her what just having sex was. And Willow had been nothing like him. There hadn’t been any false protestations or promises from Willow. Instead every touch and gesture had been genuine, gentle and full of honest emotion. She sighed as she recalled how safe and cared for Willow had made her feel.

‘Was that how it had been between Willow and Tara,’ Buffy wondered. What had she been so afraid of? She hadn’t felt unnatural or awkward, not with Willow. She couldn’t imagine being with anyone else and feeling so right. Did Willow now know? Had she said enough? Would she now realize that Buffy had been making love to her?

Cordelia smiled at Xander in amusement as Anya, still irritated by his earlier behavior, sat at the dining room table pointedly avoiding him and awaiting his overtures of apology. “She’s gonna eat him alive,” Cordy commented to Faith, as she gently smoothed a healing ointment onto her companion’s right wrist.

“Yep,” Faith agreed. “He’s whipped and loving it. Never figured he’d take that from anyone but Buffy and Willow,” she continued, as they both, without any subtlety whatsoever, observed and enjoyed the domestic bliss that was Xander and Anya.

“Anya? Honey? You know I wanted to be at home with you,” he offered, slowly edging towards her, knowing from past experience that she needed reassurance.
“Oh, and that’s why you went off bruise-hunting with Giles. It seems to me you just like putting your life in danger, Xander. I’ve seen some horrible things in my time … I’ve been the cause of many of them actually …” she stated, smiling in fond remembrance. Shaking her old self off, she continued, “I just don’t understand why?”

“Anya, it’s not like I knew we were going to be attacked,” Xander complained.

“But you were attacked and I saw you. You always get attacked. You put your life in danger for them and they don’t even sleep with you! Sometimes I’m not even sure they like you all that much - so they probably never will sleep with you. But you still risk your life. It’s like you’re some Lesbo groupie. I mean, look,” she said gesturing towards Faith and Cordelia. “Now we have two more.”

“What??!” Cordelia exclaimed, dropping Faith’s hand like a hot potato. “Who the hell do you think you’re calling a … a …”

Faith’s jaw dropped and then she laughed. “Lady, you got a lotta brass.”

“Anya, they’re not lesbians. At least I don’t think … I mean they’re friends. Cordelia’s just tending to Faith’s wounds like any bosom buddy would … like Willow would tend to Bu …” Xander flailed, stopped by the mental picture now forming in his mind, his expression rapidly becoming vacant.

“HEY!” Cordelia snapped, recognizing that Xander was about to formulate one of his infamous little fantasies. She stood and marched towards him. “Perv!” she exclaimed as she planted a well aimed slap on the back of his head.

“Oww!” Xander yelped, drawn out of his thoughts by the blow. Glaring at Cordy, he reminded her “You never minded before.”

“You lost the right to do that when you had illicit smoochies with her,” she said, gesturing towards Willow before turning away from him completely. ‘Blast, I thought I’d gotten over that,’ she realized unhappily.

“Damn stud, is there anybody you haven’t played ‘one-on-one bind me and grind me’ with for at least, oh I don’t know, seven minutes?” Faith remarked, throwing Xander a knowing smile and a
“I’ll have you know that Xander is a Viking in the sack,” Anya replied instinctively defending him. “He has many talents, which I’m certain none of you taught him and I have over a thousand years of experience,” she boasted. “The manacles you can buy these days are far more accommodating.”

“What?” Cordelia shrieked. “The next thing you’re gonna tell me is that you don’t mind him having sexual fantasies about every woman in this room.”

Willow, who had been listening quietly, now glared at Xander and raised her eyebrow “Really?”

Looking at Willow in shock, Xander exclaimed “I wouldn’t … I didn’t … I haven’t had … about … ,” he began, only to have his eye distracted by Cordelia’s steely gaze. “Okay, look there was that one time … But hey Will, you’re playing on my ‘Team’; you know, my side of the fence now.”

“Your side of the fence? Team? What team? Hey, it’s not like there’s a club, you know. I haven’t joined a cult,” Willow declared.

“This isn’t about you,” Anya exclaimed, feeling that Willow really should keep out of this -- before adding defensively “So don’t even think about hitting me again.”

Seeing the hurt expression on Willow’s face, Xander jumped to her defense. “Anya, you know she didn’t mean to hurt you,” Xander offered. “I thought we’d talked about this?”

“Oh yes, you talked about it. I was just waiting for the orgasms,” Anya replied. “You’re always defending them. You never defend me!” she accused, building up quite a head of steam now that she had an audience.

“Gee that’s new,” Cordelia piped up sarcastically.

Xander glanced at Cordelia, smirking, “You were always perfectly capable of defending yourself,” he pointed out.
Cordelia tilted her head to one side before retorting, “Thank you so much for sidestepping the issue, but that’s not the point. You always took their side; never mine. Seems nothing’s changed.”

“That’s not true,” Willow stated firmly.

Turning to face Willow, Cordelia responded “How would you know?” throwing a raised eyebrow at her one-time nemesis.

“Well, he managed to keep you a secret,” Willow replied, suddenly a little unsure about her ground.

“A bit late for excuses now, isn’t it?” Cordelia smirked.

“And to think I believed him when he said you were different with him,” Willow spat back at Cordelia. “What did you ever see in her?” she asked turning on her oldest friend.

Xander squirmed, switching from one foot to another and raising his hand to scratch his head as he watched the train wreck coming his way. The turning of Cordelia’s head in his direction sent chills down his spine.

Giles stood in the kitchen both enjoying the show and yet wishing he was elsewhere. The sight of Xander floundering under the microscope of four women who it appeared knew all his biggest secrets, was almost unbearable. His masculine pride urged him to help out a fellow male, the only other of his kind in this apparently emotionally unbalanced group, but his instinct for self-preservation told him to stay out of it before the blood-letting began.

Faith stared at the angry women before her. She could tell that the wonderful Cordelia that she knew was only a few steps from full Queen C mode, while Anya was a seething ex-demon about to spit fire, a fearful Xander was looking for somewhere to hide and an uncomfortable Giles was questioning his manhood. But what really unsettled her was the fact that one of them looked and sounded like Buffy yet was so Willow-like in her words and actions, that a chill ran down her spine. Had this been any other time, any other place, she would have been happy to sit back and watch the fireworks. But seeing the body of her sister Slayer without her essence before her reminded her exactly why they were all here. And that what she was seeing was just some all too familiar misplaced anger.

“LADIES!” Faith yelled, winking at Xander. “Much as I’m enjoying this bitch fest, and believe
me when I say that I am, have you all gone freakoid on me or what? Shaking up a cocktail of bitchy jealousies over him when there’s important things to do?” She shook her head in disbelief, throwing Xander a dismissive glance.

“Hey,” Xander responded automatically, despite the sudden guilt that overwhelmed him.

“You deaf, action man? I said shut the hell up already and get over it. All of you!” Faith almost shouted, glaring at them all and adding, “Jeeze, what is this? A rehearsal for Days Of Our Lives? We should be talking about how to rescue B, not firing your guilt crap at each other. Those guys took her, we lost her, we didn’t protect her. So suck it up and let’s figure out what we can do to get her back. Right, G-man?”

Willow, Xander and Anya stared open mouthed, unable to believe that Faith had just brought them all down a peg or two … and justifiably so. Cordelia, although stunned at Faith’s outburst, slowly began to smile as pride filled her. They all looked at Giles, knowing that if he replied, then they really had heard correctly and had just been told off by Faith.

“Ahhhm, well, yes indeed …” Giles managed as he picked his proverbial jaw up off the floor, amazed that Faith had just done what he should have been doing – getting everyone focused on the mission to rescue Buffy.

***************************BtVS***************************

Now at the headquarters of Angel Investigations, Wesley trawled through the files he’d managed to download so quickly; wishing he’d had more time. The picture before him was scattered and fragmented. He could see that Wolfram & Hart wasn’t really that particular about their client list, but that alone wasn’t what had him worried. It was the frequent occult and mystical references he had found that caused concern.

Doubtful that he could make anything of the data before him, he went on-line. Surfing around their company name, he found himself amazed at the lack of information available. It was almost as if they didn’t exist. He had never heard of a large law firm with such a low public profile.

Then he found it - a blog. Some guy in South America; ranting about how the firm had sold his daughter, over six years ago, in a pan-dimensional auction; claiming that Wolfram & Hart, were trying to bring about the end of the world. He further maintained that the firm was run by demons!
Retrying his search, but this time focusing on blogs, he almost jumped as over six hundred results came back. “Well,” he exclaimed, as he started to read.

Almost half an hour later he sat back, his mind a melee of disbelief and concern. “Angel!” Wesley called out. “I think that we may have a bigger problem than either we or the Sunnydale group expected.”

“Willow, I really think we need to wait. If we go now they’ll be expecting us and they will be prepared for us. I believe Faith is correct. We need to let the waiting get on their nerves. We must let their tiredness work for us, wait until they’re already seeing us in the shadows,” Giles advised her, each point coated in understanding and sympathy.

Faith watched shocked as for the second time she could ever recall Giles stood up for her. It felt good, if a little belated. But just when she thought they were getting through to a very ‘wanna do it now’ Red-in-blonde-hair, the face before her became pale and her eyes seemed to roll into the back of her head. Instinctively, Faith moved forward. She’d seen this with Cordy – Red was about to zonk out on them!

Willow felt herself falling to the floor overwhelmed by so many emotions, but instead of the harsh landing she had expected a pair of strong arms suddenly caught her, lowering her gently. She could feel tears welling from somewhere and a rasping breath, but they weren’t hers! Then she felt something on her face, moist, no wet. Tears? But she wasn’t crying – ‘what the heck is … Who … no, No, NO – Oh Buffy don’t cry …’

“Bring her over here,” Cordelia instructed, as she watched the pain filling Willow’s face. Faith gently picked Willow up and placed her on the couch as Cordy had directed. The Seer had never really paid that much attention to what a vision looked like but that was before she’d been ‘blessed’ with them. So without shame she stared, fascinated by the way Willow’s eyebrows seemed to draw together in anger and pain. ‘Do I look like that? Do I look like I’m dying inside?’

Buffy didn’t know where the voice had come from. ‘Maybe I’m dreaming,’ she reasoned. The voice had been so soft, so endearing, so warm … so scared? It had drawn her back into that last warm night, those soft and tender arms, those lingering lips – Willow.
She could have sworn she had actually heard her. Was she going crazy? Did the crazy hear the voices of those they longed for? Was that true madness? To be taunted by your memories and tortured by the voice of someone you long for?

Her laughter was hollow as it echoed around her enclosed space, filling her ears with its fragile tones. ‘Oh great, now the wheels come off the wagon! This can’t be happening - a cracked slayer. Like hell! I am so not losing it! They’re just messing with me,’ she decided as she tried to persuade herself that she’d only heard Willow’s voice because she was scared and she wasn’t used to being scared … not like this anyhow.

*****************************BtVS***************************

“Look, we’re pretty banged up. Gotta say we could all do with some zzz’s. That’s sleep to you, G-man,” Xander said.

“Well, I guess since this is your place, you get to make the sleeping arrangements,” Cordelia noted, turning to glance at Willow. “But I don’t think we should move her just yet.”

“Xander sleeps with me,” Anya pointed out unequivocally, still somewhat unsure about the new two additions to their group.

Cordelia held in the smile she could feel creeping up on her.

Deciding that Cordelia appeared to have regained control of her tongue, Xander glanced about the apartment as if counting. “Well, I guess if Anya and I stick with our room, you and Faith could take the spare,” he offered, hiding a slight smile as he imagined the two of them on the cozy little bed he had removed from Willow and Buffy’s dorm room when he had secretly gifted them with the queen-sized bed and a rose. No chance for rose on this bed tonight, he thought.

Shaking his head clear, he continued “And that leaves Giles out here with Willow,” as he glanced at Giles for approval.

“That would seem sensible. I have no idea what just happened, although I gather you believe it was a vision,” he responded glancing at Faith.

“Looked just like what C goes through,” she replied glancing at the Seer and then back at Willow.
“I’m guessing Red’s gonna need a couple of pain pills when she comes to.”

“They give you a headache?” Xander asked, impressed that Cordelia would regularly go through anything like what he had just seen Willow experience, and its aftermath.

“Headache doesn’t really begin to cover it,” Cordelia replied, somewhat embarrassed by the look of admiration she saw on Xander’s face.

“Hey G-man,” Faith interrupted, “I think she’s coming to.”

Ignoring the fact that everyone seemed to be referring to him by that damn silly nickname, Giles eagerly made his way to Willow’s side as Faith stepped back to allow him complete access to the woman she’d been standing guard over for the last half hour.

“Willow?” Giles called softly as he took her small hand in his; briefly forgetting that he was being watched. Concern etched across his face, he leaned a little closer. “Willow, can you hear me? Can you open your eyes?”

“Bu … Buuuu … Buffffyyyy,” she whispered as her eyelids fluttered.

Giles found himself blushing but pushing his embarrassment aside he responded “Willow, what did you see?”

“Hea … heard … no felt,” Willow mumbled as her eyelids lifted and she tried to focus on the worried faces gathered around her. “Buffy. I felt her.”

Giles brought his head back to look at her oddly.

“Felt her … fear. Giles, she’s so scared,” Willow declared, her eyes wide.

Holland Manners had a forbidding presence from yards away, but right up close he was terrifying,
and scared the shit out of nearly every single one of his employees. Smiling, he glanced to his left at the limp body of the man he had until five minutes ago been interviewing. Dropping his eyes towards the small bloodstains on the once cream-colored carpet, he casually said “What a pity. You can’t get that out of a carpet. Believe me, we’ve tried.” Glancing up at Hyatt Ramu, without changing either his tone or facial expression, he asked “Are you afraid?”

Hyatt nodded slightly as he tried in vain to ignore the beads of sweat he could feel beginning to form as they usually did within minutes of entering into the presence of the Vice President of Special Projects.

“Well that’s understandable. You’ve really stuck your neck out on this one. Rather egregious behavior for you. Did you actually believe I wouldn’t learn everything? That I don’t prepare for everything?”

“I …” Hyatt stumbled, glancing towards the blood stains.

“You lied to us – more importantly to me,” Holland noted threateningly, his eyes steely and clear. “This is a delicate moment, son. Do you admit to your ambition and lies or do you try to deny what you now know that I already know?”

Hyatt found that he was staring at his feet and so he slowly lifted his chin to meet the gaze of the one man that he truly both admired and feared. “I didn’t betray the firm, Sir. I was only thinking of what was best for us all. Either ‘True Night’ will fall or the ‘Amulet’ will eventually reach its intended target. I assure you there will be no downside to this.”

“Really? You decided to pre-empt matters that had been set in play by the Senior Partners decades ago; events of which you have only a very limited understanding. And yet you feel that you can assure me? My, we have become brave, haven’t we?”

“Brave?” Hyatt asked as his mouth dried up. That would have inferred that he was taking a chance, that he was gambling. And he didn’t gamble.

“Indeed. Well, you’re in a crisis, son; A crisis of faith. Very few men make their own destinies. Those that do have the courage of their convictions and they know how to behave in a crisis. I wonder if you do,” he stated, his eyes questioning.

“Like now?” Hyatt replied, realizing that he was being judged.
“Like now. Unless I’m mistaken, and I very rarely am, you may be proved to have everything it takes to go all the way here – drive, ambition and, depending on the outcome of the events you have set in motion, it would appear excellence. But I don’t think you know what you’re really asking for nor getting into, and until you do – I guess we will both have to wait and see. Won’t we?”

Faith stood by the door of the spare bedroom, staring at the single bed before her, more than a little surprised at how nervous and unsure she felt at having to share it with Cordelia. She hadn’t shared a bed, for the purposes of sleeping, since her early days in the orphanage. Even her one-night stands didn’t stay until morning.

“Okay. It’s gonna be a tight fit. So you want the left or right? Or do we top and tail?” Cordelia asked grinning, bravado taking over as she fought the butterflies in her stomach. ‘I’ve been sharing my apartment with her for over a month. Why am I so spooked now?’ she wondered.

Taking her lead from Cordelia, Faith responded “Not really loving the idea of you kicking me in the head all night,” she winked “so I’ll take the right side.” Moving towards the far side of the bed, she quipped “You don’t snore, do ya?”

“Nobody’s ever complained,” responded Cordy. ‘Where the hell did that come from? There hasn’t been anybody to complain in a long time. What the hell am I trying to prove?’ she wondered as she sat on the left side of the bed and removed her shoes.

“Good to know,” Faith smirked as a strange almost jealous feeling washed over her. ‘What’s it to me that she’s got exes? What was I expecting her to be - a nun?’

Cordelia pulled off her slacks and, throwing them onto her bag, she found herself staring at the door wondering why Xander had put them both in here.

As Faith bent down to pull off her shoes a sharp pain shot down the side of her head and she caught her breath. “Jeeze,” she gasped. Sitting back up, she grimaced in annoyance at the tranquilizer residue that still seemed to be flowing through her veins.

“You okay?” Cordy asked anxiously, leaning across the bed to touch Faith’s shoulder.
“Yeah. Just got a playback from the tranq cocktail they hit me with,” Faith stated, feeling the warmth of Cordelia’s hand on her shoulder. It was strange but real nice to have someone concerned about her. “May have to sleep with my boots on.”

“Damn it, why did you let them …” Cordelia questioned, jumping from her side of the bed and coming around to Faith’s.

“Oh yeah, like they asked permission,” Faith muttered. But before she could think of a defensive quip her breathing was cut off by the sight of Cordelia in what appeared to be only a shirt, her long legs fully exposed as she approached the Slayer to kneel at her feet and remove her boots. ‘Get a grip! You’ve seen her naked before. What’s the big? Damn, she looks good in that. Oh boy, is this going to be a long night!’

-----------------------------------BtVS-----------------------------------

Holland Manner’s reviewed the video of Angel’s visit. “You’re certain that’s all they took.”

“Yes, Sir. Just as you anticipated,” the security guard confirmed, gulping and praying that he hadn’t somehow slipped up.

“Good. Very good,” Manners muttered mostly to himself, “It would seem we’re somewhat ahead of schedule. Interesting.”

“Sir?” The security guard questioned before he could help himself.

“These are interesting times young man, very interesting times,” Holland Manners replied. “Do you play the stock market?” he asked rising and walking towards the videotape machine.

“No Sir.”

“Not a gambler. I like that. Well young man, the stock market isn’t about buying the right shares. It’s about information. The value of information; what you know, when you know it and how you use it,” he stated ejecting the tape. Turning to smile at the now very nervous security officer, he continued “Did your father ever teach you the value of keeping information to yourself?”
Gulping, the officer nodded before replying, “Yes, Sir.”

“Well young man, let us see if your father taught you well,” he stated before opening the door and leaving with a parting nod to the now perspiring young man.

**********************************BtVS**********************************

“How long have I been out?” Willow asked as she gazed at the smiling but obviously concerned face of Giles.

“About four hours,” he replied. Glancing outside he added, “It’s nearly three am.”

“Crikey. Where is everyone?” she asked glancing around.

“Recharging and letting their wounds heal,” Giles explained. “Catching a few zzz’s, as Xander calls it, seemed a good idea.”

“Yeah, guess that’s true,” Willow commented but as she started to sit up, a little dizziness hit her. “Woooah?”

“According to Cordelia and Faith, you had a vision,” Giles explained. “Do you remember it?” he asked apprehensively.

“Yeah. I remember it. Oh Giles … She’s hurting so much, so scared,” Willow said her eyes wide with pain.

“I know. But we’ll get her back. I promise you,” Giles assured her.

As Willow attempted to swing her legs around she recalled that she had fallen. “Thanks for catching me.”
“I wish I could take credit but that was Faith. She realized what was happening long before the rest of us. She caught you and made you comfortable …” he stated nodding towards the couch, “she stayed with you until you started to come around,” Giles recalled, his features pensive yet showing a trace of obvious admiration for the behavior he was describing.

“Oh,” Willow responded, a little unnerved that Faith had been the one to catch her and not sure what she should say now that she knew. “Can I have a glass of water?” she asked, choosing to deal with her thirst rather than the confusion that now filled her.

Standing, Giles turned and walked towards the kitchen area. “I know you have little or no reason to believe … I mean with all that’s happened, why would you? In the present circumstances … I feel certain that asking you to trust Faith would be pointless. But the fact remains that we are going to need her,” Giles stated with certainty.

Willow stared at his back and, although the thought of trusting Faith made her insides twist, she also noted that much of what Faith had done had saved their asses. Okay, she’s been the one to put said asses in a sling. But there seemed to be so many things to consider. What the ex-slayer had said to Buffy had been closer to the truth than she cared to admit. Oh Goddess, why is nothing ever simple?

“For one thing we have no idea of their numbers. Faith is the best person to help us determine that accurately,” Giles continued, knowing that what he really meant was ‘she’s the only one I dare risk because she could probably fight her way free if she was captured.’

Willow nodded to herself as she acknowledged what Giles had omitted from saying. “Okay, so we need her. That doesn’t mean I have to like her, you know.”

“I understand,” Giles acknowledged. “But you may have to work with her.”

“Huh?”

Turning towards her as he filled the glass with water, Giles smiled in partial apology. “I’ve been thinking about your idea to use slayer residual magic.” Turning off the faucet, he moved towards her. “After all, it was the residual slayer magic that allowed the vision rod to work as well as it did. However, at the same time I’m somewhat uncertain how much you could reasonably extract and use from one slayer’s body, especially your borrowed slayer’s body. But I’m fairly certain that the bodies of two slayers would contain, even allowing for a diminution over time, a sufficient quantity of magic to greatly improve our chance of success,” he finished, passing Willow her water.
“Two slayers?” Willow contemplated, considering the increased options that would give her. "That might just work. But I’ll need to gauge what level of magic I’m working with. Maybe do a test run.”

***************************BtVS********************************************

Slim scratched his ear again. The damn itch just wouldn’t go away. He’d been sitting here for almost six hours now; staring out at the darkness, watching shadows, watching dust, watching shapes. He was getting tired, grungy and damned itchy. The warehouse was full of dust and who knew what else. He could feel his skin reacting to all of it. He could hardly complain about the filth because the guys would rib him until next century.

He glanced at the box, wondering how dirty and uncomfortable it was in there. ‘Well at least she’s stopped yelling out and screaming.’ He’d checked her ropes and given her some water about two hours ago. She’d been pretty mouthy and he’d barely been able to stop himself from hitting her … that is, until he had seen the tear stains down her cheeks. He never could cope with a woman crying.

Suddenly he saw it! A movement … Yes, it was a movement … just behind that junction box. Lining up the sights of his weapon, he tried to relax his breathing. Loosening his arms, he flexed his fingers around the trigger. Then he saw it. Damn it – a cat.

‘Where the fuck are they? If they’re coming, why don’t they just come? What the hell are they waiting for? Maybe the Boss was wrong. What the hell are we worried about? What could a bunch of kids do, anyway?

***************************BtVS********************************************

Giles had awakened everyone around four, stating rather cryptically that some things needed doing before dawn. Cordelia was somewhat put out at how quickly Faith had managed to reemerge from her sleep.

The Seer now stood in the shower letting the water pour over her skin in a vain attempt to wash off the feeling of confusion that had bothered her all morning. She’d awakened after only a couple of hours sleep, not having been that tired in the first place. Turning to gaze at Faith who was still very much in a deep sleep, she’d continued looking at her new friend – yes, they were friends. Not questioning that she hadn’t simply gotten up and left Faith sleeping, she now wondered why she
hadn’t. Closing her eyes, she let her mind wander back.

She’d laid there, at first just listening to her Slayer’s breathing, subconsciously setting her own breathing to the same rhythm. Then she’d turned her head to one side taking in the profile of a woman she was growing to admire more and more everyday. The chestnut hair splayed out over her pillow, a strong yet feminine jaw framing a face filled with both tenderness and strength. ‘Why am I only just now seeing it?’ Cordelia wondered as she focused on the dark lashes and oh-so-tempting lips.

At first she’d considered Faith just one raging female hormone, never really taking in or caring what was underneath all that brash armor. But the woman sleeping beside her was another member of the walking wounded, left to try and pull their lives back together once the ‘dark side’ had marched over them with its huge boots.

Just before Giles had knocked on their door, she’d observed the underlying tan on Faith’s skin and recalled that afternoon when she had let Faith help her with the ‘I’m not giving up on a tan just because I work nights’ problem. She’d remembered wondering at that time where Faith’s honey-coated tinge came from. She’d thought that maybe somewhere in her gene pool was an Indian or Italian heritage. She also recalled the slight tingle of excitement that had filled her as she’d stood completely naked before the dark slayer, knowing that she was being assessed by those chestnut brown eyes. And now the longer Cordelia stared, the more she felt the urge to reach out and check if that glowing skin was as warm and soft as it looked.

“I know what you’re doing in there,” Anya yelled, as she helped Giles rouse the troops.

Cordelia’s eyes shot open and had anyone seen her face, they would have seen blushing guilt and embarrassment. ‘Oh my God!’

“You will not get out of making your bed,” she yelled. “It doesn’t work for Xander and it certainly won’t work for you.”

Faith stood on the balcony staring out at Sunnydale, recalling waking up next to Cordelia. It had taken her longer than she’d expected to fall asleep. The sound of Cordelia’s gentle breathing so close to her had stirred feelings of affection and excitement that she hadn’t been expecting. How could someone she had only really gotten to know so recently come to mean so much to her?
The connection between them, which was at first so comfortable, so familiar and safe, had changed. She didn’t know what their relationship was changing into, but whatever it was it filled her with a heady excitement, anticipation and eagerness. She hadn’t felt so alive in longer than she cared to admit. But she knew that all of this, whatever this was, could crumble away if she didn’t help to fix the mess around her.

Her mind awash with hopes, plans and worries. And she mentally yelled at the moon. ‘I’m gonna rip those guys a whole new world of pain,’ she promised herself. Maybe then she could let out the anger and guilt she had been keeping at bay. Glancing at her wrists, she recalled the helplessness she had felt when they had taken B … the pain she had seen in Willow’s eyes. She would fix this. She had to. The sound of the door opening broke her train of thought and drew her attention as she turned.

“Hi,” Willow offered warily as she moved slowly out onto the balcony, her head and heart both full of conflicting emotions as she approached the one person she truly blamed for all that had happened … both good and bad.

“Red?” Faith responded in acknowledgement and surprise, as her muscles involuntarily tightened in anticipation of a verbal attack. “You feeling any better?”

Nodding, Willow said “A little. I heard you kept it from being any worse.”

Faith shrugged “Got plenty of experience with Cordy.”

There was an uncomfortable pause.

“Look, we both know where we stand,” Willow stated, unable to meet Faith’s gaze.

“So I won’t wait for the Christmas card,” Faith replied, desperate to inject some light humor and avoid any serious discussion on the subject of Willow’s opinion of her.

“But Giles is right. We’re going to have to work together to rescue Buffy,” Willow added, raising her eyes to meet Faith’s. “So I guess we need to talk.”
Faith stared at the face before her, reminding herself that although she was seeing Buffy - this was Willow. “Okay.”

“I’ve been working on a way of using the Magic residual within the slayer line to help us when we try to get Buffy back,” Willow explained, rushing on to a topic she could control, her fear that Faith would have a go at her as she had with Buffy, pushing her to find safe ground. “Giles believes that any spell would have a much better chance of succeeding with the magic of two slayers. I’ll need to draw the magic from you.”

“So you need my blood or what?” Faith asked without hesitation.

“No, no. It’s not connected to blood. At least I don’t think so,” Willow rushed on, “I mean blood is vital and a powerful force for both good and bad. But no, I hadn’t considered blood. That’s not what I need. Although it would be interesting to try to determine if it is the slayer blood that is responsible for traits such as increased slayer strength and healing. In which case, a study of Buffy and your blood would be really interesting. Maybe another time; right now that’s not what I need. At least I don’t think so. When I cast the spell we will need to be touching so that I can draw from you,” she finished without taking a breath.

“Kinda like a transfusion?” Faith asked, desperately trying to cut through Willow’s babble to understand what exactly Willow was asking of her. ‘How does Buffy deal with Red’s babble all the time? She doesn’t even seem to need to breathe’ the brunette wondered somewhat amazed.

“Yes, like a transfusion but without the needles. And since we don’t know if it could leave you weakened or dizzy for a while, Giles felt we should have a run-through,” Willow explained, not sure why the thought of linking herself, or rather Buffy’s body to Faith’s was setting off so many different alarm bells.

“Sure, whatever it takes … whatever you need,” Faith said rolling up her sleeve and presenting her arm to Willow.

“That won’t be necessary,” Willow said, smiling slightly at Faith’s eagerness. “All we need to do it is just hold … umm … hold hands,” she blushed.

Encouraged by Willow’s slight relaxation and embarrassment, Faith winked. “Trust me, I won’t tell … if you don’t.”
As Xander watched Willow (still in Buffy’s body, of course) and Faith, he was a little unnerved by the fact that they were holding hands. It was an image he was having more than a little difficulty processing and he therefore missed Giles calling to him.

“Xander?” Giles called again in frustration. “How can he spend so much waking time daydreaming and still have survived this long in Sunnydale?” he wondered, standing and walking over to place a hand on the young man’s shoulder.

“Whaaa?” Xander exclaimed almost jumping out of his skin.

“Nice of you to join us,” Giles commented, before stepping back. “I need you to transport me to the magic shop. We’re going to need supplies. Then when Willow and Faith have finished, I want you to take her to the warehouse.”

“What?” Xander exclaimed. “Are you nuts? She’ll get killed.”

“Faith. Not Willow,” Giles explained, only to be met by a completely different look of disbelief. “She is not going to try and rescue Buffy by herself. We simply need an idea of numbers and the general layout.”

“Can’t Will get that from the city plans? You know Willow and her back-door on-line thingy?” Xander asked, surprised that Giles was apparently going to trust information provided by Faith - Information that could prove to be vital in rescuing Buffy.

“We’ve already got those. But they don’t tell us where the men are positioned or how many there are,” Giles explained, a little exasperated at Xander’s overly questioning attitude. “I’m sending you because Faith appears to me to be taking this all rather personally and I’m concerned that she may forsake her present logical position if she finds herself faced with an opportunity to rescue Buffy.”

“So with babysitter - me - in tow, it’s ‘Hey Faith, you can look, but no punchy on the bad guys’. Man, I don’t know if even I could do that,” Xander honestly replied.

“You’ll have to. We’ll only get one opportunity at this and if an impromptu attempt fails, someone
may get injured reducing our numbers or they may move Buffy or we may lose them … or … they
could kill her. I can’t risk any of that happening,” Giles explained, feeling that all-too-familiar
parental urge to strangle or shout at his brood ‘Can’t you just do as you’re told.’

**********BtVS**********

“Okay. Now I’m going to try and create a blinding flash of light followed by complete loss of
light,” Willow explained, nervously glancing at an extremely intent and attentive Faith. ‘Why is
she looking at me as if she’s taking me seriously? She never takes me seriously. Well she never
has before. I mean, she said some nice things at the mansion but that was just to get to Buffy,
wasn’t it? Let’s face it - Faith’s just being nice to make sure she’s in on the fight. I’d be a fool to
trust her. Nope, not falling for the ‘trust me’ thing,’ Willow mentally babbled, more than a little
concerned by Faith’s apparent complete acceptance of her plan. “Don’t be upset if it doesn’t work
at first.”

“Got it. Kinda like our own flash bang,” Faith commented.

“Yeah, you could say that,” Willow replied unable to hold back a smile. “I’m just not too sure how
much magic we have to work with. So scale may be an issue. I mean, I’m aiming for the block
but we could end up with just a few street lights,” Willow replied, a little nervous at attempting
magic with a woman she didn’t like let alone trust. ‘This is for Buffy. What does it matter how I
get her back?’ she reminded herself.

“So do I have to concentrate or say anything … you know … latinish or something?” Faith asked,
feeling completely out of her depth.

“Nope. Just stand there … quietly,” Willow explained.

“Got it. Translation – shut up Faith,” the dark Slayer grinned.

Willow stared at her, unable to believe she had just heard Faith make herself the butt of a joke.
“Well … ummm … It’s just … a little hard to concen … concentrate when someone’s tal …
talking, that’s all,” Willow finally replied

“Red, whatever you need, whatever it takes. Honestly, all I wanted to do was to help you two. I
never meant for this all to go so … freakin’ wrong,” Faith explained apologetically. “So whatever
I gotta do to get you two back together and so you can maybe take up where you left off,” she
smirked. “Trust me - it’s gonna get done.”

Willow went from embarrassment to anger to disbelief. “You’re asking me to trust you?” Willow asked incredulously before reverting to sarcasm. “I’m supposed to … what? Believe that this is just Faith on an uncharacteristic, altruistic quest and nothing more - so I can completely trust you? You have to know that’s not going to happen,” she stated. “You probably thought Buffy would freak at the idea of … that you’d break up … our friendship,” Willow accused.

Faith smiled sadly at her, realizing that Willow was still full of unchanneled anger. So she changed tack and lowering her head slightly as she almost whispered “This isn’t about what you think of me. This is about what you know in your heart to be true. And you do know it, Red. I can tell. And unless I’ve missed my guess, you’ve just about given up on running away from it,” Faith stated, tilting her head slightly.

“Wha … thi … how can you … Okay there was … concern … But there has been no running. Certain considerations, well thought out consequences … there was thought, a decision making process, the feelings of others … ,” Willow babbled, flabbergasted by Faith’s apparent insight into her life.

“Oh yeah, sure. Others. They so have nothing to do with finding a future, with finding a way to make up for all those lost years,” Faith replied. “Look Red, let’s just drop it … at least for now. Okay? We gotta work together to get her back and then deal with this whole apocalypse thing. Whatever you two think I’ve got coming after that – I’ll deal. I won’t run.”

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Xander stared anxiously at the array of weapons they had gathered; the collection before him somehow seemed disappointingly non-menacing. After a moment of thought, he realized why they looked so ineffectual. A slayer’s armory was designed for fighting demons, not a fully armed bunch of Rambo wannabe’s. They were blunt and savage, designed for wounding, maiming or a guaranteed close-up kill. When placed up against an AK47, they might as well have been clubs and rocks. “We’ll need to get in close,” he commented.

Giles picked up a crossbow and a cold shiver ran down his spine. He’d used most of this weaponry more times than he could recall but it had never been against living humans. When had the lines blurred? When had everything shifted? Glancing at Xander, he saw a pensiveness and concern that mirrored his own. “This could prove problematic,” he muttered.

“What we’ll really need is a diversion. Something to allow us to penetrate deep into their defenses
before they can react,” Xander said thinking out loud. “That’s what Willow’s fixing to give us. Right?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what she’s trying to do. But I’d be happier if we had a back-up plan, just in case,” Giles stated, knowing that to rely on magic alone would be far too dangerous.

Glancing out into the night, Xander asked quietly “How do you think its going?”

Giles found himself also drawn to look out into the darkness, “I’ll just be happy if we return to find they’re both still in one piece.”

Willow sat down with a thud. The light had been so bright and the darkness that followed had swallowed almost eighteen city blocks. She was both exhausted and elated.

“That was wicked fun!” Faith exclaimed as she leaned against the rail, catching her breath. She hadn’t felt this tired and drained in a long time. It was kind of peaceful to have so much nervous energy taken away.

“So much … there was so much. I can hardly believe how much … oh … Oh my!” Willow muttered as the residual static energy of the spell caught her, sending goosebumps up and down her skin. “I don’t understand how Giles didn’t know … I mean, the Watchers would have tested … I mean, they had to know,” the witch paused to breathe. “What a waste!”

“Hey!” Faith retorted.

“Sorry,” Willow responded to her protest. “I didn’t mean to say that it was wasted on a slayer. I just meant with all that … why didn’t they arm you with magic too?”

Faith recalled her training, and the many fights and disagreements she’d had with her Watcher. She remembered all the times she’d thrown a fit or just plain run out on her Watcher, knowing that there was nothing she could do to stop her. “Guess they figured playing with fire was bad enough, why add dynamite? Let’s face it; a bunch of book types – no offense - dealing with a teenage
hormonal girl who can kick major ass and take numbers; and you think they’re gonna show these
girls how to throw fireballs from their eye sockets too? Yeah, right.”

“But it would have made them so powerful … Oh, I see what you mean. They might be able to
manage a teenage super strong girl. But how could they hope to control a super strong teenage
witch?” Willow spat.

“Kinda stinks doesn’t it,” Faith commented, managing to push herself back from the railing to sit
down by Willow.

“Yes, it really does,” Willow agreed, wondering at the years she had missed. Years where she and
Buffy could have had something in common, something only they could share, something where
they were on equal terms. But she would certainly explore it further when she got her Buffy back.

As if reading her mind, Faith asked “Is this the way it always feels whenever you do your mojo
thing?”

Considering the question, Willow replied “Sometimes, depending on the spell. Usually … not so
much. There have been nosebleeds. Must’ve been tapping into the slayer magic along with
remaining witch magic.”

Grinning, the brunette Slayer said “B is gonna love doing the magics with you when she gets
back.”

******************************************************************************BtVS******************************************************************************

Leaning against the wall of her new steal cage, Buffy shut her eyes in shock as the blindfold was
ripped from her. She didn’t know how many hours of blindfolded existence she’d endured, but the
sudden jolt of neon light was blinding. The sound of a bolt being shut and a lock being turned let
her know that she had simply exchanged one cell for another. She couldn’t understand why they
would bother to lock her up again if they were just going to kill her. In fact, she didn’t quite
understand why they hadn’t killed her already. It didn’t make sense!

She’d been terrified when her cell door was opened to then have multiple hands grabbing at her,
dragging her out, pulling at the ropes that bound her, shouting orders at each other. She’d thought
that it was the end; that the inevitable end of her life had arrived. It just hadn’t been as she had
expected. She had always pictured it happening in the darkness and shadows, in the heat of battle;
a warrior’s death. Not bound and gagged like lump of meat being taken to slaughter.

Buffy had looked back on her life; something about that damned ‘flashing before your eyes’ thing. But all she had found was mostly regret and disappointment. There was so much she should have done by now. She had told herself certain things could wait or that they really didn’t matter all that much. What a fool she’d been! Over the last few years she had done what she had always said she would never do --- she’d let slaying take over her life.

Her mind flew to earlier days and she found herself smiling at how she’d needed to fight tooth and nail for a life, desperate not to let this damned slayer gig take her over completely. Even Giles had eventually agreed that there had to be more for her, that a slayer needed a connection to the world, a reason to fight for it. Without that connection she would have been killed by now like many a slayer before her and she knew it.

She’d seen the wonder in Kendra’s eyes at the life she’d seen Buffy leading and at what was missing from her own strict regiment. But Faith had pushed in the opposite direction, living for only the moment, treating slaying like part of the fun. Buffy had always thought of herself as balanced but the more she looked back the less she saw herself having a life that didn’t involve slaying. Her social group had narrowed, her outside activities tailored to the bare essentials of attending college.

And she had managed to drag her loved ones with her. Sure, Giles was her Watcher and her mom was … well … her mom and she tried to keep her out of slayer stuff. But Xander and Willow … Her young male best friend was like the brother she’d never had. He was always there when she needed him; ready to face anything by her side. He had saved her life … no … he had brought her back. He spent so much of his time helping her in her fight. And it was probably her fault that he had ended up with an ex-demon for a girlfriend.

And Willow. She was so smart, so kind, so beautiful. She could be doing anything, anywhere. She could be somewhere safe. But she had stayed in Sunnydale always helping her whether it was with research, surfing her computer, magic, fighting by her side or treating her wounds. Or just talking, being together. ‘I don’t know where I’d be without her …’

Where the hell was her fun? Where the hell was her life going? That is, if she would have a life after all this was over.

********************************BtVS*************************

"Okay, so let me get this straight. A Barder ball thingy freezes time ... unless you’re wearing one
of those stinky things. No offense,” Xander stated smiling at Willow apologetically.

“I didn’t have any rosemary. The sulfur can be very overpowering without …,” Willow began with a shy smile.

Giles interrupted Willow. “A Bardus Ball slows time for all unless you happen to be wearing a Munimen abusque veneficiam talisman,” the Watcher explained, his tone tinged with boredom and irritation since he had already explained this twice now.

“So why don’t we have … M … talismans,” Anya stated, unable to pronounce its Latin name and not much liking the idea of having time slow down around her.

Willow sighed before adding “I need time to create an entrance and then follow our search pattern.”

“The Bardus Ball will only slow them down for about half an hour. We only had the ingredients for two. Plus the more you divert the Bardus Ball, the weaker it becomes,” Giles explained. “We’ve been over this.”

“Yeah well, I’m just a little nervous about all this magic. Why did we go and get all those weapons if we’re not going to use them?” Xander complained, feeling somewhat troubled that they would be relying on magic as much as it appeared they would. “No offense Will, but it doesn’t feel that long ago I had to buy you an ice cream to calm you down because your floating pencil … floated completely away.”

“That was four years ago,” Willow stated, annoyed and unable to believe he still remembered that.

“Look toy boy, I’ve seen what Red can do. She’s up for this and personally I’d rather take on a truck loada armed mercs with Willow’s magic than that pile of highlander leftovers. They won’t go far against a semi automatic,” Faith stated, a little ticked that Xander was being such a downer.

Willow couldn’t believe that Faith not only stood up for her but had actually used her name. She stared at her open-mouthed and mumbled “Thanks.”
Angel was pacing! Wesley found it unnerving and the longer it went on - the greater his desire to leave grew. He knew that the news had been bad in parts and a bit sketchy elsewhere, but he had delivered worse. Why was Angel in such a state?

Glancing back at his notes, he tried to recall what he had been saying when Angel had suddenly jumped to his feet and started in on his pacing. ‘I explained about the Wolfram & Hart theory, Mr. Manners, Ramu and that slimy Maclay bloke. Damn it, Faith! How could you be so reckless? Then I went into the prophecy … Oh, hell.”

This time when he looked up at the living dead man before him, he saw it – the fear, the questions, the doubts, the hope. ‘What on earth should I say to him? This is more than a ‘good luck, old chap’ thing. I mean he could … there’s every possibility … but then again if we’re wrong …’

Angel suddenly stopped his pacing and, turning to Wesley, he stated, “I need to speak to Willow.”

“Willow?” Wesley questioned. Angel always spoke to Giles or Buffy, if he spoke to anyone at all.

“I think I know what this is really all about,” he stated.
Willow stood at Xander’s kitchen counter, her mind completely overloaded by the dozens of different tasks -- matters such as where should she balance her center during the entrance spell? Had she put enough mustard seed in her and Faith’s charms? Would Xander be able to pull off the diversion? Could she trust Faith with something this important?

Glancing over at Faith, Xander and Giles as they narrowed down which weapons to take with them, a more disturbing train of thought overtook her. How far was she prepared to go? Would they need to kill someone? Could she? Would Buffy understand if she accidentally did? Neither of them had forgiven Faith – if she was to believe that Faith’s actions had been unintentional or even forgivable.

Anya was on the far side of the apartment watching the three would-be warriors with a puzzled but slightly amused expression. Willow could swear she was checking to be sure that Xander was still there. She wondered whether that was what it was like to be in a real relationship - to be in constant fear of losing what you had. Her brief time with Tara had been so new, almost childlike in its innocent acceptance of their relationship. Neither one of them quite sure what a relationship between two women was meant to be like.

But now as she looked back over her early relationship with Oz, she saw so many similarities. For the first time she began to wonder if there was any difference. Wasn’t a relationship between any two people much the same? Attraction, dependence, loyalty, support, love … she paused mid-thought, unsure if she actually knew what made up a relationship, let alone love.

But she knew that she had loved them both, and still did. Yet the love, the feelings, the closeness, everything she felt with Buffy was so intense. It seemed to speak to the very core of her heart.

Was it quantifiable? Could it be measured, observed, categorized? What she felt for Buffy didn’t appear the same thing she had observed between her own parents. Then realizing that in her experience they and Xander’s parents were the only couples she knew who had been together for longer than ten years, her heart sank. Her melancholy was interrupted by the sudden ringing of the telephone. Instinctively she reached for it.

Giles turned his head at the sound of the telephone, drawing his attention away from weapons sorting, which he was finding anything but mentally challenging. The look he saw on Willow’s face immediately filled him with concern. Then he heard her say “Angel” and he immediately understood her troubled expression.
Nodding towards her, he left Xander and Faith to continue the sorting. He gestured to take the phone but Willow shook her head.

Giles frowned, giving Willow a look of obvious concern. Angel had been such a large and important part of Buffy’s life. Both the Slayer’s Watcher and her best friend had watched her heart break when Angel had turned into Angelus; when she’d had to kill him; and, then again, when he had decided to leave (after his return from the Hell dimension to which she had sent him). Unable, at that time, to say that he thought that it was all for the best, Giles tried to imagine how speaking to Angel must be affecting Willow after recent events.

He had not seen a future in Buffy’s relationship with the vampire and the return of Angelus had only seemed to prove him right. But Willow, he now knew, had buried her own feelings and done everything she could to bring back Buffy’s vampire lover despite their extreme misgivings because it was what Buffy had wanted. And now Willow was dealing with Buffy’s “-ex” on a level she’d never had to before – as his potential replacement!

Willow’s silence somewhat disconcerted Angel. “Are you okay?” he asked awkwardly. This quiet, nervous woman was the person he was now trusting with his Buffy’s heart and life? He had always admired her quiet strength but right now he needed her to talk to him.

“Yes, yes. I just wasn’t expecting … Has something happened?” she asked. Willow tried to listen to what Angel was about to say but knowing that the person on the other end of the phone loved Buffy just as much as she did wasn’t letting her think straight.

“We’ve learned some more about Wolfram & Hart, the law firm you asked about. I’ll let Wesley explain. Then I need to talk to you,” Angel advised her. “Willow?”

“Oh, yes … yes. Okay,” she agreed, acknowledging his instructions and desperately trying to collect her thoughts. She knew that she had to concentrate.

She could hear the handset being passed and then her name being spoken, closely followed by the very familiar British tones of Wesley. “Hello?”

“Hi,” Willow offered in greeting. “What did you find out?” she asked, trying to sound interested as she forced herself to listen intently despite the desire to run that was building within her.

“As Angel may have intimated, we have managed to collect some rather disturbing information
regarding the lawyer’s firm in question. I have to say that what we have learned was disturbing, although it does not represent an exhaustive view of the firm nor, in my opinion, the events we are trying to interpret,” Wesley explained.

Willow found it easier to concentrate as Wesley proceeded to explain what he had found, his doubts, concerns and the hypothesis he had hesitantly reached. “Really?” Willow asked, her eyebrows rising pronouncedly. “Oh my … but that could mean that Angel … OH! That would mean … I mean that would mean that if he … he could …” Willow babbled, falling into stunned silence as she considered the ramifications of this information. Her silence lasted for quite some time before she spoke again. “Are you sure it’s about Angel?” she asked, kicking herself for asking and secretly hoping that the answer was – no.

“As I said, I am working on third and sometimes fourth hand accounts here. But I feel that to ignore these references, when taken in conjunction with the character, history and reputation of the parties concerned, could be incredibly irresponsible,” Wesley affirmed. “If there is any chance that … any opportunity … maybe we should … if there is a chance that …”

Willow interrupted Wesley’s ifs and maybes to ask “But how does this connect to us?”

“Can’t you see? They’re trying to bring about The Apocalypse before Angel becomes aware of his part in the prophecy and they are using you two to do it,” Wesley stated, somewhat surprised that Willow hadn’t considered that this wasn’t actually about her or Buffy. “What I can’t determine is how they knew about Cordelia’s vision. Regardless of that, ideally certain things need to be resolved before tomorrow’s sunrise.”

Giles found himself wishing he had a slayer’s enhanced hearing. Being able to listen to only one side of the conversation was incredibly frustrating. It left him with so many unanswered questions. In addition he was finding it extremely difficult to read the nuances of the looks on Willow’s Buffy-face.

As if suddenly remembering she was being watched, Willow turned her face away from Giles but she wasn’t quick enough to hide the flash of sudden fear and dread. “I see. Yes, well we’d come to that conclusion too. But I don’t see how that relates to the prophecy.”

“What prophecy?” Giles asked, his irritation and concern now very apparent.

Willow gestured for him to be patient as she reflected on the logic of Wesley’s hypothesis, desperate to find a hole, a flaw, something to make her worst fear disappear. ‘If Wesley is right … if that could happen … she would be bound to. Oh Goddess, I’m going to lose her after all … No,
No! This can’t be happening. Why? It’s a mistake ... it has to be.’ Stricken by the fear and the inevitable failure she could see before her, Willow let the handset drop from her ear.

Seeing the look of despair on Willow’s face, Giles decided he had had enough and reached forward to take the handset from Willow’s drooping hand and raised it to his own ear. “Angel?”

“Giles?” Wesley acknowledged, puzzled.

Giles glanced at Willow, surprised that he hadn’t realized she’d stopped talking to Angel. “Wesley … could I trouble you to please repeat exactly what you just told Willow?”

Ignoring the fact that Giles had just taken the handset from her, Willow stood unable to stop one terrifying thought from running over and over in her mind. ‘Angel could become human again. Buffy’s Angel could become mortal! The man she couldn’t have, the future they couldn’t have … everything she had ever wanted. Oh Goddess, what am I going to do??!!’

Eoin Maclay stood and smiled at the book before him. He had thought that this day would never come. All those years of working carefully towards his goal, of bending his knee to men he would normally have had nothing to do with. Every sacrifice now seemed worthwhile.

At first he’d resented having to leave his mountain community, forced out into the harsh world because of his unpopular fascination with the powers of the Maclay women. Realizing that his thirst for magic went against everything that his father and brothers believed in, he had long ago broken all connection with his family. Although for quite some time he’d tried to make secret contact with his grandma.

It had been her stories that had fired his imagination as a small boy. Most of the town just considered her a crazy harmless old lady, her body riddled with arthritis. They only saw her as a baby-sitter. He’d loved visiting her and he’d sought her out long after becoming old enough to watch out for himself.

She had continued her stories, extending them and exploring their meanings with him until one day his grandfather had overheard them, hitting the roof … and grandma. Little had his grandma known the envy he’d felt as he’d listened to her tales, knowing that only the women of his line could tap into the magics she spoke of. Silently he had understood why the men of his clan had
decided to prevent them from using their talents.

Now after eight, or was it nine years, of working for Wolfram and Hart he was almost at the end of his quest. Only one more thing remained to be done and he would be the first Maclay males to tap into real personal magic.

****************************BtVS****************************

“T’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Giles reiterated into the telephone, glancing sideways and catching Willow’s distant expression.

“Giles, it has to be her decision,” Angel explained, his insides gnawing at him. He knew that, despite his instinctual need to run to Buffy’s aid and Wesley’s loud protestations, he had to defer to Willow. She was the one he had passed Buffy’s care to and she needed to know that. Besides he knew that Faith and Cordelia were there to give her any help that she might need.

“Very well, but I still have reservations.” Removing the phone from his ear, he turned to fully look at Willow, who raised her head to stare blankly at him. “Angel would like to speak to you.”

“Me?” she questioned.

Giles nodded, offering her the handset.

Willow stepped forward as if in a dream, fear filling her heart as she reached out to take the telephone back from Giles. “Angel?” she muttered apprehensively.

“Willow, I know it’s been a lot to take in and that you have some very understandable concerns,” he began. “It was my choice to try to bring you two together,” he advised her, having heard the apprehension in her voice. “And I don’t regret that decision for a minute.”

Willow was mute, her own expectations and fears, making it difficult to fully take in what he was saying. It was as if he was whispering. She couldn’t be hearing right. Why would he be saying that? “W … Why?”

“You were meant for her. I never was,” Angel stated, unsure how to make it any clearer.
“I … I …” Willow stuttered, wanting to acknowledge what he had just said but unsure just how to do that. How do you thank your beloved’s “-ex” for giving her up?

“I know that you know how I feel. So trust me when I say that I know how you feel. If you want my help, I’ll be there,” he assured her. “But if you want to do this yourself, I’ll understand that too,” he added. “The choice is yours.”

Willow took the handset away from her ear and stared at it in shock. Angel was asking her permission. No, he was asking her to choose, to decide. But what if she failed without him? What if she only succeeded because of him? Oh Goddess, what should she do?

“What is it?” Giles asked Willow, obviously concerned.

Returning the receiver to her ear, she swallowed forcing the words from her mouth. “I … understand. Thank you Angel but I need to do this …”

His heart sank but he nodded, accepting her decision. “I guess I’d better speak to Giles. Good luck, Willow.”

******************************************************************************BtVS******************************************************************************

She needed to sleep but she didn’t want to miss anything. What if Willow was brought past her and she missed it? What if the opportunity to escape appeared while she was asleep? Buffy forced herself to stay awake despite the exhaustion she felt, keeping her eyes wide. The salty tears of fatigue fell down her face but she ignored them.

Last night she’d been in Willow’s arms. They had made love. It hadn’t been a dream. It hadn’t been a wish. It had been real she assured herself. Okay, she wasn’t in her body and Willow was – but hell, it didn’t matter. They had been together. She hadn’t needed to see Willow. She had felt her, sensed her soul.

She wouldn’t, couldn’t let the memory fade. But she couldn’t let it entice her to close her eyes, to fall back into that sensory memory - the tastes, smells, feelings. She had to stay awake.
‘The guys will be coming for us,’ Buffy told herself, still believing that Willow had also been taken. ‘Giles will have a plan. They’ll be here soon, my love.’

Cordelia stared at Faith in amazement as the dark Slayer moved towards the Wiccan. ‘Damn, she’s gonna try to talk to Willow now! Has she got a suicide wish?’

Willow had just punched the stuffings out of the once pretty Moroccan cushions littering the couch. While Xander and Anya had mutually chosen to ignore the destruction of their property, having recognized Willow’s almost animal-like frenzy, Faith had simply edged forward waiting for the storm to subside.

Her admiration for Willow was growing in leaps and bounds as she realized that Willow had vented her anger and rage at an inanimate object rather than a person.

As Xander stared at the destruction, recalling the amount of repair work he’d had to do at the Summers’ house and over at Giles’ in the last year, he pondered ‘Maybe we should consider having a secret base – something that could take being continually trashed.’

Cordelia found herself moving forward protectively, not sure if there would actually be anything she could do if these two went all ballistic on each other or her. But she was damned certain she’d try to stop it. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that something Angel said had upset Willow. ‘That big lug. Wait till I get hold of him.’

Faith stood her ground, waiting for Willow to acknowledge her presence with a glance. She recognized the look of despair, frustration, anger and resignation in the Wiccan’s eyes. ‘Damn it! She’s giving up.’ Instinctively she edged forward. She would do whatever she had to in order to help Willow get through this – ‘hold it together Red, you’re not falling apart on my watch.’

Willow caught the movement out of the corner of her eye and shot a look of challenge at the dark Slayer, but to her surprise all she got back was a look of concern and understanding.

Slim poured out the stale coffee, needing its boost more than he needed its taste. He’d finally
finished his shift. The half hour rest break had been a long time coming. Dawn was taking its time arriving and he knew he was getting ratty. He’d almost bitten Dorgan’s head off when he’d asked for the last check in. What the hell was the guy expecting? If anything had happened did he seriously think the guys would be keeping it to themselves? Dumb schmuck!

He pulled out his smokes and, sitting down, he’d taken great pleasure in lighting his first of the day. Stretching he reached for the coffee and, downing half the cup, he wondered what the hell they were doing here. He hated these “do as your told and don’t ask questions” gigs. He’d rather be on a search-and-destroy. This “we know what we’re doing – just follow the orders” stuff drove him crazy.

Scratching the same spot on his neck that had now been bugging him for almost six hours, he threw the last of the coffee down his throat in frustration. The sound of footsteps outside caught his ear and he instinctively reached for his piece.

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“You know what really sucks?” Faith asked quietly as she sat down next to Willow. Not waiting for a reply from her silent companion on the couch, she answered her own question. “Soft scoop ice cream; You know it says scoop from frozen but you still leave it out on the side for like 15 minutes, not because it asks you to, not because it’ll make a difference, but ‘cause inside you have this internal ‘get real’ bullshit detector and you know you’re just delaying the inevitable. So you leave it to stand, you know – ignore it for a while and the problem will just go away. ‘Cause you know, you just know - it’s gonna do a Uri Geller on any spoon that goes near it,” she stated. “The hard shit’s always hard. It always bends you outta shape, no matter how long you leave it.”

Willow stared at the carpet in front of her, letting Faith’s quiet words wash over her.

Faith continued as if reading Willow’s mind, “I know how it feels to have all that slayer strength boiling up inside you - not being able to run out and do what you want; You know, not to be able to like rush out and get her back. To know what you can do but know that you shouldn’t – that you can’t just use the power exactly when and how you want. I don’t think anyone gets how hard it is for us to have to wait before getting into the action. It’s so much easier to strike out before thinking things completely through. Believe me I should know – I’ve done it enough. It’s hard to hold back the anger and the rage; so much easier to strike out blindly.”

Willow lowered her head and said, “It’s like everything goes into a red haze. I can feel the hot blood rising.” She explained sadly “And it feels like the only thing that will work is violence. I can’t even think of researching or talking or anything other than using my fists and feet.”
Faith smiled a little “I know. It’s an incredible feeling, isn’t it?”

Willow shook her head and declared, “It’s terrifying. How do you control it? How do you handle the rage?”

Faith sadly admitted, “Honey, most of the time I didn’t. I’m doing better at that now. And I was ‘Chosen’ and trained. So you’re doing pretty well all things considered. But B … she’s always been able to handle it.”

Willow responded so softly that Faith had to use her slayer hearing “I got so mad. Look what I did to their pillows.”

Faith grinned, “Better the pillows than one of us. Don’t worry about it – they’ll understand.”

Willow responded angrily “Understand what? That I lost it.”

Not really wanting to let Willow fixate on her loss of control, Faith decided to change the subject. “Look, we all know that you were on the phone with Angel. What did he say to upset you so much?”

Willow looked despondent as she replied, “He said that it had been his choice to bring Buffy and me together … that I was meant for her”

Faith declared, “Dead boy sure likes taking the credit doesn’t he? I think that Cordy and I had more than a little to do with that. But he’s right about you being meant for her. And she’s meant for you. I think we’ve all known it for some time. Maybe we didn’t all realize or accept it but we all knew. And Angel … hell… I think he always knew it too … deep down.”

Willow whimpered plaintively, “But she loved him so much. She probably still does.”

Faith looked sadly at Willow and felt her pain. She asked, “Did you love Oz? Tara?”

Willow replied, “Yes.”
Faith then added thoughtfully, “I think that Angel was a part of B’s life just like Oz and Tara were a part of yours. Maybe they were meant to prepare you for each other somehow. Fact is they weren’t the ones.”

Ignoring Faith’s observation, Willow whispered “He said it was up to me … if he came to help us rescue Buffy.”

Reading the insecurity in her face, Faith realized what Willow was thinking and so she forcefully responded. “I hope you told him that everything was under control here. Because it is, you know.”

Willow shakily asked, “Is it? Am I risking Buffy’s life because I don’t want him to come and help … because I want to … I feel that I have to do this myself?”

Faith responded with confidence “You can do it. And I … we … all of us … we got your back. There is no way you’ve come this far only to let it all go wrong now. This is your show. And you’re going to get her back - safe and sound,” she asserted. “Then you two are going to take care of the body switcheroony thing.”

Willow plaintively asked “And then what? What do I do when I get her back? When we sort our bodies out? If Wesley’s right … it’s not just about us. There are others involved.”

Faith, stunned for a moment, answered instinctively “Others don’t matter. You two are what matters. And in case you haven’t noticed -- all of your friends are here and are in your corner … just waiting to back you up.”

Willow glanced at Faith before quietly muttering “It’s not just them … us. There’s … others …”

Glancing at the young woman - daughter, student and witch before her; Faith suddenly had an unfamiliar moment of clarity. “Look I get it. Mothers have expectations, mainly to do with the ‘white dress and grandkids’ scenario. But honey, I’ve heard about this nifty turkey baster trick” she added, trying to lighten the mood a little.

Willow didn’t respond, more than a little unnerved by Faith’s apparent mind reading.

“Are you really that upset about letting your mother down? Kinda thought you’d gotten over that
with the whole ‘out and proud Mary’ thing?” Faith asked seriously.

“This isn’t about my mother,” Willow assured Faith, wondering how the heck their conversation had ended up with them talking about her mother. She never talked about her mother.

“It’s always about somebody’s mother,” Faith commented dryly, staring at the woman before her. She’d always assumed that Willow’d had the whole package -- mommy and daddy. Okay, maybe the absent, mainly ‘forgetting you’re there’ kind. The sorta hippie parents most kids prayed for. Yet Faith had gotten the distinct vibe that Willow would have swapped them both for just one parent who had taken an interest in her failures, problems and concerns, rather than just her successes.

Willow took in the truth of the statement with a wry smile, before making it clear. “Well it’s not about mine.”

“Not your mother? I’m guessing not your father. So whose?” Faith asked wondering how someone so strong and so in control had emerged from what she knew of Willow’s earlier life. So much for adversity creating strength – Willow had lived on the edge of the Brady thing and yet looking at her Faith could see so many things she recognized in herself. She had often considered the possibility that if she’d had a mother who’d stuck around then maybe she’d have ended up a little more normal – whatever the hell that was. Suddenly it became crystal clear as the image of her ideal mother figure took shape. “Ahhh. Yeah, right. Diggin’ it. Mmmm. Joyce. B’s mom does kinda make you set your bar real high, doesn’t she?”

Willow whimpered again “She is so going to hate me for doing this to Buffy.”

“In case you’ve forgotten, the switch was my idea,” Faith reminded her. “All I wanted you to do was a more intense kind of ‘walking in each other’s shoes’ since things here in good ole’ Sunnydale are always so intense. I figured that knowing each other like this would be the wake-up call you two finally needed.” Continuing quietly she added, “I never meant to hurt either of you. Not again.”


Faith felt a weight lifting, one she never thought would. “So what’s new? Mrs. S. can hate me again,” she declared more forcefully
“That’s not it. Mrs. Summers has always been so nice to all of us … to me. She’s going to think that I’ve made Buffy gay.” Willow almost sobbed.

“Red, Mrs. S. thinks of you like another daughter already,” Faith went on trying hard not to laugh. “Plus she’s cool. And I think what she really cares about - is B being happy. And you make her happy. She knows you’d never hurt B; that you’d do anything for her. It may take a little time, there may be a little freakin’ out and getting used to it - but I think she’ll be OK. She loves you both.”

Willow looked at the dark Slayer hopefully. “Do you really believe that?”

“I don’t just believe it. I know it,” Faith strongly asserted. “And I know that B is gonna be ready for you once we … you get her back. She’s gonna run into your arms – major gushy and mushy stuff – I may barf,” she quipped. “And you know, I’m gonna get a major raggin’ – right?”

Willow really smiled for the first time in quite a while and reached out to put a hand on Faith’s arm. “Thank you, Faith,” she said rather emotionally.

Faith slightly embarrassed replied “Yeah. You know … whatever.”

After a slight pause, Faith recovered herself and declared “So Red, wha’d’ya say we get this plan of ours in gear and go get B? I know I can’t wait for another chance at the mojo we did before. Then I can get down to kicking some serious butt-kicking.”

******************************************BtVS******************************************

There was little or nothing Giles could do since it wasn’t his decision. He had tried to persuade Angel that he should reconsider but the man seemed hell-bent on supporting Willow. Irritated by the admiration he had for Angel’s decision, when he considered the strong feelings the vampire had for Buffy, he was also exasperated at having such a powerful potential team member removed from his arsenal. He would have preferred to have everything available on hand and a partner with Angel’s skill and experience could have proved invaluable.

His greatest fear was that their plan would flounder and Willow would be left regretting her decision not to take Angel up on his offer of help. Glancing at Willow who was again in deep conversation with Faith, he mentally crossed his fingers that she was capable of doing what she planned to do.
Anya’s presentation of lunch had been an eye opener. He’d never really seen her in a domestic role before. Giles was still unsure if the nervous feeling in his belly was the result of Anya’s exceedingly spicy meatball concoction or because if this all went wrong … Well, he didn’t want to think about that possibility.

Today had been somewhat disjointed and as evening approached he found himself considering the reactions and actions of their small band. Willow had spent quite a bit of time with Faith and he wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

Xander and Anya had just seemed to get on with whatever needed doing; he had found the familiar sound of their infantile and distracting banter unusually comforting. There was still so little he understood about their relationship and even less he really wanted to. But he drew surprising comfort from the unchangeable quality of the mismatched pair. Xander had never really stopped watching over Willow, despite Cordelia’s contention that it was Faith she needed to talk to and Anya’s apparent annoyance at his concern. Giles had caught his frequent darting looks at the talking women.

At first Cordelia had seemed to want to reign over the group, quietly nudging everyone away from Faith and Willow. He had feared Queen C had returned. However she had then become encouraging and constructive as she talked with a depth of knowledge and experience about fight preparations which Giles found quite astoundingly out of character. But he’d watched her take somewhat insulting simplistic instruction from Anya on the laying out of the lunch table, without a sharp word or acid retort. He’d severely misjudged her and he knew it.

The time for action was almost upon them. Turning to the young man beside him he sighed with the resignation and determination of a man who had, despite his inner instincts and inclinations, fought in one too many wars.

“Xander, let’s start getting the weapons into your car.”

Faith was sitting on the counter, staring out at what could be the last few minutes of daylight they would ever see. It was a beautiful sunset. Seeing Willow moving towards her, she smiled in acknowledgement.

Willow returned her smile and said quietly so that no one else could hear “Before we go, can I ask
you something?”

Lowering herself from the counter, Faith replied “Sure. Anything.”

Willow continued softly and sincerely “When we met … from the beginning … you … never liked me. You … hated me. Why?”

Faith closed her eyes. She’d been expecting this particular conversation ever since she’d arrived back in Sunnydale but she’d hoped it wouldn’t happen until they’d gotten Buffy back, so that she would only have to respond to the question once.

Willow saw looks of embarrassment, resignation and shame cross the other young woman’s face.

Opening her eyes, Faith looked at Willow sadly and responded just as quietly “I never hated you. I … I was jealous … okay?”

Willow’s jaw dropped. “You were … what? You … You’re a Vampire Slayer … with your slayer powers … and the stories … and the sexy. You were jealous of me?”

“Sexy? Didn’t think you’d noticed,” Faith winked, before becoming serious again. “And yes. I’ve always been jealous of you. Guess my bad was partially because of that.”

Almost speechless, Willow finally managed “I … I … I don’t understand.”

Faith closed her eyes again for a moment to try to gather herself. ‘C’mon girl – time to suck it up.’ And, then taking a deep breath, she continued, “You’re brilliant, brave and beautiful – and you’ve always had Buffy’s heart. It didn’t take me that long to figure out that what you two had was more than best friendship.”

Willow gawked, still very much disturbed by the fact that it seemed everyone knew how she felt about Buffy … well almost.

Faith smiled wryly “And so damn humble that you still don’t see it. OK. I’ve got slayer strength, speed, hearing and a ‘bite me’ body – but it’s all just physical. And until recently I wasn’t using
any of it all that well. But you … you can make computers do anything. You research as good as
or better than Giles. You have book and school smarts. The street smarts - kinda naïve but they’re
there. You help B in the field not just behind the scenes. And you’re … nice.”

Willow could feel a slight blush building. Glancing at the ground she was grateful the guys were
still loading up the car and that no one else could hear what Faith was saying. Raising her head
she instinctively opened her mouth to dispute Faith’s assertions.

But before Willow could say anything, Faith plowed on “And then - then there’s the brave part.
How many times have you gone up against vamps and demons at her side?” Pausing slightly and
sighing Faith went on “Even that time in the Mayor’s office – You knew I was Slayer strong - what
I was capable of. I had a knife and you knew I wanted to hurt you. But you stood up to me … hell,
you told me off. Now I know that what you said was true. But back then it was too late … I was
in so deep with the Mayor. I had gone over the edge with you guys too many times.”

Willow took in the sorrow in her face and nodding slightly she accepted Faith’s assessment of their
past.

Looking directly at Willow, she admitted, “I thought I’d finally found somewhere I belonged,
someone I could share this Slayer thing with. You could even say … I had a crush on B. I think I
had it before I got here. I knew her rep – great slayer, beat death, killed the Master. Hell, she even
stood up to the Council. This was someone I could learn to share things with. I thought I’d finally
found a family.”

Willow wondered how she had not seen the insecurity before.

“But it was always you guys first – her Scoobies – her Willow. I couldn’t compete. After that
first week patrolling with her - I knew I was the outsider. The way she would light up when she
talked about you guys – you were family.” Faith sighed. “Do you know what it’s like to watch
families from the outside? Terrified because you might really start to care … because you know
that only someone you want to care for you can really hurt you,” she stated her voice shaking
slightly. “All they have to do is make it very clear that they’ll only let you get so close and that
anything more is out of your reach. She was everything to me,” Faith continued in an unusually
quiet voice. “And then I hated her for not knowing that … I’d wanted her … she was meant to get
it… to understand … to know … what I wanted … what I needed … how I felt … I wanted a …”

Willow’s mind swam in fear. ‘She can’t mean… she’s in love with Buffy too….’

********************************************************************BtVS********************************************************************
Angel made his way towards the address Wesley had given him. This was supposed to be the location of a Shaman that Wolfram and Hart’s records had listed in connection with Buffy and Willow. Sunset had seemed to take it’s own sweet time arriving and his thoughts had flown back to Buffy and where he’d really rather be as he had awaited the arrival of nightfall.

The idea of deliberately seeking out someone involved the magics, especially someone apparently not too shy about using the dark stuff, really gave Wesley a bad feeling. A magical curse was what had brought Angel to this point in his life, with all its heartache, pain and unresolved guilt. Now that he thought about it, maybe Faith and Cordelia’s solution of cursing Buffy and Willow to swap bodies hadn’t been such a great idea after all.

Turning the corner, Angel caught sight of a small figure running. “There,” he called out to Wesley, indicating the shape as it ducked into an alleyway. Hitting the breaks, he shifted gears and turned into the next access running parallel to the alley.

Wesley reached into his carry-all and retrieved his crossbow, anticipating that a show of force would be required. He ignored the absolute knowledge that any show of force would probably come from Angel. He needed to feel of use and he certainly wasn’t about to question holding a weapon gave him that feeling.

Angel accelerated through the access, sending rubbish and small animals scurrying, before he came to a sudden stop and hanging a left, he blocked the exit to the alleyway just as a the figure had almost emerged from the shadows and into the brief doorway and the street light at the end of the alley.

The small figure froze and Angel heard him mutter “Not enough warning. Not nearly enough.”

“I wanted a … sister. But she already had one;” Faith declared glancing at Willow, but missing the relief that washed over the witch. “She’d puff up with pride when she talked about – her Willow. Willow – her best friend, sister, confidante … true love – even if she couldn’t see it yet. There just didn’t seem to be room for me; No matter how hard I tried, how hard I pushed. It took a while for that to get through to me.”

The disappointment in her voice made Willow wonder if she’d ever really known this woman.
“I grew to resent you … the Scoobies, Giles, Joyce. You all seemed to belong. It was like you’d let me visit, but I just couldn’t stay. It was just like every other foster family I’d ever known. So I did I did what I’ve always done. I struck out … I hit first … I hurt you before I could be hurt,” she admitted glancing at the floor rather than meeting the look of pity she knew she’d see in Willow’s eyes.

Willow could feel her heart reaching out to the woman before her, who suddenly seemed so childlike and vulnerable.

Faith summoned her courage and looked back at the Witch. “I know it’s only words and they don’t mean much.” She paused. “I hope … If you …” She shook her head. ‘Jeez, this stuff’s harder than it looks’ she admitted to herself and tried again. “Willow … I really and truly do regret the pain that I’ve caused you … and Buffy”.

Willow’s jaw dropped in surprise as she realized that Faith had just used their given names, giving her words a depth of meaning she couldn’t doubt.

“I know that you’ll probably never be able to forgive, let alone trust me, so I won’t even ask,” Faith stated, before looking directly into the other girl’s eyes and promising, “But know this --- if you ever need anything from me, y’know … need me to do anything or if I find out that you need my kinda help – I’ll be there for you. I won’t let you down. I owe you – no strings.”

Willow had never heard Faith talk for so long and so seriously about anything. She didn’t have a clue what to say.

Faith hoped she hadn’t made a big mistake by being so honest just before they went out to get her sister Slayer. Willow’s well-known “resolve” face took over Buffy’s features and the hazel, rather than green, eyes bore into her own as though they were peering into her very soul. Although it was uncomfortably difficult, the dark Slayer never looked away from Willow’s intense gaze, hoping that she could convey her sincerity.

Suddenly the Witch smiled mischievously, realizing that they both needed some light relief, and she sexily asked, “Do you really think I’m … beautiful?”

Faith was so surprised by the question, which seemed to come out of left field, and the change in Willow’s demeanor, especially after everything the Slayer had just revealed, that all she could do was stammer “I … Huh … I … ahh … Wh … What?”
Amused by Faith’s sudden inability to string a sentence together, Willow continued, “You said that I was brilliant, brave and beautiful. You kinda talked about the brilliant and the brave. What about the beautiful part?”

Faith blinked, but catching the twinkle in Willow’s eye, she finally smiled. “Goes without saying … you got that ‘I may look shy and nice but I love to be naughty’ thing going; kinda like a hidden surprise in a Cracker Jacks box – a surprising little sin thing”

“Sin?” Willow exclaimed with concern.

“Honey, you know how I love a little sin – I’d have been quite happy to let you lead me astray,” Faith advised her, winking suggestively. “But you always had B in your sights. You two belong together. Beautiful witch who now has inside slayer know-how and a beautiful slayer about to find out she’s got untapped mojo. Damn, you two are gonna give the bad guys apoplexy,” she smirked. “Okay so I’m a hopeless romantic. Shocker, ain’t it? I’ve seen some real nasty stuff in my life, hell I’ve done some of it, but you guys always reminded me of what really mattered. Getting you two together - seeing something so right actually work out – despite all the crap that surrounds us - I kinda need that too.”

“Awww, Faith.” Willow exclaimed and threw her arms around a stunned Slayer who stiffened in surprise as the Witch pulled her into a tight hug. “Welcome to the family.”

Faith’s heart burst with an unfamiliar happiness and she wrapped Willow’s slender frame in her own arms, returning the hug for all she was worth.

“Well would you look at that?” Xander exclaimed, as he walked back into the apartment to see the two women hugging.

“That is certainly a sight that I never thought I’d see,” Giles commented.

Anya glanced over her shoulder at Cordelia’s wide eyes and threw Xander an ‘I told you so’ look.

“If Buffy doesn’t get her arms off …” Cordelia scowled and growled
A grinning Xander interrupted, “Cordy, that’s Willow.”

“I know that!” Cordelia yelled at him. “Has that little b … witch forgotten that her beloved Buffy is still in the hands of those mercenaries? I just think that’s …quite enough of that.”

Xander laughed heartily and stage whispered to Anya. “Well honey, I guess you were right again. We’d better keep an eye on our two LA friends.”

Anya, still smiling, said “You should all learn to listen to me more often.”

Giles simply shook his head, as confused by their exchange as he was by the sight before him.

“Excuse me! Buffy is still out there needing us to rescue her,” Cordelia spat as she marched up to the still embracing women.

But neither one seemed to hear her.

“Willow, are you ok?” Xander asked as he too stepped towards them.

Willow looked up smiling at Faith, as she moved out of their embrace before responding “Yeah, Xander. I’m fine. Now. Thanks to Faith.” Then grinning at Giles, she added, “I think we’re ready to get Buffy. I’m pretty sure our spell and any other magic we try will be much stronger and more powerful now.”

As Cordelia moved closer to Faith, Giles inquired “Indeed?”

Willow smiled at Faith as she replied “There’s trust between us now, not just the magic.”

“Are you alright?” Cordelia asked Faith.

Faith offered her loyal friend a quiet and sincere smile. “Five by five … Totally,” she stated before reaching out to give Cordelia a big hug. ‘This mushy stuff’s not so bad,’ she decided, as she drew a stunned and confused Seer into her heart-felt embrace, filling it with all the thanks she felt because
Angel stood his ground since there was no point moving forward until the guy decided if he was going to fight or flee. Years of experience had taught him that these two animal instincts were universal. But the man wasn’t moving. He was just standing there waiting. ‘What the hell’s he waiting for – an invitation? Do something! Run already.’

Maclay sighed ‘This is taking longer than I expected. Why doesn’t he just attack?’

Wesley stood feeling somewhat like he was missing something as he took in the two men before him; it was like some weird cowboy standoff. He could almost here the spaghetti western music. Each was staring at the other, seemingly waiting for the other to move.

“You don’t seem too surprised to see me. Why is that?” Angel finally asked.

“I guess you prefer to be a surprise,” Maclay responded.

“We all like a little mystery in our lives,” Angel acknowledged.

Maclay just smiled. ‘Come closer,’ he thought as he reached into his pants pocket as casually as he could.

Angel smiled. “I should have realized they’d warn you. It seems our little visit to your employers didn’t exactly go undetected,” he added moving forward. “But what could you know that would warrant giving you the heads up, I wonder?”

“Ahh, so that’s what you’re after,” he responded glancing at the rising moon. “You’re a little late for a fact-finding mission, aren’t you?”

“You wouldn’t be trying to make a run for it if I was out of time,” Angel stated, getting closer to the man. ‘Why doesn’t he run? He must know what I am.’
“Oh, I’m not running. I’m exactly where I need to be,” Maclay stated stepping forward with bravado.

His response caused Angel to stop and glance around the alley. Seeing nothing untoward, he continued towards the man. “Can’t say I’m impressed by your choice of venue - but to each to his own. I’d have gone for something more GH myself.”

“That’s it – closer,’ Maclay silently urged, wrapping his fist around the Amulet.

“Angel,” Wesley warned. “Be careful.” There was something about this he didn’t like. The fellow was too relaxed. It was almost as if he wanted Angel to … Oh my god! “Angel!” he yelled as a bright blue aura surrounded them both.

Maclay had reached out and touched Angel before muttering something under his breath. The flash of blue light had been almost blinding. It had seemed to freeze Angel in mid-step and then the bubble of light had withdrawn to surround them.

As Wesley moved forward, he took in the strange sight before him. It was as if a large ten-foot blue light bulb had suddenly taken up residence in the middle of the alley. Inside the bulb he could just about make out the figures of Angel and the other man. But as he approached, it became harder to move, harder to lift his legs, impossible to move forward. It felt like he was trying to walk through tar.

The power coursing through his veins, pouring into him was overwhelming. Maclay could almost feel each of his organs as they soaked in the essence of the Amulet. He had used Angel to unlock it. He had used himself as the conduit and he had used what he had needed from the book to block the transfer to the vampire. He was now a living breathing battery, storing and holding the power of the amulet.

The swelling living pure magic intended to stop an apocalypse was now his.
Chapter 31

Hyatt Ramu recalled watching with fear as Maclay had walked towards Holland Manners. His stomach already in knots, he wondered why he had thought following his boss was a good idea. His grandmother had always said that those who eavesdrop never hear well of themselves.

His natural distrust and curiosity had taken over when he’d seen the senior partner come out of “Recent Acquisitions”. Years of training, years of knowing what not to see, what not to acknowledge as a junior had fallen away in response to the trepidation, self-preservation and doubt his boss had recently instilled into him. He’d been so confident of his success, so certain that his careful planning would bear fruit. But Holland’s calm, matter-of-fact statements, knowledge and questions had shaken his world. All thoughts of becoming a partner by carefully moving up the ladder via detailed planning and eventually taking Holland’s post seemed to drift from his mind, replaced by the opportunity to gaze into the world and mind of the senior partner.

Maclay was a small weasel of a man whose company he had found less than appealing. Carrying himself with an overwhelming sense of his own importance, the man had reacted to Hyatt’s job offer with the air of one being inconvenienced. The junior associate was used to people falling all over themselves to be of use to the firm. But he had finally found the mage’s price and that had changed his manner quickly enough. Everyone has his price. It had just been a matter of finding it.

But he was worried. What had the senior partner been up to -- meeting a non-player like Maclay? Was Holland following up on his project? Had he made a mistake?

When he saw Manners reach into his jacket and pause, he had hoped the action would prove harmful to the loathsome little man. He suddenly had unrealistic hopes that he was about to see the senior partner kill someone by his own hand. Maclay had appeared perturbed and impatient. Finally Holland passed him a small envelope, holding onto it despite Maclay’s eager hands. He had leaned towards the weasel of a man and, smiling as he did so, said something … no … he had asked a question and only released his hold on the envelope once Maclay had nodded.

Now sitting at his desk eight hours later, Hyatt tried to piece together all that had happened with everything else he had recently learned about Holland Manners and Angel. But he couldn’t believe what he thought it meant. ‘The senior partner would never … Why would he do something so opposed to the policy of the firm?’

Hyatt reached out for the telephone, not at all sure if what he was about to do was such a good idea. But he shook his doubts aside. He’d been the one to bring this project to near completion with no support, no guiding hand but his own. Hadn’t he earned a little autonomy?
“Are you sure you wanna try this?” Xander asked, his concern obvious.

“I have to. I need to know she’s okay,” Willow explained, “And she needs to know we’re coming.” She could feel something close to desperation building within her. She needed to reach out and feel her beloved. It was as if her heart was hungry for any small part of Buffy it could have.

Taking a look at her face Xander sighed. “Okay, Will. I get where you’re coming from,” he replied before voicing in his own fears. “But what if it doesn’t work? What if she can’t answer to let you know she’s okay, that she heard you? You’re gonna get wigged. Your head will be full of doubt. The last thing we need is our Wiccan Slayer with a mind full of holes. Stuff falls through them. Not a good thing while you’re trying to control new magics, especially with the new temporary magic partner you have. General Swiss Cheese at the Little Big Horn - not an appealing image.”

“I will not. I know what I have to do,” Willow declared, annoyed by her oldest friend’s negativity. She knew she could do this. And so should he! “I can control how I feel. I’ve been doing that for years,” she reminded him. “When we get this rescue going, there will be no holes in my cheese,” she stated with such determination that her choice of words took a moment to sink in.

Xander bit the inside of his lip, determined not to give into the mental picture of Willow’s body with a big lump of Swiss cheese as her head and a confederate hat set at a rakish tilt.

Wesley wallowed in mounting frustration. He was unable to do anything but watch as Angel was held securely inside the globe of blue light. It was so bright that he could only just make out the two figures within it.

Why hadn’t he stopped Angel from getting so close to a man versed in the dark magics? ‘I should have warned him. As if he would have listened,’ he thought to himself, well aware that Angel’s eyes normally glazed over whenever he tried to explain the results and hypotheses gleaned from his research or ex-watcher based instincts.
And so he stood feeling useless and ineffectual as his anger rose and his patience waned. ‘Surely it has to collapse soon. This can’t be how the man intends to escape.’ But just as he was about to scream in frustration at the world, the glow seemed to shift from blue to a pale green.

Buffy could hear the faint sounds of raised voices. But without her slayer hearing she had little hope of making out what her captors were arguing about.

This whole “you’re a normal girl” thing was really starting to tick her off. Okay maybe she had once … okay, more than once … wished she was just a normal girl. But that thought had long ago been replaced with the internal promise she had made to stop people from dying at the hands of vampires and demons. Then she’d had to tell her mother. Somehow that had made it more permanent and real than it had been before. She no longer fostered the illusion of growing old. She just didn’t think about it. Most of the time she didn’t think more than one month ahead; she had become the poster girl for – “one day at a time”.

But now there was Willow. Her dear sweet, sexy, loyal Willow. And she had, indeed, begun to think ahead, planning, worrying and doubting their future. She had now been considering a future, not alone, but with someone. The last time she’d done that Angel had left and shattered her fragile dreams.

Smiling, she realized that she didn’t need to worry that Willow would ever leave her. They might end up forever friends, with an awkward moment in their past that they didn’t talk about. But Willow would always be there for her - that she knew for sure. This knowledge filled her with strength and amusement. She’d always known who she would spend her life with. She just hadn’t realized the circumstances. Maybe Faith hadn’t been that far off the mark.

Reviewing the details of the prophecy, Hyatt’s mind went into meltdown. ‘What the hell is he up to?’ he asked himself, almost missing the next part of Kelly’s impromptu history of the Amulet that Holland Manners had removed from “Recent Acquisitions”.

“Fine. They’re linking this thing to Angel just as we predicted they would,” he stated impatiently, only to have Kelly hesitate and extrapolate rather than simply confirm his statement. He hated theories and the indecision they produced. He wanted cold hard facts, something he could rely on, not the interpretations of some tealeaf reader covering his or her own back. But Kelly wasn’t any more willing to put her head on the proverbial chopping block than the historians had obviously
“Okay, okay. He’s the odds-on favorite. No one else appears to fit the prophecy now that I’ve knocked the bleached blond vampire out of the game,” he stated. But something gnawed at him, the sudden feeling that all his plans were being undermined coursing through his veins. His whole plan B was focused on Angel getting this Amulet and then being forced to make the ultimate sacrifice to stop the apocalypse. But Holland Manners had just taken the Amulet and given it away. If this ruined his back-up plan, then keeping the sun from rising and causing the apocalypse would depend completely on the Witch and the Slayer not being able to break the spell in time.

Something Kelly said caught his attention. “What?”

“As I said, there has been a new development. When the group gathered to review Vijay’s findings, they … well they interpreted the final part of the prophecy somewhat differently,” she stated, pausing before delivering what she obviously viewed as bad news. “They now think that if the one described in the prophecy succeeds in using the Amulet to stop the apocalypse he wouldn’t die. Instead he could become mortal again and walk in the sunlight,” Kelly informed him, her voice trailing off.

“What???” Hyatt exclaimed, as he mentally let his jaw drop.

Willow began to focus her mind on the woman that now fully occupied the center of her heart. She needed to know that Buffy was okay. But most of all, she needed to know that she was still alive. Even though she hoped and believed that she would instinctively know if anything ever happened to Buffy, self-doubt still forced her to accept the possibility that this might not be the case. She, therefore, had to remove all doubt before starting the rescue attempt.

She had locked herself in the bathroom in the hope of having some peace and quiet. But she could still hear the rest of the gang moving around the apartment and talking. Certain that she was the main topic of their conversation she fought the urge to retreat into her shell and block out all that meant. Over the last few days she had been the center of attention in a way that she wasn’t at all comfortable with. She could feel her old demons – low esteem, uncertainty, self-doubt, panic and paranoia rearing their ugly heads. She had thought those were gone forever; Buffy had helped her get through them. She wasn’t designed to have everyone peeking into her life and second-guessing her every move. How on earth did Buffy cope?

Sorrow filled her as she realized that the one person she wanted to talk to and share all of this with
was the one person not here. Gulping, she refused to let either the anger or the fear grab hold of her. ‘Concentrate,’ she ordered herself and closing her eyes she began to focus herself.

Drawing just enough mystical energy together into a core around her heart, she mentally lifted it towards the location of her third eye, allowing only one word to enter her mind - ‘Buffy.’

Holland Manners gazed at the entrance to Remal’s vault. He really hated this place. Even though he knew he was still in the firm’s building, he always felt as if he was about to use a portal and jump dimensions. Laughing at himself, he reached out and pushed open the door.

The room before him was dimly lit by candles and its hanging fabrics created large shadowy nooks and corners like something from a poorly lit black and white desert movie. But the man that came from the shadows was no Rudolph Valentino. He was a fully grown demon of the second order.

“Holland? So soon?” Remal queried, his pitch black eyebrow rising and his sharpened horns glinting in the candle light.

“Remal, you look well rested,” Holland stated, forcing a friendly smile.

“Thank you. Yes, I am,” the demon replied and gesturing towards a pile of scattered cushions, he beckoned the senior partner into his abode. “How may I be of assistance?”

Moving towards the cushions, Manners felt the door close behind him. Glancing at the cushions he located one he thought he’d be able to rise from after their discussion had ended. Lowering himself he began, “Events have unfolded much as you said they would. Please pass my thanks on to your sister. Her foresight has proved invaluable.”

“I am glad we could be of help. Our exchanges have benefited us well over the years, have they not?” Remal questioned.

Recognizing his question as nothing more than the need to ratify the contract he had signed so many decades ago, Holland smiled, “Indeed they have.”
Remal nodded and, taking a cushion himself, he smiled - his shark like teeth almost glowing in the candlelight. “His Sire’s remains have been relocated and soon the death killer will be tempted to break the bonds of her creators. Has the Amulet been dealt with?”

“Yes and it will soon be destroyed,” Holland affirmed, unable to help the small shiver of uncertainty from crossing his mind.

“You have reservations?” the demon asked, staring questioningly at the senior partner. Sometimes these humans amused him. “Do you wish my sister had not told you of what was to come, of your own demise at the hands of his Sire?” he asked unable to keep the frustration from his voice.

“No reservations! Just the caution of mortality. As an immortal, caution may mean nothing to you but, then again, had I been immortal you would have killed me at birth,” Holland stated in a matter of fact tone showing no resentment.

Remal simply nodded.

******************************************************************BtVSS************************************************************************

Her eyelids were so heavy. Maybe if she just closed them for a moment. ‘No!’ She had to be ready … ready for what? While trying to reposition herself, she had managed to loosen the rope around her wrists but in doing so she had simply tightened the ropes around her ankles to the point where she began to wonder if she would be able to walk.

A buzzing noise seemed to invade her aching temples and she shook her head, momentarily closing her eyes against the sound. ‘No! I gotta stay awake.’ But the noise came back and this time louder, pounding against her forehead. She allowed her head to drop, screwing her eyes up and wishing she was able to cover her ears.

Slowly she began to imagine the buzzing was familiar, that it made sense somehow. Were there words hidden in it? Straining her tired mind, she tried to filter out the buzzing sound.

[B---- --’re co---- -o ge- --o. Can --o -ear me]

‘There, that was … what?’
‘Concentrate, it’s almost … Willow?’

‘Willow? Yes, yes I can hear you,’ she almost screamed with her mind as her heart nearly exploded and fresh tears, this time of joy, began to form in her eyes. ‘Oh Willow, are you okay? Where are they holding you?’

‘Willow?’

‘Willow?’

“How’s she doing?” Cordelia asked sitting down next to Faith.

“She’ll cope. There are issues,” Faith laughed, “like that’s news! But she’s got it under control. Red’s tougher than she looks.”

“Good,” Cordelia affirmed quickly setting that aside before she added, “And you?”
“I’m five by five,” Faith assured her.

“Oh yeah. The infamous ‘five by five’ mega cool Faith statement. And who the hell is ever gonna ask you what it means? Oh duh – that would be me,” Cordelia declared sending Faith her best blinding smile, eyes wide open in expectation.

The Dark Slayer was speechless for a moment; entranced by the sheer power of the smile she was being offered. ‘Damn, has she got any idea how stunning that thing is?’ Leaning back as casually as she could manage, she laughed before recovering from her silence and offering Cordy what she hoped was a smile of mystery. “But honey, I thought you liked a little mystery?”

“I get enough of that day to day. Seriously, what does five by five mean? Aside from like how to make a square,” the Seer asked grinning.

“See, first I lose my mystery and now I’m a square. That’s why a girl should always keep her mystery,” Faith stated, throwing Cordelia a suggestive wink.

“Don’t you trust me?” Cordelia asked in all seriousness. “I thought that by now, you know, after all we’ve been through … all that’s about to happen …” she paused remembering that tonight Faith was going to put herself in harm’s way.

Thrown by Cordelia’s sudden change in mood, Faith found herself staring into the depths of those chestnut brown eyes. She could read the sudden sincere concern filling them directed at her and she could almost feel her heart stop.

“Afraid I’ll betray you somehow, huh? I guess you’ve had some major letdowns on the friend front … but I thought that we’d moved passed that?” Cordelia explained, as her throat began to go dry under the heat of Faith’s gaze. She needed to know that she meant something more to Faith than just another acquaintance, just another chapter in her life. She needed to know that the friendship they had built was more than just a passing thing.

“We have. It’s not that,” Faith assured her. “I do trust you … I mean I want to. I just didn’t think it mattered to you if I …”

“It matters. It more than matters, actually,” Cordelia interrupted. “Who knows why considering how ‘valley girl’ you can sometimes be. Hey, it’s not like I’m after your fashion secrets,” she blurted out brashly, unnerved to find herself stumbling over her words and breaking eye contact.
Gathering her thoughts, she made the decision to say what she meant. “I like knowing things about you that no one else does. It’s kind of cool. It makes me feel like we … like we have something … you know … a special friendship. I’ve never had someone who … but it’s no big. If you don’t want to let me in … I mean, just tell me.”

“Hey, you are … special … I mean we do have … at least I thought we … I’d like to think we’ve … become … friends,” Faith finally managed, reaching forward to gently place a reassuring hand on Cordelia’s arm. “All this new stuff gets me a bit turned around … you know?” she asked, not really expecting a response. “Five by five - you wanna know what it means? Fine. But it’s gonna be a letdown,” she warned, knitting her eyebrows together in mock distress.

“You haven’t let me down yet,” Cordelia stated, throwing her a shy smile. “I like the idea of sharing a secret with you.”

Faith couldn’t help laughing, “You, me and half the armed forces.”

“What?”

“Five by Five is a military radio term. It means that the signal strength and clarity have both scored five out of a possible five; so ‘five by five’,” Faith paused to take in the disbelieving look on Cordelia’s face. “Okay, so the whole cruising navy bars is now out of my system,” she assured her before adding, “it’s like saying – loud & clear or A-Okay.”

Cordelia stared at her. “Seriously? That’s all it means?”

“Yep. Kinda square, huh?” she asked, pulling a childish grin across her features. “Guess it loses the cool in translation.”

“Yeah!” Cordelia laughed. “Kinda. What were you - a radio ham groupie? Okay, now I get the secret. SO not going tell anyone that I know someone who knows radio geeks. Yeeeck. So NOT cool,” she stated in mock horror.

“Happy now?” Faith asked, not sure why it was that this gorgeous person could get her to talk about … well … just about anything.

“Trust me sweetheart, I’m taking that one to the grave,” Cordelia assured her placing her hand
upon Faith’s and squeezing gently before breaking into a similarly childish grin.

*****************************BtVS**************************

Wesley moved forward in anticipation. The glow was definitely changing color. It was almost all green and he thought he could see a faint whisp of yellow now beginning to form at the base of the gleaming globe.

Then he saw Angel’s head move as if he was about to fall backwards and concern filled him. He moved closer again, positioning himself behind Angel’s attacker. Careful to stay away from the apparent faded edge of the globe, he wondered if it would simply shrink or evaporate. He was pretty sure Angel was going to fall once released but the fall wouldn’t hurt the vampire. So he wanted to be ready to take this guy by surprise as soon as the globe allowed him to.

Unexpectedly, the globe began to move quickly towards him. Caught in it, his motions became lethargic and pained. He tried to move backwards to escape its influence to no avail. Before he had the opportunity to see that it had split in two, the short man had simply stepped from it, turning to smile at Wesley’s predicament before disappearing. One minute he was there, the next he was gone.

The sound of Angel’s body falling to the alley’s floor broke Wesley’s vacant gaze of surprise as the globe dissipated around them. Pulling himself together and realizing he too had been released, he rushed to Angel’s side.

*****************************BtVS**************************

Buffy gulped, her mind reeling from ‘now I’m having waking dreams’ to ‘Jeez, she said Yes!’ Her mind exploded with joy and confusion. It had sounded like Willow – but had she wanted it to be Willow? Maybe she was just having a sleep-deprived illusion? ‘How could Willow send me a message? … Of course … MAGIC?’

Her mind went blank as her heart felt like it was bursting. The sudden influx of hope and joy was too much for her mind to take. Willow had said Yes. She had actually said yes … and they were coming to save her. ‘Hold on! If they’re coming to save me and Willow knows … that means she’s safe. She wasn’t taken. OK, but why wasn’t she taken? Why was I taken … Oh Wow - she said yes … YES!’ A silly grin spread its childlike happiness across her face.
Had one of her guards looked in at that moment, they would have thought the girl had gone mad because she was smiling, laughing and crying all at the same time.

**************************************************************************BtVS**************************************************************************

Giles couldn’t help smiling as Anya and Xander attempted to make his toolbox fit into the now completely jammed trunk of his car. They had now tried it at least six different ways but none of these had allowed the trunk to close.

“Move that over there,” Xander instructed as he pulled out a sword.

“It won’t work. The axe sticks out too far,” Anya responded, placing her hands on her hips.

Giles was reminded of the time he watched his two great aunts packing for a long weekend in the Lake District. As had occurred every Easter, he had watched as they attempted to pack everything including the kitchen sink - Aunty Mary adding more and more, Aunty Maud tut-tutting but making no attempt to stop her. The final task of sitting on the suitcase lid and bouncing, in the often vain hope that his weight would help to close the case, had become a childish sense of joy back then. But right now he was quickly replacing amusement with disbelief. ‘Didn’t they have a clue when to give up?’

“Well, just wiggle it up and down a bit. We only need a little more room,” Xander sighed in exasperation.

“Wiggling won’t do any good. The box is too wide,” Anya informed him, her tone becoming sharper with each response.

Standing upright Xander glared at the offending box. “Well it has to. We can’t leave it behind. I need it to jerry rig the equipment.”

Giles couldn’t stand it any longer. He stepped forward, reached into the trunk of the car and removed the toolbox. “One can’t help but wonder why, if all empirical evidence shows that this won’t fit into the trunk, why you haven’t considered just placing it on someone’s lap?”

**************************************************************************BtVS**************************************************************************
Willow stood slowly, shaken and drained by the emotions she had picked up from Buffy. She had used telepathy before. She’d been able to hear Xander and Anya. Why couldn’t she hear Buffy? She’d tried refocusing, shifting her center. Nothing seemed to help.

Maybe she’d been foolish to hope that her beloved would be able to respond. She could tell that Buffy’s emotional state was pretty stressed and shaky. What if she hadn’t allowed Buffy time to acquire the focus that would have been needed? She should have factored that in. She felt frustration building within her. Goddess, how she wanted her skills back and her talents, not these borrowed ones.

Glancing at the mirror at the face of the woman she loved, a feeling of sadness and loss came over her. ‘Oh Buffy, I tried.’ Buffy’s emotions had been so stretched, it was as if she had been refusing to let go, as if something was holding her. ‘She’s kept herself awake,’ Willow realized, ‘But why? There was nothing she could do. She had to know we’d come for her.’

Uncertainty flew into her mind, coupled with the terrifying thought that Buffy had doubted her; that she had somehow accepted that she was alone, that no help was coming. What if she’d been staying awake so that she didn’t miss an opening, a way out? ‘How could she think I wouldn’t … that we wouldn’t come for her … find her? No way’ she rebuked herself, ‘Buffy would never leave us and we would never leave her. She knows that.’ It was like a Scooby rule or something.

Leaving the bathroom, Willow set her chin allowing her determination to rescue Buffy to become her only focus. The apartment door opened and Giles, Xander and Anya walked in. Glancing first at them and then at Cordelia and Faith, she nodded. “So, are we ready?”

**********************************************************************************BiVS**********************************************************************************

Holland Manners wasn’t at all sure if Ramal had accepted the importance of his warning. That was the problem with non-human business associates – differing frames of reference. Absently he wondered if he should schedule a short workshop on interspecies relations.

Glancing at his watch, he smiled. By now Angel would be minus a very powerful tool intended for his use only. Despite what that silly love struck vampire had assumed, he would never be allowed to use it. Angel’s use of the Amulet would have eventually caused this branch of the firm to be transferred to the vampire. No matter who used it, there were two things Holland intended to avoid - Angel getting his hands on Wolfram and Hart was one; the other being his own early demise at the hands of Angel’s sire, Darla.
By removing the magic from the Amulet and giving it to that little worm Maclay, he had removed
the focal point for a whole chain of events. It often amazed him that so many of his junior
colleagues still persisted in seeing things in a two-dimensional cause and effect manner. This was
multi-dimensional; it involved ripples. Angel’s effect on the firm was like a multi-layered cake.
And he had just removed the raising agent that would have allowed this to happen.

Xander reviewed the layout he had seen earlier when doing reconnaissance with Faith, trying to
recall as many details of the hideout as he could. He was aware that timing would be essential. He
just hoped that Willow could keep up with the pace Faith had set when she’d tried a partial dry run
against his advice. The area didn’t have much cover, and distraction and diversion were going to
be their greatest weapons.

He’d given Anya a big hug before guiding her into the back seat with Faith, Cordelia and Willow.
Boy, had that been a tight fit. He’d almost made a wisecrack at the sight of Cordelia trying not to
end up sitting in Faith’s lap while the Dark Slayer just grinned, but had wisely thought better of it.

Giles had been quieter than he’d expected. Not that the watcher was normally a chatterbox but he
usually kicked off something like this with one of his ‘oh so very British’ speeches; like he was
channeling that Winston Churchill guy.

Pulling away from the apartment, he couldn’t help giving their apartment a quick glance.
Whenever they set off on a mission he always wondered if they would all be coming back. Their
luck had been just too good so far. He always feared that one day they would run out of luck and it
wouldn’t be the bad guy who didn’t come back – It would be one of them.

While Xander wallowed in the pessimistic world of what might happen, Giles was finding the
silence in the car as uncomfortable as the weight of Xander’s toolbox that he was holding across
his knees.

They made their way towards the docks in silence with only one interruption from Anya to check
that everyone had been to the bathroom. She had then informed them that there had been some
great battle that Alexander the Great had won only because the opposing troops had poor bladder
control.

He had been tempted to go back over the plan but a warning look from Cordelia told him that to do
so with bring down her wrath. One look at Willow’s determined features had assured him that her
mind was on mission. He couldn’t be so sure of his own mind however, as his ever-present
concern for Buffy flooded back.

Entering the main storage area of the docks, Xander had parked the car a good two blocks away from the warehouse. As everyone unloaded and assembled at the rear of the car, Giles was filled with the need to say something to Willow but nothing came to mind. So he reached over to place a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

Willow spun around at him and for a moment he thought he was about to be attacked. The look on her face was only thinly concealed and he recognized it easily – Slayer Rage! He had seen it before – in Buffy and, especially, in Faith. “Willow?”

“I’m okay,” she responded quickly, turning away from him.

“Willow, you need to center yourself. If you let that anger and rage rule you, I am certain that there will be a loss of control, a loss of focus,” Giles instructed her, shifting back into his Watcher role with comfortable ease.

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him, taking a deep breath and becoming more than a little annoyed with herself for letting Giles know just how tightly strung she really was.

“I’m glad you feel confident. One would be even more concerned if you did not but Willow, you really must take some time to focus,” he advised, turning to place the toolbox on the roof of the car.

Irritated, Willow snapped, “We don’t have time for chanting, crystals and Kumbaya. We need to get Buffy out of there.”

“And unless pasty white is going to become next season’s new formal black I vote we do just that before sunrise,” Cordelia interjected, stepping forward to stand beside Willow. “So let’s skip the ‘wise old man’ speech and get on with it. OK?”

Realizing that Cordelia was right, Xander stepped forward. “I think I speak for everyone when I say that I’ve had enough of the planning. We all know what we have to do. So let’s get on with the doing. Will knows what she needs to do and she’ll do it. Now grab that toolbox and follow me.”
Buffy closed her eyes and smiled. Somehow the fear of falling asleep was now gone. She was more awake than she’d been in ages. Her mind felt like a night at the bronze; so many conversations, she almost couldn’t listen to just the one thought.

‘They were coming to get her. How exactly were they planning to do that? Did Faith have anything to do with it?’

Then she froze at the sound of footsteps. ‘So soon?’ But they passed by her. ‘Just a guard.’

‘Willow said yes!’ They were going to date. But they couldn’t date; they were running out of time. But the ‘yes’ was a good sign. That meant she really cared for her, didn’t it? That they had a chance. That she wanted her. That she wanted more that just friendship. ‘Didn’t it?’

The footsteps were back. ‘Seems like I’ve got my own personal guard. Oh, how sweet.’

As Xander took possession of his toolbox, Giles glanced over at the machinery - a bulldozer, a dump truck, an earth digger. Then he saw it – a wrecking ball. A flood of childhood memories overwhelmed him. He’d watched builders demolish his school’s old gymnasium when he should have been paying attention to a series of lectures on post-modern art. And all he had thought was how satisfying it must be to vent all your anger in such an accepted and legal but destructive act.

Turning to Xander, he paused ‘I can’t ask. What will he think?’ Blinking slightly he turned away again.

“Okay, Anya I need you to take this and wait for me by that earth digger. Giles take this and head over to the…”

Giles mentally crossed his fingers.

“Dump truck and wait for me. I’m going to sort out that bulldozer.”
Ignoring the disappointment he felt, Giles couldn’t help asking, “What about that wrecking ball? Surely that could do a lot of damage?”

“Naah. No good. It takes too long to set up and move into position,” Xander advised him, smirking. “We’re after speed and surprise here, G-man. So it’s big wheels and tonnage.”

****************************************************************************BtVS*****************************************************************************

Wesley cradled the limp figure of Angel in his arms and wondered if he’d be able to drag the vampire to the car by himself. Then again maybe if he just waited long enough, the big guy would come to. It had taken quite sometime for the last of the globe to dissipate and release him. By that time Wesley knew that he had no chance of catching the little worm of a man who had been responsible for all this.

Glancing up and down the alley he realized that he had spent one too many evenings in the back alleys of LA. ‘I really need to visit a park or the ocean.’ Shrugging aside his internal reflections at the path his life had taken, he looked back down at Angel. ‘Oh well.’

Raising his hand he landed a well-placed slap onto his colleague’s right cheek. Having braced himself for a reaction, he exhaled when nothing happened. Raising his hand again, he wondered how long this was going to take.

Seven or eight slaps later, he gave up and bent over to grab Angel under his arms. He took a deep breath and exhaled.

“Uhhhh!” Angel muttered.

“What?” Wesley blurted, as relief washed over him.

“You work with me and you eat garlic?” Angel asked, slowly opening his eyes to throw Wesley an accusing look.

Instinctively searching his memory, Wesley nodded apologetically, “Must have been that pizza last night.”
“Ahh … the dangers of fast food,” Angel commented looking around. “Okay, why am I still on the ground?”

Standing up Wesley smiled. “Long story,” he replied, not sure how to begin.

“I’m guessing it involved that short guy,” Angel stated as he tried to turn over.

Wesley nodded, “Mostly.”

“So, and I’m just continuing the guessing here, would that also be why I can’t seem to move?” Angel asked, his annoyance very evident.

“That would probably be the blue globe thing he threw around the two of you,” Wesley advised him.

“Great. Assuming mini-Merlin is long gone, am I staying here until I can walk or did you have a plan?”

Willow followed Faith, her heart thumping so loudly in anticipation that it resounded in her ears. ‘We’re coming, my darling,’ she telepathically shouted, desperate to make contact despite the fact that she would be seeing Buffy very soon. She could feel the power building as she gave her borrowed slayer powers free reign.

“Keep low,” Faith instructed her as they reached a low cement bank topped by a wire fence. “There’s not much cover from this point on but we can get closer if we’re careful. Then it’s up to the X-man and his ego-sized toys.”

Crouching down low, Willow tried to run but the position was so unfamiliar and uncomfortable that the best she could manage was a loping trot. She could see Faith pulling away from her and disappointment filled her but shaking her head, she refused to allow it to stay. ‘Why should I be able to keep up with her? She’s a real slayer. I’m just some ‘G I Jane Slayer’ wannabe without the years of experience she and Buffy have had. I’ve only been doing this for a week, for goodness sake. I mean, you need years of experience, don’t you? Slayers are like the Special Ops of the Hellmouth and all things dark and scary. That’s why they do all that one-on-one training, learning
how to build a bridge from six egg cartons and a box of matches or how to slay a demon with a cotton ball and four Barbie pins if they had to. I’m just a witch with some borrowed powers and a couple of training sessions. Gotta keep it real. So I can’t keep up with Faith - Big Deal!! As Anya would say - I have other skills. Damn it, Giles was right. I need to focus.’

**********************************************************************************BtVS**********************************************************************************

Buffy remained alert while waiting for Willow, the others and her rescue. She tried to relax as much as possible considering the discomfort of the restraints on her hands and feet. If only she had her slayer strength, she could have easily gotten out of them.

‘I don’t understand how Willow can have my slayer abilities and still be able to use her magical powers to speak to me but I can’t do anything. Why can’t I use her magic to make her hear me … to help with my rescue? I know I’m nowhere near as smart as she is but … I mean … I used to help her with her spells … at the beginning.’ She tried to calm down. She couldn’t afford to miss anything.

Then she remembered something. ‘Wait a sec. Didn’t I already use magic? After Willow and the gang rescued me from Dracula … I am so getting tired of having to be rescued. Faith was there too, even though we didn’t see her … she dusted him for us … she …’ Closing her eyes, she shook her head trying to clear it so that she could get back to the elusive memory. ‘When those three crazy girl vamps attacked us … Willow was down, hurt … they were trying to kill her. Something happened … but what exactly?’ She paused for a moment trying to remember.

‘They caught fire. Did I … could I have done that? And then … then … Willow was carrying me back to the dorms and taking care of me … like she always does.’ She smiled at the thought for a moment, but soon started to think back about that night again. She remembered the heat; it had been inside her. And somehow … somehow she’d let it out – How? The Sirens had burst into flame. She had done it. She knew she had. But how? If she could do that, surely she should be able to answer Willow’s call.

She was furious with herself, frustrated that she couldn’t remember … that she couldn’t make herself heard by Willow.

**********************************************************************************BtVS**********************************************************************************

Xander worked his way across the now dark building site to the dump truck where Giles awaited him. Setting Anya up with the earth digger had taken longer than he’d expected despite his belief that it was the easiest of all the machines to operate. Damn it, why hadn’t he moved the machines
closer when he’d had the chance? ‘Because I’m so not suicidal boy. The guys with guns gave me the scaredy shakes.’

The resigned look on Giles’ face confused him for a moment, but then he saw the wistful glance at the wrecking ball and he allowed himself a little smile, amused that the G-man had apparently hoped to get something a bit more … macho. Who would have guessed? Shrugging aside his amusement, he swung his tool kit onto the waist high cab step and removing the pliers and wire cutters, he closed the box and placed it below the cab step. Then he made his way towards the rear of the vehicle.

“Oh, Anya’s all set. If you could get yourself into the cab, I’ll be up in a minute to give you one-on-one instruction. Should be easy considering the stick shift you’re used to.”

*********************************************************************BtVSS*********************************************************************

Slim hated this waiting. It was always the worst part of any job or battle. Nothing prepared you for the strain on your nerves, the temptation of paranoia. And nighttime just intensified these feelings - the seemingly whispering gusts of wind and moving shadows filling your mind with dread, anticipation and false starts.

He’d seen a few guys lose it in Senegal, and one rookie had set off a firefight with a colleague who had repositioned. Waiting was almost as dangerous as fighting because you don’t have a focus, a target, something to release all your anticipation and adrenalin at.

Dorgan might be a dork but at least he knew that he gave the guys someone to vent their frustrations at. Slim had been with some commanders who didn’t have a clue what their men were going through, let alone care. It was clear that Dorgan fixated on the little things as if knowing that if he did his job well, his men would allow their pent-up frustrations to be directed toward his obsessions. But Slim wasn’t about to thank him for his efforts. He had the guys’ back and that was enough.

Suddenly he thought he spotted something moving over to the left and … a flash of … skin? His changed his focus and repositioned his night vision goggles in the hope that a small adjustment would somehow help. But he couldn’t see anything. The shadow by that loading bay was pitch black and so far from any street light that nothing seemed able to penetrate its depths.

*********************************************************************BtVSS*********************************************************************
Faith stood on the loading bay, ignoring the uncomfortable feeling that she was out in the open. She’d realized during her earlier visit that this bay was in dark shadows and that you’d have to be less than twenty feet from it before you’d be able to make out anything on it.

Glancing behind her, she noticed Willow, who was crouched down at the back of the bay peering out into the night, with the unmistakable anticipation and tingling nerves that Faith knew so well.

“Well, that was the easy part. Now it’s up to the diversionary crew,” she stated.

“What time is it?” Willow asked.

“I dunno,” Faith said glancing at her wrist before remembering that she didn’t have a watch. “Why?”

“Because Xander said three o’clock,” Willow reminded her.

“I’m kinda guessing that once Xander kicks off we’re gonna know about it,” the Dark Slayer observed. “It’s like a library out here. Someone drops a pin and we’re gonna hear it.”

Willow smiled and nodded, somewhat strangely amused at having the site of her first real test as a temporary slayer described as a library. Recalling the early years and the many hours they had spent in the school library. Little had she imagined back then that what they had begun in those early days would be the backbone of their current lives.

Standing before her was the woman she had once thought of as a possible new part of the group, then as a mortal enemy and, if she was honest, as the one she viewed as the only real competition for her place in Buffy’s affections. And now they were together, trusting each other, needing to work together to save the woman they had once competed for and who was still so important to both of them.

“Faith?” Willow called, not at all certain of what she really wanted to say.

“Yeah,” Faith responded, turning back from the intense lookout she had taken up.
Pausing in her scramble for the right words that would sum up how she was feeling, Willow gave up and allowed her scrambled mind free reign. “I’m glad you’re here. It seems right somehow that we do this together,” she said simply.

Faith dropped her eyes despite the fact that Willow probably couldn’t see them and, rather emotionally, was barely able to speak. “Oh hell, Red … Newsflash - I’m not much good at this stuff. And let’s face it, most of the time whatever I do want to say only comes out half right or totally wrong. So can we leave it at – Ditto?”

Affected more than she wanted to admit, Willow simply nodded and offered a succinct “Sure.”

They both understood.

*******************************BtVSt***********************

“Oh you’ve got to be joking!” Xander exclaimed under his breath, throwing his pliers to the ground and then, bending down to rescue them.

“Excuse me?” Giles questioned, poking his head out from inside the cab.

“What kinda paranoid freak takes the ignition leads home at night?” Xander grumbled, pointing at the engine housing as if Giles could see just what he was talking about. Sighing in exaggerated frustration, he glanced back at Anya and then at Giles. “Okay, okay we improvise. That’s what we do. I’m good with the off-the-cuff stuff.”

“You are?” Giles muttered before he could help himself.

“Snide quips - Not helping,” Xander advised the watcher, who was now getting down from the cab, having realized his vehicle wasn’t going anywhere, least of all to war. “Okay. Anya has the earth digger. No way I’m re-educating this ‘Rita’ now. I’m on the bull – which has a tow bar!” Xander realized. “Brilliant! A little clumsy but brilliant,” he asserted before throwing Giles what appeared a slightly insane smile.

Giles stared at the young man in complete confusion. He knew that what he was listening to was pretty much a verbal expression of Xander’s thought pattern but, none the less, it reminded him of his first Latin lesson. Totally unintelligible.
It had to have been almost half an hour since they’d left Xander, but they were still sitting here, waiting, stinking of these damn spice bags. Sugar and spice, everything nice - NOT. ‘What the hell did she put in here?’ Faith wondered as her patience began to wear thin. ‘How long has it been?’ Faith asked irritably, ‘What’s he doing? Building a rocket?’

“Xander will get here. He won’t let us down,” Willow declared, despite feeling a little less confident than she knew she sounded.

“Yeah, yeah … I know,” Faith assured her, kicking at thin air. “I just hate the waiting … you know?”

“Believe me when I say – getting there,” Willow agreed with her. Then a soft rumbling came to their ears. ‘Listen,” she exclaimed, pointing out into the darkness and in the general direction of the building site. She could almost make out the movement of the sound … east to west.

Then Faith saw it. “You’ve gotta be kidding me!” she exclaimed.
Chapter 32

Buffy could hear movement and sighing. Someone was outside, no - behind her. She was disappointed to realize that it was only her guard and not the person she so longed to see. This forced solitude was really beginning to get on her nerves. It had her totally on edge, mainly because she knew she wasn’t truly alone. There was a group of heavily armed men out there determined to keep her company, if at a distance. But she couldn’t see or hear them, she didn’t know what they were doing, she couldn’t do anything help herself or her would-be rescuers. She hadn’t felt this powerless since her parents had decided to divorce.

She was somewhat surprised at how much she missed having others around her, especially since she’d spent so much of her life feeling as if she was alone even in a crowd. If it hadn’t been for Willow and Xander, she was pretty sure she would have ended up with Cordelia’s crowd which would surely have left her on her own once they realized she was different and not quite normal - by their standards. What did she ever do to deserve two such loyal friends? She’d have turned into a real loner, more of a weirdo than she probably seemed to most of the outside world. ‘Oh yeah, and my life’s so normal now.’

But who was she kidding? She would have been dead long ago if it hadn’t been for Willow and Xander. They kept her steady, sane, informed, okay Xander wasn’t big with the research she needed, but he’d fought by her side. They both had, they’d been on the front lines with her and helped her to remember that she was a human being, a person, as well as the Slayer. Giles may have simply been her watcher at one time but he now mattered more to her than she’d ever really thought her watcher could or would; although a simple look, would always tell her exactly what he was thinking or expecting from her, it was the absolute faith he had in her intentions that she treasured. And Willow, her dear sweet Willow always gave her a reason to survive, to come back, and to believe in herself.

She had long ago given up worrying about what other people thought of her. At least she thought she had. For years now the only opinions that had mattered to her were those of her small self-made family. And it was their feelings, opinions and safety that now occupied her thoughts as she sat awaiting her rescuers, that very same family with, apparently, a few unexpected additions.

Buffy was more than a little upset that everything that had recently happened between her and Willow had effectively taken place under their eagle eyes. Was she to have nothing that was purely her own? No privacy at all? Plus they seemed to have had their own ideas, for quite some time, about how things were or should be between them. She wasn’t sure if the easy acceptance of Xander and Giles pleased or annoyed her. Anya’s opinion was pretty much a given; as far as the ex-demon was concerned it was about sex, and nothing about sex was anything but good.

Just as she was starting to focus on her thoughts, she heard the noise of a radio as it burst into life.
“Zero one. Contact on my two,” the radio crackled.

“Zero four, affirmative. Contact on my four. Back up requested.”

Something was happening. ‘Was this it?’ Buffy wondered as she shifted her attention to the reports blaring from her guard’s radio.

Faith could feel the laughter building inside her at the sight of Xander towing the wrecking ball. That in itself wasn’t as funny as the sight of the stoic Englishman sitting … how could she describe it? Yeah, yeah … sitting regally in the cab with his arms crossed in lordly expectation as if he was a king anticipating a crowd of worshipping subjects.

Meanwhile, Anya followed with the kind of lack of patience that the Dark Slayer had come to expect from the ex-demon. It was obvious that she was trying to gun the earth digger, to get some speed going. ‘What was it with ex-immortals and the need for speed?’ Faith wondered, recalling a discharged Sreetka Demon she’d once met at a drag race. She turned her head to share her amusement with Willow, only to be confronted by a look of complete shock.

Hoping that the humorous scene before them might offer some light relief that would help remove the distressed expression from Willow’s Buffy-face, she voiced her own amusement. ‘The Saturday morning Wacky Races ‘toons have nothing on this,’’ she blurted out. ‘Maybe Will just needs help to see the funny.’

But Willow seemed to simply stare at her as if she was missing something.

Faith turned back to examine the scene before her more closely. Okay, three major boy-toys under the control of a man-child, a grown man with far too much reserve and an ex-demon with far too little. ‘What?’ she exclaimed because she just didn’t get what the hell it was that Willow was seeing.

Willow stared at Faith. ‘Couldn’t she see how ridiculously dangerous this was going to be?’
“Zero one, I have some building machinery heading towards the fence at two o’clock,” Slim stated, his trigger finger itching as he awaited instructions. Then he saw the Englishman raise his arm and throw something, which landed on the other side of the fence creating a ripple in the air as it landed.

“Zero six and eight move to back up Zero one,” he heard Dorgan instruct but his relief was short-lived as he saw the air ripple expand. It was coming towards him!

“Zero one, they’ve thrown … something. We’re under attack. Permission to respond?” he requested, raising his rifle into his preferred firing position.

“Denied. They have --n’t b –r-o-k-e-n o-u-n-d-a-r-y. They have --n’t b –r-o-k-e-n o-u-n-d-a-r-y. c-o-n-t-i---n---u----e t--- o r-e-------p-o-r-------t .”

‘What the hell was that?’ Slim wondered as Dorgan suddenly sounded like someone playing a recording at half speed.

Willow watched as the ripple moved towards them. It was too late to worry now. The clock was ticking.

“We’re on,” Faith stated, moving towards the edge of the loading bay. “You ready?”

“Yeah,” Willow responded shaking aside her reservations. Stepping forward she locked eyes with Faith and nodded.

“Okay, then. We’re heading for that storage trailer, hanging a right to that gas pump, up and over, across the gas pipe and in through the skylight,” Faith said, repeating the instructions she knew she had already given but feeling that she needed to push Willow back into the game. “Keep it tight, okay? We have to move fast.”
Willow nodded, not sure what lay ahead but certain that everything she had ever wanted in life was waiting for her inside that building.

The Slayers headed off at breakneck speed, launching themselves from the loading bay and shooting from the deep shadows that had hidden them from the eyes of their enemy.

Cordelia sat in the car tapping her hands on the steering wheel. She’d been volunteered by Xander, of all people, to be the get-away driver; much to the very vocal annoyance of Anya, who had been calmed down only after Xander told her how much he needed her to operate one of the construction vehicles.

Giles had helpfully agreed with Xander and pointed out that Cordelia didn’t have nearly as many hours battle experience, nor the knowledge of the area. After all, Anya had been the one to discover the site of Buffy’s imprisonment.

It had taken all her willpower to hold her tongue but the pleading looks from both Giles and Xander had told her all she’d needed to know. They trusted her. She couldn’t quite figure out why they didn’t trust Anya with the job but apparently they didn’t, and that was enough for her.

So here she sat, listening to the beginnings of the battle. She wondered how far along Faith and Willow had gotten, and if the Barder time ball thingy had worked.

Giles kept himself low as Xander cut through the fence like a sharp knife slicing through butter. Releasing Giles and the wrecking ball, the young man quickly headed to the right as Giles slowly rolled to a halt and Anya came up on his left.

Xander had been very insistent in reminding them that the cabs of these construction vehicles might look impregnable but they were definitely not bulletproof. Anya had, therefore, raised the forked shovel of the earthmover, lifting it level with her cab. However, what concerned Giles was the very real possibility that she’d been driving all the way here with it up.

Throwing aside his momentary musings, he peeked above the rim of the window to take a quick
look at his position before ducking back down and reaching for the controls. ‘Oh Colin, I wish you were here,’ he thought, recalling the childhood chum with whom he’d shared so many construction site misadventures.

He heard a crunch to his right and realized that Xander was already putting his bulldozer to effective use against the walls of the warehouse. Then he heard it. Something whizzed past the door of his vehicle, like a fly on speed. ‘They’ve started shooting.’ Revving his controls into gear, he let the already pre-suspended wrecking ball fly. The moment of release was filled with all of his pent-up frustrations at events and his apparent inability to see further than the end of his nose where the love life of his charge, his slayer, his surrogate daughter was concerned.

The long pause followed by a resounding crash made him giddy and he smiled childishly. ‘Wanton destruction is greatly underrated,’ Giles mused, as he drew the ball back for another swing. ‘This is better than conkers.’

******************************BtVS******************************

“Z—er—o O—n—e R—p—o—r—t,” Slim’s radio crackled, as another part of the warehouse wall was pushed inwards.

“Oh great, we’re being smashed in and Dorgan’s gone all slow mo. Figures.” He yanked his earpiece from his ear before glaring at it and throwing it to the ground.

“H –e -y, T –e -x. Y-o-u g-o-t a-n e-y-e-b-a-l-l y-e-t?” he yelled across the warehouse. Suddenly aware of the fact that his voice sounded an octave lower, he clutched at this throat. “W-h-a-t t-h-e h-e-l-l….?”

The rippling waves of the Barder ball were causing time to slow and then quicken each time they passed through the walls of the Warehouse. Each slow wave becoming longer than the fast ones, as the Barder ball began to settle. Very soon time would slow completely.

“N-a-h,” his colleague replied, apparently ignoring their vocal difficulties “t-h-e-y–’r-e k-e-e-p-i-n-g t-h-o-s-e d-a-m-n b-u-c-k-e-t t-h-i-n-g-s s-o h-i-g-h, I c-a-n’t g-e-t a c-l-e-a-r s-h-o-t. W-h-a-t’s w-i-t-h D-o-r-g-a-n----?”

“D-u-n-n-o, h-e’s o-u-t-t-a i-t,” Slim replied, deciding some communication was better than none. “W-h-a-t a-b-o-u-t t-h-e t-i-r-e-s?” he asked, just as his window and surrounding wall
began to rapidly move towards him. “W-h-a-t t-h-e….?”

“Zero eight, we have a breach,” reported Tex, watching the wall crumble and fall on top of Slim, as a large wrecking ball blasted its way through the wall.

**************************************BtVS**************************************

Buffy could hear orders being shouted as if underwater, but the final order came through to her so fast and high-pitched that she couldn’t make it out.

She could hear metal against metal, heavy machinery and arms fire coming from the far side of the building. ‘Oh, no! What’s the gang thinking? These guys have guns!’ Straining against her bonds, she only managed to cut off the circulation to her wrists. But she barely noticed. All she could think was -- ‘Have to help.’

Then she heard her guard move. He was coming closer. ‘Why is he …’ But her unfinished question was answered when she heard him cock his weapon. ‘He’s going to kill me.’

“Willow!!” she screamed, unable to help herself.

**************************************BtVS**************************************

The satisfying noise of metal falling to the ground and glass shattering fueled Xander’s adrenalin as with every impact they began to move the walls inwards. As Anya was hugging the side of the building, feelings of pride welled within him as he realized that his little sex kitten had used her brain. Anya had obviously figured out that she would be harder to hit if she reduced their angle of fire.

Meanwhile, Giles appeared to have turned into a whirling dervish. Somehow he was able to cause more destruction than Xander. He was managing to get the ball back and re-strung faster than many a professional. But what really caught his attention was the twinkle he could see in the watcher’s eyes every time he chose to peep over the edge of his cab. “Watch it, G-man – Snipers!”

And just as he said that, he saw a bullet puncture and shatter the glass of Giles’ cab. “G-i-l-e-s?!!”
“Flipping hell,” muttered Giles, as glass showered down on him. Hitting the release he fired the ball back, having aimed just to the left of his previous contact point. His brief glance at the warehouse had given him the impression that the wall was beginning to look like a depressurized canister.

He pondered the early medieval origins of the wrecking ball. The largest one he had ever seen had been some 30 tons, with an arch of 75 feet and the ability to impact with a momentum of 300 tons. Although the one he was operating now was probably half its size, he drew a childish pleasure from the sheer destruction he was able to inflict.

This time, in recognition of the bullet that had just shattered his cab window, he attempted a quick glance out of his door. He saw Anya and her earthmover, wheels spinning against the ground as she tried to wedge her shovel into and push against the frame of a locked door. The ex-demon was crouched low in her seat peering just over her cab rim and underneath her shovel. Her leg was fully extended and Giles realized she was probably at full throttle. However, the doorframe seemed to be successfully resisting.

He wondered where Willow and Faith were at this moment. He had no way of knowing if the Barder ball had done its job. If it had worked, there should be multiple time interruption ripples moving throughout the warehouse causing communication and reaction problems for Buffy’s kidnappers. Whether the ripples caused slowing down or speeding up, the time disruption should help Willow and Faith get to Buffy. Eventually time would slow everywhere for about half an hour, which would further aid their escape.

Buffy could feel the beads of sweat slowly building up on her forehead as she continued to strain against her restraints. Ignoring the noise of the radio crackle and garbled messages, she could hear the footsteps of her guard approaching.

She found herself clenching and unclenching her fists in anticipation of a fight. But just how was she supposed to fight - bound and tied as she was. She was not accustomed to being so helpless. She didn’t know how to deal with it. ‘Oh Willow, where are you my darling? Please come now before it’s too late,’ she pleaded. She was not just worried about her own well-being – her real fear was of what would happen if her beloved was to come across her dead body. She knew that Willow would blame herself for not reaching her in time.
She was astounded as the footsteps passed behind her and then stopped again. ‘What is he doing?’ she wondered, cursing him for the torrent of fear that he had just caused. She hated being afraid; fear was another thing she was not accustomed to and really couldn’t tolerate in herself. She wanted to know what was happening; she needed to know … Maybe if she tried to turn around.

The bars at the base of her suspended steel cage had made any movement almost impossible and her legs had long ago grown numb at the insistent pressure from the unyielding and inflexible steel bars as they dug into her shins and sides whenever she had tried to move. So she had resigned herself to the view across the warehouse. Below her the skeleton of the suspended ceiling prevented her from seeing what was occurring directly underneath. Occasionally she had heard running feet and raised voices.

But swallowing deeply, she drew what little strength she had left as she tried to turn herself. Each movement seemed to drag one of the steel bars across her various already blackening bruises. “Oh great, wonderful … just look at what I’m doing to Will’s body. Ughhh … well, whatever doesn’t kill me makes me stronger. Right?” she announced to no one in particular, as she jarred her shoulder in between two bars.

Faith pulled herself up and onto the skylight. Sitting backwards on its rim she reached down to give Willow a hand up. The journey across the gas pipe had been a bit hairy. She could put up with heights, but that didn’t mean she liked them.

As Willow’s head appeared by her knees, the Slayer took a look at the interior of the warehouse. There was nothing below the skylight but a good 10-foot drop to the suspended ceiling. ‘Damn it.’ She shouldn’t have listened to Xander. She should have taken a closer look herself. How the hell were they going to get down there without falling through that rickety looking ceiling?

Willow pulled her waist up to the rim of the skylight and allowed her body weight to pull her upper torso forward, rocking into the building to take a look for herself. It felt good to have Buffy’s strong and fit body to work with. But she would much rather be admiring it on Buffy and the sooner the better. After a moment, Willow raised an eyebrow then she turned to look at Faith before glancing back towards the drop. “Do you trust me?” she asked quietly.

“All time someone asks me that question I end up wishing I’d been somewhere else,” Faith commented, following Willow’s gaze, before letting their eyes meet in mutual determination. Each recognizing the Slayer within and the need they both had to see this through to its natural end, whatever that might be. “But right now I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be … or anyone I’d
rather be doing this with. So the answer’s a great big – Yeah,” she winked.

Willow nodded in recognition of the compliment. “I need you to link with me and we’re going to have to jump together. Once we have momentum, I’m going to alter our relative density in relation to the air surrounding us so that when we land on that ceiling we won’t weigh enough to break through it. The dimensional ratio is a bit tricky but as long as I make allowances for the temperature differential inside the building and natural drag … Whatever you do, don’t let go of my hand until I tell you. Okay?”

“Sounds wicked cool,” the brunette responded, dismissing the somewhat disconcerting babbling and stuff she didn’t understand before offering the Wiccan her hand. “Thelma & Louise it is,” Faith quipped.
She needed to focus and find the calm. Aware that calm seemed to be an impossibility amid all the noise and tension; she nevertheless knew it was there … within her.

Faith stared towards the far end of the warehouse thinking that she’d caught a glimpse of something metallic in the dark shadows that covered the rear of the roof space.

There it was! Willow could almost touch it -- its calm blue essence beckoning her, calling to her. Willingly she mentally stepped forward into that calm.

Faith’s chest became tight and her head light as she felt it wash through her as well. If only she could live with this feeling of calm forever. It was so true, so real, so balanced. It almost filled her with the need to cry and laugh all at the same time. Boy, she was really going to miss this.

Willow drew and gathered the magics around herself like a warm cloak, her normal nervousness and fear of failure, for once, completely absent. She could do this. She knew it. She believed it. This wasn’t the borrowed slayer part … no … this was her. “Now,” she said, leaning forward and allowing her rear to leave the skylight’s rim.

Faith followed her, not with conscious will but just because. It was as if she herself had moved forward. Then she felt it … something dragging her back. No, something holding her! “What the hell?” she yelped as she came to a sudden halt, her neck shooting forward and air being forced out of her lungs by the jolt.


No sooner had Faith commented, “Ya think?” and they were off again … downwards.

At first, the ceiling seemed to shoot towards them but then, imperceptibly, they seemed to slow. ‘That’s more like it,’ Faith thought just as her eyesight and brain were beginning to question the sudden change in acceleration. It was like staring at one of those optical illusions, in which you couldn’t tell if you were falling or rising. Her stomach seemed to rise into her chest in complaint. But damn … it was working!

*********************************BtVS*********************************

Dorgan made his way towards the back of the warehouse with three of his men in tow. He knew
what was going on and he was damned if he was going to let it work. Sunrise would be in about two hour’s time. All he had to do was to hold them off.

He wasn’t sure what he feared more --- Hyatt Ramu’s anger or the Slayer and her wannabes. Both were unpredictable. But at least he understood Ramu’s motives. These damn do-gooders just plain baffled him.

He thought he heard something above him as they attempted to sprint down the corridor. Every two or three paces he could feel himself going into slow motion. He was fairly certain that any security tape would make him look like the two-million dollar man. They must have cast a spell, some weird kind of slow-mo thing that was messing with time, but he had no way of countering that. For some reason, better known to the senior partners, black ops didn’t contain a shaman or wizard.

He’d never questioned the wisdom of that decision before; he didn’t have much use for the pebble casters. But right now he’d be happy to see one of those mumbling freaks. This wasn’t what he did best -- running from someone, no matter how strategically sound.

***************************************************************************BtVS***************************************************************************

Willow had never felt so in control and yet at peace. This was her calling, her true talent and skill. She just knew it. It felt so right. She wondered if the magics had always been around her, inside her, just waiting for her to call on them.

The ceiling was approaching, and mentally she ordered their molecules just that fraction more, lowering their mass, just as their feet touched down.

She felt Faith begin to loosen her hand. “Not yet. Let’s make our way to the edge,” she suggested, nodding towards the far wall and the slightly wider supporting rim of the ceiling skeleton.

Faith nodded and reaffirmed her hold on Willow’s hand. “You’re the boss.”

As they moved across the ceiling, a sudden shaft of light broke across their path as a portion of the far wall peeled away. Glancing towards the dockside end of the warehouse, they both froze, waiting for a movement, a noise but none came and glancing at each other, they moved forward again.

***************************************************************************BtVS***************************************************************************
The wrecking ball ripped into the side of the wall, this time separating the two sheets of steel that had recently been joined by rivets. As it continued its arc, it caught part of the interior wall and ceiling.

However, Giles had no idea of the damage his new best friend was causing. He was still sitting hunched like a naughty school boy with a huge grin of satisfaction and enjoyment plastered across his face.

Glancing to his left, he could see the top of Xander's machine as it once again accelerated towards the warehouse. He had little doubt that they were doing serious damage but he couldn’t help a small moment of doubt. Were they truly causing the distraction Willow and Faith would need?

As if to answer his question, a hail of bullets winged their way over his head.

*****************************BtVS****************************

As they made their way down the wall of the warehouse, the deafening thud of the wrecking ball and metal against metal echoed throughout the cavernous loft. Faith thought that she heard gunfire and, glancing behind her, she hoped that the guys outside were okay.

Yet again she thought she saw a glint of metal. ‘What is that?’

The Wiccan hadn’t released her hand yet and she was, therefore, leading her along the edge of the suspended ceiling like two children playing follow-the-leader, as they skipped over the intermittent joists of the suspended ceiling.

Willow suddenly slowed and crouched. Faith came to a halt behind her. “There,” she gestured.

Faith followed her outstretched hand and forefinger … it was a box, no a cage and there was something in it – Buffy! Glancing at Willow, she saw the look of concern and an eagerness that worried her.

“Buffy, I’m coming. Hold on,” Willow whispered under her breath, forgetting that Faith was behind her.
“There’s gotta to be a guard,” Faith commented, unusual caution coming over her as she realized that this was it. Then she saw him. He was partially hidden by the cage but she could just about make him out … and the large gun barrel was plain to see. “There … to her right. And he has a gun.”

Willow simply nodded and reached into the small bag around her waist. “I came prepared,” she stated, drawing out a dark blue crystal.

As Faith glanced at the odd collection of items, anxiety and concern suddenly reared their heads as she began to doubt that they were all going to make it out of this alive. She trusted Willow but the truth was that despite everything, the Slayer in her trusted a good sharp knife more than the mojo.

“Can you grab hold of that support? I’m gonna try and split my concentration and I need you to make sure that if our mass shifts we don’t sink through this ceiling,” Willow advised her, as she placed the crystal between her lips and settled herself. She removed the dispelling pouch from about her neck and placed it over Faith’s head. “Oder w-ys she h-e ear m-i pro—rl-y,” she explained, her lips still holding the crystal firmly, its tip pressing down on the tip of her tongue.

Faith nodded, grinning at the sudden change in Willow’s voice. She drew their still joined hands over the Wicca’s head, placing her forearm firmly around her waist, in anticipation of a sudden change in their weight. “Okay. Ready.”

Relief washed over Buffy as she began to hear the familiar and now very welcome buzzing … ‘Willow. Oh thank goodness.’ She’d actually feared they wouldn’t let her know what was about to happen.

‘—fy I c-n se- yo-. Oh go-d—s, wh-t ha-e -hey done t- yo-? I’m cl-se by. —f —ou can he-r me…… fo-get tha-, I kno- you can he-r me………’ Buffy heard, as the words began to clear. The sound of her dearest darling babbling was the most wonderful and welcome sound she could have ever imagined. She could feel tears beginning to well in the corners of her eyes, as the thought that she would soon be with her beloved swelled within her heart. ‘I’m coming, my dar-ing. Bu- I nee- you to distract y-ur g-ard. Okay? I need yo- to dis-ra-t the g-ard.’

Buffy glanced over her left shoulder and, for the first time, she was finally able to actually catch a
glimpse of her guard. ‘You so don’t know the world of pain that’s coming your way,’ she thought with satisfaction.

‘We’re going to shut off the lights in a bit,’ Willow advised her.

‘We?’ She wondered who was with Willow.

‘But the moonlight from the skylight means he might see us, so I need you to distract the guard. I will get you out of there,’ Willow promised, just as a warm feeling seemed to envelope her.

***************************BtVS***************************

One final wiggle had allowed Buffy to see that her guard was holding his semi-automatic rifle and pointing it at her! No, he was looking past her, over her, out into the warehouse.

‘He’s waiting for something. Oh great, just great. He knows they’re coming to get me. Anyone that tries to approach us is going to be filled full of lead.’ She wracked her brain for something to do, some way of distracting him. She needed his attention on her, she needed him to … ‘Aw hell, since when has distracting a man been that hard?’

“Hey handsome,” she yelled, in her best coy little girl voice. “Give me a break will ‘ya? These bars are doing some serious damage to my arms … legs … my whole body.”

But he simply looked at her, smiled and then looked away.

“Oh come on. I’m not asking you to release me. What harm would a little friendly massage do?” she tried, almost gagging on the words as they slipped from her lips.

Her guard huffed and smirked “Do I look that stupid? Shut it already.”

Buffy bit back her initial response and continued in the most pleading and sexy tone she could manage. “Oh come on, what do you expect me to do – tied up like this. I really could do with a rubdown.”
He regarded her with suspicion but she could see that glint of ‘what the hell’ forming in the corner of his eyes, as he slid them over her body. She had him and she knew it. Now she just needed to keep his focus on her. They’d be here soon.

Then she heard the clatter and stomping of feet. ‘Willow! Oh, god! The lights! What about the lights?’ Her mind raced, sure that the commotion she could hear was coming from her would-be rescuers. As if in agreement, her guard changed his posture, stepping back from her.

Suddenly they were thrown into darkness and the stomping feet halted. Buffy couldn’t make out anything. It was as if she’d gone deaf. She turned her head vainly as if doing so would help her regain her senses. Something clicked to her left and her guard fired. She was so close that she heard and saw the barrel explosions, just feet from her, and the screams and whistles of bullets, as they flew out into the darkness.

“Willow! Noooooo!” she screamed, just as she heard a body drop to the ground. But the firing didn’t stop. An awful image of her beloved filled her mind; Willow lying on the ground, her hand still out stretched towards Buffy, an expanding red stain on her favorite green top and a clear glaze of surprise in her tearful eyes. She felt sick. “W-i-l-l-o-w?!!?”

******************************************************************************BiVs******************************************************************************
Chapter 33

Wesley made no attempt to hide his eagerness to leave and get on with his research. But Angel didn’t take it personally. Instead he had encouraged him. The vampire had other things on his mind and at this moment solitude was what he needed. A plan … no … more of an instinctual desire had been forming ever since he had regained consciousness, maybe even before. Grabbing his keys he had headed for the rear of the hotel and the underground bay that held the means to his plan.

Angel knew he shouldn’t be heading where he was going. Willow had refused his offer of help; but his failure to capture Maclay had shaken him and something had happened while he was under the man’s control. Even after resting, during the drive back to their base of operations, he still felt as if something had been removed, something he needed to get back. And he knew that there was only one place he could recapture it.

His desire to regain whatever that was, to fill the hollow that now resided within him; the unexplainably unnerving need to contact Buffy had simply kept growing. It was almost like a hunger, a craving, greater than any he had previously known. It was all too overwhelming for him to ignore. He could feel it calling him, beckoning him back to where he felt his life had begun again.

Heading down the highway he tried to reason with the need, the calling. Why was he so driven to return? Something had happened to him … Had changed things. Was he only doing this because he needed to or were his strings being pulled by Maclay? A part of him suspected that he was walking into a trap and yet he couldn’t do anything to avoid it.

***************************BtVS***************************

Giles saw the lights go out and swallowed hard, as he realized exactly what that meant. The girls were about to attempt their rescue of Buffy. His stomach tightened as he glanced through the shattered window of his cab towards Xander, hoping to see the same look of realization on the young man’s face. He knew that he was not alone in his concern. This was the moment when everything rested on Willow and Faith.

Out here he could do nothing but keep the remaining three men in front of them busy, hopefully so busy that there would be no chance for them to attempt to retreat and add to the difficulties he was sure his young charges were facing.

It was a little strange that all his years of training as a watcher never truly prepared him to just
watch. His natural instincts still pulled at him, urging him to get in there and help. Maybe his father had been right; maybe he didn’t have what it took to be a proficient watcher; at least the Council’s definition of a watcher. He cared too much.

******************************BtVS******************************

The darkness really shouldn’t have been so much of a surprise but it was. All of her senses scrambled to adjust to the sudden pitch-blackness. She froze, taking in her surroundings and allowing her memory of where they were to settle within her mind. Willow’s hand was still within hers and she instinctively squeezed reassuringly. “This way,” Faith stated before leading Willow along the wall towards the sounds of gunfire.

The muzzle flashes stood out in the darkness, like a grisly fireworks display. But never the less, they continued towards them. She mentally paced out how far from Buffy’s cage they were and in her gut she prayed that she was right. If they went too far before turning right, they’d walk straight into the firefight.

She could feel the tension within Willow as they moved forward and it was obvious that the Wiccan was struggling to handle having one of her major senses removed. Faith threw aside the instant desire to comfort her. They didn’t have time for the touchy feely stuff right now. They had to get to Buffy before the guards realized that they were firing at each other.

******************************BtVS******************************

Giles would have preferred to move his rig closer. He felt so very far away from the action. Maybe it was just the darkness that made sounds seem closer and the distances greater. The last he’d seen of Anya, her rig was almost halfway into the warehouse but now he could hardly make it out at all.

Glancing at his watch, he realized that it was almost time to make their final move. “X-a-n-d-e-r” he called out, hopeful that the two young people were still unhurt despite the plethora of shots that had been launched at them.


Casting a quick look, Giles found himself seeking out a flash of the lime green top that she had chosen to wear but he could not make it out. “N-o I c-a-n n-o-t,” he responded, more than a little
unnerved at not being able to reassure himself and Xander that she was all right.

“O-k-a-y. W-e’-ll w-a-i-t f-o-r t-h-e s-i-g-n-a-l f-r-o-m C-o-r-d-y,” the young man yelled, “T-h-e-n m-o-v-e t-o-w-a-r-d-s A-n-y-a.”

“O-k-a-y,” he replied, wondering if Xander could hear the hesitation in his voice. The thought of leaving the cab that had been his only protection for the last twenty minutes went totally against his better judgment but he just had to hope that the darkness that now engulfed the warehouse would be enough to secure their escape.

As she was striding forward, blindly following Faith and allowing herself to trust that the dark Slayer knew where she was going, Willow acknowledged that this was like nothing she had ever experienced before, or had ever expected that she would experience. She momentarily wondered when it was that she had allowed her life to be changed so completely. What was it that had stopped her from being happy to just live in denial like most of her classmates, happy to doubt that there was anything different about Sunnydale? She smiled recalling the first occasion when she’d let her curiosity loose and asked her father why there was a light in their fridge, but not in their freezer. His answer ‘because that’s the way it is’ had convinced her that she hadn’t gotten her inquisitive nature from him. Although she’d laughed at Xander’s explanation that frozen food was ‘harder’ and therefore not afraid of the dark, she’d investigated the matter for several months before resigning herself to the fact that no one really knew why.

Maybe it was just in her nature, she’d always wanted to know why things were the way they were. It had seemed to annoy most of her early teachers, but eventually even they had finally just accepted her thirst and need to know. She’d imagined herself working in some research capacity, maybe in a large university or government facility. But this … No. She had never imagined this.

She’d never imagined that her curiosity about the limits of so-called Wiccan magics would lead her to this. Or that when a pretty newcomer to Sunnydale had been nice to her, for no other reason than it was how you should behave … that this time and this place was where that first meeting would eventually lead them both.

No one would have ever believed her if she’d told them that one day she would be so in love with a woman that she would risk her life and the lives of just about everyone she cared about to rescue that very woman. “Old Reliable, Wall-Flower, Nerdy, Nose-Always-In Her-Books, Geeky” Willow play the heroine, saving her love, helping to save the world? No one would have believed it. She wasn’t even sure that, right at this very minute, she believed it as she felt the cold beads of perspiration building on her brow.
As they rushed towards the exchange of gunfire, she tightened her grip on Faith’s hand and swallowed. No! She would soon need to form the shield, the only protection they would have from the countless bullets flying about the warehouse. “Faith, slow down a bit.”

Cordelia glanced at her watch for probably the thirtieth time. ‘Almost there.’ Nodding to herself she checked up and down the road, not at all sure what she was looking for. Or what she could do if she did see something.

She’d been sitting here for what seemed like … forever. No one who knew Cordelia Chase, would have hesitated in telling you that she hated waiting for anything. Her need to move, to do something was like an itch she had been unable to scratch for the past three quarters of an hour, while Xander and his rejects from the Goonies had headed off to collect what was probably just a load of scrap metal by now. And all she’d done was watch time slowly move on and wait.

She’d heard the sounds of metal on metal and of gunfire. IT had begun and she’d felt her pulse increase in anticipation. She felt the perspiration. Her head felt like it was going to explode. Somewhere out there … Faith was risking her life, putting herself in harm’s way and that thought worried her more than she cared to admit. The sick feeling in her stomach and the dryness in her throat were physical signs she couldn’t dismiss – she was worried, she was afraid. And not for herself ... but for someone else. Someone who had, unexpectedly, become very important to her.

Buffy had never felt so afraid. It was as if her throat was being constricted. She gulped for air as her eyes fought to see something, anything in the pitch darkness, through the hail of bullets and muzzle flashes. Willow, her Willow was out there and there was nothing she could do about it. She couldn’t protect her. She had never felt so powerless, so helpless. It made her sick.

There was nothing that could describe the sheer black hole of terror and despair that filled Buffy, as she lay bound in the darkness unable to stop the nightmare visions running through her mind. She wanted to scream. She wanted her slayer senses back, her slayer hearing. Damn it, she wanted, needed her slayer strength; anything that would stop the sickening feeling in her stomach as it clenched and unclenched. Buffy yanked angrily at her restraints. She was the slayer, damn it. She should be doing the rescuing not being rescued.
This couldn’t be happening to them. It was so unfair … after all they’d been through, after all they had discovered. How could she be allowed to have just a glimpse of how wonderful her life could be and then have it taken away? To know how she felt, how she smelled. Well okay, there was the whole body switching freaky thing but she knew who was who, she had felt what was what. She had understood, hadn’t she?

To never hold Willow again, to never hear her breathing so close and, oh, those stifled sighs. She couldn’t believe it. Willow was the soul mate she had been longing for all of her life. But instead of that making her safe, it had put her true love in danger, the kind of danger that no one but Buffy should ever have to face. What had she done? What had Faith done? She felt the anger rising within her. She had a target for the rage and despair – Faith. And she was going to make her pay.

Just as she began to let her imagination run wild, she felt it, a touch. No, it was a hand, a warm reassuring hand, a familiar hand – “Willow?”

********************BtVS********************

Xander couldn’t hear anything but gunfire as he drove his machine back towards the warehouse, towards the muzzle flashes he had seen just moments ago. The warehouse wall was beginning to resemble a tin can, squashed, buckled and creased by the continual bombardment and impacts of their battle.

Glancing at his watch he cursed. It was too dark and he couldn’t even see the face let alone the hands. ‘Mental note – get a watch with a luminous dial.’ Cordelia had to be on her way. They needed to get moving.

The last collision sent him tumbling into the back of his cab, wedging his shoulder into the side of the driver’s seat. The old plastic bucket seat had been replaced and Xander found himself thanking the Powers That Be for the original driver who obviously liked his comforts. Jumping down from the cab he headed towards the outline of the wrecking ball, hopeful that his collision and the darkness of the compound would provide him with the cover he needed to make it safely to Giles.

********************BtVS********************

Angel gazed down into the warehouse although at first he could see nothing, as it was pitch black. Adjusting to the lack of light he tried to make out the shapes he knew would correspond to the muzzle flashes. There was a fight going on below and from up here it looked like the small explosions from sparklers but down there he knew it probably didn’t look at all pretty. Although guns were not weapons he feared, he knew slayers were never trained to face them.
Buffy was somewhere down there, somewhere within that hail of bullets. Throwing aside his promise to Willow and his intention to keep his presence unknown, he leapt onto the rafters of the warehouse, traveling quickly along the underside of the roof, using his speed and strength to take advantage of every hand and foothold that the ceiling allowed him. He rushed forward, swinging onto the crossbeams occasionally before leaping up again onto the unforgiving underside of the roof in his eagerness to reach Buffy.

Decades ago he had returned to Romania, the supposed homeland of all his kind, in the hope of finding his origins, of connecting with his roots. He had left disappointed, though not at all surprised at finding nothing extraordinary. But today he was heading towards the woman who had become the root of who he now was, the reason he had opened his doors to humanity despite all his misgivings.

Cordelia started the engine and pulled forward, relieved to be doing something. Now all that concerned her was that she had timed it right; otherwise the car would quickly become Swiss cheese and so would her intended passengers. Then something caught her eye, a movement on the warehouse roof. Were they out already?

Glancing into the darkness, which was only occasionally pierced by the moon as it poked out from behind a cloud, she couldn’t quite make out what was happening. The engines of Xander’s uber large Tonka toys were still running. They couldn’t be out already. It must have been one of the guards.

Glancing around for some reason, she looked down the alley to her right as she passed and there parked in the shadows of yet another warehouse was a car that she knew far too well. “Figures,” she muttered. “She’s gonna be mega pissed.”

Willow didn’t want to admit it out loud, but she never thought they’d get this far. She had doubted that she’d ever be able to touch her beloved again. But that wasn’t what sent her heart soaring; it was the realization that Buffy had recognized her touch. “Yes, baby. Hush. We’re here,” she assured her beloved as joy exploded from within her. She pulled Faith to her side. “If I spring that lock, can you lift her out?” she asked.
“Can do,” Faith responded.

Upon hearing the voice of the woman that she believed had caused all this, Buffy desperately wanted to ask Willow what the hell she was doing here. But she bit her tongue. Her Willow was safe and appeared unhurt. And that was all that really mattered but confusion took over as she tried to figure out what exactly was happening. There had been the sound of running footsteps, then the lights had gone out, the shooting continued, the loud thundering noises, the violent shuddering of the building, and … No, she didn’t have a clue as to what was going on.

For the first time Faith could feel Willow drawing energy from her. She’d never felt anything like it before. It was like a punch in her gut, she winced at the sensations but upon hearing the padlock release and open, the pain was gone. ‘Rocking wicked. Red’s really got a handle on this Hocus Pocus stuff.’

Reaching up she pulled the cage door open, cringing and freezing as the hinges creaked. The sound seemed to travel through the darkness like a cannon shot. A cold chill ran down her spine but realizing that it was now too late; she opened the door completely and began to reach inside.

Landing by the back wall, Angel observed all that he could before moving forward to pick off the closest of Buffy’s attackers. He could feel the heat of the hunt rising within him, as it always did before a fight. As he had a thousand times before, he instinctively balanced his inner demons, setting aside the ever-present hunger. This wasn’t about feeding. Why did he always have to feel that urge? Even after all these years, he couldn’t just dismiss it or ignore it. When would it ever end? Would he ever truly be free?

Reaching out he vented his frustrations by grabbing the attacker’s gun. He used the rifle butt to knock the guy out. The thud of contact followed by the sound of a crumpling body falling to the ground did nothing to subdue his internal rage and exasperation. Then hearing creaking metal, he froze.

Buffy recognized the voice of her guard as he yelled. “S-o-m-e-o-n-e’s  b-y  t-h-e  c-a-g-e.”

“Willow?” Faith questioned, as a bullet zipped past her ear and into the cage. “Buffy? Red, turn
Grasping Faith’s hand, Willow released her hold on the lights and the sudden blinding brightness momentarily halted the hail of bullets. “Don’t let go of me. You’ll have to get her out with one hand. Let me know when you’ve got hold of her,” Willow instructed, as she turned to face their attackers.

Transferring the energy from their bond, she raised her free hand and muttered “Compello Contego.” A faint light blue shield began to form in front of her, spreading with speed to surround her, Faith and the cage within which Buffy was still trapped. But as the shield increased in size, she allowed herself a momentary look at the two groups of armed men. And for that moment Willow thought she’d lost hold of that charm in her rush to protect them, as a bullet seemed to almost drill its way through the shield before dropping harmlessly to the floor.

Giles made room for Xander as the young man climbed up beside him, making the cab feel even more like a sardine can than it had before. Drawing the wrecking ball back and securing it, Giles altered the trajectory, using his best guess for the location of the various muzzle shots he had seen but ignored until now. “Ready?” he asked.

“Whenever you are,” Xander responded, just before being blinded. “What the he …”

Giles instinctively shut his eyes against the sudden explosion of lights going on within the building and let go of the wrecking ball. “Now! We have to go now! With any luck they’re just as blind as we are.” Grabbing Xander by the scruff of the neck he essentially dragged the confused young man toward Anya, heads down as they tried to regain their sight.

As Faith tried to pull Buffy’s dead weight out, she suddenly met resistance. Something was holding Buffy securely. “What the …?” She pulled harder, only to elicit a grunt and mumbled curse from Buffy. Without thinking, she let go of Willow’s hand and reached into the cage with both hands.

“Faith!” Willow screamed as their shield dissolved and a bullet flew past her ear. However what she didn’t see were the two other bullets that struck the rope from which the cage was suspended,
splitting its fibers.

Realizing what she had just done, Faith quickly fumbled to recapture Willow’s hand as they both instinctively ducked the hail of bullets. She felt so stupid and now she’d lost track of where Willow’s hand was. Suddenly she felt it graze hers and latched onto it.

Willow threw the shield flew back into life, her remaining frustrated anger pushed her to take the lights back too and somehow she knew that Faith knew she was sending her a murderous look.

“Sorry. But she’s stuck,” Faith offered by way of explanation.

“Stuck?”

“Yeah, she won’t budge. Something’s got hold of her,” Faith went on. Desperate to make up for her lapse, she followed her explanation with another attempt, oblivious to the fact that Willow had no way of seeing that she was again pulling at Buffy’s bound form.

“Hey!” Buffy complained.

“Sorry,” Faith pleaded, letting go of the tethered woman she was supposed to be helping to rescue. Her frustration building, she thought ‘Give me a break; even the Mayor wasn’t this much trouble. But – this – this I can’t afford to screw up.’

Bending down to look under the cage, a flash of moonlight briefly gave Willow the light she needed to discover the problem. “One of the ropes is caught around some kinda hook under the cage.”

Buffy internally cursed, knowing that her earlier wriggling had probably caused this. ‘Great if I’d just stayed put instead of trying to get a better look at that ugly butt-faced guard ...’

“Can you get to it?” Faith asked.

“I think so,” Willow replied, leaning out over the ceiling to reach under the cage. As she did so, there was a deafening creak and crack as the splintered ropes stretched and broke. For a moment
Willow thought a bullet had made it through the shield, but then she realized that she still had hold of Faith’s hand.

“Willow!” Faith yelled as she felt the cage begin to drop, instinctively pulling back the Wiccan with all her might resulting in Willow only just avoiding being hit by the cage as it plunged downwards. Faith, unable to reach Buffy, grabbed for one of the cage bars, missing at first but then grasping another securely. “Brace yourself!” she shouted at Willow.

“What?” Willow questioned, only just realizing what was happening and reaching out as the first few bars slipped through her hand. Her heart sank until she too was able to get hold of one of the bars just as base of the cage crashed into the suspended ceiling. “Buffy?!??”

Angel couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Suddenly all his concern that Willow shouldn’t know he was here flew out the window as he sprang over their attackers and toward the struggling duo, only to collide with the shield. “Uhhhhgggg!!” He fell to his knees, glaring at the shield. He could only stare as the cage plunged through the ceiling, while Willow and Faith tried desperately to halt its fall.

“Willow?” he called out as he watched. Despite having braced their legs, the two young women were pulled to their knees just before the cage was halted by their sheer strength and determination.

The two women strained to hold their ground and in doing so something had to give. Willow released the lights again, resulting in their plight being illuminated for all to see.

“WILLOW!” Angel yelled in frustration, as his body was pelted with bullets.

When Willow was finally able to steal a quick look behind her, Angel could see that her face was filled with shock, confusion, stress and momentary fear. “Let me through. Now!!!” he insisted

Now besides physically struggling with Faith to hold on to Buffy’s cage, Willow tried desperately to understand what else was happening. She threw confused and baffled glances from Angel to Faith to Buffy in the desperate hope that one of them, any of them would just take over. But they all seemed to be looking at her, all with looks of anticipation and she realized that they were expecting her to know what to do. When had she become the decision maker? But with one more glance at the pleading yet trusting eyes of her beloved, she recovered.
As yet another bullet struck Angel, throwing his shoulders forward, she made her choice. “Faith?” she asked, realizing that if she let Angel through the shield Faith would be the most likely to catch a stray bullet. Receiving an understanding nod from the other Slayer, she turned and concentrated on the shield, opening a doorway.

Angel fell through the door and Willow closed it as quickly as she could. Glancing back at Faith, she sighed as the dark slayer winked “Not a scratch.”

Within seconds Angel was beside them, reaching over to grab onto the cage. “We have to pull it up,” he stated unnecessarily, staring down at the bound form of Buffy … no Willow … no Buffy.


As Cordelia drove towards the corner of the yard, the sound of gunfire became clearer. She couldn’t quite get over just how loud gunfire really was. Most of the time the battles that she was part of were fought with close range weaponry. Thankfully twentieth century man-made weapons were something that most demons and nether-world types seemed to avoid.

She’d expected to see the terribly terrific trio waiting for her signal, but there was no sign of Anya’s vehicle. Concern filled her as she slowed the car, flashing on and off the headlights as she approached the corner of the yard. She held her breath.

‘Where the hell are they? What’s been happening? Why are the lights back on? What’s gone wrong?’ Her mind swung from one unexpected and unwelcome thought to another and the last picture to form in her mind was the image of Faith running from a hail of bullets. Cordelia felt sick and, for a moment, she thought she was going to be physically ill. But suddenly a movement caught her eye.

Three figures were moving towards her. ‘Why aren’t they running?’ she wondered as one of them gestured to her, beckoning her to join them. One of the others was carrying a gun! The larger figure appeared to be limping … no … they were dragging him. OH GOD! They were dragging Giles, trying to carry him.
Buffy stared up at her ever-increasing group of rescuers. Here were the two people who had caused her more pain and heartache than possibly anyone or anything else in her life, more than all the demons and monsters she had faced, more than her father. Actually, him she’d kinda understood. He couldn’t deal with her being different, but then he probably wouldn’t have been able to deal with her as a regular girl for much longer than he had either. For a long time she’d given herself the label of ‘Distructo girl’, pretty certain she’d been the cause of the implosion of her relationships with both Angel and Faith, as well as her parents’ break-up.

But here and now with these two, was the one person she never wanted to feel that way about and knew she never would. Yes, SHE was the one. Buffy knew that now, everything she was feeling, having her so close, was so sharp, so real, so raw and that it frightened her. How could she not have known it, not have realized it before?

Shaking her fears aside, she recognized the fact that getting out of here anytime soon was quickly becoming less of a given and more a matter of keeping everything crossed, hoping for some good luck and maybe even getting a little into that religion thingy. She’d never been big on the whole Powers That Be, supreme deity/god fest, but right now she’d consider just about anything if it would guarantee that Willow and she made it out of here alive.

The determination on her true love’s face was just so glorious to see, even if it was like looking in a mirror. It almost made her forget the fact that she’d brought Faith with her. But then she remembered and confusion reigned again. Did Willow really believe they might have a future together or was she only here to get their body switch thing sorted out? NO! She’d asked Willow for a date and Willow had said yes, hadn’t she?

Angel glanced down at the fragile and bound woman below him. He was more than a little thrown by the reality of it all as well as his reaction to it. It had been one thing to know that they had swapped bodies but it was quite another to actually see the evidence right in front of him. He couldn’t quite identify or reconcile what had been wrong about her stance, her posture, her actions. Plus she smelled all wrong. Even though he knew that he was dealing with Willow/Buffy and Buffy/Willow.

But below him were the eyes of the woman he knew and loved staring up at them in complete confusion and … could it be fear? This wasn’t what he had expected to find, then again he wasn’t sure exactly what he had expected. He wasn’t even sure why he was here.
Giles stared at his watch for the third time in as many minutes as he tried to ignore the numbness in his lower leg. Damn, that tourniquet was tight. Xander was headed back towards the warehouse with Cordelia in tow. He hadn’t even tried to stop them.

Maybe because after what Xander had just done, he didn’t feel he had the right to interfere with the young man.

Killing the man would have been easy but not killing him, even though he had the young man’s girlfriend in his gun sights --- that took something beyond the normal human response and reaction. Giles had suddenly realized that he was watching them all grow up before his eyes. He truly hoped that he would have the opportunity to watch them all continue to grow and mature for many more years to come.

True that man with the gun wouldn’t be walking or breeding anytime soon, but he was still alive. The sudden illumination and then loss of light had been all that Xander had needed.

Anyá was still a wreck, so much so that against all of his expectations she was actually sitting in silence, allowing his thoughts to continue to wander.

Giles had almost missed the clue that Xander was about to take drastic action but as he suddenly saw that unmistakable look of determination cross the young man’s face; that same look that he had seen so many times on Buffy’s face and occasionally on Willow’s … oh, what did they call it … oh, yes … on Willow’s ‘Resolve Face’. He’d quickly moved to drag Anyá away. That’s when he’d finally been caught by one of those infernal projectiles. ‘Bullets and guns! Where’s the honor in a gun? Now, fencing --- that was a duel of skill … for gentlemen.’ Where the second man had come from, he had no idea.

His memory of what had followed was a blur. He was almost certain that there had been biting involved from the gunman’s screams of protest and Anyá’s bruised jaw. He recalled swinging a pipe and Xander telling him to duck, but the rest was terribly foggy. But they had survived, to emerge with two semi-automatic weapons and a hand grenade. And it took quite a bit of persuading to convince Anyá to give up the weapons to the others.

Watching the tied and bound figure below her, Willow swallowed her fear. “Buffy, oh Buffy, I’m so sorry,” Willow exclaimed as she looked at the confused and frightened face of her beloved.
Straining to keep hold of not only the cage but also of Faith’s hand, she solemnly swore “We’ll get you out of there, I promise” as she held back the tears of frustration she could feel building; not realizing that Buffy’s look of confusion was more because of Faith and Angel’s presence, as well as the possibility of her soul mate being injured during this rescue attempt than the partial dropping of her cage.

Seeing the sheer emotion in Willow’s eyes and hearing her voice almost crack, Buffy was momentarily lost. How could she ever be mad or doubt her wonderful sweet darling Willow? Drawing on all her years of waiting, she threw her true love a brilliant and encouraging smile, “Any time your ready.”

“On three,” Angel reminded them, ignoring the annoyed look that Faith was throwing him. “One – Two – Three,” he called and heaved with all his might, pulling the cage up. Elation filled him as he saw it rise, but the feeling was short-lived as the cage caught on part of the suspended ceiling it had crashed through.

As Xander moved stealthily toward the front of the warehouse, Cordelia was close on his heels. Glancing over his shoulder he took note of the car’s location. “Keep it low, Chase. I’m sorta figurin’ whoever’s left in there … they’re either trapped in the part we tin canned or they’re part of the AK49 show going on in the back. So we’re taking the front door option,” he stated, cocking the semi he had recently acquired. “I can’t believe he’s here. She specifically told him to stay away. So I suppose dead equals deaf now - huh? It’s no secret - Angel may technically be our friend, but I don’t like the guy. If he’s in there messing with the Wiffy smooches – I may need to plead the 5th later.”

“Keep your dislike under wraps, Xander. I’m sure he’s just here to help,” Cordelia asserted, although she was more than a little unsure that this was actually true. What came as less of a surprise to her was that Angel wasn’t really her main worry right now; concern for the dark haired slayer was at the front of her thoughts. “We’re just going in there to do the same – Okay?”

“I’m big with the seventh cavalry theme. But let’s go more with the Johnny Wayne, not the General Custer! Okay?” Xander stated, as he blew off the lock. Pulling Cordelia behind him, he stepped to one side before throwing open the door.

Faith could feel the muscles in her arms beginning to stretch, strain and tear under the weight of
the cage. They weren’t going to be able to hold this much longer. “Willow, can you do that ‘light as a feather’ thing again?” she asked.

“What?” Angel asked, glancing at the inappropriate person beside him. He couldn’t help feeling that neither this dark-haired former failure of a slayer nor the false temporary slayer should be here rescuing the woman he loved, the only real slayer in his mind. This should be his job and his job only. He was trying to lift the cage, but these two didn’t seem interested in helping him.

“Maybe. But I’m not sure I could hold it for long without you,” she honestly replied, assuming that Faith wanted her to float down and release Buffy.

Seeing Willow glance down at Buffy, Faith realized she had been misunderstood. “Not us – the cage!”


“Oh? Not enough juice for both?” Faith stated answering her own question. Then she glanced at Angel. “What about dead boy?”

Angel glanced at Faith, for once allowing that infernal nickname to get under his skin. He gave her his best glare of annoyance.

“You wanna be useful or what?” Faith asked, with barefaced bravado.

Glancing at Angel, Willow let Faith’s idea sink in. Releasing her bar of the cage, she quickly moved her hand to overlap one of Angel’s. “Don’t move your hand,” she ordered, switching her attention to the cage below them.

********************************************************************BtVS********************************************************************

Buffy so wanted to be up there, not down here. She wanted to be holding Willow, whispering, telling her everything that she felt, risking all that she had, all that she was. She wanted to shower her lovely brave witch with kisses, smooth her deeply frowning brow and make life simple again. Had their lives ever been simple? But instead she was down here, tied up like some sacrificial offering, being stared at with looks of concern by her ex-lover and the woman who had caused all this to happen.
Somewhere deep inside she realized that this, here and now, was when it would have to happen. She was going to have to open her mouth, speak up and let out the scream of truth that had been building within her for so long.

‘My life stinks. And not just with that “milk gone past its best by date” smell. Oh no. This is the “stinky week-old rotting fish” smell especially reserved for slayers who try to have a life. Why couldn’t we have like a balcony moment or a romantic dinner and moonlit walk? Would that be too run-of-the-mill? Okay, what about a beautiful ring in a glass of lemonade or would that be too corny? I guess even a “hey babe, what about it?” written on a dirty napkin’s probably more than I could hope for.’ Buffy laughed to herself at the sheer predictability that was the high drama of her life.

Willow, her dear shy Willow would never do it first. She would never be the one to put herself out there and risk everything, risk their current relationship, their bestest friendship status. It had to be Buffy and she knew that. In the twisted script that was her life, she was going to have to declare her feelings first. And she was going to have to do it now. Only that, would un-switch this weirdness and end this Freudian nightmare. But to get everything back as it should be; she was going to have to do it with an audience!

Cordelia followed Xander down the corridor, testing each door as they passed. But they were all locked, which seemed to be unnerving Xander, who kept throwing her confused glances like she had a clue what he was on about.

‘Not cool. Why would they lock doors? They’d want access, free and easy access,’ Xander fumed in his head. ‘Forget it!! We need to get to the back of the building. That’s where the action is,’ he thought, listening to the distant rattle of gunfire.

Reaching the end of the corridor, he tested the last door and the handle moved. He froze!

He could hear movement; no - voices from behind it and he threw Cordelia a warning look. She dutifully stepped back, bracing herself against the opposite wall, and hesitantly raised her weapon.

Looking at her, he mouthed ‘one – two – three’ before turning the handle and throwing the door open.
Watching the scene below him unfold, Angel caught the look in Buffy’s very new and different eyes. She was staring with hope and … longing … at … at Willow. It was a look that he had never seen aimed at him. He didn’t fully grasp what a shock to his system it was until his sixth sense forced him to look at Willow, only to see the same shy hope in her eyes.

‘Damn it, you knew this!’ his demon reminded him. ‘Cordelia told you. Did you honestly believe it wasn’t true? What kind of fool are you?’ He could almost hear the laughter. ‘But it doesn’t have to matter. Feelings just get in the way. You could take her. She could be yours forever … until the end of time,’ the demon suggested, calling on the memories of loss that flew back into Angel’s mind as he recalled having to leave her.

Angel shook the thought away, guilt-ridden that it had somehow been possible for the darkness that haunted him to draw on even his most sincere feelings and memories, and turn them against him, against her.

Willow began to concentrate on the cage when suddenly the door of the room below them burst open. Her heart leapt into her mouth and she held her breath. She could feel Angel and Faith tense in anticipation of the worst. But then Angel strangely relaxed, causing Willow to throw him a questioning glance.

The muzzle of a gun peeped into the room, doing nothing to lower her blood pressure. But then a familiar figure came into view and looked at up at them with a stupidly grinning face.

“Gee, Will. Extreme dating or what?” Xander smirked.

As Cordelia followed him into the room, she elbowed him in the ribs and muttered under her breath, “This from Mr. ‘Anya Honey, I can beg if you need me to’.”

“Hey!” he protested half-heartedly, before moving towards Buffy’s cage. Looking up at her, he asked anxiously “You still with us?”

Buffy simply nodded, a lump forming in her throat as she realized that almost everyone was here.
‘Is this how it will always be? Is this what Willow would, hopefully, be saying yes to? Never having complete privacy, everyone assuming they know our business, because they feel like they know everything about us.’ She looked up at Willow, only to see a combination of amusement and annoyance on her face.

Angel coughed, finding it almost impossible to hide the discomfort at the emotions he could feel flowing between them. “Willow?” he questioned looking at their joined hands.

“Oh … yes … Yes. Xander, Cordelia, please stand back,” Willow instructed as she tapped into her physical connection with Faith and Angel, preparing for whatever energy she could draw. But she was caught unawares by the darkness and sheer force of the power from the vampire that charged at her, not into her as much as at her. It was so base, so nether-worldly, so ferocious. ‘What the…?’ It was too much for her to take. It seemed to batter down her controls, her center vanished and then she was flying.

“Willow?” Faith called as their hands were torn apart.

Away from Faith and Angel, she flew towards the cage, which also seemed to be dropping. Towards its open door and down inside it, towards … Buffy! ‘Oh no, I’m going to crush her!’ was all she had time to think of as she threw her hands out in front of her. Maybe if she could just support her fall, cushion the landing ...

“Uuuuggghhhhhhhmmmmmmffff!!!” was all that Willow managed as every last ounce of air was forced from her lungs by the impact, first into Buffy and, then mere seconds later, as the cage hit the ground. The matching grunts of protest that escaped her beloved did nothing to make matters any better.

“Buffy? Willow?” Xander yelled, as he hurled himself towards the plummeting cage and his two oldest friends. But something caught him and pulled him back.

“Whoa there, cowboy,” Cordelia exclaimed, as she pulled him back, pretty certain that Anya would skin her alive if she let Xander get crushed. But as soon as she had stopped him, she threw a concerned look up at one of the two figures standing over the hole in the ceiling.

Through his confusion at what had just happened, Angel realized that the shield had fallen as a
bullet whistled past his ear. Reaching out he grabbed Faith and pulled her in front of him, using himself as a bulletproof vest to absorb the hail of bullets that flew at them. “You’ve got to get out of here,” he stated, as his body shook in response to the bullets peppering his body.

“No kiddin’,” Faith stated, glancing down into the room below. Seeing Cordelia’s concerned face, she grinned and forced her way out of the vampire’s embrace, stepping over the edge and launching herself to land just clear of the cage. As she plunged through the plume of dust thrown up by the cage’s landing, she yelled. “Geronimo.”

Angel huffed at the infantile approach Faith had to fighting and just about all threats to her mortality. Then another bullet pieced his back and he felt it tickle its way into his body, causing him annoyance. Growling, he turned to face the men who just didn’t seem to understand that they couldn’t kill him. The best they could manage was to piss him off and, boy, were they doing a good job of that.

Buffy tried to regain her breath despite the weight pressing down on her. Gasping, she couldn’t help feel emotions building at the closeness of her precious witch. She was here, they were together, well kinda. All her wishing, all her hoping that Willow was still alive, that she could finally tell her how she felt was almost a reality. She'd been hoping she would have the chance to speak to Willow, to admit all that she had in her heart, but now that she was finally here … Buffy just couldn’t seem to gather her thoughts, let alone find the perfect words. It was like an impulsive reaction as forced out the first thing that popped into her head, between gulps for air, “So … did ya’ … miss me?” Buffy managed with a desperate grin.

The sound of her own voice threw Willow for a split second but the sympathetic panting from the body below her left her in no doubt where the question had come from. Willow laughed nervously, feeling Buffy gasping for air below her, before realizing the truth of the question. Raising herself up she stared at the woman she loved. Looking sincerely into her beloved’s eyes she responded “More than you’ll ever know.”

The look of hope and joy that appeared in Buffy’s eyes … her own eyes … Buffy’s eyes was all that she needed. Finally giving in to the longing and the relief at being this close to the only person she had ever truly loved, Willow leaned down, her eyes wide open. Their eyes locked, Buffy was staring deep into her very soul as Willow repeated “More than you’ll ever know.” Throwing all that she felt, all that she’d prayed for into it, she placed the most heartfelt and sincere kiss she had ever attempted onto the lips that visibly shook as she approached.

Buffy was lost in that moment, her surroundings disappeared and all she could feel was Willow, her dear sweet Willow. Truth flowing into her, filling her up, warming her and dispelling her
fears. But it was so much, almost too much and a sob broke from her throat as she kissed her back, with every bit of longing, every dream she’d never dared dream, all of it. As they both closed their eyes, the sound of gunfire vanished and even breathing was forgotten, as they poured themselves into the kiss.

Neither one seemed able to pull back or stop. It was as if they were joined, as if they were one, as if they had finally and truly found each other. Barriers fell, emotions took flight, questions silently asked and answered. Without words they had the conversation that fueled the kiss. The honesty and truth released left them feeling like they were rushing towards a canyon. Willow sensed the edge as they approached it and only her natural instinct to protect the woman she loved allowed her to pull away.

Buffy opened her eyes to protest the interruption but the look of genuine care and concern from Willow relieved her frustration. Buffy’s heart seemed to lift into her throat as she attempted to voice her feelings. “I … I kinda … no, I absolutely … I mean I think I always kinda knew that I … This is always so easy in the movies. Babbling? I’m babbling!” Buffy realized, as she looked at Willow’s patient face. “Is it still cute … when I do it?” she asked nervously.

“Unh huh,” Willow admitted, blushing as a lump grew in her throat.

“What I’m trying to say … and doing a pretty crappy job of it, is … I think I … No, <gulp> … I know that I do … I mean I didn’t know, but I do know now. Damn it, Willow! I’M IN LOVE WITH YOU!” Buffy declared loudly for all to hear, her heart and soul wide open.

Willow caught her breath before releasing a heart-bursting sob and beaming a smile of disbelief and relief. Leaning forward she kissed Buffy’s nose. “I … I know …” and then moving on to her lips before adding “I love you too. I always have.”

Above them, below them, all around them a light began to build, a glowing intense amber as if from their hearts, growing until it was blinding and Willow, still in slayer mode, threw herself back on top of Buffy, shielding her newly-admitted love’s face with her free arm. But even through her closed eyelids Willow could still see the bright, strangely familiar amber light that had suddenly appeared around them.
Chapter 34

Cordelia instinctively reached for Faith’s crouching form as the amber light began to spread towards them. Gripping the dark Slayer firmly by the scruff of her neck she pulled both her and the dumbstruck Xander towards the still open doorway. She wasn’t too sure what the light meant, but she was pretty damn sure that letting it wash all over you was just taking an unnecessary risk.

Faith allowed herself to be drawn away by her wanna-be watcher Cordelia since she didn’t really want to have that light switch her with anyone else’s body. She liked hers just fine. ‘Switching with Xander – yeeecchhh; or Cordelia – ‘mmmm interesting’ she thought staring at the cage and its very intimate contents.

Faith just couldn’t take her eyes off the vision before her. Buffy and Willow – together, sooo together and, damn it - she’d been right - in love. Any other time she’d have barfed at and made fun of the ‘lovey dovey’ scene that was playing out before her eyes. But seeing them bathed in the same light that orby thing had thrown out back at the Bronze that first night, after all these two had been through… And here they were - tied, battered, hurt, scared, but fighting to be together. It just made her swell with pride and satisfaction. ‘I’m getting soft in my old age.’ The hand that had been at her collar released her, moving to turn her head away from the light as if she were a small child.

Frustrated she looked up at the hand’s owner, “Hey?”

Cordelia’s face was full of concern and annoyance. “I am not itching to switch with either of you guys, so let’s just keep our distance and not take any risks. Okay?”

Buffy could feel her heart bursting as she held onto her Willow - her dear sweet, gentle, passionate and loyal Willow. ‘Oh my … I’m holding her! My arms are holding … My arms! These are my arms … that’s her face …’ Buffy’s mind rambled as she opened her eyes slightly to squint through her eyelids at the face of her true love. ‘We’ve switched back! I’m me, she’s her.’

Then she felt it - the instinctual knowledge of power, the restrained muscles, the heightened and anticipatory senses of a slayer. And that slight knot in her stomach that told her that a vampire was near – Angel? Why had he come? Had Willow asked him to help?

Willow moved below her, only slightly but she felt it. “Willow?”

“Buffy?” Willow mumbled as she suddenly found herself thrown about in her own body, trying to reconnect physically and magically. She squinted. “Dizzy … kinda bright.”

“S’okay … I’m here,” Buffy assured her, as every corner of her heart screamed out to protect and
comfort the unique and beautiful woman below her. As she tried to raise herself up, an overwhelming spinning began. ‘Whoa’, her mind, still believing she was bound, rejected the idea of movement while her body attempted to obey its orders to move.

Willow was faced with a new overwhelming impulse to cry. Swallowing noisily, she raised her head in an attempt to show Buffy just how much her words meant. But a surge of heat suddenly shot from her toes to the top of her head as the Magics welcomed her home.

Buffy felt it too. Her reacquired slayer senses picked up the surge of good as Willow once again became a Magic emitter and the blast of warmth almost made her release her true love.

*********************************BtVS*****************************************

Hyatt Ramu drummed his fingers on the desk beside his telephone, impatient for news, yet at the same time preferring that there be none. No news was good news. Yeah, right. Since when? Not since the 1900’s when international communications really took off. That would have been the era for him; he would have thrived during that boom time.

But reality came crashing back as without warning his office door flew open allowing a rather pretentious version of Maclay to burst through. “Now this is what I’ve been talking about, this is what I was born to know,” he declared, brushing his hands affectionately over his proudly protruding chest, as he threw back his shoulders and strode into the room with total self-assurance. He showed no regard for the fact that Hyatt was occupying it.

Hyatt instinctively made a move to stand, causing his chair to creak, thereby drawing the sharp-eared attention of his visitor.

Glancing at him with a look of surprise as if he’d just that moment realized that someone else was present, Maclay raised an eyebrow. “Not that I owe Wolfram & Hart anything since I lived up to my end of the bargain. But for some reason despite having purchased a ticket back to Hicksville, I felt I needed to be here. So here I am. What’s your excuse?”

*********************************BtVS*****************************************

Xander stood in complete awe, unable to stop the whoop of elation that escaped his lips at the realization that he had just witnessed not only one of his all-time fantasies but that his two best friends had finally found each other. He felt the lump in his chest rise to his throat, stop and swell,
just as a dangerous dampness rose within his tear ducts. The urge to cough, to sniff, to do something to hold back the unmanly emotion he could feel building overwhelmed him and he forced a trilogy of coughs in the vain attempt to prevent tears.

Glancing at Cordelia to check that she hadn’t noticed his predicament, he was shocked to see a tear beginning to fall down her own cheek. ‘I don’t believe it - the ice queen is melting.’

Faith simply grinned the widest possible grin she had ever grinned, but although her eyes were also shiny and moist, she was damned if she would cry in public. She had never imagined how good it would feel to do something like this for someone because it was the right thing to do without expecting anything in return - no money, no shiny new knife, not even forgiveness – okay maybe a little forgiveness. Hell, it felt great.

She threw a good-natured punch at Xander’s arm, which elicited a howl. “Owww! Hey, slayer strength. Watch it.” Ignoring the young man, Faith turned to Cordelia, picked her up and happily swung her around. Cordelia’s yelp of surprise shocked Faith who stopped short and looked deeply into the other her friend’s confused eyes. Blushing for the first time that anyone could remember, the Slayer gently put the Seer down and mumbled “Sorry.”

It was Xander’s turn to grin as he looked from Buffy and Willow to Cordelia and Faith. ‘Oh yeah, my fantasy life has just improved soooo much.’

****************************BtVSBtVS*****************************************************************************

Although Angel knew he should be enjoying himself, throwing these mercenaries around like rag dolls wasn’t helping to lower the heat that was rising in his blood. He had lost her. She would no longer be the perfect love he had surrendered. She had moved on. When had she given up on him, on them? When had she stopped believing in their love? When had he lost her? Vainly he searched his memory to try to pinpoint the exact moment, the pivotal event that had caused their love to die. No – her love to die because his feelings hadn’t changed and they never would.

Two men launched themselves at him. Kicking one away to his left, he curled into and threw the other over his shoulder. But what he didn’t notice or remember was that he was standing just in front of the hole in the suspended ceiling. When the satisfying thud of a body didn’t follow, he glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the man falling to earth, just short of the cage holding the two clinging women who were torturing his thoughts. He was momentarily frozen by the image before him, bathed as it was in a residue of amber and by the look of them as they clung to each other.
She had been the one to change. Her one-time declaration of unending desire and love had obviously been false. She had lied to him. She had led him to believe that she would wait for him, that theirs was the love that would never be denied. He had placed himself in danger to protect her, given up his roaming ways, even helped her to vanquish his sire and the Master. Had she simply been playing him all along… to ensure his help?

A torrent of doubts suddenly invaded his total being, feeding the heat within his blood and weakening his hold on the demon within. He could feel it crawling into the corners of his mind, picking at his weakness, his love for Buffy. ‘You’ve really got it bad for that girl. You think you’re over it, you think you can just walk away, just let her go. But she’s under your skin, in your blood. You’ve tasted her and yet she lives! She made you feel human and that’s not the kind of thing I can forgive,’ his demon murmured into the mounting insane emotions he could feel building.

*******************************BtVS*******************************

Willow couldn’t take her eyes off the face before her; the amber light that had surrounded them just seemed to draw her even closer towards the woman she loved. “Do you know you’re doing that thing you do with your mouth that boys like? Oh! I didn't mean the bad thing with your mouth that boys like … the other thing that I like … the nice thing that you do with your mouth that I like. I should just stop speaking now,” she mumbled, closing her eyes.

Buffy found herself bathing in the sheer Willowness of the woman before her, so sincere and lacking in guile; and then there was the Willow-babble that she had missed so very much. The amber light had taken quite some time to dissipate and it seemed that while it was still present that time had stopped to allow them the briefest of moments to themselves. But an unconscious mercenary suddenly flying past the cage had quickly brought Buffy back to reality.

Glancing over her shoulder Buffy realized that she needed to get Willow out of this cage. She could hear gunshots above them. “Will, it’s okay. I think I know what you mean but if you really need to you can explain it later, when we’re … alone. Right now we need to get you out of this cage,” she explained, sensing that the sudden re-acquaintance with her Magical self had made Willow forget where she was and the danger that surrounded them.

Pulling herself onto her knees Buffy moved her hands under Willow, careful to ensure that she didn’t touch a “no-go” zone. She was pretty damn sure that Willow was finding this ‘close, but not close enough’ thing just as hard as she was, having an audience and all. They certainly didn’t need to make it any harder. She could wait – as if she had a choice.

She couldn’t feel anything holding Willow and so she attempted to lift her true love. But only half way to straightening her back, something pulled Willow back! “What the….?” Buffy questioned.
“She’s still stuck. The rope’s caught beneath the cage,” Faith yelled helpfully.

Buffy threw Faith an instinctive ‘thank you’ look before she realized what she was doing. For some reason she didn’t want to think about right now, the most bizarre grin was plastered across Faith’s somewhat blushing face. ‘What the hell is going on here?’ she wondered, before turning her attention back to her beautiful Witch. She lowered Willow and rolled her onto her side so that she could take a look at the ropes binding her.

******************************BtVS*******************************

“And you really think that’s going to help? Okay, okay, if that’s what you want and I can’t talk you out of it. Not that I’d bother trying,” Maclay quipped, disbelief apparent in his tone. “Right now?”

“No, not right this minute,” Hyatt stated, and recalling his many previous meetings with this man, reminded himself ‘be careful with the words – talk about literal.’ He could almost imagine himself reappearing still seated, but with no chair beneath him. “I’ll let you now when and where.”

Maclay huffed in annoyance, raising one condescending eyebrow before retorting. “Take your time. I’ve waited two decades, what are a few more hours? You’d think that I’d learn patience during that long tiresome build up to my birthright, huh, wouldn’t you? But I never understood what the big deal was about patience.”

Hyatt tried to ignore his comment and pulled open his desk drawer but annoyance got the better of him. “You think this is over, don’t you? You think you’re now free of the firm but I have news for you. No one is ever free. Once you sign on, they have you – forever.” There was no bitterness in his tone, just a matter-of-fact statement. However the hollow, empty feeling at his core was in distinct contradiction to his calm exterior as he pictured just what punishment would await him if this all fell apart, which it seemed to be doing.

Standing he nodded, “This isn’t over. Despite your lackluster performance, this plan will work. Even if I have to finish things myself,” he stated as he moved towards the source of his annoyance. “Why is it that only I can see the bigger picture? You just can’t see it, can you? And you most definitely cannot figure it out.”

Maclay threw his head back and laughed. “Oh trust me, sonny, we’re not talking M.I.T here. Talk about a “paint by numbers” performance. A fourth grader could have told you why this wasn’t
going to work,” he stated, scratching his ear. “You based all of this on one ill-conceived homophobic notion and that’s what let you down. I, however, provided you with a fall-back based on some very real male norms. But do I hear a thank you, do I hear any appreciation? No. Why is that I wonder?”

“Indeed, a ‘thank you’ would just be good manners wouldn’t it, Mr Ramu?” the Senior Partner, standing in the doorway, interjected.

**********************************BtVS**********************************

Xander moved forward eagerly, gesturing for Cordelia and Faith to join him. “C’mon. We need to tip the cage over.” Realizing that he was right, Faith and Cordelia quickly moved to grab the bars of the cage nearest to them. “Buffy, try to hold her steady,” he instructed before nodding to his companions.

Pushing with all their might, they felt the cage slowly begin to move, only to rock back. Confused, Xander stared at the problem through a deep frown. Glancing towards his two best friends, he threw Buffy a look of apology.

A quiet voice broke the momentary silence. “Pull it towards us,” Faith offered, only to have Xander raise an eyebrow in her direction. “If we use our own weight….”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Xander acknowledged, bracing himself. “Ready? Go.” This time the cage didn’t seem to need much persuasion to tip towards them. “Okay, now step back. Come on or we’re waffles.”

Throwing an amused glance at Faith, Cordelia quipped “There’s just no part of this that isn’t fun for Doughnut Boy, is there?” as she quickly stepped clear of the now turning cage.

**********************************BtVS**********************************

Giles was starting to get more than a little upset. They had been gone far too long. He could sense Anya’s temple twitching, as even the ex-demon began to exude her concern. Tapping the steering wheel with his thumb, he began to chew the inside of his lip while the throbbing of his leg grew worse and unwanted images of what might be going on began to form in his mind.
“How long has it been?” Anya asked.

“Longer than I’d like,” Giles replied, casting her a concerned glance.

Anya raised a questioning eyebrow. “So, what are you going to do about it?”

“What am I going to do about it?” Giles mouth fell open as he raised an eyebrow and glanced towards his wound. “Exactly what are you expecting me to be able to do?”

“Something … Watcher-like,” she stated unhelpfully before sighing, “Watching isn’t really very action-packed, is it? No wonder you’re putting on weight.”

“I …” Giles mumbled, losing the ability to speak in the face of Anya’s tactlessness. Subconsciously, he tensed his stomach muscles and glanced at his midriff. ‘Is it visible?’ he wondered as he recalled the entire very large bread and butter pudding he’d absent-mindedly consumed only the other day, while researching the other watcher chronicles for anything useful.

Anya sighed heavily, before adding in her all-to-familiar “ex-vengeance demon” reminiscing tone, “Men just stop trying when they reach a certain age. Why is it okay for a man to let everything sag and wrinkle? What’s really sad is when they somehow manage to surround themselves with young nubile women, forcing them to hang on their every word. If I’ve seen it once, I’ve seen it a thousand times.”

Giles could feel his blood beginning to boil and the only thing that kept his hands from her throat was the thought that somewhere in another dimension, Anya was really being strangled and people were cheering.

******************************************BtVS******************************************

Angel, oblivious to the joyous events below him, allowed the rage to rise as two of the remaining mercenaries tried to box him in, one from the left, the other from the right. ‘Oh Please! Is this the best they can do?’ he wondered. His eagerness for a real challenge was obviously not about to be satisfied.

Okay, so he’d known what they were sending Faith to do, Cordelia had been pretty clear on that issue. He’d known that it was the right thing to do, that Buffy and he could never truly be. He’d
known how much Willow loved Buffy. He’d known he could trust the Witch to never hurt his Slayer, but he hadn’t been prepared for the reality of acknowledging that this was what Buffy wanted too, that Buffy was deeply in love with the woman, that his role had been taken. He was no longer the greatest lost love of Buffy’s life. He was no longer the one she would compare all others to, the only one who had truly shared the Slayer aspect of her life, the only one she would always regret losing.

Buffy hadn’t thrown him anything more than a confused look. There had been no happiness at seeing him. There had been no request for his approval. Why should he have expected one? She’d always challenged him, always fought to be true to herself and he’d respected that. But he’d been her confidant, her confessor – and she’d never confessed this, not even an inkling!

And now he and Buffy were truly finally done.

********************BtVS*******************************

As Buffy untied Willow, she allowed herself to look around, concerned that she had no idea where they were, let alone which way was out. She didn’t like not knowing exactly where she was or how they had gotten to her. Were they going to have to fight their way out? As she glanced towards the open doorway, she couldn’t help wondering with concern where Giles and Anya were. Finally releasing Willow’s hands, she suddenly became tense as they flew back towards her.

“Buffy?” Willow questioned, reaching for her beloved’s face. Concerned by the look of doubt that she had just seen, Willow drew the Slayer’s face towards her own. “Hey, it’s okay,” the Wiccan assured her beloved.

Realizing that Willow was the reason she was free and that this had all been part of a plan made without her did little to quiet her nerves, as she tried to recapture her self-confidence and calm. Her newly reacquired Slayer strength and power did nothing to remove the feeling that she had somehow lost control.

Willow offered her beloved yet another reassuring smile before turning to their audience. “Xander, where’s the car?”

“Out front, engine running,” Xander replied, trying to hide his concern at the silence that had suddenly overtaken Buffy.
When neither on of them appeared ready to start moving, Cordelia sighed and raised an impatient eyebrow. “I’m not sure how long Angel will be able to hold them back,” she pointed out in her best ‘annoyed and know-it-all’ voice. “We need to get moving. NOW!”

“So you want me to take you right to her, no matter where she is or who’s with her?” Maclay asked the young man. His questioning arched eyebrow supported by a glint of mischief helped to cover his inner irritation at having orders barked at him by this upstart. There was something about this cocky young man that almost reminded him of himself, all those years ago, eager for quick success, ready to take risks, ready to skim the edge. Time and his family had taught him a painful lesson, one he’d never forgotten. And for some reason a lesson he was itching to pass on – ‘someone always wants it more than you do – so get rid of him or her first.’

Watching Hyatt Ramu with the same interest he usually reserved for his thoroughbred Arabian stallion, Holland Manners wondered if instinct or arrogance would win out. “I believe that’s exactly what this young man’s after,” he asserted, somewhat amused by the almost manic determination in the eyes of the man. ‘How quickly will the seams appear to split; no one tailors young suits like they used to. So unless I’m gravely mistaken, he will have to be rebuilt like all the others.’ But perhaps this would be the one who would be worthy of his position, perhaps this one would not have to be rescued and restored by him.

“Just make sure I’m facing her and there’s no one between us,” Hyatt ordered. “Give me twenty seconds, then pull me right back,” he reminded the Mage as he reached into his desk drawer for the equalizer before moving towards Maclay and nodding.

Holland Manners hid his grin at the cocky tilt of the young man’s chin and the dismissive way he ordered Maclay around. Having no fear was one thing, thinking that you will never need someone you’ve just walked over was quite another. He liked what he saw.

But Maclay didn’t seem bothered, as he nodded in return and gestured briefly, speaking under his breath. There was no immediate discernable change to their surroundings and Hyatt Ramu stared at him in irritation for the briefest of moments, then the shimmering began.

Just ahead of them Cordelia and Xander shot through the exit as gunfire broke out somewhere nearby, but Buffy was unable to tell where it was coming from. She ground to a halt and pulled Willow back from the exit, her instincts taking over. The look of surprise and annoyance on her
true love’s face shook her slightly. “Sorry, Will.”

“Giles and Anya are out there waiting for us. We have to hurry,” Willow declared impatiently.

“I know, Will. But we don’t know who else is out there waiting for us,” Buffy explained, reaching out to hold Willow’s shoulders as if that would somehow make her listen more intently. “I’ve no intention of taking unnecessary risks when we don’t need to. You could cut the lights,” she suggested. But upon seeing the slight confusion still evident on the witch’s face, Buffy found herself adding “I don’t want to risk losing you, when I’ve only just… when we’ve only just… Will?” she pleaded, hoping that her true love would simply accept and understand what she was struggling to put into words.

The concerned appeal for understanding that was unmistakably apparent in Buffy’s loving face and voice forced Willow’s eagerness to dissolve. “Okay. I’m just scared that if we hang around any longer… I just want to get you away from here, away from them,” Willow explained leaning closer to her Slayer. “Somewhere less… precarious to our health, where we can… continue our… talk.”

Reaching up to gently stroke Willow’s cheek, Buffy smiled. “Talk, mmm… Okay but no fair if you’re gonna use big words, or even a lot of little ones.”

***************************************************************BtVS***************************************************************

Cordelia threw a look over her shoulder as they approached the fence and the waiting car. Anya had the rear door open and ready, a look of annoyance on her face that left no doubt she was pretty pissed at having been kept waiting. Realizing that no one was following them, the Seer slowed, allowing the bulkier, ‘not so much a sprinter’ that was Xander to overtake her.

As Xander launched himself over the car hood and towards the passenger side of the car, like something out of Miami Vice, certainly scratching his paintwork, Giles was too distracted to notice his actions. He’d been focused on Cordelia’s almost skidding halt. Looking past her towards the warehouse, he realized they were alone and his heart sank.

Xander dove into the front passenger seat, by lifting Anya onto his lap, leaving the back seat free, only to be greeted by a glaring Giles. “Where are they?”

The young man knitted his eyebrows momentarily confused until he realized that Cordelia wasn’t in the back seat and that no one else was arriving to board their getaway car. “They were right
Behind us."

Having stopped just behind Buffy and Willow, Faith shook her head and smiled warmly as she watched the brief tender scene before her. She knew that she should break them up; that this was neither the time nor place, but she just couldn’t. And she couldn’t believe the softie she was turning into.

Then she heard the click.

Faith instantly knew what it was and a shiver ran down her spine. Catching a slight movement to her right in that darkened doorway, she knew that she didn’t have time to warn them. There was only one thing that she could do. She had to protect them at any cost. She launched herself and flew through the air towards their mysterious attacker. Her arcing trajectory brought her between the loving couple and the would-be assassin’s hiding place, as a muzzle flash momentarily illuminated a familiar face.

Something ripped into her lower right thigh, like a searing red-hot poker, but her Slayer momentum kept her going. However, just as she almost managed to reach the dark shape of their attacker, certain that she could wrestle whoever it was to the ground, the shadowy figure seemed to shimmer and then disappear. “What the…?” she exclaimed as she hit the doorframe hard.

Hearing the gunfire, Buffy and Willow released each other and turned in shock as they witnessed the dark-haired Slayer’s actions. Once she had landed, they raced to her side. As Willow knelt over Faith searching for her wound, Buffy rushed through the darkened doorway.

Faith shook her head, trying to remember what she’d just done and why her thigh felt like it was on fire. Looking down she saw that she was bleeding profusely from her wound. Looking up at Willow and regaining her senses, she barked out her instructions, “Get Buffy and get out of here,” she ordered, “He may come back.”

“Let me take a look,” Willow insisted, attempting to determine the severity of Faith’s injury through all the blood.

Hearing footsteps coming down the hall, the dark Slayer’s brows knit together. “There’s no time. You have to get out now. I’ll only slow you down,” Faith insisted, as Buffy returned only to shake
her head, indicating she hadn’t found their attacker.

Willow glared at Faith. “Are you kidding? Do you have any idea what Cordy will do to me if I leave you here?”

“And not just to you,” Buffy added, supporting Willow and now a little less concerned that staying here was really any safer than charging out into the open and sprinting for the car.

“Trust me, she’s not that scary. I’ll be… unnggh… five by… five. Just get outta here,” Faith ordered through gritted teeth. “I’ll be right behind you. OK?”

“Oh sure. And having you behind me is meant to be comforting? I don’t think so,” Buffy stated in a no-nonsense voice. But seeing the honest disappointment and hurt in Faith’s eyes, she realized that her attempt at humor had been badly timed. “Besides… we never leave any of our own behind.”

At that, Faith raised her head and gave Buffy an intense look filled with quiet amazement and gratitude. Willow cast a quick holding spell to slow the dark slayer’s loss of blood and then without thinking she tried to lift her. When she hardly managed to move the woman, she huffed in annoyance before remembering that she’d lost her borrowed Slayer strength.

“I think that’s my gig,” Buffy said, as she gently moved Willow out of the way. “Check the door and get that lights mojo-thingy ready. We’re gonna get moving the minute I have her,” she added as she squatted and raised Faith easily onto her shoulder.

Willow moved to the exit and taking a quick glance outside, located the car. “Okay, all clear.” Holding her hand out towards Buffy, she added “I’ve spotted where the car is, so I’ll lead the way.” Seeing Buffy stare at her hand in confusion, Willow added “I’m gonna need to draw a little Slayer magic for this.”

“A little slayer what?” Buffy questioned, still gazing intently at her extended hand. For a moment she’d thought Willow was just being really sweet, if a little inappropriate, considering their current circumstances and the bleeding Slayer on her shoulder, but apparently she’d missed something.

“Watch out B. It kinda tickles andtingles the first time… in a nice way though,” muttered Faith from her less than dignified position on Buffy’s shoulder.
“It what?” Buffy exclaimed.

Willow thought that her beloved’s eyebrows were going to shoot up and off her forehead, and despite the gravity of the situation she smiled. “I need to draw Slayer magic to turn the lights off, and to do that we need to hold hands. And, Faith’s getting to weak with her injury”

Casting her mind back to their arrival, Buffy remembered that she had seen Willow and Faith holding hands. She recalled how jealous it had made her, but now realization dawned. ‘Willow had been drawing Magic from Faith.’ “Wait! I have Magic??”

“Give that girl a prize. Yep B, you got Magic. I got Magic. We all got Magic. Yippee Deee. Who’d’a guessed?” muttered Faith, any patience for this explanation game having long since disappeared now that she was oozing blood and getting quite lightheaded. “Get over it and grab your girlfriend’s hand before some smart ass takes a shot at mine.”

**************************************************************************BtVS**************************************************************************
Chapter 35

Giles couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing as the lights went out yet again. ‘What the devil is
going on?’ He thought he’d seen two figures, just two. Where was Buffy? Unable to reconcile
what he thought he’d seen, he shifted into the reality of what needed to be done. “Okay, we have
two incoming. Get ready.”

Cordelia moved herself as far over to the left of the rear seat as she could manage, anticipating that
the last thing that would be needed was an argument over seating. Her nerves rattled as she
waited. ‘What kept them? Why only two? Who did they leave behind’ she wondered, but her
concern was distracted by the sound of running feet.

Having a body thrown into her lap wasn’t quite what Cordy had been expecting let alone having
that body grab hold of her and whisper, “Sorry, didn’t mean to keep you waiting, babe.”

Throwing her arms around the woman now sitting in her lap, in relief Cordelia exclaimed “Faith?”
before she could stop herself.

Faith smiled, hearing the concern in her tone, and before Cordelia could say anything more she
gently kissed her friend’s neck, “But you so know you’re gonna forgive me.”

“In your dreams,” Cordelia spat as she tried to ignore the goose bumps, not to mention the tinges
that the feel of Faith’s lips had caused. But her momentary embarrassment was quickly forgotten,
as first Buffy and then Willow piled in next to her.

“Hit it, Giles,” Buffy yelled as she pulled Willow, who almost landed on top of her, into the car
and closed the door behind her.

Forgetting his concerns at getting all of them out of there as soon as possible Giles found himself
needing to ask the question. “Buffy?”

“The one and only. The Slayer has returned.” Buffy exclaimed, before recalling that Faith was in
the car too. “Well, the first one anyhow.” Then she recalled all the previous slayers in her line.
“Well, the first of the two of us, that is. It’s me, okay? I’m back,” she asserted as Willow gave her
hand a reassuring squeeze. “And we’re back,” she added smiling to herself before muttering, “I
really need to get back to the one liners and lose the Willow-babble.”
Not needing to hear anything more Giles released the break and hit the accelerator allowing the car to speed forward as if it was leaping with the same excitement he felt exploding inside at the knowledge that everyone was still alive.

Angel knew that they had gone and he knew that he should too. He should leave not only this battle but also the Hellmouth because something he didn’t like the feel of was nagging at him, calling to him. Throwing the last of his attackers against the rear wall he found himself growling in annoyance, disturbed by the emotions and the not so subtle digs his demon had been making.

When had he lost the inner peace he’d found so comforting since leaving her and this place? He couldn’t recall any specific moment. It was as if it had crept up on him only to be heightened by returning to this town.

No, there had been that man, that Wolfram and Hart magical grunt. He’d taken something, he’d drawn something from him, he’d … Angel searched his memories desperate to grasp the thought, the knowledge, the understanding of events that he could only sense.

Heading towards the stairs he heard a car engine gunning and then the spinning of tires as it pulled away. Sighing, he felt, both, relieved and annoyed yet unsure why he should be plagued by either emotion. It was as if he didn’t know himself and he didn’t like that at all. The only way he had managed to survive all these years of feelings and emotions was to know himself and his limits.

But the raging anger at the injustice of having lost Buffy and being back here reliving that loss began to overwhelm his search for logic, for meaning. The voice of his demon was growing louder, its comments closer to the bone than he really wanted to admit. He was jealous, he was angry; he could feel his blood temperature rising as the image of Buffy and Willow flew back into his mind.

‘Whatever she’s hoping to get from the witch will be nowhere near what you can give her. How could it ever be?’ his demon whispered.

Holland Manners had only one question once his young protégée had completed his re-materialization. “Well?”
Staring anywhere but at the Senior Partner, a thousand possible variations and excuses ran through Hyatt Ramu’s mind. Could he risk saying he’d killed her in the hope that he could get the job done before they discovered the lie? Should he say he’d only managed to wound her? No! Any of the firm’s many seers would be able to provide the truth within minutes of being asked. Maybe he could admit to having hit the wrong slayer and blame Maclay. That could work, that daft old bird had it coming anyway. Shifting his eyes back towards his boss, he reviewed the options again, hoping to glimpse something in those blue eyes, some idea of how much he knew.

But the ice-cold eyes of the Senior Partner seemed to have nothing for him, no clue, no direction. All he knew for certain was that he was taking too long with his answer. Swallowing, he made a decision in that split second that could come back to haunt him. He chose honesty. “She lives,” he muttered, preparing himself as best he could, to pay what he was sure would be an excruciating price for his failure. But the Senior Partner’s reaction wasn’t at all what he had expected. Holland threw his head back and laughed, “But of course she does.”

As they sped away Buffy tried to relax, but it didn’t come easily. She could still feel Willow drawing something from her. It felt oddly personal and appeared to be creating such a connection that Buffy swore she could almost feel Willow’s heart beating. Realizing that it had been the other Slayer who had first known this with her, Buffy felt jealousy wash over her. She hadn’t been the first to feel this connection with her true love, to experience this link to such a gentle and yet intensely strong woman. Oz had been the first to receive her love and know her, Tara had been the first woman, Faith had been the first to feel the link. Was she to be the only one not to experience a first with her true love, the best friend she had known longer than any of them had?

Briefly glancing at the woman whose hand was holding her own so firmly, she let her eyes linger on their joined hands, as she inexplicably wondered what everyone in the car was thinking about the fact that they were holding hands. ‘What’s wrong with that? What am I, some kind of prude? After all I’ve been through with this woman. They all know what we did. Well, kinda. Hell, they all heard me declare myself, declare my love. Oh, when am I gonna get over myself? What is this… high school? We’re two grown women; we don’t need to explain ourselves to anyone.’ Continuing her internal rant and berating herself for the feelings of embarrassment and shyness, she found herself torn between wanting to shout to the world that she had found the woman of her dreams and yet wanting to keep these early tender steps of their relationship private.

Why was this always a battle for her? Why couldn’t she ever have something that was just hers, something unconnected to her role as the Slayer? Was that even possible? But then again, if it hadn’t been for who and what she was and the way her Slayer powers or lack of them had shaped
events, would she ever have had the courage to fight for this, to have taken the risk of losing her dearest friend in the hope of something that could be so much more?

Willow had risked everything for her too. How could she ignore what that meant? Buffy couldn’t. Lost for words and unwilling to share how she felt with the rest of the gang in the car, she moved her right hand briefly, covered their joined hands and gently squeezed in a silent ‘thank you’ before returning her free hand to the back of the front seat as a brace against Giles’ somewhat erratic driving.

Willow felt a sudden flow of warmth from Buffy’s small and simple act. Certain that she was now blushing as she searched for a response, something true, something honest…. raising Buffy’s hand, she silently brushed her lips over the soft skin of the woman who filled her heart.

Buffy’s breath caught in her throat and she thought she was going faint from the shiver of electricity that seemed to shoot straight to her heart. ‘Oh Wow! How does she do that? ‘Okay, so it’s a given that I won’t be the first … but I’m gonna be the last. And Hell will freeze over before I screw this up’.

**************************************************************************BtVS**************************************************************************

Slim dragged his bruised and battered body up the stairs, cursing under his breath. It had taken him far too long to make his way out of the debris that had once been his side of the building. The three colleagues that he had managed to find were so badly wounded that they couldn’t be moved. He’d had to leave them. Making his way to the rear of the building in the hope that he wouldn’t be able to confirm his fear, he mentally crossed his fingers that the reason for the sudden radio silence wasn’t what he expected it to be. Calling for their extraction because they had failed in their mission was something he didn’t want to have to do. He’d heard stories about what happened to those that failed.

Reaching the top of the stairs he crouched before tentatively pushing open the door as he cursed the day they’d ever been selected for this mission. He never would have believed that this could happen. They were professionals. How could a group of college kids and a stuffed shirt Brit do this to them? He and his men had taken out demon clans, disposed of mob bosses; hell, they’d even out-foxed the FBI only last year.

As his actions hadn’t produced a hail of bullets, he chose to stand before entering the upper level of the warehouse. Stepping out into the open he quickly took in the scene before him. Four men were scattered on the ground obviously unconscious, if not dead.
The movement had been so sudden that he couldn’t quite take it in at first. He was being lifted. Something had him by the scruff of his neck.

Giles glanced in his rear view mirror, his nerves still refusing to believe that they weren’t being followed. However, what caught his attention was the rather odd expression on the face of his Slayer in the back seat. “Buffy? Are you okay?”

“Huh … What?” Buffy mumbled, suddenly awakened from the awe of how Willow’s tender kiss had affected her.

“Are you okay?” Giles repeated.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. A little giddy to be back in my own bod but I’m good,” Buffy responded.

“Welcome back,” Xander added, twisting his neck to glance into the back seat before asking, “Did they let anything slip? You know like the name of the guy behind this strong-arm interference?”

“Nope, they pretty much kept me in the dark, literally. I don’t know what they thought I’d do if I could see them,” Buffy commented, recalling the dark despair that she had visited while awaiting her rescue. Suddenly remembering how she had believed that Willow might be dead, her eyes glazed over.

“Buffy?” Xander questioned, the faint light from the dashboard allowing him to see her momentarily leave them.

Seeing the concern evident in his face, Buffy threw him an apologetic smile. “Sorry, I was back there for a minute. Gave me the wiggins.” She allowed herself to shiver and shrug her shoulders as if throwing the memories away.

“‘Creepezoid mercenaries in the pay of some big bad wolf taking on innocent blond riding hood’ - not exactly pay-per-view. The ending’s a given,” Xander smirked.
“Red riding hood was not blond,” Anya suddenly piped up, “and as for innocent … what she did to the Wolfgang brothers could get you arrested in certain states.”

No one said anything; no one knew what to say and Xander simply crossed his eyes as if to say – don’t ask me.

Ignoring Anya’s outburst, Giles turned away from the warehouse area and onto Main Street, before advising “Willow, I think you can let go of the lights now. No one’s been following us.” Allowing a good five hundred yards to pass before pulling over, as the pain in his leg was increasing, he added, “Xander, much as I hate to ask, could you drive? I’m certain that most of us will be requiring medical assistance if not the solitude of a nice warm bed.”

Hesitantly releasing Buffy’s hand, Willow felt the heat rising in her cheeks. For reasons that she knew too well, the idea of lying in a nice warm bed alone did nothing to relieve the aches that were racking her newly returned body, let alone the longing in her heart. ‘What has she been doing to me?’ she wondered as she tried to release a knot in her shoulder and the throbbing in the rest of her body. ‘Oh yeah, tied up most of the day.’

Buffy felt Willow leave. It was as if the sun had vanished behind a cloud and she didn’t like it one little bit. There had been a brief flash of concern. Realizing that she had momentarily felt her Willow’s distress, Buffy turned her full attention to her true love. Ignoring the others, she twisted in the limited space available, reaching to cup Willow’s face. “Wil? What’s wrong?” the Slayer questioned as she felt something push against her back.

“Hey. Owwww,” protested Faith as Buffy pushed against her wounded leg.

Realizing what she had done, Buffy immediately released Willow and tried to move back, only to jam against Faith’s leg again.

“HEY!! Watch it.”

“Sorry,” Buffy offered again, suddenly feeling like a klutz, as she tried to find a safe way to maneuver that didn’t involve throwing herself at Willow.

“Oh for heavens sake!” Cordelia exclaimed.
“Sorry,” Buffy repeated in an almost whisper, wanting more than anything to disappear, as she tried a standing crouch, only to pull Faith’s leg up with her.

“Eeeeeeoooommmwwww!!!” screamed Faith, gulping in a lung full of air. “Okay that’s it! Look, Red slowed the bleeding but this gunshot wound still hurts like hell. You’ve slept together. We all know you have. Joy of joys, you’ve wandered through each other’s love valley. You’ve walked in each other’s bodies. Plus you’re in love with each other and it’s not a secret anymore – SO SIT ON HER LAP ALREADY!” Faith growled through pain-clenched teeth.

***************************BtVS***************************

Angel grabbed the mercenary by the scruff of his neck, as the man emerged from the doorway, hoisting him upwards. He’d been perched above the doorway, about to exit the same way he’d come in; in the hope that retracing his steps would bring him back down from his somewhat agitated and aggressive state. But then this guy had thrown open the door and for some reason beyond his understanding and the vampire had been drawn back into why this was all happening. Or to be more precise why this was happening to him?

‘You get cursed; you have a soul forced upon you. That’s not punishment enough? Oh, no. The witches want bubble, bubble, toil and trouble for you, my boy. They want their pound of flesh. So they hook you up with little miss virgin goody-two-shoes and her gang of misfits to plague you with humanity. They pump blood into the weakest organ in your long-deceased body. And then - oh and this is the sweet part – they hang it out to dry. They take the little blonde away and give her to … another witch. You’re telling me that it was just coincidence that her best friend was a witch? Yeeeah right!’ his demon ranted. The voice was getting louder, and he didn’t seem able to block it.

Shaking the man vigorously he felt it rise within him; the rage, the hunger, the fire, and the knowledge that this would take nothing, be nothing and not matter at all. What is one life, one single solitary soul? Of what importance was this man’s soul; was it more important than his own? This man had killed, he could smell it on him and, yet, someone somewhere had decided that he - could not, should not kill him. Where had these impossible rules come from? Weren’t his needs, his longings, his desire for victory just as valid?

He knew he was doing it, he was letting the demon in, at it’s own pace. And his world was becoming darker.
Xander could hardly deal with the incredible number of quips and one-liners that insisted on battling for primary position in his mind every time he looked or glanced at the rear view mirror. The image of Buffy and Willow holding hands created some intense fantasies. Hell, that was to be expected. Now add that not only was Faith practically sitting on Cordy’s lap but also that Buffy was actually sitting on Willow’s. It all just pushed his imagination into overdrive. And having had his own little sex beast Anya, sitting in his lap, wriggling every time Giles attempted to change gears, really hadn't helped any either.

Swapping seats with Giles was meant to help, but despite Xander trying to concentrate on getting them all home safely, he could still see the Watcher rather stiffly trying to ignore the fact that he was now practically sitting on Anya’s lap. The young man swallowed the latest imaginative pictures back just as he opened his mouth. He really wanted to have some fun but expressing his often under-appreciated sense of humor in this confined space was just asking for trouble. Having survived their rescue attempt, he really wasn't about to tempt fate. The odds were sure to be against his survival if he let loose in front of this audience and he knew it.

Not sure when he'd started to take an interest in their mission-by-mission survival statistics, he mentally assessed this one. ‘Okay, we have two non-fatal injuries but everyone’s skin and non-bumpy facial futures were intact. Today was a good day, a success by every measure that mattered.’

**********************************************************************************BtVS**********************************************************************************

Unnerved by the unusual and unnatural silence that had settled over the group, Cordelia decided to open up a subject and not just any subject. “How on earth did you get shot anyway?”

“Duh, let me think… I got in the bullet’s way,” Faith responded dismissively, more than a little distracted by the discussion Giles and Xander were having about the most direct route to Sunnydale Memorial Hospital.

“A bullet meant for us,” Willow piped in.

“For me,” Buffy corrected.

“You should have let them shoot Buffy - she has Slayer healing too. Why would you deliberately let someone shoot you? Ohh oh, if Buffy and Willow can’t forgive you now that they’re multi-orgasm buddies, you thought getting shot would do it!” Anya stated in all seriousness.
“Anya’s right,” Cordelia commented. Receiving a combined hail of questioning looks and raised eyebrows, she added, “Well she is. You chose to take the bullet?”

“No choice. They didn’t see it and I didn’t have time to warn them,” Faith responded, trying to appear as matter of fact as she could since this whole ‘you took a bullet for them because you want forgiveness’ was just a little too close to the bone.

“We were distracted. We should have been paying more attention,” Buffy mumbled, as she tried to figure out what the hell she actually wanted to say.

“You’re damn right you should have been paying more attention,” Cordelia blasted the blonde slayer. “I don’t give a damn about this weird holy grail of absolution. Faith didn’t deserve to get shot.”

“I know that,” Buffy responded, her back rising at the inferred accusation.

Faith turned her head and catching her friend’s eye in a fixed stare, she firmly stated, “C, it happened. My choice. I owe them both that much and more. So, let’s just get past it.”

Realizing that Faith wasn’t going to budge on what she’d chosen to do or why, Cordelia huffed. ‘Why on earth does she think fixing things has to hurt?’ Cordelia wondered. “Yes well, I’m just thinking… you know, it’s not like we have a Slayer incorporated HMO is it? That and your police record should make filling in the Memorial’s forms a real hoot.”

Looking straight at Cordy, Faith did little to hide the fear, “I can’t go there! They’ll call the cops.” Faith’s head swam as the reality of their destination sank in. The last time she’d entered that hospital… Gulping for air she became more and more agitated as harsh memories flashed before her.

Despite at first questioning the intensity of Faith’s emotions, Cordelia was drawn into the fear as Faith instinctively began trying to escape. Cordelia saw the haunted look of someone reliving a nightmare. ‘She’s terrified!!’ The Seer immediately tried to calm the dark-haired Slayer. “Faith, take it easy, honey. You’re making it bleed again.”

“I’m not going there, you can’t make me. Stop the car, donut boy!” she demanded, trying to lurch towards the steering wheel. “Let me outta this car!” Faith insisted, before catching sight of Willow’s concerned expression. “I’ll take care of myself,” she added momentarily finding rational
thought.

Cordelia tightened her grip before calmly stating, “You are not going anywhere, young lady. You need medication and treatment.” Turning to Willow, she quietly added, “Can you do your witchy thing to slow down the bleeding again?”

“I’m not going back there,” Faith continued to insist, which did nothing to calm everyone’s concern at her obvious distress.

Willow nodded at Cordy before quickly and firmly taking Buffy’s hand once again, telling herself that she just wanted to juice up the spell she’d used to keep Faith from bleeding to death in the warehouse. Reaching out to the dark Slayer, she wrestled to grasp her hand, as Faith continued to try to evade Cordelia’s hold, which the Seer was trying to maintain without hurting her further.

‘I won’t go back there. You can’t seriously expect me to go back there. To wake up in that room again... alone.’ Suddenly she was back in the hospital, in a coma. ‘So alone… stare up at that ceiling… I can hear them talking over me… like I’m not here. No one can hear me… so alone…’ Faith couldn’t breathe. ‘Was the knife still in her? Didn’t they take it out? Why did it still hurt? Someone was pushing it… No…. Someone was holding it… no… holding her... Cordelia… was holding her. Will she keep hold… what if she lets go? Why do I think she’s different? I couldn’t trust before… Look what I did… I lost everything… not again. Not again.’

Although she had never seen Faith so upset before, Buffy understood her fellow slayer completely. She, herself, hated hospitals and she recalled her own dreams about Faith, their fight and the coma. Those were dreams she never wanted to have again, let alone share or go through again. But despite her sympathy there was one thing about the scene before her that forced her to smile - Cordelia had turned herself into “little miss clingy”, trying to keep hold of Faith. It seemed that Queen C was prepared to get really personally involved in this one. But that didn’t change the fact that Faith’s writhing was going to get someone hurt. “FAITH!” she bellowed in warning. But just as she prepared herself to launch into the fray, the warm tingle that was spreading up her arm and across her chest calmed her. Buffy decided that she really could get used to having this magic connection with Willow.

Giles interjected, keeping his tone measured, “Faith, we have to go to hospital. You have to be properly treated and so do I. You can’t just rely on Willow slowing down the bleeding until your Slayer healing takes over.”

His argument was reasonable and logical but Cordelia could feel Faith’s heart racing nonetheless. She was heading towards complete panic. “I know Willow’s like ‘magic Swiss army knife gal’ but you guys must have proper medical supplies somewhere?”
“Of course we do,” Willow assured her, “Giles has the main store of medical supplies at his place. There’s a smaller supply at the shop and top-notch first aid kits at most of our homes. I always carry some sutures and a… Why?”

‘They had let her slip into it… they had been relieved… they had let her go. Just like all the others. No one had held her hand, no one had… missed her.’ Faith wasn’t hearing what was currently going on around her; she was back in the hospital during her coma. She was in a complete meltdown, terrified of going back to jail and terrified of going to the hospital – both held cold memories for her.

Cordelia gently leaned towards the ear of the terrified woman, who was tugging at her heart, and gently said, “Faith, let me take care of you. No hospitals, no police. I promise. Do you trust me?”

“You won’t let go?” Faith asked in a quiet almost childlike voice.

“I’ll never let you go,” Cordelia assured her without hesitation.

Her voice childlike and trusting, Faith whispered, “Okay.”

Cordelia felt her heart leap at Faith’s response and she raised her head squaring her jaw. “Xander, drop Giles off at the hospital. Then take us to his place.” She was going to make this happen. “Willow, I’ll need you with us.”

*****************************************************************************BtVS*****************************************************************************

Intrigued by Cordelia’s apparent need to care of Faith, Willow began to recall the looks she had seen pass between the two women but more importantly what had been hidden in their glances when the other wasn’t aware. Turning to Buffy, a silent acknowledgement and understanding was reached without the need for words.

Buffy turned to interrupt Giles’ objections, “I think Faith’s right. The hospital will have to report gunshot wounds to the police, who’ll come to investigate. That wouldn’t be good for her. As a matter of fact, it wouldn’t be good for any of us,”
“And the bad guys know we have wounded. They’ll be expecting us to go to the hospital,” Willow added. “It’s not safe.”

Nodding Buffy jumped back in, eager to push their point home. “But they haven’t been to Giles’ place yet.”

Xander changed direction as Giles asked nervously, “And just who is going to treat us and take out the bullets?”

“I will,” Willow responded as confidently as she could manage, “From what I’ve learned in the past day about controlling gravity’s effect on inanimate objects… harnessing the natural magnetic field of an object… I’m fairly certain that by drawing on Slayer magic I will be able to extract… remove the bullets. I know I can do it,” the wiccan ended throwing Faith a look loaded with promise.

“Are you sure?” Cordelia and Giles asked in unison.

Feeling the need to acknowledge the efforts that both Willow and Buffy were going to on her behalf, Faith responded to the question. “If Red says she can do, that’s good enough for me.” Willow was obviously still trying to regain control of her facial emotions, as her face showed both thanks and an intense pressure to succeed. So Faith took immediate action to lighten the load, as only she could. “But you're gonna practice on Giles first, right?”

For the first time in what seemed like ages everyone laughed … except Giles.

Willow had never experienced such exquisite torture; for what seemed like hours she had been trapped in the back seat of Giles’ car with her beloved firmly seated on her lap.

Her mind had traveled through simply thousands of mental pleasures, as every movement of the car seemed to make Buffy’s rear press more firmly against her pelvis; with each gear change, every time Xander braked or steered sharply into a corner Willow’s world became one of heightened senses and growing hunger. She had never felt such raw need. It was as if their forced separation and public reunion had only served to bring into sharper focus every desire and dream; some guttural and basic, others residing in the clouds and almost noble.
Much to Willow’s surprise Buffy had displayed a very apparent delight in not being able to move from her lap since Faith and Cordy had remained in the back seat of the tiny car. In fact her Slayer seemed to settle herself in, twisting slightly to one side, throwing her right arm behind the trapped wiccan’s head, before pulling Willow’s arms around her waist. All of this did nothing to alleviate her pleasurable discomfort. Buffy’s deep sigh of contentment seemed to travel from her own body and to Willow’s. Buffy seemed to no longer care who saw them.

‘Is it possible? Does she feel it too?’ wondered Willow in awe, gently squeezing Buffy before returning the ‘sigh’, hopeful that she would be understood. And then she faced true temptation. Just there, at the end of her nose, so close she could almost feel their rise and fall, almost caress those tender slopes; she lost all sense of time and place. Hypnotized by the tantalizing closeness of Buffy’s breasts, their movement, the hint of white lace only visible when she inhaled, the subtle interruption to the smooth fabric that indicated the presence of an obviously hardening nipple - she was lost.

********************************BtVS********************************

Somehow everything seemed to amuse the Senior Partner about this whole situation. His eyes crinkled at the look of distress and wounded pride that ran across Hyatt’s features. It had been so long since he had tasted this himself. Why couldn't the young man see the ridiculousness of it all, how wafer thin the possibility of total success had ever been?

He often wished that more young people would take an interest in good wine. The ground is tended and fed, sometimes for centuries, the casks treasured from generation to generation, the vines inherited as if gold. And when a cask is bottled with due reverence, it is because everyone knows that when the wine has reached its potential. Only then can they taste the fruits of their endeavor and classify it a success or failure.

However, Maclay’s obvious enjoyment of Hyatt’s discomfort would have been seen as creepy by most people. The man had issues that would have challenged Holland Manners in his early years. But after over four decades of living mostly waist high in this little seen world, there was very little that really concerned him about the extremes of the human mind.

Maclay thought of himself as a Napoleonic figure, fighting for his birthright and with the egotistical belief that he was somehow going to be a savior to the men of his clan, welcomed with open arms and gratitude. Manners could almost predict Maclay’s reactions when his news and arrival wasn’t received as he obviously expected it to be. No story was ever truly new.

********************************BtVS********************************
Willow’s response was more than she’d hoped for or expected. Buffy could feel the heat, hear the increase in her true love’s breathing and feel her trying not to clench her thighs together. The thrill of knowing that she was the cause of Willow’s obvious arousal was exhilarating. ‘Oh, hell.’ She wanted her. No, she needed her. Realizing that Willow was now visually devouring her breasts didn’t really make the journey to Giles’ place any easier, but she actually didn’t want to stop this. She could feel her nipples beginning to harden under the heated gaze of the woman who at this moment seemed able to stop her heart mid beat whenever she wanted. And having Cordelia and Faith next to them in the car only seemed to make things hotter.

Briefly their eyes met, through heavy lids, intoxicated by the desire that they were mutually allowing to build. Buffy could feel her stomach muscles beginning to tighten. She could almost feel her skin tingling, warming under Willow’s loving gaze. Swallowing she averted her eyes. Never had she felt so shy and yet so brazen; so completely consumed in the moment.

Adding into the mix the occasional fantasy-enriched glance from Xander in the rear view mirror and her own numerous prayers to the powers that be that Anya would not speak and ruin this sweet agony, Buffy came to the stark realization that this was by far the strangest, most agonizing and erotic foreplay she had ever known. And she loved it.

“Can’t I just drink half a bottle of gin, like in the movies?” Faith suggested, as she watched Willow pounding the large pile of herby looking sticks to dust before adding it to the saucepan boiling away on the stove at Giles’ place.

“This is an anesthetic. You may have slayer healing and pain tolerance, but Giles doesn’t. Extracting a bullet through traumatized flesh…” Willow stopped, realizing that she was saying more than she needed to. Sorry. “That part usually gets left out.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Giles muttered.

“Yeah. Thanks for the visual,” Faith added, grimacing at the thought of being conscious through this. She’d lain in that truck for over an hour with her knife sticking out of her; the one Buffy had stabbed her with. She’d felt her own blood seeping into her clothing. Blood had always just been part of business until then, probably because it had always been someone else’s. She felt a pressure on her shoulder and, turning, she saw Cordelia’s reassuring face.
Glancing at the contents of the saucepan Willow turned to Buffy. “Could you pass me the sugar… uhh… honey?”

“Honey?” Buffy questioned momentarily thrown by the apparent endearment.

Realizing what she’d just said, Willow stammered “I… I meant… the honey… Not you ‘Honey’… not that you’re not. If I was going to give you a… a pet name, not that I would without checking if you liked it… I mean some pet names are just silly and childish… using rhymes… like Xander the Philanderer… Or Buffy the Muff… [gulp]. I should stop speaking now…” Willow finally decided before squeaking out, “Honey helps the medicine go down.”

Quickly covering her embarrassment at the rhyme Willow had almost completed, Buffy glanced at the boiling potion. “Are you sure you’re going to need that much?”

Willow glanced at her recipe, grateful to be able to change the subject. “Well the recipe asked for seven quarts of… Oh… seven cups!”

**********************************************************************BtVSS**********************************************************************

Willow leaned over Faith, her right palm turned upwards, her left hand firmly grasping Buffy’s. As she slowly pulled her palm higher, Faith once again began to complain that she didn’t need the disgusting looking concoction; the witch paused until the dark slayer settled down.

“Oh for goodness sake, just drink the damned stuff,” Cordelia ordered, shoving the glass of pale green liquid in front of Faith.

Faith glared at her and shook her head. But Cordelia just glared right back.

Staring in amusement at the battle of wills before her, Buffy couldn’t help but feel sorry for Faith; she’d finally met her match.

Leaning forward, Cordelia fixed Faith with a far too knowing look. “Just exactly who are you trying to impress?” she asked, shaking her head in annoyance before her eyes softened to make clear that she knew this show of bravery was intended to impress her. “Thank you, but I’d prefer roses and a pair of Jimmy Choo’s. I never thought I’d see the day when I’d be the level-headed and dependable one. Now drink so we can get this over with and they can take care of Giles.”
Taking in the meaning of her words, Faith realized how foolish she was being. Leaning forward she placed her lips on the rim of the glass and Cordelia nodded tilting the glass for her.

Holland Manners guided Maclay towards the main foyer, only half listening to the ramblings of the wanna-be demigod.

“Of course, most people believe that a man’s allegiance to the social order, common decency and cultural taboos is either a matter of nurture or nature. However, I and many others have always believed that there is a third and more spiritual control in play; the balance of what is perceived as good and evil contained within any human soul,” Maclay continued to ramble.

“Indeed?” the Senior Partner interjected with what he judged to be just the right note of interest.

“Oh yes. A soul’s ever evolving balance of good and evil dictates far more than people give it credit for. Think of the human soul as a filter, connecting experience and emotion before passing the end product on to your decision processing cortex, the balance deciding what gets through and what doesn’t, slanting the tone and color of your options. And so if we remove, say, even some small part of the good balance, the decision making process is weighted, isn’t it? Maybe towards perceived evil - towards say emotional need, animalistic desire and man’s instinct to survive at whatever price. By altering a soul’s balance you can alter the perceived consequences and ramifications of any decision,” Maclay concluded, “And I think I’m about to prove that beyond all doubt.”

“Really?” Holland Manners smiled.

“You can thank me later,” Maclay advised him as he finally exited the building.

Buffy followed Willow into the bathroom after she had finished treating Faith, unwilling and unable to be without her for any length of time. The connection had become even stronger than before and when it was broken she once again felt the loss. ‘How can my whole world so totally change in such a short time?’ she wondered before laughing to herself. ‘Everything in my life happens at such break-neck speed that my brain just has trouble keeping up.’
Willow flipped down the toilet seat to sit down, leaning back against the tank. “I just need to regroup before the next one,” she stated as if needing to explain.

“I know. It’s okay,” Buffy assured her, kneeling in front of the woman she couldn’t bear to be apart from.

Willow gazed down at her with such gratitude and understanding that Buffy felt compelled to say, “You were amazing. I could feel the control that took. I’m not sure how you did it.”

Her praise got her a weak smile from the wiccan as she shrugged her shoulders. “Let’s see if it works, before we start with the ticker tape parade. There were so many veins to close, so much blood. I’m pretty sure that she could feel it towards the end. I’m going to have to make the potion stronger. What if …”

Reaching up and grasping her hands, Buffy stopped the babble. “You were amazing. It will work. Did you see how Giles looked at you? He was so proud,” Buffy stated before adding, “And I’m so proud that I could just…” she leaned in to kiss Willow’s hand. Fighting the urge to reach up and feed on those luscious lips, she switched gears. “But you can’t go back in there until you recharge so where do I plug you in?”

Raising Buffy’s hands she returned the kiss before gazing at her best friend and replying with a smile “Already we need toys?”

*****************************BtVS*********************************
Angel couldn’t hold it in and standing on the roof of the partially demolished warehouse he let out a roar, so primeval that it seemed to draw from the very depth of his being. This wasn’t right. She was his. She would always be his. Ever since he’d first laid eyes on her he’d known she was the one. He’d known that she was dangerous, that she would call on parts of himself that he had thought long ago dead. And she had.

Why had he agreed? Why had he let it go this far? Buffy’s feelings for Willow were just a phase, an extension of their friendship. They could never have the same depth of meaning… She’d tried to replace him before, but no man had ever measured up. And, to be perfectly honest, that fact had pleased him. No man could ever replace him. Willow wasn’t meant to be a threat; she was just a safe bet. After all, Buffy had needs. It wasn’t real, it couldn’t be!

But it had looked real. It had felt as if there was more than just… Nooo!!! Buffy was just fooling herself. She was going to live a lie. So why did that bother him so much?

Cordelia wiped away the beads of perspiration that had built up on her brow. Her insides still felt hollow but thankfully the desire to throw up hadn’t come back. Xander had turned almost white and, in the aftermath, she threw him an understanding glance.

“That appeared to go well,” Giles commented, a trace of nervousness apparent in his tone.

“Oh yeah! The new and improved Wicca/Slayer tag team just kicked some mega 21st century ass. I mean I know Willow’s always had magic smarts but that was way more than a floaty pencil. Did you see that glow?” Xander gushed, standing to head towards the bathroom, before remembering that it was occupied.

“Indeed, it seems that their… coupling has had benefits that no one could have foreseen,” Giles confirmed, turning to Cordelia. “I take it your dream didn’t infer that by succeeding in bringing them… together… that something more would be brought into existence?”

“It was a ‘Vision’. A dream is running to catch the bus naked. Evil trying to take over the world by crippling the Slayer - that's a vision.” Shrugging, Cordy continued, “Nope, it was more of a ‘this is the bad stuff that will happen’ if they don’t get it together.”
Giles nodded, slowly realizing that he was witnessing the evolution of the slayer line. As her Watcher, he’d read all the diaries, all the accounts, but he’d never been presented with any reference to a Slayer teaming up with a human. Yet it was true that Buffy had always been different. She had always had the Scoobies and her mother for support but a partnership… a mating? There had been Angel… but no, that had not been the same.

“Xander, give me a hand, will you? We need to move Faith to the sofa,” Cordelia pointed out.

Xander threw her a questioning look from behind the kitchen counter as he placed the saucepan back on the lit stove.

Sighing, Cordelia raised her eyebrows. “Giles will need the table next.”

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Willow couldn’t take it any longer. Buffy had been holding her and stroking her hair for what seemed an age and, although she knew it was meant to be soothing, it was becoming nothing but torture. “Buffy?”

“Yes?”

“I need you to… could you please stop that?” Willow mumbled, as she let the shiver loose.

“What?” Buffy responded, pulling her chin back from Willow’s shoulder in confusion.

“The… stroking,” Willow explained, a little breathlessly.

“Oh! Sure,” Buffy said suddenly feeling rejected. “Sorry.”

Grasping Buffy’s hand, Willow said “S’okay, I just… if you keep doing that… I don’t think we’ll ever get to Giles. Tingles and, well… Tingles.”
Buffy smiled with relief, “Tingles, huh?”

“Yeah,” Willow stated, fighting back the desire to blush.

“Kinda hoping you’re not talking about the bad kind? You know, the ‘evil’s a-coming’ tingles.”

“Nope,” Willow grinned, “Definitely not the bad kind.”

As they stared at each other, sharing the silly smiles that insist on covering your face when you’re in love, time seemed to stand still. Buffy could feel the joy building as she could almost feel her heart expanding. She hadn’t felt like this in a very long time. As a matter of fact, she didn’t think she had ever felt exactly this way. Willow looked so happy. She could see and feel the love that this woman wanted to give her. It was amazing. She didn’t want this moment to end, but they had to get stuff done before they could truly relax and enjoy their happiness. Sighing, she turned her head to one side in apology. “It’s time, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Giles had maneuvered himself onto the table with all the understandable uncertainty of a father forced to place his life once again in the hands of his children. This happened far too often for his liking. He really wished he could have avoided having to prove his trust in them yet again. But Buffy and Faith had been right - they couldn’t risk a trip to hospital and the bullet had to be removed.

He had sat in numbed pain awaiting the outcome of Faith’s ‘surgery’ and healing; watching with such pride as Willow showed the immense control and confidence that she now had. He had swallowed his natural and quite predictable fear that she would falter or doubt her own abilities. But as each part of the healing passed by smoothly, he was in complete awe.

Glancing at his sofa where Faith seemed to be sleeping and resting comfortably as her stalwart companion Cordelia watched over her, he was forced to realize just how much more than they once were, these young women had become. Each had showed such maturity, such self-sacrifice, such strength. He couldn’t help but wonder if they really needed him any more.
Shaking aside his inner concerns, he tried to settle himself. It was now his turn and despite his respect for the two women approaching him, he couldn’t quite manage to swallow the nervousness that filled him at the thought of what was about to happen. It had been one thing seeing that bullet extracted from Faith - it was quite another to know that you were about to have it happen to you.

Buffy felt Willow’s hand reach for her own long before their fingers touched. An anticipatory shiver ran down her spine and she smiled to herself.

“Did you drink the anesthetic?” Willow asked, and seeing Giles indicate the empty glass in Anya’s hand, she nodded “Okay”. Moving forward she briefly touched his shoulder before smiling nervously at him.

“You’ll be fine, Willow. I saw how well you ministered to Faith,” Giles assured her, bracing himself.

Pressing her lips together in an accepting smile, she reached inside herself for confidence. ‘He’s right. I’ve already done this once,’ she reminded herself. Buffy gently squeezed her hand and she felt a warm wave of support bathe her.

Giles was momentarily distracted as he watched Willow center herself, observing the stillness of a young woman, now capable of drawing on the stronger magics and somehow even drawing on Buffy’s inner strength, and he saw the focus that took over Willow’s normally reserved and shy attitude. But then he felt it… something cold building within his leg. There was no pain… only the feeling of cold spreading, pushing its way into the wound. The sensation wasn’t unpleasant. It was simply… well… unnerving.

He had limited his own forays into the world of Magic and he had been more than a little hesitant during Willow’s early interest in the subject. ‘Damn it, you know you were a pig-headed oaf.’ His own personal knowledge of just how wrong experimenting with magic could go had long ago dictated his opinion on the subject. He often wondered if he should have even voiced his objections. Willow’s natural youthful rebelliousness, if you could ever use that word to describe her, had simply drawn her further into a subject that, at first, she had found academically challenging and, then, enthralling as her natural ability came to light. But having watched her grow, seeing the Wiccan appear and now seeing her innocently hover over the boundary that would shape her into an exceptional sorceress, his fears changed.

Willow’s ability to control her use of magic and selectively draw from the magic available had
already been proven. The things she had managed to do in the past day alone further demonstrated that she had truly moved beyond the limits of his experience, attaining a level of magical aptitude and practical experience far beyond even his Watcher-trained theoretical knowledge. ‘How can I continue to guide her? Will she let me? Does she realize…?’

A shift within his leg broke his train of thought as Willow, eyes momentarily closed, began to raise her upturned palm.

“Shouldn’t she be looking at what she’s doing?” asked Anya as her question, laced with slight annoyance, broke the silence.

“Shhh,” Xander hissed.

“I guess she doesn’t need her eyes to see what she’s doing. I mean it’s not like she can see into his leg anyway, is it?” Anya muttered.

Giles closed his eyes, attempting to dismiss Anya’s vocal rantings.

Willow could see it… finally. Forming a point at its core in her mind, she drew the energy needed from Buffy. Slowly, tentatively she used it to alter and shift the forces of gravity, lightening the weight of the bullet. Holding it in place, she drew again; this time to create the path, careful not to strain any of the already sensitive and traumatized areas of the wound.

Buffy saw the beads of sweat beginning to form on Willow’s brow. She could feel the sheer mental focus of Willow’s concentration. Standing still, doing nothing wasn’t something she enjoyed, but she did it. This was her true love’s thing. Willow had stood back and followed orders for years, allowing Buffy to call the shots; she could hardly bitch when the tables were turned. Then she realized that she wasn’t just doing ‘nothing’. She was actually participating in Willow’s procedure.

“Ooooh. Look,” Anya commented as Giles’ leg started to rise.

Willow’s eyes flew open. Sure enough the whole leg was beginning to rise and blood was beginning to ooze from the wound. ‘Less, I need to use less,’ she realized and altering the balance, she satisfyingly saw the leg lower. ‘Okay now, I need to turn it about 10 degrees on the vertical which should shift the trajectory and avoid… Balance… Balance. He doesn’t have slayer healing. I’ll have to cauterize those veins. Balance… balance…’
Angel watched them through the corner of Giles' living room window. He didn't know what had
drawn him here or why he felt the need to hide and spy on them. Then he recalled how badly
Buffy had reacted to his support of Faith the last time they'd spoken. He really did hope that they
were past that. He needed to speak to her and have her listen to him. Hell, he'd sent the fallen
slayer to become a matchmaker between Buffy and Willow. And he had just seen Faith
deliberately take a bullet to protect them. These sacrifices alone had to mean something and should
permit civilized conversation, damn it!

The Scooby gang had always impressed him, but he had no doubt that after the Angelus episode
they would never truly trust him again. He was damned sure that neither Xander nor Giles had
suffered any sleepless nights when they’d thought he was dead. Could he really blame them?

As he watched Buffy hold Willow’s hand, jealousy rose up, its depth surprising him. ‘I'm over her,
aren't I?’ he wondered. ‘She's over me - that’s obvious.’ He seethed. He couldn't seem to control
the feelings of loss, jealousy and frustration. None of this had ever been his choice. He'd had to
give her up. He'd had to save her from Spike. None of this had been truly his choice. It had all
been about loving her and keeping her safe. But every time… it had meant surrendering his own
dreams. How could that be fair?

Okay, so he couldn't grow old with her while Willow could, if you ignored a slayer’s normal life
expectancy. He couldn't give her children. Well, neither could Willow. He couldn't guarantee
safeguarding her from Spike but neither could Willow.

Angel turned from the window and, gazing into the darkness, he let out an inner grunt of
exasperation. ‘What have I done?’ He could have been with her. Okay, not in the physical sense,
but damn and hell spawn, it hadn't been about that for him. But she'd wanted more, and now look
how that had ended. No! This was better.

‘I need to talk to her, I need to know… What?’ Racking his mind to make sense of his feelings, he
tried to ignore the images of their one night together, of how she had felt; the noises she’d made,
the smell of her. ‘Why am I thinking of that?’

Buffy could feel Willow drawing from her and, yet, feeding her. She had never been so aware of
the magic, so attuned to its music, the octaves and soaring scales that seemed to be playing within her veins. She allowed her mind and heart to wonder at the possibility that Willow was playing this music just for her, so that she could somehow understand the attraction of the magics. No wonder the magics meant so much to Willow.

But Giles’ sudden intake of breath drew her back to the reality of what they were… no… what Willow was attempting to do. She watched in total amazement, as Willow appeared to marginally enlarge the entry wound. Then she saw it -- slowly approaching the surface, only to pause. ‘He looks so pale, so drawn, so … old? Just how old is he? I’ve never asked. Okay, on his last birthday he was…? How can I know him so well… and yet know so little?’ Buffy wondered as she tried to offer him a reassuring smile.

Just as she had with Faith, Willow paused to repair the torn ligaments and veins behind the bullet as she moved it carefully towards the surface. Giles had no slayer healing powers and she began to feel perspiration forming on her brow. She could almost picture the organs in her mind’s eye, but she didn’t dare close her eyes and trust her inner vision alone. Continuing the balancing act of force, action and growth was exhausting. She couldn’t allow her mind to wander for so much as a second.

Seeing the beads forming on Willow’s brow, Xander glanced at Buffy in concern, only to see a look of absolute devotion and support on the face of his dear friend as she quietly held on to Willow’s hand and smiled at her watcher. His eyes followed hers. ‘When had Giles begun to look older?’ Fighting the lump that began to form in his throat, he smiled quietly and offered a silent prayer that there wouldn’t be some price to pay for this. ‘These darned magics always seem to have consequences attached.’ He had come to think of Giles as the ever so wonderful English Uncle that the kids loved and that parents refused to talk about. He wasn’t ready to let go of him yet. “Does it hurt much?” he asked.

Clenching his jaw before turning to glare at Xander, Giles slowly formed his response. “I’m lying here after drinking what can only be described as boiled twig tea, while a bullet intended for you is being slowly pulled from my screaming flesh,” raising his eyebrows to look over his glasses, Giles fixed his gaze on Xander. “Do you seriously want me to answer or shall I just glare?”

********************************************BtVS********************************************

Had his death really all been just some large cosmic joke? It seemed that women always managed to spin him around and lead him where he least wanted to go, for most of it. At first, women had just been a pleasure - like good ale, a fine stallion and roasted meats. Okay, his father hadn’t been overly impressed by his hedonistic approach, but women had been about fun and nothing more back then. His life had been so much simpler than his death.
In death, he had been drawn to the strong women he’d never known in life - first Darla, then Buffy, and now to an evolving degree Cordelia. Damn it, she’d talked him into this. Since when had he been the poster child for alternative lifestyles, not including death as one? Women had always tried to change him. And he’d let them.

He’d thought Darla to be his soul mate in death, his teacher but she’d used attraction and desire to devastating effect. Her own sexual appetite had tempted him from what would have been his own pedantic ways. Why were women so good at using sex to mold men?

In his earlier years he’d quite enjoyed exploiting man’s peculiar sexual weaknesses; the guilt and secrecy that lingered within those that most of society considered deviants, their fixation with the fringes of sexuality, the breaking of society’s taboos and the risks that involved had drawn him in, if only as a spectator.

But Buffy had reconnected him to life. He hadn’t asked her to do that, but she’d done it anyway. Making him care about the emotional implications of sex, just like Darla, she had used sex. She had used her innocence, knowing what the temptation of such a fruit could do to a man. He might as well have held out his wrists and asked her to chain him.

*********************************************************************************BtVSB*********************************************************************************

Anya yawned as she settled on a kitchen stool. ‘It’s far more exhausting watching all that magic stuff and the emotions. Why is everything so damned emotional with all of them? How do they stand it?’

Leaning against Buffy’s deceptively diminutive but strong and comforting frame, Willow sighed, glancing with satisfaction at the bullet in her open palm. It was over. She’d done it. Giles was still lying prone on the table, Anya bandaging his wound as Xander glanced at the stairs that led to Giles’ bed.

Buffy appeared to have been watching the scene, too, as she led Willow towards Giles’ favorite chair. “I won’t be long,” she promised, brushing Willow’s hair from her face as she lowered her true love into the rather well worn but treasured seat.

Willow sank into the soft leather, doing her best to keep to herself from the feeling of loss. She had felt so connected… to Buffy… to the magic… she had felt so strong, so confidant and so centered but now that it was gone, her natural insecurities returned. So she just sat there and watched as Buffy carried Giles up to his bed. Glancing at Faith’s now sleeping figure and Cordelia’s relaxed slouch, she yawned. Her eyelids seemed so heavy; maybe if she just closed them for a moment.
Anya opened her eyes at the sound of movement, ‘Oh yeah, Willow gets to sink into the comfy chair, like what she did was that hard. You should have seen me in my prime, firing inert bullets into that unfaithful soldier and them moving them around to cause the most damage, without killing him. Now that was tiring,’ Anya internally railed before allowing her eyes to close again.

Buffy followed Xander back down the stairs. Giles hadn’t really said much as they’d tried to make him comfortable, which wasn’t really that surprising. That English reserve had always made him uncomfortable with any kind of physical contact. Every time she’d hugged the guy he’d frozen up. Being manhandled to bed was probably like social inappropriateness overload or something.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, she almost ran into the Xander’s back as he suddenly stopped and stood staring at Anya who appeared to be sleeping, half on a kitchen stool and half on the counter. Then she heard it, a faint wheezing noise followed by a puffing sound. ‘Oh my god, Anya’s snoring!’

Glancing past Anya, Xander’s eye caught a faint spire of steam. ‘The pan!’ he shouted, leaping forward.

‘The what?’

‘The twig tea. It’s still on the gas.’

*******************************************************************************BtVS*******************************************************************************

Holland Manners paused as he approached his personal elevator, Maclay’s parting words replaying in his mind. Turning, he headed down the corridor towards the man, if you could really call him one, he had hoped to avoid for a good long time. Pondering the idea of asking one cryptic man about the cryptic comment of another filled him with understandable misgivings, but he had no choice.

*******************************************************************************BtVS*******************************************************************************

He could see them, Buffy and Willow holding hands again, approaching the car as Xander led the way. ‘I could just walk up to them and say hello. Ask to speak to her,’ Angel reasoned.

‘Oh, and asking gets, does it? Since when have you ever just been given what you’ve asked for?
Get some large ones. Take what you want. You know you can. Taking is much more fun, remember?’ his demon reminded him.

‘I don’t have any right to…’

‘Right? What the spitting torment has right got to do with it? This is about might, power, winning. But hey, if you’re happy to lose, I guess the little blonde really did cut them off. And that bloody witch let you go to hell. She could have stopped it from happening, but oh, no…’ the demon continued.

‘It wouldn’t have mattered, the walls between the dimensions…’ Angel attempted to respond.

‘Yeah, yeah, that’s what they told you. There you were -- a lovesick bat; makes me sick. I’ll believe you, Buffy – I’ll die again for you, Buffy – I need the drama, the tragedy -- it goes so well with the tortured soul and quest for redemption I’ve got going. Get over yourself. DEATH is closer to life than you realize. It’s survival of the fittest, dog eat dog, an eye for an eye and all that stuff.’

‘No… this is wrong. You shouldn’t be this loud. I hold you in… I can hold you in… I can silence you…’

‘Really? I think you want to hear me. I think you need to hear me, but the truth hurts, doesn’t it?’

Angel fell to his knees as the car pulled away. ‘Nooooooooooo…’
Willow couldn’t take this silence much longer. She’d thought the car was bad but standing here at the bottom of the stairs, wondering where Buffy would want to take this, knowing that she needed to calm down or she’d explode at the first kiss. It was a nightmare. She needed to plant her feet down somewhere… find some balance… maybe sit on some ice.

Stepping forward Buffy took a deep breath.

“You must be tired---”

“Are you hungry---”

They chuckled with amusement; both at having tried to speak at the same time and with relief that it appeared that neither one of them were prepared to head upstairs just yet.

“A little. I seem to ache all over,” mumbled Willow as she struggled with a sudden attack of shyness as Buffy, her real honest to goodness Buffy, moved even closer.

Nervously twitching her hands, Buffy smiled. “Sorry, most of those aches are my fault. I’d suggest a nice long soak in the bath, but I’m not sure you want to risk another after the last time.”

Laughing nervously, Willow raised her eyes to those of her beloved. “Sounds good… but let’s eat first this time.”

“Deal,” exclaimed the Slayer, forcing herself to attempt to relax. ‘She’s not expecting us to jump right into bed. Why would I think she would? Taking it slow… that’s a good thing… isn’t it? What if she doesn’t want to? She’s black and blue, you idiot.’ Reaching out, Buffy gave in to a need for something so simple. ‘I can do this.’

Taking Willow’s hand in hers, she momentarily allowed herself to enjoy the slight flutter, the feel of her skin. Smiling at her Willow, she guided her true love away from the stairs and into the kitchen.
Wesley stared at the book, a sinking feeling rising from the pit of his stomach. “There’s a design to this chaos and he’s part of it. Why wouldn’t he be?” Moving back to the online archive reference, he scanned schedule five of the stolen gifts index dreading that he would find exactly what he did only moments into his scrolling search. At least with books it took self-preparatory hours to get used to the premise or basis of a hypothesis. This damned internet allowed you to plunge into fear without adequate warning.

“It’s almost circular, that’s how he managed to miss it,” Wesley muttered as he reached for his phone book.

Eating together was a menu of nervous silence, with a side order of broken small talk, followed by a dessert of wishful, longing looks. Clearing their plates, they brushed hands and electricity seemed to set the room alight. Willow, hearing Buffy gasp, gave in to the longing and reached out to run her hands into the hair at the nape of her beloved’s neck, pulling her into a searing kiss.

There was something so personal about the way that Willow was kissing her. It was as if she was learning a new language, Willow-speak. She could feel her mouth moisten in anticipation. Willow’s lips were asking questions of her.

This kiss was about the truth, it was about finding life, it was about desire, but mostly it was about Willow silently saying – **I really did mean it when I said I loved you. Tell me you meant it, too.**

Buffy had never been kissed quite like this before. It made her feel more female than she had ever felt in her life. Willow was somehow kissing her soul. Each tender touch, each lick and each flick of the redhead’s tongue was unraveling Buffy and throwing back the steel curtains that she had used so often to keep some parts of herself private.

Feeling her knees buckle she allowed herself to enjoy the momentary light-headedness. ‘Oooh god, how does she do that?’ Throwing caution to the wind, she pulled Willow to her, crushing her in her arms, drinking in the lips of her one true love. She had to show Willow that this was real for her, too. Pouring her feelings and longing into every meeting of their mouths, determined to impress her true love with the depth of her feelings, Buffy threw herself into a whirlpool passion and honesty.

‘Air, I need air,’ Willow realized as her knees wobbled. Drawing back, she quickly cradled Buffy’s face in her hands to hold her at bay. “Breathe. We – have – to – breathe.”
“I’ve heard that theory – it’s overrated,” Buffy smirked.

Grinning between gulps for air, Willow smiled. “I almost lost you… I can’t believe this is real.”

“As real as it gets. I’m sorry it took me so long to tell you,” Buffy apologetically offered.

“You’re worth waiting for,” Willow stated, rather breathlessly, fixing Buffy with a meaningful gaze.

“I’ve wasted so much time.”

“It doesn’t <pant> matter. We’re here <gasp> breathing,” Willow reassured Buffy between gulps. “We can’t go back <pant> and change the past <gasp> so there’s no point in thinking about that. Plus… there’s the whole causality loop and… time paradox to consider if we did…” She paused in her babble, looked lovingly at her beloved and said quietly, “Buffy, you weren’t ready.”

“I was so afraid of losing us. You know that, right?”

‘Us’ is looking… pretty good to me right now.”

Buffy responded with a rather lecherous grin. “And it tasted pretty damned good, too… until that whole needing to breathe thing.” Running her free hand over Willow’s rear, she savored the urge to squeeze a Wiccan cheek. But her true love inexplicably raised a questioning eyebrow, as if she knew exactly what was on the Slayer’s mind and instinctively Buffy reeled herself in, chastising herself - ‘What are you? Some kind of bar room gorilla. Way to go with the finesse. Willow isn’t just a hot body that I need to touch everywhere and I need her to know that, to know that this… us… here, now and forever… is what this is about. “Do you know what I’d do if I could go back in time?” Buffy asked wistfully.

Willow absently replied “Nope. What?” as her mind processed Buffy’s ravenous look, she experienced a giddy feeling and dry throat. ‘Did I do that?’

“If I could go back in time, I’d find YOU… sooner,” Buffy stated before letting her hands bring Willow’s lips to her own, firmly showing the Wiccan exactly where she belonged.
Maclay walked towards the bus station, a spring in his step. He was finally ready. He was going
to show them all, everyone who had ever laughed at him or judged him, telling him it couldn’t be
done and that it was wrong. It couldn’t be wrong…it felt too good. There had been a rush of
powerful magics as he had bled hope and guilt from the Vampire’s soul, stripping away two of the
fundamental human psychological balances.

Without them the demon would be stronger; it could exert its influence. He’d heard it calling to
him when they were joined and he’d been inspired. It had been a moment of genius. People didn’t
fully understand, didn’t fully appreciate his gifts. Even the Senior Partner, a man of vast
experiences, had undervalued what he had done for them.

There had never been a moment like this before. She’d been so careful not to let her best friend
know how she felt, but now Buffy knew and that rooted everything in reality and consequences.
Their other nights together had been about fantasy and not missing the opportunity when she’d
realized that Buffy was not opposed to exploring this side of her sexuality. It had also been about
trying to get back into their own bodies. But the beautiful woman leading her upstairs had made it
very clear that she wasn’t experimenting anymore. She wanted a relationship. Buffy wanted them
to have a future… together. ‘Scared? Why am I so scared?’ Willow wondered as she felt the
thousand butterflies take off in her stomach.

Her eyes were naturally drawn to the swaying motion of Buffy’s hips, the way her rear seemed to
call to her. It was bizarre how Buffy’s body could affect her so much, considering she had
occupied that very body until only a few hours ago. But she was back in her own body and tonight
this would be the way it was meant to be; there would be no need for shadows, darkness or
weirdness. She could just be herself. ‘But what if she preferred … icky thoughts… who would
prefer to make love to themselves… Buffy’s not kinky, she’s normal. Well okay, slayer normal…
Oh! Wait! Why didn’t I think of that before? I don’t have her stamina any more! What if I can’t
satisfy her or… I fall asleep?’

Reaching Buffy’s bedroom door, the Slayer turned to her Witch. “We don’t have to if you don’t…I
mean… I know you’re tired and… if you want a bed to yourself tonight… I’ll understand,” she
hesitantly offered, her face doing very little to hide what she really wanted --- Willow in her bed.

Willow’s mind exploded with fire at Buffy’s sweet offer, doing away with her doubts and
hesitations. Giving in to her impish enjoyment of the moment, she responded, “I could sleep on the
sofa… but Giles always says that the best treatment for aching muscles… is to keep them…” She paused, leaning towards her beloved, “… warm and active.”

“Yeah… active… and warm… heat is important,” Buffy gulped as a blush crept up her face. She loved this teasing, tempting side of Willow. Opening the door and drawing Willow into the bedroom, Buffy held her hunger at bay. The honeyed rays of dawn streamed into the room as they made their way to the bed.

Turning to her true love, Buffy paused. She didn’t know if it was an issue of trust or a lack of courage but she needed Willow to make the first move this time. Her beautiful redhead held the key to this, to their first real time, their first honest, real, true time together. No matter how desperately she wanted to taste her true love, it was more important to her that Willow be the one to unlock this door. She wanted – no – she needed this to happen because Willow wanted it to.

************************************BtVS************************************

Cordelia stared at the softened and sleeping features of her newest friend, relieved to see that Faith had finally surrendered to the exhaustion she had been fighting. Faith had chosen to rest her head on Cordelia’s lap, in the first instance grinning up at her and asking how Giles was doing, but eventually she had allowed Cordelia to see the pain. The Seer sure as hell wasn’t going to move her now. The brunette Slayer hadn’t really settled down until Giles had been taken to bed, the boiling anesthetic had probably helped, but even then she had been attempting only to catnap until Xander had finally taken Buffy and Willow home.

She could still hear Anya tidying things away in the kitchen as she awaited Xander’s return and another round of why snoring was antisocial in public. The woman had been unusually quiet, for the most part, throughout Willow’s amazing performance and she was almost certain that during the second operation she’d actually seen her wince in sympathy. Anya’s ‘ex-demon’ status had been extremely unnerving when she had first heard of Xander’s new flame. But meeting her had only served to further remind Cordy of Doyle and how blind she’d been in the past.

Glancing down at Faith and gently moving a strand of her hair away from her face, she wondered if her own closeness to Angel wasn’t just another example of how she’d learned to avoid making connections, taking risks. ‘So I pick a guy who can only ever be my friend, and ooooh… added bonus, I have to be ready to stake him and throw him out of my life at a moment’s notice. Let’s be honest, Xander was the last truly emotional risk I took until Faith. Wait! What? How - not making much sense - can I get?’

As she tried to analyze the emotions that had confronted her in the last day, Cordelia couldn’t help feeling like she was reading an ‘advice to the lovelorn’ column. ‘Okay, so it’s a given that there are probably more than a few gay vibes kicking off around here at the moment. Go figure. I
mean... we stood really close to them when they switched back and they were blasting out that aura stuff like there was no tomorrow.'

Adjusting Faith's blanket, she tried to find a comfortable dozing position. Xander would be back soon and it wouldn't be long before she'd have Faith in her own bed. 'Now's not the time for this. And Faith’s not exactly up to quenching some Anne Heche type curiosity... yeah, I'm just curious. Why shouldn't I be? Everyone wonders what it would be like... Don't they?'

**************************BtVS**************************

As Xander walked back into Giles' apartment, he was met with the expectant face of Anya. Uncertain what she was expecting he cocked his head to one side, offering her the unspoken question, what?

"We’re going to have to stay here, aren’t we?” Anya asked.

“Well, that would be a “yes”. Giles will need us,” Xander responded, unsure if the G-man was really going to enjoy having Anya as a nursemaid.

“Then you’ll need to get rid of them,” Anya insisted, nodding towards Faith and Cordelia. “We’ll need the sofa to sleep on. You can pick me up some fresh clothing while you’re out,” she advised him, brushing away the dust that was still clinging to her slacks before flouncing off towards the bathroom.

Xander nodded and moved to take a look at Faith. If she was still asleep he really didn’t want to wake her up just yet. As he approached them Cordelia raised her head.

Without twisting her neck to face Xander, Cordelia responded to his silent inquiry. “She’s still out, but I want to get her somewhere more comfortable. She was renting a room above a shop on Maple Court, I have the address,” Cordelia advised him.

Moving in front of her, the better to read Cordelia’s expression, Xander noted that Faith’s head was comfortably nested on his ex’s lap. He allowed himself a knowing smile, as it seemed that Sapphic stuff was catching. But the one eyebrow-raised glare he received in return, told him all he needed to know; one more smirk and he’d regret it. It seemed Cordelia still had the ability to make him shrink with just a glance.
Buffy stood holding her needs and desires firmly in check. She wanted this so much. But she wanted to know for sure. She still had doubts; she still had fears; why the hell wouldn’t she? Everything had happened so fast and so intensely between them.

Willow stood unsure as to what to do next. Buffy wasn’t moving and yet there was such an inviting look in her eyes… ‘Why isn’t she doing anything – saying anything? I’ve obviously missed something. What’s with the hesitation…? It’s not like we haven’t been here before… Last time, no the last two times she was the one who… She’s always been the one who…. Oh! OH! It’s my turn. Zero on observation. She wants me to make the first move.’

Gulping as she realized what the hesitation was actually about, she tried to calm herself. At least this time she wasn’t exactly working in the dark. They’d had two nights together, she was pretty sure that she’d managed to please Buffy both times. But she’d let Buffy set the pace on both those occasions. This time she was being given the lead and, if she was honest, she didn’t have a damn clue what to do with it. With Tara it had been so warm, caring and unthreatening, she’d never quite lost her head, in the way she had with Buffy. Taking a deep breath, Willow offered her beloved a tender smile as she stepped towards Buffy. ‘I can do this. Okay, so I’m not big on the butch. That doesn’t mean I can’t show her what I want. Is she expecting passion or tenderness? Way to go, I haven’t got a clue. Maybe that extreme passion had been required because of our awkward situation. Maybe Buffy’s hoping for something different this time.’ As chaos took over in her mind, Willow allowed her body to take the lead. At least it seemed to know what she needed… to be as close to Buffy as she could possibly get. Mentally crossing her fingers she hoped that the rest would just come naturally and sooner than it eventually had with Tara.

Reaching the blonde, she leaned forward, keeping her eyes open and in contact with her beloved as she tilted her head, before placing a tender but fleeting kiss on Buffy’s warm lips. Seeing her beloved’s pupils expand told her everything she needed to know. She stepped fully into Buffy’s body before pausing just inches from her lips. She could feel Buffy’s pulse heighten as she slowly moved in for a second kiss, this time allowing her lips to linger just a fraction longer. She bathed in the slight sound of Buffy breathing her in, allowing a lightheaded joy to quench her doubts.

Unable to hold herself back she raised her hand to gently brush aside a strand of Buffy’s hair, before once again leaning into that slightly open mouth. Brushing her lips across the opening she allowed her tongue to escape and caress the almost available mouth before her, causing it to fully open and invite her in. Pulling Buffy’s body into her own she plunged into the sweet heaven that was her beloved’s mouth. So warm; so inviting; so vibrant, and then she met Buffy’s tongue and the sky fell. From that moment every gasp seemed to send a thrill down her spine, as Willow allowed herself to express the love she felt so long for the woman in her arms.

Their kisses seemed to scale the highest of mountains and to plumb the deepest of seas, as they
explored and teased each other with unselfish abandon. There was no list, no curse, no timetable and no other reason for this pleasure than that they both wanted it.

Pulling Willow on top of her, Buffy fell back onto the bed, eager for the feel of her true love’s body on her own. Laughing in joy at their mutual pleasure, she gazed into the face of the woman she loved, into the sensitive half-lidded eyes of the woman who had long ago stolen her heart. “I love you,” she stated simply and honestly, allowing herself to voice the heart-swelling emotions that were flooding her mind.

Willow blushed and paused, fixing Buffy with a look which she prayed held all the sincerity she wanted to show, before she quietly responded, “I love you, too. I always have.” It felt wonderful to be able to declare what she had known to be true for so long without an audience and for no other reason than this was how she felt about the beautiful woman in front of her.

Buffy felt her heart expand in the sure and certain knowledge that they had finally found each other. She needed contact, skin to skin, lips to lips; running her hands down her beloved’s back to the gap between Willow’s top and her slacks, for there she knew there would be skin. She needed to feel the skin of this woman, to see her eyes when she touched her.

Willow’s eyes went wide and she couldn’t help but curl her toes as she felt Buffy’s fingers thread their way under her clothing, tracing electric circles across the most sensitive part of her back. “Your skin is amazing…” Buffy whispered, as she lifted her head up to capture Willow’s inviting mouth, “… so soft.”

Willow felt the fires building as they explored and teased each other with kisses, caresses and writhing bodies - she loved it. No one had ever made her feel so wanton and full of physical need. The last time they had been together she had begged for release, uttering words she had never known herself capable of saying out loud. Her abandon had come from trust and love, undeclared though it had been; she now knew that it had always been there nonetheless.

Pulling her mouth away from her beloved, the Wiccan smiled devilishly before sitting up astride her Slayer. A newfound confidence pushed aside her natural reserve, as she locked eyes with Buffy before beginning to unbutton her top. She wanted to see, she needed to know… and she was left in no doubt as Buffy broke their eye contact to watch intently as each button was released.

As she finally allowed her top to fall open, satisfaction filled her, as she noted Buffy visibly gulp. Reaching for the hands at her side Willow guided her beloved’s hands towards her needy breasts, placing the Slayer’s hands firmly just where she needed them. Pushing her chest forward, arching into Buffy’s warm hands, Willow removed her own, throwing her head back.
As Willow’s hips shifted against her pelvis, Buffy felt a familiar tightness between her legs, as she cupped and kneaded the perfectly formed treasures she had been offered. How could Willow apparently give her control and yet make her feel so out of control, so truly under her true love’s power? It was incredible! Mesmerized by the feel of Willow slowly riding her, she knew she needed more, tracing her thumbs beneath the almost non-existent bra she lifted it up, releasing two perfectly formed breasts and their pert nipples. “Oh yes…” Buffy muttered, pulling herself up. “MINE,” she growled as she surrounded a pink semi-hard nipple within her hungry mouth.

“Ahhhhh…” Willow exclaimed as a surge of passion exploded within her.

Buffy thrilled at the sound of Willow’s moan. Focusing her caresses, she began to tease and tempt the captured nipple with her tongue and lips. Savoring the heady sensation and sweet taste of her true love as the nipple began to stand to attention under her ministrations, no longer pink but blazing red, the nipple seemed to be straining to burst like a fully ripened fruit. She gazed in amazement, allowing herself the visual pleasure she had been denied during their shadowed nights.

As Cordelia helped her to stand, Faith couldn’t help glancing at Xander’s openly smirking face. ‘He’s enjoying seeing me like this,’ she decided. ‘Figures!’ Glancing past him towards the kitchen, she met the annoyed eyes of Anya. ‘What the hell’s up with her? Was I snoring or something?’

Xander couldn’t get over the looks of care and concern that kept crossing Cordelia’s face as she helped the still-healing Faith to her feet. The dark slayer accepting help was one weird thing but add the cracks in the ‘stone cold bitch face’ that allowed him to see Faith’s pain, discomfort and annoyance – that was brain freeze material. There was something very odd happening to the almost all women he thought he knew so well. But his ringside seat came in really handy as he saw Faith’s right knee begin to slightly give way. Instinctively he moved forward to offer assistance.

Faith glared at him, causing him to back off just inches from her as Cordelia’s loud cough caused the dark slayer to nod in acceptance of his help. But as he stepped into her right side and allowed her to grasp his forearm, Faith raised her voice, announcing to the room in general. “Just one misplaced hand, donut boy, and you’ll need Viagra to keep Anya from buying shares in Duracell.”

Xander pursed his lips, “You cut me with your… ooooh… words. I think I know the six-year old you stole them from?”
“Yeah. He asked when you were going to return his full-size Wonder Woman action figure,” Faith responded, raising her eyebrow knowingly.

“Trust me, by now he doesn’t want it back,” Cordelia cringed. “I saw what he did to a life-size cut-out of Paula Abdul.”

“Athletic cheerleaders, overly strong women in short skirts… I see a theme.”

“And I was gonna ask where you were hiding the ‘Freaky Faith’ and ‘Queen Cordelia’,” Xander quipped. “Color this a bonus day. I get to drive you two; now mix in a little rectal surgery and it’s my best day ever,” he winked.

The banter continued, under Anya’s exasperated gaze, as the trio made their way out of the apartment. As the trio approached the car, she tried to work out if Xander really did prefer the cheerleading or nurse’s outfit?

Oblivious to Anya’s musings, Xander led them towards his car. Leaning Faith against the car, Cordelia caught a sudden movement out of the corner of her eye -- someone in black, in the shadows. It didn’t take long for realization to sink in. ‘It’s way past dawn. What the hell is he still doing here?’

*******************************************BtVS*******************************************

Buffy had a distinct memory of just how each piece of clothing had been removed. Even the slight nervousness at being stark naked as the bright daylight streamed into the room could do nothing to diminish the arousing effect of their mutual strip tease. This would be something she would always remember.

She had seen a new side to her true love, a quiet unchallenging strength that somehow gave Buffy permission to be truly herself; to shed the armor, to lay aside her protection and the natural distrust she normally carried. Each caress, each kiss seemed to empower her to let more and more of herself out.

“I could spend forever touching you like this,” Willow whispered, childlike pleasure exuding from her eyes.
“Forever is a long time,” Buffy commented; her natural caution resurfacing before being swept away as Willow’s naughty thumb began tracing the sensitive area of her inner knee, sending little electric shocks up and down her entire body and forcing her toes to clench.

“It could never be long enough,” a mock innocent Willow responded, from behind big wide eyes, before she was unceremoniously flipped onto her back by an equally childlike Slayer.

Cordelia gently closed the door behind Xander, throwing the deadbolt into position, before turning to gaze at the curled up form of Faith. It had taken both of them to help her up the three flights of stairs to this room and every movement had drained Faith. Despite her efforts to appear “five by five”, she had seen it on the dark slayer’s face and felt it in the tensing hand she had held.

Faith needed to sleep but before that she needed to eat something. Cordy was pretty damn sure that it had been hours since Faith had even remembered to eat. She hadn’t eaten for several hours herself. Fighting her instinct to just cradle Faith in her arms, she made her way to the very basic kitchen area and opened the refrigerator.

She didn’t know what she’d expected to find, but she was pleasantly surprised. Throwing Faith a look of approval, she was surprised to see her friend trying to stand. “Whoa! What do you think you’re doing?” Cordelia yelped, stepping towards her.

“Nature calls,” Faith quipped, her eyebrow lifting in annoyance.

Suddenly feeling very silly for not having thought of this, Cordelia stopped. “Okay. But I think you’re gonna need a hand.”

Raising a surprised eyebrow, Faith grinned. “Different equipment, no pointing required.”

Cordelia pushed her tongue out of her partially opened mouth running it along her exposed teeth and tilted her head at Faith, “Really and there was I thinking that plumbing’s just… well, plumbing the world over.”
“He what? How could he seriously think…? Why the hell would he…? That arrogant son of a… Damn it!” Holland Manners railed before sinking back into the well-upholstered chair and fixing his other-dimensional adviser with a steely glance. “This could greatly complicate matters.”

“To a degree.”

“To a degree? Are we even on the same page… the same line? In the long run this could change everything for us. Head Office has a very important role for him to play in the future of this firm. If his mind goes ‘south for the summer’… But I don’t suppose you consider that… oh, I don’t know… change of inter-dimensional importance?” the Senior Partner responded sarcastically.

“Change is constant… within every dimension. Its importance is just a matter of perspective,” the demon commented, shrugging with what appeared to be three shoulders.

“Profound and Cryptic…” Holland muttered shaking his head. “Do you even care how unhelpful that truly is?”

The demon simply smiled tolerantly, causing him to feel like a small ignorant child; not something he really wanted to acknowledge. Right now he was seriously contemplating putting out a ‘hit’ out on that interfering little wanna-be. But he needed to think, he needed to view this from all sides, all perspectives. Was there an upside to having Angel taken out of the equation?

Buffy had never felt so satisfyingly alive with another person. Her rising passions were mixed with joyous abandon as she laid full length atop her tempting Willow, allowing her heady anticipation full reign, ignoring and quashing her natural instincts where physical relationships were concerned. Willow was gazing at her with such desire and pleasure, as she began to curl and thrust her pelvis into the captured body of her own true love. She raised her hips and dipped forward to capture a brief kiss before returning and allowing her pelvis to revisit the invitingly trimmed red hair between her Willow’s legs.

Willow sucked in her cheeks, “Ooohhhhh!” she exclaimed in response to that arching pelvis as she began to writhe beneath the Slayer, eager to accept and express her sheer pleasure. An unheard music seemed to join them as they both found the same excruciating and exotic
Below her had been the most exquisite carpet of Willow pleasures; every part of her true love’s body seemed to be moving to meet her. But now, it was as if they were melting together, blending into one. She was unable to tell who the heartbeat she was hearing belonged to, let alone, whose body was leading and whose was following, in their snake-like writhing dance.

She could feel her wetness as it began to trickle from her. As Willow gasped, her eyebrows rose in surprise and Buffy realized that she wasn’t alone in the knowledge. “See what you do to me,” she mumbled, before growling in acknowledgement of her mounting desire.

Willow was in heaven, spreading her legs a little more, her senses overloaded by the deafening hum of passion as Buffy’s hips deepened their movements to take advantage of her invitation. The repositioning of their limbs caused a shiver of anticipation to crawl over and under Willow’s skin and into her body, into her very breathing. Her hands had now found Buffy’s rear, which she thoroughly kneaded, demanding more. She had felt her beloved’s juices flowing to join with her own and the sensation was mind-blowing. All doubt that she could arouse Buffy had vanished at that moment. Surprisingly, the feeling of empowerment mixed naturally with her desire to relinquish control. But she couldn’t be bothered to analyze or question the contradiction – this was amazing and that was enough.

But she needed more, the hunger between her legs was beginning to scream, she needed…?? Instinct led her hand away from the taut muscles of the slayer’s rear, bringing it to just above where their hips met and as if understanding her intent, Buffy raised herself just enough to allow her hand access. Sliding her hand between them, Willow raised her head to capture Buffy’s sweet mouth, plowing in and exploring with every morsel of desire, as she slid her upturned hand down, down, down – ‘ahhhh there it is.’

Their writhing allowed her very little movement, but the prominent, wet and sensitive bud at the center of the Slayer’s movements told her all she needed to know as she gently brushed it and captured it between her index and middle fingers.

“Oh Yeeeesssssss,” squealed Buffy as a wave of intense feeling seemed to wash over her brain, sweeping away her already dwindling control.

Matching her rhythm Willow gently pulled at the bundle of sensitive nerve endings, with every upward arch of Buffy’s pelvis. A charge of satisfaction exploding within her as their rhythm became a pounding frenzy. The Slayer was throwing her hips back and forth, forcing her most tender of part to be almost stretched to its limits, her ride wanton and abandoned. Willow was in awe, every pelvic thrust and feel of Buffy’s stretching clit, pushing her further and further towards the edge. She was so wet.
Eager to join Buffy’s headlong gallop to pleasurable oblivion, she gave into the hunger, thrusting her own hips to meet Buffy’s downwards plunge.

Gasping as they ground into each other, Willow won the battle of tongues, diving almost to the back of her true love’s throat before releasing Buffy’s mouth and allowing herself to let loose a guttural scream of pleasure as she squeezed her beloved’s now distended clit, between her forefingers, causing Buffy to grind into her, arching and momentarily holding still.

Willow’s mouth now attached itself to her Slayer’s left breast and as she tortured it with her lips, tongue and teeth, she could feel every muscle of Buffy’s body tense in anticipation, causing her to tremble. And now it was her turn to growl – “MINE”. Knowing what was so near, the Wiccan offered a silent prayer for release as she finally moved her fingers, milking the Slayer’s sensitive bud, as she thrust upwards with every one of her remaining needs.

“Oh Noooooooo…” Buffy yelled, as she felt herself falling, plunging towards heaven. She was almost there and Willow’s loving dual assault on her nipple and her bud would surely get her there. “Please,” she begged, holding her breath. Her very heart seemed to release with the final intense squeeze of Willow’s wonderful fingers and nip of her teeth, as she felt herself welcome the intense orgasm as it washed over her entire being.

As she felt Buffy come, her juices oozing down between her open legs, Willow felt as if the top of her head unscrewed. “Ahhhhhhhh… Ohhh Goddess… Yes… So… beautiful.”

“Yessssss… Willow… Ohhhh Yessssss!”

“Ohhhhh Yesss, Yes!… Buffy! Yes!” Willow screamed, acknowledging her own release as she plunged over the edge and into a satisfying mutual oblivion.

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