Distance

by Herself_nyc

Summary

When Buffy goes to the aid of an amnesiac Spike after the L.A. apocalypse, they both find out what lies at the core of their mutual attraction. Can their new love survive the return of Spike’s real memories of all that’s gone before?
Rating: NC-17

Notes

Disclaimer: All hail Joss from whom all these characters flow
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When the word first reached her that Spike had somehow emerged alive from the debacle in L.A., Buffy didn't credit it. Andrew had always had an ... enthusiasm for the vampire. It went with his enthusiasm for the tall tale.

When further word came confirming the first word—Faith was on the scene—a frisson she'd have liked to call joy but that was really dread coursed through her, beginning at her tingling scalp, ending at her twitching ankles. Spike hadn't perished, Spike had been working with Angel—who had not emerged, alive or otherwise, whom Giles maintained had gone to the dark side.

She made up her mind there and then that Spike's surfacing was no reason to leave Scotland.

Then came a further bulletin. He's got amnesia.

If anyone, Faith's message said, could jog Spike's memory, it would be her.

And we need to help him why? Buffy thought. But she packed a bag.

At the entrance of the Council's L.A. facility, off a freeway ramp not far from the waterfront, which from the outside looked an awful lot like the kind of featureless big-box warehouse favored by smugglers and terrorists and other clandestine organizations operating on a semi-underground basis, she was met by one of the local slayers on duty, who led her through a series of featureless corridors, into a large cold cement room, part of which was walled off with strong bars.

Spike, dressed in green scrubs too large for his slender frame, lay on the floor of this cage, knees drawn up, arms wrapped around himself like a shivering child, apparently asleep. Buffy saw that he was bruised and scratched all over, injuries she would've attributed to the big battle, except that vampire healing should've cleared those up days ago.

During the plane trip she'd listened to music and paged through a big stack of magazines and worked on some lesson plans for the advanced slaying workshop Giles was prodding her to start, and just generally willed herself to stay in the moment. So she wasn't really prepped for the heart-juddering shock of seeing him again, intact, alive.

He looked exactly like she remembered, or—no, not exactly like she remembered, because memory was a distorting medium. He looked exactly as he always was, this first fresh unexpected sight of him bringing back again for her, all the big and little details of him she'd hadn't known she'd forgotten.

Regarding him through the bars, she made the decision she'd been resisting during the journey; what her stance would be, to This Situation. To Spike Returned. A few facts came together, interlacing like cards when you shuffled the deck, with that clean ththththwap that sounded so tough and efficient. One, that the last time she'd seen him, Spike had turned away her declaration of love, with disbelief. Two, that his death had turned out to be distinctly temporary. Three, that a year had passed, and he'd never let her know he was alive. Had, in fact, sworn Andrew to keep schtum about it, which, amazingly, he had. And four—the cards slid together into one thick rectangle she could tap hard against the table, and done—Spike had been right.

She hadn't loved him. She'd depended on him at the end. She'd mourned him afterwards, longer and harder than she'd mourned Anya or the young slayers, but ultimately, not all that long. And then
she'd gradually stopped thinking about him. To the point where, before she got the first call about him, she wasn't sure how many months it had been since he'd fallen from her daily train of musings. After all, who ever thought about what they weren't thinking about?

"Why is he locked up like this?"

Her guide shrugged. "We don't really have anyone who can babysit him. He's constantly agitated, when he's awake he bashes himself into walls and screams. So we had to cage him, and they've been putting sedatives in his food. His blood, I mean. Supposedly he's more 'comfortable' that way, but I guess it's mostly to keep him quiet, because we're pretty short-handed here. I mean, lots of indians, right, but hardly any chiefs. You can give him his next feed if you want. The stuff is in here." She pointed to a cooler in the corner.

"How'd he get here in the first place?"

"One of the slayers came across him unconscious in the wreckage at the end of the battle, and recognized him through the burns. Vi, I think her name was. She had to go back to Cleveland with Faith, they left yesterday."

"So, uh ... it's not just that he has amnesia. He's insane."

"Well, I don't know what he's normally like. But basically, he's a very ravenous, very pissed-off vampire with a really bad case of PTSD, and he doesn't talk. We didn't know whose side he was fighting on. There was a motion to put him out of his misery, but Faith said that wasn't such a good idea. Not 'til you'd seen him, anyway."

"Not 'til I'd seen him," Buffy echoed.

"Yeah. Faith said he used to be, like, your pet vamp." The girl shrugged. "I dunno what that means."

"That Faith. Ha ha. Such a kidder." Buffy frowned. "Okay, now get lost. Please."

She'd heard him whimper before, and she'd heard him cry out before, and she'd coped with him being all flaily and fangy and out of it before, but that didn't really make this any easier.

When, upon rousing, he threw himself headfirst into the bars, and picked himself up and did it again, she got the point of the sedation.

"The battle is over! Stop fighting!"

He trembled all over, emitting a low irritable growl.

"Calm," she said. "Let's just be calm." She approached the bars, hands peaceably upheld.

He focused on her—slowly, as if his eyes weren't working too well.

"Spike. You're okay."

He scrambled into the corner farthest from her, snarling and staring. His yellow eyes were feral, no sign of sanity, let alone recognition.

This was like that time Angel came back from hell, an animal she'd had to chain up.

"Easy now. Easy. You're safe."
The other slayer had left her with the key to the cage. When she opened it, taking care to be slow, to make gentling sounds and keep a friendly, nonthreatening smile on her face, his snarl angled up into a roar.

"It's okay. It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you."

Before she'd closed half the distance between them, he pounced, knocking her over, scrambling out of the cage to throw himself with a sickening clang against the outer metal door. He bounced, fell, sprang up, threw himself again. When she reached him, blood was streaming in his eyes.

But when she touched him, he froze.

"Spike, it's me."

The growl rumbled through him, like he was an idling engine. He kept his head turned away, but as long as her hand stayed on his arm, he was still.

When she let go, he hurled himself once more at the door. His body hit with a dead dull thud.

"Stop. Okay? You're hurting yourself." Once more she curled a hand around his shoulder, and once more he froze. Still not looking at her, still fanged out. She hit the intercom button.

When the other slayer reappeared on the far side of the locked door, Buffy said, "I'm taking him out of here. The confinement is making him crazy. Don't argue with me, I outrank you."

Arm in arm, she led him back the way she'd just come, to the plain glass doors of the warehouse, overlooking the parking lot, and a jumble of similar buildings. It was just after sundown. The other girl glanced around at them. "I probably shouldn't let you do this, but like I said, we're short-staffed. I hope you know what you're doing."

"He shouldn't have to be a prisoner."

"He's an out-of-control vampire."

"He's not out of control right now."

"Where are you taking him?"

"Does it matter? He's with me. That's all you indians need to know."

"I know you're supposed to be the boss of all of us, but ... he tried to tear the throat out of everybody who went near him. I don't think this is a good idea."

She couldn't bring herself to look at Spike, or at the girl she was addressing. Buffy kept her eyes on her parked rental car, gleaming in the yellow sodium lights. "I won't let him hurt anyone. If it turns out that he's got to be ... I'll take care of it." Without waiting for anything more, she pushed the door open, and tugged Spike through it.

He stopped just outside, lifting his face into the warm, tarry evening air. Buffy watched him then. His nostrils flared. He seemed to be surveying the sky. When he found the thin sliver of moon, he stared at it as the seconds lengthened. Her hand was still curled around his arm.

"See? No more cage."
He leveled his gaze on her now, the golden eyes glinting, lips pulled back around the fang array. He was still trembling, shivering almost, as if he was cold, as if he was in pain.

"You know me, right?" He must know something, given that her touch, and presumably her scent, was enough to calm him.

His growl renewed itself, and he broke from her, loping fast across the parking lot. Okay, maybe this was a bad idea. She took off after. Spike ran with his head up, looking around, turning to right and left. It only took a few moments for her to recognize that he wasn't fleeing her—he was searching. A burst of speed caught her up with him. Again, her hand on his arm brought him to a stop.

"I don't think you're going to find them. Anyway, we're pretty far from the epicenter of the battle. And I'm sorry, but I don't think anyone else survived."

The after-the-fact intelligence about the L.A. battle was sketchy, and she didn't understand it very well. Giles had claimed Angel had gone bad, allied himself with some local branch of Big Evil, Inc, but she couldn't bring herself to believe that, anymore than she could quite bring herself to believe he was really gone forever, even though for the last year she'd barely given more thought to seeing more of him than of Spike, whom she'd known to be dead.

Supposedly.

She was resolutely not thinking about that meaning Angel was dead. She wasn't ready to plunge into mourning again now.

What Spike had to do with any of this was still a big goose egg to her.

And for all she really knew, what Spike was searching for right now was simply prey. A sedative-free kill.

His face was such a blank. Plucking his arm, she drew him back towards her car, and this time he followed passively enough.

She thought—how not?—of the time she'd rescued him from the torture of the First. He'd looked at her then, and said, I knew you'd come for me.

He'd known that, and later on he knew better than to take her declaration at the moment of their parting for more than he believed it ought to be. It irritated her, when she went over it. How complacently he'd said, No you don't. Like he always comprehended her more thoroughly than she did herself.

Even if, as she slowly understood later, it was true.

She turned to face him, tugged his hand.

There was nothing in his eyes but banked, apprehensive wildness.

"I came for you again, Spike. It's me, it's Buffy."

The words emerged from her lips on a bolus of pain she was not at all prepared for. This reunion, with someone dead, someone she'd assessed, and filed away in the less-trammeled sections of memory, an enemy who became a sort of ally, even, for a little while, a sort of friend; a curiosity, a strange presence she'd never quite known how to relate to. An incident of a few years in her life, past, done, over. This return brought with it a base dismay, which she felt in her sinews, in her mind like the oppressiveness of an oncoming illness. Like the time when she'd been too depressed to really
know herself. She recognized that dreaded shadow, and wished she'd never come here.

He didn't answer.

With resolve, she put the dread away from her, and led him back to the car.

She used the car's GPS to steer her to the hotel she'd chosen—L.A.‘s tangle of freeways and streets made no particular sense to her otherwise. As she slowed for a light in an old part of downtown, Spike sprang into sudden motion, throwing open the car door, crashing out, rolling and tumbling to his feet, streaking into a run. Quickly as she could, Buffy curbed the car and ran after him. She was just in time to see him disappear behind a hulking abandoned building, ruined by fire. The smell in the alley when she reached it told her that more had happened here than a blaze. Spike was pacing in a tight arc, hands held to his head. His dive from the car had torn his thin scrubs, in the stray bits of light she saw the glitter of blood from the fresh road burns. He wept, paced, pushed his forehead against the greasy bricks in one particular spot, inhaling deeply, then springing back to do it all over again.

"Is this where you fought?" Is this where Angel died?

Spike went down on his knees, body curled over like a Muslim at prayer, and for a moment this seemed to give him relief, until he shot up again, and again pressed himself against the wall, scrabbling at the brick.

"What happened here? Can't you speak at all?"

He dove past her, into a heap of charred, wet, filthy garbage piled against the burned-out building. She tried to tug him out, as he rooted through the smelly junk, but he resisted, and then she saw why.

He emerged holding something in his hand, something as charred and broken and dirty as everything he'd dug through.

But then she saw what it was.

The hilt of a heavy sword. The blade broken off almost at the base. It fit Spike's grip like it had been made for him.

He held it aloft, as if its shining blade was intact, as if he was making some last promise to himself before the onset of battle.

Buffy stepped toward him.

Spike's back arched; for a moment it was as if the sword hilt was a hook he dangled from. Then with a cry, he threw it from him, like something red-hot, and crumpled to the pavement.

"Spike!"

He lay where he'd fallen, his face in a puddle. She pulled him around, onto his back. He was still fangy, but otherwise vacant. She laid a couple of light slaps on his cheek, wary that he'd lunge for her throat when he came to.

He grimaced, the stirring of his arms and legs more like a convulsion than a return to consciousness. When the amber eyes flew open, they stared past her, full of unfocused horror.
"Left me here. All gone an' left me."

"Spike! Spike, who left you? What happened?"

But he was gone again, his whole body rolling in the grip of some unseen force. She couldn't hold him. He shook and flopped, groaning like a tormented animal.

Then whatever it was, abruptly let go. He lay still. The bumps and ridges were gone, revealing a bruised human face smeared with blood and filth.

She'd forgotten, also, the effect of his eyes, the clear blue depths of them. When they opened, they were like a doll's empty and stark, and she was afraid that he'd been left vacant, the last bit of his mind somehow scooped out and gone.

She leaned in close to him, laid her fingers softly on his torn forehead. "Spike."

He blinked, his lips working, a cough rattling his chest. He turned his head, the eyes focusing out of infinity, to find her.

"Are you back now, Spike?"

"Bloody hell."

Relief flooded her. "You're all right now, Spike. C'mon, let's get out of here."

He shied away. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'll be right outside the door."

She left him to soak in the brimming steaming tub in her hotel bathroom.

Since the—incident—in the alley, he'd been anxious, a little hostile, but mostly biddable. Not only did he have no idea who she was, where they were, or anything about himself, he also didn't remember the cage in the Council HQ, or her arriving to take him out of it. He might as well have been born in that alley, except that he had speech. His personality seemed unfixed—one moment he'd be typical back-talking Spike, the next, he'd exhibit a strange old-fashioned cautious kind of courtesy. Either way, he was clearly wary of everything, including her, not daring to try her patience with too many questions. Whatever effect her touch and scent had had on him before seemed gone with his earlier wildness. He betrayed not the slightest hint of any previous familiarity with her. They'd returned to the car, stopping at an Army-Navy store to get him a new outfit, then at a butcher shop for blood, before arriving at the hotel, where she hustled him quickly across the lobby and into the elevator before anyone could object to his half-naked, besmirched presence.

When she checked on him ten minutes later, peeking in through the cracked door, he was huddled beneath the water as if it was a blanket. Chin-to-chest, silently crying.

All the forces of her instinct urged her to just shut the door and leave him be. Get Giles on the phone and find out whom she could pass this problem off to. Delegate, delegate, delegate. She was Slayer Number One, she wasn't expected to deal with nagging little off-side details like this.

The sight of his weeping made her own eyes burn.

Before she could stop herself, she'd barged in. "What's the matter?"
He started, with a little splash, put his hands up before his face. "Please—"

She realized he was being modest. Hastily, she turned her back. "I, uh, actually can't see you, under the water, from where I'm standing. And ... I've seen you before. Not that ... not that it matters."

"You know me."

She hadn't really emphasized that, since the alley, because insisting on the You're Spike, I'm Buffy thing somehow felt pathetic, and he hadn't asked. After the first thing he'd said, he'd avoided questions about identity, hers, his. Answered her queries about what he knew, what he remembered—which was nothing—and didn't volunteer.

"I'm sorry. You wanted privacy." She started to leave.

"Wait. You know me?"

"For years." She knelt beside the tub, touched his cheek. "Smell me. Don't I smell familiar?"

"Everything smells so strong. I don't know why."

"You'll remember me when you smell me. You always—" Always loved my aromas. My various aromas. You'd tell me about them, until I punched you in the nose to shut you up. She passed her fingers under his nostrils, and then, a little bolder, pressed her palm to his lips. The intimacy of this touch, the presumption of it, made her flush. He seized her hand, pressed it there, took a long searching inhalation. Let it drop.

"I'm sorry, Miss."

"Don't call me miss. Why do you call me that?"

"What ... what should I call you?"

"My name is Buffy. Buffy. Buffy Summers. The slayer? None of this is registering at all?"

"Know fuck all!" He struck at the water, splashing her. She drew back.

"Okay. It's all right. It's probably temporary." Like your demise. She should call Giles. Recruit someone to take this over. This situation. She went to the door, and paused there.

"Back in the alley, when you found the sword hilt—how did you know where it would be?"

He stared at her, and the tears came down out of his eyes, but all he could do was shake his head.

He was a stranger. A stranger wearing the face of a departed enemy-turned-ally, someone she'd never sufficiently understood, never sufficiently credited, whom she'd finally been able to box away, undigested, unrecalled.

No point asking this confused, frustrated man the questions that belonged to Spike. And this was curiously a relief, because were she to ask him Why didn't you tell me you were still alive? there would be an implication that it mattered, that she cared, that there was something further she wanted. Yet she didn't want that implication to exist between them.

Probably, Buffy thought, that was why he'd never contacted her. The same instinctual recoil from anything that might jar the bruise.
Or indifference. Just indifference, really, could explain it all. Time passed, emotions cooled into effigies. He'd moved on, as she had.

The man who wasn't really Spike emerged from the bathroom wrapped in the terry robe, a towel slung round his neck. He moved slowly, uncertain of his welcome, looking around the spacious room as if wondering why there wasn't more of it. "I'm hungry."

"I have blood for you."

"Blood? Are we both going to sleep here?"

There were two beds, separated by a night-stand. She'd thought of getting a second adjacent room, but was leery of leaving him alone, in case he flipped out again, in case he left it and went and killed someone, to satisfy his hunger, his innate urge for violence.

She rose, took up the coffee pot she'd poured the blood out into. "I think it's better we stay together. For now."

"This is awkward."

You think so? She poured out a cup. He cocked his head. The aroma. All the things he could smell. He sidled towards her.

"Is that for me?"

She offered it. Taking the cup, he looked into it, sniffed it. Hesitated. "I don't understand this."

"It's okay," Buffy said. "You're a blood drinker. This is what you need."

His eyes flashed gold, the ridges rising. He gave out a grunt, and felt at his face. "What's—what's happening—feels strange."

"It's all right," she said, trying to put even more gentleness into her voice. "Drink it."

He didn't drink. He held the cup out at an awkward angle from his body, and looked at her. "Who are you? How do we know each other?"

"We were once comrades at arms."

"Soldiers?"

"Kind of."

"I can't remember anything like that." He brought the cup beneath his nose again. Sniffed it. "I wouldn't think girls took up arms."

"Some do. Go on and drink, it's all right, really."

"Blood-drinker."

"Vampire," she said, soft, soft, as if the word might shock and offend him. "You're a vampire. You have been for a long long time. But you have a soul." She didn't know if this was still true, but it made her feel better to say it.

"That's why ...." He put the cup down, and his amber eyes rolled, like those of a rearing horse. "I want to—I've got this urge to—"
"But you're not going to hurt me," she said. "You know you can control yourself, and I know it too. Yes?"

Hesitantly, still exploring his face with his fingers, he nodded.

"We can just sit together and talk, and you can drink."

Slowly, he reached for the cup again, and this time, drained it. She approached him with the pot, poured out the rest. "Refill." She tried to smile, but he wasn't looking at her. "What do you remember? Anything at all?"

"We fought together in a war?"

"Yes. A while ago."

"Something must've happened to me then and that's why I'm lost."

"Not then. More recently. A different battle."

"When I try to think, it makes me feel sick. That can't be right."

"Sick how?"

"I don't know. Here," he touched his forehead. "And here." His belly. "I want to go outside. Hate bein' locked up."

It wasn't yet midnight. They left the hotel on foot. She noticed that being out in the night air, under open sky, seemed to ease his well-behaved anxiety.

They walked at random. After a while, he said, "What's my name?"

"You call yourself Spike. I don't know your real name." She was reluctant to say 'William', there was something in the word that embarrassed her now. No reason to share that.

She yawned. The jet-lag was catching up with her. Back in Scotland, she'd be training, teaching. Dawn and Willow and Xander felt very far away, not just because the air here was warm and dry whereas at the castle it was always cool and moist. Not just that.

They walked for a long time, aimlessly. She waited for him to speak, to ask questions, but he seemed instead to be reading the breeze, to be, perhaps, otherwise leary of finding things out. When they encountered people, he gazed after them sometimes with a longing look, but she wasn't sure if this was loneliness or appetite.

In a park, they were in time to interrupt another vampire's dinner. Looking up from the ashes, stake in hand, she met his horrified stare.

"What the fuck did you just do?"

"That vampire was going to kill that guy."

"You murdered him." Spike crept forward, put his boot out squeamishly to toe at the ashes in the grass. "Bloody hell."

"It isn't murder, it's a slay. It's what I do."

"I'm a vampire."
"You have a soul. Don't worry, as long as you control yourself, you won't get slain."

"Long's I control myself?"

She was afraid he was going to cry again, he looked so devastated. He sat down abruptly, face buried against his up-drawn knees. She waited a few moments. When he didn't move, she prodded him gently. "Hey, c'mon."

"Why should I go with you? This's well out of order."

She forced her temper down. "It really isn't. It's just because of the amnesia, that this doesn't make sense."

"You kill my kind. Shit. An' that's what I am? Some kind of animal that jumps punters in the dark an' drains 'em? I mean, that's normal?"

"You haven't done that in a long while, Spike."

"I'm called Spike. I have done it."

"Well, yes."

"Want to do it now." As he spoke, the ridges rose, his eyes flashed. "Would you come at me with that stake if I did?"

"You're not going to. Please, let it go. I know this is painful and hard for you, but it's got to just be temporary."

"So you say. Know nothin' of the sort."

"Well neither do I, but it's better to hope, right?"

At four in the morning they went into a diner. She ordered coffee and pie for both of them, but when it came, he pushed the pie away, and said, "Don't I take tea? I think I take tea."

When it came, he sipped and for a moment his expression smoothed into pleasure. Then his brows knit again. "Why are you here?"

"You need help."

"But why you?"

"I told you. We used to be—"

"Used to be. Not anymore."

It was hard to look at him, because his face was full of things she didn't like to recall, the house on Revello, the smell of cigarette smoke, her mother's voice, the loneliness before battle, the absence after resurrection. He was still blond, still had all the little expressions that came back to her now in an inventory of past ambivalence and attraction and revulsion, ultimately so jumbled up she couldn't make a decision about them.

If she'd known he was in Los Angeles, she wouldn't have sought him out. She was sure of that.

Dawn might have. But not her.
"I think everyone you were with lately ... I think they all perished. I think that's what happened in that alley."

When she brought up the alley again his eyes went vague and the corner of his mouth twitched, but he had nothing to say.

When they left the coffee shop it was time to get back. She was for calling a cab; she'd lost all sense of how they'd come. But he stopped her. "I know where we need to go."

"You know! Good. Something's coming back to you."

"No. But I can feel our way."

She followed him. He moved fast now, not like before, coursing along, keeping to the shadowy side of every block, tracing their route on the air. Long before she expected it, they were back at the hotel entrance. The wind had picked up. Spike turned and faced into it. "I can smell the sunrise coming. Makes me feel funny. Disappointed."

"Are you tired? I could sleep."

Eyes closed, he let the air bathe his face. "I don't know why I'm here. By myself. What am I supposed to be doing. It doesn't feel right."

"I'm here too." She reached for his hand, but he moved out of reach.

"It doesn't feel right," he said again, and went inside.

The earth opened under her feet, and the fire flared, her senses whirled, tilted, and delivered her back to her pillow, wet with tears. It took a moment for her to discern that the sobbing she heard wasn't her own. Slipping out of bed, she went to him. He was curled with his back to her, shoulders shaking. He didn't wake when she touched his arm, but as the warmth of her hand registered on him, his quaking eased. She crawled up onto the bed, fitted herself to his back, and slept again.

When she woke, she was in the wrong bed, alone. She didn't remember getting in with him. She heard the shower running. Her pajamas were undisturbed, no wetness between her legs. Nothing else had happened.

To distract herself, she sent texts. To Giles, to Willow, to Xander, to her sister. She was going to ask for help, but what she asked for was a little time, and promised to check in again later.

When he came out of the bathroom, Spike stopped and looked at her, sitting up cross-legged in his bed, the phone in her hand. "I don't think that's where you belong."

God, had she really just crawled into bed with him? She recalled it now, her own bad dream, his sobs, her instinctual desire to seek and offer comfort—to get him quiet so she could sleep again. He was beneath the sheet, and she'd lain on top of it, spooning him, not skin-to-skin, but as close as on those last couple of nights, when they'd lain together in their clothes, waiting with patient resignation for the crisis speeding up to meet them, waiting perhaps for their deaths. Not talking and not making love and not asleep, but still somehow as satisfied together as ... as they were ever likely to be. Ever
meant to be. Disappointment, compromise, entente. Those were some of the words she'd use, to tell the story of her and Spike. Not that she ever did.

She hadn't gone to bed with anyone since Spike. Not because of Spike. Because of reasons that had to do only with herself. She was certain of that.

"I'm sorry. There were nightmares. I guess it felt like the thing to do at the time."

"I don't know you."

"I get that." She didn't get it, really, because his blunt rebuke hit some unknown tender place in her. He doesn't know me, this isn't Spike. All their old shorthand, of both cruelty and kindness, didn't work here.

"What are you going to do with me?"

The blunt question startled her. "I don't have a set plan, I thought we'd ... hang out. I'm sure you'll regain your memory soon, and then you can do whatever ... whatever you want. Look, I know you don't remember this either, but before I came for you, you were in custody, with people who didn't know you, and it was making you crazy. I got you out of there. You're not my prisoner, but I can't just leave you on your own."

"Who are you? Still don't quite suss that. Buffy. Miss Buffy Summers. The girl who carries around a stake."

She took a breath. Why did this feel so risky, just telling the truth? "You're a vampire, you know that. I'm the vampire slayer. Which is how we originally met."

She tried an encouraging little smile, but his expression soured. "Ha bloody ha."

"You asked, I'm telling you. The slayer helps keep the world safe from Big Demon-Apocalypsy Evil, a team of which you used to be a charter member. Years back, some stuff happened, you started batting for good, you got a soul. And then you died saving the world, last year."

"Saving the world."

"Yes. You really did. I know it sounds weird."

"Not dead though, am I?"

"I didn't know you survived—or were revived—I'm not clear on that. You were here in L.A., but I can't fill you in on anything more recent, because I don't know. I've been in Italy, and Scotland."

"An' what got you started on that, slaying vampires?"

"I had the potential, I got called. There's this whole supernatural One Chosen Girl in Every Generation thing. Well, there was—now there are thousands of slayers. But until a year ago, there were only two. Really there's just supposed to be one. It's a long story. But it's not like I saw something about it in CosmoGirl and thought, 'Oh hey, I'd like to spend my teen years fighting vampires!' It happens, sort of like becoming a vampire happens. Well, even less volitionally than that."

His eyes went wide. There it was again, that look of sickened horror. "So that's why—"

"Why what?"
"You ... there's this ... shimmer ... you give off, I feel it like a vibration all through me when you come close. Rattles my sinews. It's ... disturbing."

"Does it hurt you?" Spike had never said anything like this. Even at the height of their sexcapades, he'd never mentioned shimmers or vibes or disturbances.

His lip curled. "Isn't it supposed to?"

"I don't want to hurt you. We stopped being enemies a long time ago."

"No, it doesn't hurt, exactly. It ...." He frowned, appearing to try different words, like keys, none of which fit this particular mechanism. "Disturbs."

"Okay, I don't want to disturb you," she said. He inclined his head, a formal little nod, of acknowledgement, like he accepting but not really accepting an apology. It gave her a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach. Not disappointment, exactly. She stepped back, held up her hands. "I'll keep my distance."

Okay, now I really should call for back-up. Hand this one off. Since I disturb him. She could bring him back to Slayer HQ, where he could interact with the others—maybe Willow could figure out a way to return him to normal. Once he was cured, he'd probably want to work with the reformed council, in some capacity. Preferably on a different continent. There were plenty of slayers who could use a little vamp-muscle. And she could get on with what she'd been doing.

She didn't call though, because she was afraid Giles would just tell her all over again that Angel had gone evil, that Spike had never been trustworthy, that all the evidence now pointed to him having gone rogue too.

She wasn't ready to really get to terms with Angel's death yet. She needed to put that off a while.

And maybe if she brought him to Scotland, they'd stick him back in a cell, and he'd freak out all over again.

She'd just have to give this a little more time.

In the hotel restaurant, which had no windows, she ate, and the man who wasn't really Spike sat across from her with more tea and rifled through all the newspapers he'd bought at the hotel newsstand. She'd told him, as they sat down, that she didn't really keep up with current events, a remark both off-hand and ironic, and mostly just thoughtless. She expected him to ask questions about what he saw in the papers, but when he folded the last section and laid it on the unused chair beside him, he said, "Nothing in there seems to have to do with my dilemma. You, and what I can't remember."

"We operate pretty much underground."

"The lights out there are so harsh. Bright. I have this idea that they're brighter than they can possibly be. That there's more of them than there should be." He moved the spoon around in the saucer. "I think I'm very far from where I started out."

"Well, you have moved around a lot. You're very old."
He glanced up.

She felt like it was her job somehow to open an infinite matryoshka doll—each one giving on to the next, none of them final or definitive or different, smaller and finer on into infinity. "You've been a vampire for a long time. Since the nineteenth century. It's the twenty-first now." She'd already noticed that he wasn't flummoxed by the technology surrounding them—he'd turned the TV on in the room, instinctively got the location of the light-switches. His lostness didn't extend so far, or at least there was a part of him that retained its orientation in the present. Yet he seemed to have in mind some earlier, gas-lit time.

"And all my associates are dead."

"There was an apocalyptic battle fought here last week. Your side won, but ... there were losses. Do you remember Angel? Big tall broody vampire guy? Apparently you were hanging around with him this past year." She had this on Andrew's authority. It still spun her around, that Andrew had known, and kept silent, because Spike had told him to.

He shook his head. "What was my side?"

"There are differing opinions. But I know you were still on the side of the good. Angel was still on the side of the good. He beat the bad ones back, which is proof enough for me. I don't care what Giles says."

Spike turned to gaze out across the other unoccupied tables, towards the check-in desk, where a few people were lined up with their luggage. He mused, gripping and releasing the spoon. "Sounds like a fairy-tale. How do I know any of this is true?"

"Believe me, I wish it wasn't."

"You're an odd girl." He turned back to her now, one brow raised, head slowly tilting in a familiar way to take her in.

How could he have all his mannerisms, and not be himself?

"You said, before, that you'd seen me naked. Were we lovers?"

"No!" She forced herself to slow down; her mental arms were frantically flapping. "Like I said, we've fought side by side, and so I've seen ... stuff." The lie tantalized her, heating her cheeks. Maybe he could tell she was lying. But she didn't want to have to describe what they'd been to each other, it wouldn't help this blankened man to know any of that ugly stuff, and when he regained his memory, he'd understand why she answered this way. He'd prefer it.

When he regained his memory, they'd be parting.

The waitress came back to ask if he wanted more tea. Her manner was flirtatious; she barely acknowledged Buffy's presence. Spike listened to her banter with a willing smile, as if the girl was exemplary of what he'd have liked from Buffy—something lighter, something easier.

"We'll take the check," Buffy said, her request cutting across the girl's chat. The waitress drew herself up stiffly, and walked off.

"Oh ho," Spike said. "Didn't like that a bit, did you? She fancied me."

"She did. And while I really have no wish to keep you from getting laid, I can't let you make any dates while you're in this state. I don't know what you'll do."
"What I'll do?" His face fell. "Oh. You think I'll rip out her throat."

"I don't think that. But it's a risk."

"Know that rippin' throats is what I want. But at the same time, know that if I do ... I'll regret it right after. Hell, during. Regret it sharp."

"Okay, but I can't let you go off alone with her or anyone. You were completely out of your mind not that long ago. If you fall into that state again, you'd be in trouble."

For a second, his pout convinced her he was back—he'd been faking all along, playing her, teasing her. She knew that look. It made her want to slap him. It made her want ....

"You'd better be right that I'll snap out of this soon. Should be allowed to get my end off when I want to, if I'm not a prisoner, like you say."

She got up. "I recommend exercise, and cold showers. Let's go."

When it got dark, she proposed they go on patrol. She didn't know if this was a good idea in this situation? It was no worse than any other, to try and show him something of what they'd been talking about. The slaying in the park the night before had happened so quickly, and he hadn't been part of it. She wanted to try to get him involved, reawaken his affinity for the physical acts of hunting. Maybe slinking around in the shadows looking for demon trouble would awaken the real Spike.

Maybe, she thought, palming her stake, he'd get carried away, and attack someone, and she'd have to slay him. End of situation.

She meant to go back to the park, but as they waited for a light, Spike's attention was drawn to a seedy bar with a knot of young people outside, loud rock music issuing from within every time the door opened.

"Could murder a pint. Stop here."

"We're looking for demons, not to get you drunk."

"Why shouldn't there be demons in there as well as anyplace else? C'mon now." He was already out of the car, and once again she had to park in a hurry and follow him.

By time she got inside, he was belly up to the bar, jaw thrust out as he bobbed his head to the beat, two glasses of beer in front of him.

"You know this song?"

"Sure." With a grin, he crooned, " I'm not present/I'm a drug that makes you dream/I'm an Aerostar/I'm a Cutlass Supreme/In the wrong lane/Trying to turn against the flow/I'm the ocean/I'm the giant undertow .... Brilliant, that is."

"When did you first hear it?"

"When it was new."

"And when was that?"

He shrugged. "Dunno, dozen years back?"
"Where were you? What was going on?"
He wasn't grinning anymore. "Don't. Bloody. Remember. Would if I could, yeah?"

"Okay, sorry. Thanks for the beer."
"Have a dance."
"What?"
"Sorry I snapped at you. Dance with me."
"Dance?"
"Girls love to dance. You're a girl, aren't you?"

"But ... yes. Yes, okay, I'm a girl." There was no point saying Since when do you dance? and no point—really really no point—in replaying in her head that time, full of beer and boasting, when he'd told her all she'd ever wanted to do was dance with him.

They'd danced. They'd had their dance.

He was tugging at her wrist now. The bar floor was crowded with couples. The music was fast, not the kind that involved touching, and that was good because she'd promised not to be too disturbing.

Never mind that maybe he was disturbing her.

It turned out Spike could dance. Not so well that the floor cleared to watch his moves, but credibly enough. And it didn't take Buffy long to notice that the gazes of some of the women near them were straying from their own partners to hers. Even bruised up, Spike in a tight black teeshirt cut a dramatic figure under the colored lights. He was smiling again now, involved in the groove to the apparent exclusion of all else. Little by little, Buffy relaxed. She hadn't danced in a long time, had forgotten the simple pleasure of it, movement that wasn't about fighting or training to fight. The tight pressing awareness of weirdness, uncertainty, anxiety, lifted. This wasn't Spike, he was just some guy, who was trying to be agreeable to her, who wanted to have a good time and for her to have a good time with him. Having a good time right now wasn't going to effect the outcome of The Situation any more than staying tense and focusing on patrolling would.

When the music stopped she was covered in sweat, feeling light and happy. She followed Spike back to the bar, where he ordered two more beers. She clicked glasses with him—"To your memory!"—and drank hers down in a few fast gulps.

He signaled the bartender for another. "You're a girl can hold her liquor, that's good."

"I wasn't always." She thought of telling him about the time he'd gotten her drunk on JD from his hip-flask, taken her along to watch him cheat at kitten-poker. Miserable as she'd been then, that evening had since taken on a sheen of humor. But she stopped herself. "Do you like this beer?"

"It's all right."
"What's your favorite kind?"

He took a long musing sip. "The pint some other bloke stands you."

She laughed. "I'm treating you to these."
"You're treatin' me to everything. Don't like that—I'll pay you back, once I'm myself again."

"Don't worry about it. This all goes down as expenses."

"Expenses? Whose expenses?"

"The Council of Watchers." She had to lean in to talk to him, now the loud music had started up again. She knew he'd be able to hear her all right, but she couldn't hear him.

"That's the organization you work for?"

"More like the disorganization, and I don't work for them. We comprise the slayers, and those who assist and guide them."

"Remind me again what a bunch of disorganized vampire slayers want with a vampire. Why are you helping me? If you are helping me. Still not real clear on that."

"Because you're an ally and a comrade. And we take care of our own." Mostly. Unless they're Angel and his people.

"Your own." She could see that he still lacked any real comprehension of what that meant.

With a shrug, he drained his glass, set it on the bar. "C'mon. This is a good song."

He wanted to escape back into the music. She didn't blame him.

They poured out of the bar with the closing crowd, into an early morning grown cool and breezy; she shivered in her sweat-moistened shirt. They'd been dancing right up until the music was cut and the lights turned on; she was giddy, laughing at Spike's teasing. People dispersed in all directions, and Buffy's neck tingled. She tapped his arm. "This way, quick—"

The familiar sensation led her around the corner, into an alley, where she found the familiar sight, two vampires with two young women backed into the corner formed by a dumpster and the bar wall. It was like a continuation of the dance, moving in, teasing first, quipping, getting the demons to turn on her with a snarl, and then a kick, a twirl, one, two, dust. Sloting the stake back into her rear waistband, under the hem of her top, she told the women to run. They jostled past Spike and were gone. He stood staring at her, his eyes amber though there was no sign of bumps or fangs. With a laugh he came towards her. "An' you smell like sheer heaven."

Before she could move out of the way, he'd backed her against the wall, arms up on either side of her shoulders, and lips close to her cheek. "An' you smell like sheer heaven."

She entirely meant to duck out of the way, had not the slightest intention of lifting her mouth to his, of curling her hands around his arms, tipping her head back and taking his kiss. Not the slightest intention.

He was polite, inquiring, lips and tongue not too wet, not too intrusive. She recognized it, though—that flare in her own lips, her skin answering his slightest invitation, lighting up with a desire that traveled quickly to her core, making her squirm and groan—that effect he always had on her that cut through her judgment, her reticence, even, once, her disgust. He inched closer, gently persuading rather than aggressive, his body against hers, so she could feel the knot of his excitement against her belly. That was Spike—watching her fight got him hot.
Violence of all sorts got him hot.

"I thought I disturb you."

"Find I can stand it." He put his hands on her then, turning her softly, backing her towards the sidewalk. "Not here, though. You're not a girl for a dirty alley. Want to have you in bed."

Her whole being forked around this proposition. She trembled as she said, "Listen, I don't think we should."

"You have a boyfriend?"

"No, but—" A wince. Should've said yes, so much simpler. "I mean, it's not that I don't like you. But—I shouldn't take advantage of you while you're—" Even as she said the words, she felt their lameness. Memories dopplered through her head, every other time he'd put moves on her, every other time she'd succumbed or refused. Her skin went hot, a fevery feeling more about chagrin than arousal.

"Just because I've got amnesia doesn't mean I'm not in my right mind. Want to make love to you. Why not?" He closed in on her again, lips by her ear. "Know you want to. Can feel it, smell it."

"I know you can. I'm sorry."

"No, that's not what I mean. It would be—I mean, our professional relationship—it wouldn't include anything like that."

"Pretty damn sure that whoever I really am would want to fuck you just the same."

"Well, maybe once you are back to normal, we can revisit this. But I'm certain you won't want to."

"Certain?"

"It would be a mistake."

He showed a slightly sneering little smile, meant to beguile. "How 'bout I declare amnesty? Won't blame you for it when I get my self back. If I get myself back. Will recall that it was my idea an' that you first turned me down, though your little heart made such a leap in your chest when I pressed up against you."

My little heart. Oh—! Even in this outlandish state, he kept his ability to seduce. And she, despite all their sad history, still wanted him, the way she imagined a brand-new user wanted junk, for that sweet, spinning, ecstatic pleasure. Wanted him never more than at this moment, when she could greedily take all of his deliciousness that her throbbing body now demanded, with nothing of their old disaster to cloud his experience.

She could fuck him again and he wouldn't know how awful she was being. How selfish, how predatory, how mean.
He took hold of her once more—his grip coaxing, not sharp. This time she didn't pull away.

He was quiet in the car, in the elevator. Kept right up behind her as they moved to their room, as she fitted the card key in the door, practically tumbling in. His whisper in her ear as he shoved the door shut behind them: "Let's see you strip off for me."

She pictured herself, giving him a little show. Culminating in straddling his thighs, pulling his big cock out of his jeans. How it used to fill her hands, how hungry she'd been for it.

And what if he came back to himself at that moment? Shit. She could picture it; his memory rushing back in like the wrath of God, and there she'd be, naked and spread out and vulnerable, caught right in the middle of Making use of me again. That's what he'd say. He'd be furious. Promise or no promise. He'd probably snap her neck right there.

She'd done things so wrong with him. It had been such a bad bad time, last year, but she should've been more careful. Pushed him much farther away much sooner. Or drawn him closer. As close as he'd wanted to be. One or the other, neither of which she'd been sensible enough to attempt. What she had done, keeping him dangling, keeping him useful, letting him make the supreme sacrifice after a last-second declaration she still flinched to recall—Crap crap crap, could she have done any worse?

He turned her to face him. "What's this?"

"I— " Shit. "I'm having second thoughts."

"Gettin' that, yeah."

She wondered what she smelled like to him at that moment. Different than a little while ago. Bitter, she was sure.

"There's something you're not tellin' me, here."

"I'm sorry I'm interfering with your ... your needs. Our needs." She took a breath. "Except that we're really not good candidates for taking care of each other's ... needs."

"You think that's all this is, me wanting a shag and you bein' handy?"

"It really doesn't matter."

"Feel drawn to you." His gaze seemed to have the power now to raise the gooseflesh on her whole body. "Gettin' fond of you."

"Don't get fond of me. I mean—it's like Stockholm Syndrome. You know what that is? Really, I'm not trying to be mean, it's just ...."

"Yeah, yeah, Stockholm Syndrome, right. Don't quite think that explains what ... what you been doin' to me since you found me."

"I'm not trying to do anything to you."

"It's that ... simmer, like I said."

"You said you didn't like it. You said you wanted me to keep my distance."

"Well, that was before ... before I got to know you a bit. Feels different now." He threw himself into
a chair, turned his head into the hand his cheek rested on, murmuring into his palm, "Would be willin' to forget everythin' all over again after, if it meant I could make love to you now." Reacting to her expression, he waved a hand. "Never mind, pet, not gonna hector you. No good like that. Only want it if you do."

More harsh memories he didn't know he was springing. She wished she could go, be alone for a while to get her equilibrium back. But she didn't dare leave him alone.

"Listen, I am really sorry, and I'm not trying to make you crazy. But this is getting to be more than I can handle. I'm going to try to arrange for us to go back to HQ. I have to negotiate, to make sure you're treated fairly when we get there—which I'm sure I can do. There are other people there who can help you, you won't have to be, like hand-cuffed to me all the time. And—" her attempt at a light laugh sounded to her more like a honk, "there's lots of other slayers there, some of whom might want to go to bed with you! So you'll be better off all around."

He stared at her. "Do what you think's best, yeah, but don't want to go to bed with other girls."

Okay, okay, okay, subject change now! "I'm going to get on the phone. I—I think I need a little privacy for this, okay, so I'm gonna go into the bathroom. Will you stay here and wait? There's blood in the mini-fridge."

He was already reaching for the TV remote. "Whatever you say, Miss Buffy Summers."

Perched on the edge of the tub, the phone in her clammy hand, her body still emerging from the disorganization of desire, Buffy took a few deep breaths. This was ridiculous. Ludicrous.

The day before he'd been all bent out of shape because she'd come into his bed—onto his bed—to comfort him in his sleep, and tonight he was all over her wanting to fuck.

To make love. Which was not so much a Spike locution—she restrained herself from counting back in time the number of times he'd said the one or the other to her in Sunnydale—appalled that she could summon all the occasions up so easily, through her thick cloud of shame.

He was exaggerating, carried away on too many beers, on dancing, on seeing her slay. He'd come down, and tomorrow he'd probably be just as glad that she'd rebuffed him.

But she had to get them out of this strange pas-de-deux, stat.

It didn't prove so simple. When she called, she was told that the Council jets were all out on other assignments. She'd have to wait a few days, or come back on a commercial flight. But a commercial flight of that duration with a combustible vampire would be risky.

And then when she got Giles on the phone, he turned out to be not all that amenable to the idea that Spike ought to be helped. Even when she described what had happened in the alley—his anguish, the sword hilt, the one sentence he'd gotten out before falling into convulsions—Giles sounded mostly unmoved, though he made perfunctory sympathetic noises that came across as more condescending to her than sincere.

"He helped us save the world. Do I really have to remind you? We could. not. have. done. it. without. him."
"My dear, I do appreciate—"

"Don't my dear me with this, Giles! When Willow got in trouble and was all evil, you didn't just write her off, did you? Spike hasn't been evil in a long time, he's a comrade. We owe him."

"Bring him here if you think it's best, but I can't issue a blanket promise that we'll give him the freedom of the castle when we have no idea what state he's in or what he might do."

"You have no idea what state Xander is in or what he might do. Or my sister. Or anybody. Heck, me."

"Buffy, please be reasonable—"

"Let me talk to Willow. No—wait. Nevermind. I'll call her myself, later."

Though they'd rebuilt nearly all their bridges since the Black-and-Veiny thing, a tickle of mistrust of Willow remained. She didn't want to expose Spike just yet to Willow in Let's-Figure-This-Out-And-Fix-It mode. It wasn't clear that Spike's amnesia was magically-induced, but layering more magic on him now ... could be bad.

"New plan."

Spike took a couple moments to tear his gaze from the TV. He'd found some South American soccer match.

"Turns out you might not be so well-received back in Scotland as I hoped. Maybe things will go better if we get out of the city. There's a sort of safe-house slash retreat-house the Council has, up the coast. It's quiet there, lots of outdoors. You can swim in the ocean. I dunno, it might be conducive to you getting better."

"What'll I do, when I get better?"

"I ... I hope you'll work with the Council. You'll probably want to continue with the mission. You used to have a very strong, dedicated sense of the mission."

"Work with these punters you say won't receive me now?"

"It'll make sense to Spike."

"There's all sorts that's supposed to make sense to this Spike. Spike, Spike, who is Spike?" He made it into a little jeer, like a football chant.

She slid into the other chair near his. "Spike is a good man. He's someone who made a decision to turn his back on his demon instincts, and work to be a man. He succeeded beyond his wildest dreams."

"By dyin'."

"To save the whole world." She felt she was telling a story to a child, a child who was anxious and needed to be reassured. But it was her own heart that swelled as she issued these promises. She'd cheated him of the comfort he craved in his last weeks, had admitted him to a certain intimacy that was still short of the intimacy she knew he pined for. Couldn't give the love he probably deserved—love not being something a person could produce just because it would come in handy. At least now
she was getting a chance, however painful and awkward and potentially disastrous, to show him a little kindness.

Though with this thought came the stinging sense that between her and Spike, mere kindness was another kind of withholding, another disappointment. Spike hadn't wanted kindness from her, at least without the accompanying lashings of blinding, passionate, full-on connection he seemed sure she was only holding back out of sheer perversity.

He tipped his chin at her, like a polite guest making small talk. "How'd I do that, then?"

"There was an amulet, that had to be worn by a particular kind of warrior—a champion. Not a plain human, not a mere demon. You insisted on being the one to wear it into the battle."

"So I put on a trinket, and that was it?"

"It required enormous courage. The amulet focused the force of your soul, your determination to beat back the invasion—and its power destroyed you along with the enemy. This vast vast army was all burned and buried, the world was saved, because you were there, with the amulet on, but you had to stay until the very end. You burned too."

"An' then I got better."

"Uh ... yes. The amulet was somehow restored to its source, and you with it."

"Its source?"

She tried to explain about Wolfram & Hart, about Angel, but having had the story only from Andrew, replete with exaggerations, elisions, and long wild-eyed hard-to-follow digressions during which spit built up in the corners of his mouth as he talked, she didn't get very far before Spike turned the sound up on the TV again with a shrug.

When the next commercial came on, he said, "So, we're goin' to this holiday house together, but it's strictly a hands-off arrangement."

"It has to be."

"Startin' to think this Spike bloke's in purgatory. Workin' off his sins in a long round of stiflin' frustration. Never thought the accomodations in purgatory would be so posh, though. Anyway, it's the mackerel snappers believe in all that." To her questioning look he answered, "Catholics, pet. Church of England, me."

"Really? Since when?"

"Dunno. Always. Not that I ever went in for it much."

"How do you know that?"

"Just do."

"What church did you go to when you were a child?"

He frowned. "Quit that. Interrogatin' me's not helping. Just makes me cross."

"Okay, okay." She sprang up. "I'm going to get my things together. We'll leave this evening."
Getting ready for bed this time was strange. He'd already seen her in her pajama bottoms and tank top ensemble, but now she felt like her mere presence in the room was an unfair tease. Unfair to both of them. He stayed put in the chair, with the TV on, when she finally slunk out of the bathroom and dived under the covers. She thought she could feel him not looking at her.

She knew he couldn't help smelling her, feeling her pulse; sometimes in the old days she'd felt like Spike could read her mind. He had to be aware, at least in part, of how full of bullshit she was. It was kind of amazing, that he stayed put. That he trusted her this much. She wasn't sure, if she was in his place, if she'd do the same.

The hours of the afternoon ticked by, and she dozed, awakening a couple of times an hour to the heightened blare of the TV ads, then drifting again. Spike barely moved.

Then he was shaking her. "Sun's down. C'mon, let's be off."

She pulled over abruptly. "Before we leave town—"

"Why're you stoppin' here?" He looked out his window at the dark burned-out hulk of a building that filled a whole city block.

"This is where you found the sword hilt. Where you had your second black-out."

"Oh joy."

"I think we should go back there again. The spot seemed to be ... pretty powerful. Maybe this time something there will spark something."

"Don't think so, pet."

She squinted sidelong at him. "Are you afraid?" Then in a gentler tone, "I'll be with you."

"Not afraid. Why should I be afraid of some place I don't even know?"

She thought his bravado rather telling, and didn't press him. They sat for a few moments in the silent car, as traffic flowed by them, and Spike looked at the building.

"Seems to be an old hotel."

"So I gather."

"This big battle, finished up here?"

"Yes. It's where you were found afterwards, and when I was taking you away from ... from the Council's HQ here, you leapt out of the car and ran back there when we were driving by. You don't even remember that?"

"Do nothin', do I, but dash your expectations on that score. Not as clever as you'd like me to be."

"It's nothing to do with clever. You were always clever—smart—you still are."

Spike gave the shrug that was already becoming a familiar gesture, and sprang the door lock. "Let's get it over with then, if we must."
Despite his fear, he led the way, around to the back of the building, into the long smelly greasy alley. Buffy was nervous herself, and hung back a little, hoping that would make her anxiety less likely to transfer to him. He paced forward with his habitual swagger, the stride, she realized, watching him from behind, of a smallish man who always had to assert himself, to seem bigger than he was. Big Bad, he used to style himself.

When he reached the center of the space, near where she'd found him dashing himself against a particular patch of bricks the other night, he paused.

Buffy waited. Better not to suggest, to prompt. If something was going to happen, it ought to happen for him spontaneously.

He sipped the air, opening his mouth to taste it better, turning his head slowly, eyes closed. "Stench of death here's overwhelming."

"It's rank, yeah."

"You don't know a thousandth of it." He made a face. "There's more sorts of nasties died here than you've probably met up with in all your adventures."

"Think so? Anything else coming to you?"

He moved around slowly, taking soundings. It took some time for her to notice that as he ranged, putting on a good display of taking it all in, he kept shy of that one place. Passed it over and over without pausing, always contriving to be facing the other way.

When he'd trailed off towards the far end of the alley, she stepped over to make her own inspection.

It was too dark to see a lot of detail, but this section of the wall wasn't particularly stained, or broken. She tested it with her palms; it held firm. Everything smelled just as charred and icky here as everywhere else in the alley, as far as she could tell.

What a terrible place for Angel to have to meet an army, for Angel to have to go down.

"I can't believe you're gone." She whispered into the blank brick, leaning against it as her knees went watery. She'd always counted on Angel being somewhere, part of some potential future for her that she never took seriously anymore but clearly hadn't entirely dismissed.

"Eh?" Spike had drifted back towards her, was still a few yards off, but then he could hear a pin drop in the next street if he listened for it.

"Nothing."

He came a little closer; and his eyes went gold. Closer still and the ridges rose; she saw his fangs descend, as the low rolling growl reached her, skirling down her spine. She came around so her back was to the wall. "What?"

He didn't seem to hear her, or even to see her. Suddenly this patch, that he'd ignored up until now, engaged him utterly. He bent at the knees, as if planting himself against some onslaught, lips peeling back in a snarl. She sidestepped, got behind him.

"What is it, what do you see?"

Spike skidded backward, as if tackled and driven by something huge and heavy that flung and pinned him. His howl was the same she'd heard from numerous vampires in the seconds before she
staked them, animal rage.

Buffy dove at him, grabbed his shoulders, and pulled him out of range. Afterwards she wasn't quite sure why this had seemed the thing to do, but the effect was immediate. The howling stopped, Spike went limp, the game-face gave way to the human.

"Spike—!" If he started in again with the who-are-you-where-am-Is, she'd kick herself all the way to Santa Barbara for trying this.

But when his eyes opened, Spike immediately looked for her, tipping his head back to fasten on her where she crouched above him, then rolling with agile quickness up and over, snatching her into his arms, lifting her off her feet.

"Hey!"

He ran with her, out of the alley, and once clear, set her down. Oddly, he was panting.

"What's going on?"

"Can't look in there!"

"Look in where?"

The expression on his face, haunted, flinching, filled her with dread. He was still holding her; she let him. He buried his nose in her hair and took snuffing breaths.

"Spike," she murmured, calm and careful. "Look in where?"

"Eh?"

"You just said, can't look in there—where?"

"Dunno."

"You said—"

"Did I? Let's get out of here."

"Not until you tell me—"

Slowly, he let her go, put his hands to his face. "Feel like a steamroller ran over my head."

His eyes were moist with tears. He reminded her of a little boy, stunned by a sudden tumble.

"Gotta get out of this." He started off, in the wrong direction. She sped after, plucked his arm. "The car is this way."

He spun. Confronted her for another long moment that made her fear she'd lost him again.

"I'm not gone."

"You're right here. We both are. What?"

He seized her hands. "I'm not gone. Don't leave me alone."

She recalled then, her whisper into the bricks. Angel. Spike's hands were cold, and so white and dry, wrapped around hers. She squeezed his fingers. "Don't worry, I won't. I'm going to stick by you until
this is over."

He blinked, and a tear tracked down his cheek. He brought one of her hands to his lips, sketched a cool kiss on the back that made her shiver. His murmur, "You are a sweeter lady than you know," sounded more like the man who hadn't wanted her to see him in his bath, than like any Spike she'd ever met.

Embarrassed, she fumbled free. "Let's go now. It takes a few hours to get to the safe-house."

Once they were well away from the old hotel and its spooky alley, Buffy said, "I think there's something here that doesn't want you to get near it."

Spike didn't answer. Since they'd gained the car, he'd been slouchy, slow, and curiously silent; when she glanced at him, she saw he was asleep, head tipped back, lips parted, brow knit as if in pain.

Here was a reason to call Willow. She could fly in and work some mojo on that place, get under the cloak of whatever the magic was at that spot. Without having to meddle with Spike himself.

As she sped up the Pacific Coast Highway, the traffic light late at night, the radio murmuring pop music, he stirred, and yawned.

"Hungry."

"Cooler's in the back."

He reached around. In the rearview mirror, she saw the lid lift, a blood bag float out and then disappear from the frame. When she looked back at him, he'd vamped out, and was using his left fang to tear with a curious delicacy at the plastic.

"Do you feel better now?"

"Could sleep for days." Bewilderment in his tone. He sucked down half the blood in one chug, and sighed.

"Anything coming together for you?"

Another sigh.

"Look, I have to ask."

"That so?"

Now she sighed.

He took another swallow. "Not like I'd keep it from you, would I, if there was anything to tell?"

"I really hope not."

A silence. He finished the blood, tossed the empty into the back seat. "You know I appreciate what you're doin' for me, yeah? I'm all alone an' lost, an' here you are, dropping everything to look after me. Even though I think you don't much care for this Spike punter."

"You're welcome. And that isn't true."
"Nah. Don't humor me. I'm not a kid, I can suss out a few things here."

He was putting her in her place—at her distance—again. Not that she could blame him, after how she'd given him the hot-and-cold treatment. After all the questions he'd asked that she'd deflected. He was far from stupid, he could see there were long stories, big truths, she was keeping back.

"I like you," she said. "I really do. You ... you're very easy to be with."

"Me."

"You, who I'm talking to right now."

"Ah. An' who am I?" The remark was meant to be rhetorical, issued in a dreamy voice as he turned to look out the window, into the night. After a few moments, he said, "Don't want you to call me Spike anymore."

This startled her. She turned the radio off. "It's your name."

"It's what this vampire fellow styles himself. The ripper of throats. Don't want to be called like that."

"Spike is who you are. Even when you got your soul, you were still Spike."

He frowned. "Spike's not me. This me you say you like—must be quite different, yeah? Spike doesn't fit. Name for some brute-ish animal, some bloody social deviant thug. Sure you don't know any other name for me? Spike was a man once upon a time."

His words struck her like bile splashing up into the back of her throat, foul thick and corrosive. Guilt and regret. A name. He wants a name, Buffy. Pick a name. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. Moe, Larry, Curly. "It might ... it might be William." Might? Might? Shit, he'd remember this conversation later, when he was himself again, he'd match it up to the last time she'd said that name to him, when she was disposing of him, and he'd hate her. He'd hate her if he didn't hate her already. She had to force herself to ease up her grip on the steering wheel, and keep her eyes on the glowing yellow line. Breathe, breathe.

"William?" Little aura of surprise. "William. Will. That's not bad. Infinitely better than bloody Spike. From now on, call me Will."

She could've choked. "I'm used to calling you Spike."

"An' now you can get used to calling me Will."

"I'll forget."

"Try."

What was it in that one word that brought forth her tears? They spurted out, like iron filings drawn to a magnet.

Spike didn't move, but after a couple of beats, said quietly, "Pull over, girl."

Parked on the shoulder, heart hammering, she sprang out of the car. He left her alone for a few minutes, staying behind as she paced, the gravel crunching beneath her soles, struggling to get herself under control. She took out her phone. Someone, someone, she needed someone to take this off her hands. Who would come? Even Andrew, she believed at that moment, would be more help than hindrance.
A touch at her elbow made her spin around. "Don't have to tell me, what's got you so upset. But don't cry."

"I'm fine."

"Sure you are." His voice could be like this sometimes, so gentle. She remembered other times he'd spoken to her so soothingly, given her such generous permission to be herself in his presence and pay him no more mind than she would or could.

"I could drive for a bit."

"You don't have a license."

"Won't speed. Won't need one."

It was a relief, to relinquish control of at least this one thing, for a little while. She could tell it pleased him too, to slide into the driver's side, to command something for a change.

"W-W-Will."

She saw him smile. "Buffy Summers."

"Take the next exit, okay? I want to get some coffee."

The exit led to an isolated strip—a gas station with a convenience store, and across the way, a Subway, both lit up with remorseless fluorescents, the sight of which sparked more sad, anxious memories.

"Spike told me once—" She was getting it already, referring to Spike as some absent third person! Even if she still couldn't quite bring herself to address him as Will. "—that some demons like to stand under fluorescent lights because it makes them twitch. Me, I hate them." She almost added, Spike thought I was a kind of demon, and that I wouldn't admit it out of perversity. Because if I did it would mean I wasn't really that different from him, deep down. But no, she wasn't going to get into that. How her thoughts betrayed her!

As if he sensed that she regretted the topic, he said only, "Want your coffee from the shit sandwich shop or the Stop 'n' Rob?"

"Uh—Stop 'n' Rob, please. We should top up the gas tank too."

Twenty minutes later, when she pulled out from the convenience store lot, doing eighty up the freeway on-ramp, listening out for the sound of sirens she dreaded hearing, Buffy had forgotten this little exchange, his ironic coinage. She'd walked in, was getting her drink while Spike did the fill-up, and was as startled as the lone clerk when the mulleted guy coming out of the men's room pulled a gun. He herded her behind the counter with the cashier, and there was nothing her slayer powers gave her that could disarm him.

Spike came barreling through the entrance in full game-face, getting the guy to spin around, to point the gun at him. Earning himself three bullets to the chest as he ran at the mullet, tackling him to the floor. Together they'd disarmed and bound him—Spike administering a punch or two "for holding a gun on my girl, you tosser!"—then fled before the clerk could calm down enough to really think about what he'd seen: the fangs, the man who'd taken three point-blank gunshots without even slowing down, much less bleeding out.
He was bleeding plenty now, all over the back seat of her rental car. "Christ, this burns. Got bruises on my bruises already, an' now there's holes in my bruises."

"I don't think we should stop yet. Drink some more blood."

"Whatever I pour in'll just pour out again, I'm a feckin' sieve," he grumbled, but she heard him fumbling with the cooler.

"You saved my life back there. Thank you."

"You'd have been all right."

"I'm not Supergirl. If I get shot, I die. It happened like that, once before. I would've died on the operating table, except my friend, a witch, got the bullet out with magic."

"Yeah? You must've been bloody scared just now, poor pet."

His sudden touch on her shoulder startled her. She flinched.

"Ssssh. Slow down."

She eased up a bit on the gas. His hand stayed put, cupping the curve of her neck into her shoulder. Steadying her. "That feels good," she whispered.

"We'll make it. You're doin' fine."

They arrived just before dawn. Buffy punched the security code into the keypad with shaky fingers, waited for the gates to open, and drove the last mile up through the private woods, to where the house nestled amidst trees on an abutment high over the ocean. Inside, jelly-kneed, thirsty and faint, she went around pulling the drapes on all the windows.

When she came back to Spike, he was in the kitchen, taking off the blood-sodden shreds of his teeshirt. Sight of the ragged red holes in his chest drew a moan from her.

The bullets had gone clean through, the exit wounds on his back just as gory. She offered a rueful smile. "I can tell you your shirt is a total loss, hope it wasn't your favorite one."

"Think I've another couple just like it."

She dug out the first-aid kit—there was always plenty of bandages and salves in a slayer house. "I'll fix you up."

"S'nothin'," he insisted. "Leave it."

"No." Buffy dabbed at the wounds with a warm wet washcloth, feeling sorry when he gasped and winced.

She made him lift his arms so she could wrap him round with gauze. He stood patiently for her ministrations, and when she'd snipped the end and taped it down, he caught and drew her close.

"Dunno what I would've done if you'd been hurt. Or killed."

Her throat had gone thick and dry; she couldn't speak. She couldn't not thread her arms around his waist. "Little girl, little girl, you're all a-tremble. You're exhausted." He tucked her head in beneath his chin, rocking her just slightly, a lulling motion that drew the last of the tension out of her as if by some charm.
"Stop 'n' Rob. Guess they call 'em that for a reason," she babbled. She wanted to just close her eyes and stay held like this forever, with her cheek nestled in the cool smooth curve of his neck.

"All a-tremble, poor pet," he repeated, steering her backwards, prodding and leading her numb stumbling body, out of the kitchen, up some stairs, into a large airy room. Half-stupid, half-asleep, she let him undress her and put her to bed. Was it her dream, or did he hover for a moment over her, as he pulled the sheet up? She held her arms out, coaxing, and when he dropped into them, she cozied at once into that same good place, against the column of his neck, and was out.

Even before her dreams dragged her to break the surface of sleep, they were about nothing but thirst and the hot pressure of her bladder. Reluctant to turn on a light or even open her eyes, lest she lose the cottony warmth that would lead her back into slumber. Buffy found her way to the bathroom, feeling her way in the incomplete darkness, finding, with hands dabbing the air, the toilet, the faucet, the plastic tooth glass.

Slipping back into bed, she caught sight of the red numbers floating near her, the clock on the bedstand. It was early—she'd only been here a couple of hours. Scooting back to swing her legs in, she encountered Spike's outreaching hand. His whisper, groggy, aggrieved. "You there? Went an' took all my warm away."

She gave herself back to him, let him tug her in, his body a cool bolster she fitted herself against. He exhaled, his breath tickling through her hair. "Need you close, pet."

She scooched nearer, entwining their legs. His feet, even under the quilt, were icy. Already she was dropping away again.

The next time she roused, the clock said nearly ten p.m. Her mouth was once more ashy. Spike was gone. "Great, Buffy, you broke the land sleep record." Her body felt like it weighed two hundred pounds as she dragged herself out of bed. Everything hurt like she'd been pummeled.

Funny how that worked. How one little gun trained at her heart could cut her down to the same size as any other terrified woman.

She looked for Spike. Her first instinctual fear was that he'd bolted. Maybe taken the car and just lit out. But she saw out one window that the car was where she'd left it. And then out another, she saw him. Behind the house was a wide patio, with a kidney-shaped swimming pool set into it, whose underwater lights cast up an eerie blue shimmering on his white body. He was sitting on the end of the diving board, legs dangling. Hair and skin glistening—wet. He'd taken off her carefully wound bandages. From her high vantage, in the strange light, his bruises were invisible, and she could see only one of the wounds, a black nickel-sized dot, high on his back. Leaning on his taut arms, planted on the edges of the board between his thighs, he thrust his head a little forward, as if he was listening for something, or taking in some aroma on the air. Then little by little he leaned back, propping his arms behind him, then letting himself down on his elbows, and finally his back. Drew his knees up, feet side by side on the board. He lay there, motionless, exposed, one arm crooked over his face, like a sun-bather. Moon-bather.

Then he touched himself.

The patch of hair in his groin was the only dark thing on his pale body, except for the bullet holes. He'd spit in his palm, brought his hand into languid motion. Peering through the inch of parted drapes, eye pinned there, Buffy froze. Her nipples went hard, clit squirmed; the tremor of her thighs made her realize how tightly she was holding herself, like any movement would betray her.
She shouldn't watch.

She didn't know this man, he was dependent on her, he didn't know he was being observed. Those were just three reasons why it was wrong. And what had happened last night, the cuddling after the trauma was over ... physical comfort she'd been too addled and tired to resist. Nothing wrong with that, but nothing to presume on. Especially not as an excuse to spy on him taking another kind of comfort.

Buffy pulled herself away, careful not to jostle the drapes. Retreated to the master bathroom, where she ran the shower as hard as it would go.

Tried to think of anything but what she'd just seen—and everything she could so easily conjure from memory—as she brought herself off with soapy fingers, once, twice, a third time, until her knees buckled and she lay in the tub, legs open to the falling stream, lips parted to gasp.

She knew he was in the kitchen. She hesitated. What to say? It seemed important to say something, and to say it briskly, calmly, briefly. Something that would let him know that his embrace, his company in her bed, while completely acceptable and appreciated—at the time—shouldn't make him feel she expected anything more, or that she would offer any kind of continuation. Above all she must be firm, but kind, kind, kind. He was dependent on her, she reminded herself again, who knew how long this situation would last, she'd already turned him down and the reasons were no different now than they'd been two days ago.

The kitchen door swung open. "What you doin' loitering out here? Made coffee."

His smile was smooth, boyish, refreshed. Amazingly, his bruises were less; his hair, still moist, shone as if it had been newly blonded; his blue eyes sparkled. "You were quite the sleepin' beauty. Must be ravenous now. There's not much here. Could ring for a pizza, maybe?"

As if he had a string attached to her navel, she moved forward as he beckoned, through the swinging door, following him halfway across the spacious kitchen floor. He was wearing jeans, and the white towel slung over his shoulder hid the wounds. "Feelin' better? You were busy dreaming nearly all day."

"I don't remember any dreams." This wasn't at all what she meant to say. "How do you know I was dreaming?"

He shrugged. "Scent. Could feel the vibration of your eyes movin' in their lids."

Jeez. Remind me never to be a vampire. Too much information. "Listen, Spike—I mean." She stopped, overwhelmed by a hot flush of chagrin. "Sorry. Will."

He was pouring coffee into two mugs. With a glance over his shoulder, he said, "You're gonna tell me last night was just about you bein' so scared, an' me so ripped up. Don't bother. I know."

This was exactly what she'd been going to say, so why was she suddenly scrambling to backpedal? "No. No. No."

"Here." He extended the mug. She stepped to take it, he drew back at once, keeping his distance. Why was this so confusing?

She wondered—if this wasn't Spike, would it be different? Really not Spike—some other man, with
She didn't know.

God, she didn't know. The question just whirled around her head like a flock of starlings, the twittering filling her up with confusion and embarrassment.

Spike was looking out the window, into a stand of firs that obscured the ocean horizon. Sipping at his coffee, he said, "You feelin' more tranquil now?"

"I'm all right. I'm used to ...." You never got used to it. Not really. Not to guns pointed at you.

"What are you supposed to be doing right now? I mean, if not for me."

"Could be almost anything. Training the new slayers. Or—traveling somewhere to fight some local threat. We try to monitor demon activity worldwide, and when we find some hot-spot, I go in with a team."

"So I'm keepin' you from your important work."

"I'm sure if there was anything that took priority, my phone would be buzzing."

"So I could lose you anytime."

Don't say 'lose me'. 'Lose me' is the wrong nomenclature here! "It's kind of hard to plan much of anything in advance, when you're a slayer. But don't worry."

"An' now we're here in this beautiful place—well posh it is, been down that long long staircase to the sea, an' saw what a big piece of ground we've got here, all walled off to keep the nasties out—or in. Now we're here, what's supposed to happen?"

"You're going to rest, and try to relax, and maybe that'll do the trick for you. And I'm going to get Willow—she's our chief mage—onto the situation in the alley. If there's something there, she'll find out what it is. And maybe that will help you."

He went on staring out, watching the fir branches stir in the ocean breeze, the coffee cup pressed to his lower lip. She found herself staring at his profile, at that lip, that she used to lick and suck in between her own, and kiss. The dismay was back, congealing in her ... why did it have to be like this? She hadn't had any of these lewd revisitings in the last year. Yet now, back in his presence again, she couldn't stop her thoughts from swooping in on him from all sorts of oblique angles, all coming back to the one place, this greedy knowing nostalgia for his body, his ways of touching her, tasting her, fucking her. It was nothing to do with love, it was something far more base. He'd become for her the model, the reference point, of arousal, of release. The stock figure of her physical fantasies. And none of those fantasies came without an accompanying flare-up of gross unease.

"Haven't touched your coffee."

He was right next to her all of a sudden, his fingers wrapping around the forgotten cup in her hand. "S'cold now."

For a couple of seconds they endured a minor tug-of-war over the cup. Spike won.

"Help me. Yeah." He dashed the cup into the steel sink, where it broke, splashing onto the counter.
"Tell me just one thing, Buffy Summers. If it's such a bloody mistake, why'd you sleep all day in my arms, with your lips 'gainst my throat, an' bathin' me in such a scent of contentment? Why'd you give me that for nothing?"

She had no answer, only an overwhelming irrational sense of his unfairness—she'd resisted observing him, but he'd taken in every one of her private secrets! Her heart threatened to explode, even as the pressure in her throat, a bolus of pique, resentment, embarrassment, threatened to choke off her next breath.

"Spike's not here," he said. "I'm Will. Why won't you deal with me?"

"It's not like that. I can't just pretend—"

"Spike's been wiped."

"He's inside you! I can call you whatever you say, but you are Spike!"

"All right, so I'm bloody Spike—do I deserve this from you?"

Shame pulsed through her like a drug released into her bloodstream. "You don't," she murmured. "That's the point."

"You act like this everytime some fellow just wants to take you to bed? Like a bloody traffic cop—come on, then stop. Maybe you get off on denyin' yourself! No wonder you don't have a boyfriend, teasin' bitch."

"That ... that really isn't fair."

He gestured at her—fatigue, disgust. "Ttcha. Know what you'd better do? Better recruit someone else to mind me. This here's not workin' out for us."

He might as well have driven a fist into her face. She couldn't look at him anymore. "I'll make some calls," she whispered, and fled.

Phone in clammy hand, Buffy sat on the edge of the bed, unable to assemble the least bit of purpose.

She'd brought this on herself. Why did she invite him into her bed? That she was exhausted, traumatized, half-asleep and just not thinking was of course absolutely no excuse. Half her life was spent in such a state. That there was something about him that was inexorably comforting, tantalizing, delicious to her ... wasn't his fault, and also was no excuse.

He was right, this wasn't working. She disturbed him, he disturbed her, and they had no business trying to coexist through this crisis while all this inappropriate indefinable feeling existed between them.

With gelid fingers, she touched the screen on the phone. It purred, and then was answered.


"I know. Hey, how are you? Giles told me you were with Spike."

"I need some help." She explained about the alley, her voice echoing back to her, robotic. Why was it hard to breathe? Since when did she have so little rein over herself? "So I think you're the one who can find out what the hex is there. There's got to be something."
"Sure," Willow said. "I'm definitely intrigued. I've got some stuff I'm working on here but I could come to L.A. in a few days—is that soon enough?"

"The sooner the better. I'm hoping that if you can unmask whatever it is, Spike's memory will come back. The longer he's just sort of ... wiped ..."—She didn't like that word, but he'd put it in her head—"the harder it is for him."

"I get that," Willow said. She paused, then in a different tone, said, "How is it for you? I guess it's kind of bizarre, seeing him again, after ...."

"I thought he was dead. But this isn't the first time I've had people come back from the apparently dead. I'm dealing. It's not like. Not like when Angel came back? Not like I expect anything to come of this reunion I never remotely wanted? Not like I might be developing feelings for this Spike who doesn't know why he shouldn't have feelings for me?"

"Not like what?" Willow said. "Buffy?"

"I just ... sort of feel for him, y'know? He's all alone. He doesn't know anybody, he doesn't know himself."

"That doesn't describe you," Willow said gently.

"No, I know. I just. It's. He was a champion. He was supposed to be at peace."

"Giles thinks he went rogue. Maybe whatever brought him back after Sunnydale was controlling him."

"Do you believe that?"

Willow paused. "Much as I respect Giles' opinion ... and I've been reading up on this Wolfram & Hart operation, and it's serious ... y'know, I just can't believe that of Angel and his people. I met them, I worked with them. They wouldn't have gone to the other side. Neither would the Spike I knew there at the end. If he was with them, it was for the mission."

Had Willow been there, Buffy would've thrown her arms around her. "I think so too."

"I'll get to L.A. as soon as I can."

"We're not there right now," Buffy said. "Spike needs rest and quiet, it wasn't doing him any good to be in the city. I might ask some other people to come spell me here with him, but we can keep in touch by phone."

Willow chuckled. "You don't want me and my magic fingers anywhere near him. Got it."

"Willow—"

"No, really, I got it. It's okay, Buffy. You stay well. We'll talk."

The call over, Buffy caressed the phone's smooth edges, wanting and not wanting to make another call. She should get someone else here. He'd demanded she do so. She could call Faith, and ask for Vi. Vi had found Spike after the battle, Vi knew him, and Vi had none of the baggage. She was a nice person, she'd take an interest, and she had the strength to cope if Spike got fangy or crazy or both.

So why wasn't she punching up Faith's number?
It wasn't like she'd have to know why she needed help.

Shit no. Because Faith would know. Faith was the one who'd insisted they tell her about Spike in the first place.

Faith had always read more into things between her and Spike than were really there.

She'd call. A little later. Meanwhile, the house's lowest level had a slayer gym where she could pound out her aggravation against the fast and heavy bags, expend her rage at herself on various pommels and agility testers. That was what she needed now. That would clear her out, make her able to talk to Faith, to Vi, with the right tone of self-command. The big work-out montage always set her right when nothing else could.

She was halfway to her suitcase for her sweats when the knock at the door froze her.

"Buffy." His voice strangely muffled from the other side.

"What do you need?" She meant to go to the door, to open it smartly and confront him like the number one slayer she was. Instead she fell back into her seat at the edge of the bed, willing him to stay out.

He entered sideways. "Was well out of order just now. No call to say what I did."

"It doesn't matter," she said dully. "You were right." Now would be a good time to develop a sudden power for instant teleportation.

He sidled closer, then abruptly knelt on the floor by her knee. Didn't touch, but looked up into her face, his own palely uncertain. "Wasn't least bit right. Presumed too much. Forgive me."

Her voice was thick and resistant. "I don't understand ... I don't understand why you want me anyway. I'm not nice to you. I'm not ... friendly."

"Dropped all to see after me, saved me from the Devil knows what. Call that nice enough. An' you're drawn to me too, just as strong, 'neath all your histrionics. A bloke likes that in a girl."

This kindness might as well have been a scimitar in her guts. "Don't."

"Started gettin' to me the minute we met. You jumble me up, Buffy Summers, you call to me. Who's to explain such things? Wouldn't press it, if I didn't know was mutual. Indiscreet of me, yeah, but you give it off so strong, you know, feels absurd to play like I don't notice it. All unmoored as I am, can you blame me for wantin'—"

She couldn't let him go on. "Spi—" Clench. Flush. "Will."

"All right, Will. It's just too hard."

"Think it's any easier for me, man doesn't know his own bloody surname or date of birth? But feel I know you. Feel it dead strong. Know my own mind, even if not my own history."

"Say I let these feelings develop. Say I let myself get involved with you." Just floating the idea so specifically filled her so full of longing she was panicky and faint. Where had this come from? A few days ago she'd been cool and dry and desireless as ... as a husk. A demon-ass-kicking husk. It was working for her. "Didn't it occur to you ..." She tried to swallow it down, tried to deliver herself
calmly. "... didn't you think of how it'll be for me, when your memories come back, and ... and you're angry at me for taking advantage of you? Spike can't consent to this."

"Why should I feel different than I do right now? Nobody's put up in amber. All that's happened to me last few days, it'll still have happened whether I get my memories back or no."

"You've figured out that there's a past to this."

"Not stupid, so, yeah. Got my strong suspicions." He smiled, a smile sweet and coaxing as a breeze across overheated skin. "Can't imagine what could be so awful that I couldn't change my mind about you. Is it really so bad as that?"

She nodded, and shook her head, and nodded again, more firmly. "I can't risk it. I can't. I get torn up, every time I try, it hurts too much."

"Try what, pet?"

Don't ask that. Don't make me say.

"Ah, sussed it right then, I did. You are fallin' for me too." His gotcha tone was as clement as his smile, as his fingers gathering her hands into his. "Brings me out of the wilderness, that does, pet."

"You're killing me. It emerged as a plea, but she was already capitulating, tugging him up onto the bed with her.

"Ah, yeah, that's it," he said, as she pulled him close. "Let me drive a bit, like you did last night. Lemme take care of you. You need a bit of seeing to."

It took all her reserves of strength to keep from bursting into loud raucous sobs. All she could think of was disaster, shame, the awful inevitable pain that would follow this surrender. Because he would remember, it could happen at any moment, and Spike would dash her away and leave her, and then everything that made her able to go on with her lopsided half-lonely life would be nothing against that final crush. She'd never be able to raise her head after that.

Love was her great vulnerability. Love was what finished her. Her life, her self, just wasn't made for it.

Staring at the ceiling, trying to deny her hunger for his caresses, the urge to stare forever into his eyes, Buffy held herself together, at least until he'd lightly drawn up the hem of her shirt, fingertips cool and tantalizing on her belly. She held her breath, as if that would keep back the deluge. But when she felt the first cool velvety impress of his lips on her bare breasts, the dam broke, and she flooded into sobs.

"Sssh, sssh. Why all this? Pet. Just relax, it can't be so bad as this."

He touched her lashes, webbed with thick tears. He was still smiling, gentle and fond, waiting for her. "It's not easy bein' Buffy Summers, is it? Thought I had my own troubles."

How could she tell him, his good-nature was disembowling her? Buffy closed her eyes. Took long ragged breaths, trying to get calm.

Calm, calm, she would be calm. She was the slayer, she was strong and in control.
When she opened her eyes, he was still right there, up on his elbow above her.

"Better?" he said.

She nodded. "But I'm not quite ready to do this yet. Can we wait?"

"Wait for what?" Then, restraining his disappointment, "Course we can wait."

"You know I want to. Just ... sex is a big step."

"An' you've just taken the biggest. Admittin' to bein' in love with me." He quirked a half-grin. "A total stranger."

"You're not a total stranger. I wish you were."

"Wish I was," he echoed. His expression changed, as if part of this was only now becoming vivid to him, that he contained so many associations for her he was himself entirely ignorant of. He went solemn, and with a respectful gesture, pulled her shirt down again to cover her breasts and belly.

They remained sprawled together, lightly touching. Buffy put her hand up to his hairline, smoothed fingers through the curls there. "There's so much to feel just like this," she said. "It's kind of overwhelming for me."

"Is it?" He sounded pleased. She envied him his in-the-momentness. With no past goading him with expectations and rue, he could luxuriate in the present, anticipate pleasure to come.

"I'm afraid." I've just handed you the power to destroy me.

"Don't want you to be afraid. Afraid's no good to me. Anything else goin' on in here?" Light finger laid on her heart.

"Happy," she gasped. She repeated it, to make sure he understood, even though she was still in tears, still quaking with little sobs. "But I'm afraid to be happy."

"Hasn't worked out for you before."

"That's an understatement." How surreal it was, to have this conversation with Spike. Looking into those eyes she so thoroughly knew, and telling him what he ought to know about her, used to know, would know again. That she was a walking disaster of the heart.

"You're a brave girl. This time'll be different."

"It's never different."

"Tellin' you it will. You mind me, now."

He was so solemn, scolding, that a laugh erupted out of her final sob, burbling up with as little intention, drawing forth more tears. He chuckled too, and drew her closer to him. Half sprawled on him as she was now, she felt his erection trapped in his jeans.

"Does it excite you when I cry?"

The question startled him. "At this point, everythin' you do gets me hard." He brushed at her tears. "Don't need to do anythin' about it. Said I'd wait."

"I know. It's okay." She shifted herself, so her head still rested on his shoulder. "It's been so long
since I just ... did anything like this."

"How long?"

"Long."

"Who was the man? Anyone I ought to know?"

"Ought to. But don't."

"You like plugging me with mysteries."

When you remember me again, you're not going to want me. Why am I letting myself in for this? She couldn't drag herself away now. It would've been like going out an airlock.

"I want to ask you to tell me about yourself, but of course you can't. That's weird." Angel, loving her, had wanted to share as little of his past with her as he could. He'd deflected most of her questions, plied her with kisses when she got too inquisitive. "There's nothing good to say," he'd remind her, and she'd pout, comprehending and not comprehending.

The clean deft naivety she'd been capable of, ten years ago, shocked her now.

"Can tell you how you make me feel. Can ask to hear all about you."

She'd never remotely had a conversation like this with Spike. Had resented his declaratons, his inventories of her charms. Refused the few questions he dared put to her over the course of their head-on collision affair, and of course never dreamed of asking him for information. Who wanted details of the pit of filth one was wallowing in?

Oh God, how can I do this to him?

"Soon," she breathed.

"When you're ready," he agreed. "Pet, you've no idea what this's like, right here. All lost I am, but feel like I've found home."

"So do I." She could do it again, tuck her face in against his neck—why did that feel, above any other possibility, like the most consoling, the most delicious place she knew—and be held. Spike seemed contented too, to idle like this, unpressing. She breathed him in, familiar faint tang of clean undead flesh, notes of chlorine from the pool, and shampoo. What did he smell? He'd said, a little while ago, that she'd had an aroma of happiness. Like a secret confession, given only to him.

After a long silence, she murmured, "Do you really think of Spike as gone? Wiped. I mean ... aren't you really him? Beyond ... underneath ... I don't know how to say it."

"Not a philosopher, you."

No, not a philosopher. But you talk like him, and you move like him, and—" You kiss like him.

"Well, yeah, know I must be him, somehow. All I meant, before, is it's no good holdin' back because somethin' you're nervous about might happen someday. You can't know if it will or won't. An' I can't know if I'll ever get my memories back. Do know I've come to love you, an' don't want to put that off."

"You've been so patient."
"With all you're not tellin' me."

Curl of disquiet in her belly. "That too."

He shrugged. "Each day, seems to matter less and less, my past, yours, anybody's. Without mine in my own head, what's your testimony to me? Hearsay. Could tell me Spike hated you like poison, but I don't hate you, so what'd I do with the information?"

"You can't really mean that you like being cut off from ... from everything you know. You haven't given up on wanting to be cured."

"No." He frowned. "Don't mean that. Makes me feel small, an' lost like I said."

"I still need to help you recover."

"You're doin' all sorts for me."

"It's just, the consequences, when you do—"

"Hush. Love, you're tremblin' again. Hush. Am I really such an angry an' retributive fellow when I'm at home?"

"I can't even begin to explain."

"Don't fret yourself. Let's go out, get a breath of air."

She washed her face, then followed him outside, along the trail through the thick trees that led to the stairs down to the Pacific. A long, switched-back wooden staircase, bolted to the cliff, the view amazing all the way down, dark restless ocean. He held her hand, leading the way, and she walked just behind him, feeling like a trusting child. At the bottom they took off their shoes, rolled up the bottoms of their jeans. Spike took her hand again, and tucked it into the crook of his arm. The gesture felt old-fashioned to her, reminding her of the little glimpses he'd given her in the last few days, of the man he'd perhaps been before he was turned. Parts of his personality he'd repressed, but didn't know to repress now? Traits that were William's. She didn't want to ask. Anyway, it was lovely to stroll this way, to feel him looking at her like she was precious, the ocean wind blowing her hair back, the sand moist and crunchy under her feet.

"There's only right now," she said. "That's all there is, isn't there?"

"All we need."

They approached the edge of the water, where the waves broke into lacy foam, and the wet sand was startlingly cold under her soles.

This was the romantic beachy get-away she'd never had, with Angel, with Riley, with anybody. She hadn't fantasized about anything like this since she'd come back from the dead. Since then, her musings about what would really content her, informed by memories of heaven—actual heaven, not just things anyone could say were heavenly, stupid approximate ignorant word—all had to do with, she realized now, oblivion. Some kind of oblivion beyond effort and responsibility.

Death, really. Where other people daydreamed about moonlit strolls on the beach with a beautiful lover, she conjured pleasant moments of unexistence.

"What're you thinkin'?"
It was what the lover in the story, the movie, always asked. She laughed. "You don't want to know."

"But I do. Don't ask for what I don't want. You'll learn that about me."

"I already have. Okay, if you must know, I was thinking about being dead."

"Don't want you to think of that."

"But I was. I was remembering it."

"Been dead, have you?"

"Oh yes. A lot, actually. Well, twice. The first time didn't last very long. The second time though, I was very much elsewhere, and else ... wise."

"Elsewise?"

"Completely at peace, enfolded in love."

He stopped, and pulled her into his arms, tucking her head under his chin, encompassing her in his embrace. "Like this?"

No. "Yes."

In her pocket, her phone began hollering at her like a cat with a grievance.

She fumbled it out. "Sorry."

"You got to jet off an' kill beasties?"

Quickly scanning the incoming messages, she shook her head. "No." There were texts and emails, from her sister, from Xander, from, unexpectedly, Faith. Also Giles. They scrambled up to sit on an outcropping of flat rock, just out of reach of the plashing eddying tide. She let Spike look over her shoulder at the photos the screen displayed of each of her correspondents. Maybe some recognition would spark.

"Who's that pretty girl?"

"My sister Dawn. She is pretty, isn't she?"

"Exquisite, yeah." He stared. "Do I know her?"

"You do. When I was dead, you helped take care of her."

"Did I? Ahhh. An' who's that bloke?"

"Xander. You know him too. You know all these people, actually. And they're all interested in how you're doing."

They're the world, starting to encroach on this private little illusion of ours. Starting to make it impossible.

"Well, go on an' tell 'em. I'll give you a bit of privacy." He shifted around, so his back was against hers; they leaned together, propping each other. She let her head rest on his shoulder, before
remembering the gunshot wounds.

"Does this hurt?"

"Not a bit. Go on, I'm lookin' out to sea." He chuckled. "Beats bein' all at sea, though I'm still that too, aren't I?"

"Probably not for much longer," she said, knowing she'd passed the turning point of hoping he'd recover. When he recovered, she'd be caught, and punished.

Dawn's email alternated mundane news about TV shows and slayer gossip with questions about where she was and what was wrong with Spike and was he really alive and what was he like and could Buffy tell him please that she forgave him? Xander's text said only that he was thinking about her, that Martha and Steffi were making progress with the nunchuks, and if it wasn't too much trouble could she bring him a couple boxes of Oreos when she came back, because they didn't have any American cookies at the shop in the village and he was sick of Hob Nobs. Giles just wanted to know if all was well at the safe-house and did she need anything.

Faith's message was a little video of her, sticking out her tongue, rolling her eyes, grimacing, and then saying she assumed Spike hadn't ripped her throat out yet so he must be less crazy now she'd abducted him from the L.A. headquarters. "You'd better be makin' some serious time there, B, or else you're even more pathetic than I always knew you were."

Sorry you had to hear that," Buffy said, slipping the phone back in her pocket. "Faith's a fan."

"Who's she then?"

"Slayer Number Two."

"Didn't sound like she looks up to you much."

"Your fan, I mean."

"What was she talkin' about, you abducting me?"

"When they called me to come to L.A. to see you, you were in a bad way. Incommunicative, and violent. They had you locked up and sedated. I made an executive decision that you'd be better off with me, away from there."

"Good call."

"I think so. But you were the one who bombed out of my car in traffic and led me to the alley. That's where you woke up from the crazy. I don't know why."

"So went from a wild animal that wouldn't talk, to this."

"Trauma can do that." He'd been crazy when he got back from Africa. All those weeks cowering and hiding in the high school cellar—where she'd been all too happy to abandon him, as she cringing recalled. Though then he'd been mostly quite gentle, and had plenty to say, none of it making the least bit of sense.

He lolled back, his head rolling against hers. "Wonder if I'll be sorry, to remember what happened to me. To the others, whoever they were. Maybe it was such a horror that it's better it's all gone."

She suspected that could turn out to be the case, but still she couldn't just agree with him. She'd
always been someone who believed in facing facts, dealing with reality. Hated being tricked or lied
to or hoodwinked. If it was she who'd been robbed of memory, no matter how devastating, she'd
want her mind back.

Even if it meant losing your peace of mind? REALLY?

"You're musing."

"I am, and I shouldn't. Like we said before, we only have right now, and it's all we need." She
turned to face him. He was waiting to receive her, drawing her face close in his two hands,
smoothing the wind tumbled hair away from her mouth. The rock was hard under her folded knees,
but his kisses were silky and absorbing. After a little bit, he drew her across his lap, a more
comfortable angle to taste her mouth, to offer his. She hadn't kissed like this since high school,
nothing but mouths, no progression to more serious action, and with a sense that nothing could be
more serious than this gentle persistent penetrating exploration of lips and tongues and teeth. She
could feel that he was smiling as he kissed her; she could feel the tenderness brimming up in him. His
hands petted her blowing hair, cupped and adored her face, her neck, but went no further. She held
his head in her outspread hands, smoothing the hair under her thumbs that felt like the feathers on a
breast of a bird, detaching from his lips to press hers to the points of his cheeks, to his lids, the lashes
fluttering, the whorls of his ears, hard shield of his forehead, and lower down, nibbling along the
sharp jaw, to the tempting hollows beneath. She nipped at his adams apple, and drew a gasp. Made a
shallow experimental bite at the curve of his throat, was rewarded with a louder gasp, and when she
drew back, a flash of gold-eye.

"Oh, you like that." Why this reminder of his vampirism charmed and excited her, she wasn't sure.
But it did.

Fingers on her chin, tipping her face up again, redirecting her efforts back to his mouth. More
languid, fervid kisses. Her body pulsed with warmth, despite the chill night ocean air, yet somehow
the intense throbbing was easy to ignore in favor of this limpid concentration of mouth on mouth.
Spike's mouth was the only mouth, and it was hers, hers to possess and enjoy. He wanted nothing
else but her hypnotic kisses. They were in the same place, shared the one desire.

When had that ever happened before?

It was only the leading edge of morning that drove them from their perch. Spike could smell it before
she detected any change in the color of the sky. "Come, sweetheart."

Again he held her hand as they hastened along the beach.

"Am I your sweetheart?" She asked the question like an eager, silly child, already embarrassed to be
requesting compliments, but unable to quell the urge. He smiled, squeezing her fingers.

"Are you my sweetheart? Silly girl."

She'd barely eaten anything in she couldn't remember how long. Hunger crashed in on her now, a
rude and offensive guest in the house of her fluttering, hovering, delicate desire. In the kitchen she
made a thorough inspection, found more coffee though no milk to put it in it, and in the freezer,
toaster waffles and sausages. A bottle of maple syrup, caked and stuck to the shelf it rested on, turned
up inside the fridge door. A veritable microwave feast. While she assembled things, Spike again
attacked a blood bag with one sheepish fang. She took it from him, and removing the frozen
sausages from the turntable, put it in to heat. "Nicer this way."
"Ah?" He smiled. When she poured the heated blood into a mug and gave it to him, he looked so pleased, as if she'd just prepared a ten course meal that had taken all day.

It occurred to her suddenly to wonder if William was any more accustomed than was Spike to a routine receipt of routine kindness.

She ate, thinking, no one ever has to know I sat on Spike's lap while I ate breakfast, and then he kissed the sweet maple flavor from her lips until it was all gone, and then just a little longer to make sure.

She expected, from prior experience, that he'd press her for sex. He'd agreed to wait, but she could imagine him thinking, well, that was HOURS ago. He'd been constantly seductive in those months when she'd succumbed to him and could not stop; every time he saw her, he tried for whatever he could get.

"I just want you to understand ... it's not going to be today."

If his surprise was feigned, it was an awfully convincing job.

"Never thought it would be."

"I'd like you to sleep with me though, but only if you want to."

"If I want to!"

"Okay, good. I just ... just wanted to get that straight."

She wanted to think her reluctance had to do with keeping a decorous pace to this strange impulsive affair, not rushing interactions that contained a delicacy she wasn't used to in her experience. But she knew it was much more about raw fear. The less she permitted herself, the less Spike would have to rage against when his memories reappeared. She thought of him like a valley in deep fog. River, trees, roads, settlements, everything still there, intact beneath the encompassing mist. That mist could burn off at any time, and there he'd be, with her right up in his face. You're sick, he'd say. Even now, still puttin' me to use.

"You don't trust me to keep a promise?"

She didn't want to say I know what you're like.

"It's good, havin' you in my arms, making me all warm, an' breathing you in." He gathered her closer, buried his face for a moment in her hair. "Eases me. Think about what's to come, how I'll possess you an' make you mine, but you already are, aren't you?"

"As much as I can be anybody's."

"Still parsing it fine."

"Spi—Will. You know I can't help it."

"Gettin' that, yeah."

She kissed him again, to show that she meant no distancing. He tasted her lips each time as if they were new to him.

"What still beats me a bit ... what's a fine strong warm woman want with a creature like me? Perverse, rather, vampire slayer fallin' for a vampire."
"Lots of people meet their dates in the workplace." The joke sounded flat as soon as it left her lips. It came to her then, that Spike had once said something like that to her, on one of the numerous occasions he’d tried to refute her essential disgust at him, to assert that they were meant for each other. "My first lover was a vampire. It never really occurred to me to be put off by him. He was very attractive to me, his temperature and his ... presence ... just seemed like part of him. Not something lacking. It's like that now." She curled her fingers around his hand. "And you must know you're very handsome."

"Am I?"

"Don't fish."

"Can see I've got a tight enough body, but dunno what I look like. Could have a mug like a monkey."

"Well, you don't." She gave him a teasing prod in the ribs. "You have a fair sharp face, a full mouth, and the bluest eyes of any I've ever seen. C'mon, you've got to sense this—the way people look at you."

"Way you look at me."

"How do I look at you?" she asked, a curl of tension flexing in her belly.

"Most of the time? Like I'm a nuisance an' a worry. But some times? Like you'd like to eat me up bite by slow bite."

"Well there you go. You know perfectly well you're not ugly."

He was quiet for so long then she began to grow antsy. Time to get moving again. Except that his arms were folded around her hips, and she didn't want to be the first to pull away.

"Who was this other vampire? Your first lover?"

"It was a long time ago, he's gone."

"You slay him?"

"No." She didn't want to explain. Already sorry she'd brought Angel up. That was the trouble with this ... every question he might ask her brought up things too difficult to confront while she was trying to enjoy this amnesiac idyll. It was sick, carrying on a kind of shadow-play of a love affair with a man who'd been nine-tenths erased. What did it say about her, that she could unleash love only for someone whose personality was so abraded? Always in secret?

Another memory popped into her mind, sudden and grievous.

Buffybot.

How disgusting that had been.

Wasn't this nearly the same? She'd been given a life-size, functioning replica of Spike, like him in all the ways that would be pleasing to her while conveniently sans all incriminating backstory and acid opinion. A veritable living doll, programmed for affection, gratitude, and pleasure free of all complications. To be enjoyed until she got caught, which would have to be very soon now.

And to think she'd exerted so much energy into letting Spike know they had nothing in common.
His lips tracing through her hair, to nibble on her ear. "Sorry I asked."

She slipped off his lap. "I really need to go out and buy provisions. Can you do without me for a little while? Before I go—how are your wounds? Healing up? Let me see."

He pulled off his teeshirt.

"Good, they're almost gone."

"Don't suppose they'll scar," he said. "How's the back?" He leaned forward for her inspection.

She laid a hand lightly on his protruding spine, brushing fingers across the black scabs. Then couldn't resist leaning in to inhale the nape of his neck, where the hair feathered away into smooth skin the color of paper. When had she ever had time to cherish anyone like this? It embarrassed her, the number of whims that skirted through her mind concerning him, some of them more suited to a little girl adoring a wonderful new doll than to a mature slayer in love with a broken vampire. She let her cheek rest against his nape, knowing that its warmth would give him pleasure, as would the tickle of her hair against his bare back.

"I think if not for you, that guy would've shot up the place. If you'd been facing the other way, and hadn't seen him ...."

"Did see him. Saw him in plenty of time."

"I wonder why you were the only one they found."

"Eh?"

The blurted question discomposed them both.

"After the battle. Angel was gone, and the others ... did you survive because you fought best? Because you were facing the right way?"

Beneath her touch, Spike shuddered.

"Maybe I was the one coward. Maybe when they ran ahead, I ran back."

"No, not you. Never."

"No?"

"I'm sure. You wouldn't have done that."

She could feel him straining to think, probing his own blankness. "Would hate to think so," he said. "But what do I know?"

His uncertainty chilled her—he'd been putting up a very brave face, but the amnesia was a burden on him. How would it be, to try to manage without any real grasp on your sense of self?

"You'll just have to take my word for it." Another kiss. "Now I really should go shopping. I need nonfat yogurt, you need blood. I'll just be a couple hours, tops. Wait up for me, okay?"

"Always, pet."
Odd to be alone, carrying out mundane tasks. She'd been with him barely a week but already she'd completely inverted day for night, and Spike had somehow become her whole world; leaving him alone gave her a pang. The ordinariness of the sunny day, small-town traffic, parking lots and bright stores, had an edge of the surreal. It couldn't be true, but looking around her as she did her errands, Buffy felt like the only person who was on her own, not part of some couple or family or at least chattering to someone else on a cell phone.

How long had it been since she'd finally dropped her old fantasies about 'the normal life'? She certainly hadn't been thinking that way since the fall of Sunnydale, and probably long before that. Since her resurrection. She could remember herself before, how preoccupied she'd once been with those longings, with her sharp sense of deprivation. But all it was now was a memory. Could it just be adulthood that had revised her, or was it that she'd been dead for months, and wasn't meant really to be alive again at all?

Some times, when she lay in bed waiting to doze, she would wonder if she really was. In the strictest sense.

She hurried. Willow would come to L.A. in a couple days, Spike might get his memory back at any moment. She didn't want to miss any more of her sweet time-out with him than was strictly necessary.

Later on, she'd want to cherish every bit of it.

She expected to hear the chatter of the TV when she came back in. In the silence, she assumed he'd fallen asleep while he was waiting. She put her purchases away, then went looking for him, first in the huge low-slung living room with its vast stone fireplace, where he might've dozed off on one of the sectionals. No Spike. She ran up to look in the bedroom. He wasn't there either.

The safe-house had once been the Big Sur retreat of a watcher, one of the Council high-ups who'd perished in the explosion, whose will had proved out later all in the Council's favor. Each room featured stuffed bookshelves, and one, the one with the least interesting view, conducive to getting down to work rather than lollygagging out the windows, was a study with two walls covered floor-to-ceiling in volumes. It was there she found him, books spread out on the huge work-table, not the novels or art tomes scattered through the rest of the rooms, but the kinds of volumes out of which much useful but nothing good ever came.

Demon compendiums. Watcher diaries.

She couldn't have snuck up on him, not with his senses. But he started guiltily when she spoke, and slammed shut the tome he'd been consulting.

"What are you doing?"

He cast a wary glance over the collection he'd pulled down.

"Are you researching?" she asked stupidly. "I don't think you're going to find much info about the amnesia in—" She started towards him. Spike sprang up, careered towards her, catching her hand, pulling her towards the door.

"Did you get beer?"

That's when she knew he didn't want her to see what he'd been reading.
She ducked past him and went to look.

He'd been reading about himself.

An image it took her a moment to register as him took up the left leaf of one of the outspread books. A young man in sepia-tone, wearing a bulky overcoat, sandy hair tumbling over his forehead, chin held high, defiant eye on the camera. Behind him, an improbable painted backdrop of a distant waterfall. It was the curled lip that registered on her first.

Another book reproduced, of all things, a photo-booth strip, four pictures of Spike and Drusilla, both wearing hats, mugging for the automatic camera in some dance hall or amusement park, sixty years ago. A slender dark moustache traced the outline of his mouth. Hers was open in hysterical mirth. The third book he'd closed so hastily was A History With Commentary of the Vampire Clan of Aurelius.

"Oh, Spike." Had she only thought, she could've ... what? Locked him out of this room? Taken him elsewhere in the first place?

"Looking at this kind of stuff now ... it's not a good idea."

"Wandered in here for somethin' to read, and found all this. Couldn't not look." He seemed scared, abashed. "I'm a notorious vampire an' you're a vampire slayer, an' here we are. Makes a fellow wonder. Maybe you're torturin' me."

Her body felt unmoored, like she was about to float up to catch on the ceiling. "This is torture?"

"Psychological, maybe. How do I know you've got nothin' to do with me losin' my mind? Maybe you done that. An' now you mean to pick me to bits, an' destroy me. No one around to hear me or help me."

Where had this paranoia come from?

"That isn't what vampire slayers do. We don't lull vamps, we don't pick them to bits, we just stake them. Clean and fast. It's not torture, and it's not psychological, and it's not why you and I are here. Everything I told you is the truth. I thought ... I thought you were in love with me."

"Maybe that's what you've done to me! Why aren't we enemies?" He was struggling, visibly, as if some disjointed bits of self-knowledge were bobbing up, incomprehensible, tormenting. "'Cordin' to these learned books, I'm overripe for punishment. I'm a right bad 'un."

"Not any more. You switched sides."

"Nothing's written here about that."

"Those are old books. Written long before you won back your soul."

"My soul? What's that? You really believe in such tosh? An' why would a vampire do that even if he could?" He was glancing around now, as if assessing the exits.

"William. Hush now." She made herself smile her sunniest smile, repressing fiercely the fear he was stirring up, that he'd flip out again, that she'd have to fight him. "Most vampires wouldn't. You're unique."

"That's bollocks. D'you really think I'd buy that?" He imitated her. "You're unique. It's all in the books—I'm a oner all right, at mayhem—" He sprang up then, rushing to the window. The house
was mostly glass, but every wall of windows was outfitted with thick running drapes she'd carefully closed. Before she could stop him, Spike dragged the heavy material aside, taking the late morning sun full in his face.

Smoke had begun to curl off his skin like steam off a frying pan when she broke out of her shock and shoved him back.

"What are you doing?"

He snapped around with a snarl. The next thing she knew, he'd pinned her against the wall, fangs at her throat.

Her every instinct was to chop at him, free herself. She'd easily gotten out of worse encounters thousands of times. But that was what he wanted, or feared, at any rate expected. To be shown that he was a monster, this situation an elaborate deception intended to end in his destruction at her hands.

So she forced herself to remain still, and not just still, but loose, even as he bore down, serrated teeth cutting her flesh. Were he really in mindless kill mode, she knew, he'd tear at her with all the decision and thrust of a hungry lion, and they'd be bouncing each other off the walls now, balls-out.

The char of his singed skin filled her nostrils.

"Do it if you want to," she said. "Satisfy your curiosity. I trust you."

She could feel him thinking, parsing this. Her torn skin pulsed. "Maybe you'd say that." His voice muffled against her neck. Pressing in a little deeper, her whole left side responding to the pressure, tingling and stinging. She thought she could feel the individual pools of blood welling up around each fang—she could certainly see them in her mind's eye. Forced herself to take a deep breath, counteracting adrenaline by will.

"I trust you, Will. Trust me."

Another snarl, a sharper pain that freed her. Blue eyes in a pale face knit with remorse, swam before her. She filled her emptied lungs.

"It's okay," she said, before he could launch into any recriminations. "I'm impressed you held it together this long. This was bound to happen." Palm clapped to neck, but the bleeding wasn't bad, he'd been well clear of the artery.

He shook his head. "Wanted to. Still want to. S'what I am."

"It isn't all you are."

"How do you know!"

She moved past him, on her way to the bathroom, hoping he'd follow. She wanted him out of that study.

He did, still arguing, but with with less confidence as the rage and violence drained out. Just tears remaining, streaming down his blanched cheeks.

"Don't want to be this thing,. But there's Spike—William The Bloody—in all those books."

"Those books are old news. You are not a thing." Even though I used to call you one, and treat you like one. "Help me clean this, okay?"
He resisted looking at the wound he'd made, but when she tugged at him, he grew pensive, concentrated. Dabbed the torn skin with a hot washcloth, carefully fitted it with a large bandaid.

"It's not so bad," she assured him. "What got you going on this?"

He was more sheepish now than anything else. "Spooked me, bein' left on my own. My head ached."

"Will." She took his face in her hands, tip-toed to bring her face level with his. How weird was this, so weird, but what else could she do but treat him tenderly? "Listen, this is not some mind-game experiment. We are so not enemies. The stuff in those books, yes, it's about you," And probably understates the case, "but it was a long time ago. When you get your memory back, you'll know it. You're never going to be that way again. You are a hero, and a champion. A good man."

"Hero." He laughed dully. "Hero. Quite a word."

"It happens to be true."

"Goin' doo-lally. Scare myself."

"You're fine."

He drew away from her touch; slowly enough so the withdrawal didn't feel brusque, but he didn't seem to want her too close now. He gave her an oblique look out of glistening, red-edged eyes. "Why didn't you slay me when I bit you?"

"You call that a bite? Please. I've had hickies that were worse. C'mon, let's have a beer before bed."

"Bed. That's what I want." His eyes had gone unfocused; between one sentence and the next, he was nearly asleep, as if he'd been injected with some powerful soporific. Wandering out of the bathroom, he made it as far as the bottom of the stairs, where she had to catch him as he wobbled, and helped him climb. By time he pitched forward onto the bed, he was already asleep.

The room was absolutely silent, and gloomy with the drapes drawn. After all this, Buffy couldn't imagine ever sleeping again. Spike was out. Un-breathing, of course—she'd been used to that—but absolutely silent and unmoving too. She thought again of the 'Bot, how you could shut it off, and it would wait, eyes half-shuttered, if you caught it mid-blink, in whatever stance it was in when you hit the switch.

She wandered around the room, rustling things, opening closet doors, until she realized what she was doing—hoping Spike would just wake up and be absolutely normal again. Finally she just went to him, laid a hand on his shoulder, gave him a little shake. For a predator like him, that ought to be enough to have him fully awake in a flash.

But there was nothing.

It was like he'd checked out.

Her phone rang. She let it sing in her pocket for a few cycles, hoping this would disturb him, then grabbed it out.

"Willow?"
"Don't be sore at me for just showing up, but I'm on the doorstep, can you let me in?"

"My doorstep?" Buffy took the stairs two at a time. Through one of the narrow panes that outlined the house's front door, Willow smiled and waggled her fingers.

"I needed you to go to L.A."

"Hello to you too. And I'll go. In a little while." They were still talking into the phones. Buffy hesitated, fingers on the lock. Willow's waiting outside was a polite gesture; she could've just as easily teleported herself right into the bedroom. The house had some glamours on it but of course it was Willow's team that had set them.

"Come on in. Be quiet please, Spike is asleep."

"Thanks. And hey, I don't even expect to see Spike. I just wanted to get some more info from you, and it's easier in person. I thought you'd be glad I got here sooner than I promised."

"I am glad. Thanks, Will." Buffy led the way into the study.

Willow's gaze lit immediately on the books scattered across the big desk. "You've been researching? Find anything?"

"No and no. This was—Spike trying to find out who he is. It wasn't pretty."

"I know that whatever's wrong with him, he's still got his soul. He was very upset."

"Well, that's good ...." Willow turned a few pages. "Huh. I would've said I could never feature Spike in a hat, but he's more in one than out of one. And oooh look, a necktie."

Buffy sidled closer to peer over her shoulder. "Huh. I think pre-soul Spike would've forfeited a lot of kittens to keep me from seeing him dressed up like that."

He looks kinda snazzy, actually. Those lapels, though. I doubt they'll ever make 'em that wide again." Willow turned her back on the books. "So how's it going?"

She was all best-friendy, not the slightest hint of innuendo or judgment in her question, or expression. Still, Buffy hesitated over what to say, and how much.

Stick to the facts.

"There's a hot-spot in that alley. When Spike gets anywhere near it, he wigs out. He was wigged out when I first got to him—the slayers had him locked in a cage, which, okay, he was trying to kill them all, so I guess I'm glad they didn't just slay out. He calmed down for me, though."

"So on some level he knew you?"

"I don't really think so." You jumble me up, Buffy Summers. "He was still wild when I took him away from Slayer Central, and then he led me to the alley. I don't know if he remembered it, or if something there pulled him, but he had a kind of melt-down, with convulsions. After that, he got lucid. Talking again, calm, oriented, at least as much as you can be without any kind of memory. But it was like he was born in that moment—he didn't know how we'd gotten there, or that he'd been locked up. He was meeting me for the first time."

"Huh." Willow jotted notes into her PDA. "Did he say anything at all that was pertinent?"
"Yeah. When we were there the first time, he said something about 'went in and left me'. He said that before he came to and was lucid. And then the second time we were there, he said 'can't look in there'."

Willow's eyebrow shot up. "Which fits my working theory, that there was a portal open in that alley."

"A portal? That Angel and his people went through? Do you think they're still alive?"

"Right now it's just my hypothesis."

"Spike was fighting with them, why would he get left behind?"

Willow shrugged. "Who knows? Could be anything. He wasn't close enough. Or he was unworthy. Or the others were unworthy. Or ... the portal could have nothing to do with what happened to Angel, and Angel might just be dust. Sorry, Buffy."

"I guess there's no way to really know that for certain."

"Unless we find him alive, no, there really isn't. That's how it works with vampires."

"As I well know."

They were quiet for a couple of moments. Buffy listened out for any sounds from above, but the house was silent.

"Hey," Willow said. "Got any coffee?"

Buffy made coffee, but didn't want to drink coffee, because drinking coffee with her best friend was supposed to be when you got all confidential and told things, and she didn't want to tell Willow that she was having a bizarre love affair with amnesia!Spike. Willow might pretend to be sympathetic and interested, but Willow would judge.

Willow was already asking leading questions. "Is it strange, being with Spike again?"

"What do you think?"

When Willow pouted, Buffy apologized. "Things are a little tense here."

"I can't help but notice that you have a band-aid on your neck."

She'd actually managed to forget the bite—that was what an unexpected distraction could do. It started to throb again when Willow pointed at it.

"I tripped on a barbecue fork."

"I have no doubts about your ability to handle this," Willow said. "But I hope you're not refusing help just because—"

"I don't need help. The last thing I need here is some junior slayer"—they were all junior slayers to her—"who doesn't know him and thinks this is a case."

"No no, I'm just saying," Willow said. "Your sister knows him. Xander. Even Andrew, maybe?"

"If Andrew showed up here, I'd have to kill him."
"Okay, okay."

"We're fine. Spike's very sweet, actually. He's really a very gentle soul."

"Who just happened to run at you with the barbecue fork."

"You're assuming I didn't hurt myself patrolling."

"Or hey—maybe you cut yourself shaving. What do I know?"

At that, they both laughed, and Willow poured coffee into Buffy's empty cup, and pushed it across the counter to her. "I'd better get going, I want to see the alley in daylight and then at night. But listen... no one's gonna hassle you for being friends again with Spike. Okay?"

"Friends again? Will that be before or after our nap and cookies?"

"Just sayin'."

"Giles will never trust him."

"Giles isn't the boss of us." Willow put her mug in the sink, and stowed her PDA. "Give me a hug. I'll let you know what I can figure out."

His thrashing woke her from a light dreamless sleep. He shot up to a sitting position with a strangled growl, and fumbled at the lamp.

"Will?"

"Ah, you're there." Blinking and yawning, he scrubbed at his face with the heels of his hands.

"I've been here for a while." After Willow left, she'd lain down beside him, careful to give him plenty of space, though she was still spooked, and sure she'd never drift off while her neck throbbed and her thoughts bobbed. It was all she could do to resist a fierce temptation to go back to the study and repeat his research. How many pictures, how much information about Spike, was contained in those books?

"What's this?" He pointed at the band-aid on her throat.

"Don't you know?" Instant dismay, which she repressed.

He tugged it off, squinting to look. "Somethin' bit you." He frowned. "When did that happen?"

Shit. "A few hours ago." She took the dirty band-aid from him, folded its sticky wings in over the pad, and tossed it into the trash can beside the nightstand. "It doesn't hurt any more."

He sniffed. "Somethin' got a taste of you."

"Very little."

"You slay it?"

"Will, what were we doing earlier? Before we came up here to sleep?"

"We... you went to do the shoppin'. " 
"That's right."

"Guess you ran into some vampires."

"Not exactly. While I was out, what did you do?"

His hands balled into fists. He drummed them on his thighs, his face darkening. "Why d'you want to know?" His brows knit, eyes filling with fury. Buffy noticed that when he was angry, the scar on his brow pinkened. "I've lost time again, that's why we're playin' twenty questions?" He focused on her again, and as quickly, the anger gave way to confusion. "Christ. Attacked you. Hurt you."

"You really don't remember?"

He shrugged off her gentling hand, scooted out of her reach, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "Christ. Christ." Knuckles drumming his temples. "Went off on you. Bit you. Can't remember it. This's no good. S'no good for you to be alone with me. Ought to lock me up. No good no good no good." Each repetition was more of a snarl.

"Will, don't get worked up. Sssh, sssh. It's okay." Slipping out of bed, she came around to face him. This was like the night in the old lady's house, when he'd brought her to see all the victims he'd turned. Been forced to turn, with no memory of it afterwards. He'd begged her then to finish him off, and she'd refused. "Listen to me. You didn't hurt me, and you won't hurt me." She saw him again in her mind's eye, caged in the Council's cinder-block jail in the city. If she hadn't gone ... if Faith hadn't summoned her ... he'd be dust now, staked by some impatient slayer who saw no reason to try to help some random insane vampire.

She couldn't believe she'd hesitated to make the trip. "I will always help you. No matter what, you're safe with me."

"You're not safe."

"No, I am. You took a little nip, that's all. You wanted to, and I let you, and then you decided that was enough and you let me go." That was a more or less accurate depiction of what had happened, right? "That's all, we didn't even fight." She held up her arms. "See? No bruises. Neither of us so much as threw a punch."

Spike stared at her like a stricken child, then broke into ragged sobs. When she reached out to touch his tear-wet cheek, he shied, batted at her hand as if it was a fly buzzing at him.

"What did I do? Why'd I bite you? Can't fuckin' remember—!"

Had this not been so harrowing, she could've laughed. You with no memories at all, and me so full of them, everything you say and do brings up a whole multiplex!

"Well ... while I was out, you got into the study, you looked yourself up in the books. There's a lot of stuff in those old books about Spike when he was bad. Before he—you—changed, before you got his soul. Stuff which raised questions."

"Went for your throat."

"Not exactly." She described again, choosing her words carefully for neutrality, what had happened in the study. As she talked, he stared into his lap. His sores wrenched her. She longed to gather him into her arms, but he still wouldn't permit her touch.

"When's the help comin'? Need someone else here."
"I didn't call for help. We realized we wanted to be alone together, remember? To enjoy each other's company?"

"You can't still want that."

"Why not?"

He wouldn't look at her.

"I don't want to share you with anybody else right now. I just want to be alone with my lover."

That got his attention. "Lovers? That what we are?"

When their eyes connected, a frisson went through her, a tremble down to her toes. Again she tried to take his hand.

He moved his hand clear of hers, then gestured at her, eyes widening. "Sat on my lap, you did. Watched you eat a waffle. Such kisses. And down on the beach ...."

"Exactly."

"Seems a bit mysterious though, you goin' for a fellow doesn't remember where he was last week. Or a few hours ago."

How like Spike, to always put his finger on her sorest place! "You forget that I know you. For years. When all your memories come back—" This resonated in her head like her mother's long-ago warnings Just wait 'til your father gets home—!

His gaze went flinty. "So ... you lied to me t'other day, when you said there was never anythin' between us before. Or are you lyin' to me now? Tryin' to make me—or you—feel better 'bout getting a pash on for Mr Blank?"

"There were ... feelings, in the past. But the way things were, nothing ever came of them."

Whose feelin's? Mine? Evil fangy thing in love with you? Must've been right unpleasant. Like me better now I'm just a body without a mind, do you?"

"No!"

"Sittin' on my lap, snogging me, how's that jibe with you staving me off couple days ago on the grounds that Spike wouldn't want me to fuck you with his cock?"

This was only the kind of thing Spike might say at any moment of any day or night, so why did it cut her so?

"Nah, must've been that you were in heat for him, and he wanted nothin' to do with it. That makes more sense."

"Okay! You win! I'll leave you alone as soon as I can pass you off to someone else!"

Only when she'd slammed the bathroom door did she realize she should've left the room, not bolted in here. The white fixtures—the whole bathroom was white white white—seemed to stare at her, her agitation and shame bouncing off those stark surfaces, blasting back at her. In the mirror, she was all eyes, and grey circles around them. She stared at herself in horror. He was right. She was pretending to help him but really all she was doing was using him to play out this fantasy of a love affair she could never really have. It was atrocious.
Behind her, the door flew open.

"Buffy—"

She screamed.

Her cry bounced off the porcelain fixtures, the white tile walls, the sheets of mirror, and shot up her spine, an existential goosing that dragged out another, wilder scream. Sensation coursed through her with the force of a spell taking hold—the whole thing flashing back nearly as vivid as on the night itself. Not pausing to register anything in Spike's look or voice or stance except that he stood between her and escape, Buffy flew at him feet first, knocking him down in a heap, scrambling over the writhing bony tangle of him to get away.

He shouted her name, she ignored him. He grabbed her leg; she kicked him in the face, clambered up, and fled.

Outside, the sun was low, but its rays still stretched, mellow and orange, across the patio. Buffy flung herself out through the sliding glass door and stopped, breathing hard, the glare in her face.

"Oh God. Oh God." Her heart walloped in her chest, missing beats. Spots burst in her line of sight. She sank into a chair. "Shit. Shit."

Nothing like this had happened to her before. Had she developed the habit of reacting like this to the merest flash of threat—with blind frantic horror-flick panic—she'd have been quite permanently killed years ago. This was so not like her.

Now that she was free of the confining room, his blocking presence, panting in the warm slant of sunset, she realized that Spike had almost certainly intended nothing worse in coming after her than to continue their argument.

He might even have been about to backpedal.

Of course he could know nothing of their earlier encounter in that long-destroyed upstairs bathroom in her defunct town.

She'd kicked him in the face just now for nothing. Really nothing, because after all, wasn't what he'd so crudely accused her of so close to the truth as to make no difference? He had every right to be suspicious of her, to call her on what she had and had not told him.

She couldn't do this. It wasn't working.

She sat for more than half an hour, wrapped up in her woe, the encroaching sense that she was making a hash of this because a hash was all it could ever be. The sky pinkened in the west, the blue going deeper and deeper. Venus appeared. The water in the pool rippled in the breeze, which stirred her hair around her shoulders. Only when it was full dark, did she rise. Time to go inside and try to fix this. She didn't know how. Probably it wasn't fixable. Probably she should do what she'd just suggested, call in someone else to take this over, and head back to Scotland.

Her nape tingled. Instinct made her turn, look up.

He stood in the bedroom window, peering down through the parted drapes. His face a white blur in the dark, blotted with a dark stain, features indistinguishable.
Feeling immeasureably foolish and sad, she lifted a hand, made a feeble wave.

Spike waved back, or at least, she thought she saw his hand near the glass, before he withdrew.

We're going to freak each other to death, she thought. That's how this'll end. Mutually assured freak-a-struction.

Behind her, a light flared, throwing a yellow parallelogram out on the terrace, contiguous with the kitchen, a bright stage-set behind the glass doors. Spike was there, moving around slowly, not glancing out to where she stood only some ten feet away on the other side. He opened the refrigerator, some cabinets, went to the stove.

Buffy watched, foggy and dull, as he carried out certain motions that only gradually resolved for her into the understanding that he was cooking eggs, brewing coffee. Putting bread in to toast. She'd never seen him fix a meal, at first it struck her mainly as odd, as though she was watching someone like Prince Charles, who never had to work, setting out to do the same with no more than a vague sense that it couldn't be all that difficult if servants did it all the time. She saw smoke rise from the frying pan, egg shells slide down the outside of the garbage can.

The wind picked up, and she hugged herself, not moving, watching this tableau.

When at last he approached the glass, her every impulse was to retreat into the darkness.

Eyes trained towards her knees, he muttered, "Got your supper."

With her kick she'd opened a cut across his cheek and the bridge of his nose. The orbit of one eye was purpling and puffy. "S'cold out here for you, innit?"

"You didn't have to do this. You should have—" Should have waited, in state, for me to crawl in to you and tell you how sorry I am.

He misconstrued her, but without further resentment. "Yeah, well, tired of sittin'. Wanted somethin' to do. Come in now."

He went back to the stove, slipped the eggs, their edges too brown, off onto a plate, snagged the hot toast out.

"Spike, this was all a mistake."

"Right you are."

"No, I mean—my mis— No. I'm trying to say, a misunderstanding. You were right to question me before, I shouldn't have gotten angry and stomped off on you, and then—"

"An' then you kicked me in my face, which I get a feelin' is only your habit of long usage."

She repressed a wince. What a gift he had, for divining essential truths even out of his darkness.

"I once had a very bad experience with a furious man in a very tight space. When you came into the bathroom I had a flashback. Big big over-reaction. Not about you. Not about anything that we're struggling with here. Please forgive me." She went to him, where he stood by the table, her plate in hand. He was sullen, no surprise, the cut and bruising making a sort of mask across his features.

He still didn't need to know, while he was devoid of context, about the attempted rape.
Now he looked up, carefully examining what she hoped was her own expression of earnest, entreaty. He frowned. "Not about me."

"No." Not a lie, she told herself, because he hasn't been that Spike in a long time. That Spike isn't here. "But if you still want me to go, I'll go. Willow can probably come stay with you until I can recruit someone else, and I will make sure the Council people understand who you are, the care and respect and honor you deserve."

"Don't want—"

"You don't have to say what you think I want to hear. Really, if—"

"Don't bloody want you to go!" He let the plate, which he'd been holding all this time, drop onto the table; it clattered, the eggs slopping halfway over the side, one piece of bacon flipping over to land in the empty fruitbowl.

They were both frozen, his shout echoing against the marble surfaces.

More quietly, he said, "Pet, I've got such a mouth on me. Was my fault."

"No no no."

She reached up, sketched her fingertips over the raw cut, the swollen flesh. Spike's eyes closed; he endured her touch. "Ought to put it to better use, than bitin' you an' sayin' ugly things. I remembered what it was, my poor mind's all shot full of leaks. I spewed a lot of bollocks at you when you came back from your shoppin', an' attacked you, an' you talked me down an' put me to bed like sweet girl you are."

"Spike—I mean, Will—"

"Call me Spike if you like it better. Can't get away from it, it's in the books. It's what I am."

This startled her. He stepped back, out of her reach. "Silly game, to play at bein' some new fellow."

"'Spect that's so," he said, again misconstruing. His voice dropped to a rasp. "though how you can know it an' go on helpin' me, can't bloody fathom. Even so, couldn't bear it if you were to go."

"I don't want to go. Don't you know yet that I've fallen in love with you—so hard—Spike, look at me—so hard, that if you don't forgive me and hold me, I ... I don't know what I'll do. She knew she must be scarlet, so hot were her cheeks.

He blinked, and for one terrible moment she thought he was going to reject her.

Then he opened his arms to her at last, and she swarmed into them. "Spike—Spike—oh please—"

He swung her to the table so she didn't have to stand on tip-toe to reach for his mouth; his own now against her lips, speaking wordless reconciliation that resonated through her in long sighing tremors.

Kissing wasn't enough, to convey her relief, her joy—she grappled him close, legs slung around his hips. She dropped backwards onto the table top, dragging him with her, feasting on his mouth.

Kissing wasn't enough, and yet she'd never felt more eloquent, kissing, she read whole paragraphs in his lips and tongue on hers, as the deaf-blind girl comprehend signs pressed into the palm of the hand.
When at last she dragged her mouth free to suck in air, laughter spangled out. She hid her face against his neck. "Say it, say it, say it."

"What? That I love you? Don't you know it?"

"That you forgive me. Spike, please. Tell me."

He regarded her, a vague fond smile possessing his mouth, hands cradling her head. A thorough examination, his blue gaze heating her, making her squirm inside. "You're afraid I won't forgive you this very thing we're doin' now, when I'm myself again. An' what can I say to that? Can't promise you I'll love you when it all comes back to me. P'raps I'll punish you every cruel way there is when I remember all. P'raps I'll even have a bit of right on my side. You seem to think so."

Though his words sent tendrils of dread through her, it made her feel simultaneously brave, bucked up, to bear his weight in the saddle of her body, to have his face so close to hers it filled her line of sight.

"I made the wrong choice once, I'm not going to do it again. I convinced myself I was being prudent, but it wasn't prudence, it wasn't pragmatism. It was fear. It was taking the easier path."

"All this mean you're gonna give yourself to me now?"

A deep thrill shivered through her. "It does."

He rose; she slid off the table with as much grace as she could muster. Standing upright was dizzying.

Spike plucked a strip of bacon off her sleeve. "Don't you want your supper first?"

She tossed the bacon towards the sink with one hand as she fisted his shirt-front with the other. "Thought you were serious."

"As the grim reaper, pet."

In her pocket, Buffy's phone vibrated and purred.

"Turn that off," Spike said. He was waltzing her delicately backwards towards the stairs, his mouth buried in her neck, sending electric pulses of pleasure up and down her body's meridians.

"Incoming text."

"Can wait."

She pulled it out. "It might be important. Slayer stuff." Isn't this what I always do? Why I'm still all alone? she thought. Then, No. C'mon, let's not overdo the signs and portents. "It's from Willow, it's probably about you."

The message read: Call me. I've got information re: alley.

Before she could press the speed-dial, Spike took the phone from her hand. "Later. All's I want to know about me right now is how good I'll feel gettin' naked with you."

I could tell you that already. Even as she knew she shouldn't, Buffy found herself arguing. "Don't you want to know? She might have found the key to what happened to you." Without waiting for his
reply, she put the call through. Willow answered immediately. "You have news?" Buffy didn't know what she hoped the news would be. Spike detached from her and wandered off, his hands jammed in his pockets. Dumb, Buffy. Dumb. Even if it was positive news, it could've waited a couple of hours. Or all night. But Willow was already speaking into her ear.

"Why didn't you tell me that alley was behind Angel's old hotel?" Her voice sounded hollow, half-breathless, like she'd been running. "Angel had a hotel? I didn't know Angel had a hotel."

"That was the Hyperion. He lived there for—well, I guess you two were out of touch. But I've been there, I met all his people. I didn't realize until I followed your directions to the place that the big battle culminated behind the Hyperion."

"Is that important?"

"The magical residue in that alley ... in the whole structure—is huge and beyond ugly. I lost what's got to be my last four or five lunches, just going back there."

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah, yeah." She didn't sound so sure. "But Buffy, it's worlds upon worlds of badness, back there."

"Meaning what?" Spike had disappeared into the kitchen. Buffy followed. He stood at the open refrigerator door, chugging down a bottle of beer.

"I got some trace readings on inter-dimensional conjunctions that opened there. Opened in the not-what-you-want way, like when ... when you jumped off the tower back in Sunnydale, because universes were bleeding together. Only, worse."

"Worse, how worse?"

Spike glanced around then, the bottle at his lips. Buffy thought he'd drift over and ask to hear what Willow was saying, but there was no curiosity in his gaze.

Which was kind of weird.

"The end of the world happened in that alley."

"Uh ... Will, the world didn't end."

"Well, not ours. For which we can be thankful. But you know this isn't the only world there is. Or, now, was."

"This all sounds really dramatic, yet vague. What does it have to do with what happened to Spike? And Angel?"

"There's a lot of physics to this, do you want me to explain the physics?"

"That would be a no. Just—is there any chance Angel and his people might be somewhere else? Can we get them back home?"

"If he wasn't dusted in any normal way in the battle, getting pulled into any of those converging dimensions ... no vampire or human could survive, or if they did, they wouldn't be ...who they were.
What they were." Willow paused. "I'm really sorry."

Move on, move on, next question. "What's the prognosis for Spike's memory?"

"These other dimensions, the physical laws there, they're different. If Spike stared into something his brain couldn't handle, that could explain the psychosis, and the forgetting. Right now, that's my best guess for what happened to him."

"Will it wear off?"

"It might. I'd have to see him, to assess. Usually the longer someone has amnesia, the less likely they are to snap out of it, but with a vampire, who knows? There are probably things I can try that would help him. As far as this alley goes, the safest thing is to glamour it over so no one wanders in here until the effects dissipate. That should take another couple of months."

"Months? Geez."

"It's pretty toxic. You didn't feel anything odd yourself when you were there?"

"No. Guess my hide's pretty thick by now."

"Guess so. How're things there?"

"Good. We're good."

"I think you should two should come back to the castle. You shouldn't be all alone. Dawn misses you. And maybe working with the other slayers would help Spike. Work is good for all of us, right?"

"Yes. Well, maybe. I'll think about it."

Spike was chugging a second bottle of beer, head tipped back, his adams apple bobbing.

"Willow, I've got to go now. Thanks for coming out here, thanks for everything."

"I'm sure I could do more, there are lots of memory spells, if—"

"I'll ask him. We'll talk."

Ending the call, Buffy switched off the phone, even as she knew it was too late. She might as well make another seventeen calls.

"So, Willow said—"

"Heard what she said."

"Demon hearing, right." She went to him. "You've had the fridge door open all this time, you're letting the cold air out." She started to shut it; he caught the edge, and reached around her for another bottle.

"Three in a row? Really?"

"What, you're my Mum now? Fancy a drink." Setting the second empty on the counter, he opened the fresh bottle, and giving her a wide berth, moved out of the kitchen, across the wide white foyer, to the study door. She followed at a distance, feeling caked up inside, full of recriminations. Stupid stupid stupid Buffy. She should've been upstairs in bed with him right now. Full of joy. The echo of his kisses still shimmered through her.
Inside the study, she caught his arm. "Sweetheart. Forgetting something?" The words came out wobbly. She'd never called him by any endearment before—had never, she realized with a lurching sensation of falsehood, called any of her men anything but their names. Her smile felt forced. When she went on tiptoe to brush her lips against his jaw, her toes ached.

"Forgetting something? That your idea of a joke?" He pushed on to the big desk where the books he'd pulled down were still scattered. "Ever read these yourself? Suppose you have. Know your enemy an' all that."

"Actually, no. I ... I'm more of a People magazine-type reader, myself. Spike. I don't think there's anything in those books that's going to be any use to you. Spike, I'm sorry I took the call."

"Know you are, pet." He didn't sound angry, more preoccupied. "You written up in these books?"

"Me? I don't ... I don't think so. Not these, anyhow." For which small favor, much thanks.

He turned to her then, his hand moving towards her, and she thought he was going to caress her, to pull her close. But his fingers only lifted the hair from her neck, thumb tracing the raised marks of old wounds. "Got scars. Been bitten before. By me?"

"No."

"Told me you've been dead. Was it a vampire that killed you?"

"The first time, yes, but not with his bite. Somehow he was too haughty to just drain me, which was my good luck, I guess. He left me face down in a pool of water, but my friends revived me. The second time had nothing to do with vampires."

"So I never had my fangs in you before?"

"No."

"But I've tried."

"You tried. A lot. For a while."

"Wanted to kill you. Turn you?"

"I don't know. I don't think you were ever much of a turner."

"In dreams begin responsibilities."

"Huh?"


"I don't know." This whole conversation was giving her the heebie-jeebies.

"Don't you? Thought you knew me well."

"I do." And I don't. "And I ... don't. We ... we didn't have a lot of conversations. We were both more about deeds."

"Strong silent types, eh?" An eyebrow raised. "Thing that's botherin' me ... you were mighty cool when I backed you up an' sank my fangs in your throat in here earlier. But later I come in on you in the loo, you shriek an' panic like a child." He fingered his swollen eye. "Child that well knows how
to put the boot in."

Never should have given him time to think.

"I told you, I had this bad experience. Ever since, I guess I've got this thing about getting barricaded into small rooms. I should work on it. It's a vulnerability I don't need."

Taking a swallow of beer, edging back to find a chair, Spike cocked his head. "Tell me about it. When did it happen? Was it a loo, or some other little room? Was that where you died the second time?"

She was standing now before him, like a pupil about to recite to a tutor. With the wall of books behind him, there was something kind of magisterial about Spike, even in his jeans and tee-shirt, even with a beer in his hand.

"I don't really want to talk about it now." She sidled over to another chair—not the power chair, which he'd taken, but a straight wooden one. Sitting on it didn't make her feel any better. "Do we have to do this now? I know I shouldn't have taken that call, but we could get the mood back if we —"

"You're the lady an' the tiger, you are." He turned the bottle in his hands. "Don't know where I am with you. Know what I feel, an' what I want ... but wonder if that's enough."

A part of her could actually imagine crawling to him, begging him from the floor not to talk this way.

"What would it take to ease your mind?"

He regarded her, not answering, his expression mildly neutral. Buffy forced herself to sit absolutely still, not to betray herself.

When he didn't immediately answer, she said, "I'm willing to try whatever would help. We could take a little time out. Or—we could go downstairs to the training area and spar. Or—" She paused. The idea astonished her, so unlike her, yet so full and strong. Confident. "Or, you could—"

Spike leaned forward. "Could?"

She touched her neck. "If it would reassure you. Please you. You could feed from me."

His eyes went wide. He sat back. The beer bottle clacked against the chair arm. "What makes you think of that? Was it what I used to dog you for? Or was it what you secretly wanted? From me? Or any random vamp?"

"No. No to both of those questions. But—"

He was at her side, kneeling to look at her straight on. "But you'd rather have me at your throat, than reveal what you're keeping from me."

Buffy opened her mouth, but could make no sound. The words reverberated in her head. Not quite resolving into an accusation, because there was no bitterness in his tone. Only a certain understanding, calm comprehension of the sum of this, and that. And then to her astonishment, he leaned in close to her, his look soft and once more fond. "Strange strange girl," he whispered. "Praps you're right. Praps it's better for us both that I don't know. Praps it's better we two try an' be happy, rather than wise, yeah?"
In place of the rebuke she was braced for, the harsh peppering of questions and accusations she’d been sure would follow, came this tender excusal, followed by his mouth on hers. It was like a benediction. As was his cool comforting hand on the back of her neck, his forehead resting against hers, a gesture she hadn’t recognized until now as an old intimacy of theirs she profoundly missed. His faint breath smelled not unpleasantly beery. She circled him in her arms with the sharp satisfaction of the jerk when the parachute opens overhead.

Then he was gathering her up, like a fireman or a bridegroom, carrying her out of the study. Buffy had her eyes closed tight, the better to feel the solidity of his grip, the smooth easy speed with which he bore her up the stairs. She bounced when he dropped her on the mattress, and gasped when he tore her jeans open like they were made of paper, the rending cloth stinging her thighs, pulling them apart. He buried his face there, his wet mouth against the already-wet strip of silk he left in place, swarming kisses through it.

"Knew your quim would taste of heaven," he muttered, taking deep snuffing breaths of her, nose buried deep, that muscular tongue working at her through the soaked silk. Excitement skyrocketed from zero, so fast and deep and intense she couldn't control herself, neither her twisting quaking body, nor her keening crying voice. His fingers slipped inside her, instantly slick, crooking and stroking so she bucked up against his open mouth. Hard and soaking and violent as a sudden windstorm, the climax overtook her, overlapping, disorganized, almost unbearable. Her voice cutting in her ears like the wail of an animal, too harsh, irrepressible. Then the long long shuddering, like a fall that never ended, every sinew vibrating, scooping air in through her open mouth. And Spike still there, nose and mouth buried in the silk, drenched, tracing her so slowly now as she wound down from the peak, sipping and inhaling her like she was the lightest heaviest wine.

Her hands were tangled in the bedclothes, a tight fistful on either side. She spidered them out, feeling for him. He caught one in one of his (the other still resting inside her, a fullness that she saluted with a squeeze). Spike groaned into her pussy.

"Luscious cunt. Shall fuck it in a bit."


"You flatter a fellow, how you thrash an' spend."

It's how I am, with you.

"You were ready to have your cunny seen to," he said. He lifted his head now, so she could see his face between the two tips of her breasts, across the expanse of her belly. His brows, his lashes, webbed with her spunk, nose and lips and cheeks glistening. Slowly he drew his fingers free, spread them out across her mons. Her clit still throbbed; he gave it a soft flicking with his thumb through the silk, so saturated now that it might as well have been part of her skin. She jerked, rocking up. "This's part of your powers too, I see. Slayer fight, an' slayer appetite."

He climbed up on the bed then, coming up over her, thumb still teasing her hard clit as he neared her face. She grabbed him by the nape in both hands, greedy sloppy kisses around the clock of his face until he brought his mouth to hers, connecting like two magnets clamping. His thumb worked her harder now, and he let her feel the bulk of his erection, still caught—it must be painfully—behind his fly. She reached to free it. Spike tumbled slowly over, let her open his jeans, skin eager hands under the hem of his teeshirt. He pulled her top off next, leaning up to press moist open-mouthed kisses on the nipples that showed dark through the thin silk of her bra. Even as he did so, she reached for his cock, manoeuvering as he held her off with a teasing grunt, then letting her grasp it.

"Let's see you give him a suck."
She didn't need the suggestion—there was nothing else in her mind.

He combed and gathered her hair, slipping it through his fingers, holding it back to admire the sight of her full-mouthed face. He was sitting up, legs akimbo; she came at him from the side, curving in over one outthrust leg, breasts crushed against his thigh. He stroked her back as she stroked up and down with her mouth, her two hands wrapped around his length.

Loving the familiar slick spongy heft of his cockhead in her mouth, the mild peaty taste of his pre-cum. The flood of memory that came with this, not easy. But if she could not tell him things, there was still the obligation to admit to herself, everything. So much she shied away from. She'd used her mouth on his cock, in the past, to distract him, to mock him. Never gave him the pleasure without an overtone, far sharper than what she'd ever put into their fucking or anything else, of her contempt.

She'd never wanted him to think, when she came to him in his crypt, her secret vice, that she remotely thought she belonged on her knees before him, his cock between her lips. That she could possibly like it.

Like holding his ballsac in her hand, kneading it, pushing him down so she could reach it better, kissing him there with wet open deep kisses, running her tongue back across the smooth taut skin at the seam of his body, to goad the pucker of his ass. Like the helpless noises he made as she did all of this, as she jacked him with her strong hand, stake-grip on his thick curved cock. Like kissing the tip with gentle maddening little licks, showing off the sight of her swollen lips taking him in, her red cheeks and shining eyes and all her wild hair falling around her face, brushing his belly and his thighs.

She hadn't wanted to give Spike that ultimate pleasure, in the past. And a year later, when they both knew the end was coming, when she lay in his arms for two consecutive nights, she'd thought of giving it to him then, a raunchy consolation for a Spike who was willingly waiting to die to save the world. She could've done it. But she had not.

To spare, she knew now, herself.

Hands in her hair, he rocked up into her mouth, groaning and babbling, close to the edge.

He would know. If he wasn't certain before, he would know now, when he'd come. That she was too familiar with his body, his rhythms. That they'd done this before.

She hoped her flush of shame was lost in the uprush that hit him right then, a jerk, a guttural cry, and the sudden taste across her tongue of Spike's spunk, somehow both deeply commonplace and miraculous. She hadn't known how much she missed it.

When his hand curved around her face, tipping it up, she let him look at her, though she was sure now he would chide her for her lie.

But he only gathered her up into his lap, and kissed her.

She recalled how he liked things, at least, the first few times before she made it clear that she wouldn't permit him what he liked. After he came, Spike always wanted to cuddle her, to kiss and make smutty, appreciative, inconsequential remarks. To perhaps doze for a few minutes and wake up for another bout.

He used to scold her for her coolness, for jumping up too soon. "Fuckin's not like a drive-through at your bloody Doublemeat Palace. Don't crumple it up an' chuck it soon as you're done."
"Yeah well, take it or leave it," she'd said, and he'd always taken it, until she stopped giving.

Thinking of this, she returned his light kisses. He'd kissed her this way, possessive little nips, in Giles' living room, when they'd had that spell cast on them.

Bizarre to realize that, and not the time under the stairs in the Bronze, was really the first time she'd tasted him.

She'd thought they were going to get married.

She'd been so happy.

"What a lewd little slip of a thing you turn out to be," he whispered, hand exploring her breasts, still clothed in her bra. "What a pretty way you have with my cock."

"You approve?"

"Was supreme." He smiled. "Like havin' your nipples pinched, do you?" She wriggled. "Ah, you do."

"And yours?" She already knew the answer to this. Spike liked it when she twisted, pulled, gnawed, kissed 'my tits' as he called them. She brushed her palm over one now, pretending to be experimental, to see what would happen. He arched, and beneath her thigh, his cock thumped. He'd be hard again in a minute.

"'Spect I'll like everythin' you might care to do. Certainly aim to find out."

"Good," she said. "Because I have some notions."

"Got a notion to get fucked? Because I could have at you whenever you say."

Tumbling backwards, opening her legs, Buffy said, "Yes please."

Before, she used to dread doing it with him face-to-face. Because face-to-face was more intimate. Face-to-face meant he'd ask her to open her eyes, if she was trying to keep them closed. Ask her to look at him. Expect her to kiss. And there had been times when she'd been able to do that, to just force down her revulsion at having Spike in so close, or revel in it. But there were other times when she wanted to be taken and pretend to be still alone, when his face, so full of yearning affection, repulsed her; she'd tell him she came more easily doggy-style, or on their sides, facing away from him. And he'd say, "You come no matter what, you saucy cunt," but he'd mostly do it the way she wanted. Lest she get up and leave if he resisted her.

She'd been so caught up in her own loneliness those months, she'd never considered the depth of his.

Smiling, Spike hovered over her. "Let's have this off." He undid the front hook on her bra, lowered his head to press his mouth to each nipple in turn, to lick at the soft undersides. "Sweet."

His cock, hard and wet again, brushed against her belly. She took it in hand, throwing her other arm around his neck as he came up to kiss her mouth again, slow tongue-tracing smooches.

"I'm so excited," she whispered.

"An' me."

"I can't wait to have you inside me." This felt like lovemaking 101, but it was so far away from anything she'd ever remotely said to him, and so very near to what she simply, burstingly, felt.
He went into her slowly, not lying on top but scissor-fashion, her leg over his hip, which felt somehow more companionable, egalitarian, friendly, than what she'd anticipated. She watched his face as he sank in, noted how his lashes fluttered, his compulsive grin. "Good?"

"You're good," she said. "You're big." Men liked to be told that—Spike had liked to be told that. And it was only the truth.

"Not too much?"

"You couldn't be too much for me."

"That so?"

She'd imagined they'd go at it like crazy this first time—his first time. What was the expression—hammer-and-tongs. But Spike kept it slow, apparently more interested in watching her, kissing her, caressing her hair and face and breasts, stroking her clit to make her jerk and flail.

Gradually she realized it was her first time with him too. First time she wanted to watch him so closely, to explore him this way, with her hands and mouth, to bear down on his cock inside with a languid firm pressure that made him gasp and laugh and roll his head on the pillow.

This was like playing.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd played. Let alone in bed with a man.

"How's that disturbance doing?" she said.

"Feelin' it. Feelin' it particular."

"When there's vampires around, I feel this kind of little zing at the back of my neck. Is that what you feel around me?"

"More'n that."

"Really?" She wondered if he'd felt it with the other slayers, when they had him locked up. If Spike had been aware of this all along, and just never said anything about it?

"When it's just you," she confided, murmuring into his ear through her own smile, "the zing feels ... different. Like that feeling you get right before your sweetheart kisses you, on the nape of the neck."

"Never been kissed there, I don't think." He smiled. "That I can remember."

"When I can reach it, I'll show you how it feels." She ran a hand down his flank. "I'm going to kiss every bit of you. That's going to be my project."

She nudged him then, taking over the fulcrum, picking up the pace of their fucking. "But first I want to see you come. I want you to come inside me. Come hard."

"At your command," he said, and then did.

They walked arm in arm down through the silent closed-up house, naked, feet silent on the thick carpets. In the kitchen, Buffy downed a yogurt, standing up at the refrigerator, scooping it out with her fingers. Spike licked at her mouth, her hand, grimaced. "Dreadful, that stuff is." She drank down two glasses of water. They kept their hands on each other, asses and bellies. She was sticky with
him, skin, hair. But didn't want to wash, not yet.

"You look beautiful like this," Spike said. "All tawny and tossed-about."

"Yeah?" She padded out to the foyer, where a large mirror hung opposite the door—good for checking one's look before going out, and making sure that callers weren't undead. She hadn't looked herself over, full-length and nude, in she couldn't think when. Spike came up behind her, a hand spread over her buttocks, gently goosing.

"Wish I could see myself."

"I've got a camera on my cellphone. Or—wait. I think there's something better." She led him down into the lower level, where the slayer training space was laid out with every possible piece of equipment. Including, what she'd dimly registered pushed into a corner when she'd checked it out earlier—a video camera and monitor. Used to tape the girls and then show them what they were doing wrong or right. She pulled it out. "If I can figure out how this works, you can see yourself on the TV."

She expected him to preen—he'd always had plenty of satisfaction in his appearance. But he approached the monitor, eyes wide, mouth ajar in shock. "This— Good heavens."

"What's the matter?"

He turned his head from side to side, trying to view as many angles as he could. Put his hands to his hair—tufty from their exertions in bed.

"This ... not what I expected. This isn't me."

"What do you mean it isn't you?"

"My hair's ... darkish. Not yellow. And ..." He fingered the scar on his brow, consternation pulling his features down. "I didn't know I looked so ... hard."

"Hard is bad?" His distress seemed to come so out of nowhere.

"Look like a hooligan. Some kind of chancer. Goes with that name, I suppose."

She noticed again the little slip in his personality—the glimpse of who he might have been before he'd thought of being Spike. The man who thought the lights were too bright in the city, who didn't want a strange lady to see him in the bath.

"Do you ... have an image in your mind? That you thought you'd see?"

He frowned at that, as he did every time she tried to probe his absent memory. "Would've said no, but somehow ... know it shouldn't be this. My body seems ... not quite right either." He glanced at her. "An' those clothes I been wearin' ... those are wrong too. Wouldn't dress myself in that rubbishy stuff." He sounded confused now, as if he felt he'd been tricked.

"No? What then?"

"Proper clothes." He turned away from the camera, wandered out of its range.

"We can get you different things. What kind?"

His back was to her. He'd fetched up in front of the wall of weapons—swords, scimitars, throwing stars, staffs, everything. He tipped his head back, taking them in, tiers upon tiers up to the ceiling.
Stepped back, as if he feared they'd come down on him.

She came up behind him, slipped her hand around his arm. "William, what's happening?"

He turned, open mouthed. He looked to be in pain. One hand flew up to touch his brow, to trace the scar.

"I don't know."

"You know where you are, though? Who am I?"

"You—" His lips pursed, as if he was searching for a word. "You—are a lady who—who brought me to—" He looked around then, at the big open room, at the pommel horses and mats and padded suits hanging from hooks, at the weapons and free weights and yoga blocks. Then back at her, taking in, as if for the first time, that they were both naked. "You are a lady," he repeated, his eyes widening in doubt. "I am William. I am William ... Pratt. At least ... is this a dream?"

"Sweetheart, no."

"I have misplaced my spectacles, and yet I see everything so clearly. That must be because I am in a dream."

"No, there's another reason. Are you sure you don't know who I am?"

His expression shaded into a smile, small, knowing, nearly smug. "A dream, yes, in which I am playing at Adam and you are Eve."

She could have cried. "Maybe you should wake up now. Try to wake up, Will."

"It's an allegory," he said. His voice dreamy now, as if to match his supposition. He gestured at their surroundings. "These are signs, yes? There are symbols I do not grasp but I know something."

"Try to wake up."

"And you, you too are an allegory. What day the genial Angel to our sire

Brought her, in naked beauty more adorned,
More lovely than Pandora, whom the Gods

Endowed with all their gifts, and, O! too like

In sad event, when to the unwiser son

Of Japhet brought by Hermes, she ensnared

Mankind with her fair looks, to be avenged

On him who had stole Jove's authentic fire."

"Spike—c'mon. Wake up now. You know me. Buffy. We came down here so you could see yourself, right?"

"It's all strange, but I know the lines, I know what you are to me, and me to you. Listen:
Into their inmost bower
Handed they went; and eased the putting off

Those troublesome disguises which we wear,

Straight side by side were laid; nor turned, I ween,

Adam from his fair spouse, nor Eve the rites

Mysterious of connubial love refused:

Whatever hypocrites austerely talk

Of purity, and place, and innocence,

Defaming as impure what God declares

Pure, and commands to some, leaves free to all.

Our Maker bids increase; who bids abstain

But our destroyer, foe to God and Man?"

"Spike. You're wide awake. We're together. We're naked because we've been making love."

"Symbols! I understand it. It all relates.

Here love his golden shafts employs, here lights
His constant lamp, and waves his purple wings,

Reigns here and revels; not in the bought smile

Of harlots, loveless, joyless, unendeared,

Casual fruition: nor in court amours

Mixed dance, or wanton mask, or midnight ball,

Or serenade, which the starved lover sings

To his proud fair, best quitted with disdain."

"Not symbols. No more poetry, please. C'mere." She drew him back towards the camera. Maybe
seeing himself again would snap him out of this ... fugue thing. "Look. Spike and Buffy.
Remember?"

He couldn't seem to focus on the monitor. Like a dog when you try to get it to look at TV, he looked
everywhere but. When she pointed, he looked at her hand. Then he looked at her, smiling happily,
but without the desired result. "I cannot believe," he said, as if he was remarking on the weather to a
stranger, "that these dreams of mine are a sin."

"No, no sin. But I'd like you to wake up. Please wake up, okay?"

With an air of satisfaction, he said, "I am still innocent."
Oh God.

She hauled back and slapped him.

"I say!" The pain and disbelief in his face almost dissuaded her from trying again.

She delivered the next blow with a closed fist. He went over, sprawling. Lay still, so that she thought
she'd only managed to render him unconscious. Until he sat up slowly, holding his nose.

She hit him again. "C'mon, Spike! I know you're in there! Time to mix it up with the slayer!"

It took two more blows for him to fang out. He came at her with a roar, grabbing her swinging hair
in one fist, managing to twist her arm around her back so her neck was exposed. A kick to his knee
freed her. He stumbled, howling, but recovered quickly, circling her. Slavering.

She wasn't sure she'd ever seen him slaver before.

"Spike? Are you back now?"

The flat amber eyes didn't flash with recognition.

Oh good, Buffy. You've quite possibly just made this about a hundred times worse.

"Spike. It's me, it's Buffy. Talk to me."

Another roar.

Why, she wondered, did vampires roar? It was kind of odd. They weren't lions. So why sound like
lions?

And why hadn't she gotten some clothes back on them both before trying this? What was her rush?

Next thought: this had worked a lot better when it was about getting Angel to bite her so he wouldn't
die.

That was the last coherent thought she managed before the rain of blows started.

Dry as the desert. Her mouth. Nose. Eyes. Couldn't open them. Huge whanging pain in the back of
her head. Body one big ache, that as she came to, resolved into a whole constellation of aches.
Biggest of all, at her throat.

She tried to rise. Nausea gripped her; her head felt at once huge and lighter than air. Rolled, and fell.
Crack. She gagged, forced her gorge down, forced herself to roll again, onto her belly. Tangled in—
something, ropes of seaweed.

Sick. She was going to be sick.

No. No no no I am the slayer and I am not going to barf.

Opened her eyes at last to find herself on the floor, beside the training room sofa she'd just plunged
off of.

The tangle a wool throw rug with fringes.
Steps on the stairs then. She wanted to look up, but it was too hard to move.

"Oh no—what happened down here? Buffy!" Steps hastening across the wood floor, and then something swung in her line of sight, orange. Hands on her shoulders.

"Told you I was dangerous."

Willow said, "Help me lift her up. No, wait. I'll do it, this is gentler."

Nothing touched her, yet suddenly she was borne up off the floor, supported at all points, the rug covering her. She seemed to be floating, sailing. Tried not to turn her head. Failed. Bitter stuff splashing out of her open mouth.

"Ugh!" Willow jumped back. "It's okay, Buffy. I'll clean it up later. Try to hold it together for a minute, I'm moving you upstairs."

She couldn't see them, the way she was facing, just her progress, across the training room, up to the main level. Heard the footsteps, Willow's and Spike's, trailing after her.

Then she was lowered onto the wide deep sofa in the living room, against a pile of cushions. She could see them now, the little bit of magic flash dancing around Willow's fingers, and beyond her, hovering in the distant doorway, Spike. Still wearing his game face.

"I'm going to be—"

A wastebasket appeared, more magic, just in time for her to be sick into it. She fell back.

"You lost a lot of blood," Willow muttered. "You should get a transfusion."

"No hospitals. I just need to rest."

"How many presidents?"

"Shrub. It's 2005. My head hurts. There's only one of you though."

"Good. I guess you'll be all right." Willow gestured behind her. "He'll make you some hot tea."

"Is he all right?"

"He's not the one I'm worried about."

"Will, it wasn't his fault. I provoked him."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because he'd gotten lost again, and I thought getting him to vamp out would make him realize he wasn't ... William Pratt. So I provoked him. It was a stupid stupid thing to do. I should've been more patient."

"Pratt?" Willow started to grin, but cut it off. "He said he was William Pratt?"

"I guess that's his real name? He never seemed to know that before. He regressed, it was weird, and scary, he was declaiming all this poetry at me—"

"Declaiming! No wonder you had to punch him."

"I'm going to be—"

A wastebasket appeared, more magic, just in time for her to be sick into it. She fell back.

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"Declaiming! No wonder you had to punch him."
"Ha ha. Okay, basket—"

The last bit was nothing but bile. Bringing it up left her too dizzy to talk any more.

"Just rest, I'll talk. You're going to want to know why I'm here—Spike called me with your phone. A couple of hours ago. You were unconscious for a while. He said he almost dra— uh, he had a taste."

From the kitchen, she heard the whistle of the kettle.

"I'll get your tea."

"No, Spike. Let Spike."

Willow cast a dubious look over her shoulder. "Just don't move." She padded off into the kitchen.

The ceiling was very white. A lot of things in this very over-designed minimalist house were white. Buffy stared at it, trying to reassemble the whole event. She couldn't recall being bitten. The pain at the back of her head suggested she'd fallen on it hard. Had she already been out when he went for her throat?

And when did he come back to himself? Before he bit her? During? After?

Willow reappeared with a steaming cup.

"Where is he?"

"He ... he doesn't want to disturb you."

Disturb. There's that word again. "Spike!" Her intended shout emerged as a rasp. Willow helped her sit up, put the cup in her hands.

"Just drink this."

"Spike!"

He reappeared then. Again coming no further than the doorway. Too far off. In his clothes, she noticed, down to the boots. Still wearing his fangs. She glanced away.

"What wrong with him?" She tried to whisper this, but it came out, loud and blunt, and made her wince.

"He said he's ... having a little trouble controlling his face."

Buffy wanted to say, Oh go away. Just go away and leave us together and I will kiss him better. I will love him better. I will never ever hit him again and we'll both be better.

"Spike."

"Don't want me near after I savaged you."

"Spike." She stretched out a hand. Wanting to cry, to have a good lose-it-all childish tantrum until he came and held her, held her while she wept it all out against his neck. "I'm sorry."

"Lost the time," he said. "It's no good. Can't trust me." He wouldn't move into the room. She flexed her fingers imploringly, but he wouldn't come to her. Willow gathered her hand down, placed it back around the cup.
"Spike, maybe you can get Buffy's robe, or her clothes or something?"

When he'd gone upstairs, Willow leaned in close. "I think it's time for the two of you to come back to Scotland. We can try to help him, and if there's more trouble like this—you won't be all alone."

"I want to be alone. I know him. No one else knows him or cares."

"Buffy, no one's going to keep you from each other. But he's right, he's dangerous. It's dangerous for you to stay by yourselves." Willow smoothed her hair. "You're white as the proverbial sheet, chica."

"He's my man, Will. You get that, right?"

Willow smiled, and squeezed her hand. "I got that a while back. Maybe even before you did."

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"Spike, what about those clothes?"

He was in tears when she found him. Willow, mindful of other times she'd been in proximity to Spike when he was in distress, kept her distance, ready to hold him off by magical force. Lips grimaced over the exposed fangs, tears rolled down the lumpy cheeks to drip off the incisors.

"She's going to be all right," Willow said. "And she's asking for you. So it's all right."

He raised his head, made a violent dismissive gesture of the hand. "Nearly dead, when I found her. Found her stuck onto my fangs, found my belly full of her life."

"Oh." She'd wondered about the sequence. He'd been vague on the phone, vague when she arrived. "Bad black-out, huh? What's the last thing you remember prior to, uh ..."

"Gettin' stuck into her throat? We'd been in bed."

"Oh. Okay. No need to say any more about that. Spike—maybe if you try to, you know, de-fang yourself? You'd feel better."

"Don't you think I've been bloody trying!"

"Okay, okay! It's just ... Buffy would like you to go to her, but, it would be easier, I think if—"

"Not goin' to her. Girl's not in her right mind. Promised she'd never turn on me."

"She said she hit you because she thought it would help."

He looked at her like she was stupid. "She won't do it, so you'll have to. Make it quick, yeah? Wave your magic little hand an' get it over."

"Wave my—what? Wait a minute. What are we talking about?"

"She thinks I'm retrievable. Said she'd never give up on me. Silly bitch, we can see that's not on. Do it."

"Spike, I'm not going to slay you."

"Know you could do it with a snap of those fingers."
"Yeah, I could. But I won't. Um ... are you feeling like you might have another episode? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Trying to say I'm: No. Damn. Good."

"Look, I can put some magical restraints on you for a little while, if that would make you feel better. But there's no way I'm slaying you, so forget that."

He turned the full fierceness of his demon face on her. "You know it's only thing to do. Why won't you just do it?"

"Because she knows I'd have her head."

Willow turned. "Buffy! I told you to stay put!"

"I wanted Spike. He wouldn't come to me. Could you give us a minute, Willow?"

"Don't you leave us, witch."

"Please," Buffy said. She looked green, holding the rug wrapped around herself like a sarong, leaning in the bedroom doorway. Caked blood on her neck, hair in cavegirl mode.

But still Buffy even so.

"I'll be just outside the door," Willow said. She pulled it almost to, so she couldn't see, but could still perfectly hear, sitting on the floor with her back against the wall, what was going on just a few feet away on the other side.

Hear Buffy shuffle towards him even as he muttered at her to keep her distance, hear how she lost her balance and he leapt to catch her. Hear her one little glad sob and her lips against his skin and her whispered apologies. How she knew she'd made a mistake, how she should never ever have hit him and it was all her fault and how he should be glad really because he'd saved her life, he'd come back to himself in time and he'd saved her and she was fine and they were fine.

Spike growled as she talked, that kind of under-the-breath growling that still gave her the willies even with all the power she now commanded. Willow could picture them—she'd be looking without fear into that distorted face, not letting him turn away from her.

"I'm a time-bomb," he said. "Go off at any moment."

"No—it's only that I provoked you. I don't know what I was thinking. You have to forgive me. I swear I'll never do that again."

"You apologize too much. Bad sign."

"No. No. No. Don't say that."

"Bloody hell. Wasn't you at all really, was it? Was seein' myself in that TV thing."

A silence. Then—"You remember that? Spike, you remember? You said your name was William Pratt. You—"

"It's comin' to me now. Saw myself, only it wasn't what I expected. What I felt like. Did my head in."

"I know. And I was stupid, I should've waited, or called for help, instead I—"
"You're a vampire slayer. Stands to reason, what you did."

"No. I was foolish, but I know better now—"

"You an' me. Tickin' time bomb."

It was surprising at first, this whole turn of events, but really, Willow thought, when you remembered the whole thing with Angel, and then with Riley ... it made a kind of sense. Had a kind of inevitability. Back in Sunnydale, those last weeks in the house, she'd wondered if Buffy and Spike weren't, somehow in the midst of all that crowding and chaos, managing some stolen moments together. At the time the idea had felt slightly obscene, yet still possible. She'd been so intense about him then, intense and also intensely private. And in the year since, her complete lack of reference to him, not so much as an idle remark dropped, even when anyone said something about the old days ... she kept him close, Buffy did. Hidden away close in her heart. That was how she loved.

They were silent then, on the other side of the door. Willow heard it as a stymied silence, frustration, impasse.

Then Spike growled again. Nothing else for a little while, but that growl that was like breathing, and she imagined him, struggling with himself, with his mystery and blankness and love for this girl he thought he'd just met, and wanting to have an end put to it. Then Buffy whispering, and Willow couldn't make out what she said. Until she called out, "All right, Will. We'll go back to HQ. We're ready."

When Willow looked in, they were sitting arm-in-arm, at the foot of the rumpled bed.

Spike wore his human face again, eyelids red and crisp. Buffy was smiling. He looked a little bit, Willow thought, like he was in her custody.

He acted nervous, getting on the Council's jet, buckling in. The comfort of the expansive leather chairs, the liquor drinks in tiny bottles, thick beige carpeting on floor and walls, not really belying the smallness, tightness, of this 8-seat metal tube. Willow assumed he'd never flown, or at least believed he'd never flown, but he said nothing about it. Just let Buffy hold his hand through the taxiing and take-off. Willow, sitting opposite, kept her eyes on her book, pretending not to be watching him. Buffy, still white as a lily, grey rings under her eyes, fingers laced with his, laid her head on his shoulder as if there was absolutely nothing wrong, and went right to sleep.

Spike waited ten minutes, to make sure she was really deep. Willow counted them on her watch. Waiting for him to speak to her. She was ready.

"Tell me the truth, Miss Willow. Who's this girl to me?"

Well, maybe not so ready.

Could it really be right, to tell him things Buffy herself could tell, and had obviously chosen not to?

"It's a long story."

"Understand this is a long trip."

"Spike, listen. I don't think it's at all unlikely that your memory will come back. What happened to you earlier—the regression—it's an excellent sign. Part of the process, of your mind putting itself back together. And if you're willing to let me work with you, I could probably help expedite the
"process."

"With magic."

"There are spells, ancient, very time-tested spells."

"Magic's not a toy. Don't know much but I bloody know that."

He looked and sounded so much like the old Spike, who'd always been suspicious of her, it was kind of spooky. For a second she could believe he'd been shamping the whole time. Then he made a conciliatory gesture. "Sure you're skilled an' all ...."

"Well, it's your choice. I won't force anything on you. My ... my days of doing that are over."

He crooked a brow at her. "You an' me—we're not mates, are we?"

Again she realized how un-ready for this questioning she was. "I'm always positively inclined towards Buffy's friends."

"I just tried to kill her."

"I don't hold you responsible for what happened. Buffy explained it to me. She thought she could jog your memory if you vamped out."

"Think she's daft. Why's she so easy on me?"

"Because what's happening to you isn't your fault. She knows you're not evil. She knows you don't want to hurt her."

"What do you know?"

"Nothing different."

He gave her the sharp eye. Willow forced herself to hold his glance, much as she wanted to look away. The uncanniness of this situation was developing for her, minute by minute, with a deepening appreciation of how strange it must be for Buffy, to be with him, his personality pretty much intact, but everything else gone. The awkwardness was multi-dimensional.

"Tell me what I was."

"You know who you are. You're a vampire. You have a soul. You were an ally of Buffy's, before. A friend."

"Don't think it's that simple. Forget her—tell me 'bout you an' me."

"Uh, there is no you and me."

"Don't mean like that. But I gather you an' I have been around. What's the story there?"

"Well ... you tried to kill me a few times before you got the soul. That was pretty much par for the course."

"Must resent me for it."

"It was a long time ago. And you never really got your mitts on me." Easy to sound brave and nonchalant, now. She still didn't like to think about those times—when he'd held a broken bottle to
her face. When he'd pinned her on her bed and the only thing that saved her was the newly-installed chip. A long time ago, but if she focused on those times, the badness flared up.

She'd always hated being so vulnerable.

"Well, I beg your pardon, for what it's worth."

"We're good, Spike. We were good before you died."

He chuckled. "Before I died. Amusing, hearin' about that, my so-called death. Find it hard to credit. Feels like a bit of a rumor."

"It was a death. You never knew it wasn't going to be permanent."

"Guess I was a lucky bloke."

Beside him, Buffy stirred, sighed. A sweet smile played on her lips as she cuddled in closer against his flank.

Willow said, "I can tell you this—I haven't seen her look so happy in many many years. Despite what happened with the uh ... biting."

"Been waitin' that long, has she, for a fellow like me? Don't suppose there's many amnesiacs about as well-hung as I am. An' I take it she's got a yen for the vampires too. Guess it makes sense, vamps an' slayers bein' all Montague an' Capulet."

"Y'know, I'm not going to dignify that with a serious reply." Willow took out her Blackberry and started typing emails. The Council plane lacked wifi, but they'd go out as soon as they landed, which would be time enough for the others to read them before they arrived at the castle.

Spike shifted slowly in his seat, freeing his hand from Buffy's, replacing it with his arm around her. She sighed again, but didn't wake. He laid his lips against her hair.

"How can I cherish her so much when I barely know her? That's the thing. That's what dogs me."

"Clearly you do," Willow said, pretending not to glance up. "Cherish her. Anyone could see that."

"Knowin' she could kill me with her little finger—that's arousin'. There can't be too much said for that." Willow saw his adams apple bob. In a different tone, he said, "She's all that's sweet an' good to me, though she won't answer my questions. Can't imagine bein' without her anymore. But I'm afraid I'll be her death."

The words hung between them. Willow wasn't entirely unafraid of this either, but then she was determined to stick with the tone Buffy had set, back at the house.

"She isn't so easy to kill. And now that you'll be with all of us, we'll help keep things safe until you're well again."

"At the beginnin' she wouldn't have me because she said I'd hate it, when I remembered myself again."

This news left Willow whipsawed; she couldn't think of a quick reply. "Why?"

"That's what I'm askin' you."

"Clearly she changed her mind."
Spike's lip curled. "You're not gonna tell me squat, are you?"

Willow sprang her seatbelt. "Would you like a beer? There's a cooler full right here."

"You're a cunt. Tryin' to drive me insane."

"No."

"Usin' me while I'm round the twist. Deceivin' me."

"Spike, no."

"What d'you call this then? Trickery. Mental cruelty. Don't deny it. Usin' me for your pleasure."

"No—that isn't—we made love—you said you love me—"

"That wasn't even enough for you, though. Had to taunt an' goad me into nearly killing you."

"That isn't how it was!"

"You think I can ever forgive you for that? For havin' the taste of you in my mouth forever? Pretty piece of revenge, Slayer, but it's too much. Didn't deserve such cruel punishment. You're a wicked girl, to torture me so."

"No! No! No!"

"You're a liar. Been lyin' to me an' using' me for a long long time an' nothing'll ever make that right."

"Oh God—Spike—"

"Ruined me, you have. Ruined me."

"No. No no no. I didn't lie, I didn't lie, I didn't lie! I'm sorry!"

"Buffy!"

She came awake with a lurch, gorge flopping, head pounding. Willow was in her face, saying her name, and her own noise echoed in her ears.

She tried to look around, but her neck was stiff. The wound throbbed, beating a tattoo at her throat. A dream. It was a dream. Spike was right there, his arm around her.

His lips against her ear. "What're you sorry for, Buffy?"

A dream. Only a dream. A horrible horrible dream. How much had they heard?

"I need to pee." She fumbled with the seatbelt. Spike opened it for her, helped her to her feet. She dared a quick glance at him, afraid to see the hatred, the anger he'd just unloaded on her. Everything she'd dreaded and expected every minute. All those accusations, pure justice. She still wasn't sure he hadn't really said them. It was so real, the words still reverberated in her head. His voice, his voice.

They moved towards the tiny toilet cubicle, away from Willow, who'd put on earphones, to show she wouldn't eavesdrop.

He only looked at her, sedate, a little uncertain. "Okay, girl?" Hand wrapped around her arm,
supporting her. She dropped her gaze in embarrassment.

"Was I talking a lot in my sleep?"

"Cried out that you were sorry. You're still all pale, look like hell." He slipped her hair back behind her ear. "This hurtin'?" Her throat. Willow had cleaned and bandaged it, and she'd put on a turtleneck sweater, so it wouldn't be the first thing the others saw when they arrived.

"Spike, are you angry at me, about before? Tell me if you are. You must be."

His expression didn't change, but his eyes did; they had a way of shading into a darker blue; she would've said she'd never noticed it before except that she recognized it perfectly now, that subtle sign that he wasn't saying all he thought. She curled her fingers around his arm. "Please. I take full responsibility for what happened in the training room. I know it was awful for you. More awful than I can imagine. But please please please don't—"

"Buffy ...."

"Don't let it make you hate me. Please."

He frowned.

"What? Spike—"

"Don't like hearin' you plead to me. Doesn't seem right."

"Oh God." It took all her strength not to break down.

His finger on her chin, tipping her up to meet his eyes again. "Apart from anything else, got to go along with you, don't I? Got no one, nowhere else to go. An' you're the expert, aren't you?"

"The expert?"

"In dangerous demons."

"Spike, you are not—"

"Think we pretty much disproved that theory today, yeah?"

"You're entitled to be angry at me. To ... have lost faith in me. But not to blame yourself. Please, not that."

"Not that."

She couldn't tell what his tone meant—restrained disgust, hostile teasing, mockery, plain denial. She heard all of those things. And a kind of blankness, that he retreated behind, when he stopped trusting his instinct for her and recalled only that they were strangers and he was a stranger to himself.

"Don't get you. Why're you so keen on me? Why's any of this happening?" He shook his head. "S'like bein' a marionette, yeah, an' I don't know who's got my strings."

"No strings." Don't say I'm using you. It's not like that anymore. "I thought what we have right here ... that it's mutual."

"You tell me nothing."
"Because I can't tell you your own memories. I can't tell you your past. You said yourself, the other
day—whatever I told you, it would be useless. My perspective. No context." Prejudicial. She didn't
say the word. Too risky.

"Easy for you—"

"Not easy. None of this is easy. Spike. I see that you're suffering. But I need you to believe one
thing. If you still care for me, could you just try to hold on to it? No matter what happens, will you
promise me you won't forget what I'm about to tell you?"

"Will I—?"

She laid a finger against his lips. "Right here. Remember. That I said. You are the love of my life.
That started before I found you in L.A., and it will continue even if ... even if."

She saw the wonder, the questions, in his eyes, and could only imagine what he was thinking—that
there was some unspeakable shame in this somewhere, that it had to be, in some way he'd know
when he knew himself again, intrinsically wrong. Wicked, like he'd said a little while ago—was that
really just a dream? She could tell, by the way his mouth stayed unyielding at her touch, by the way
his eyes, rapidly moving back and forth across her face, searched for clues, for the bigger meaning,
that he mistrusted this. Her. She wanted to tell him there was no bigger meaning, that this was it, the
biggest.

Part of her feared that none of this was going to matter, because after all, what was love, her love, to
him? He must've long since outgrown the self who thought he needed it. Hadn't he proven that, by
ignoring her all this last year? He'd recall that, when his dependency on her was over.

He'd be so angry. He'd think she was a fool.

"Why are you so afraid of me?"

"I'm not. I'm not."

"That's not how it should be. You pleading. You afraid."

"I'm not." She was blushing. Stupid. Stupid to deny it.

Again he shook his head. Dubious, not telling her what he was thinking—it made her want to thump
him. He reached behind her, opened the toilet door. She gave him another glance, and shut herself in.

In the tiny cubicle, she peed, and regarded herself in the mirror, and refused to give way to the tears
that boiled up hot behind her stinging eyes. He would know, and Willow would know, if she cried.
She'd been crying too much. It weakened her.

A glance at her watch showed her they were nearly there.

When she emerged, he was still standing there, leaning against the bulkhead.

"These people of yours ... they gonna be all sweet reason like the witch here?" His smile,
conciliatory, wobbled. One eyebrow jerked and twitched.

She was putting Spike, her highly flammable demon lover, out of the frying pan and into the fire.
How would he do, suddenly confronted by her friends, by a whole keep full of slayers?

How would the slayers and her friends do with him?
She smoothed her hand over the turtleneck. The bandage was hidden. No one had to see it. "They're good friends. They'll be your friends too." If I have to kick every one of them in the ass, twenty times over.

"Somethin' I forgot, before."

"Forgot?"

His hands, dry and so cool that she shuddered as he slipped them through her hair to draw her face towards his. "To kiss you. Do it now."

His mouth too was cold, dry, made so by the recycled refrigerated air on the jet. He rested his forehead against hers for a long beat, while she tried to put all of herself into the contact, the reams and reams of things she would tell him if she could, if it would do any good.

"I'm at your mercy, Buffy Summers."

"No you're not. I'm at yours."

The jet descended. Circling the tiny airfield twenty miles from the castle, low enough now that Buffy was easily able to spot the two familiar vehicles she'd really really hoped not to see. The cherry-red convertible. The black SUV with the tinted windows. She glanced at Willow; she'd seen them too.

Spike was in the toilet, washing up.

"Did you tell them all to meet us?" Buffy said.

"Not exactly. But maybe it's better. You can say whatever you want to say to all of them at once. Without the girls crowding around confusing matters."

"What I want to say. I want to say something?"

"I thought you'd have a rousing speech prepared."

"God, is that something I do now? Still? Am I known for my rousing speeches?"

"Just, this occasion ... I figured you had remarks in mind."

Buffy closed her eyes. "Oh I do."

Willow squeezed her hand. "You know I'm totally behind you on this now."

"Yes. Thank you. Frankly—"

"You were surprised. I saw that. But you and Spike aren't the only ones who've changed."

"The changing ... is what has me on tenterhooks." Buffy sighed, and stretched. Spike emerged, his hair and shirt-front damp. Five minutes later, the jet was taxiing into the hanger, out of the sun.

"You know, you guys are just going to get over-ruled. I don't even know why you're bothering with this."
"Dawn."

"Please don't Dawn me, Rupert." She was glad she'd started calling him by his first name. He hadn't invited her to, but apart from doing this funny stuttery eye-of-death thing at her the first dozen times she addressed him that way, Giles hadn't objected. She was practically a grown-up now, and they were practically family; it was long past time she quit calling him Mr Giles. Even if she knew he didn't really like it when anyone called him Rupert.

"Buffy isn't going to over-rule us," Xander said, "because when it comes to the castle, we're a democracy."

"When it comes to Spike though, we are not a democracy."

Both Xander and Giles grimaced, as if on cue. Dawn wanted to laugh. Except none of this was really funny, and she didn't know what was going to get off that plane. The last time Buffy had hauled Spike home, it was ugly. Just about the only thing she was pretty sure of was that Buffy was bound to be in one of her classic bad moods and no matter how they greeted her, she'd be snippy. At best.

Since she'd heard about Spike being alive, amnesiac and crazy, Dawn had been trying to decide what this was going to mean. She'd assumed, right up until the call came from Willow that they were coming in on a Council jet, that she wouldn't actually be seeing him. She hadn't been surprised that Buffy, after initial reluctance, went back to California to help him. Not after how she'd gone into the belly of The First to rescue him back in Sunnydale. Spike was a big fat pain in the neck, but apparently he was her big fat pain; her sister was nothing if not loyal and prone to taking up lost causes. She, Dawn, would be dead if not for that.

But Dawn had assumed Buffy would get him situated out there somehow, and then leave him and come home.

Though really when you thought about it, Buffy was all about bringing psychotic-mixed-up-Spike back into their midst. It was getting to be a pattern.

And she kinda had to do it again, what with him having saved the world. You couldn't take that away from him.

"He saved the world, Xander. You can't take that away from him."

"I should never have exhaled. That was my mistake. As long as I held my breath, that asshole was really dead and gone."

"You know, he's probably thinking the same about you. Except that, oh yeah, he has amnesia. So he doesn't even know you."

"That's right. And it makes an excellent segue into what I'm about to say."

They turned. Buffy was almost on top of them. They'd expected the jet passengers to emerge from the small door off the hanger, but she'd come out the same way the plane went in, and snuck up on them. Behind her, in the shadow cast by the big building, Willow followed, just ahead of Spike.

Dawn didn't want to stare at him, even though she really wanted to stare at him, so she tripped forward and caught her sister in a hug, which allowed her, over Buffy's shoulder, to get a gander.

He looked nearly the same. No older. No less blond. Dressed in a black shirt, blue jeans, boots, just like always. His face was banged up with cuts and bruises, but she'd seen that before too.
The only difference really was that when their eyes met, his held no recognition. Almost no expression.

And that difference was huge.

She'd gotten accustomed, last year, to snubbing Spike. But that he should look right through her, like he'd never seen her before ....

Buffy returned her hug, but only briefly before setting her aside.

"Hey Giles. Xander. I want to introduce you to my friend."

The expression on Xander's face—Giles' too—well, Dawn wished she'd brought a camera. Buffy's expression was familiar—she had on her Look of Grim Determination. She glanced around at Spike, who had come to a stop some fifteen feet away, well short of the border between shade and sun, his hands jammed in his pockets. When she reached a hand towards him, he gave one shake of the head. Buffy, apparently determined to work with that, turned back to the others. "This is William Pratt. He's a bit leery of meeting you because he's getting that you're not that anxious to meet him. But that's gonna change now. Will, meet Xander Harris, Rupert Giles, and Dawn Summers."

Giles cleared his throat. "Buffy, it's the determination of the Council that—"

Xander interrupted. "He doesn't come into the castle."

If Buffy's eyes could shoot laser beams, Giles and Xander would've been smoking piles of carved-up meat. She stalked closer, grabbing them each by an arm, pulling them away, beyond Spike's earshot. Dawn followed. Willow, glancing anxiously at Spike, gesturing to him, left him in the shadow and joined their circle, out in the late afternoon light.

Buffy was pale, Dawn noticed, like she hadn't slept in days, like she'd been fighting hard. Now she was closer to her, really looking, Dawn saw that she had bruises of her own, on her face, on her fists. That turtleneck was probably meant to hide more, though if she thought she was fooling anybody with it, she was kidding herself.

Buffy pitched her voice low and emphatic. "I hope I only need to say this once. Whatever residual hatred, dislike, mistrust, anger, whatever, you have for Spike, you need to put it aside now. For one thing, without his memory, he's a stranger to all of you—a stranger who deserves your hospitality, kindness and respect. All the bad things Spike ever did weren't done by this man. He doesn't remember anything that happened before a few days ago. What he's gleaned about his back-story repulses him. He merits the same open-minded welcome as any boyfriend I might bring back for you guys to meet." Buffy paused, giving each of them a hard look. "If he doesn't get it, I walk."

Xander blinked his one eye. "Boyfriend? Please tell me you didn't just say boyfriend."

"I said boyfriend. We're involved. You'd better deal."

Dawn wished she had a pause button for this scene, or better still one of those 7-second replay buttons like on the DVR, so she could blip back and hear it again. Hear her sister say ....

"So now you're in love with Spike?" She hadn't meant to blurt. But she had to hear it. It felt so Through the Looking Glass.

Buffy tucked her chin down, that sort of defensive stance she took when answering threats from towering demons, or asserting her right to the last donut in the box. "In fact, I am."
"No," Xander said. "No. This is not happening. Buff—"

"You know what's not happening, Xander? You delivering a tirade of your objections. I know what they are. They've expired. Get over it."

"Anya—"

Giles silenced Xander's riposte with a cut of his hand.

Xander crossed his arms. "He doesn't come into the castle. This isn't just me talking. It's the consensus of the slayers."

"I'm bringing him home," Buffy said. "Are you telling me the castle isn't my home?"

"You guys. Don't you think you're being kinda rigid?" Willow laid a hand on Xander's arm. "This is Buffy. We know what happens when we try to second-guess her, right? That never works out."

Xander's lip curled. "Willow. Et tu?"

"C'mon, Xander. You're always saying you hope Buffy will find someone and be happier. She has."

"Spike isn't someone. Spike is a festering sore that keeps breaking out no matter what you do to it."

Buffy said, "I can't believe this," in the low reasonable tone that indicated she was in a fury. "Giles, you could say something adult and sensible any time now."

"Buffy. While I respect your ... loyalty, and good-heartedness, even towards an old enemy ... and while I don't deny Spike was of vital assistance in the final battle of Sunnydale, all the intelligence since indicates that he'd joined Angel's rogue organization in L.A. A branch of Wolfram & Hart. I've explained to you what Wolfram & Hart represents."

"I think you're wrong about that. I don't believe for a second that Angel or Spike lost the mission."

"What you believe is simply not commensurate with the facts."

"Like the weapons of mass destruction? That was supposed to be the best intelligence too. Giles, there is absolutely no reason to be suspicious of Spike, he's—"

"Amnesiac, yes. At the moment. Also unstable and recently psychotic. I had quite a detailed report from the L.A. slayers. And what happens when he recovers his memory? You don't really know which side he's on. Think of the Trojan horse."

"Hello, soul? Sought out and fought for? Amends made? Supreme world-saving sacrifice done entirely of his own free will? Returning to the mission with Angel after the supreme sacrifice? Getting his poor mind torn apart in another apocalyptic battle? How many times does he have to prove himself to you before you really start to look awfully mingy, Giles?"

Dawn didn't want to listen to anymore. It made her dislike them too much, and that hurt, especially since lately she'd been liking Xander again a lot. And wasn't it mean to stand here arguing in a clump with Spike waiting nearby like the ostracized kid on the playground?

When she approached him, he lifted his head, chin jutting out in that nervy way she remembered. Dawn smiled. "Hey. Hi."

"You're the sister. Buffy's sister."

"Dawn. My name's Dawn." Awkward, she thrust a hand out. He stared at it, catching up, then took and shook it. His hand was white and bloodless even for Scotland, where most of the people in the village near the castle shared the pallor of the undead. And his flesh was cold, even though it was summer here, the end of a rather warmish day in fact. Cold as if in response to the cold reception. "I'm so glad to see you again, Spike." Her face flooded with heat as she said it. It was like a stupid ice-breaker game, or an improv exercise, talking to him as if they didn't know each other, as if they hadn't watched night after night of TV Land reruns together, painting each other's fingernails black, scarfing pizza, arguing, playing hearts for a penny a point. For a whole long summer, you were my sitter. You were my friend. You took care of me.

"How d'ye do."

"Good, I'm good. Uh ... okay flight?" She wanted to tell him that she was sorry she'd never talked to him, at the end, never made a point of clearing the air. I hated you because you hurt my sister, you hurt Xander, you hurt me, you messed everything up and then you abandoned us. And I should have forgiven you later but I was sixteen and selfish and angry. Please tell me it's all right. She couldn't spill all that, not here on the tarmac of the little airport, with her sister arguing with the others just out of earshot.

"Was all right. Never flown before." He frowned. "That I know about. You feature her. Your sister."

"Um. Thank you."

"Yeah." He scraped a boot toe back and forth on the ground. "She's lovely, is Buffy."

Yes. Thank you." Her sister had said she was in love with this bizarro-Spike, who didn't remember her, and this was incredibly weird and improbable, as if she'd turned up saying she was in love with the old man at the village post office, who made a snotty sound in the back of his throat while he counted out your stamps.

Anyway, how could you be in love with someone who didn't remember anything before last week? It was like a philosophy problem. Interesting to think about, but hard to actually do.

Though it was like Buffy, who was nothing if not perverse and kooky, to finally fall for Spike when he was too brain-damaged to know that was what he'd wanted all that time.

Another thought came to her. Presumably, being in love with Spike, she'd been doing it with him over the last few days. This intruded on her consciousness twinned with what Xander had told her last year, that Spike was gone because he'd tried to rape Buffy, would have raping her if Buffy wasn't the slayer, and anyway the intent was the same as the deed, in a case like that.

She'd never thought Buffy would want anything to do with Spike, in that way. For a while after Buffy's resurrection, she'd fantasized that Spike would win Buffy, they would get together and he'd move in. She wanted it not so Buffy could have a boyfriend, but so they'd be a sort of family, taking care of her, two almost grown-ups she could pretend were her parents, the way at school sometimes a gang of girls got together and pretended to be each others aunts and cousins and sisters. But that was a long time ago.

Dawn glanced around. How long was this haggling going to go on, before Buffy made a Plan B?

And if Buffy wasn't going to go back to the castle, should that mean that she, Dawn, should stay with her?

They'd have to spend the night at the Travelodge out by the A road. Dawn wrinkled up her nose at
the thought. Spike looked miserable, still digging at the ground with his toe, just like someone at the wrong party who wanted to die.

Dawn opened her mouth, hoping she could come up with the right thing to say, when the Scoobie scrum broke. Xander tossed the keys of the SUV to Willow, and stalked off towards the red car. Giles said a few more words to Buffy, before doing the same; when he reached it, he turned to peer back at Spike, his face tight and expressionless. The men drove away.

Willow and Buffy came back to them. Buffy slipped a hand through Spike's arm.

"Where we goin', then?" Spike said.

"To the castle. Home. Willow, can you pull the car up into the shade so we can get in?"

The four of them piled into the big black car, Buffy and Spike in the back.

There wasn't much talk on the drive. Willow pointed out a few landmarks, which Spike politely acknowledged. She told him about the castle, which was also a huge manor house, with numerous extensions build over the years to form a many-roomed, many-leveled, rambling warren of a place, where each of the Scoobies had a separate apartment, and the slayers lived in more dorm-like conditions, while renovations and improvements were constantly underway.

"The contractors think we're a private women's college. At least, that's what we tell them."

"A college."

There was something funny about his voice, or not his voice precisely, but his accent, and how he said things. Dawn was trying to remember if she'd ever heard him say "how d'ye do" before, but then, when would he have ever had the occasion? Maybe when she'd introduced him to her friends, back in Sunnydale? Had she ever actually made introductions? She couldn't recall.

After a stop at the butcher's in the village to put in a standing order for blood, they arrived at the castle just as the sun was lowering behind the high hills beyond. The tall grey keep was outlined in gold, casting its shadow down into the valley, which was already half in shadow itself as they wound up the last stretch, the part that belonged to the manor, walled off and private. Dawn craned around in the front seat to give Spike and her sister a big smile. "I'll cook something for you when we get inside, what would you like?"

"That's sweet, Dawnie, thanks. Maybe an omelette?" Buffy turned to Spike. "Would you like an omelette? With lots of hot sauce? And fried potatoes?"

"Would I?" The suggestion seemed to amuse him.

"You're partial to spicy food," Dawn said. "And anything fried. In fact, it was you who taught me how to make a real fry-up, with the tomatoes and the mushrooms and sausages and the bacon. And then I move here and find out it wasn't actually something you invented. The real British breakfast, served all day."

Another polite uncertain smile. "Ah? Did I?"

"Fry-up, coming up," Dawn said, pretending with all her might that this wasn't going to be one of the stranger evenings of hers or her sister's lives.
"Here we are." Willow drove right over the moat and into the courtyard, which was completely shaded. The red convertible was already parked, and there was no sign of Giles and Xander. A cluster of some dozen slayers stood in front of the main set of doors leading inside, some with hands set on hips, some with arms crossed, all looking in one direction. The news about Spike had swirled through the denizens of the castle five or six times since Willow's call, taking on new details as it passed from girl to girl in a swoop of Chinese Whispers, to the point where many of them were going around fully armed and expecting to see someone on the order of Hannibal Lecter crossed with Kakistos emerge from the SUV.

As they got out of the car, a voice cried out "Mon frere! Well met, well met, Mon pauvre vieil ami!"

It was Andrew—he emerged from the scullery door opposite, arms wide open in a Gallic greeting. Spike froze as he closed in, going for the full-body hug. Buffy responded with a full-body block.

"Andrew. We're in Scotland. We all speak English. Spike is English."

"This is an occasion! A great event, unlooked for, glorious! The return of the great—"

Buffy shook a fist. "Until I tell you I'm not pissed off anymore that you knew Spike was back and kept quiet about it—until then, Andrew—"

He cringed from her bobbing hand, then looked up into Spike's face with a smirk of sophistication. "She enjoys ribbing me, you know, it's her little joke, she's a personality, The Summers. But I'm her right-hand man. The go-to—"

"Andrew! We'd like to go inside and just decompress, all right? Family only." Buffy buttonholed him. "That doesn't mean you. Just to be crystal."

"Crystal!" Andrew grinned and gave her two thumbs up.

"Who was that?" Spike whispered.

"It really doesn't matter."

She turned to confront their other welcomers—if you could call them that. The head of the wedge was Marla; one of the older ones, someone Dawn had never really spoken to except once in the laundry room about pinning odd socks up to the bulletin board. She'd dropped out of the police academy in Houston Texas after she got called. She didn't really know Buffy, either.

"Hi guys," Buffy said. She gave the girls not the Look of G.D., but a big friendly smile, like she thought they'd come out to salute her. "I'm back, I've brought Spike." Like they were going to be so glad he was there. Dawn had to give it to her sister, she was Nerve Incarnate. "Spike, these are some of the slayers based here. This is Marla, Ana, Hee Sun—"

Marla stepped forward. "Buffy. We really don't want this to be difficult."

"I actually do remember all the names. Spike probably won't, not right away. You guys can help him, though."

"We're here to escort him to the cells."

Buffy dropped the smile pretence then. Marla towered over her, but when Buffy drew herself up, there was no one bigger. Possibly in the entire world. "Spike lives with me, in my rooms. Actually, he lives here. He is part of this, us, what we do. He is your colleague. I hope soon he'll be your friend."
"He's a notorious vampire. His allegiance is at best unknown. He goes in the lock-up, or he doesn't enter."

Dawn had hoped they wouldn't be this organized about it. Or that Giles and Xander, racing back ahead of them, would've called the contingent off. She looked up; every open window all the way around the courtyard was peopled with faces, the other inmates of the castle, watching.

Buffy glanced up then too, her eyes narrowing. She took a breath.

"You know, I made a mistake." Her tone was conversational, curiously light. But her voice was loud enough to be heard across the courtyard, probably all the way up to the top floor. "My friends can tell you, it's a mistake I make over and over again. Something major happens, something that affects me deeply. And instead of talking about it, I keep it to myself. I bury it deep inside me. So those closest to me don't know the truth, the importance, what it meant to me, how much it should mean to them. When we were fighting the First in Sunnydale, and afterwards, it was about Spike. I kept to myself how much I cared about him. Why I trusted him. What he meant to me. How much I needed him, as a fighter, and as a friend. I didn't take the time to explain to anyone how moved I was by what Spike did—how, out of love, he quested after his soul. How he fought for it and won it and came back to lay his sorrow and repentence at my feet and make amends to me. He made them, over and over, to me and all of us, even though I never truly reciprocated. He stayed with us, took shit from us, fought with us, and in the end at Sunnydale, he stayed behind to suffer and die so that we could win, and survive, and be here today. I should've been talking to all of you about his heroism every damn day since, I should've been teaching you about the great champion of that battle, who saved all our lives. I didn't. That was my big mistake."

Dawn thought she heard drumming, but it was her own pulse, thrilling to her sister's words. Spike listened with his mouth slightly open, eyes large and bewildered.

"That's why you're making your mistake right here. It's okay, it's not your fault. You didn't know. But now you do." She looked at them all—first at Marla, meeting her eyes, waiting for her expression to change. At the other eleven girls, each for as long as it took. "I'm sorry I never told you Spike's story. It's a wonderful story and you all should know about it. There are a lot of other stories too, the lore you all should have to be better slayers, and I promise you, I will tell them all. But right now, Spike and I are tired, and thirsty, and hungry, and we want to go inside and rest."

None of the girls said a word, but they broke their barrier, moving to the right and left. Dawn saw how they looked at her sister, some almost worshipful, one or two with flickering resentment, but most with respect and curiosity. They took in Spike with wide wondering eyes—this fresh perspective on him, delivered by such an unimpeachable source, was going to take a little adjustment.

Taking Spike's arm, Buffy led him up to the huge iron-girdled main doors, opening the smaller door carved into one of the big ones.

"Spike, come in. Welcome." He stepped through slowly, as if wary of what would be on the other side.

"Speaking of private," Willow said, "I'm not really family either. I'll see you in the morning?"

Spike turned. "Stay an' eat with us, Miss Willow."

Spike's invitation surprised them all. Willow smiled. Dawn thought Buffy would be annoyed, but she seemed relieved. Spike was gazing around—the ante-chambers walls were heavy grey stone, some covered with obscure, not-very-clean tapestries.
"Quite a place this is. Bit of a stage-set."

"I prefer that house we just left," Buffy said, once more scooping his hand into hers, "But this has come to be home. As much as anything is home anymore. And parts of it are cozier than this."

"Your real home was destroyed," Spike said.

She squeezed his fingers. "My real home is you."

In Buffy's neat little flat at the top of the tower, Dawn cooked and Willow laid the table, while Buffy wandered around chattering at Spike, telling him all sorts of things Dawn knew he wasn't taking in, about the castle, its history, its situation, its lay-out, the neighborhood, the name of the mountain range they could see out the windows, that the hot and cold taps were on different sides than in California, and on and on. Spike sat in the big armchair with a beer in his hand, not really drinking it, not really listening, eyes fixed in a thousand yard stare.

Dawn, cracking eggs, thought of the night she'd overheard the news that she herself wasn't really human. Maybe that's how Spike felt right now.

"Buffy."

The nervous chatter cut off. "What?"

"Was any of that true? What you said out there?"

"Any of it? What do you mean, any of it? It was all true. It was something I should've said to them all a long time ago."

He got to his feet then, but instead of going to her, he went up to Willow, who was folding the cloth napkins into elaborate mitres to give herself something to do. "Tell me, why'd I go off an' get a soul? Why would a demon blood-sucker do such a thing? Or is that some kind of metaphor?"

"It isn't a metaphor." Willow concentrated on what she was doing with her hands. "And ... I don't know why. I can't tell you."

"Can't, or won't? You, Miss Dawn. Why'd I do it?"

She couldn't look up from the crackling frying pans—she had two of them going, trying to get everything done at the same time. And that was good, because she thought if she looked at him then, she might lose it.

Buffy was at his side now, her hand on his arm. "Spike, we can talk about it later, when—"

"This business of the soul, I don't understand it. Dunno whether to believe in it."

"It's because you have one, that it seems so improbable," Willow said. "It's just in you. And because of the amnesia, too. When you remember everything, it'll all make sense."

He ignored this, his burning gaze still fixed on her. "Miss Dawn. Tell me."

Willow came beside her and quietly took the long fork from her fingers, freeing her to move away from the stove. She felt addled by the question, by the intensity of Spike's glare, the roiling potential in him for anger, outrage, protest. Her sister looked like she'd lost control of a wild animal and didn't know what to do next.
Dawn said, "That's easy. You did it because you loved us."

He seemed stricken. Spike stared. His lips moved; she could see him sounding her words over to himself: because you loved us, as if he couldn't credit them, couldn't believe them.


They were interrupted at their meal a few times, by slayers knocking at the door with errands or questions elaborately concocted to sound spontaneous and casual, as if they had no idea at all that Buffy had a visitor inside. Willow dealt with the intruders smartly in the foyer, not letting anyone into the apartment. "You'll see him when you see him. Tell everyone, they don't want to be crowded."

Each time it happened, Spike, who was barely eating anyway, put down his fork. The haunted stare returned, as the three of them still at the table listened to Willow at the door.

After the third intrusion, Spike said, "Stirs 'em up, doesn't it, all those slayers, havin' a vampire in their midst? They feel it."

"They're young girls who want to see a good-looking celebrity," Willow said. "That's all. Don't worry about them."

"Your friends, Harris an' Giles. Giles who runs this whole op. Loathe me. Suppose they have their reasons?"

Willow and Dawn both started to speak, but Buffy cut them off. Her mouth a thin line. "No one loathes you. They're misinformed, that's all."

Spike's silver clattered onto the plate. He pushed back hard from the table. "What did I do to them? They bloody know, my crimes 'gainst them suck at their very marrow, any fool could see it. Any fool 'cept me who did the deeds an' doesn't know what they are!"

Dawn was a little scared by this outburst, but more distressing was watching her sister, who looked like she wanted to tear her own heart out and hand it to him, if it would help. She stammered, but never got a sentence started.

Seeing her distress, Spike softened. "Sorry pet. Bit jumpy, I expect."

Willow put down her cup. "We should go, you two are exhaused. Dawnie, come, let's say good night."

"The dirty dishes—"

Willow gestured at her. Forget the dishes.

Spike got to his feet. "What's—what's to keep me from getting loose from here while Buffy's asleep, an' causing some trouble?"

Buffy said, "You aren't going to do that," at the same time that Willow said, "I can put a little ward on the door, that'll make a noise if you try to go out before morning. Will that make you feel secure?"

Spike nodded.

As they left, pulling the heavy door shut behind them, Dawn paused at the top of the descending stairs. Willow was already starting down.
"What about the spell?"

"We don't need a spell. He'll think it's there, that's will set his mind at ease."

Buffy locked the door. Spike still stood by the table, head and shoulders drooping, the misery and dejection pouring off him in sheets.

"Might not have been the best thing, us comin' here."

"Just give it a little time. The slayers will find you charming, and as for Giles and Xander, they'll adjust." A yawn overtook her, but at the same time she didn't think she'd ever be able to fall asleep. Nor that either of them should, before they'd attended to each other, alone. She slipped her arms around his waist. "Come to bed. Make love to me a little."

It was the right thing to say. There was enough of the true Spike ever present in him that he couldn't hear this suggestion and be unmoved. The press of her groin against his was answered by a growing bulge. His mouth tasted faintly of Tabasco, enough to make her own tingle as she swept her tongue languidly against his.

"How's this feelin'?" He fingered the edge of her turtleneck.

Buffy stepped back and pulled the sweater up and off, then tore the bandage away. "All healed. That's a perk of being a slayer."

He leaned in, examining her neck with a frown. "There'll be a deep scar."

"Good."

"Good?"

"I could get 'B loves S' in a heart tattooed on my butt. But tattoos are so common, don't you think?"

That made him smile. As did her fingers undoing his flies, tugging them open. She pulled up the hem of his shirt, knelt to press kisses on his belly, down to where the patch of wiry brown hair sprouted. She teased it with her fingers. "Your pretty cock. Show me it."

"Pretty?"

"Your huge manly cock. Okay? C'mon, actually it is very pretty. Which is something very few guys can legitimately claim." She nuzzled his crotch through the denim, felt it bulge bigger. Was tempted to suck him off right there, but she wanted bed more, and sensed he did too, that exciting as it was when she went down for him, he needed a more equal conversation right now. "I want you horizontal."

She was glad that, despite her complete lack of prospects, she'd splurged on the biggest size bed when they moved here. Glad there was plenty of room for them to roll around, to shake off the constraints of the long long day, get all mixed up and upside down. Spike seemed to shed about a hundred layers of doominess with his clothes. Her cloudy, fatigue-addled head cleared a bit when she was tangled with him, sparking and teasing with lips and hands. His erection was caught between their bellies, making her sticky. They both wanted to stretch out the moments before he went inside, filling them up with expansive, inquiring kisses, hands stroking and exploring.

"You are quite the leader," he said suddenly, the last remark she expected as his fingers caressed up
"into her pussy. "Those ladies were persuaded by you."

"Just call me General Buffy."

"I was ... moved. Even though I don't know all you were referring to."

It was William who spoke, the shape and tone of the voice not-so-subtly different.

"I should have said all that stuff a long long time ago. I make everything harder for myself, by keeping so quiet."

"You've suffered a lot of pain and hardship, haven't you? For many years. I didn't really grasp it before. I still don't, but ... I'm starting to see."

"I do my job. And really ... I couldn't imagine a different life. Not anymore. Saving the world, it gets kind of ... addictive."

"Does it?"

"You should know. You've done it twice. At least," she kissed his breast-bone, his nipple. "At least, once for sure, and I believe again in L.A. I think the world is intact because of what you helped do in that alley. Anyway, that's my story and I'm sticking to it."

He laughed a little, very softly, the air puffing against her neck. "So we're two heroes, are we, fucking, like in some dirty verses one mustn't translate from the Ancient Greek."

She giggled. "Let's translate it. Let's recite it out loud."

When she straddled him, putting him inside, he reared up and caught her against him. "Like this," he murmured. "Need to kiss you. See you. Need you close."

"We are close. Sweetheart, we are."

"Need you closer."

Buffy sat on his crossed legs, folded hers around his hips. Face to face, mouth to mouth, fucking more with muscle than movement. His mouth on each breast in turn, tonguing gasps out of her, matched by his grunts as she tugged his hair. She knew he was struggling with an excess of emotion, too vivid even for what they were doing, straining together, longing to somehow become one.

Then it passed, the wave of feeling. He exhaled, sighed. Smiled. Kissed her hair, her eyes. "Adorable girl. My adorable girl."

He praised her. Not the way he had in the old days—when he'd say things like "Always knew you were a dirty hot cunt, Slayer, always knew you'd fuck like a cat in heat. Knew you wanted Big Bad to sort you out. Wanted Big Bad to fuck you with my big hard cock." Words she'd hated, that made her twitch and flail and come.

He was a little more polite, but his remarks still whipped her up. "Got an action on you, Buffy, could drive a fellow mental. Tight little cunny grips my pego like a fist."

"You are the most ..." she searched for a word, was a little startled by the one that popped into place. "... the most compelling fuck I ever—"

"Compelling?" He laughed. "Pay a forfeit." The forfeit was taken in kisses.
They rocked harder then, pushing each other to the edge. When Spike spent, his eyes flashed gold; the sight registered on her like a thumb on her clit, just right. Without a word, each knowing what the other wanted, she dug in, flexing, and got him hard again; he grinned. "Most fellows can't do this, can they?"

"No. Vampires only." She nipped at his throat. Wanting to see his other face, to bring it in so she could show him that even though he'd bitten her, scarred her, it wasn't something he had to hide or deny or fear.

"Know what you're doin'," he whispered, mouth buried in her hair, under her ear where his lips, his breath, his voice, made her shiver.

"Is it all right?" she whispered. "I want it to be all right."

"Want to be fucked by a brute, do you?" His tone curious, interested. "Ugly mug against yours, makes you wet."

"Maybe. Sometimes."

The flash again, the gold eye, but no ridges rose, no fangs. He tumbled her over, covering, pushing her knees up.

"They all like that? All the vampire slayers? Or just you? Just you wants to part her little thighs for the monster?"


Afterwards, sated and logy, lying side by side, he brought his face close to hers, noses touching. She gave him another kiss, lazy and completed.

"Like feelin' your sweet breath against my lips."

"I don't know how sweet it is."

"Smells good to me. Like all your smells."

You always did. He'd liked her sweaty, stinky, liked to lick out her sodden armpits, would plead with her—never successfully—to come to him when she was menstruating so he could eat her pussy. She'd let him do it if he still wanted to. There was nothing, she thought, floating out into a drowse, that she wanted to deny him now.

It was the deadest portion of the night when her bladder woke her. She lay crushed against him, his skin still almost cool against hers, and dry, like the cotton sheet, though bonier. She had to slip free of him to get out of bed, and doing so made her momentarily sad. She thought of those final two nights, the cot in the basement, when she'd let him hold her and tried to tell herself that that was appropriate, and enough for both of them, no conversation or gestures necessary.

When she came back, his eyes were open, glimmering in the dark.

"Woke up an' feared it was all a dream. Didn't know where I was."

"And then you heard the toilet flush and you knew you were in an old jerry-built Scots castle." She felt around on the bedside table for the lighter, and sparked a candle. It gave off a comforting aroma
Spike gathered her in again, encircling her with an arm, legs tangling. "Doesn't irk you, does it, havin' a cuddle?"

He thought he was the only one who was needy. She shifted, settled herself against him, kissed the mouth she found near hers. In the glow, his skin was like white velvet. In this bed, with the quilt pulled up over them, nude and relaxed, she felt safe, and young. Younger than she'd felt in a long time.

"D'you know, you scared me at the beginnin', there was such a tumult round you, like putting a hand to a fire. Thought you'd do me harm. All that power. It crackles inside you. It sings through me when I'm near you."

"Do you feel that around the other slayers? I guess you don't remember the ones in L.A., but earlier, outside, did you feel it then?"

He considered. "Was tense out there. An' then you spoke, and all there was was you. So ... hard to say."

"Well ... we've never really been afraid of each other." She meant to reassure him, but the statement, echoing back, meant more than it had in her head.

"That so? Why is that?"

"You were—" She stopped. How could she say You disgusted me but somehow but you were always more of a pest to me than a threat?

"I was too stupid to be afraid? That it?" He smiled. "Could believe that."

"Fear wasn't part of your persona."

"I had a persona."

"Yeah ... you know."

He smiled, as if she'd made a silly joke. "Don't, actually."

"You must notice it. There's these two personalities in you. Spike. Who holds the Nobel Prize in talking dirty. And then once in a while, this other one. William Pratt. Who tells me I'm a lady, and knows lots of poetry."

"Know you're a lady. An' I know plenty of poetry."

"But he's the one who— Look, maybe we should go back to sleep. We're going to have another big day in a few hours."

"You like him better? This other 'persona'?"

She knew the right answer to this. "I am in love with you. Who are large, and contain multitudes."

"That's Walt Whitman, that is, though you don't have it quite right. Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.

"Well see, there you go, Walt knew all about you. Spike and William are both you, or maybe it's more elegant to say you are both Spike and William—like matter is both particle and wave—see, I'm
smart—and maybe they—you—are a little contradict-y, but it's all good."

His eyes narrowed, and his lip took on this teasing curl. "On account of I'm compelling. An' have a pretty cock. An' can fuck longer than a live fellow, an' satisfy you better."

"On account of those, yes. Among lots of others."

"You're a girl likes her fucking and can stand a deal of it. Ever lay a vamp before?"

"You know I slay plenty."

Fingers pinched her nipple. "Laid. An' you heard me right the first time. Coaxin' me to fang out while I was boning you. That what makes me compelling?"

"No. Well, maybe just a teensy-weensy part."

"Wait a bit—you said your first lover was a member of the undead tribe. Did you fuck him?"

"I can't believe you'd want me to talk about this now."

"Did you fuck him, Buffy? Did he bite you while he fucked you? Is that how you got your other scar?"

"No Spike, it isn't."

He was quiet then, for so long that, if he wasn't still caressing her hair with idle fingers, she'd have thought he was asleep. "Don't be cross with me, pet. Gropin' in the dark, I am. At such a disadvantage, it gets heavy, not knowin' even the simplest things about you, myself, the past. Over a century an' a half of blank. Would I know the answer if I was in my right mind?"

"Spike, I want to be in bed with you right now. Just you."

"Ah. Quite. Sorry." She could feel him thinking. "What's so bloody odd, lyin' with you, know this isn't the beginnin' of me getting my end off. Know all the ways to go about it, to please an' be pleased."

"Very pleased," Buffy said, hoping he'd take the compliment and not go on to what she feared was next.

"Can think of all the ways I've ever fucked. But there's nothin' in my mind where the other person's supposed to be."

She wondered if he was trying to get her to say they'd slept together before.

"Those pics of me I saw in the books, I had a bird in most of them. You know her? What was she called—Carmella?"

"Drusilla. And I really don't want to talk about her either."

"S'pose you wouldn't. Was with her a long time, wasn't I? We got up to bad bad things. Maybe you did for her."

She didn't want to say that, as far as she knew, Drusilla was extant. That would lead to more questions, and the more she had to think about Drusilla, especially in connection with Spike's sexual finesse, the more grossed-out she'd be. "Let's go to sleep."
"Could use a breath of air. Didn't you say there was a way out onto the battlements from here?"

"Yes. You want to go outside?"

"You can stay here. Just need to refresh myself on the night sky."

They both went, through a little door off the kitchen, up a narrow stone stair, and out, onto the top of the south tower. Her frequent retreat, at all hours. Two beach chairs were folded against the crenellations, and a forgotten coffee cup was filled with rain-water. Spike smiled at that, before lifting his face up to the open sky, taking deep grateful breaths. There was a sliver of moon, enough to show her the white silhouette of his nude body, leaning against the stone. All around the tower, the green sward spread out to the rolling mountains. Farther off, not visible but, at this hour, faintly tanging the air, was the sea.

"Give me some advice, pet."

"What advice?"

"Your friend, Miss Willow. Says she might be able to magic my memory back. Should I let her try?"

"She's very powerful. Very knowledgeable."

"There's a checkered history there, I gather."

"Well, there is. But if we held one another's histories against each other ... none of us would be here. You need to know that, actually. None of us has clean hands. Not Willow, not Giles, not even Xander, though he's never actually killed anybody."

"Not you. You've got no murder on you." He drew closer to her. "I'd know it, if you did. Dunno how, but I'd know it."

She shook her head. "People have died because I failed. And I have plenty of other things I regret doing. Or not doing."

He put an arm around her. His skin cool against hers, but he turned her so his body blocked the cold night breeze. "What shall I decide, sweet? Shall I ask the witch to put her enchantments on me?"

"You hate it. Being in this state."

He was silent for a moment, and she felt him considering, not the question itself, but her yearning in asking for it. The shame reared up in her, like the splash of bile in the throat. Shame at being afraid. Shame at being found out.

"Hard to be a proper man, isn't it, when you don't know what man you are."

"But you feel, don't you—I'm sure you do—your goodness, and your—"

"Don't fret, Buffy."

She stopped. He knew all about her apprehension, that she was concealing things from him, that she dreaded his restoration. That at least was clear to him, if nothing else.

She laid a cheek against his arm. "Can we wait? It really hasn't been that long. I'm hopeful you'll have a break-through all on your own. And that would be better, wouldn't it, than magic?"

"P'raps I will. True that I'm not in a big rush to be spelled. Magic's always risky."
"How do you know?"

"Eh?"

"I mean, what makes you say that? You sound pretty sure. What's the association there?"

"You're doin' it again, woman, poking at what I've lost. Don't know how I know! But I do. Feel it in my old dead bones."

"Okay. Sorry. Shall I pay another forfeit?"

"What might that be?"

"Well ..." She bounced down onto her heels, laid her face against his bare belly, breathing warm air through the curls, against his cock. "Maybe this?"

His flesh surged beneath her touch. It flattered her, his ready excitement, his passion, always had, even before when she was so certain she didn't want him to want her. He'd always made her feel it was about her, not just that he was horny and she was a live girl, or even a slayer. She was Buffy, and Spike longed for her, longed to fuck her and immerse himself in her and be seen by her. Longed for her attention. Any attention.

Her pussy was wet now too, just from having him in her mouth, bobbing her head to take him in, making him wet, moist velvet against the roof of her mouth. She closed her eyes, to feel it better. So crazy, love was, that it could encompass standing up for your man in front of a cadre of slayers, and getting on your knees to suck his cock. It was sublime. Spike's fingers spread into her hair. He murmured about how warm she was. She wrapped her hands around his balls, warming those too.

If he were to remember himself right now, while she was pleasuring him ... maybe he'd be kind to her. Maybe he'd realize he'd been wrong, in choosing so callously, so finally, to keep her in the dark.

If she was good to him every hour of every day from now on, maybe this delicate new happiness knitting itself around them like a shell, would remain intact. Never be broken.

"They all caved. Like that." Xander snapped his fingers. "Marla wasn't supposed to cave. I'd pegged her for a non-caver." He paced in front of Giles' desk.

Giles removed his glasses, rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "She is Buffy. And I doubt even Robin Wood would've been unmoved by that address."

"So that's it? You're caving too? He just gets to stay here? The wolf right in the middle of our flock?"

"The girls are hardly sheep, Xander."

"I realize that and yet I do not let it interfere with my analogy."

"Xander, this situation behooves calm. The more you allow your emotions to unsteady you—"

"Hey, I'm steady. I'm a rock."

A knock at the door; he jumped, and maneuvered to hide it; a cramp shot up his ankle. Damn it.

Xander opened to Buffy.
"Oh, hi. I didn't know you were here too. Hi."

She was all pink and gold, rosy from sleep and he didn't want to know what else, hair freshly washed and bouncy. Wearing a pretty summer dress, legs bare, feet in skimpy sandals. Smelling like shampoo and cologne. Xander realized he hadn't seen Buffy in such girlish clothes since they'd been in Scotland. These days she was always wearing cargo pants and hiking boots and hoodies, ready for action.

"Where is he?" Xander said. He'd meant to say hi back to her, meant to acknowledge how friendly she looked, but then his impulses betrayed him.

"He's having some breakfast with Dawnie and Willow." No affront, no combativeness. She came in, sketched a little wave at Giles. "We need to talk. We need to get this situation into the here-and-now."

They were sweet little women, the witch and the sister, perky and accommodating, treating him a bit like he was an invalid, but clearly trying not to. He liked them, for themselves and because they were dear to his brand-new dear one, his sweetheart Buffy. But he couldn't help at the same time seeing them, like a photographic double-exposure, as bags of the hot live human blood he hungered for, even as he sipped warm hog from a mug. Seeing them too, even more maddeningly, as two folders full of secret information, things he longed to know, the enigma of himself. What could they tell him? What did they see when they looked at him, how many different exposures laid and laid and overlaid on his own face and form?

He thought of those books in the safe house, the images of the slick sharp-faced vampire, William the Bloody, his hard hard eyes, the scar on his brow, the hollow cheeks and outthrust lip. Pleasure in having his picture made, showing off his potent stuff for the lens, sure of himself, those cheap good-looks.

Other images in the books, the true faces of vampires, hideous, stayed with him too. He looked like that when his fangs came down. He looked like that, and she, incredibly, sadly?, liked it. How could that be?

"Want more?" Dawn asked, pointing at his cup. She was clearing away the dishes, remnants of buttered toast, dregs of coffee. He knew these two were 'minding' him while Buffy was gone on certain business elsewhere in the castle, and that they were doing everything they could think of to make it seem that that was not what was happening, that they were just breakfasting with a guest, sections of The Guardian and The Independent littered across the table, the witch with her laptop at one end, scanning messages.

"Ta, love. Had enough."

She smiled. "I don't know if I'm allowed to say this—" The witch glanced up, but Dawn kept talking, "—but I missed you a lot. I hope ... I don't know if you'll want to, but I hope we can spend a little time together, do some of the things we used to do."

"What would that be, then?"

The witch really was giving her the stink-eye now, but still not saying anything. Dawn stacked the dishwasher. "We played cards. Monopoly. Watched movies together, bad ones, the dumber the better. You'd tell me—" She blinked, sucked in her lip. "Never mind that. But we could play cards —"
"I'd tell you what?"

"Stories."

Willow shut the computer's lid. "Dawnie."

She was shutting this down too, but he had to try. "What stories? Tell me one."

Willow repeated, "Dawnie."

She flicked her hair back off her shoulder. Little defiance, he liked that. "Just ... stories about what London was like, back when, you know. I was starting to read the Sherlock Holmes books then, and you'd answer my questions about stuff in them, because you'd been there then."

Willow's smile was a little tight. "I guess you don't need to check your email, Spike. Want another section of the paper?"

"Wonder if I do have email. Would be pilin' up a bit, wouldn't it? Suppose I'm not the only one, not keepin' up my correspondence." Willow looked a question. "I mean—these others, my supposed comrades. Angel an' them."

"You know who Angel is?"

"Buffy told me he was another vampire, wore the white hat, I was apparently workin' with. Wouldn't credit there'd be so much of that. Blood-suckers on the side of light."

"There's just him and you."

"Huh. Angel? Funny name for a bloke. Say ...."

Willow spun around to the sink, turned the water on full, and began banging around last night's dirty pans.

Spike followed her. "This Angel. He's not t'other one, is he? Who Buffy ...."

"We could play a hand of cards now!" Dawn said. "If I can find a pack. I have some in my room ...."

"Is he?" Spike said, standing close to Willow's shoulder, able to gauge the answer just fine by how she colored up, the gallop of her pulse. "Don't insult me now, Miss Willow."

"Okay, yes. You figured it out. She's always loved him. But it's been over for years."

"Still, she should be mourning."

"She's been so taken up with you, she probably hasn't had time to start processing that yet. She got the news at the same time—that Angel was gone and that you weren't." Willow looked up at him then. "But when it really hits her, which it will. It'll be hard."

He slotted this big new piece into his meagre inventory of knowledge.

Willow wiped her hands. "Please don't ask me anything else. I can tell you more about this place, who's here, what we do. Things you should know."

"All right." He sat down to listen.
Giles wasn't helping. Before she showed up, Xander had been sure he was the engine on the anti-Spike choo-choo, but now Buffy was here, speaking for him with such plaintive reasonableness, Giles was listening and asking the occasional neutral question and failing entirely to remind her that Spike was absolutely no-doubt-about-it Evil Bad and Worthless.

"Doesn't it amaze you, even a little bit," she was saying now, "that he got himself souled? That he came back afterwards to help us, even though he knew he wasn't going to be welcomed? I mean, you're so scholarly, Giles, it never excited your curiosity, to find out more about that? It's never happened before that we know of, a vampire choosing a soul?"

"Potentials were dying, the First was closing in—I had more on my plate than I could handle."

She looked at him now. With the patented darling-little-Buffy expression that he had no defenses against. Usually. But whenever he thought about Spike, he thought about Anya. That's how it was—that shit-heel had managed to pair himself up with her such that now she was gone forever, he couldn't uncouple them. Anya whom he'd wronged, Anya who'd let Spike seduce her. Anya had suffered and fought and died in battle too. And nothing had brought Anya back for another bite at the apple, the human life she'd loved so much.

Buffy laid a hand on his leg. Xander thought of her leg, that glimpse he'd had of it, shockingly bare, bruised, beneath the disheveled grey bathrobe. How she'd been just crumpled there on the bathroom floor, her face distorted by tears and pain. Spike had done that. Spike had tried to rape her, and okay he'd failed, of course he'd failed, but he'd mauled her and bruised her and shocked her, and that was unforgivable. How could Buffy not understand that getting a soul didn't change that, that there was nothing but obscenity in her taking for her lover that vampire, who'd brutalized her, brutalized them all.

"I didn't want to have to remind you," she said, all soft and sweet, "but it was Spike who got you away from Caleb when he put your eye out. He'd have blinded you entirely ... he'd maybe have killed you. If Spike wasn't there."

She was sitting on his sighted side, but he turned his head, so he couldn't see her.

"Right now, he's just a person who needs help. No memory, no family, he's lost. Xander, you know how it feels to be lost, to need support. Who else can help him, understand what he needs, but us? And I really think you'd like him. He doesn't know you and you really don't know him."

"So I'm supposed to befriend him while he's all Charley, and then when he remembers that we hate each other's guts, I'm supposed to—what?"

Now Buffy looked sad. She was dragging out all her big guns. Xander glanced at Giles, but the big man on the far side of the big desk was being irksomely passive.

"Xander. I know what it is, to be so angry for such a long time. I do. And I think I understand, really truly, that I'm asking you to go counter to your sense of good order, which has always been so strong. But please. Please, for me, can you try? I need your help. Like I always always do."

Her words went through him like the proverbial hot knife in butter—when it came to Buffy, he was all too often weak like veal—and he probably should've eaten something before he came in here, to stave off the food-related ideation.

But veal or butter or buttered veal, he was sticking to his truth.

"Giles, why am I apparently the only one who hasn't forgotten that Spike was helping Angel start
another apocalypse over there in L.A.? I get that he has the power to cloud womens' minds, but you —?"

Giles sighed. "Buffy has pointed out that our intelligence isn't definitive. Willow believes Angel was still on our side. I have to acknowledge that I might well have made the wrong call."

"You really did," Buffy said, her voice low and gentle, graceful in triumph, hate the stupidity but love the stupid.

He couldn't take it. "I'm the one with one eye but you, Buff, have a blind-spot the size of the North Sea when it comes to that peroxide turd. He should be dead. He should be in hell. Him and Angel both, rotting in hell."

"Xander. Is it really good for you, to be so bitter?"

"Yeah I'm bitter, I'm bitter as triple, cold-brewed FUCK."

"Why you little minx. Won again."

Dawn beamed. "That's because you taught me to count cards."

"Did I!!"

She nodded, looking ready to burst with the pleasure of it. He couldn't quite suss this, how anxious the girl was to sit with him, to have his attention. Couldn't be all down to his beaux yeux.

Which, come to think of it. "Look here, Miss Dawn, could do us another good turn. Got one of those cameras that shows you your picture soon's you take it?"

"A digital? Sure I do. Why?"

"Need to see myself. Got a glimpse the other day, an' wasn't best pleased. Need to make some changes."

Her face fell so quickly you'd have thought he'd proposed to hack off all her long hair. "Why? You look fine. You haven't changed."

"Clothes're all wrong. Hair—"

"Your roots aren't showing."

"Not s'posed to look like this. Not proper."

She was flummoxed. "How are you supposed to look? You look like Spike." She pouted. "Wait, I'll get the camera, I'll show you."

She scampered off. Willow was in the sitting room, working. He went to the doorway. "I look like always to you?"

She glanced up from the mesmerizing screen. "You're banged up. But yes, you look fine."

"I need a suit of decent clothes. I need—" His head started to ache, trying to think of what he needed, like trying to retain the fragments of a dream upon awakening.
Dawn came dashing back, the little silver camera with its cord in hand. Five minutes later he saw a half dozen images on Willow’s laptop screen.

"See?" Dawn said. "You're perfectly normal looking. You're Spike."

The pleading in the girl's voice stirred him up with confusion and dismay, even more confusion and dismay than he felt at the sight of himself with the yellowy-white hair, the dark scored brow, the black tee-shirt. A variation in kind of the brute in the watcher's books, a little dandy of despicability. He wanted to slither free of all that, like a snake sloughing its skin, but at the same time he wanted to please this little sister, who seemed to have so many warm ideas about him, whose idea of his proper appearance was this, with any proposal of change an upset.

At least this morning he was able to see the images and not have a psychotic break. He turned away from the screen. "I'm Spike. That's as it should be, then." He gave her a smile, that lit the girl up like a flower. She seemed to love him. How could that be?

Buffy's lashes fluttered. Then she grew still, steely. "If he hadn't fought for his soul and won it. If he hadn't come back to us and helped in ways no one else could've done. If he hadn't willingly died to save us all. I might be able to understand your stance. But Xander—"

"So he's Jesus now." Words of vinegar, acid across his tongue, acid flung in Buffy's face. She jerked from the splatter, her mouth falling open. But he couldn't stop. "He's your new religion. You worship him. With your body. The rest of us have to believe or be cast out."

He couldn't see Giles, but heard the man's chair scrape sharply back, felt him coming swiftly around the desk, before the hand clapped down on his shoulder.

"Xander, perhaps you'd better leave us now."

"Yeah. Yeah, I need to get out of this." Rising, he was afraid his knees would collapse; his body felt like it was made of molten taffy. Fury so intense he could barely see out of the one eye. Aiming himself for where he thought the door was. Slamming it behind him.

The girl, promising no more cheating, dealt another hand of cards. Willow switched on the radio, dialing through various stations, iterations of English and Scots accents melding together with dissonant blasts of music. Paused for a few seconds on some Chopin, then as Dawn wrinkled her nose, kept going. Passed then returned to a loud, scratchy jazz number.

The nose twitched. "This is old. Corny."

"It's not corny, it's great. My Dad used to play this stuff all the time when I was little. He used to dance with me to it. He'd say I was his little flapper." Willow did a few steps, rolling her knees, waving her hands. Dawn's laugh was a bark.

"Dumb!"

"Nah, it's great when you get going." He sprang up, the music getting into him in a way that felt familiar, comforting. Like in that bar the other night, Neil Young. Something he knew without knowing how, floating up strong and distinct out of his blackness. Hotel ballrooms, a blaring band, a crowded dancefloor, everyone in evening clothes, the images—memories?—flooded his head. He caught Willow's hand, swung her in. Awkward at first, but then she wasn't bad. Soon they were
exchanging grins—hers full of incredulous delight.

"Wow, you're good!"

"Done this before."

"Do it with me." Buffy was there in the doorway. Willow lurched into a chair as Buffy stepped in to take her place. The song changed just then, something slower, a foxtrot. She didn't know how to foxtrot.

"Lemme lead."

She giggled, nervous, flushed, smiling. "Show me." He took her through the steps, marveling at his ability, his sureness, unmoored to anything specific, how he'd learned himself, whom he'd danced with before. As they moved around the room, hugged up close, their feet occasionally colliding, he picked up hints of what she was was trying to conceal, a pulse high when she'd come in, a flush already going too. She'd been angry, a little while ago. On her errand, elsewhere in the castle. Now she was intent on this foxtrot as if there was going to be an exam.

"Just glide with it," he said.

She frowned. "I'm all about the gliding."

The other two had gone, as if they'd been silently dismissed. They continued through three more numbers, gathering smoothness, Buffy starting to relax in his arms. Then the announcer came on. She stopped, her left hand still draped on his neck, the other clasped in his. She'd come out in a light bloom of sweat, the flowery scent of her perfume suffusing him. It came to him then, sudden as a trap-door opening under his feet, and he was there, in the moment the blaring band fell silent, the collective moaning sigh of the crowd that gave way to a hum of chatter, shuffling feet, complaining voices, a woman sobbing, the air stinking of human sweat, coffee, Irish stew, home-brewed gin, hair burnt on curling tongs, an amalgam of different cheap perfumes, colognes, oils and tonics, an undertone of urine. A hall, wooden floors, wooden walls, no windows, a mirror-ball overhead, ceiling fans slowly twirling, somewhere in one of those warm Southern places, Mobile or Baton Rouge, an all-night dance, no, not just a dance, not just one night, a marathon, young couples competing to keep going for days, the last ones down taking the prize, cash money tantalizing in that first year after the big crash. He'd been there with her, his dark princess, his light-toed Drusilla who loved to dance almost as much as she loved the squeals of babies, the cries of children, his cock in her cunny. She was grinning up at him, pretending to be tired like all the other girls on the floor, in a white silk dress with bugle beads flashing in the colored lights, her eyes liquid and half-crazy. Ten minute break every hour, when the suffering, determined humans would lurch off to the bogs, bolt down some food, weep, throw-up, pray. And they, the two vampires, would single out the strongest contenders, male and female. She had a trick, Drusilla: what, in those Southern towns, they called mojo. She could make a person come to her. Make a person submit. They could feed on anyone they liked, in the dark cloakroom, and send them back out into the crowd, upright but wobbling, recalling nothing. Have a quickie themselves then, hot hard fuck up against the wall, then rinse their mouths with the sting of liquor from the flask in his pocket, talking trash about their victims, mockery tasty as blood, as they returned for the next 45-minute round.

The blood of the others, made them tireless. They'd won the contest, won the money, all fair and square so far as anyone knew, fistsful of crisp twenties, presented with an engraved brass cup he'd chucked in a ditch later as they careened out of town in a dark green roadster. He could feel the car around him, the rattle of the gearshift under his palm, but that was all, driving off into an abyss of absence. Memory cut off like a reel of film, flapping useless.
The sound and sensation and stink of those days and nights in that hall blew through him now in a giddy gross rush, a bolt of pain through his head with the memory like a vessel exploding. Reeling, he grabbed at a chair, sat down hard.

So much glee. In cheating, in violence, in bloodshed and deceit and death.

"Spike? What is it?"

Her voice startled him. The room came back into the focus. Scotsman talking on the radio about the history of American dance bands of the jazz age. Buffy all redolent, her hand back on his shoulder, face looming in close. "Are you okay?"

He didn't want to tell her. Disgusting. "Somethin' came back to me."

"A memory? What was it?" She cracked a big smile, but in her eyes he saw the pindots of fear.

"Saw myself ... dancin' with my girl. Same sort of music as was playin' just now. Took me back."

The smile faded. "Your girl ... Dru?"

"Guess so." He searched for more—beyond the white silk cut plain and narrow as a bathing costume, the beads that flashed like little blinkers, the slippy feel of her silk stocking against his hand when he put it up her skirt, her cooing as he fucked her in the hot close little ante-room. Cunny cool for all its wetness. There was nothing else—he couldn't make her appear to him in other guise, couldn't see her laid out beside him in a bed, or against any other background, couldn't find where he'd first met her. Just that one sliver, like the view through a door three inches ajar. All else blackness.

"Dancing where?"

Didn't want to tell her the whole thing, certainly not how the memories juiced him up, so he'd be hard in another minute if he didn't distract himself. If he didn't stop thinking of how they didn't feed from the neck, at that marathon—they went where the bite wouldn't show. He'd sink his fangs into a girl's inner thigh, snuff up the musk of her cunt-sweat and mute hypnotized terror as he swallowed. Battening on her. Getting strong to beat her on the floor, getting hard to fuck his Dru.

"Just dancing. That's all." He had to swallow now, once, twice, to keep his stomach from reacting to the outrage of his senses.

"That's good," Buffy said. "If you can remember that one thing, it probably means that more is coming."

More is coming. Christ.

Buffy's smile was wavering. He slipped his fingers in with hers. "Never mind that. How'd your errands go?"

"Giles is starting to see things my way. And meanwhile, he's agreed that you can work with the girls again."

"Work—?"

"Before, when they were still potentials. In Sunnydale. You helped me train them. Gave them some practical lessons in fighting with skilled experienced vampires. I was hoping you'd do that again. We have a lot of girls on the squad here who could use the practicum."

"You want me to—" He struggled to let the foul memory go; it clung around him with a palpable vitality. The vein in his temple throbbed like a flail. But what she was saying was more important. "You want me to fight."

"Spar. Do you think you can do that? We could do some ourselves first, to get you limbered up."

"Sure, pet. Whatever you like."

"You're wincing. You don't have to tell me yes when you mean no."

"S'not that, got a bit of a head-ache."

"What would help?"

"Dunno. Just wait it out." What he wanted, he realized, was to be alone for a little while. Could he tell her that? Just to have the room to himself, to try and deal with this new shard of himself. A drink wouldn't go amiss either. Well, given his druthers he'd like to get blotto, and to be left alone to do it.

"I—I'll be nearby, if you need anything." As if she could read his mind—which if she could, that would be half the problem solved. He heard her go into the bathroom, the water go on. Was able to relax a little, feeling himself unobserved.

And then the knock on the door.

He waited, but the water didn't go off—she hadn't heard. Spike went to it. "'Lo?"

No answer. Clearly whoever it was had been hoping for a different greeter.

Spike opened the door anyway.

Harris stood there, foresquare, hands balled into fists at his side. "Is Buffy around?"

Here was the source of the emotion he'd smelled on her—this one was acrid with repressed rage. "Come in, I'll tell her. Think she's rinsing out her smalls or some such." Spike stepped aside. The other man had to turn his head to look at him, and did, the one brown eye taking him in like some eyesore in what ought to be a beauty spot.

"Wait a minute. I have something to say to you."

Something in Spike curled up, like a salted slug, at the words, the hard look. And something else unfurled, something fearless and combative that told him this angry man was a nothing, his opinion of no interest. The two somethings duked it out with Spike's curiosity, making his head throb harder, his stomach roil. That would be the last straw, if he were to hork up blood all over Buffy's friend.

"Yeah."

Xander stepped out, onto the landing, and down a few stairs, so Spike had to follow.

"I realized something about you just now," Harris said.

"Yeah?" Spike leaned against the stone wall, that still held the dead chill of winter even now. "Do tell me, 'cause I know fuck-all about myself."

"I asked myself, why is this happening? Because you've been in L.A. the last year, getting your evil on, which is par for the course with you. But you left Buffy alone. You weren't interested even in letting her know you were around."
Harris leaned in a little closer, like he was going to give the punchline of a joke.

"This is all in Buffy's head. You and her together, it's her new project. She's making it all up. She can do that, because you have amnesia. When you stop having amnesia, it will end."

The corners of the man's mouth twitched slightly as he spoke; his tone was confidential, almost cheerful. The meaning not immediately apparent, but before he could parse it, Buffy's voice came from within, calling out. "Sweet—? Why's the door wide—oh. Xander." She froze when she saw the two of them, her eyebrows crawling up towards her hairline.

"Hey Buff. I came by to apologize for before. I was way out of line."

Brows down. "You were."

"I know it. I'm sorry. You were right, about the bitter. I just wanted to say that. And that I'm really sorry I spoke that way to you."

"Huh. Well. Okay. I accept your apology." Her voice at half speed, muffled, like she was logy, newly awakened. Didn't look at Spike, only at her friend. Who put his hands out, to take her in his arms; three steps lower than her, they were at eye-level as she laid her cheek on his shoulder, accepted his hug with brittle motions. Spike watched, wondering. What had the fellow said, that he was backing down from now? Bitter, yeah, the bitterness cloaked him. He didn't smell sorry.

What he smelled like, what he sounded like, was someone certain he'd win. By attrition. By elimination. Someone who could afford to be patient.

What he'd said. When you stop having amnesia, it will end.

Was just what she was so afraid of.

It will be all right. It will be all right. It will be all right. If she kept repeating this while the coffee dripped through, didn't skip a beat or miss a trick, it would be true. Hell, it was true. Xander had apologized. Xander had allowed her to introduce him to Spike. The men had shaken hands while she watched. And now they were both at the big kitchen table, waiting for their elevens, and Xander was going to give her the run-down about what had gone on at the castle while she was away, and help get Spike into the loop. It would be awkward for a little while and then it would stop being awkward, and all would be good.

After all, Xander had been okay with Spike, mostly, those last few months in Sunnydale. They'd co-existed. They'd even worked together. So this out-sized reaction to Spike now, had to be about more than just Spike. It was Spike-linked-to-Angel—Xander had never gotten over his suspicion and dislike there, so of course he'd been all over the idea that Angel had gone dark in L.A. And on top of that, a resurgence of grief about Anya. Which could happen. Grief was a tricky thing, like anger, you couldn't control it, you couldn't call time on it, you might think it was over and done with and then phwoooom it reared up again bright brand-spanking new. But even when it did, usually you had your little meltdown and then you got on with things.

Xander was going to get on with things. And Spike would make allowances, if only for her sake. He wouldn't let Xander's antipathy interfere with ... with ... splort. Coffee brewed. She grabbed up the pot in one hand and the biscuit tin in the other and turned to rescue them from their unwieldy silence.

Xander opened the tin. "We haven't been here long but we've taken up all the customs. Biscuit?" He offered the tin to Spike, who took a suspicious sniff, and shook his head.
"Sugary."

"That the point."

"Don't fancy sweets." He hesitated for a second, then put a hand out to touch her hip, where she stood beside him, pouring. "'Cept for this sweetness." He smiled up at her, and for a second she had a dopey feeling of being a happy fifties housewife in an advertisement, making perfect coffee for her perfect husband. Then she glanced at Xander, whose face was set in a pleasant plastic neutrality.

Why didn't Xander have a girl? The castle was full of them. Was it because he was a sort of authority over them, that he wasn't seeing any of them? She ought to speak to him about that, encourage him. Vague ideas tumbled through her mind; double-dating at the movie house in the village with Xander and the slayer of his choice, a couple pints at the pub afterwards, the four of them playing darts. Girls holding back a little so it would be more of a contest. How nice and ordinary that would be.

But unlikely. "So," she said, slipping into a chair. "What did I miss while I was away?"

Xander talked, spitting out names—girls and demons and watchers—and their little code-words for brewing situations. Spike was listening, but Buffy knew he couldn't really be following any of this. He still seemed to have a headache; he looked paler than usual, which hardly seemed possible, faint greenish circles under his eyes. Xander mentioned other cities, other continents—places where her presence might be needed soon. Spike tensed a little, at the prospect of her leaving.

She knew Xander was mentioning this stuff just to wind him up. To put him off-balance. Gently, she said, "There's other squads can handle that stuff."

"Sure, if you think so," Xander said. He gave Spike an easy, insincere smile. "You were lucky the Buffster was between crises when the call came about you. Otherwise you'd still be cooling your heels with our colleagues in the City of Angels."

Spike nodded. "Don't remember that."

"Right. You were batshit, they mentioned that. Had to be locked up and sedated."

"Xander ...."

"Just filling him in."

"He knows about that."

"Uh-huh." Another smile, another swallow of coffee. "Could be kind of a nice break, huh, Spike?—not remembering anything. All the painful shit just wiped away, and you get the girl. Whereas others—I, for example—get to keep the agonizing memories, all that stuff we can't do anything about anymore. And the girl is all gone. The girl, a demon not unlike yourself, receives no do-over. Of course, that means her sacrifice was real. Not like yours."

Buffy started up. "Xander—!

Spike's hand on hers. "No pet. Let him say his piece. His mind's full, an' might as well be unburdened on me as anyone else."

"What he did in Sunnydale, for our side," Xander said, the emerging broken, like a forced confession. "Didn't mean he was good. Because it was only for you. The ulterior motive—never anything but what he wanted from you. That he wasn't going to ever get. Because you wouldn't do that. You wouldn't and you didn't. Never." His hand trembled against the mug handle; he pulled it
back into his lap. Head lowered, talking to the table. "Only now—he comes back from the Never-
Should-Have, and you get a case of the, I don't know, The Outlandish Guiltts, and start thinking you
have feelings for—feelings that." His mouth was tight, teeth grating. "I don't deny he's got some kind
of strong sexual pull, I'd like to, but I've seen it too many times now. He pulls who he wants to pull.
But that isn't love, Buffy. That isn't love, he isn't life, this can't be real."

She wanted to overturn the table, to shout him down, to shove him out the door and down the stone
steps of her tower. Spike leaned forward. "What did I do to you, mate? Tell me."

"You're not my mate."

"All right. Harris. Tell me why you hate me. Go on."

"No." Buffy waved her hands between them across the table. "No no no. What is the point of this?
It's just—" Hateful.

Spike, not looking at her, his eyes firmly focused on Xander, said, "She's tryin' to protect me from all
my truth, an' won't answer my questions. But you don't give a shit 'bout that, so talk. Gather I had it
off with your bird. What else?"

She was going to cry out again, get up and drag Spike out of the room. But it was Xander who got to
his feet. "I've got an elsewhere to be, so I'll take a rain-check on that." He winked at her then.
"Thanks for the coffee, Buff."

She followed him to the door, resisting an urge to restrain him physically.

"Xander, you and I have to talk—"

"We'll talk. We'll talk and talk."

"No, I mean—I have things to tell you. Things I should've explained before—"

He tapped his wristwatch. "B Squad's waiting for me below. We'll do it, count on it."

When the door clicked shut on him, she leaned against it. He was being a bear, but wasn't it her fault,
really? He didn't have the facts. She'd never told him the truth about the Spike. He knew nothing of
the good, and thought the bad exponentially worse than it had been. Held grudges on her behalf
she'd long since dispelled.

Spike was at her back, his hands closing around her shoulders. "Seems like a sad man."

"I hadn't realized how sad." Her throat clotted. "We think we're so close, we've been friends forever,
but we don't share enough. We leave each other too much alone."

"Think that's just the way of the world, pet."

"You don't ... you don't have to take what he says about you at face-value."

"No?"

"For one thing, when you slept with Anya—which only happened once—she and Xander were
broken up. He'd stood her up at the altar. You were upset about ... you had your own troubles. You
weren't trying to take her away from Xander."

He turned her, tipped her chin up. "What troubles, Buffy? Troubles over you?"
"This was two years ago. It's such a long time. In slayer years, that's like a couple of decades. Slayer years, like dog years ... because of the life expectancy ...." Not such a funny joke, really. Not funny at all. And for that matter, in vampire years, two might as well be an hour. When Spike came back to himself, all this stuff, it would still feel fresh, wouldn't it? "How's your head-ache?"

"'Bout the same."

She pressed her body against his, drew his face down, forehead to forehead. Eyes stinging with backed-up tears, pity for Xander whom she couldn't reach, for him, for herself, so much that was unreachable.

Reaching behind her, he flipped the door lock. Then lifted her up, arms around her hips, rocking into her. With a little gasp, she caught her legs around his waist. Cottony warmth suffused her, tailed by keener heat as his mouth explored her jaw, her throat. Relief ran through her. She had this, she had him, she could show him again what he was to her, how she was for him. Against her neck, she felt him smile, then a little growling chuckle that made her squirm and groan.

"Want me?"

She spurred him with a heel. "Need you."

They made it only as far as the kitchen table. All three mugs fell to the stone flags; two broke. It was over quickly. Buffy lay gasping, holding him in place. "Don't move. I like the weight." She cradled him, stroking his back. It worked, it worked so well, sex, it cleared things out.

But never for very long.

"We've done this before," Spike said. He raised his head. She didn't dare glance away. Willing him to silence. His gaze seemed to rummage through her, plundering her hidden truths.

Then he lowered his lips to hers, a soft kiss, like the kind that wakes the princess. "Breathe, pet."

She coughed. God, obvious much? "

Never mind now." He shifted off, to give her room.

His forebearance brought the tears up again, but she didn't give way. She wanted to say What are you thinking, what are you thinking about me? even as she didn't want to know, wanted to be spared the process that led to his once more postponing curiosity, letting her off the hook. She reached for him, pulled him on top, arousal flaring again so high she mewed with it, pleading with her voice and her body.

The one need between them that was entirely equal, mutual. Where they could exist together completely and solely in the moment.

Where, released for a little while from the whole sorry dark tangle of the past, she could demonstrate for him her simple truth.

There was always a percentage of the girls—a slowly declining one, she was glad to notice—that watched her every move whenever she appeared among them. Buffy knew the girls were fascinated by her; she was the original, the most powerful, full of glamour and mystery and experience. There were so many of them, that she hadn't really gotten on a familiar footing with any of the new slayers. She taught them and advised them and sometimes bawled them out. They gossiped about her,
assessed her, criticized her behind her back. Sometimes she knew what was being said, and sometimes she could only guess, and most of the time she didn't really want to know.

But in the days after she brought Spike into the castle, she was aware with something like paranoia, of how closely she was being observed, speculated on, discussed. Especially after Xander's abrupt departure with a small squad—answering a call from Faith for him to coordinate the big anti-demon op in Cleveland—something she might have horned in on herself, if not for Spike's presence, and despite Faith's resentment. Xander's anger and disgust about Spike's presence weren't exactly a secret; even though the op was real and Xander the one who'd have gone no matter what, his leaving forty-eight hours after Spike's arrival created a buzz.

It was easy to ignore for a couple of days—she thought of herself as being on her honeymoon, not really wanting to leave her rooms, except for those hours at night when they went out into the woods, so that Spike could have his air and his stars and his long run, making her labor to keep up as he tracked animals for the sport of it, moving swift and silent through the shrouded leafy dark. Then in the hour before sunrise, making love to her on a mossy rock by a purling stream, a location out of one of the romance novels the girls swapped in the laundry room.

But they couldn't hide out forever. She was aware that Spike was already concealing a restlessness that could only get worse. She was afraid to probe his thoughts too deeply. The morning after Xander left, she brought him down to the training room. It was her usual time for teaching, a good time to get him involved.

He'd resisted sparring with her out in the woods—she'd tried to get him going a couple of times, dancing around him, punching the air, coaxing playfully C'mon, try to get a kick in at me, just try, but he preferred, he said, to cover ground, needed to dispel himself ahead of the long daylight hours shut indoors.

The room was already full of girls in motion, working out amidst shouts and grunts and jokes and chanted count-downs. When they walked in, everyone stopped. Every head swiveled.

At her side, Spike stood frozen. She whispered, too low for any but vampire ears to hear: "Are they too much for you?"

He blinked. She imagined him taking them in, a huge roomful of slayers, through all his vampire senses. He was tense, planted back on his heels, motionless. Assessing.

Then his shoulders rolled, neck curling. He stepped forward with a smile. "Hello my darlings."

A shiver climbed Buffy's spine, distinct as fingers spidering up the cleft. It was him. He was back. This whole thing was over. He'd just reintegrated, bam, like that.

"Oh my God—Spike—"

He stepped forward, just out of reach of her reaching hand. "William the Bloody, the Notorious, the Reviled, at your service. Which of you ladies would like to take me on?"

No one moved. That's when he turned to her. Fanged out. "Shall we show 'em then, Buffy? Little demo for the troops?"

Behind the fierce array, the puckish grin, his uncertainty glimmered.

She'd been wrong. He wasn't back. He was making it up. Doing what he thought she expected. He was, ha ha ... Vamping.
In front of all these keen observers, nothing was more important than to show him in his best light. Her emotions were nobody's business. She shook back her hair, took a stance. "Hand to hand?"

"As you prefer."

Later, she would tell herself again that it was all her fault, for not preparing the way. Not talking first to the girls. Not talking to him.

She hadn't anticipated the variables. What could happen.

What did.

That a Dinka slayer, six-foot-two at fifteen years old and with only rudimentary English, would impetuously seize the opportunity of Spike's turned back to launch her own attack.

Or that quicker than the eye could track, Spike would break Bakhita's long thigh bone in two places and then have to be dragged off her neck, the blood spattering from his lips as he screamed.

Three slayers held him down until Willow dashed in to put a stasis spell on him.

It took two hours for him to stop making the pitiful keen of an animal with its leg in a trap, for the game-face to finally fall away. Another hour in which he slept—at least, she hoped it was sleep, though it seemed like death. Buffy sat by him on the training mat, his hand wrapped in both of hers. The room had been cleared except for three slayers who stayed to keep a watch. It was all she could do not to tell them to get lost, but she knew they were there on Giles' orders, and that they wouldn't go. Anyway, it was probably better that they get this eyeful, so that later on they could tell the other girls how it was when the vampire came to, how after his initial confusion, his first thought was of the girl he'd hurt.

"They took her to the hospital. She'll heal." No need yet to tell him that he'd shattered the bone, that she was in surgery to have a metal rod inserted. She was a slayer, she'd be whole again in a week. "And she'll have this experience. She'll have learned something."

"Didn't want to teach her that." He groaned, struggling against the stasis that held him almost immobile.

"Did you ... did you have another memory, when she came at you?"

The mere question seemed to cause him pain. She couldn't tell if his silence was because he couldn't answer, or wouldn't. She smoothed a hand through his hair. "Spike, it'll be all right."

"I am a monster."

"No. It was my mistake, I didn't prepare the girls. You just weren't ready yet."

He fanged out. "I am always ready."

There was something so deadening, so despairing, in this display, that she couldn't find a quick answer. Spike turned his head away from her. She felt he wanted to crawl off, like that wounded animal, to hide himself.

Then Giles was there, with Willow. Released from the spell, Spike sat up. He moved like an old tired man. When she tried to help him, he waved her off. Rising slowly, a hand to his forehead. "How's the girl?"
"She'll recover," Giles said.

"Suppose you have somethin' you want to say to me."

"Giles, this isn't his fault. I—"

"Don't."

Anger sparked at his pleading look. She said, "No, you don't. Don't spin this accident into a shame spiral. You have nothing to be ashamed of. You are one of us, and you're not whole, and there's no one here who doesn't want to help you." A glance at the others. "Right, Giles? Will?"

Willow, bless her: "Absolutely right."

Giles, after a pause: "We must address your condition. In a practical manner."

"Lock me up."

"No! That doesn't solve anything."

"I'm a killer. I—"

"No. You're just not ready to be exposed to threatening situations. Any warrior who'd survived what you've survived, would've done the same. We don't punish that person, we care for—"

"I'm not a person, you silly bint."

"Mr Pratt, would you join me in my study? We can talk more comfortably there."

The name, Giles' tone, snapped him around. "Right. Lead on."

She followed, but Giles laid a hand on her arm. "Not you, Buffy."

"What do you mean, not me? You can't—"

"Can speak for myself," Spike said.

"I know, but—" How she hated having to relinquish control! "Giles. Remember what I said. Wherever he goes, I go too."

Spike looked around. The study might as well have been in-situ for decades; done up in donnish splendor, walls of books, old good rugs, heavy draperies, worn-in sofas, a huge desk heaped with material, the small computer set off to the side—its user clearly not a computing man.

An obscure thought wriggled through his mind, that he was here to be caned.

"Water? Ice?"

"Neat. Just a finger'll do me."

Giles handed him his drink in a heavy crystal glass, and took his seat not behind the desk but in the other leather club chair opposite Spike's.

"Didn't want to break that big girl. Couldn't control myself. She thinks I'm all right, but I know nothin' of the sort."
"Quite. Yet I think her assessment is correct. Post-traumatic stress. Complicated by the fact that you're a vampire as well as a man."

"As well?" Spike chuckled. "Girl's not here. Don't need to humor her."

"I'm not humoring her, or you. Everything she said when you two arrived, was entirely appropriate. I still don't know for certain what you were up to in Los Angeles after the battle in the Sunnydale hellmouth. Set that aside for now. Whatever has become of your mind, your soul seems to be intact. I'm going to proceed on the understanding that you are one of ours."

One of ours. The phrase echoed strangely in his head. "You didn't want to let me in this place. You didn't like the sight of me with her. Why not?"

Giles swirled the scotch in his glass, sipped. "Never mind that, Pratt. All water under the bridge."

"No one will tell me anything. An' call me Spike, I know you want to. Pratt's a bit of an unfortunate handle anyhow."

"Well, Spike. Willow believes that your chances to regain your memory organically are still good. But that it's best that we don't make suggestions which—"

"Suggestions?" He laughed. "That what we callin' em now, all my horrors? Tell me this much at least—I ever hurt you?"

"Physically? No. In fact, you came to my aid a time or two over the years."

"Saved your life?" he sneered.

"In fact."

They all kept saying that. He really might as well have been Jesus like Harris said, to hear how they all rabbited on, how they got that solemn po-face expression when the matter came up. Made him feel sick. "I'm no good to anybody in this state. Dangerous. Useless."

"No one is useless. You would like to be of use?"

Something in the question flooded him with a longing he hadn't yet realized. "Hate this feelin' like a bloody invalid. I'm able-bodied enough. Give me a mop and a bucket. Give me—"

Giles extinguished his smile in his scotch glass. "Work there is here, a-plenty."

"Well let me at it, then. Need to fill my days, do some bit of good. Just tell the slayers not to make any sudden moves around me. Not to come up on me from behind without makin' a loud noise first."

"We'll do that."

"Still think ... guess a vampire can't just go an' check himself into the laughing academy, can he? Too bad."

"You aren't really suggesting you want to be medicated?"

"Dunno what I want. Just ... whole thing seems ... dubious. Guess I'm in Harris's way of thinkin'. Isn't that a lark?"

Giles removed his glasses, rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "I've known Buffy since she was fifteen, and have found her to be a fine judge of character, often displaying insight beyond her years. This
time I'm going to trust her judgment about you, Spike. I suggest you do the same." He rose then, extending a hand.

No caning. He felt he'd gotten off too easy. His senses told him Buffy was now hovering outside the study door.

"Anything else you'd like to say, or ask?" Giles said. "Of course we can talk again, whenever you like."


The other man's eyebrow shot up. "Your—?"

"Clothes. I need a suit of clothes. They tell me I'm dressed like I always do, but I don't like it."

He seemed amused, but quickly repressed it. "I have occasion to drive into Edinburgh day after tomorrow. You can come with me. The light will make it difficult, but you used to get about in the day, before. We can manage it."

"I've got no money."

"My tailor will put it on account. You will of course be paid for the work you do here—"

"Startin' out deep in debt. That makes a fellow feel human, all right."

He couldn't take any more apologies. Any more of her claiming of blame for what he'd done, for his condition, or anything. She was brimful. It made it hard to look at her. She got very silent very quickly, feeling reproached. Took the drive to the hospital, twenty-five miles with him lying in the back beneath a blanket—no use waiting for the ten p.m. sunset, visiting hours would be long over then—without speaking. He could feel her smouldering. Knew he ought to tell her what Giles had said, but some perverse irritated pique kept him from speaking. He had no good reason to be angry at her, but when did a body ever need a reason to indulge in ire? He knew that, though he didn't know much else. Why be any angrier now than he'd been two days ago or three, at her refusal to fill him in?

Giles had said it was Willow's opinion—a witch, not a doctor, but then he was a demon, not a man—that he shouldn't hear suggestions. It was bloody clear that he'd been a brute and a monster, chockful of murder and mayhem. No secret to that. But why should this slayer, who seemed to be all that was righteous, claim him as the love of her life? More there, more to her, than met his too-innocent eye, perhaps. The getting of the soul—he still didn't entirely believe in that, squishy sort of Christian idea he couldn't imagine all these intelligent people taking with such solemnity. If it was true, what could that be about? He couldn't invent a story to fit the slim so-called facts, and the more he tumbled them about in his mind the more absurd they seemed.

Were they playing him, the whole lot? Why bother? He was a vampire, they killed vampires like termites. Was it information they hoped to get, something about this battle in L.A. he'd been on the right or wrong side of, locked up in him, inaccessible and necessary? Was this whole thing in aid of ferreting that out?

Yet Buffy didn't seem eager for him to come back to himself. Otherwise wouldn't she be all over trying the magical solution, trying it now? And for that matter, what was stopping them from forcing
him to submit to the witch's ministrations?

So, no. He couldn't have anything they needed in that line. It was what he had that she alone needed, this Buffy Summers who made pretty speeches about his heroics but wouldn't tell him what they'd once been to each other.

Who was so sure he'd hate her, leave her, when he knew everything again. And yet she'd fallen for him—plummeted, you could say. Some times while he fucked her she put him in mind of a drowning girl, or a girl wishing she could drown, submerge and never come up.

How many times could he ask her, when she refused to answer?

"Look, just let me say it." She spoke from the front seat, facing forward, her voice tight and brittle. "I get that you don't want to hear it, but I apologize. I shouldn't have assumed you were ready for the sparring. Maybe you never ever will be, and that'll be okay. I want you to know that."

He thought of asking what, if he was no longer a fighter, his role in her life was going to be. But knew the question would discomfit her, and whatever answer she came up with wouldn't really enlighten him anyhow. "Don't worry, pet. We're both feelin' our way."

On the surgical floor, they were shown to the right room, and found that Andrew and a few other girls had gotten there ahead of them, with flowers and balloons, though the language barriers kept the visit subdued. But when Buffy looked in, they got up to leave before she'd even opened her mouth.

The patient was tucked up neatly in bed, her dark head forming a staring pupil against the white pillow, the white gown. They'd put her in traction.

Spike stayed out of sight behind the bed-curtain while Buffy greeted her, doing the usual speaking-slow-and-loud thing that everyone did when they didn't expect to be understood. Bakhita listened to her apologies with a yearning uncomprehending look, full of stymied willingness to understand. She answered in her own language; probably just as slow and loud and with as little effect on Buffy.

But he understood. "She wants the books that she keeps by her bed."

"Huh?"

Spike sidled into view, hands held up before him.

"أنا آسف عن هذا كله."

Bakhita, whose fists clenched at the first glimpse of him, became incredulous, then animated, when he spoke. Exclaiming her surprise, accepting his apology, explaining that Andrew had managed to convey to her, by using a translation program on his laptop, who he was, and why he wasn't to be slain, or blamed for hurting her. She asked him to sit, to please talk to her, there was no one else in this place who could.

Buffy said, "You speak Dinka?"

"It's Arabic, pet. An' I've got a smattering. I ..." A piece of information, not really a memory, detached itself from the general fog and rose up to his grasp. "Spent some years in Alexandria before the Second War, learned the lingo in the street." He repeated this to Bakhita, who laughed and told him that explained why his accent was so malformed.

"Well, gee. This is good. I ... I'll leave you to it for a while. I can call the castle and tell them to bring her stuff."
She walked out, stiff-backed. He was tempted to follow, to placate her. But placate her for what? Knowing a language she didn't know? He slipped into a chair, accepted a grape from Bakhita's hand, and for the first time in his remembered experience, felt that he was an equal in the exchange with another person. The two of them were strangers, at a disadvantage in situations they didn't entirely understand. Lonely and confused. Able to make each other laugh—he with his bad constructions, his abysmal accent, she with her reconstruction, using her hands like puppets, of their thirty-second battle royal. She was more than ready to forgive—seemed almost proud of having been bitten. As Buffy had predicted, she was pleased to take it as an experience, something that would fortify her when she faced her next real threat.

When Buffy reappeared, he was reluctant to go. Bakhita made him promise to come back the next day. He told her she'd almost certainly be back at the castle by the end of the following day—that slayer healing will surprise you—but that they would talk again, whenever she liked. Buffy stood with arms akimbo, waiting this out.

"Anything you want me to tell her for you?"

Buffy frowned. "Did you tell her I'm—"

"Sorry, yeah, we covered that."

"Right. I'm not supposed to be sorry. We should go. Apparently there's another contingent of visitors on the way."

Back in the car, she was quiet for ten minutes.

"You ticked off at me for knowin' her lingo?"

"Of course not."

"What then?"

"Are you really not going to tell me what happened in the study? With Giles?"

"Sure I'll tell you." He supposed he couldn't avoid this any longer, that his peevish urge to hold back, to put her at a distance, wasn't right, strong as it was. "He's a fair man, your Mr Giles. He's going to give me other work, since I'm not fit to train slayers."

"Other work?" The idea seemed to stun her. "That's what he told you, that he's going to make you work?"

"Told him I want to. A fellow needs to work, pet. Can't live on love, good as that is."

She said nothing, and a couple of seconds later, she switched on the radio, booming techno that resounded in the small closed space, cutting off any further conversation.

In her kitchen, she began assembling the ingredients for supper while he sipped at some warmed blood. Not until she took a ceramic bowl from the cupboard and set it down so hard on the table that it cracked and separated into two pieces in her hands, did she break her silence.

"I feel I'm failing you."

If she'd said anything else.
Or if her voice had merely been firmer. If she'd looked at him instead of at the broken crockery when she spoke.

He might not have gone off.

But as it was, that one pleading little sentence was a match to tinder.

"Failing me? Why the fuck would you think that? Because you're lyin' to me with every word you do an' don't say? Because you tell me you've never been afraid of me but there's fear in your every look?"

"Spike—"

"Am I your project? Your charity-case?"

"No!"

"You're so scared I'll kick you to the curb when I remember who you are, why don't you just tell me an' we'll see where we are?"

"Willow said it would be dangerous—to your mind, to your sanity—for any of us to tell you things! You have to remember it yourself!"

"An' meanwhile I'm your fuck-toy an' cuddly Mr Golliwog all in one. That's bloody convenient for you an' your needy little cunt, isn't it?"

He saw her start towards him, violence in her staring eyes. Multiple flashes of her strobed through his head in that moment, flaring and dying, leaving him no wiser about times or places or causes, only that it was her long habit—to silence him with her fists.

His roar filled the room, echoing through his body, giving him strength. The chairs flew like nothing, paper airplanes—the crockery they smashed colliding with the sideboard, less than nothing in themselves, but the flying furniture arrested her trajectory towards him. She gaped. He needed something else, lest he strike at her. The table now, oaken, ancient, heavy—upending that was better—the crack and crash as it hit the stone sink answering his rage, stoking it.

And then she tackled him, and they staggered 'round the wreckage, grappling, too close for real blows. She was chanting "Stop stop stop stop."

Here it was again, the wild instinct to turn and tear. Make the kill. So easy. So natural. So satisfying.

He got in a rabbit punch, ooooof and she was off. He bolted, not for the door, but the top of the tower. Heard her scrambling up the narrow stairs behind as he jumped up on the battlement. Moat below, dark valley spread out around him. Wind like wine.

He leapt.

"A domestic disturbance?" Willow's brows crawled up towards her hair.

"Can you just find him for me? He's left the castle."

"Do you want to find him?" Willow knelt by the table, the massive wood surface cracked into two, now blocking half the kitchen. "Do you know how old this is? I was told it was assembled in these rooms, over five hundred years ago, it could never be moved."
"Except by super-heroes."

"Buff ... what happened?"

"I told you. We had a spat."

"Did he—"

"No, he didn't touch me. He fricasseed the furniture, and then he left, air-borne. I thought I was going to vomit, seeing him take that flyer."

"Vampires can do that."

"Well, duh. I know he's not lying mangled on the edge of the moat. He's AWOL."

"I'm not so worried about him," Willow said. "I'm more concerned about you. What did you two ... spat ... about?"

"Just ... c'mon, Will. It's private."

"Really?"

"Really."

"No, I mean, really? You're still gonna do that? I thought we talked now. That we were girlfriends again."

"We are."

"I know why you didn't confide in me back in Sunnydale. Either before I went evil or afterwards. I get that, I totally do. But now? Have you really talked to anybody?"

"Please tell me you're not reading my mind."

"Really not. Can't. Wouldn't. But I know you, Buff. You repress. I've figured out that whatever was going on between you and Spike, before he went off and came back souled ... was a lot more than you've ever told anyone. And last year ... there was a lot more going on then, too. I can guess some of it, but I shouldn't have to."

"I told Tara."

At this, Willow paled.

"When you ... when you two were broken up. One night, after I'd been out all ... I told her I was involved with Spike. She said it could be all right, that it was something I could have if I wanted. But I couldn't hear that. I couldn't think it."

"She never said."

"It was a confidence."

"You fell in love with him, didn't you? After ... after I brought you out of your grave."

Buffy shook her head. "I couldn't. I mean ... I couldn't love anyone or anything then. That was what was so awful."
"Maybe you couldn't love anyone who was only human."

You always hurt the one you love, pet. Her gorge rose at the thought. "I thought he was defiling me. I thought I couldn't stop him. But it was me. He wanted to love me and take care of me and I only ... and he let me. Everything, he just let me."

"He hurt you though. That night, in your bathroom."

She almost smiled into Willow's questioning look. "I couldn't begin to tell you what a long time coming that was. You have no idea the things I did to him first. I was an equal partner in driving him as mad, as miserable, as I was."

"And then he went looking for his soul."

"And then he went looking for his soul." What resonance those words always had for her, echoing, reverberating, the awe of it, the wonder. The one vampire in all the world, all of history, to seek out his own pillory, to face up to his own past.

Buffy rubbed at the broken wood with her thumb. Winced at the splinters she drove into the pad. "His love for me, was, in its way ... perfect. Whole and pure and glittering. Like a diamond. How can anyone face up to something so ... distilled? So perverse? I killed it, Will. I starved it out of him, little by little. So by the time I ... when I knew ... it was too late."

"How can you be sure about that? I don't think—"

"His devotion, at the end. It wasn't for me. It had, what's the word? Trans ... transmogrified. It was for everyone. It was about the whole world." I want to save the world. When he'd said that to her, back at the beginning, they'd neither one known how true it would be. "He knew he was going to die, he wanted to. It was all he wanted." She did smile then, her lips twitching. A laugh she couldn't control. "No other desires left. None. He was only full of glory."

"No other—do you mean—"

"What?" She was laughing merrily now, breathlessly, she couldn't rein it in. "You thought we were lovers, in those final days? You thought we were packing in every last second of sweetness we could grab together? Oh Will. Oh my God. How little you know."

When Willow took her in her arms, the frantic laughter gave way to sobs.

Now this was the stuff. There was nothing like a gang of drunken Scotsmen to take your mind off your troubles. An hour ago they'd jumped him with fists and bottles in a pub garden just for swaggering-while-English; now they were all roaring football songs together at the Toad & Hammer across the square, brawl forgotten, sloppy mates for life in a sea of lager. When the barman called time he was feeling no pain, floating an inch off the sticky floor. Tumbling out into the cool night with his posse, shouting, chanting, tormenting this stupid sleepy little village that was too quiet, too sedate. Four of them overturned a car in the side-street. Nothing loath, Spike picked it up, easy as scooping a beetle off the ground, and hurled it into another. An alarm whooped, lights went on in windows. The shout of astonished approval this earned from his new friends bore him up like a lashing of junk-laced blood. They were his now, he was their leader. They sailed round another corner, into another crowd of pub-leavers; the thump and crack of instant battle, stink of blood, vomit, beer filled the air.
No coppers showed. The fight gave out of its own accord, the participants scattering at some voiceless signal. He was running through an alley with three or four others, left, left, right, kicking at rubbish bins, glorious noise, then in at a garden door.

"All back to mine," his new host slurred, fumbling at the door of a tiny brick house, finally throwing it open with a bang.

"Me too?" Spike said.

"Aye!" And he was in.

Willow helped her clean up the wreck that was her kitchen. They debated whether it would be a good idea to magically repair the ancient table, both understanding that this, uh, spirited discussion, was in lieu of the real argument over doing the locater spell on Spike. Willow being all for letting him off on his own recognizance. Buffy afraid, but not wanting to say so, that he was never coming back.

Or that he'd kill somebody out there. That too.

"I should probably ... fill him in a little," Buffy said. "I pretty much have to now."

"Yeah." Willow was sitting on the counter, making the broom and dustpan dance with little flicks of her fingers. "My advice? Lots of 'I' statements."

"That's always your advice."

"It's good advice! What I mean—tell him about yourself. Don't tell him, you were this or you were that, anymore than you can help."

"Oh. So I don't get to say 'You came back after your death and hid it from me because you obviously didn't love me anymore'?"

"Buffy ... he loves you. Any idiot could see it."

"He doesn't exactly have a choice right now, does he? I'm the only person he knows, and he's stony broke."

"You're being too hard on yourself."

"You would say that. That's what the best friend says."

"Y'know ... I get what you were saying, about how he was Mr All-Desire-Purged, before we went into the hellmouth. But c'mon. He's not some Zen Perfect Master. He's Spike."

"He never even called me. For a year. He made Andrew promise to keep quiet. He was over me. For all I know, there was someone else. And when he comes back to himself, it'll be her he'll want."

"Or him."

"Him—who?"

Willow shrugged. "I dunno. I just kind of like the idea of Spike macking on some cute guy."

"Will!"
"Hey, lesbian, but not impervious."

More warm lager, a chorus of tops popping. The other fellows blotto, shouting and banging about. The tiny house, nasty low-ceilinged rooms, was furnished in empty cans, porn mags, greasy crisp wrappers torn inside out. Under all that junk, some half-broken settees, cushions nearly as greasy as the wrappers. Whole place stinking of rotting food and sewage. Might as well have been a squat. He smelled three young men in regular residence, a rotation of other male visitors, and no woman or girl having set foot in the place in years. The TV came on, some poor girl with huge implants who couldn't possibly have been paid enough to submit to what was going on in her pussy and mouth simultaneously. The others collapsed around the room, suddenly intent on the screen. Spike sank into a corner, knees drawn up, sipping.

What now? None of these punters was remotely shaggable, even if they weren't bleary with drink, farting and belching. A couple hours remained before sun-up, he reckoned. He could just go back. Envisioned himself crossing the moat—they'd know he was out there of course, they'd got demon-detectors out the wazoo—knocking on the huge doors. Foot thick they were. Please ma'am, may I come in?

She hits him. Fist to his face, thoughtless as swatting a fly. She'd promised never to hit him again after he bit her in the safe-house, but it's clear to him now that it's such a well-worn usage with her, she can't really help it. You're the love of my life. What did that even mean?

On the sofa, two of the fellows started poking at each other. In another minute, they'd progressed to blows. When the TV exploded, Spike jumped up. No good here, no good. One of the idiots was unconscious, and bleeding, and he was peckish. Time to go.

No need to say goodbye.

Outside, he looked up and down the quiet dark terrace, considering.

Round the corner, a motorcycle was parked. A little trickery with it, and it was his.

He rattled the foot of the bed a little, and she opened her eyes. In his bad Alexandrian Arabic, he whispered, "Hush, darling. It's too early for visits, but we don't mind that, do we?"

Bakhita beamed. "No, we don't mind. I can't sleep anyway. This hurts."

Spike drew the chair close to her. "That's on account of it's mending so fast."

"How do you know?"

"Don't, rightly, but stands to reason, yeah?"

She squinted at him. "You smell strong of beer."

"Sorry 'bout that. Been on a bit of a spree. I'll have a wash."

She giggled. "You sound so silly when you talk!"

"Anything to amuse." In the bathroom he did his best to make himself neat. He'd stopped off in the hospital basement after ditching the motorcycle, helping himself to some fresh blood, moving
lightning-fast so no one would see him, shutting himself in a men's room stall to suck it down. Then popped up to the surgical ward, stealth coming easy.

Needing ease.

He'd only tried to kill Bakhita. That made her the most uncomplicated relationship he had going right now.

When he returned, slipped back into his chair, she regarded him with a long cool look. "How did you find your soul?"

"I don't know, love. Got no memories. Not sure I believe in souls, anyway."

"Souls are true."

"If you like to think so."

How can you not believe in souls? You're a vampire. You know magic is so."

"Maybe because of that."

She smiled. Her teeth were white like peppermint against her deep brown lips. Made him want to lick them. "Maybe if I stop believing in slayers, I could go home."

"Not having a good time, are you?"

She pouted for a moment, then pulled out of it. Didn't want to go there, and he could respect that. "I need to learn English."

"That's easy enough. I mean—it's probably bloody hard. But you can do it. I'll help you."

"Yes?" Her laugh was like music. "How do I know you speak it any better than you speak Arabic?"

Now he laughed. "I don't, pet. But I'll make you a colorful speaker."

"Colorful?"

"Let's start with you gettin' the swear words down. Once you've got those, you can ease your mind, an' the rest will come."

When the nurse came in with the digital thermometer, as dawn was pinkening the edges of the venetian blind, she gave him a startled glance, but said nothing about his bedside presence, probably because he'd had the forethought to filch a white coat with somebody's identity badge pinned to it, off the back of a chair in the blood-bank.

Having reviewed the words for all scatological functions as well as the various objects in the room, he and Bakhita had both been dozing for a half hour; fatigue had come down on him like a hood, so it was a struggle to come to. After the nurse left, her shoes going squidge squidge squidge on the lino, Spike closed his eyes again, hoping to get a bit more kip before the breakfast trolley arrived and the doctors came by on their rounds and he'd have to figure out what to do next.

But punchy as he was, sleep didn't return. His head was full of Buffy.

He thought of ringing her, then realized he didn't know her number. Stupid. Made him feel like a
runaway child.

Girl was probably furious at him, after he'd demolished her kitchen and called her nasty names and fled into the night. That was mannish of him for sure.

She was only trying to protect herself, and really where was the shame in that? Lonely woman who'd lost all hope gets her man, of course she does everything she can think of to hang on. Besottedness was a state of being which garnered his most solemn respect. Even if the beloved was ... not really a man at all, only some broken monster. Was bloody sad really, but then they were both in the same boat. He was besotted too. Her fear of the "real" him, this Spike character's anger and rejection, floating between them like a threat, made him leery of himself. What kind of a venal jack-ass was he really, not to want this woman? So she was quick with her fists, and beat him sometimes ... they didn't make blues songs out of circumstances like that for nothing. There was something to it that wasn't quite all bad. At least, when the girl was a vampire slayer an' the fellow was a vampire. Stood to reason, didn't it?

And really, what would be gained by her answering his questions, telling him what she was protecting them from? He still wouldn't know himself. And any fool could guess that their past, whatever it was, must've been fucked up and fraught. So what? It was over now.

God, he wanted her.

Right now he just needed to be taken in her arms, to beg her pardon, be forgiven, then shagged back into a more cheerful state of mind. There was a lot to be said, wasn't there, for living in the ever-present moment, casting eyes neither forwards nor backwards? If she thought he could make her happy, wasn't that all there need be to it? Love the girl. Work. Could be a fine life.

More footsteps, stealing up to the bed. Spike opened his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" They both said it at once. Then the awkward patch afterwards, waiting for the other to speak.

During which Bakhita woke, focused on Buffy with a wide smile, and said, "My leg it fucking hurts like bitch, yes?"

"Uh—"

"Good, pet. But you want to say, 'My leg fucking hurts like a bitch'."

"What, you're teaching her to swear?"

"Can't call yourself fluent in a language if you can't talk blue. You're here early."

"We—Giles wanted to convince them to x-ray her leg again, otherwise they'll never think she's remotely ready to be checked out. I came along because ...."

"You didn't sleep all night anyhow?"

Bakhita watched them, understanding plenty without knowing all the words.

"We can't talk in here. Tell her that Giles will be looking in shortly."

Spike conveyed the message in Arabic, Bakhita nodded. He followed Buffy out into the corridor. She was wearing the same clothes as the day before, a sloppy grey hoodie on top, hair scraped into a messy ponytail, circles under her eyes, nearly the same level of turmoil clouding her aroma as when
they’d fought before.

Exquisite.

He caught her back against the wall, going for her mouth. She pushed him off.

"We have to talk—"

"Sod talk. Need you now."

The words made their impact in a palpable astonishment; he saw them—or something—dissolve her resistance, and the next second she'd grabbed him, hustled him across the corridor and through a door.

"Oh Spike—yes—"

Her hands were everywhere, taking possession, mouth gasping as she pressed kisses into his.

They were in the gimp loo, with the deep shallow sink sticking out of the wall; she was already scrambling her bottom onto it, spreading her legs, pulling up her skirt.

It was then, grasping her to him by the arms, hands closing around the stuff of her grey hoodie, that a bomb went off in his head.

—grey stuff in his hands, pulling at it, grappling, struggling—intractable obstinate goading—pushing pleading forcing—

Then he had the door down—torn from the hinges—was scissoring across it, away from her, in the grip of a blinding blindsiding pain he couldn't evade because it was him, detonating in an endless stabbing loop in his head. Ran pell mell, through the human stink, too much odor, too much light too much sound too much everything. Get away get away get away.

Only when he'd gone to ground in a custodial closet down in the bowels, pitch-black and tiny, stinking of chemicals that masked every other smell, did the eruptions lose some of their immediacy. Tailed off from happening now now now into flashes of memory he still couldn't control. No coherent sense or order in the flood of sensation, no beginning or ending, just an affront, a violent despair, beating a harsh tattoo in his skull. His whole mind shied from examining it. So bright and awful, an awfulness that pierced all through him, chisel to the head, a migraine of the whole body, making him shy and curl and groan.

When the light strobed across his tight-shut lids, he flinched. He'd dug himself in to a tight metal frame, chucking out a bunch of toilet rolls to lever himself as far into the corner, into the dark and close and small, as he could get.

But she'd found him.

"Spike. What ... what are you doing in there? What happened?" Tentative, voice gentle as doves, but he couldn't uncoil himself, wouldn't look at her.

Wouldn't, couldn't, shouldn't. When she knelt there, amongst the tumbling paper cylinders, and touched his arm, he pulled himself in tighter.

"Spike, you can't stay in here. Please come out."
Mustn't. Mustn't be touched, not by her. Not unless it was to slay, to end. Why hadn't she?

What was wrong with her?

"Sweetheart, whatever it was ... it's over now. We have to go."

Hands over his face, heels of palms digging into flesh. Small small small. Couldn't stand the noises. Noises wouldn't stop.

Then another voice. "Buffy, let me." Shuffling, scrambling, then another, larger presence, different smell. Giles. "William Pratt. Do you hear me? If you don't want to attract the attention of the authorities here, who will detain and try to examine you, you must come out of there, and come quietly out to my car. Can you do that?"

The place suited him. Subterranean, no windows, plenty of space, not unpleasant smells, always something to do, and as much company as he could like. The girls were constantly hungry. He helped get out four meals every day, but still they'd appear in the kitchen at all hours, wanting to rummage in the larder, the fridges. They'd all gotten the message from Giles, that he was to be treated as a comrade, and most of them seemed willing enough. He liked watching them eat. Liked their jokes, tolerated their questions, most of which he couldn't answer. Some of them would ask him to fang out, wanting a good look, even wanting to touch. Mostly they were kind, some a bit diffident. They'd heard that he had his moments of batshit crazy, but none seemed fearful of him, only appropriately cautious, not wanting to set him off for his own sake rather than theirs.

He slept in a snug little room that had once belonged to some under-kitchen maid who'd been housed close to the fires she had to tend first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

His trip to Edinburgh had been postponed, but he had new kit all the same, wool trousers, white cotton shirts and undershirts. Things that felt proper, satisfactory. Every other day he polished his new boots, enjoyed handling the brush, the neat little can of blacking, the soft cloth. He got rid of the yellow hair one day, letting Andrew, strangely eager, go at him with the electric clippers, purring it off to leave a soft short furze that reminded him, as he ran a palm over his head, of the felt on a snooker table.

He worked, and waited for something more to come back to him. Willow and Dawn kept reassuring him—he hadn't described the content of this latest crisis—that his memories would come back. "You're not going to get better overnight," Willow said. "It's going to be a process. Gradual re-integration. And ... you probably don't have a lot of happy memories in the first place, so ... it's going to be a hard process. But you're not alone."

He wasn't alone. He was a minor, humble, grateful member of this enormous complex household. Doing the tasks laid out for him by Mrs Ambler, who ran the castle's domestic matters with a cool, rather humorless precision. She was unimpressed by his demonhood and potential insanity; cared only that he did his jobs the way she wanted them done, and when he proved competent, letting him be to get on with them. He learned the tidy satisfactions of being a servant, having a place.

He had his choice of spots to spend his evenings, on the other side of the baize as he joked to himself—watching telly or playing Xbox with the girls in the lounge, or a hand of cards with Dawn, who made a point of visiting him every day too, working at her studies in the late afternoons at one end of the vast work-table while he shelled beans, scoured pots, ran the mop across the wide stone floors. (She was disappointed but understanding about the change in his appearance.) Helping Bakhita with her English, the homework she brought back from the local high school, improving his Arabic a little
too. Hours out of doors at night, sometimes walking the local lanes with Giles or Willow, or just on his own, down to the village where he’d have a pint or two, not with the louts but in the old men’s pub, their burred impersonal talk a kind of sop as much as the lager.

The only one he didn’t see was Buffy.

Not quite what he’d intended, when he told her he couldn’t live with her, couldn’t sleep with her.

But that seemed to be how she took it.

He didn’t quite know why he couldn’t. Still didn’t understand what it was he’d remembered, if it was a memory at all and not some brutal haunting, an astral punishment for he knew not what. It had receded into a recall of pain without the pang itself, except sometimes. Sometimes as he drifted into sleep, or out of it, it struck, gale-force. Chopped off at both ends. The horror in it being the sense of yawning over something bottomless, vast, dreadful, in the grip of an unassuageable, obscene and defiling need.

He knew nothing else about it. Except that it had to do with him, and with her, and that he couldn’t touch her now, and wondered that she ever wanted him to.

"So he's completely round the twist again, and now he's prepping our meals? This is a good idea how?"

Spike paused in his kneading, hands sunk deep in the bread dough. The voices carried easily from the empty dining room, two doors away. He wasn't used to hearing forceful male voices in the castle. Andrew sounded like a girl half the time and Giles almost never raised his.

"He's fine! For the last ten days, he's been completely sane and rational. And sweet. He likes to work."

"He likes to work? That's not how I remember it. And I don't know if I want him with his undead fingers in my—"

"Would you pipe down? He can probably hear you."

He waited for Harris and Dawn to come through the door. But their voices receded. He went on pounding the dough.

"How's ... how's your sister?" It was the next day; he'd debated with himself for quite a while before asking.

Dawn raised her head from her school books.

"She's ... I guess she'd okay. You know, in Malta."

"In Malta? That slang for somethin'? I know 'In Coventry', but not—"

"Um ... she left for Malta last Tuesday, on a mission. I assumed you knew."

"Didn't." He resumed chopping up the salad. Tossed her a ring of red pepper, which she caught neatly out of the air and put to her lips.
"I thought she'd left you a note or something."

"No."

"You can call her up, she has her phone."

"She'll be busy."

"She would want to talk to you."

"Can wait for her to get back."

The next day around noon he was awakened by Mrs Ambler's brisk knock on his bedroom door. "Spike—phone for you."

He opened. "For me?"

The housekeeper thrust her mobile at him. "Don't be on long, I'll need that back."

"Who'd be calling you wanting me?" But she'd already stomped back towards the kitchens.

Then he heard her voice. "Spike?"

"Buffy."

"You don't have your own phone, we should do something about that."

"Really not necessary. Where're you?"

"Still in Malta. Dawnie told me you didn't know. I'm sorry about that. I wasn't sure when I left ... I should've written you a note, or had her tell you."

"You all right there?"

"Fine. Some over-ambitious mage opened a portal, and now there's a dragon infestation. Every time we think we've cleared it out and closed the portal, it pops open again like a jack-in-the-box. It's messy, but kind of fun, actually. Good experience for the squad. Listen—"

"I'm still here."

"I need to talk to you."

"Yeah."

"But it seems like all our encounters so far just make things more difficult for you."

"I'm not so bad now."

"I can be back late tomorrow if you say it's okay. Otherwise ...." He heard her breathing against the phone, thought how odd it was, that she was so far away and her little sighs and hesitations were being beamed up to a satellite and back down again. What a world this was. So full of mysteries. Buffy Summers being Mystery Number One. "But if you can't see me, then I—I could go take care of some stuff in Rome. For a few ... for a while."

"Course I'll see you."
"Please don't just say what I want to hear."

"No. Been expectin' daily that you'd put your head 'round the door down here an' say hello to me, but I don't blame you for bein' sore."

"... oh. Was I supposed to—? I thought you ... You were the one who said ...."

"Never told you to keep away."

"It felt that way to me. But I'm not 'sore'. Spike, I miss you every single minute. Every second." She paused. "You have every right to be angry at me, but I hate hearing you sound so ... flat. That is so not like you."

"I'm all right. They're keepin' me busy an' everyone's been right friendly."

"Please, if you're not ready—if you prefer—I can go—"

"Why're you so stuck on me? Haven't I brutalized you over an' over?" The words burst out before he could weigh them; the problem that lurked in his mind every waking moment, that populated the unrecalled business of his dreams. A problem he tried hard to push aside, too much for his enfeebled powers of reason. To bury in work and chat with the girls and a level of patience that surprised him, feeling alien like so much else he experienced in these enigmatic days.

Down the phone, she yipped. "What? No!"

"Startin' to suspect I'm not the only one who doesn't remember things rightly. The evidence I've got says—"

She cut him off. "That's what we need to talk about. But not on the phone like this. Please say you'll sit with me when I get back and let me explain."

"This is your home. Wouldn't keep you from your home."

She was silent then for so long he thought maybe the connection had dropped. Then she said, "Okay" and "Bye" and he heard only air.

The phone was hot and slippery in her hand, from being pressed between sweaty palm and sweaty ear. It was hot here, the dragon exhaust making it hotter. She was sitting in the shade, by herself at a crummy back-street cafe, with a bottle of exorbitantly-priced imported beer in front of her, and she wanted to put her head down and cry for the next seventeen days.

It was almost certainly too late. Though she was getting the feeling that that was only the story of her life, at least, of this resurrected, not-meant-to-be portion of it. Everything coming around just a little too late, making for Maximum Pain Levels.

Telling him she missed him produced a sensation like pushing a rusty knife into her own guts and stirring it around. Not to mention his. Here she was again, imposing herself on this destroyed man who Just. Couldn't. Take It. Being near her brought him out into emotional and physical agony. At the beginning she'd thought she could help him, but now ... now it felt perverse, a selfish yearning to put her own need for him, his attention, his presence, his body against hers, above even his own well-being.

She didn't have to live at the castle. There were plenty of places she could relocate, other slayer
squads she could head up. If he was comfortable there in Scotland, she could let him have that place, that comfort. He deserved to be at ease, to be looked after. He'd served, he was a hero.

The thought of more separation, indefinite separation, filled her with despair.

God, love was tantamount to insanity. That was all it was. Complete and utter.

Willow had told her it was time to talk to him, and usually Willow was right about things. Usually these days, anyhow. But what if he flipped out again? What if even her mildest 'I' statements catapulted him back into madness? She couldn't get the image of him, folded into the bottom shelf of that metal-framed storage unit in the janitor's closet, his slender body shaking with terror, out of her head.

What had he remembered that brought that on? No way to know, but she could take a good guess.

He climbed the stairs slowly. Unsure of his right. The tower was her home, and she was away, and he'd said he couldn't stay in there anymore.

Probably the door would be locked. She hadn't given him a key. He wouldn't force it.

But at the top, he found the door didn't lock from the outside. Going in, he passed from the clammy cool of the stone stairwell to warmer air. The windows had been left uncovered; the night-time rooms still held the heat of the sunny day just over. Everywhere was evidence of her hasty departure. The bed strewn with rejected packing choices, the wardrobe doors left open. He went to close them, was drawn instead into the full-on scent of her that her clothes gave off. Couldn't resist burying his face in the tightly-packed garments. Rich, complex, layered. So exciting. Stirring. Activating. He went hard, breathing her in, skin tingling top to toe. In his head, a kind of flapping in the dark, like the wings of a hundred birds disturbed in their cote. Tears sprang to his eyes; he heard, more than felt, the crunching noise of his true face emerging.

What she did to him. Everything he was, she heightened. A certainty he couldn't ascribe, but here was ample demonstration.

He tried to expand on the memory he'd had in the hospital; urging it forward, backwards; something else must be there, the lead-up, the aftermath, so he'd know for sure what it was about.

Nothing.

That morning, when he'd been awakened, he'd been dreaming of two linked hands, in flames. He couldn't summon up the rest of the dream.

There was so much in the aroma. With each deep snuffing breath, ideas of ideas bloomed, like a million billion words all on the tip of his tongue, tantalizing, inaccessible.

His whole being was somehow about this Buffy Summers, but he didn't know how or why. He was afraid of her, and he wanted her, and he knew, the way he knew about things that had happened long before his birth, unwitnessed by him but no less real for that, that he'd committed crimes against her that ought to have had no outlet in forgiveness. Her desire for him was senseless, worse than senseless. Out of order.

Freeing his cock from his flies, he stroked off, inhaling her, pleasure/pain the emblem of her. Turned away from the wardrobe, grabbing up a pair of panties from the bed, wrapping the silky morsel around his shaft. Knees rattling, he spent.
Christ. The tears came then, anguished, grateful. He didn't know which. Didn't know what was to become of him, or her. Brilliant, awful, it was all a blur.

All night he lay across her bed, across her scattered clothes, the pillows redolent of her. As the sun rose, light spilling across the mountains, he forced himself to move. Couldn't defile her bed. He climbed up the battlement stairs, threw open the door. First air of morning, bright and cold and clear. In the shadow of a crenellation, he girded himself to do it. Three steps up and out into the open. Flame. He was pretty sure it wouldn't take long, it would hurt, but only for a moment. Then it would be finished, he would be finished, and his ashes would blow off and be gone.

He eyed it, the bright sun flooding the battlement, just a few feet away from where he stood. Eyed up the relief of ceasing to exist. What would happen to this soul they nattered about all the time? Would it end up in hell? Such fairy stories.

But then it was a bit daft, wasn't it, being a vampire who didn't believe in souls and hell. They all spoke of such stuff with real authority.

Well, he wasn't afraid of that. Couldn't be worse than his current existence.

He put a hand out. The skin bridled, reddening at once, bubbling, and then there it was, flame licking the fingers like he was made of papier mâché. For a few seconds, he felt absolutely nothing. Took one more step, closer to the border between shadow and sun, arm thrust across it. Watched it burn.

Then he thought of her return. How she'd look for him. Expecting that talk.

She wouldn't know, none of them would know. Where'd Spike gone? She'd think—she'd think God knew what, spend God knew how much time searching, or—Spike snatched his hand out of the light, put out the flames with all he had, his own body and the stone wall. The stink, the pain, made him cough and moan. He stumbled back down the steps.

A note. He'd have to leave her a note, so she'd know, and not waste any more of herself on the lost cause of him.

As he blundered into the kitchen, he felt a presence.

Harris. Standing over the broken table, tool-belt on, tool-box by his feet. He started.

"What the—?" He darted forward, like he was going to meet him in a body slam. Then, seeing the charred arm, he pulled up.

"What's that? You start to commit suicide and couldn't man up enough?"

The hand, his forearm, throbbed, burned like they were still aflame. Spike couldn't draw breath to speak.

Harris, open-mouthed, stared. Put a finger up to point, tentative, instincts at war. "Shit, that's gotta hurt. Come here, I'll—"

He reached; Spike skirted back.

"I need to know. Who the hell am I?"

Stunned silence. Their eyes met, staring.

Then Harris cleared his throat. "I'd like to tell you."
"You got a bottle? Need a bleedin' drink."

Buffy had no liquor except for the vodka in the freezer. It was the preference of neither of them, but Xander poured two juice glasses full, and made sure Spike went ahead of him into the sitting room. "We're alone here," Spike said, dropping into a chair. "You're not afraid of me? Aren't I supposed to be evil?"

"The stink off that arm is evil—keep it down-wind of me if you won't let me wrap it up."

Spike stared at the blackened flesh; Xander thought he might be on the verge of having another one of his 'episodes', as Willow styled his bug-shagging crazies. But he only nodded. "Down wind it is." Spike picked up the glass. "Za Vas!" Tossed it back, one long chug. With distaste, Xander watched his adam's apple bob. Spike wiped his lip on the back of his hand, then held it out for a refill. When he had it, he said, "Been keen to know, since I first clapped eyes on you, why you hate me. Can't just be because I shagged your girl."

"No, it can't just be that."

The venom didn't seem to reach him. Spike waited, his pallid face impassive in a way that made Xander want to punch it until it was as much of a mess as his charred hand. He'd meant to start off by impressing on him that it was a cosmic mind-fuck of the first order, an insult to all that was decent and right, that he kept pulling out fresh chances, swam in oceans of slack, while Anya, dear sweet little Anya who had tried and tried and tried the entire time he knew her, just got heart-break and death. She was stripped of life forever. No new chance to clarify things, to get her right, to make it up to her. No way to ever assuage ....

But all of that was too complicated, too diffuse, it could lead to too many explanatory convolutions. Also, it was none of Spike's damn business. What Spike needed to be told was one thing and one thing only.

"You raped Buffy."

It only occurred to Xander after he said it that it might've been a good idea to get a big axe out of the weapons chest beforehand.


Xander downed his own vodka, and poured himself another. "You raped her." It was easier to say it the second time, the words less like razors on his tongue. Loosened, he pressed on. "And before you did that, you stalked her for months. No, make that years. Forced your debased, disgusting urges on her notice. Made tough times tougher for her by your constant presence. Got her to do things with you that ... that she never would've wanted to do, if she hadn't been ...."

Hadn't been dead. The Buffy who died would've never touched Spike. Resurrection ruined her. She was never the same Buffy again. He'd convinced himself otherwise, back after Spike left town. And when he came back again at least Buffy had held him at a distance, not remotely far enough, but a distance all the same, until he died and that chapter was closed.

Only it wasn't closed, because Spike kept recurring like malaria, and Buffy's behavior towards him now was proof he'd been wrong about her. How could his Buffy, his friend and leader, how could
she love this?

The vampire moved then, just enough to bring the glass to his mouth and drink. "Hadn't been—?"

The taste in Xander's mouth was intolerable. The vodka made it worse, but he drank more. It made his head feel tight and dense, his joints like rusted flanges. That wasn't what a drink was supposed to do to you, but it was what it did, apparently, when you drank with Spike. When he recalled now how he'd let him stay in his place, let him be around all those months while Sunnydale fell to shit, Xander wanted to clock himself. How could he have been so complacent? Spike. While good people, Tara, Anya, were gone or soon to be.

"If she hadn't been in a bad way."

Spike seemed to absorb the phrase, a bad way, into himself; it registered on his face, and the curling and uncurling of his hands. "This ... rape. She doesn't remember it?"

"How she manages not to think of it every time she sees you, I'll never know."

"When you think of it every time you see me."

"It happened."

"Harris, I don't doubt it." He drained his glass, let it slip from his fingers. It bounced on the rug, rolled under the coffee table. Spike let his head loll back on the chair cushion. "An' this business of me bein' a hero, makin' the grand sacrifice ... what's the real story there?"

Xander had things he was going to say; he hadn't been planning on answering questions.

"This soul I supposedly went out an' won. What's it mean, really? Know you'll tell me the truth."

"That doesn't—"

"Thing plagues my mind the most. She's your friend, an' you know her. So tell me, what does Buffy want with a wicked demon in her bed? This some elaborate revenge plot I can't work out now I'm shell-shocked an' simple?"

"Shut up." Snatching up the bottle by its neck, smashing it against the table edge, Xander grabbed Spike by the collar. "Just shut the fuck up."

"Can't kill me with that."

"I know. But I can carve a chunk out of your stupid face."

Spike dangled, no resistance.

"I tell you you raped her, and you dare to ask me questions about heroism? I tell you you raped her, and you have nothing to say about that?"

"It's not you whose pardon I'd need to beg. Wasn't for you I was on my way to—" He raised the arm, the skin black and red, peeled and blistered, oozing and raw. "Was just on the point of gettin' out of her way for good, only didn't want to breed confusion, so was lookin' to leave a note. An' then there you were."

Oh shit.

"No need to write a line, now we've had our chat. You'll fill her in. Just tell me one thing, Harris."
Xander's fist, curled tight around the stuff of the vampire's shirt, ached. In his other hand, the broken bottle seemed to urge; he longed to thrust it forward, into Spike's eyes. Vampire healing wouldn't bring those back, would it? Buffy wouldn't want him if his face was an eyeless gash. She couldn't, could she?

"One thing only, Harris. What sort of woman is she, that she wants her undead rapist for her lover? What's wrong with her?"

"There never was any rape."

Buffy crossed the distance between the doorway and his hand faster than Xander's eye could track; in a blink he was relieved of the bottle, of Spike, and shoved hard into a chair.

God, if he'd just dawdled a while over his first cup of joe, Spike would be dust now. "I shouldn't have come up here."

"Yeah," Buffy said. "You really really shouldn't have." She turned her back on him then, and it was like the slamming of some dense enormous door.

"Spike— Oh my God. What is that?"

Xander hated that she could look that way—so frightened and defeated—over Spike. She who, however altered by death, was the dearest and most deserving of women, she deserved to be loved and looked after by someone as good, as full of heart, as she was. Xander had once thought that might be him, but that was so long ago now, the notion evoked only amusement. Buffy needed someone so much better than he could ever be. She needed to hold out for that man, who had to be out there somewhere, who would find her in time. If she didn't throw herself away first, on ....

"It was me, beginning to burn."

"Wha-at? No, no that doesn't happen again! Spike—you were supposed to be waiting for me."

"Thought I'd better not."

"Xander was telling you a lie. You didn't rape me."

"Remember doin' it."

"You—what?" She'd been fluttering over him, but when he said that, Buffy stood back. "What do you remember?"

He looked up at her, still with that blanched inexpressive look, like he was a million years old. All passion spent.

Unlike him, really. Xander noticed that much.

"Want to know why you don't remember it too."

"Because it never happened."

He frowned. "In the hospital loo, came to me. How I forced you. Hideous it was."

"You tried to. That's all."

"Was in a loo that it happened, wasn't it? An' that's why you got so upset, back at that house, when I followed you into—"
"No!" She rounded on him then, getting up into his face. "Xander, how could you do this? How could you lie?"

"Didn't think I was."

Her gaze was harrowing. A kind of disappointment that could disembowel. "Really? Then I guess ... I guess I don't know you as well as I thought."

"Buff, c'mon. Even if, that time in your house, he didn't complete ... didn't he force you, over and over—against your will. It had to have been. You wouldn't consent to ...."

"Xander, I don't deny that our affair at the time was ugly. But it was consensual. I thought you had that clear, but I see you don't, so hear it now. It was consensual then, and it's consensual now."

"How can it be, when he's practically a vegetable?"

The old Spike wouldn't have let that pass without at least a loud exclamation, but there was nothing from him, just a strangled squeak from Buffy.

"Why are you doing this? Why are you so determined to interfere with my happiness? Is it really just because you have none of your own? Is that the kind of person you've turned into?"

Behind her, Spike lurched to his feet. Paused for a heartbeat, swaying a little, then darted, swift and silent, towards the kitchen. Xander knew where he was going. And all he'd have to do was keep Buffy distracted for another minute while Spike got up the tower stairs, and then they'd have all the time in the world to hash out their attitudes to the return and self-inflicted dusting of William The Bloody Fuck.

Just another moment, and he'd be gone for good.

"Awww, Christ. Spike, don't—!" In trying to vault over the back of his chair like some football tackler, Xander overturned it, going down hard on his knees. As he scrambled up he heard Buffy cry out, the sound echoing off the narrow battlement stairwell, followed by a crash as she and Spike tussled to the bottom.

When he reached the kitchen himself, Spike was on the floor, and Buffy was sitting on him.

"Xander, tell him you lied."

"I ... yeah. Okay. You didn't rape her. But only because Buffy is the slayer, and she kicked your—"

"Xander."

"It was a lie. I lied. Buffy told me at the time that there was no rape. She'd told me since that she forgave you for the whole thing."

Spike craned his head to look at him. "Then why do I remember it?"

Buffy said, "We fought that night, it was bad, and yes, you tried, and I resisted. But you stopped. You stopped and left. Why can't you remember that?"

"Just get ... flashes an' bits ... but know what they mean."

"You don't know what they mean."

"Makes no sense, you wantin' me. Let me up, will you?"
"Not until you stop talking crazy. Xander, help me."

Help you with Spike. This was the last thing he wanted to do, but Christ Almighty, there she was, Buffy, at her wits' end.

"Spike, think you've lost your window on burning. Now Buffy's back. Anyway, suicide is what cowards do. You ... you're a lot of things, but a coward was never one of them."

The vampire stared at him. Didn't struggle. The stare unspooled, unbroken, but less and less specific as Xander forced himself not to writhe beneath it. Until it was as if some switch inside Spike had flipped; he was far far away, lost in his own depths; the stare might've been the glassy unseeing eyes of a dead man. They waited; Buffy leaned in, her face above his, hair dangling to brush Spike's cheek. She gave Xander a glance, What is this?

Who knew? No point checking his breathing.

Then Spike's body rattled, as if in a wind gust. He fanged out, straining.

Xander darted forward. "Buff—"

She was already braced on him, holding him down at the shoulders. She made no other move, neither offensive nor defensive. Spike was breathing now, the air whistling through his fangs.

Lifted his arm a little. "Hurts like a bloody bitch—"

Buffy got to her feet. "Let us bandage it then."

Spike sat up slowly. Xander thought: Us?

"I should really go."

"Not until you help me fix up Spike's arm."

"Willow's better at—"

"You are the one who's here."

So he found himself, once again, following Buffy Summers' orders. Getting out the first aid kit. Removing dressings from their sealed packets while Buffy led Spike to the kitchen sink, washing the blackened hand. None of this really necessary for a vampire. He'd heal. Spike always fucking healed.

How did he do it? What was there to continue for, Xander wondered, when you knew you were just bad?

"Xander, please heat up some blood. It's in the freezer."

While his back was turned, she spoke to the vampire, in a gentle murmur, as if he was a small child. "Your bumpy is up ... is that because it hurts less that way?"

"... I ... reckon. Try to—"

"It doesn't matter. I'm going to smooth some stuff on your hand, it'll feel better in a few minutes."

"Buffy—"
"It's going to hurt but I'll be as gentle as I can."

"No, wait a bit."

Xander stared into the freezer, the frigid air bathing his face, which he hadn't realized had gotten so hot. It felt like intruding now, to turn back into the room, but like eavesdropping to listen in on what they were saying, though they were all together in the one place.

Spike said, "I need you to tell me, why. Can't suss it for myself—either you're some way twisted ... don't want to believe that. But I don't know why else you'd go in for a foul thing like me."

Xander didn't have to gaze around to see Buffy bridle, to picture her anguish, her stubborn protest. "You're not ... you're not a foul thing, Spike. I love you."

"Everythin' I know about myself is—"

Xander slammed the freezer door. "You don't know everything." He stepped closer. "What you don't know is, you changed."

Buffy was still holding his arm over the sink. Spike craned around to regard him, frowning.

"Hardly anybody does that," Xander said. "Change. We talk about it all the damn time, but we just clang along doing the same dumbhead stuff year in and year out. But not you. Yeah, you were as foul as they come. But being around Buffy for a couple of years, altered you. She's got that effect on people, she shines on them and they get a little less ... full of shit. Just a little. But with you, it turned out to be a lot. After you tried to ... after that low point, you left town. And when you came back, you had a soul."

Buffy was looking at him now too, but he avoided her eyes; stuck to Spike, so he could get through this. "You traveled half way around the world, and fought some kind of to-the-death contest, to get your soul restored—at least that's what you told her, and she told us, but it's deeds that matter, and you did the deeds. You came back to Buffy, and you made amends. And I still don't like you, and I still wish she'd never laid eyes on you, much less let you touch her. But you're It for her, you're The Guy. You won her, and now you'd better be man enough to stick around and love her, because the one thing Buffy doesn't need any more of is getting her heart broken." He tossed the frozen blood bag on the counter. "You can believe that, because you know I wouldn't say a positive word to you if I wasn't on my honor in front of Buffy to tell the goddamn truth. I'll get out of here now. Work to do."

Until he was out her door and down the tower steps, Xander was half sure Buffy would pursue him, knock his head against the stones. That parting admission wasn't going to undo the damage with her. He'd probably lost her now for good.

Shit damn stupid irony. If he'd been less conscientious about taking a look at that broken table, this morning of all mornings ...

But then, losing Spike again, after this short unexpected return, would've gutted her.

The idea of Buffy gutted, well, he hated that too.

He hated that worse.

Veering through the dining room, Xander sought out Mrs Ambler. "Your vampire scullery boy's on the sick roster today. But I've got a little time. Load me up."
Xander's departure left them in silence. Buffy turned off the running water. Wrapped a clean dish towel around Spike's hand. He winced, but made no sound. "The most important thing is for you to feed. I'll heat a cup for you, then I can wrap your hand while you're drinking it."

He nodded. She couldn't quite get a full view of his face, he kept turning himself so she couldn't see his eyes. He seemed transfixed, far off again like when he was splayed beneath her on the floor.

"I'll wrap your hand, and then I'll fill in the details on what Xander just said. I'll answer anything you want me to. I don't know which is the worse mistake, keeping things from you or not keeping them, but somehow secrets never really work out too well, do they? I should've known that by now."

He let her lead him to a chair. She kissed his brow. The urge to take him in her arms, to hug him and rock him like he was her child just snatched out of traffic, was so strong she knew she had to ignore it. Busy her hands with the tasks before her; microwaving the blood bag, snipping it open, pouring it into a tall mug. She was afraid he'd refuse it, but he took the cup and drank.

"I was able to come back sooner than I thought. I'm glad I did." She slipped into a chair beside him. "Listen now. You were a notorious vampire, some hundred and fifty years old, when you and Drusilla came looking for me. You two were ... a big problem for me, for a while. I thought I'd slain you both—I brought a flaming church organ down on top of you—but you both survived. This was over seven years ago. You were foul, Spike. The stuff you saw in those books back at the house, most of it was accurate, more or less. But like Xander just told you, you underwent a change that ... that no other vampire in history has ever done, and you did it of your own free will."

He raised his head then, met her eyes. He looked so weary.

"Drusilla was gone, and you were—de-activated, as a vampire. I'll explain that later. Anyway, you fell in love with me. I don't know why. The whole concept, at the time ... well, I thought it was laughable, and ... and disgusting. But there you were, on the scene, and when Dawn arrived, with a hell-god on her tail—I'll explain that later too—you were the only one besides me who had the strength to hold her off at all. I asked you to help me protect my sister, and you stepped up. After I died, you stayed, you looked after her. Even though the others, apparently, weren't too happy about it. And then when they resurrected me—you, that's another sidebar for later—I was in such a bad way, still dead up here," she tapped her temple. "You were there, wanting my attention, willing to do anything, and I used you, to work off my anger on. You wanted to love me, and all I'd let you have was sex. We had some furious, thrilling, and, uh, really violent, fucked-up, self-loathing encounters. And then I decided it had to stop, and you ... with all the mixed signals I'd been giving you for weeks, you thought I could be persuaded to go on. That's when the thing in the bathroom happened. You hurt yourself, I think, more than you hurt me, really. It was a blow to your psyche. you decided you had to be really different, something new. When you came back ...." She tailed off. He was drinking the blood in small sips, showing no sign that he was really taking in what she was saying.

"Spike? Would you look at me?"

Slowly, he glanced up.

"Are you hearing what I'm telling you?"

A slow nod.

"Spike, you don't have to rehash those transgressions. In the last months of your life, I forgave you everything. I don't know if you forgave me my part, but I thought you did. You were my friend, and
I believe ... I believe I was yours. As much as ... I mean, not as much as I would've wanted to be, if I wasn't up against an enemy I really didn't think I could beat, who was going to destroy the whole world. I wouldn't have beat it, if not for your part. Your sacrifice. I let you go to your death and I didn't tell you my love until it was too late. Until you were burning. You didn't believe me, or else ... maybe it just didn't matter to you anymore. You were beyond any question of loving any one person. I don't know. I left you to burn, and I thought you were dead. Somehow you were brought back, in Los Angeles. And you never contacted me, for a whole year. Andrew saw you there, and you made him promise not to tell me. So when I came to get you, a few weeks ago ... I thought any chance I'd had with you was gone altogether. Being with you, like this, with your amnesia ... that's why it seemed wrong to me, because I believed—that in your right mind, you'd chosen to keep me in the past. But I couldn't stop myself, because you ... you are ...." She had to pause, to keep her voice level. "Let's just say that everything you experienced, while you loved me and I wouldn't look at you ... all of that has come back on me. Maybe double. Maybe worse. I feel it all. I belong to you, whether you want me or not. It's out of my control."

"Poor girl. All that power, an' you're laid low by a fever."

"Oh Spike, you're not a fever. You're—" She couldn't think of a word, or else there were too many words, a whole thesaurus of words, backed up in her brimming throat.

Setting the cup down, he drew her onto his lap.

"It's always some little thing, gets to the hero. Little nick at the base of the ankle undoes him. Her."

Even as he murmured so discouragingly, he pulled her close, bent her head to rest in her favorite place against his neck.

"You're not a little nick. You're my love."

"Old Nick, I am more like. Devilish thing. Everythin' that's come back to me, an' what I read about myself, is loathesome. All I've got for t'other side is the word of a few who care more, I suspect, for pleasin' you, than for the strict truth."

"You're wrong."

"I don't know, Buffy. I don't know."

"I want you to be well. If you need me to go away again, I'll go. If you don't want me, say so, and I'll go live in Rome. You'll be welcome to stay here, to be a part of this place."

He held her, and she felt him musing. Her own breath held, waiting to know her fate. Thinking of the little flat in Rome, what it would be like to live there, by herself. How she would have to steel herself, control herself, to keep going and not despair. As if despair could be controlled. It was ridiculous. She had no control over anything.

"Harris says I'm not to break your heart. You been disappointed much, before?"

"I want you to decide for what you need. Not me."

"Ah, that's a yes, then. You wear it well, pet, but I could see that, even without his say so."

She shifted, pushing her feet down towards the floor. Better to get up, to put a little distance between them, so he could say what he needed to say. So she could govern herself better, when she heard it.

But he didn't let her go. "Stay put. Did you really think I'd see you off? Suppose you know more'n
me. Suppose I'd better be guided by you, 'til I'm whole again."

"Spike, if you don't—"

"Ssssh. Know my mind, what little of it I've got. Love you today, I'll take your word on those yesterdays. They're over with, anyhow."

He turned her head, brought his mouth up against hers. She only realized then that he was still fanged out, that he'd been fanged out the entire time. She kissed the distended mouth, tongue licking softly in past the sharp, parted teeth. Felt his cheek alter, smooth, as she breathed against him. Pulled back to look into the blue eyes. Put a hand up to touch his cheek, his scarred brow.

"What happened to your hair?"

"Didn't like it. Got rid of it."

"So I see. I guess I'll get used to it."

"It'll grow back. Maybe my mind'll grow back with it."

"Will you let me make love to you now?"

He rose, spilling her easily onto her feet, his good arm twining around her. "Wouldn't stop you, not for anything."

They made it to the bedroom, she was starting to undress, when the trembling began. Strength gone from her fingers so she couldn't undo the buttons of her blouse. Knees shaking so she had to sit down before she fell down. A delayed wallop.

"What is it?"

"You were going to kill yourself."

He sagged. "I ... yeah."

"You were going to kill yourself!" Seizing up the nearest object, Buffy hurled a wide photo frame full of shots of Dawn and her mother at the wall. It shattered with the jagged crash of her own heart.

Spike started. He seemed suspended, for a moment, like he was going to disappear off into himself again. Then he knelt at her feet. "Seemed like the only thing for me this morning, but now I'm glad it didn't come off. I'm sorry, Buffy."

Her belly twisted around itself, erupting in acid. "Are you? Or are you just resigned? Because I know all about the resignation thing, the sticking around for other people thing. If—"

"No, pet. No no an' no." He took her hand in his whole one. "Got no interest in leavin' this—leavin' you—anymore. Believe that."

"How did ... how come your hand got fried?"

He told her about going up onto the battlement, then returning to write a note, and encountering Xander. The absurdity, the serendipity, of this made her laugh, probably because the only other response open to her would've been a round of uncontrolled screaming. Two attempts in one morning, the first nothing particularly to do with Xander wielding a broken bottle in his face. Shit.
He laughed a little too, but she could tell he was perplexed. They were still on the roller-coaster, and he was a few cars behind.

"This whole situation, God—! It must feel insane to you. Like you're trapped in a bizarre dream that just goes on and on. We must all seem like such desperadoes to you, and you ... with just these little glimmers of self-knowledge." I don't know how you stand it. "I guess I can't blame you for wanting the exit."

"Was the coward's way. Your friend was right enough about that." He rose to sit beside her, his leg touching hers. "No need for it now I'm more sure about you."

"You should always be sure about me." You always were, even when I wasn't. Especially when I wasn't. "Once I start to care about someone ... it doesn't happen very often ...."

"Got it, yeah. Poor little miss, you're still trembling."

"And you're white as a ghost. Maybe ...."

Together they moved up on the bed, ignoring the clothes still strewn across it, still wearing their own, to lie huddled together.

"Go to sleep, sweetheart. When you wake up, you'll feed again, and your burn will hurt less."

She waited for him to close his eyes, but he kept them open, kept them fixed on hers, as if he was searching down through the clear water of a pond to spot one particular sparkling bit on the bottom.

"D'you call all your lovers sweetheart?"

The question was like a boomerang, coming from the opposite direction of her attention, whanging her.

"I haven't had that many lovers. Four, to be precise. Don't laugh at me." Her giggle broke the air between them like a burp. "But ... no. No, I never went in for endearments before now. You just ... you just bring something out of me I didn't really know was there."

"Don't suppose you let me say sweet nothings to you before, either. When we were re-enacting the Clash of the Titans in bed."

"We almost never actually did it in a bed. Pretty much everywhere but."

"Ah-ha."

"And ... no. I didn't let you say any of the things you wanted to say. I was a No Tenderness zone. When you were soft with me, I was harder with you. Punished you for all my own ... my own ...."

"Poor girl."

"I was very sick with sadness. I think you kept me alive those months, even though what we had was so black. I owe you lots of ... lots of softness now, to make it up." She moved her face closer, laid her lips against his. They tasted coppery, bitter. She kissed him, and his mouth opened like the catch springing on a box. A groan rumbled in his throat.

"Suspected there was backstory, from the beginnin'. When you wouldn't sleep with me. An' then when you did. Didn't say anything, but I felt like you'd been through my territory before. Like you were returnin' to somethin' you knew."
"You used to make me frantic. Physically. You only had to look at me ... or I only had to think about you ... and I'd be throbbing. I hated myself for—I'm sorry, Spike. It's only the truth."

"Tell me the truth, can take it."

"I hated myself for desiring you, but boy howdy did we—do we—fit. The first time we did it, it was like we both just knew, exactly how each other's bodies worked, how to work each other into a frenzy. It was ... we were magnificent together. Except for the me being all swollen with guilt and remorse every time." Hard to think about, hard to relate, but it seemed crucial now, to spill it. She wasn't Catholic, but she thought of the confessional. "The reason why—not just chemistry. Though we were all fizzy with chemistry, we were a chemistry set. But it was because you knew me, Spike. That was the uncanny thing about you, from the very beginning when you came to Sunnydale gunning for me ... you figured stuff about me that no one else guessed. Stuff I didn't even want to know about myself. And you'd tell me the truth about things, and ...." A laughing little gasp. "And here you are not knowing anything, but the crazy thing is you still knew me."

His smile was tentative. "Was something about you, from when I first clapped eyes on you in that alley ... that disturbin' ... didn't know why. Still don't, really."

"Somehow, even back when we were enemies, there was this ... intimacy. I could never explain it. Andrew would say it was destiny with a capital D. Andrew loves to tell about us like we're in a comic book, like our story was all fore-ordained, epic, everything fore-shadowing something else."

"'Praps he's right."

"Andrew is a little twerp. And don't be fooled because he looks like Tintin, his hands are dirty too."

"What, him? He likes to hang about in the kitchen while I'm doing the bread. Gets hard in his pants watchin' me knead dough an' thinks I don't notice him rubbin' himself against the edge of the counter."

"Okay, gross."

"He's a murderer?"

"We all are. Even Xander. He once summoned a demon who danced a bunch of people to death. And somehow ... we never really talked about it afterwards. God. I don't want to talk about it now. But just so you know, you're not the only one here with a past you're living down. Nor are you the only demon. Anya—she's dead now, but she was with us for a good while—she was one too. A vengeance demon, for, like, a thousand years."

"Makes me a piker."

"Precisely. We're all trying to balance the scales. To keep the good from getting swamped."

"Go to sleep, Buffy. Your sweet little lashes are flutterin'."

"You first."

"I won't go anywhere."

"You'd better not."

"Can cuff me to the bed post, if you don't trust me. Know you've got cuffs handy."
"I trust you. I've trusted you for a long time, Spike. I wouldn't stop now."

He surfaced into hunger and fire, remnant of some irretrievable dream coloring the edges of his consciousness even as he discovered what he was doing.

Taking.

As his fangs sank in and the first deep pull filled his mouth with hot liquid life.

Beneath him, she was in motion, thrumming, mewling, struggling, her body beating up against his.

He was buried in her, canted, deep in her pulsing heat.

She shuddered hard, shaking against him, sucking in air with a whoop, expelling it on a frantic cry.

He had to stop. He tried to stop.

She was crying. Hands tearing at him.

He tried, but he couldn't control himself.

His name sawing out from her throat, Spike, Spike, and Oh God.

Her fingers against his face, prodding at the seal his lips made against her neck. "Oooh-kay ... getting a little whoozy now ...." Prying him off. "Good—! Yeah—! I'm so close, Spike! Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

That was what this was?

A fuck?

He didn't know how it began. He shuddered with the terror of not-knowing, of being high on her blood, and not knowing not knowing not knowing.

Rolled off, his cock going soft, the tight hard tingle in his balls backing up, a harsh ache.

"Hey—what—"

She was looming over him; he shoved her aside.

What was going on here? What was he doing?

His clothes were torn. Trousers just rent open, loose threads where the buttons had been.

"Spike?"

He sprang up. "What'm I doin'?"

She was all pink, cheeks and forehead and chest. Dribbles of blood running down from her throat, around the apple of her breast, hair in a dense tangle. She opened her mouth a couple of times. The rest of her motionless, arrested. "We were having a really really good time. I ... thought."

You ... you wanted—"

"Spike, you were giving me what I asked for. Don't you remember?"
He shook his head. Tears backing up behind his eyes, that felt at the same time dry and hollow in their sockets as something moldering in a tomb.

"Woke up, an' I was on you ...."

"Woke up? You were awake! Uh ... weren't you? We were only doing what we wanted."

"Maybe I don't want to bite you. Maybe that makes me feel like a slaverin' bloody beast!"

She shifted now, closing her legs, hiding her breasts. Almost cowering for a second, before she tossed her hair back and looked at him straight-on and clear. "How could I have known you weren't wide awake? You ... you didn't speak, but your eyes were open, we were connecting ...."

"Christ. What's wrong with me?" He squeezed his temples; maybe given enough pressure, his hidden memories would pop, he'd be put right like a TV when you kick it.

He kicked the corner of the bed. "This what we used to do? You said you'd been in a bad way—that how you played Russian roulette? Gettin' me to feed while I fucked you—easy way to make me lose my head an' finish you. Suicide by vamp."

Her expression iced over. "No, actually. Just now was our very first time doing that. Before, I wouldn't have wanted it, and you never tried it on."

"Didn't I? That a clue, d'you think, about my nature?"

"Your nature—?"

"Don't want to feed off the woman I love. Maybe there is something wrong with you. Twisted. Perverse."

Her anger was banked now, like a storm piled up behind a mesa. "Maybe there is. Most slayers don't sleep with vampires, much less fall in love with them. I guess I'm that one in a thousand who's just abherent." Fists clamped tight. "This is really odd, see, because you were always the one who had no limits, who pushed me to do this that and the other. And just now I thought I was giving you the ultimate pleasure. I know you were making me feel good. No, great. Really great." She pouted. "There was never any danger that you were going to overwhelm me—you were on top but I was in control. You know ... I'm much stronger than you are. There's really nothing you can do to me that I can't stop if I don't want it."

"An' who's to stop you?" The words slipped out before he could repress them.

She went chalky. Fury clouding the clearness of her eyes. Humiliating her, a mistake. He hadn't meant to. "Spike, I didn't know you were still asleep."

"Dunno that I was asleep. Dunno where I was."

He could feel his whole body battening on the power in her blood. It surged through him, warm and alive. The charred muscle and skin knitting itself in the bandages, tingling hard as it palpably mended. As he thought of it, the potency of what he'd fed on, his cockstand returned. He grabbed up the first thing he could reach, to cover himself, one of her teeshirts left on the bed.

Buffy crawled towards him. "Don't do that." Her tone different; conscious effort to reject the anger that boiled through her. "Please—take off your clothes and come back to me." She gestured. "Don't let's have shame between us. There used to be so much, it was hateful. You didn't hurt me, and I'm sorry you're freaked out, but we're both okay."
"Dunno what I'll be a minute from now."

"Well, who does? C'mere. Finish what we started. Start again. I want you in my arms all day."

Shucking his ruined clothes, letting her draw him back down, into the salty musky aroma of her body, the disordered sheets, the tang of her still-oozing blood, felt like a descent into bottomless depths.

"God, you are so beautiful," she said. "Lie back, let me just ogle you for a minute, okay?"

Under her scrutiny, his erection wilted again. She sat up on her haunches. "Spike, I didn't know you weren't really with me. I know how important consent is—look, I promise—next time you wake up all ready to roll, I'll get you to tell me how much is the square root of forty-four and who the Prime Minister is before we get busy, okay?"

"Glad it's just funny to you."

"Oh Spike. No, it's not funny. But what's the point in punishing yourself for something that wasn't wrong in the first place? Is it really so terrible that I'm hot for you, that I want you up inside me in every possible way? C'mon ... things keep cropping up, taking us away from each other, and ... I need you, Spike. I need this."

"You need to get yourself off by bein' half drained."

She stiffened. "It was nothing I couldn't spare. I'm strong, remember, I'm the slayer. I didn't know how good it would feel ... how arousing ... and there's nothing I want to deny you."

"Didn't think you were. Just ... didn't know it was to be that."

"You were very willing. I didn't have to force you."

He turned his face away. "No doubt."

"Are you afraid I'm going to ask you to turn me? I won't. Never."

"You say so now."

"Never." She threw up her hands. "Do we have to fight now? Isn't it a waste of time?"

He jumped up again, stumbling away across the room.

"Be careful—there's broken glass on the floor!"

He could've laughed at that. "You say there's nothin' I can do to you. But what about the others? Your little sis hasn't any special powers, has she? An' what about the locals? Can't even go down the pub for a pint if I can't be trusted not to light into some punter's neck."

"So ... for a little while, you can stay in the castle, while this shakes out. Have your pint with the girls. Visit with Dawn when I'm around, or one of the other slayers, or Willow, she's powerful enough to freeze you on a dime. Spike—I think this incident has to mean you're getting better. Things are—shifting around in there."

"Or I'm gettin' worse. More black-outs, more frequent. You don't know, do you? All we know is when I disconnect, I'm dangerous. An' this isn't the first time."

She'd been reaching for him with both hands, but now she let them drop. Keeled slowly over, to
bury her face in the pillow. Then, with a long God-give-me-strength breath, raised her head again. "For the record, please note: I invited you to bite me. I urged you. I took your head in my hands and guided—"

"Buffy. Missin' my point."

"Oh God." She thrashed at the pillow. "You aren't wanting Willow to hex you?"

"Might be ... might be time to try that."

She drummed her fists against her thighs, blows he felt against his own chest, where he suspected she imagined them falling. Frustration and fear brought out a bloom of sweat on her body, enhancing her aroma to the point where he could practically feel it, in his sinuses, in his barely-retracted fangs. She was such a presence. He was a magnet, she his True North.

"Look, can we—I'm not downplaying what you're saying, your fears, I get them. But can we just ... can we just give it a few more days? I mean ... I just got back, and here we are alone together at last, and I just want some us-time. Please? Sweetheart?"

When she called him that, in just that tone of voice, it was as if she was reaching inside him with her little fingers and plucking at his heart.

She reached out again, hand starfishing. He let her pull him back down beside her.

She was already kissing him, her hands on his body, when she drew back. "You haven't accepted my apology."

"I have. I ... I do."

"For reals?" She regarded him, head on one side, assessing. "See, here's another one of those moments when you're more that other self, who I never got a peek at in the old days. The one with the modesty and the poems. He seems to be a guy who's not too sure that pleasure isn't somehow sinful, and that just letting go isn't the trapdoor to no-return. I never knew anything about the man you were before you got turned, I assumed ... you were always Spike, who'd go for whatever gusto was going, y'know? It never occurred to me you wouldn't want to feed from me if I offered it."

He put up a tentative hand to touch the puffy broken skin on her throat. "You said Spike never tried it on with you."

"Probably because he sensed that I wouldn't have merely punched his lights out ...." She went grim. "He knew the faintest suggestion would've gotten him staked. We're talking about the time when I was sick, when I was on the edge ... I couldn't have permitted ..." She cleared her throat. "I couldn't permit you to forget that we weren't equals. That what we had wasn't a love affair."

"Ah." The subject, like her blood, was over-exciting, over-activating. Made him fidgetty, filled him with unwelcome speculations. "Couldn't, mustn't, love the vampire killed two slayers before he came after you."

Buffy's eyes went wide.

"Was in those books, pet, back at the house. Bold-faced caption, under all my photos. Slayer of slayers. First thing I saw."
Her eyes closed, and she breathed. Certainly wishing he'd forgotten that. "Please don't drag all of that into bed with us. Why can't we just have the here and now, for once? Why can't you believe that I loved what we were doing, that it's what I needed and thought you wanted it too?" She blushed, her voice going chokey.

It made perfect sense that she'd dread the full restoration of his memories.

She still struggled with it herself, it was plain to see. He had no trouble imagining the Spike he knew a few things about, falling in love with this girl, this pure pillar of righteous deadly power. He'd fallen in love with her afresh almost from the first minute of opening his eyes on her, weeks ago. It was the other way around he still couldn't fathom. So he'd gone off and fought for a soul, come back and fought at her side. Former enemies could become comrades, he understood that. But to choose as her lover a demon with such a history? Who'd hunted her kind for his sport? Who'd begun by hunting her? To lavish on him such tenderness, to so reflexively surrender herself, even up to her own pulsing lifeblood?

The more he experienced it, the more perplexing, perturbing, disturbing it seemed.

She could swear it up and down, but a girl meant to slay vampires, her life dedicated to cleaning away unclean monsters—for that girl to want to lie down with one every day, to give herself to him so utterly ... there was something sordid in it. You could explain it and clarify it all you liked, but there it was.

"Oh sweet." He smoothed back her hair. "This slayin' business, takes a good girl an' warps her into —"

"No—!" She jerked back. "No, you will not explain our love away! That isn't our story! That isn't what is!"

He put up his hands to cup her face. She resisted, shying back, suspicious. Her skin hot with chagrin, because like an idiot he'd told her that her desire, her affection, was deviant. That something she relished disgusted him.

Did it really? He wasn't sure, had he really been able to consent, whether he'd have refused or no. The question didn't seem all that relevant at the moment.

So much he didn't know about her, and so much, clearly, he didn't know about himself—the Spike she'd loved, the Spike she expected him to be for her again. Her emotion crackled in the air around her; it seemed to shimmer through her hair, and from her glossy eyes and quivering mouth.

"I'm sorry, pet. Guess I don't know much. Inferences're all I've got." He smiled, needing to placate. It hurt, hurting her. It hurt, this conflict in his incomplete self. He wanted to stop it too. He wanted that good here and now.

Her answering smile wavered, milky as sun through clouds. "I'm sorry too. I said I didn't want to fight, and I'm being all fighty. But I need you to not believe we were just some horror-show, because that's just one little facet of our story, and not the most important. Can't you trust me when I tell you—those last few months, you were my best friend. And before you died in Sunnydale ... all that was not-enough between us, was me. Me hesitating and holding back. My fault. I lost you then and I can't make that mistake again."

"An' am I really the fellow you lost? Gettin' the sense I'm not."

"You are. I mean, of course—with the amnesia—but you're fundamentally you. What, you think I
He made a mute gesture, bewilderment, question. "Think you're a bit disappointed when I don't play quite like you expect. You're not used to Spike denyin' you anything.

"Can we agree the biting thing was an honest mistake? I had no clue you were blacked out." She flushed all over; it mortified her, that he was judging her for desiring the bite, enjoying it. Every time he came back to that, it was like touching a wound.

"Doesn't it frighten you at all? Bloody scares me. Got no clue where I was in that time."

"I get that this is serious and real. But scare me? No. It's a situation, and we'll deal. I—we—have dealt with worse before. There's always something potentially bad on the horizon. That's why I want to seize this moment."

There was no point hashing it out any further. He saw her viewpoint, and that she'd only see so far into his. "Right. I just don't want to hurt anyone, pet. Couldn't bear it, if I was to get out of control an' do that."

"You won't. I'll make sure that doesn't happen."

Her eyes were so full of pleading, she probably wasn't aware of how much, how her expression begged him to put this aside and take her in his arms.

When he did, when he laid his mouth against hers, she moaned, sharp and high, her body jerking as if he'd completed some electrical circuit. Her hands, electric too, skimmed his body, tugging him close, claiming his cock, making it hard again.

Her need. So intense. Such a great cache, stored up for so long without outlet.

She cried out when he covered her, melting back as he drew her knees up, opening her wide. The tears spilled out then, allowable in the general onrush. She moaned as he made his first entrance, pushing slowly into her drenched pussy, deliciously swollen from their earlier exertions. It gripped him like her hand, tight and hot. He started a steady rocking rhythm that worked for her, made her pinken and gasp, toss her head. Spilled beneath him, legs akimbo, her arms up around his neck, she beamed. So much gratitude in her eyes. Gratitude and relief. "Good. Oh Spike, isn't this good?"

It was. The loving potency of her surrounding him, welcoming him, made his misgivings seem tenuous. Whatever she was, whatever he didn't yet know about her, this was real. She'd been right enough, when she said how they fit.

He came with a series of hard shudders, buried in her, her voice coaxing in his ear, urging him, praising him. She held him through it, her arms strong enough to contain the convulsing force of his release.

Even after the last long tremor, he was still hard.

Her blood. Making him feel like a god.

"More," she breathed. "Please, more. Can we never stop?"

Here was another piece of this puzzle. What merely flesh and blood fellow could keep up with a girl like this?
When she opened her eyes, driven awake by a full bladder, Spike was still asleep, his bandaged hand thrown out to the side. He didn't breathe, but she could see his eyes moving beneath their lids.

He had a right to his sleep—they'd gone at it like monkeys, for hours. Buffy grimaced a little as she rose, she was so sore between the legs. Once she'd gotten going, her arousal ramped up with every climax, turning into a kind of holy ecstasy, ardent, tireless. Spike too ... empowered by what he'd fed on.

He'd said nothing, the whole time, about the source of his extraordinary stamina. Didn't gloat or boast—in that tender sexy way that Spike used to, when he'd be overwhelmed at his good luck, to actually be fucking his slayer. She'd hated hearing him talk like that ... at least, she'd hated it, or thought she did, at the time. Now she kind of missed it. She even kind of missed being called 'Slayer', which made no sense.

In the bathroom she washed her face and hands—a good shower or bath was necessary but she wanted Spike to take it with her—and inspected her neck. The bite had already scabbed over; it was a little itchy but only stung when she probed it.

The immense jolt of pleasure she'd gotten there ... nothing like she'd imagined. The only comparable time was when she'd made Angel do it, to save his life, and then her mind-set, the sensation, were entirely different. She'd never understood why people liked getting sucked on by vampires—that time she'd caught Riley ... it was just gross. But that was before. Her impulse, to invite Spike's bite, had sprung from a wild urge to give everything possible, to be possessed by him entirely. She hadn't imagined she'd like the actual sensation, let alone like it so much. The pleasure came from the bite, the pull, but it emanated from him too, from it being Spike in her arms, at her neck, his lovely prick inside her at the same time. It didn't feel dangerous, deadly. It had felt like an embodiment of their love, a perfect exchange.

But he didn't seem to want to know about that.

His reaction ... what a spin-around. She still couldn't quite believe it. Spike. Spike feeling objectified by that.

On the way back from the bathroom, she paused by the broken picture frame. Stupid thing to throw. She didn't like seeing these pictures, the only ones she had of her mother, lying in broken glass. Picking them up delicately, she looked around.

The whole apartment was a mess. Broken furniture, broken glass, stuff strewn everywhere, and smelling now like a bordello.

But Spike was in her bed, safe. She paused again to look at him. There couldn't be enough of looking at him.

In the kitchen she heated up a mug of blood. Returning to the bedside, trying not to hold her nose from the smell—it was a smell she was going to have to get used to, would be, please God, living with for the rest of her life—he was still out, head thrown back on the pillow, lips parted. She set the mug down on the night-stand, and caught him eyeing her.

"Could wake up to forever to sight of your pretty tits an' wouldn't complain."

"How's your hand?"

"Feels ... feels all right." He held it out for her to pull off the bandages. The skin underneath was white and smooth and whole. "That healed faster than I thought." He frowned. "Expected a longer
wait, because I've been burned before. Had ..." The frown deepened. She watched the progress of
the memory, breaking through on his face. "All burned down one side I was, an' my back broken.
Couldn't walk." His lips parted, a kind of awe. He looked like he was watching a film. "Where was
I? Was full of rage. Who at? You, I s'pose. You did it to me, didn't you?"

"Y-yes."

"Don't think it was you I was so sore at, though. Someone else."

Angel. Angelus. He seduced Drusilla away from you. She didn't want to talk about that. She'd barely
had time to remember, the last few weeks, that Angel was most likely dead. And hated going over
those terrible days, love's first indelible betrayal.

Spike sat up, shaking his head, and reached for the mug.

"Are you getting more? Memories, I mean?"

"Stuff comes in these narrow slices, mostly, when it comes at all." He held up his thumb and first
finger, nearly touching, to demonstrate. "Like peerin' through a crack. All out of context. Glimpses.
Can't situate it." He drank. "You could tell me what you know about it."

"I could ... I will. But later, okay? I thought I'd run us a bath."

"Sounds fine."

"And then I have to start straightening up around here."

"An' I've got to go see Mrs Ambler. She's probably issued a bounty for my head, me not showin' up
for duty, what, two days now? She'll never let another vamp slavey for her, if she thinks they're all
like me."

"That doesn't matter."

"What d'you mean? Matters to her. Work has to get done. An' it matters to me."

Shit. Can I get an instant replay? "I meant ... you're entitled to a little time off for a crisis." Don't
bring up that if he'd completed his suicide, he really would've missed work. "It's just kitchen work,
it's not like it's—"

Spike stared at her.

"Not like it's fightin' the demons an' savin' the world, right. Not like I once did, accordin' to you lot.
Just seein' to fillin' the bellies of those that do."

She winced. "I'm really glad you like the work. I didn't mean it like it sounded. I can be sort of blurtly
sometimes."

"Y'know, can't be Tonto to your Lone Ranger, Buffy. Can't have your back in battle, not while I'm
in this state. Couldn't even help train the girls, right? Kneadin' bread an' cleanin' up's all I'm good for,
innit?"

"Don't ... don't say that."

"I don't mind it. I aim to do it regular."

"And you should. Like you said the other day. Work's important. We all need work. And hey—we
also need to wash. Let me start that bath."

"Go an’ do that. Leave the broken glass, I’ll see to it. Don’t want you to cut yourself—doesn’t matter if I do."

"Okay." She bent closer to him, hovering a few inches above his mouth. "Knock knock."

"Eh?"

"You awake, my sweetheart?"

"Reckon so."

"I’m going to kiss you. That okay?"

"Try it an’ see."

"I’m asking first."

He reached up then, caught her face in his hands. "You happy then, pet?"

"I’m happy. But you shouldn’t ask that. It’s ... it’s better to be sneaky, about stuff like that."

It was all she could do to draw away after a few kisses, instead of pouncing on him for another long bout. He seemed to feel that too; reluctant to let go, his fingers threaded in her hair, tongue teasing against her lips.

"I love you, Spike, so much."

He brought her a cup of coffee into the bathroom a few minutes later, as she was stepping into the big tub. Brushed his teeth to get the blood funk out of his mouth before joining her in the water, hot almost to searing. She sighed and sank down as far as her nostrils. Beneath the surface, Spike’s hand explored, gliding up her leg, slipping between her thighs. She gave out a little hiss.

"Worked you hard. Maybe I should leave you be."

"I think you could touch a little. If you’re very gentle."

He smiled, and it was like the smiles she remembered, randy and knowing and a little daring. Tip of the tongue appearing for a moment between the lips. "Do I know how to be gentle?"

"You do." She tipped her head back, slid down a little further. His fingers ghosted over her mons, stirring the curls, then slipped down, tip of his index finger finding the point of her clit, barely touching. "Oh God."

He lifted her leg across his own body, to make more room. His eyes fixed on her face, as he summoned her to orgasm with whispering movements of his fingers. It didn’t take long.

"You are so good at ... me."

"Seem to be, yeah."

She reached for him, but he stopped her hand. "Better have my wash, an’ get down to the kitchens. You’ve got places to be too."
"Spike, really, no one's going to expect us to put in an appearance for a little while, they know we —"

"I need to go to my work."

"Uh ... okay. Sure. I understand." A giggle escaped her, that sounded somehow like an old woman's, echoing back to her. Making her spine stiff, despite the hot soak, the release that still vibrated inside.

"Not sure you do, pet." His expression darkened; as if there was a direct circuit between it and her own body, her heart set up a racket in her chest that made her want to cough. That he took her hands and squeezed them did nothing for her rising sense of dread. "Don't blame you, Buffy ... you've been waiting a long time to have your man an' play house with him. An' I want to play house with you. But not like this. Right now I'm not a man. Not, anyhow, the one I was, who followed you into your battles. I'm neither one thing nor t'other. An' the longer we try an' pretend that there's nothing more for me than to be of service to Mrs Ambler down in the kitchen an' to you up here ... the sadder we'll both be."

"Service—? Is that what this feels like to—? Oh!" She jumped up with a splash, skidded out of the tub—almost slipping, her instinctive grace somewhere absent, yanking the robe off the back of the door. Where was an invisibility spell when you wanted one? Where was a teleportation spell? She'd have liked to be in Borneo, stat, where she could cry the cry forcing its way through her, in secret privacy.

"Sweet—" He was up now too, the water rolling off him, that body that was the centerpiece of all her lusts and loves, free for the first time since she'd found him again of all bruises, wounds and blemishes. She couldn't look. In the mirror opposite she saw only herself, her head ducked, body shivering, before she blew out of the small room, through the bed-chamber, snatching up clothes as she went. Jumping into them in the sitting room, intent on getting out.

But he followed her. Came up slowly, saying her name, reaching a tentative hand, nothing to goose bad memories. "Sweet. Was my turn to say it wrong. Didn't mean—"

"No, I think I just heard how you really feel, and Spike, I am so sorry. This is what I was afraid of, at the beginning. Why I turned you down in the first place. Please don't!" His hand was curling around her arm; she pulled free. "Please don't—I can't be strong if you're going to touch me."

"Sweet, never meant you to think I don't adore ... that I don't want ... I need to be fixed. I need to be whole. No more waitin' for nature to take its course."

"Yes. Yes, I see that. I'm sorry I ... I was selfish, and you ... I'll tell Willow. I'll send her up to you."

"No no, not like that. Wait a bit, we'll both go see her. 'Spect she'll have to prepare anyhow. If she could've accomplished it with one abracadabra, expect she'd have done it by now."

"I'm going downstairs."

"Wait. Just wait while I put my clothes on."

"I'll tell Mrs Ambler you're on your way."

At the bottom of the stairway that led up to her tower, she paused, straightening her clothes, arranging her expression before anyone else saw it. Deep inside her, a terrified angry little girl was yowling.

But she shut the door on her, and went on to her errand.
Giles was there in Willow's workroom when Buffy put her head around the door. "Hey guys. I'm back. Well, I've been back for a while."

"We knew," Willow said. "Xander told us. But we thought you should have some privacy. Uh ... is everything okay?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Your eyes are red." This was Giles; he stepped closer to her, glasses in his hands, taking them off, slipping them back on. "What's the matter, Buffy?"

She was going to say Nothing, All Was Copacetic, but then she was in his embrace, taking whooping breaths in a fight not to cry. She took a deep breath. Why didn't they hug more often? Why didn't she hug everybody every day? Why leave it only for when she was at her wits' end?

When she had herself under control—it took three strong breaths—she answered. "I'm okay. But Spike kind of isn't. He says he's ready for Will to try to restore his memory. So, uh ... if you could prepare whatever you have to ... and you should talk to him first of course. He'll be at his job, in the kitchen." She pulled back a little. "Which brings me to ... the kitchen? Giles, really? You couldn't find him something a little more, I don't know, worthy of a hero?"

"He said he didn't want to sit and push papers. He asked for something physical."

Willow said, "Obviously we'd have put him in charge of the training program, if he wasn't—"

"I know. I know. Okay. It's just ..." Don't say it bugs you that your boyfriend is the one who juggles the dirty plates after every group meal. "Can you help him? He's slipping. He ... I don't know what Xander told you."

"Just that they talked. That there was a rapprochement."

"Though he didn't actually say 'rapprochement'," Willow added.

"He didn't tell you Spike was suicidal?" Their expressions indicated this was news. "He's not now, we ... settled that. But he had another black-out—nothing bad happened!—but he's shook up. He doesn't want to wait anymore."

Giles and Willow exchanged glances.

Willow said, "I've been researching various approaches. I can discuss them with him, and we can decide on a course of—"

"Magic."

"Well yes. A course of magic. To help him."

Willow, to her credit, managed to look and sound confident without the tinge of arrogance she often still failed to hide. Though that little bit of humility might mean that really she had no faith in her ability to retrieve Spike's past. The whole question just scared her.

"Are you all finished checking out the alley? You couldn't learn anything about it that might help?"

Willow shook her head. "I told you—I found evidence that a number of realities collided there, stuff was bleeding together, it was very bad. But the worst of it happened elsewhere. And those portals or
whatever they were, they're closed now."

"Could you open one?"

"There would be no point." Willow shrugged. "Actually ... I probably don't have enough mojo to reopen what was going on in there. Or control it if I did. Whatever made that happen—it's out of my league."

Giles said, under his breath, "I wasn't aware there was anything you considered out of your league."

Buffy turned back to him. "Giles, do you think this is the best thing?"

"Well. If it's what Spike wants, I don't suppose we can credibly persuade him to postpone it any more. You don't want him to feel that we're withholding solutions from him. That he's not a free agent."

"God, no. It's just ... so drastic. To force it, I mean. I just worry that—"

"There's risk if we do nothing as well," Giles said. "Risk to him, his psyche. Risk also to others."

She couldn't argue this. She knew it was true. That any more resistence on her part would be worse than self-regarding, it would be cruel.

He didn't see Buffy all day. If she ate, it wasn't with the girls. Dawn turned up during the lull between lunch and dinner, while he was peeling potatoes, happy to see him, twittering about this and that. If she knew anything about the drama of the last couple days, she didn't say so.

While he was clearing up after the evening meal, Giles and Willow appeared. Giles made a polite little speech, we understand you'd like to try a mystical remedy, we'd like to talk about it, please come to my study. Willow eyed him, he thought, like he was some sort of prize morsel.

He followed them there. Giles shut the door, poured single malt into three crystal tumblers.

Accepting his, Spike said, "Where's Buffy?"

The two exchanged a little glance.

Willow said, "Buffy felt you'd be more comfortable if she wasn't here."

"Did she? Well, I'm sorry for that. I'll just go get her."

He rose, went to the door, to find Willow sliding in ahead of him. "Maybe you don't want to do that."

"Think she ought to hear whatever you tell me."

"She has. I mean, we went over it all with her this afternoon. She thinks—"

Giles took it up. "She believes you'll be able to decide more easily what feels right to you if she isn't here."

"Then let her at least tell me so herself. Please."

Another glance between witch and watcher. "I'll have someone fetch her." Giles flipped a switch on
the intercom on his desk, spoke to some unseen assistant. "Meanwhile, have your drink."

"Should I drink, right before—?"

"Oh, I'm not going to do anything tonight," Willow said. "At least, I'm not going to do the memory spell. What I thought I'd try, just as a preliminary, and with your consent—nothing will happen without your consent—is to take a little peek inside first."

"A peek? What, you gonna saw open my cranium?"

"No, I mean ... I can try to take a little stroll through your mind. I might be able to see what you're unaware of, maybe some clue as to the origin of the problem, that could help me tailor the right kind of spell to set it right."

"You're gonna snoop through my memories?"

"If I can even see them. I mean, the pertinent ones."

"It's the impertinent ones I'm worried about—vampire's mind, bit of a rude place."

"It's an invasion of privacy, yes. But I promise you I'm not going to tell anyone what I saw. And don't forget, I've known you for years, so I sort of have an idea what goes on in your mind."

"No one has any idea what goes on in anyone else's mind. Barely know our own."

Taken aback by his vehemence, Willow nodded. "I see your point. But listen, I've done this before. With Buffy, actually. There was no danger. And a little liquor to relax you might be a good idea."

Spike turned. "Want you to hold my hand. That'll be all the relaxing I need."

Buffy stood wavering in the doorway, brought out a smile just as wavery. "Really?"

"How could you think I wouldn't want you here?"

When she came close, he drew her down, onto the arm of his chair. Twined an arm around her waist. "Silly girl, no need for you to stay away." Even though he was looking at her, Spike was still aware of the glance—so many glances—that shot between Willow and Giles. They weren't used to seeing their Buffy in this light, probably. Or him, either. They had other expectations of him.

Buffy said, "You're going to let Willow do the psychic walkabout?"

"Suppose I'd better. 'Cept what's to keep her from gettin' hurt, that's what I don't understand. If there's nasties—"

"It's just a look-don't-touch kind of thing. A recon operation. Nothing in your mind can hurt me."

"You think every witness gets out unscathed?"

Giles stepped closer. "Is there something specific you're concerned about? Some memory that's surfaced that you haven't told us about?"

"N-no. Just a gut-feelin'. That in here," he knocked on his temple, "is a quick-sand swamp."

Willow said, "I'll be very careful. I promise I'll stop at the first sign of trouble."

"Oughtn't to do it here. I should be tied down."
Buffy squirmed. "Spike ... no."

"What if I get violent?"

"You won't. You'll be in a light trance, you'll just be sitting very still. And Buffy is right here, she can overpower you if need be—but it won't be necessary."

He glanced around at them. Assessing their expressions, their stances. Trust these people? He didn't know much about them. They'd been kind to him, they were full of stories and bursting with so-called knowledge about him, but it could all be a hoax.

On the other hand, what really was there to lose? His hold on his sanity, his self-control, was already wobbly.

Buffy rose from the arm of the chair. "Whatever you decide, Spike, is all right with me."

"Do it, then."

End, pt 1
Even though she'd put him into a trance—he went under more easily than she'd thought—this wasn't like going into Buffy's mind when she was catatonic. That time, she'd found herself in the midst of the tight little loop playing out over and over in her friend's head, the loop that had to be broken through to get her back to reality.

In Spike's mind was nothing like that.

Even in a hypnotic state, her first entrance was like stepping out a door into a sandstorm, except the sand was sharp-edged pixels, a storm of imagery and sensation that cut at her like flying glass.

Spike ... take it easy. Try to relax. At first there didn't seem to be a Spike in here, not one she could see and address as she had when she went into Buffy's mind.

Am relaxed. Go on' an' look.

He was doing everything he could, whether willfully or unconsciously, to drive her out. He, or ...

something.

Willow pushed forward. In the midst of this chaos, there had to be something recognizable.

She would look for something familiar, something positive, as a starting point.

Buffy.

A mad relentless delirium of sensation and feeling coalesced out of the jagged havoc, everything superimposed and super-immersed, smells and flavors even more vivid than visuals, feelings and reactions that were also colors and aromas and tastes, gathering, snowballing, a sensory and emotional tsunami. All at the same time, her face was buried in Buffy's wet heaving pussy, her cock too, fucking it, while her mouth was at once flooded with Buffy's hot blood, her twining tongue, her sobbing breaths; there was worship and passion, keen and enveloping, laced with acrid tangs of anger, unease. Buffy's keening voice filling her ears, her body flexing and straining all around her, hands wrapped in her hair, groping and caressing, a wild fluttering galloping intense urgency building and crashing, not just once but over and over, all different, all simultaneous.

The hail of sex spun away suddenly, giving way to Buffy's face, thousands of Buffy's faces kaleidoscoping, every imaginable expression, popping and flashing all around, the cacophony of each face's speech making a crackle of undifferentiated sound, emotion roiling.

Everything Spike was trying not to think about, trying to keep hidden and private, rushed at Willow in full-immersion sensurround.

And anything she'd ever furtively imagined or tried not to imagine about her friend's most intimate attributes ... well, there was very little left to wonder.

She had to take a moment to suppress her embarrassment and set her own mind in order, before proceeding. The waves of him were so strong, ceaseless. Okay, Spike. Onward. Let me see something older than the last few weeks.

Willow pushed on. Trying to find some thread that would lead back to the origin of the problem, to L.A.
And then she was there. In the alley, reeking of death and magical residue. Seen through Spike's mind, it was at once vast and tight, terrifying, mysterious, even as she could see every brick, every piece of detritus, in the dark. There was no one else there. When she tried to nudge him backwards, to find the battle, the open portals whose evidence she'd detected, there was nothing. Her attempts to wrench some clear meaning out of the assault of impressions set up an inner howling that spiraled, louder and louder, the sand-pixels returning to envelope her in burning stinging grit. She could go no further, because there was no further. Only a wall. His mind a kind of box, its borders fiercely defended.

Turning, she tried another direction. Bullets hit her, passed through her body, each a sear of agony that didn't keep her from rushing forward, tackling the man with the gun. Jumble and flurry of sensation around this, pain like she'd never known, comfort at Buffy's hands; Buffy's sweetness radiating everywhere like the energy off a star. Buffy's kisses a whole universe.

Willow paced off the confines of Spike's mind. The depths were infinite, every minute impression, every layer of consciousness bathed in fiercely-felt emotion, confusion and wonder, love and fear, reliance and frustration.

But all there was, was recent. All she could find of the things of the past were pictures he'd seen in books, and little shards of experience, disconnected from their context, jagging up to pierce her consciousness.

It was a hard harsh place, Spike's mind, everything subjected to aggressive doubt, aggressive judgment. She came upon herself, hood-eyed, scheming, power streaming off her in dark purple sheets.

Pulling out an immense relief. It would be hard to look either Spike or Buffy in the eye for a day or two. Way too much information. She was eager to go off alone and meditate herself back to clarity.

"Okay, uh, that wasn't what I expected." Her voice emerged shaky; she cleared her throat. No point letting the others in on her shock.

Spike was sagging in his chair, white-knuckling the armrests. Buffy bent over him, laying gentle fingers on his temples. "Does it hurt, sweetheart?"

"Not too bad."

Giles: "What did you learn, Willow?"

"That's the thing. Nothing new. There's nothing I can access that goes beyond what Spike's told us. There's nothing there prior to what we know about, when Buffy went to L.A. and they returned to the alley. Or if it is there, it's completely blocked off. This could be an extreme kind of PTSD. Or it could be something else doing it. I don't know."

"That mean you can't hex me back to myself?"

"Not necessarily. It just means that ... well, it means that whatever I try is going to be dangerous, because I'll be flying blind. I can't guarantee the results. You need to think about that before you decide to go ahead."

Willow could see why he was so eager. How the confines of that concentrated place, just a few weeks' worth of experience, churning around and around on itself, tantalizing and withholding ... well, if it was her, she'd want a way out. She'd never really thought about how all those memories she took for granted, going back to earliest childhood days, were a cushion for the present. Without
them, everything could be too raw. Too exposed.

Buffy's gaze was like a harsh light in her eyes. "What could happen?"

"Well, that's the thing. I don't know. Any spell I could do that would uncloak what's hidden in Spike's psyche could bring back everything, or only some of it. Or it could ... change him."

"Change him how?" The question a backhanded slap to the face.

"Take it easy, Buffy. I don't want to make this worse. I'm just trying to give an adequate warning, that ... this is really uncharted territory. There's no one with a lot of experience in this, especially not when it comes to vampires. I've been checking around."

"Checkin' around. Bloody great. Keen to be the big test case."

"You can take as much time as you need to decide," Giles said.

Willow watched him, watched the little shades of expression flicker at the corners of his lips, his eyes. How different, how subtle, compared to the tempest of his inner life. If Buffy knew how he experienced her—the stark contradictions, the visceralness—would she still feel the same way about him? Or was it that very intensity, inhuman, superlative, that drew her to him?

Spike got to his feet. "How d'you feel about it, Miss Witch? You confident? Or you privately dreadin' that you'll make me into a worse muddle than I already am?"

"There's no success without risk. I've learned that."

"I really don't like the sound of that," Buffy said.

Spike put a hand on her shoulder. "Though you know it better'n any of us, don't you?"

Buffy went up to Willow. "Tell me if this is something you can't do. There's no shame in it. Just be honest."

"All I can tell you is that I've got spells that could work. I'm confident of my ability to do these spells, and do them right. It's just the ultimate results that are ... open to question."

"Just!"

Spike handed his tumbler to Giles. "Will have another, if you would be so kind." When he took the glass back, Spike said, "An' you? What would you do?"

"Willow has, over the years, proven herself extremely capable."

Buffy stalked up to them, her eyes flashing. "Spike, I think we should talk about this alone."

He drank; took his time. "Nothin' more to talk about, pet. Gonna go through with it. Got no choice."

"So ... in the morning you might be back." Buffy sidled into the living room, two wine glasses in one hand, the bottle and a corkscrew in the other. "The return of The Full Spikey."

He reached up from where he was sprawled at one end of the sofa, took the bottle, and set to opening it. "Hope so."
"I hope it all goes all right. Though that sounds like a kind of idiotic thing to say. I mean, it goes without saying."

She was just perceptibly—perceptible maybe only to him—trembling. Poor girl had been vibrating more or less continually since her return from Malta, but now she was repressing so hard it was difficult to watch her.

Spike took the glasses from her hand, poured the wine, then pulled her down into his lap. "Here's where you belong. Now have a drink."

"You don't have to be so nice to me."

"Where's this comin' from?"

"I don't—never mind. I don't know why I said that."

"Because you think you deserve some punishment. Why's that?"

"I don't, I ... I'm nervous. Please don't jump down my throat."

"No one's jumpin'. Look here, Buffy, as this is our last evenin' before I get the treatment—whatever that turns out to be—and as it's obvious neither of us can think of anythin' else—there's something I'd like you to tell me."

She paled; her parted lips went dry. Spike put a hand up to her face, traced the line of her cheek with the knuckles of his fingers. "Sweet. Think you might even feel a bit less bad if you just out with it."

"Out with what?"

"Say what makes you so afraid. Why is it, d'you think, that I never let you know I was alive? That's what's tormentin' you so."

"There's no big mystery there. You never believed I cared for you—certainly not remotely enough, anyway. And at the end, you'd fallen out of love with me."

"So, torch I carried for you for years, just went out?"

"I'm sure of it. Fires die for lack of fuel. I could've reached out to you that year, but I chose not to, until it was too late. Way too late. And then when it turned out that you weren't dead, you went on devoting yourself to the mission ... because that's the kind of man you'd become. But you did it far away from me, and without calling attention to yourself. Because you didn't want me to feel any obligation, or ... you'd just moved on. That's all. It happens." She sipped. "It happens."

"An' you really think, once I know my mind again, that all that's gone between us these last weeks, will count for nothing?"

"I don't know. I shouldn't assume." The whole time she'd been answering his questions, she'd been staring off across the room, affording him a view only of her hair and the line of her cheek and the tip of her nose. Now she glanced around quickly, giving him a glimpse of the full misery in her brimming eyes. "Spike, I want you to know you're free. Whatever happens, you're free."

"An' if I don't want to be free?"

"Please don't tease me. I really don't think I could take it right now."

"No, not teasin'." She was so keyed up, this strong amazing girl, she might pop like a soap bubble.
"Drink up, and try to relax."

"I don't think relaxing is on the menu tonight."

"I think you're bein' too hard on yourself. Right now, an' about what happened between us back then. I don't know, of course. But I suspect I won't recall it the way you do."

"Maybe. Maybe not." She shrugged.

She sounded so lost, saying that. He took the wineglass from her, and drew her face down to kiss. Her lips barely parted. She held back, he sensed, because letting go right now would be too painful.

"I'm scared too," he offered. "But what's the point of ruining our evening over it? Might all go smooth as silk, an' you'll have the old Spike back at your side by lunchtime, ready to fight demons an' all."

"Or something else might happen." She jumped up, began to pace. "What if Willow's spell goes wrong? Believe me, she's good but nobody's perfect. What if she ends up erasing you altogether? What if—"

When he caught her, stilled her, Spike felt the wound-up potential in her quivering frame; how close she was to hitting out, or whirling into a destructive dance with the furniture.

"I've got to take the chance. You understand."

"I do. I do!"

"Get that you don't like it. Get that I can't promise you anything. But isn't it better to be hopeful?"

Her little laugh sounded desperate. "If you knew all about my life—knew what you used to know, I mean—"

"Pet. Don't want to be another disappointment to you."

Her laughter redoubled. There was a devilish point to her smile. "And how will I ever know, if you stay with me, whether it's for real, or because you don't want to disappoint?" Another shrug. "Who am I kidding? Of course I'll know."

"Seems to me you're so determined to be disappointed, it'll be that whether or no. Have a care with my heart, Buffy, as well as your own."

"Oh—" He'd struck a blow; she absorbed it.

"Come here. Need to kiss you, an' you need to be kissed." He drew her down again. Somehow her fear and agitation siphoned off his own; he felt a peculiar kind of resignation, as if he'd just inhaled ether.

"Wait a sec,'" Buffy said. "I have an idea." She fished her phone from her pocket. "We can make a little video. A mnemonic for you, in case ... in case something goes wrong tomorrow. I'll hold this up, like this," she extended her arm, "and turn the camera on, and you say a little bit about what's going on, and the decision you made to let Willow spell you, and how you feel about it. Then we'll have it to play back."

His first impulse was to laugh at the idea, to take the phone from her, toss it away, drown her in kisses until she remembered what this night was supposed to be for. What was the point of a
mnemonic if the witch failed? He'd likely just be left exactly as he was now. Or he'd be completely
ga-ga, like they said he was when Buffy came for him.

But she was so eager, and it occurred to him that whatever she believed she wanted it for, the little
video would be for her. She wanted a memento. Something she could hang onto if he got lost, if she
lost him. Something to prove to herself that what they'd had these last few weeks was real.

"Turn it on then. How much time's it give me to spiel?"

"Two minutes. Okay. You can start ... now."

"Oh God. Oh God. Oh God."

Her spine had turned to melted taffy, she couldn't feel her splayed legs at all. Her whole being was
concentrated in the congested knot of flesh where Spike's tongue teasingly played. He'd already
brought her off with his mouth, kneeling on the floor as she slumped on the sofa. They'd fucked the
same way, him on his knees, her legs hooked high on his arms, a position that lent itself to long
pensive kisses, to getting tangled in each other's gazes, to a tight overheated rhythm that made her
grunt and curl her toes and finally come hard, her teeth sunk into his shoulder. And now he was once
more between her thighs, three fingers slowly fucking her ass as he languorously licked out their
combined spunk, tongued her tight swollen clit. Her own whimpering excited her.

"Thank you. Thank you for this."

He lifted his head a little. "Not exactly sufferin' for my art here, Buffy."

"I know. But ... I need so much, I know I do, and you give me ...."

"Need it just as much. Couldn't be a cunny more glorious than yours."

She pulled herself up then, curled forward to grasp his face, press kisses on his slick mouth. Slid off
onto the floor, pulling him around—avoiding the legs of the coffee table—to take his cockhead
between her lips. Trying to give head while getting it at the same time usually didn't work so well—
something tended to get short shrift—but Spike's deep groan told her he was in his element, his nose
and mouth buried in pussy while she sucked him off.

He was never more completely himself, Buffy thought, savoring him like an ice cream cone, than
when he was getting laid. The essentials, despite his scrambled brains, were all there when they did
this. She was the one who was essentially different, giving where in the past she'd only taken.

Though Spike's greatest ecstasies, as she'd gathered early and used against him often in those days—
came through submission; even when she let him do whatever he liked to her, even at their most
violent, she'd often sensed that Spike was getting off on playing the role of the monster he always
said she needed. He submitted to her even when it was she who wore the handcuffs.

Now he held so tight to her hips she could feel the bruises forming beneath the press of his fingers;
holding her flush against his face, his tongue fucking deep into her cunt. His cock drooled across her
palate, thrumming. She palmed his balls, which were tight and full though he'd come already; probed
past them with wet fingers to invade his asshole. He cried out and wriggled as she worked her
fingers in. The next moment his cock was pumping; filling her mouth with spunk.

She held it there for a few moments, letting herself taste it, letting herself feel the tautness of his body
beneath hers, to take a mental snapshot of the moment, the raunchy grace of bestowing pleasure.
But he was already tapping at her flank, wanting her to turn around. "Give us a kiss."

"We're filthy," she whispered, smiling, bringing her face up against his.

"Nice, isn't it?" Spike said. "You know how to gratify a fellow."

"You."

"You were this good to me before, can't think why I didn't run straight back to you."

"I wasn't. I just told you. It was really complicated. Sex makes you think it's simple, but then that feeling wears off, and you realize it's never really like that."

He folded her in his arms, settled her against him. The floor was hard, the rug rather scratchy, but she didn't care. "So you say, but how reliable are you?"

"I'm telling you the truth." She wanted to just float, why did they have to talk?

"Not sayin' you're lying, just sayin' you understand things your way, maybe that's not the only way they are."

"Spike." She laid a finger on his lips. "This is so good. Can we not say things that tomorrow I won't be able to think about without crying?"

An hour before dawn, they went up to the battlements. It had been raining all night, and was still drizzling when they walked out into the air, naked and barefoot, the stones cold and slick beneath their feet. Buffy turned her face up to the veil of mist. He could feel her hesitating, wanting to say something.

Decided not to prompt her. Just leaned on the crenelations, looking out across the valley. Now the time was getting so close, his doubts were burgeoning. Would he really be better for the retrieval of his past? Willow had told him that most of his memories were probably painful ones. He needed them to be whole, but perhaps wholeness was over-rated? He had a place, useful work, the love of a splendid woman, who needed things uniquely in his gift, even if those needs made him uneasy about her and himself. Maybe he ought to seize on all that and not ask for any more. He was prone to dangerous break-outs, it was true, but where better to be kept under control than in a castle brimming with slayer-girls?

He was never going to be anything better than a vampire. There was no cure for that. So perhaps it was better for the state of his soul—ha—for the past to remain a blank? Better for the state of his love affair with Buffy, to take her, take everything, on faith?

Beside him, standing close but not touching, Buffy also looked out into the dark.

"Slayers got better night-vision than regular girls?"

"Nope."

"Huh. Would've thought—"

"It would make sense. But no. We blunder around in the dark just like everybody else."

"Suspect that's not quite true."
"I can fight in the dark. But that's not what we're talking about really, is it?"

"What are we talking about?"

She sighed. "Spike, I just want you to know, if I've done wrong by you these past few weeks, my intentions were good. I tend to have bad timing. Again, not talking about fighting. Talking about everything else. I just hope that you'll forgive me, whatever ... whatever needs forgiving."

"Likewise. Don't think there's anything on your side needs forgivin', though. Shouldn't spend the last little bit of this lovely night exchangin' apologies."

"How, then?"

"Little poetry fills the shank end of an evening—

Thy gift, thy tables, are within my brain
Full character'd with lasting memory,
Which shall above that idle rank remain
Beyond all date, even to eternity;
Or at the least, so long as brain and heart
Have faculty by nature to subsist;
Till each to razed oblivion yield his part
Of thee, thy record never can be miss'd.
That poor retention could not so much hold,
Nor need I tallies thy dear love to score;
Therefore to give them from me was I bold,
To trust those tables that receive thee more:
To keep an adjunct to remember thee
Were to import forgetfulness in me."

She let a couple of beats of silence go, before sighing again. "You're an amazing man, Spike."

"Not one of mine. Shakespeare."

She turned a smile on him, her eyes and teeth glinting in the dark. "I stand by my opinion."

"Tonight, I promise I'll say you off another one."

"You—"

"You remind me, if I forget."

She laid her face against his arm. "I'll remind you. If you forget."
The women were for doing the spell right there in Giles' study, where Willow had performed the mind-probe the day before. But when Spike insisted that this time, with real transformative magic being performed, they'd better chain him up, Giles quietly agreed, and would brook no arguments.

So here they were in the bowels of the castle, the locks-ups. Not much used, because Buffy was never about taking prisoners. But they had a handful of cells, all fronted by heavy, close-set bars.

"I'm not putting shackles on you," she said, shutting the door on him, softly so it didn't clang. "When this is over, in a few minutes, I'll let you out."

She'd promised herself that she wasn't going to do or say anything embarrassing in front of Giles and Willow, but at the last moment she couldn't resist kissing him through the bars, and really, for all the times she'd seen Willow, if not Giles, kiss people, wasn't she entitled?

Spike went and sat on the shelf-bed. "This all right, Willow? Or need me closer?"

Willow was lighting the candles she'd set out on a small low folding table, and unpacking little shallow bowls of herbs from a tote bag, deploying them amidst the candles. Giles stood to one side, arms folded, looking rather far-off, a man day-dreaming at a bus-stop. Buffy had wrapped a hand around a bar on the cell opposite, as if she needed to be anchored in place.

Willow said, "Right there is fine." She was almost ruthlessly calm, and smelled already of magic. Spike could feel it stirring inside her, full of power like a topped-up battery.

He folded his hands in his lap. He'd fed on two pints of the finest hog, had a hot shower, and was ready as he'd ever be for having himself ensorcell. Willow had explained, up in Giles' study, how she'd chosen the particular spell, out of the many that effected memory. She'd given a right scholarly little dissertation on its origin and variations, how it worked, and why she felt it was the best one to start—and she hoped—end with. An elegant speech he'd stopped listening to fifteen seconds in and which he knew Buffy couldn't hear either.

Willow lit the final candle. The air smelled of burning sage and some other herbs he couldn't identify, of cold dank stone, and Buffy's subdued anxiety. As Willow began to chant in Sumerian, Spike closed his eyes.

This's how you do me, bitch? This is how you do me?

His voice echoing over and over, no place she could run to escape it, it filled her head even back in Willow's study, five levels above the dungeon where they'd left him.

It was all he would say. Over and over. Shouting it. Whispering it. Looking out through the bars at her, ignoring Giles and Willow. Looking at her out of eyes like black holes.

Not answering any of their questions. Not responding to anything they said. He'd fanged out a couple of times, snarling, snapping, but not crazy like before. No throwing himself against the bars like a goaded animal. Just This's is how you do me?, and that stare.

They'd left him there, two slayers posted outside the outer doors at either end, just in case. Left him there because after a while it made them all feel like idiots, like charlatans, trying to figure out what had happened—what had gone wrong, right there in front of him and his burning eyes.
Willow said, "He's still compos mentis. If—"

"You don't know that."

"He was talking in complete sentences, Buffy."

"One sentence. One complete sentence." She kept having to uncurl her hands; fists kept forming, wanting something to smash, to undo this rotten scenario.

"He didn't seem to be in pain. Physical pain, I mean." Willow wasn't looking at her, Buffy realized. She was looking everywhere else. She was shuffling papers, flipping through books, like someone at an IRS audit whose documents weren't quite in order.

"We don't even know if he's still Spike."

"He certainly sounded like Spike," Giles said. "Let's not make this out worse than it is."

"I warned you that it might not work the first time," Willow said. "We just have to regroup. There are other things I can try."

"You don't even know what you did."

"I can go back into his mind for another look. And then—"

"No. I don't want you to do that."

"Buffy, I'll have to, if—"

"I knew this was a terrible idea! Okay, okay." Uncurling the fists. "I'm sorry. Calm now. Look, I'm going to go back down there and talk to him. Maybe ... maybe I can get something more out of him, that might buy us a vowel."

Giles began, "We can—"

"No we. I'm going to talk to him alone. After all, it was to me he was talking. Maybe he'll have more to say if there's no one else around."

He paced it off. Ten steps square. Ten steps square. Ten steps square. Deep underground, he could nose that. The other cells empty. Faint stink of demons long gone. Air clammy, dusty, unpeopled, old. Nothing like the Initiative, but if it didn't reek of those army brats, it certainly felt like their work. Who else could clap him in a cell with no memory of how he'd been snatched, how he'd got here?

Slayer and her people in league with them, like he'd always known. Made sense really. It all made sense, except ... he didn't know why. Why they'd bung him into another prison. Bit extreme really, for what he'd done.

Far off, a clanging.

Then footsteps, coming closer. Another clang. The door at the end of the cell block, out of his line of sight. Shut with another metal echo, and he felt her there. The slayer. Not coming closer, just standing inside, breathing.

"Why're you doin' me like this?"
His shout echoed through the cells, against the stones. Then her steps started up. She came into view.

Looking pale, tentative, then quickly going steely. Girl he knew, her shining eyes, shining hoops at her ears. Staring at him like she did, like he was an affront to nature. All he’d done was try to help her. Show her what she needed to see.

"What did I do to you, Spike?"

Oh, games. We were playin' games. Twenty questions, round two. She’d left Red and Rupes out of it this time, but it was going to be the same thing, asking him a lot of nonsense, the three of them dithering more and more the less he said. He knew how to play. Had learned a thing or two from them, wasn't going to run his mouth for no purpose.

She leaned against the bars of the opposite cell, fingers hooked in the front pocket of her jeans. Eyeing him. "Do you know who I am?"

Bloody hell. This could get boring in a hurry. "Slayer. Always thought Buffy was the stupidest name out."

She slipped then. The steely control gave way, her eyes opening, lips parting. "Spike—you are back —"

Back? Back from where? He'd been minding his own business in his crypt with a nice bottle of filched port, and then all of a sudden he was here locked down tighter than a gnat's arsehole.

She started towards him, then caught herself. "Why are you angry at me?"

Duh. He sketched a rude gesture at the bars that confined him.

"If you'll talk to me, I'll let you out."

Oh, no fear.

"I don't like seeing you locked up. But I need to know what happened."

"Like you don't know all about it. I'm the one in the bloody dark."

"In the dark about what?"

"Oh bloody hell! So I showed up soldier-boy for the suckjob-john he was clearly born to be! Did it for your own damn good. An' you pay me back by slammin' me into some subterranean cell, an' messing up my head!"

She gave him the hub-cap eyes treatment. "You .... Are you talking about Riley?"

"No, I'm talking about Marco bloody Polo."

"You ... you think you're here because you took me to that vampire whorehouse?"

Double-duh.

"What do you mean, that I messed up your head?"

"Must've done somethin' to my chip. Made it so it hurts all the time."

"Your head aches?"
"Oh, that an unintended side-effect? Don't pretend to look so bleedin' concerned!"

"Is it really bad?"

"Yeah. Not like if I was to have the satisfaction of stovin' your pert little face in, but ... yeah. Aches like a bloody bitch, you really want to know."

"I'm sorry. Is that all you meant, about messing with your head? Or is there something else?"

"Look, what's this in aid of, Slayer? This isn't your usual way of goin' bout things."

"Spike, what year is it?"

"You mad?"

"Please just tell me."

"How should I bloody know? Dunno how much time I've lost. Feels like a lot, feels like ... dunno what .... What did you do to me? How'd you get me here? You look different. Older. Makes no sense."

"What year was it when you took me to see Riley in that place?"

"Two thousand. Everywhere, even up your nose."

He saw how carefully she didn't react to this, which was another big tip-off right there. It ought to be two thousand, and it wasn't. That explained why she looked different, but ....

The whole time they talked, the pain was getting worse and worse. When he'd first opened his eyes on the cell, it was just a headache, the kind you'd have expect to have after a bad drunk, and he'd been in the middle of a real stinker of one, last he could recall. But now it was starting to feel like they'd clapped a metal band around his cranium and were tightening it bit by bit.

"Please answer my question. Is there anything else besides the headache, that makes you say we messed with your head?" Little by little, she drifted closer. Then she was right there, and her fingers hooked onto the crossbar. Pink nail polish. She smelled like coffee and agitation and fucking. God, she did his head in. He wanted to touch those fingers. Wanted to kiss the little tips and taste the salt of her palm. He'd told Riley he envied him, and goddamn it he did, every single second. Slayer broke the soldier-boy's heart, but what Spike wouldn't give to have even that much of her attention, to be hurt by her that way. Trampled 'neath her neat little feet.

"Spike? You can tell me."

"Something's been at my head. Don't know how. But here I am, an' you lot have done it."

She met his eyes then, looked at him for a long time, without any particular expression, but more intently than she'd ever done before. "Spike. What's your real name?"

"What?"

"Where are you from? London, we know that, but where? What part? What street?"

What the devil was she playing at now? His name? His street? Why not rank and serial number? He didn't know those, and he didn't know about any streets either. Not that he was going to let on.
"You don't know, do you? What's your girl's name?" Buffy asked.

"Don't have a girl's name, I'm a man. I'm Spike."

The corner of her mouth ticced, a laugh repressed. He'd show her, laughing at him—

Before he could snatch at her fingers, she withdrew them, stepped back. "You misunderstood. I meant—the name of your girlfriend. The one you came to town with."

"You're tryin' to trick me. Not goin' along with it."

"No trick. I'm trying to—look, of course you don't believe me—but I'm trying to help you. I need to situate you, so .... Can you tell me her name?"

"Don't have a girl. No girl. You know that."

"But you did."

"Did I?"

"Don't you know?"

"Bugger this for a game of soldiers!" He threw himself on the bunk. His head felt enormous, throbbing, and she was dicking him about, teasing, fucking with him.

"You don't remember Drusilla?" Buffy said.

Drusilla? Where'd she come up with a cockamamie name like that to throw at him?

"But you recognize me. You recognized Willow and Giles. You remember Riley."

"Well, yeah."

"When did you come to my town, Spike?"

"To Sunnyhell?"

"You know that!"

"Course I do. Always ... guess I've always been here. If that's where we still are. The pain was getting worse. He thought he might hurl. Didn't want her to see that. Mustn't come across as weak.

"You were never anywhere else?"

"Bloody hell, quit questionin' me!"

She came back then, right up to the bars. Her lips in a pout. He'd have liked to bite them off, except he was feeling too sick, and the prospect of more pain if the chip fired just made it worse.

"Beetle off, will you? Leave me be."

"I'm sorry. It wasn't supposed to be like this." Then she stepped away, but in a moment she was back, pushing something through a little hatch at the bottom of the cell door.

A thermos. "It's warmed up just how you like it. I'll go get something for your headache, I'll be back in a little while. And you won't be locked up in here very much longer, I promise."
"What're you playin' at?"

"It's all right Spike, the blood isn't doctored. It's just pig blood, it won't hurt you. It might help you feel better, if you feed."

"You. Look like her—almost exactly. Smell like her, identical. But clearly you're not her. What's your game?"

She just shook her head, and then she was walking away.

He dashed a fist against the bars. "This's how you do me, bitch?"

"I'm taking him out of that cage and bringing him back upstairs."

"Buffy—" Giles was getting his frown on; she cut him off.

"Why not? I just got done explaining to you guys—as far as I can tell, he thinks it's five years ago. He thinks we're punishing him because he tipped me off about Riley getting suck-jobs." It made her reel, recalling that. She hadn't thought of Riley, hadn't said his name, in forever. Startling to realize it was only five years, it felt like a whole other lifetime ago. It was. When she was a different person, not yet dead the second time.

Willow was now flipping through different books. "This is actually a good development! I mean, not as good as if it had gone 100% right. But it proves that his memories are in there. We've salvaged one, we'll unveil the rest."

"Look, he told me that when stuff did come back to him, it came in little slivers. Like peering in through a cracked door. Will, I think Spike's stuck in one of those slivers. He didn't remember Drusilla. I'm pretty sure he also didn't remember that his name is William Pratt."

"I'm actually a lot more optimistic now," Willow said. "This suggests other fruitful approaches—"

"Buffy," Giles repeated. "I would prefer that you leave him where he is until we've sorted this out."

"He said his head aches. I don't want to leave him in that dungeon, by himself, feeling sick. That's not exactly how I'd like to be treated myself."

"You don't know that he was telling you the truth about what he does and does not remember. He'd say anything, to get a chance to overpower you. We don't know what he's capable—"

"Oh come on Giles, I know everything Spike is capable of. At the time we're talking about—the time he thinks this is—he was a pain in the ass, but harmless. The chip reined him in."

"The chip is gone now."

"He doesn't know that. And there's absolutely no reason to think his soul isn't influencing him even if he doesn't realize he has a soul. Look, what's the point of making him feel punished? The more angry and suspicious and oppressed he feels, the more he's going to resist, and that's gotta make it harder for Willow to spell him again. Will? Am I right?"

"Well ... yes, it could kind of gum up the works."
She was eager to get back to him; this dickering made her antsy. She'd never have been crowned Miss Outstanding Empathy Of Whatever Year, but right now all she could think of was what he must be experiencing, finding himself locked up, disoriented, afraid.

She almost shrugged Giles' hand off when he laid it gently on her arm. "Buffy, are you sure you're not so determined to bring Spike out of that cell because you need to feel better for his presence?"

"Huh?"

Willow had glanced up, was goggling from the other side of the room.

"The relationship you have with him doesn't exist in his mind."

"And that's a reason to mistreat him?"

"When this is over, he'll understand why it was necessary for him to spend a little time in the cell."

"No Giles, when this is over he'll understand that we really have changed, that we're not still reacting in this knee-jerk way to the mere fact that he used to be our enemy! Will—how much time do you need to prepare another spell?"

"Well ... at least a day. More, if I dot all the i's."

Buffy wheeled around again. "I'm not leaving him down there. And I need—what do we have that'll kill a migraine in a vampire?"

This is NOT about me feeling better. She stomped down the stairs two at a time—the castle, especially whenever she was trying to get from one end of it to the other in a hurry, could feel like one of those Escher prints that were nothing but stairs, infinitely folded into each other, going neither quite up or down, without egress. I mean, of course it makes me feel better to treat him right, but the important thing is to treat him right in the first place.

Memories long unvisited bloomed out in her own mind as she hastened down. Riley. She hadn't known how very averse she'd been to thinking about him—her occasional little nostalgic forays into the past, musings about her college career, about the first year Dawn came among them, about her mother's final illness ... none of these somehow included Riley, though he'd been there throughout. He'd played a crucial part in making her decide to drop her liaison with Spike—his reappearance in Sunnydale in the middle of that, walking in on them ... that was the Triple Crown of Shame, no wonder she'd let herself conveniently forget it.

Now she wondered just why Spike had made such a point of taking her to the scene of Riley's great shame. She hadn't considered Spike at the time—he was an annoyance, and dragging her there was just another one of his annoying, attention-seeking ploys.

But she understood it now. He'd wanted to detach her from her boyfriend, because he was already in love with her.

She'd never asked Spike when he'd first fallen for her. Before his death, it had simply never occurred to her to care. And since, he wouldn't have been able to tell her.

But it must've been around that time. He'd told her when Drusilla came back to town, but it had to have been brewing earlier. Surely, he wouldn't have done what he did if not for that.
And No, Giles, that doesn't make me feel better either, she narrated, hauling open the heavy metal door into the dungeon, nodding at the slayer standing guard. "I'll be bringing Spike out in a little while," she said. "And then you can go."

The thermos was untouched. Spike lay on the shelf-bed, an arm flung across his eyes, but when she came close he leapt up, assembling his face into a sneer.

"Does it still hurt?"

"What d'you care?"

"Does it? I brought you a painkiller."

"Painkiller, yeah? Pointy, pine?"

"No Spike. It's Vicodin, actually, and I had to buy them off one of the girls for—never mind. Do you want them?"

"Bugger off."

"Well, they're here if you want them, just ask. I'm letting you out now."

"Ah, yes? Would like my final cigarette, then. An' a blindfold."

"Spike, no one's going to slay you. I'm taking you upstairs."

"Upstairs?" He waggled his brows. "Ooo er, missus."

And there she was, blushing. To cover, she made a point of jangling the keys, pulling the door open with a flourish. "Come on out."

He hung back, giving her suspicious glances. "What's this? Where are you taking me?"

"Up to our—up to my rooms. We're in a castle in the Scottish countryside, it's where I live now. I'll explain it to you."

Spike burst out laughing. "I get it! I'm asleep. I'm havin' one of those dreams where you're dreamin' about havin' a crazy dream!"

"Not quite. C'mon."

As he passed in front of her to leave the cell, Spike leaned close, took a deep whiff of her neck and shoulder. "Don't smell of soldier-boy, but someone's been givin' you a good rogerin' lately."

She blushed again, but this time she made no effort to cover for it. Instead she laid a hand on his forearm. "What more can you tell?"

He shot her a look of amazement.

"It's okay Spike. What do you smell?"

"What's got into you? Who are you?"

"You know who I am."
"Doesn't add up."

"I'll answer all your questions. But what else can you figure out about me?"

He backed off a few paces, his eyes filling with dismay. "How d'you do it? How d'you make all this up, to hoax me? Why go to all the trouble?"

"This isn't two thousand. We're in two thousand five, and a lot has changed. You just don't remember it right now, because your memory has been tampered with. C'mon."

"So it's the pirate's life for you, eh, Harris?"

Xander bristled. "What's he talking about?"

Willow pointed at the eye-patch. A fixture they all, most especially Xander himself, had long since ceased to notice.

Buffy had hoped to get Spike up to her apartment alone, but they'd been way-laid—or, met, as Giles and Willow would've categorized it—by a contingent, including Andrew and Bakhita, in the corridor, and shunted into one of the big drafty tapestried reception rooms.

Giles apparently wanting to make a very public and above-board accounting to Spike, with lots of witnesses.

"What's all this in aid of?" Spike bridled when Bakhita took a step closer to him. "Whoa—who's this little girl?" He had to crane his neck to look up into her face. Buffy could see that he knew her for a slayer; her proximity obviously discomfitted him. When Bakhita, smiling, spoke to him in Arabic, he actually gave a little jump, and had to recover himself by jostling Buffy, saying "Where's that fag you promised me? Thought I had a packet but you've rifled my pockets."

"You really want one? You, uh ... you gave it up."

"I wouldn't bloody give it up, I don't care what bloody year it is."

Bakhita spoke again, and this time Spike fixed on her with a greedy attention, and a nod, before she galloped off.

"Please tell me that child doesn't smoke," Giles said.

They all stood around in awkward silence until the girl returned, to pour five packets of short, heady Turkish cigarettes into Spike's hands.

"You can't light that up in here," Giles said, but they were already tearing into them, Bakhita producing a Zippo from her pocket. Spike hesitated for one moment at the sight of a slayer with a flame in her hand, then leaned in to accept the spark.

"That's the stuff. Filthy." He blew a long stream of smoke. Giles waved at the air. "Oh buck up, Rupert. Have one yourself, you know you want to."

"No thank you, Spike."

"So. Who's gonna tell me what's going on here?"
He didn't believe them. After Giles had spoken, making judicious and measured explanations, after Willow told him about the spell she'd attempted, and Xander chimed in, and Andrew's flights were stifled, the group dispersed, leaving Buffy free to go where she liked with the incredulous Spike.

"Maybe you'd like some air? We could take a walk in the grounds?"

"A turn through the shrubbery? Oh, lead on, my lady."

His mocking stance had strengthened with every piece of the story he'd heard. He'd chuckled, in a go on, pull the other one manner. The more detail they'd filled in for him, the more detached, derisive, scornful he'd become.

No one had mentioned his relationship with Buffy. Whether because they felt it was for her to tell him, or because they wished she'd keep him in the dark on that score, Buffy didn't know. It certainly wasn't something she wanted to bring up in front of the others, as long as Spike was in this mood.

He sniffed suspiciously at the air when she led him out through the portcullis. "What's to keep me from just takin' off?"

"Nothing, really. Well, there's a demon-sensor on the boundary wall. Anything goes over it in either direction, will summon the girls."

"The girls."

"The other slayers. There's over a hundred of them here."

"Guess that explains my headache."

"Maybe. I doubt it, though."

"Think I'll take my chances." In a blink, he was gone. Buffy took off after him; he ran faster than her eye could track, but she was faster still, and tackled him a mile off, just short of the wall that bordered the woods. They sprawled on the turf.

"Gerroff!" He pushed her.

Seeing him give a pre-emptive wince, against the explosion of pain in his head that didn't come, she covered: "C'mon, you'd have to hit me harder than that. But I don't recommend it."

"Too right."

And there they were, stretched out on the summer grass, side-by-side. And if she'd wondered earlier whether he was in love with her yet, she had her answer now, in the way he looked at her, furtive, shy, his eyes full of repressed longing. Probably thinking it was dark enough that she wouldn't quite notice.

Then he closed his eyes, and breathed in. He had a way of inhaling, that was like the touch of a blind man on her face, taking in her details, learning, observing. She stayed still, allowing him to perform this subtle inquiry, waiting to see what conclusion he'd draw.

"Makes no sense. Slayer, why ... why d'you smell of me?"

The headache, that had been become less in the open air, got worse now, as if something inside him didn't want to know the answer to his own question. He hastened to cut Buffy off before she could
speak. "How do I know any of this bollocks is true? How do I know it's two-thousan'-an-five?"

She pulled her phone from her pocket, flipped it open so he could see the screen. August 2, 2005.

"You could fake that."

"Which is more plausible, that I'd be faking my mobile, and this entire set-up, or that you might have amnesia?"

"You lot hate me. Why'd you drag me along to this game of Ivanhoe? Why d'you care if I've got amnesia or not?"

"Things change. And I never hated you."

"Call it despise, then. I'm not important enough to be hated. You mean to tell me it's years gone an' I've still got this bloody chip in my head an' I'm still doggin' you around because I've nothin' else to do? Wouldn't do that. Would top myself first."

She was so cool. She could just lie there, stretched out on her belly, tugging at the grass with her little taper fingers, like his nightmare was nothing. "Spike, are you sure you don't remember anything else? Anything from the past? Drusilla? Black hair, kinda googy eyes, dressed like an overpriced doll? You adored her. You spent a century with her. She betrayed you. That's got to be indelible. She's got to be in there somewhere. And why don't you remember coming to Sunnydale? You weren't there always. You've been plenty of other places. Where did you go when you left Sunnydale, before you came back and got that chip?"

"Don't know. Don't know!" This interrogation made him feel punk. Whatever the hell he was sure of—that this somehow had to do with that idiot Riley Finn, his rival, getting revenge for being ratted out—when he tried to feel backwards, like throwing out an arm on the lip of the abyss in search of some steadying rail, there was nothing there. He ought to be able to think of certain things, not the stupid things slayer was asking about, because fuck her ... but other things. Because yeah, wasn't right that he'd been there all along. Had to come from somewhere else. But there was nowhere else. He thought of trains and ships and cars, but nothing his mind threw up was specific—no specific ship, no specific trip. He might as well have been standing on an ice floe in the dark forever until a year or so ago.

Everything behind him just blank.

Buffy was looking at him. "Willow will try again, to restore your memories. She needs a little time to prepare."

"Why? Why're you doin' this? You lettin' her experiment on me, that it? I'm a fangy guinea pig?"

"No. Weren't you listening to what Giles told you? Spike, listen."

She laid her fingers over his. Their warmth shot through him like a gulp of heroin-laced blood. He stared; what was this? Buffy never touched him except with punches. She never spoke to him in this tone of voice.

He was through the fucking Looking Glass.

"Listen. I told you, lots has changed. I know you're in love with me, Spike." She smiled then, a smug little moue that made him want to slap her. "That love changed you. It changed both of us. You went on to fight at my side, you became a hero. Most recently you were involved in an apocalyptic battle in L.A., where you were found afterwards, with amnesia. That was a little over a month ago—we've
been trying to help you ever since.”

This made no sense. No sense. No sense. Insulting, that she'd spout such tosh, right to his face like she thought he was some kind of credulous baby. He couldn't look at her now. How'd she find out about his feelings? He was never going to let her know about that. At least ... not any time soon. Not until he was certain Finn was well out of the way and she might be getting worn down a bit by not having her ashes hauled regular anymore.

"Spike, I know it sounds strange. I know you're scared. But really, truly, you're among friends here. I'm your friend."

"My friend. That's a laugh, Slayer. That's the best laugh out."

She leaned in a little closer. He could see the green-gold facets of her eyes, the two little points of reflected light in their clear whites. She blinked. "Spike, haven't you guessed it yet? I'm your girl."

He dug his fingers into the loam, pulling it up in clots. He leapt to his feet. Hurled a heavy tuft of earth and grass in her face.

"An' you say I'm evil. You, Buffy Summers, are a devious bitch."

This time when he ran, she didn't follow right away. Wiping the loose moist crumbs of earth off her cheeks and forehead, she could hear him, sense him, retreating. If he was going to attempt to scale the wall, he'd meet the girls. They'd all been alerted that he was strictly no-slay. She didn't think he'd hurt anyone, not with the awareness full on him of that choke-chain in his head.

So she could afford to give him a little distance.

It was a pleasant night. Mild, a breeze carrying the scent of gorse down from the hills. The air here always smelled so good. She took deep breaths of it now. Steadying herself. This now was bad, but it wasn't necessarily a disaster. Willow called it cause for optimism. His memories were still there, even if he couldn't get at more than a slice at a time.

She got up and strolled, following along with the tall ancient stone wall at her left, in the direction Spike had taken. She liked this wall, it had personality, there was something weirdly maternal about it, you could tell your secrets to its cracks and facets, where they'd be safe.

She whispered, Please let Spike find himself again. Whether he wants me in the end or not. Just let him be okay. That's all I care about.

When she came near him again, he was sitting in the Arcadian stone summer house next to the pond that some late Georgian owner of the castle had installed as a piece of fashionable ornamental folly. Buffy paused, downwind, listening. Spike was muttering to himself, but she couldn't make any of it out. Just the agitation.

What an ordeal this was for him.

She thought of that time she'd been stung by the demon that made her hallucinate, made her believe her whole life, all her friends, were a fantasy, and that she was mad, shut up in a hospital. Another episode she'd barely returned to since, too painful for reminiscence. That had taken just a couple of days, whereas here it was weeks and weeks unfolding for Spike of uncertainty, fear, lack of control.
Someone less strong than he was—less packed with ego—would've succumbed by now.

Suddenly his head appeared, thrust out through the columns of the summer house, peering at her where she stood half behind a tree. "Know you're there, you lyin' twat. Fuck off."

She came slowly towards him. The dew was rising, the grass slicking around her bare feet in sandals. "Aren't you curious about what I told you?"

"You're just trying to do my head in. Why don't you stick a stake in me an' be done!"

"I'm telling you the truth. You and I—"

He sneered. "You're my girl. Oi, let's see you prove it." He fanged out into that rude feral grin he wore at his hungriest, his grossest. "Give us a kiss, then."

She came up the three little marble steps, into the folly. Spike retreated before her, but she closed the distance, laying a hand softly on his arm. He growled. She went up on tiptoe, the edges of her sandal soles touching the toes of his boots. Breathed softly against his fangs, then laid her lips against his cheek, drawing them slowly over the harsh demon flesh to the corner of the distended mouth.

Maybe, as in a fairytale, one true-love's kiss could undo all the bad magic, make everything whole again.

The growl renewed; she felt fear in it, distress; he trembled, holding still for one long moment as she pressed her mouth to his, her fingers caressing his arm, putting all the tenderness she could summon into these muted gestures.

Then came the blow to her face that knocked her down.

The marble floor, cold against her cheek, gritty with bits of leaves and twigs, felt upside down, like she'd fallen up to the ceiling. His boots filled her line of sight. He'd expect her to return the blow, so that was what she wasn't going to do.

When she could look up, Spike was goggling down at her.

"How'd I do that? The chip—"

"The chip was removed, over a year ago." Her lips were slippery, wet. Buffy touched her nose. Please let that not be snot pouring out. Blood on her fingers, blood trickling out of both nostrils. Slicking her tongue, where she'd bit it. He'd gotten off a smart one, in his assumption that he wouldn't get a second chance. She sniffled.

Then Spike was kneeling, peering at her closer.

"I don't believe this." More awe now than incredulity.

Dizzy, she started to sit up. Then he was helping her, his hands on her shoulders. She wiped her smarting nose and lips on the hem of her skirt, and was shifting to get her feet beneath her when Spike, saying it again, I don't believe this, snatched her to him.

Covered her mouth in a kiss like freefall.

Threading his neck, pressing close, she gave herself to his plunging invasive tongue, this violent demand for proof of the impossible, or anyway, a lucky dip for the forbidden prize. He grappled her
close with one hand, the other taking a rough tour, squeezing her breasts through the thin cotton of her dress, pinching the nipples, daring her to throw him off, to quash him like he deserved.

He hadn't handled her so aggressively, not since those frantic couplings in Sunnydale, and the rush that blew through her taught her how she missed that crude lust. She was already so wet, so ready for everything, anything—there was no question of stopping him.

"What you do to me," she gasped. "See? See how it is?"

"Somethin's turned you into a right slag, see that plain." Pushing her breasts together, he buried his nose in her cleavage, took a long sharp breath. "Christ you're a slut on heat."

"For you."

"That what I am, your undead toy? That's your fancy now? Wouldn't have thought it, but then was a vamp that fucked you first—you're imprinted for it. Finally quit pretendin' you don't like a monster." He thumbed the scars on her neck. "You make me fuck you with my game-face on, bite you, an' then you wipe my mind 'til the next time you get the itch. Clever, that is."

"No. No, that's not how it is at all."

He dropped her; she came down hard on her coccyx, bit her tongue again. He was already at the other end of the little folly, up on the bench, like he was trying to avoid mucking his boots.

"Spike—wait a minute." She scrambled up. "You remember Angel?"

He put up a hand, as if to ward her off. "What angel?"

"You said—" Why did it still make her flush, to say certain words out loud? "You knew it was a vampire I first ...."

His eyes flashed gold in the dark. "Everybody knows that."

"But how? Who was this vampire?"

"Don't bleedin' care, do I? Think I'll take my chances with gettin' over that wall." He jumped down, jostled past her.

"Spike, wait." She caught his arm, wheeled him around. "This could be important. You might be having a break-through."

"Oh, can't have that, can we? Would ruin your fuck-toy, yeah, if I knew too much? Better wipe me again."

"You really have that exactly wrong. We're trying to help you get all your memories back."

His lip curled. "Don't believe a word out of your mouth."

"Then maybe ..." She pulled her phone out of her pocket. "Maybe you'll believe your own."

"Bloody hell, what'd you do to me?" At first sight of himself on the tiny screen, he grabbed at his head.

Buffy hit the pause button to freeze the image. Spike had taken off out of the summer house, cursing.
She remained huddled on the bench, eyes fixed on the glowing little rectangle that showed the two of them, shot at her arm's length, cuddled together on her sofa, her head on his shoulder.

Her little beacon.

She waited.

Spike's roar of fury echoed across the water. Evoking the threat of wolves in the hills.

Suddenly he was back, a cigarette glowing between his lips. "You lot have been plunderin' my brain, else why'd you shave my hair off?"

"Believe me, it wasn't my idea. I like you blond. You did that yourself. You said you didn't like it."

"Sure. Sure, that's just what I'd do."

"Will you shut up and look at this before you start arguing with me again?"

"Give us that." He snatched the phone out of her hand, fiddled it. She had to resist the urge to grab it back. What if he erased it? Or crushed the delicate thing beneath his heel?

Then the voice emerged from the tiny speaker, tinny and low. His voice. "Here we are, then. I'm to make a little speech, on orders of my pretty darling here, Buffy Summers the vampire slayer, in case tomorrow I lose what few wits I've got left. What shall I say? Well, today's August first two-thousan'-an'-five, and I'm Spike. Who used to be a fellow called William Pratt in life, an' is currently a vampire the watchers' books style William The Bloody. Buffy tells me that I left off bein' that, that I'm a good man, only demon in history to want his soul back an' win it. That I'm a great warrior, an' a hero. I've got to take her word on it, because I had some kind of mishap a few weeks back, in Los Angeles California, an' now my memory's all bunged up. I don't know my past, or not enough of it, anyhow, to stuff up a gnat's arsehole. An' when I do get back some bit here or there, it's ugly an' leads to me makin' a fangy nuisance of myself. Which is why I've asked the witch Willow Rosenberg, to hex me up in the mornin', so I might remember myself again and be a whole man, or whole demon, or whatever it is I really am. Chancin' it, though I'm wary of magic, sensible vamp that I seem to be. Suppose that's the story, an' all. Hopin' I'll come out all right at the other end of the big spell."

Then her voice: "You have a little more time."

"Shall I say I love you an' fear to lose you?"

"That's what I was going to say. I love you so much, and I'm afraid, but I support you, no matter what happens after."

"Good girl. Shall I give you a kiss for you to look at later?"

"For us both to look at, yes."

Watching this. Spike did a good imitation of a pillar of salt. Nothing moved except his thumb, getting the video to play over again, and then a third time.

Buffy sat quietly, letting it do its work. Hoping it would do its work.

He was silent until the end, and went on staring at the screen even after it dimmed.

"Gnat's arsehole."
"Uh—what?"

"Down in that cell you had me in before ... crossed my mind that I was locked up tighter'n a gnat's arsehole."

"Yes?"

"And here I am sayin' same thing in this little flick."

"I guess it's your phrase du jour."

"Bloody hell."

"That's your other one."

He dropped down onto the bench beside her. "Can't believe this. Lemme see that again."

She set it playing. This time she could see it too, could greedily absorb every little visual detail, how he held her close the whole time, smiling indulgently, with bravado, casting little glances down at her with every few words, to check her reaction. When he folded her into a kiss, the video went a little blurry as her hand jostled in the air, but it was there, every bit of it, and watching it made her eyes burn.

The man in the video was no more the complete Spike she'd loved too late than the anguished version sitting beside her, but she'd stopped caring so much about such nuances; she loved him in all his states, even as she knew he needed to be restored before he could fully choose or reject her.

She hoped that when that happened, he'd remember how she'd dealt with him now.

Next to her, Spike propped his arms on his knees, cradled his head, and moaned.

She longed to touch him, but kept her distance.

"That can't be me." He scraped his boots on the marble floor. "That isn't me. It's a trick."

"You know it's not."

"What's wrong with you, then? You'd never let me touch you. You're not that girl."

"You're not the Spike you think you are. If you remembered the time between two thousand and now, you'd know why I love you."

"Couldn't happen. Couldn't happen. Couldn't happen."

She didn't know how to answer. This could just devolve into a he-said she-said, a piece of absurdist theater.

He glanced at her. "You'd let me have you right here, wouldn't you?"

There was such contrary despair in his tone.

"I would, if I thought it would comfort you. But not if it would only make you more confused and unhappy." She twisted her fingers together. "You have to wait a while, for Willow to ready another spell. We've got satellite TV, and Jack Daniels, and blood, and if you'd like someone else to keep you company—that girl who gave you the cigarettes would be pleased I'm sure to sit with you ... that's okay too."
"Sit with me. You mean, keep guard over me."

"No, that's really not what I meant."

He frowned, his reply licked with irritation. "Guess everythin' I think you mean is wrong."

"It doesn't matter, Spike. I know this is hard."

"Don't get you. Don't bloody get any of this." He lit another cigarette, took a deep long drag, that he held for longer than a breathing man ever could, then expelled in a stream without a cough. Staring straight ahead, he said, as if expressing a choice between the beef or the chicken, "Think I would like to throw a fuck into the slayer, if it's all the same. Probably never get another chance, be an idjit to pass it up."

"That would prove to you that I'm nothing, wouldn't it?" Buffy said. "If I part my knees for you?"

"That's about it, yeah. Still, I'll have it."

He hadn't moved, except to bring the cigarette to his mouth.

"You missed the part about you having your soul."

"Heard it, but as it's bollocks, I'm not paying it any mind."

She squeezed her paired hands between her knees. Her nose still stung, and her nipples hadn't yet received the message to stand down. The early morning was chilly now. "Don't you feel ... your conscience?"

"That what it is, that makes my head ache?"

"I don't know."

"Can't remember sinkin' my teeth into anybody. Though looks like I've been into you, or someone has."

She rocked a little, hugging herself. "Maybe we should go inside. Like I said, there's blood and TV and—"

His hand shot out; the next moment he was on her, pinning her, his fangs nicking her ear. "Which shall I take first, Slayer, your cunt, or your throat?"

She held herself still. Held her breath.

"Go on, lady's choice." His tongue traced the line of her last scar. She shuddered. "Or stop me."

"I won't stop you," she whispered. "But you would. You would stop yourself. Of that I'm sure, because I know you, Spike."

For a space in which her heartbeat reverberated in her inner ear, five times, six, seven, he kept her there, letting her feel the sharp incisor scraping flesh, letting her feel the hard bulge of his angry arousal against her hip.

Then he was on his feet. His sudden absence a vacuum that made her gasp. It was all she could do not to reach for him. Her fingernails bit into her palms as she forced herself to keep still.

The lighter flared, his cragged face orange in the glow, a new cigarette lit. "Get me a bottle, that's
what I want. Get me two. Christ, I've had about as much of this as I can take."

Spike took a deep swig from the bottle and held it out. "What happened to your eye?"
"Evil guy stuck his thumb in it."
"Bad luck."
"You were there."
"Wasn't me, though, was it, Harris?"
Xander made a You wish face, and took his own swig. "Buffy would expect me to say at this point that it was thanks to you I'm not completely blind."
"Buffy would expect that, huh?"
"Well, only because it was you who got me out of there before he could go for the other eye."

Here he was, years removed from his parents' dank basement, living in his own high-tech swinging bachelor pad in an ancient Scottish castle, and yet once again having to babysit the crazy vampire. This time when Buffy had texted him from out on the grounds, saying Spike needed a drink and some distraction well away from her, he'd known better than to protest. He owed her, and if this was how he had to work off the debt, well, he'd work it.

It wasn't like he was seeing any swinging action in the swinging bachelor pad.

Typical really, that he'd be shacked up in the middle of nowhere with over a hundred nubile young women, and too honorable, or too shy, or just too pathetic, to get him some.

"Don't tell me," Spike said. "Just does my head in. An' I probably won't remember it in the morning anyhow."

"Suit yourself." Xander turned up the TV volume.

"S'like I've got blinders on," Spike said. "Can't look backwards, or sideways. Can barely see forwards, either, since I don't know what any of this bloody is or what I'm doing here."

"It sucks, man, I get that." Xander turned the volume down, pushed the bottle back to Spike's end of the coffee table.

"Willow's really got the mojo to fix this? Or you lot just too afraid of her that you let her muck about as she likes?"

Spike might not know shit right now but he was still weirdly astute. "Kind of both," Xander said, shrugging.

"Oh, glorious."

The knock at the door came as a relief. Maybe Buffy had changed her mind and was going to take him away again.

Xander opened it to Dawn, with a manila envelope under her arm. "Can I come in?"
Buffy hadn't said anything about keeping her sister away from her vampire, so Xander bowed graciously and let her pass.

"Hiya Spike. Do you know who I am?"

He gazed unsteadily up at her—he'd had enough to drink by now that his eyes were red, his movements a little tremulous.

"You ... you're the little sister. Grown up, you have."

"Right, I'm Dawn. Can I sit with you?" She dropped onto the sofa, closer to Spike than Xander would've liked, but as Dawn sometimes reminded him, he wasn't the boss of her.

"I brought some pictures to show you."

"Dunno if I want to look at any pictures. Gettin' drunk, y'see."

"I don't think this will interfere. It might help, that you've loosened up."

Xander said, "Hey, maybe this isn't such a good idea."

"Maybe not, but it could dislodge something. We don't know. Just let me try for a minute."

Xander fingered the stake concealed in his waistband, under his shirt. Spike had to know, since he'd successfully broken Buffy's nose, that the chip was inactive. He didn't like him so close to Dawn, with the chip inactive.

"Buffy said you didn't remember some important people from your, uh, unlife. But I thought maybe seeing some pictures would spark your memory, so I printed out some images from the Council database."

The first one she laid on the coffee table in front of Spike, was, it took Xander a moment to realize, Spike himself. He stood against one of those old-timey studio backgrounds of a waterfall in a glade, his chin tipped up defiantly at the camera, dressed sort of like a lumberjack in his Sunday clothes—the overcoat too large for his small rather skinny frame. His hair was shaggy and long and fell in his face, not quite concealing a bruised and blackened eye. One hand was concealed behind his back, the other balled in a fist.

Spike took this in slowly, his eyes widening, inspecting the picture from the upper left corner to the lower right, as if it was a page of type.

"Is that little shite supposed to be me?"

"In 1881. This is the earliest picture of you in the archive. Taken in Yorkshire."

"Yorkshire."

"What were you doing in Yorkshire?" Dawn asked.

"Up to no good, no doubt."

It was clear he had no idea.

Dawn took out another picture. Same backdrop, same photography studio's curly-wurly signature logo at the bottom. A slim but stately blonde woman, laced tightly into a dress criss-crossed with stiff ruffles and frogging, and crowned with an enormous feathered hat, stood beside ... holy crap. Beside
Angel. The name burst from Xander's lips before he could stop himself.

Dawn gave him a glare. "Great. Spike was supposed to get to figure that out himself."

Spike squinted at the figures, at the big gloverying man in the dark suit with its fat elaborate cravat. "Buffy said somethin' 'bout an angel. She didn't mean this tosser?"

Dawn gestured at Xander to keep still.

"He's a right bruiser, he is. This lady's a little bit of all right, if you could peel her down a few layers. She's got a cruel mouth, though. Vampires, these two?"

"You don't recognize them? Look harder."

"This is her angel? Couldn't be. Got a mug on him like a pervert schoolmaster—a right Squeers, he is. Look at those fists. Sledgehammers." He glanced back at the photo of himself. "You reckon that one blackened his eye? Could be."

"Probably," Dawn said. "You were all together then."

"What, me with them? Don't look like much of a fun couple, do they?"

"There was a fourth in your party." Dawn set down the matching photo of Drusilla like the final card in a tarot layout.

God, even in a sepia image over a hundred years old, she still gave Xander the creeps. Those eyes bugging at him across time. She stood stiffly, as if she'd just been scolded, slightly hunched, almost furtive. Her clothes were velvet, a little disheveled when you looked at them closely, her hair tumbling over her shoulders. She wore the same hat as Darla, as if someone had insisted on plunking it on her head for the record. She looked miserable and completely mad.

Now Xander looked expectantly at Spike. He'd have to know her. You couldn't take care of the same girl for over a century, only to have her betray you in the end, and her face not strike some chord inside you, even if your brains were made of scrambled eggs.

"Sad bird," Spike murmured. He glanced at Dawn then with the expression of a dog who's just done a trick.

"Not always." Dawn took another sheet from the envelope.

This picture was taken in front of a backdrop of some kind of amusement park or fantasy city. At the bottom was stamped A Souvenir of the Great Coronation Exhibition ~ Great White City, Shepherd's Bush, London ~ 1911. The Drusilla in this photo, beautifully and neatly dressed in white lawn, was slightly blurred with laughter, her arm threaded possessively through that of Spike, who posed proudly in a linen suit and boater, his neck enclosed in a high celluloid collar, chin thrust out in what seemed to be his habitual stance.

Spike laughed. "Ain't they elegant!"

"I guess the coronation brought a lot of tasty tourists into London, huh?" Dawn said. "You must've had a field day."

He sobered. "Guess so. Who's she, then?"

"You tell me. You must know."
"This that Estella, Carmella, what was it? Slayer mentioned."

Xander grunted. "Do you think you're fooling us for a second?"

"Eh?"

"Estella, Carmella. Crap. You know who that is, Spike. C'mon, man. You know."

"Here's some more." Dawn unfolded a bigger sheet, on which she'd gathered together a myriad smaller images, snapshots, photo-booth strips, that taken all altogether looked like the record of one couple's manic weekend of playing dress-up. Here was Spike in a grey tailored suit, his hair black, there he was with blond stiff tines and eye-liner, white arms bare, there again in a kind of zoot suit, head nearly buried under a fedora, and in every shot she was there, with her googly eyes and toothy smile, thin body somehow twisted as if she could never hold still, and their bodies, their hands, always touching.

Christ, Xander thought. This is really all Drusilla's fault. If she'd just stuck by him ... Spike wouldn't be here, and Buffy wouldn't be in love with him. And okay, we'd probably all be dead and the world would be in hell, but at least ....

Spike said, "This is my girl. Where's she gone to?"

"What's her name?" Dawn asked.

"Don't know. Can't think." He grabbed for the bottle.

Dawn slid her hand over his. "Just wait a second before you do that. Please just try to remember, Spike. For me."

"You? An' what are you to me?"

"You protected me. Looked out for me. Like the best big scary vampire brother an orphaned girl could have. Please try."

He stared at her, and Xander thought—or maybe it was just because he was in so much suspense—that something flickered in Spike's eyes, not at the sight of Drusilla, but of Dawn, Dawn's guileless, pleading, open face.

Spike held his gaze. Shifted a little closer to Dawn, sniffing.

"Yes, smell me if that'll help." She sat up straighter, as if that would make her aroma more telling.

"You ...." He frowned, then grimaced. "My bloody skull's splittin'."

"I'm sorry," Dawn said.

But he leaned in closer, sniffing her neck, her shoulder. Xander wanted to wallop him off.

"... you'd be on the rag ... little spitfire, sassing me an' burstin' into tears when I'd get cross ... smell drove me crazy an' at the same time ... same time I'd ...."

Xander was on the verge of protesting this coupling of Dawn and blood and Spike's appetite, but before he could open his mouth, Spike shot up from the sofa, stumbled over the table, overturning it, and bolted out into the corridor.

When Marla and Jean tackled him—Xander had them standing guard outside—he was roaring and
snapping, his face a feral mask.

"This is one of those times I wish the Vulcan Neck Pinch really worked," Xander said.

"You want him unconscious? I can put him unconscious." Marla brought down her fist, and Spike went limp.

"Right before he spazzed out, he seemed to be having a new memory."

"That wasn't a new memory Dawn, it was an old, disgusting fantasy."

Buffy looked from Xander to her sister. "Guys, not helpful. Tell me what happened, no embellishing."

"It wasn't a fantasy. I think he was remembering me in the summer you were dead, Buffy. My system was all wonky, I swear I had about seven cycles in those four months, but I was afraid to tell Willow and Tara. I was all freaked out already without needing to mainline hormones on top of it. Spike was looking after me a lot, and I was pretty moody with him. I think that's what he was talking about."

Buffy turned to him. "Could that be it? What did he say, exactly?"

"I don't know ... something about spitfire and sass. I'm not sure. Sorry, Buff."

"I am sure," Dawn said. "He was definitely getting a memory of me, of that time when he and I were together a lot."

"And whenever he gets a memory, he goes psychotic. Great. Where is he now?"

"Marla put him back in the cells."

"Oh, perfect."

When she got down there, he was curled tightly in the furthest corner, scrabbling at the wall, growling.

"Spike." He looked up when she drew close; the growl ongoing, but in his yellow eyes now there was more pain and bewilderment than danger. Kneeling beside him, she stilled the frantic hands in her own. His fingers were bleeding. His face was bruised where Marla had clocked him. "Spike, I'm sorry this is so hard."

He quieted, as he had back in L.A. when she'd first gone into his cage.

The sun had already risen, so she couldn't lead him outside, but Buffy coaxed him out, up the stairs, and back to Willow's study. He breathed growls in and out, as if he needed the air, the sound a low sawing of woe. But he let her hold his hand, followed her willingly.

Willow said nothing when she saw him, just pointed them to the sofa. "I'm almost ready. Just double-checking my equations."

"If it doesn't work this time, I think we'll have to ...." Buffy stopped. Have to what? They were already doing their utmost.

Beside her, Spike stirred, trying to tug his hands free. The game-face fell away as Buffy looked at
him. His blue eyes were watery, exhausted. "Christ. Christ. What hit me?"

His voice, issuing calm and reasonable from cut and swollen lips, gave her a thrill of relief.

"Does it hurt a lot? I can give you some tablets."

She started up; he caught her wrist.

"You— Where am I?"

The question, his expression, pierced her like a blade; she stifled a cry. Back to the beginning again. All progress erased.

Willow hastened towards them. Spike turned, took her in, looked back at Buffy again. His mouth opened.

"Bloody hell—Buffy? Willow."

"Spike. Yes, it's us. You know us?"

"Do I know you? What sort of silly question is that? Where are we?"

"In my study. In the castle?"

"Castle. What castle? How'd you get me here?"

"Uh ... where should you be?"

"Was where we arranged to meet—alley behind Angel's place for the big showdown. You lot were givin' us the snub. Changed your minds last minute? Where's Angel an' the others? They get out too?"

Buffy looked at Willow. Willow seemed equally thrown, equally speechless.

Spike saw them checking with each other. "What's goin' on here? You two got some scheme brewin'? Maybe this's some kind of cosmic time-out you pulled so you can help? Because we're gonna need all the help we can get. We're outnumbered about fifty-thousand to one."

Another glance at Willow, who had gone all rabbity. Buffy cleared her throat. "Uh ... I'd better just tell you straight out—the battle was over weeks ago. The world didn't end but ... we believe you're the only survivor from Angel's team."

Spike's double-take pierced her again. " ... weeks? Can't tell me that—was there just a second ago, in the pourin' rain, Angel an' me an' Charlie an' Blue, we were—we were—" He stared into his lap, feeling at himself with his hands. "Oi—where's my leather? These aren't my clothes. An' I'm bone dry." Leaping up, he grabbed Willow, shook her. "What's this mischief? What've you done?"

Willow whispered, and Spike flew backwards to bounce off the bookcases.

"Will! Was that necessary?" Buffy went to him, but Spike was already on his feet again, ducking around her as if she wasn't quite there.

"This is well out of order! Put me back there! Need to get back an' fight! Losin' time, here!"
Was it her imagination, or was he not really looking at her? Looking everywhere but where she was standing right in front of him? Maybe it was only his agitation, his confusion.

"Spike, that's the thing. There's, uh, lost time. Since you were found after the battle, you've had amnesia."

"I—what?" He wheeled around to face her, and for one second their eyes caught, before he looked away.

"You were found in the alley after the battle, by a squad of slayers Faith was leading. You were badly burned, and ... PTSD ... and you'd lost your memory. That was about six weeks ago. I came to get you, I've been with you ever since, and Willow has been trying to restore your memory, magically. At your request, I hasten to add."

"That's bollocks, because the battle's just gettin' started! An' I'm missin' it!"

Silently, Willow held up her laptop, showed him first that day's date, then the news stories she'd archived out of Los Angeles after the battle, about a catastrophic chain of subterranean natural gas explosions that burned a ten block radius of downtown, around the hulk of a disused 1920s hotel.

By time he'd seen the fifth or sixth one, the tears were coursing down Spike's cheeks.

"Hey, it's okay," Willow said. "Angel and the others didn't fight in vain. The apocalypse was averted."

"They're all gone an' I'm here in some stupid castle an' you say that's okay?"

Willow gave him her all merry and bright face. "You fought—you prevailed! You're alive&!"

He'd lifted his hand, as if to dash the laptop to the floor; Willow's question froze him. "Are you insane?"

Buffy stepped forward. "Spike, listen—"

As if she was invisible, inaudible, he swept past her, out of the study. The slam of the door reverberated through Buffy like a canon shot.

"What ... what just happened, Will?"

"I don't know. My spell kicked in, maybe? Or ... he just suddenly got it all back on his own?"

"But he doesn't have it all back. He's still in L.A. He doesn't know about any of this here." The childish panic threatened to engulf her like rising flood waters.

"Maybe ... the rest'll kick back in soon. This is real progress."

Buffy went to the door. "Or maybe this is just another temporary memory sliver and an hour from now he'll be somebody else."

"Spike! Hey—where are you going?"

He didn't know where he was going—he didn't know where he was.

He drew up short. Here was Dawn Summers, grown tall as a giraffe and fair as a gazelle, emerging
from behind an arras in one of this maze of huge ridiculous stone rooms.

"Bit! You here too?"

"Bit?"

Christ. The last thing she'd said to him back in Shitdale, wasn't it about setting him on fire if he got too near her sis? He retreated back up a step. "Dawn. Shouldn't—didn't mean to—don't presume—"

"You called me Bit. Oh my God—Spike? Spike, are you really back with us now?"

Laughing, she flew at him, her trajectory knocking him back to sit hard on the step, with her suddenly sprawled in his lap. "I knew it, I knew it, I knew you'd be all right! Oh this is wonderful! Where's Buffy, does Buffy know?"

Apparently her hard feelings of the year before were all forgotten now.

"You know what I'm doin' here?"

"Yes—you're—wait a sec'. You don't?"

"Got plucked out of L.A. just as the end-game was 'bout to play. An' now they tell me it's been over for weeks. Can't be. Can't be that I shirked the bloody fight."

"Oh no." Suddenly alive to the awkwardness of her seat, Dawn slid off onto the step beside him. "You've forgotten the last few weeks?"

"No. I'm bein' played for a knave while the others fought an' fell an'—"

"Spike, you were in the battle. You were covered in it when they found you. Faith arrived with a squad and helped turn the tide, but so far as Willow could figure out, there were portals open there, worlds spilling together, and the apocalypse got shunted into another dimension. Some slayers found you all burned and buried under rubble. You fought to the end, there's no doubt about that."

Willow had told him this already—he resisted it again. Couldn't be true. How could he forget that? How could he have been there, soaked in cold rain, Charlie's blood on his hands, the thundering of the advancing demon army drumming in his ears, and then be here, and no idea of anything in between? Because there wasn't anything in between. He'd been yanked. That had to be it. "You weren't there, so how would you know?"

"No, but I spoke to those who were. That's part of my job now with the council, I interview the girls after an operation and create detailed records."

"You—you're still a kiddie."

"Please. I'm a college girl at St Andrews. I study ancient languages. And I'm already training to be a watcher."

"A watcher." He looked at her then—really looked. He'd been unfocused at first, full of flurry and distraction, but now he took her in, the way he'd done in the old days, when he was her friend. "Dawn Summers. You ... you've bloomed out wonderful."

The compliment, his steady serious gaze, brought up Dawn's blushes.

"You're not still sore at me," he said, "can see it in your sweet puss. So you tell me, honest now—what's this all about? Why'd they pull me out?" He pouted. "Or maybe you don't know. You're not
She explained again. Again he was shown the date—this time on a mobile phone. Again told that he'd fought, that his survival had nothing to do with failure, that he'd been stricken with amnesia. He listened, the despondency stirring in his guts, thinking of Angel, of Charlie and Illyria, that moment when they'd turned to the mouth of the alley to see it blocked by that great demon machine of an army. He'd been so ready.

Ready to fight, and die fighting. The right way. The way he'd been made for.

Now Dawn was saying something else; he'd lost track of her. "Eh?"

"Where's Buffy? Haven't you seen her since—since you got here?"

"Saw her, yeah, s'pose I did."

"You suppose?"

"I need to get out of here, Dawn. I need to get back. Maybe—maybe there's still some way I can—if Captain Imponderable knows I'm not there, he'll never let me live it— Shit."

It wasn't like she'd never seen Spike cry before. They'd cried together many times over that summer of Buffy's death; it was one of the most endearing things about him, that under the tough exterior was mourning as deep, anguished and single-focused as her own, that he didn't pretend to hide from her. The comfort of that, at the time, had been enormous.

But this was different. He wept out of anger, and a bitter searing frustration she couldn't approach. She didn't know what he knew, just the barest outlines of the L.A. situation. And that he seemed to be enraged because of once more being denied a final death was so terrible to her that she didn't want to think about it.

"Oh Spike, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. But you did fight. You did. Please believe me, I wouldn't lie to you."

"Got to get back there."

"There's nothing left. It's all finished." She tried to slide her hand around his, but he clenched a fist and jerked it away. "Spike ... please ... haven't you spoken to Buffy? Buffy will—"

"Got no time for that. I need to go."

At the top of the staircase where they were huddled, concealed around the turning, Buffy listened, and was afraid to go to him. He wanted nothing to do with her, with any of them, he wanted nothing but to stand with Angel.

And Angel was dead.

Spike sprang to his feet. "Need a car, with the windows blacked. Where can I find such a thing?"

Dawn rose too, dithering. "Wait—wait—we can help you. We can take you back to the alley, if you want to see it. But you can't just go—you have to see Buffy."

He made no answer. Before Dawn could press him, Buffy heard footsteps in the hall below, and Giles' voice.

"Spike. I understand your faculties have returned intact. I congratulate you, and now I have some
They were alone in the big empty dining hall, just Dawn and Spike at the end of one long table, each with a steaming cup, the only light burning at the other end of the room, so that when she looked in, Buffy saw just their dark outlines, and shadows on the wall. They leaned towards each other, talking inaudibly.

Maybe, she thought, it would turn out finally to be the two of them who would get together. Dawn and Spike, who had no ugly baggage to unload. She was still a little too young for him, but Spike could wait, he had nothing but time.

All that time he didn't seem to want.

Maybe he wouldn't want Dawn either.

Maybe he really didn't want anything, with Angel gone, except one more battle he could perish in.

He'd been with Giles and the others in the study for hours of debriefing on both sides. She'd longed to go in, but couldn't make herself open the door. Instead she'd paced up and down in the corridor outside, went up and down to her rooms five times. Finally came back to find the meeting broken up, Giles and Willow together talking quietly. They'd filled her in.

"Did he tell you what Angel was up to? That he hadn't gone evil?"

Giles rubbed his eyes. "He told us—finally—about the Circle of the Black Thorn, about Angel's plan."

Buffy could tell by Giles' tone that he knew he'd been wrong, and was annoyed at himself, and wasn't ready to admit it yet, to apologize. She longed to rub it in herself, to force him to say he'd made a monumental blunder, but she was too tired to start.

Spike was angry: over Giles' refusal to help Fred at Angel's call, over missing the battle. Even listening to Faith on the phone, testifying to him that she'd gone to L.A. with a squad and seen the battle through, found him on the scene when it was over, didn't entirely mollify him. Faith hadn't seen Angel fall, but she was sure, like the rest of them, that he was dead. Spike had finally believed their version, Willow told Buffy, but reluctantly. "I don't think he feels it. Something in him's really still convinced that the battle is going on right now while he's not there. He can't shake it, doesn't really want to shake it, but he made all the right reasonable noises finally."

"All the right reasonable noises." The phrase rang funny in her ears. "But he doesn't remember anything that's happened since the alley."

"No."

"Do you think this is the result of your spell?"

Willow dropped her gaze. "Honestly? No. Maybe it was Dawn, showing him those pictures. Or maybe ... I don't know. I hope this progress is permanent, but we can't be sure it'll last. Like you said, it might be another crack—a big wide one, but one that could close again."

Buffy almost hoped it would. The selfish fearful little girl in her wanted the other Spike back, the one who so openly loved her, who knew he needed her, even if only because she was his sole connection to a strange world.
How bitter and unbearable all their shared sweetness turned without his collaboration in it. As if
she'd made it up, a stupid little impossible fantasy of a nonexistent love.

Now, as she stood hesitating in the dining hall doorway, Spike turned in his chair. "Oi—who's
there?"

Dawn said, "It's Buffy. Come sit with us, Buffy."

Her boots might as well have been nailed to the floor. She couldn't pick up her feet. Couldn't cross
the distance. Spike didn't want her to come.

"Buffy." Dawn got up, started towards her. She withdrew from the doorway, from the sight of
Spike, and waited for her sister to emerge.

"What's the matter?" Dawn whispered.

Buffy couldn't answer. Her throat had closed into an acrid knot.

Dawn put an arm around her. "Do you want me to tell him? About the two of you? I could tell him
about it, all the stuff from these last weeks, so when you go in, he'll ...."

"He'll what? He'll pretend for a little while that he cares at all? That it's got anything to do with him?
Why would he do that? To please you?"

"Oh Buffy, no. Is that how you think it'll be? Why? I think he'll take it as wonderful news, that you
two were—"

"No. Don't you say a word to him about it."

" ... okay. Of course I won't if you don't want me to. But I think you're being dumb."

"Did you ask him why he hid from us for a solid year?"

"No. I thought ... I thought I would leave that to you."

"Dawnie, I'm not jealous. I'm glad you're friends, I'm glad he likes to be with you. He's got to be so
lonely right now ...."

"Buffy, that's Spike in there. Why don't you just go to him?"

"He can only think about Angel right now. About the mission. He doesn't want to talk to me."

"But you're both mourning the same death."

Her eyes burned. She swallowed, blinked. No crying, not now, not until she was safely alone.

"I'm going up to my rooms. Will you make sure Spike has somewhere comfortable to sleep, and
everything he might want?"

"Of course I will. But—"

"Go on. Don't leave him sitting there alone."

He hadn't come to her. There was nothing stopping him from coming out and talking to her, but there
he stayed, at the table. Buffy gave her sister a little push, back into the dining room, and walked
away.
Spike turned the empty mug in his hands. "So, I've had amnesia."

"Well, you still do. But before you didn't remember much of anything. Now you don't remember only the last few weeks." Dawn peered at him. "Do you? I mean, really nothing?"

"Was in the alley. An' then I was in Willow's book-lined room."

"Damn." Dawn took up his cup. "I'll heat you some more."

"No, I'm all right. So, what've I been doin' here while I was ga-ga?"

"You weren't ga-ga. Well, only intermittently. Really, all told, not so much."

"So what've I been doing?"

"Kitchen work."

"Eh?"

"You wanted to be useful, so you were helping in the kitchen. Bu—I mean, first they tried you with training the girls, but you couldn't do that."

He drummed his fingers on the table, and stared at them as if the process would divulge something. "Why couldn't I?"

"Because facing the slayers made you violent. You broke a girl's leg in three places when she jumped you. Oh, she's okay now. She's one of your biggest fans here, in fact."

"So I've been out of my mind an' good for nothing."

"No. You roll out a mean bread dough."

Spike plucked at his clothes. "Dressed me like some old duffer an' stuck me in the kitchen. Suppose Giles's been enjoyin' that. Year that's gone hasn't made him any less of a twat. Foolish bugger."

"Spike, he didn't know. All the signs pointed to Angel being on the wrong side."

"An' blah blah blah."

Stupid Buffy, wanting her to keep quiet. If she could just tell him, Dawn thought, it would be all right.

Of course, he hadn't yet brought up the subject of her sister.

"Sounded like Faith's got her own thing goin' at the Cleveland hellmouth. She came to help Angel despite orders. Removed from central command here, s'a good thing. Think she'll have room for one more?"

"You want to go to Cleveland?"

"After L.A. Got to go back there an' see it for myself. Got to do a reco after Angel. If he pulled through it somehow, the demon grapevine on the spot may have some word. If he didn't ... well, a hellmouth's the place for a fellow of my inclinations."
Fuck Buffy's instructions. "What about my sister? You're going to at least talk to her, aren't you?"

"What about?"

"What about? Spike!"

"She an' I said our respective pieces way back in Sunnyhell, Niblet. No need to drag through that again, just because I've fetched up here. Ancient history."

Stupidass. Who are you trying to protect? Her? Yourself? Probably yourself. Coward. She didn't say it, though she yearned to.

Spike yawned then, head tipped back, mouth open wide. His eyes flashed orange, the fangs starting out, so that for a moment he looked like a lion. "Could lay my head down right here an' go to sleep, I'm so drowsy. Got a bed for me anywhere in this pile?"

You sleep with Buffy. God, she should just say it. Just send him up there. She's waiting for you.

"Sure," Dawn said, scraping back her chair. "There was a room set up for you while—when—look, it's through here." She took him to the little maid's chamber off the kitchen where he'd installed himself while her sister was in Malta. Some of his things, not that he'd recognize them as his, were still there, and the bed, though made, ought to smell of himself, which Dawn figured would be comforting, if this Spike was susceptible to that kind of comfort.

"It's kind of spartan," Dawn said. "If you'd prefer, I've got a spare bedroom in my little suite, I'd be happy for you—"

"No, this'll suit me fine. It's just for the one sleep. I'll be leavin' this tomorrow."

They'd given him such odd clothes—wool trousers, white shirts. Some sort of mockery there? And, as he discovered while he was washing, they'd shaved down his hair to nothing but a velvety fuzz. Sort of treatment received by officers taken prisoner in those WWII flicks on late-night telly—not outright mistreatment, but just enough to show who was the subjugated. Was a larf, really. Why bother? Why bother with him at all?

Well, they'd needed their intel. Which they'd got out of him today, so that was that. He'd be free to go, disappear back into the grey area of it all being the same endless mission, but he'd be buggered if he'd ever take orders from Rupert.

On the little table beside the single bed, a few books were piled. He looked through them, the characters swimming before his eyes as he repressed another yawn—each one had a place marked. Was he the reader?

The Odyssey. Metaphysical poets. Anna Karenina. He was half-way through it. And at the bottom of the pile, an old paperback, water-stained and cello-taped, a Maigret story by Georges Simenon, translated into Arabic. Odd. As he handled it, a slip of paper fell out. A note, hand-written in the same language

My friend Mister William, This is for your language practice. You will tell me about what you read, and I will do the work you set me and tell you all about Valley of Blood in English. I think you will like this story, it has seven corpses. You are a very good teacher. Your friend Bakhita.

Teacher?
So he made the bread and taught English to at least one slayer. Still rather like those gentleman prisoners in the old films. Funny, he hadn't used his Arabic in years.

His head still ached. As he turned out the light, pulling the sheet up over his shoulder, he was sure he'd be asleep in a moment. But with the dark all around him, images swam up beating at his exhausted consciousness. Was this somehow Angel's doing? Maybe the old man had planned all along to cut him out at the finish, deprive him of the final glory? It was in his power, wasn't it, to get him teleported out at the last second?

Would he? Shit. They weren't mates, but Angel had trusted him there at the end, he'd recruited him like he'd recruited the others. Why boot him, then?

Maybe for her.

The voice that spoke in his head startled him. It was his own, but he didn't recognize it. Which was—crazy. Either he was or he wasn't, it was or it wasn't, or ... His head buzzed with fatigue, rang inside like a struck bell, so he couldn't follow his own train of thought anymore. Yet sleep wouldn't come.

Alice swimmin' in her own tears, I am. Drownin' in 'em.

The voice echoed, the voice that was him and nothing to do with him. For her. For her.

With a groan, he heaved out of bed. Looked around for a bottle. If this was his room, there'd have to be one, right?

There, on the under-shelf of the bedside table, a bottle of Jack, half full, with a tumbler inverted on it.

He didn't bother with the tumbler.

When he'd drained the whiskey, he laid his head again on the thin pillow.

—Dunno where I am. Didn't expect to see you.

—Me neither. I'm glad you're here.

—Where are you going?

—Nowhere. This is nowhere, it doesn't matter. So it's all right.

—Is it then? Can I kiss you?

—Love. Yes. Oh. Oh.

—There's time? Even for this?
—Especially for this. Oh lover. Oh God. Hold me.

—Got you. Sweetness.

—Don't leave me.

—Thing is, I'm not really here.

—I know, it's not really happening, but ... couldn't you?

—Don't really know each other anymore, do we?"

—that's not true. Oh. Oh fuck. How can you say that when at the same time you're—

—But we aren't. We're a million miles apart.

—Come inside me. God I need you. Oh sweetheart.

—You said it didn't matter.

—Not anywhere else, but here.

—You said this was nowhere.


He jerked, and flew—

—and fell.
Pitch blackness. He struggled, felt the sheet rip around his legs.

Bed. He was in a bed.

Loose-spined. Wet where he'd spent onto his own belly.

Lamp on, the room resolved. His little chamber off the kitchen, warm and smelling of bread and whiskey.

Buffy’s warmth, her voice, melted through his mind’s fingers, ungraspable. Beyond that a dark sense loomed, some grave danger postponed, misplaced, forgotten about. He leapt up—had to find it. Some fire set going somewhere, fire in the rain. Pulling up his trousers, he ran, barefoot, out through the deserted kitchen, out into the hall. There was no one about. A cry clogged his throat, but he held it back—to cry out might unleash the horrible thing that lowered across his mind, the shadow of disaster. He'd find it first. Try to extinguish it and—

Rounding the corner he collided hard, head cracking, bouncing back, down on his bum.

Scrambled up. Buffy was a little slower, hands crossed on her nose.

"What're you doin'? C'mon, help me find it!"

"Help you—what?" He pulled her up by one arm; she shied away along the wall.

"C'mon!"

"Spike—what—where are you going?"

"Got to—it's—something ...." He couldn't feel it anymore. The harsh urgency dissipated, spent like the dried spunk crusted on his belly. "Sorry, I ... maybe I had a nightmare."

She was backing away, like something scared her. He went to her, pulled her hands down to reveal her face. The inner corners of both eyes were black, her nose and lip shadowed in bruises. "Bloody hell—when did that happen, pet?"

He couldn't fathom her expression—she seemed to be caught in a bad dream herself. "You ... you broke my nose."

"I did? When?"

"It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. Spike—what is this?"

"What's—? Dunno. Woke up and ...." Only now did it strike him as odd that he'd been sleeping again in the little room, and not up in the tower with her. "Pet, did we have a quarrel?"

He didn't know why she burst into tears, or why, when he tried to take her in his arms, she resisted. When he reached for her again, she struck him—an open-handed thump on the chest.

"What is this?" Buffy cried. "Where are you now? Where are you?"

"Love—I'm right here."

She let him take hold of her then. Wet eyes open wide, searching his face.

"You want to tell me what's got you so upset?"
"No. No, that might take too long. Come, this one's closer. Hurry!"

She yanked him into a run, half backwards, not letting go, back the way he'd come, pushing him down onto the disordered little bed he'd just risen from, swarming over him, pressing kisses on his mouth like a drowning gulping for air. The pressure of each kiss he returned against her bruised flesh made her flinch, but she took each new one on a fresh gulp of air.

He rolled her over, wriggling out of his trousers, pulling up her nightgown. She was moaning, one long continuous moan, pain and desire. The moaning stopped when he entered her. She held her breath for a long stroke, her arms quivering taut around his shoulders.

"Do you love me?"

"Do I—?"

"I need to hear it!"

"Course I do. I'm yours, pet. My little darling. Love."

"Say it!"

"Love you, Buffy. Spike loves you. Haven't I always?"

She cried again a little when it was over, her face against his neck. He petted her hair, wondering at her.

"Suppose I've lost myself again," he ventured. "Things're fuzzy even now."

"Oh Spike." She sighed, and pressed closer to him, shivering. "What's ... what's the last thing you remember? Before you went to sleep?"

She sounded like she didn't want to know, and he realized he didn't want to know either. Remembering, piecing together, it was too much trouble, when he was warm and sated with her in his arms.

But because it was her, he tried. "There was ... there was all those crocks to wash, with lasagna baked into 'em. Took a couple hours."

"Lasagna?"

"No?" He didn't want to disappoint, now he was making the effort.

"Spike, that was days ago."

"Guess it would be. I'm sorry pet."

"You don't remember deciding that you were ready for Willow to do a memory spell?"

"Did I?" He tried to concentrate, but having come with her three times, he was overwhelmingly drowsy; it didn't feel important. "Maybe I recall that a bit. Yeah. A bit." He slipped off, on a thought of Willow's scent, herbs and the particular tang of redhead sweat, distinctive and acrid.

A sharp tug at his nipple woke him. "Spike—!"
"Didn't work then, did it? The spell?"

"I don't know. No. You ... you keep changing."

"They say a change's as good as a rest."

"What?"

He breathed her in, burrowing his nose into her hair. The fog was rising up to meet him; he wanted to disappear into it with her. They'd be safe there.

Buffy said, "We shouldn't have done this. I shouldn't have. I'm supposed to be strong, but you make me ... you make me so desperate. I'm sorry."

"Wanted you, didn't I? When it comes to bed, I'm at your command, you know that, pet."

"But you're not stable, and you ...." She pulled away then, exposing his bare moist flesh to the cold air. She was crying again, grabbing up her nightgown from the top of the bookcase, keeping her back to him.

He struggled to stay awake. He didn't like this, but it seemed important.

"Where're you goin'?"

"This is too much—!"

"Don't leave me. Buffy. Don't leave me alone."

She turned then. She'd gone pallid beneath the bruises, eyes glassy and unfocused. "Spike, I know now— you wouldn't want this. I knew it and still I—"

"Who wouldn't? I do. Buffy." He was too logy to lift his head, but he reached for her, a hand stretching out.

"The real Spike. He was here."

"Dunno him. Don't go an' leave me. My head aches."

She came then, to perch on the edge of the bed; let him twine his fingers in with hers. She touched his forehead, as if to test for fever, or maybe to soothe the ache; through the mounting pain, he couldn't tell. He couldn't really see her very well anyway, she seemed to be getting very distant, her voice blurring out into a wordless hum.

The fog was all around him now, and she was gone.

He'd dreamed of her, so vividly that he believed he could smell her intimate aromas on his hands, on the pillow. Another trick of the mind, or of the devil that was playing with him. Was Angel also tucked up in a narrow bed up some out-of-the-way wormhole, smelling his bygone love on his fingers?

It smacked of Wolfram & Hart; it was the kind of thing they'd do. Fond they were of sticking a fellow up the junction, making things just pleasant enough that every fresh disembowling would spell real agony, and not merely the physical kind.
It made sense, more sense than his earlier idea, that Angel had booted him from the fight. It explained all this: the castle, its inmates, the proximity of Buffy.

But if that was the game, he was going to disappoint them. Because the girl was nothing special to him anymore, she was old news, and if Wolfram & Hart were that out of touch as to think he was nothing more than the same old love's bitch who'd been out for nothing higher than the pretty wench's approving smile, then maybe the Old Man really had rocked their foundations before he died.

And if he, Spike, was the only one remaining, well he'd strike at them again himself before he joined Angel in hell. No matter what it took.

He lay still for a few moments, breathing in the heavy fug of sex. Illusionary fug, he reminded himself. He hadn't meant to sleep so long—it felt like a long time. But they'd robbed him of his sense of time, his orientation sent spinning wildly, so he might be upside down and inside out for all he could tell. The backs of his eyeballs ached, and he was fiercely hungry.

Physical need made him impatient now.

He'd already had his last day, downed his last feed. The redundancy of this offended him.

What was the key to this castle, what would smash the illusion and set him free?

On the other side of the door, girls' voices, clang of pots and cutlery. He rose, had a good wash, dressed again in the sedate clothes. He'd better avoid Dawn. She was part of the entanglement. The catch to spring would be somewhere else.

"He's getting more and more unstable, Will."

Willow sat up, switched on the lamp. She wasn't sure how long Buffy had been sitting at the foot of her bed, her legs curled under her. It was getting light outside.

"And I did something really stupid. Not just stupid. Wrong."

"What did you do?" She sat forward, took Buffy's hand. Which was dry, the skin feeling stretched and shrunken like she'd gone without water for days.

Buffy told her, how, unable to sleep, to sit still, and despite knowing it was a bad idea, she'd gone down to check on Spike. And ran into him, collided, literally, in a corridor. "And he was different again—he was the one who ...."

Willow nodded.

"And he was disoriented, but did I let that stop me? No. I seized the moment. And afterwards he was even more out of it, confused ... he fell into a sort of trance ... I couldn't wake him. He was like a rag doll." She plucked at the bedclothes. "I'm afraid we're losing him. He's fragmenting."

Buffy was distant, aloof, her face half-turned away, but as she seemed to float on the edge of indifference, her fingers tore at the blanket, working a big hole in the weave. Willow caught her hands.

"Buffy, stop. It's all right, you ... yeah, you probably shouldn't have slept with him."
"There's no excuse. I wasn't supposed to be doing awful things like this anymore. I was suppose to have grown up past that."

"I know how he makes you feel, I know how hard this is for you."

"It isn't hard for me, it's hard for him. He's the one who's suffering, and I just make it worse."

"We're doing everything we can to help him. We'll go to L.A. today—in a little while. The alley has to be the key to all this. If we bring him there ...."

"He was agitated and out of it but when he took me in his arms, he was happy too. Just trusting me. I knew I should leave him be, but I thought this might be the last time I'd have him. The one who's mine. Because when he's back in control of himself ... he made it clear. I'm nowhere."

Nothing here could be trusted.

He had to get back to the scene.

And he'd overslept—the sun was out again. Unless it was always out here. Maybe that was part of the place, this Wolfram & Hart construct, a Scotland where it was always sunny, 24/7. That would be one for the books.

In the kitchen, all of the girls looked at him, like he'd just strode into their locker room. Hundreds of slayers crammed in, stinking up the place with their girlsweat and their menstrual blood and their clashing perfumes. Most said hello. Some smiled. He ignored them.

A tall older woman appeared, apron on over a green cardigan, wooden spoon in hand. "You don't look like you're reportin' for work." She had the accent of the Orkneys, the ruddy cheeks to match.

"Guess I'm not, today."

Her lip curled a little. "I'm Mrs Ambler. This'll be about the fourth time I've introduced myself to you in the last—"

"Yeah, things're tough all over. Any chance of a hot cuppa blood?"

She gave him a marked once-over. "If you're not going to work, I'm not going to feed you!"

Before he could protest, she waved the spoon at the ceiling. "It's your bonnie lass up in the tower keeps your blood! Go ask her for your breakfast an' get out of my way if you're not goin' to be useful!"

"Bonnie? Who's Bonnie?"

Behind him, Dawn said, "That would be my sister."

Spike turned. He hated that they were using Dawn. It was hard, looking at her, to hold onto the conviction that this was all false. She was such a good facsimile.

"She's no lass of mine."

"Spike, you've got to talk to her." This Dawn gave out the patented Snacksize Eye-Candy Stare. The one she'd used to get him to spend his own beer and cigarette money on pizza and soda and trinkets for her, the one that she'd used to wheedle him into letting her stay up all night or doing her French
homework so she could just copy it in her own writing. "I mean, c'mon, this is getting really stupid. Ancient history or not—you have amnesia, Spike. You don't know what you don't know. You have to see her."

None of this mattered. It was a waste of time, but then he knew what happened when the victim struggled in the trap—it got tighter and tighter. Stay relaxed, and one might get free.

He shrugged. "As you like, Bit."

The part about her being the lass in the tower came clear when, having followed the Dawn girl through what felt like a mile of drafty reception halls and corridors, she delivered him to the base of a steep winding stone stair. "Her apartment is at the top. She's in there. Just go in."

"How can I?"

"You're already invited. Just go talk to her."

He started up the stairs, but only—only, you Wolfram & Hart bastards—because he was hungry.

She was leaning against the sink, her back to the room, staring out the window with a mug of coffee clasped in her hands. No clothes on. He rapped a knuckle against the doorframe, and she jumped.

"Spike! Oh my God, what are you—" He saw her gaze dart towards the dishtowels hanging off the oven door, assessing and rejecting, before she drew herself up with a deep breath. "You should've knocked."

"Sis said it wasn't necessary."

"I know you've been avoiding me. She wasn't supposed to send you up here."

"No? I guess you'd say that."

"You guess I'd—?"

"Was told you had some blood. That's what I came for."

"Oh, you're hungry?" She got a kind of gleam in her eye then, put down the mug and went to lean against the refrigerator, arms crossed. "The blood is in the freezer. Why don't you come and take some?"

A parallelogram of sunlight spilled in through the window, but didn't quite reach where she was standing. It made the room, that smelled of coffee and her body, warm.

"You're the honey trap they put at the middle of this snare. They think all they need to do is show me Buffy's tits an' they'll have me."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Who's this they?"

What an act! "You belong to 'em!"

"Do I? Who?"

He couldn't say it without a sneer. "Wolfram an' Hart."
"The evil law firm? That Angel was heading up?"

"Was more to that than met the eye. But got no time to stand around tellin' you your own business. You might as well cover yourself up. Not interested."

She shook her head. "I'm a honey trap, huh? You think they'd've told me. I'd have combed my hair. Maybe put on some concealer. High-heeled shoes."

"Wouldn't have made any difference if you did." They didn't know their information on him—on what would move him, what would fuck him up—was obsolete.

It was curious though, that they'd set her out for him in this state. Did they imagine she made an attractive sight for him, looking like merchandise that some other vamp had already pawed over and rejected? With her hair scraped back in a sloppy ponytail, two black eyes and a purpled swollen nose. She was too thin, too pale, black-and-blues dotting her flesh all over. Her chest and breasts and arms covered in gooseflesh, blotchy with blushes.

There were recent bite scars on her neck.

Not at all a good likeness of the Buffy Summers who'd once obsessed him. They should've made her golden and tawny, with that little touch of puppyish roundness she'd had when he first knew her. Unblemished, inviolate, not beautiful but so stunningly pretty. That would've been a temptation. Not that he'd have succumbed, because he was onto their game. But he'd have been more interested in a good look.

She said, "I guess they were just counting on you being attracted to the power. To the Buffy-essence? The form not mattering so much? Except you don't seem to think I really am Buffy. I don't interest you. I don't even worry you. So why not just come over here and get the blood?"

"You're a slayer."

"I thought I was a Wolfram & Hart honey trap."

Something prickled through him as he looked at her, something that began at the base of his spine and radiated up and down all through him. Hesitancy, that corresponded to the airy dangling sensation, like when he'd been in The Deeper Well, gazing down through the hole in the world, confronting that massive absence.

Formidable.

Dreadful.

But this woman wasn't an absence. She was the entire opposite of that.

She was too deep to be a construct. To be merely running a script.

He blinked, tried to clear his head, to grasp again the firm feeling he'd come in with, that this was all a sham, a trick, a puzzle he could outfox to escape from this limbo.

But it wasn't working. Doubt took root. An infection eating away at the edges of his certainty, making space for confused images, voices, to bleed in from the extremities of his consciousness. He tried to refuse them, but they boiled away there, just beyond comprehension.

The Buffy went on, "You don't remember any of the time you've spent here at the castle. With me. You don't remember last night."
"Know I'm bein' tricked about. Kept out of the fight."

"You have amnesia. You keep phasing in and out. It's hell on both of us."

"So you lot keep tellin' me. Nice story."

"Something is affecting your mind. Before you didn't remember any of your past. Now ... you've lost the short term."

She was trying to sound so reasonable, putting on her little show. Standing there in her altogether. Like the real Buffy would ever do that. Even when she did fuck him, she'd never really let him get the kind of good long looks at her bare body that he really wanted. She was always covering herself up, not out of modesty but because she denied him everything that didn't directly pleasure herself.

He summoned his resolve. He'd come for blood, and she'd challenged him to take it. Well all right, then.

He strode forward. She didn't move. He stopped at conversation-distance. Her head tipped back a little to keep taking him in. Her frown was resolute, but he felt something pleading behind it. Well, he wasn't quite playing her game, was he? He reached past her head to take hold of the freezer door handle.

She still didn't move. Neither to make way for him, or to resist.

This close, he could smell her dried sweat and the fug of sex on her skin, her hair. She seemed awfully real, and he could remember the time when he'd been stirred by Buffy Summers—this girl here wasn't she—as he'd never been stirred by anything else in life or unlife. She'd put him on his path. He had the mission because of her. Still, loving her, wanting her, seemed like a long time ago, like something that had happened to some slightly other fellow than himself. A simpler one, who believed in destiny but had no worries about good and evil or the fate of the world.

She sighed. "They're crafty and powerful, Wolfram & Hart, I get that. But how could you really not grasp the truth here? Don't you smell me? Smell yourself on me?" She'd uncrossed her arms, instead spread a hand open over her heart, like she was giving a pledge.

He thought of his dream, if that was what it was. How he'd awakened with the aroma of her in his little bed. Maybe they'd drugged him and put them together. That would explain the smells.

Impatience and anger kicked up in his gut, hitting out at the invasion of doubt. "Like Buffy would be such a mess—bitten up an' knocked about! Dunno what that's about, but I'm not fallin' for it."

She held herself open. "This mess, as you call it, is what I need you to remember. The last few days, the last few weeks—how could you get everything back except that? It's all you. What I've gone through with you."

He blinked. "Me." He did it then, snapped up a fist into her face. With the blow came a sharp almost cheerful realization—he should've done this right away. What was there to lose, after all? War was on, battle was his element. Fighting was cleaner than talking. It made sense no matter what the illusive trappings it was wrapped up in. She wasn't Buffy, but she'd be slayer-strong. He hit her again. Blood started from her purple nose, and she feinted out of the way. She parried his next strike with a raised arm, but instead of hitting back, she only shoved him off.

"I'm not going to fight you." She pointed to her face. "You were the one who broke my nose, when you were angry and afraid, and I let it happen because I'd promised you that you'd never be my punching bag again, and I meant it."
He smiled, flexing his fists. "Seems like a stupid thing to promise. Buffy wouldn't."

"I don't think so. I want you to know things are different between us, that my respect and love are real. If that means taking your violence until you figure it out, I'm prepared to do that. When you're in your right mind again, you won't hurt me anymore. The rest of these marks, they're yours too. I'm glad to have them. Look." She held out her arms, showing off hickies in the turn of her elbows, in the soft curve of her armpits, along her breasts, "These are your kisses, where you've devoured me. And look," She thrust out her hips, so he could see not just her curly mons but the insides of her thighs, spotted with bruises, and the pinky-red inner pooh of her swollen sex. "We fucked last night so hard, so ... magnificently ... I'm still wearing it." She turned, showed him her behind, the violet imprints of his fingers still marking her hips and buttocks. "See where you took hold of me? But I'm not just talking about love-making." She pushed back the loose hair from her neck, "Here's where you bit and fed from me. I wanted you to have every bit of me I could give. All of this mess, you put it on me. Whether you want to believe it or not, I am Buffy. I'm yours."

Voices and faces and sensations bubbled like corrosive at the edges of his mind as she talked. Doubt rose, slopping over everything he needed to be sure. He told himself, even strange as this was, she was nothing that couldn't be counterfeited, faked. Wolfram & Hart could do anything. They would, they could, do this, show him a girl with Buffy's face, who'd been mauled about, who would pretend it meant something more than that she was their puppet.

She had to be that, just some puppet. A construct.

He held hard to his conviction.

But the conviction, as she confronted him, all undefended, was already slipping. In the clear morning light, she was so distinct: pallid and contused, delicate, wounded, flushed and trembling. The aromas of her body bloomed out in the kitchen's still air. An ache started behind his eyes, and with it, a sense of unreality boiling in from the margins, or maybe it wasn't unreality. Maybe the shadows that moved in the corners of his mind were something else.

She was so calm and certain, talking to him. "You were the one who initiated this, when I came to you in L.A. You had amnesia, you didn't know me at all, but you were drawn to me, and I ... I couldn't resist you, couldn't resist myself. I was afraid you wouldn't want me when your memories returned, I was afraid you'd be angry at me for all of this," her hand again sweeping down her body, "And it looks like I was right to be afraid. But I love you Spike, I loved you in Sunnydale and I held back and I lost you. I just couldn't do that again."

She tipped up her chin. He saw the strength shining off her. All that strength and surety and Buffyness that he remembered. Her eyes, even staring out of bruises as they were, contained everything he'd ever known about her.

That's when it happened.

The voices, the moving suggestive sensations gathered force in his mind, so the very air of the room seemed to change, to take on a harder tangibility.

Inside him, the barrier cracked, began to collapse. He tried to preserve it—it was what composed his righteous determination to escape, to get back to the struggle.

The cracks strained against the great population of forgotten things. It was too much; with a sick rush, every certainty he was clinging to collapsed. Memory—everything—poured through.
This had nothing to do with Wolfram & Hart. This was real, and he was here because he was a fuck-up.

The battle was—not so much over as gone.

It had gone and he had failed to go with it.

Angel and the others had been dead for weeks.

And he, having conveniently forgotten everything that was most crucial to him, forgotten how he'd held back like some yellow cur while Angel surged forward, had been dallying away the days and nights since with Buffy.

Comprehension plunged him into an acid bath of fury and shame.

This was Buffy.

Buffy with something gone vitally wrong in her too. Because how else could she have fallen into this disgusting mistake?

How, having resisted him for so long, had she given way only when he was utterly ruined and broken, a coward, a stranger to himself?

The irony was incredible.

Somehow she'd played out some elaborate drama with someone she thought was him. Or ... no. She knew it wasn't him—that was the supreme joke of it. She was glad to have his body, his supernatural strength and prowess, all his old devotion, in a figure who was yet smooth and innocent and didn't want or know anything except her.

That was it.

She'd been talking to, trying to reach, that other Spike, the one who'd impressed her little body with all these marks and bruises, which she seemed to value as if they meant she'd made some kind of breakthrough.

All at once she was tugging at him and he realized that he'd sunk to the floor and she was kneeling, trying to get in his face. "Spike, stop it. Stop making that noise."

It took a few seconds for him to locate himself as the source of the jagged laughter that filled the room. This laughter was indistinguishable from drowning, but he wasn't going to drown, he wasn't going to get out of this the way he'd gotten out of that alley, slipping from cowardice to erasure.

How could things have come to this pass? He'd been ready to die, so why hadn't he? Since when had he been yellow? As for her—she'd never loved him, not really, not even at the end when, dazzled in the face of his extinction, she'd said her goodbye. So how did she get to this?

His love for her was a far-ago thing now. Beaten out against the hard rock of his exile in L.A., the mission with Angel, against the reality of having to continue when he'd thought he was finished. He could barely think about it now, the intimate intricacies of a love affair had nothing to do with what he'd been about just before ... before he'd dishonored himself, his mission, in that alley.

She must've read some clue in his face, because hers went still. She backed off a little, turning her gaze aside; he saw her profile, a blank stare, lips parted, outlined in the advancing sunlight. The light that reached him now, as she sprang up. He felt its hot tickle on his face and arms, started to stretch
into it. But she went to the window, snapped down the shade.

"What just happened?" Her voice was sharp, high. It made him wince. He wanted to cover his ears with his hands. Hunker down, melt into the floor. Why hadn't he died there? He'd been ready. He'd been ready, he knew he was, to help save the world.

Her voice was a brittle bully. "Tell me where we are. What is this now?"

"Like you said. I'm Spike. You're Buffy. It's finished. This whole bloody charade."

"You remember—" She gasped, then froze. Her face was a mask. She was so carefully marshalling herself, he could see that she knew, that her worst fears were true, her happy little romance all burned down. He was a little sorry for her, for her pain, even though he still couldn't fathom how she'd gotten there. He recalled it all, every scene they'd played together in the last weeks, but it was only that, some kind of play that had been performed with his body. He couldn't feel it, couldn't inhabit it, except that it fired him with shame and he'd have forgotten it again if he could. Where was the sudden plunge into psychosis and escape when you really bloody wanted it?

Buffy said. "Oh." Then again, "Oh," hands fluttering to cover herself, like the dreamer who realizes she's naked in front of everyone. But it was no dream.

She ran out of the room.

She was dressed the next time he saw her, hair pulled up neat and tight, long sleeves, a scarf wrapped around her neck, no skin bared but face and fingers. He wasn't sure if just a few minutes had elapsed, or an hour. His body, scraped up off the kitchen floor, felt immensely heavy, but still too weak and light a stem for his head. He'd have liked to pull it off. He'd have liked to die, except that death now was meaningless, just one more piece of cowardice.

Standing in her bedroom door, Buffy looked at him like he was a stranger. A stranger who had spit on her. They were standing on either side of her parlor, which he'd been skirting out towards the stairs when Willow appeared, blocking his retreat, talking in her blue streak way.

Probably trying to cover for the swamp of weirdness she'd just walked in on. Slayer planted there staring at him. Him planted there, being stared at.

Then he realized Willow was talking about the alley, about going to the alley, because the key to his amnesia had to be there, and she was ready to take them.

And Buffy, her jaw dropping as she began to speak like an automaton's, said, "He doesn't have amnesia anymore Will. He's back now."

"Really?" She wanted to light up, Red did, with the good news, except the harsh dissonance in the room, in her friend's voice, confused her. Her eyes flared with happy light, but she hesitated. Then she said, "Are you sure?"

Buffy's bruised face went darker still. A flush of chagrin. Her anger at him, at herself, was a match for his own.

"We're sure."

"Uh ... " She was checking them now like they were a tennis match, which was kind of funny because neither of them was moving. "So ... okay. Spike, how do you feel?"
He couldn't speak.

Buffy said, "He feels fine." Her voice was a shard.

"Because he looks fine," Willow said. "You both look, uh, just great."

Buffy said, "Spike's not staying."

At this, the witch's face seemed to grow, eyes getting huge, mouth opening. "He—what are you talking about? Buffy—you guys—"

"When they charged forward." His voice astonished him. "I didn't go." He hadn't meant to speak; he had no air, his tongue and palate were sere. The words fell out like dust-balls. "Angel an' the others. Went into it. An' I didn't. They died. An' I didn't."

Willow was staring at him now as if he'd turned into something incredible, a Belisha beacon, an elk. "You did not."

Suddenly there was nothing more crucial than impressing her with his cravenness. "Tell' you—"

"Well, I don't believe it!" Shouting like he'd told her off.

"It's true!" Cunt.

"If that's what you think, then you still have amnesia." Willow was in motion now. She started up to him, full of confrontation; he thought she was going to take him in hand, but she veered abruptly, stalked instead up to Buffy. "You believe this?" To Buffy's stare, she cried, "Are you crazy? When has Spike ever refused a fight?"

He roared then. "Tellin' you I failed! Was a fucking coward!"

Willow barely glanced at him. She had Buffy by the arms, as if to steady her, or to shake her. "Buff. You do not believe this. You've kept your faith in him all this time, you know him—so why am I having to holler at you about this?"

Buffy blinked and turned a little, still jerky and slow like a busted robot. She whispered something. Willow leaned in closer. "Huh?" Flipped a glance over her shoulder towards him. Then back in Buffy's face again, "Please. That is crazy-talk, that is proof that he's still not back in his right mind. Don't even think about it. Right now that doesn't mean anything."

"You didn't see—you didn't hear what he said—!" Buffy's cry sounded like a child's, on the edge of a tantrum.

Willow bristled. "Spike, your Spike, would never succumb to despair." Then she was pulling her, dragging the slayer towards him. "I'm taking us to the alley. We are going to solve this thing. We are going to restore you, Spike."

Buffy dug in. The rug bunched up under her feet. She yanked free. "Wait!"

Willow crackled with purpose. "For what?"

Buffy raised her eyes, trying to connect with his, but he couldn't look at her. She spoke to Willow. "You know what's wrong with him?"

"His energy is all wrong, out of phase. It's worse now than it was before—this insanity proves it!"
"How do you know?"

"I feel ... something I can't describe. Because it's literally undescrivable. We've got to go now."

"Just let me get my axe."

Buffy admitted the ease, the instantaneousness, of teleportation. Undoubtedly there were times when it was the only way to travel. But she didn't like it. It wasn't just that it gave her the heaves, and an after-effect worse than jet-lag (she wasn't subject to the regular jet-lag everyone else got, some slayer-power thing she thanked her stars for). Even quick as it was, she was never able to get through it without experiencing a moment that felt exactly like dying.

Later, she'd swear it lasted a whole lot more than a moment.

And it wasn't exactly like dying.

But she got the indescribable part.

You couldn't describe it because the mind couldn't comprehend it. Passing through it was sheer agony. Afterwards, all she would clearly summon back of the throes was a disjointed memory of getting her tonsils removed at the age of three, when two big doctors had had to hold her down while a third clapped the anesthesia inhaler over her face. It was as if, while they traveled from Scotland to California, she was reduced to nothing but that single pinpoint of consciousness, everything else she was or ever had been or ever might be smeared in nonexistent colors across a foul plain of horror so profound that just the mere intimation of it made her scream.

It was her screaming and Willow's, echoing off the dank charred alley brick, that announced their arrival.

They were splayed in a heap on the dirty broken pavement, as if they'd been slammed there.

"Uh, ouch."

Buffy said, "So it's not just me?" She grabbed the axe closer.

"It feels like this to you every time?"

"Bad, but never that bad. What just happened—happened to you too?"

Willow was scrambling up, gingerly, like an old lady. "Let's not talk about it, okay? Where's Spike?"

Spike lay on the dirty cracked pavement a couple yards off, face-down, twitching. Looking at him, Buffy had an uneasy sense that what she'd just gone through, the sensation her mind refused to contain, was due to them having somehow come through him, the disorder of his mind.

And with this idea came the nausea, and when she was done horking, the idea was gone. By then Willow was at work, pacing up and down, taking little hovering flights into the air. She'd pulled a small instrument out of her pocket, something that looked like a gold sextant crossed with a gyroscope; it glowed and floated before her. Spike was still on the ground. Buffy saw him try to get up, and flop back like some unseen bully had shoved him down.

Before she could open her mouth to ask, Willow volunteered: "This is bad."

"What's bad? What it is?"
"There's some big instability here. Spike's caught in it."

"Caught? What do you mean caught?"

"Maybe the better word is bound."

"Oh, sure, let's have the better word. Why didn't you detect this when we were here before? And what can you do about it?"

That's when the air—except it wasn't the air, it was the space that contained the air, the reality that contained the air—shook like a square of Jell-o, then froze.

A small flock of pigeons that was crossing through, hung in the air at eye-level. Buffy stared at them. Then came the voice.

"You can do nothing."

The birds were fixed, but she could move. Buffy spun to see the figure that strode toward them. Some kind of demon, blue, leathery, female and no taller than she was.

Willow cried out. "Oh shit—Fred Burkle? What happened to you?"

"You address the shell. Fred is gone."

"Where? Who are you?" Willow seemed intimidated, which was a look Buffy hadn't seen on her in years. It wasn't reassuring.

Time to be the slayer. She could move, and did, wielding the axe, putting herself between the demon and her friend.

"At last I have located my pet." The demon gestured, and Spike rose; not by himself, but levitating into the air. His pose was stiff and frozen, and Buffy could see that he was in pain but unable even to cry out. The demon looked him over. "He is altered. The top was yellow."

"What are you talking about? Leave him alone."

She had enormous mesmerizing eyes. When she trained them on Buffy, Buffy found herself on her knees.

"You will bow to Illyria."

Behind her, Willow squeaked: "You're Illyria?"

Buffy said, "You know her?"

"Not like we've met. But I've heard about her. She, uh, caused the death of Fred Burkle, and overtook her body. She's a god. It was her coming into being in this dimension that Angel was trying to prevent. When Giles wouldn't send help."

"Oh great." Buffy tried to rise, but couldn't.

Illyria gestured again, and Spike whooshed over their heads, coming down on his feet, and then falling hard to his knees before the blue demon. "You should have awaited me, half-breed. I returned for you and you were gone."
Buffy saw Spike try to respond; his muscles flexed, but he couldn't move. His face was caught in a still grimace, half fanged-out. All he could do to was roll his eyes.

"Leave him alone."

Illyria looked at her again, and once more Buffy felt the power that came through those bug-eyes, like the spectrum spilling from a prism. The body, slender and small in its leathery covering, was merely the thinnest visible edge of some staggering concentration of authority. "These females are inconsequential, and may depart this place."

The flapping of the pigeons overhead broke the silence; the frozen moment was liquid again.

Buffy leapt up. "I'm not going anywhere. What is this?"

Willow cleared her throat. "Majesty, it was by your mighty act that the armies of the apocalypse were diverted from this place, wasn't it?"

Illyria's head pivoted like a bird's.

"Will you tell us, Majesty, the glorious tale of your triumph?"

Buffy stared around. "Will!"

Willow shushed her. "Majesty! We humbly implore, tell us of your magnificent conquest."

For a split second Illyria seemed flummoxed, and Buffy thought it very likely that in the next second both she and Willow might cease to exist.

But her patience held. "The half-breed Angel was not without honor. His cause was just." Her eyes sparked. "But he was deceitful. By his deceit, I was weakened. By his deceit, Wesley was killed. Thus in my grief I came to this place. I took my vengeance on all these pests."

"How did you take this glorious vengeance, Majesty?" Willow said. "Was it by opening the portals that bled the worlds together?"

"You know much," Illyria said.

Buffy couldn't tell if the god was impressed or pissed off; she seemed to examine Willow as through an invisible magnifying glass.

"With my last energies, I shunted them to a place of retribution. I saw them all cut down, turned to ash, their ashes decimated across time and space. I have since recouped my power—now it is greater than it has ever been. Within me cluster entire universes. Time refracts around me."

Gods did love their exaggerated declaratives, but Buffy had a sense that this was only the truth. Like Spike's slivers of memory, they were experiencing only the barest tip of this god-head, manifesting here.

Willow nodded. "You are indeed magnificent. But still you mourn."

Illyria's face crinkled into a sort of affronted sniff. "I was only beginning to enjoy Wesley. He is irreproducible. His loss has made a hole at my core that nothing can fill, in this world or any other. His erasure offends me. Grief offends me."

Willow said, "Yes, grief is very hard."
Buffy waved the axe. "If you're so powerful now, controlling time and dimensions, then you can bring Angel and his people back. You can bring back this Wesley." Wesley? Could she mean her old watcher Wesley Wyndham-Pryce? Huh. Gods went for the darnedest guys.

Illyria's voice rose up into a boom. "Those who are destroyed are destroyed forever. Their particles eternally scattered in time. What is done thus cannot be undone, even by my magnificence."

Willow said, low and deferential, "And that's why you were so angry at Angel, because of your terrible loss. That's why you didn't try to spare him at the last moment, the way you spared Spike."

Spared Spike? Buffy opened her mouth—hadn't Spike asserted that he'd held himself back? Hadn't he insisted he was ... and she'd believed him.

How could she have believed him?

Illyria drew herself up. "Angel caused me to be diminished. But as his larger cause was just, with my last energies, I sent them all out of this dimension, to be crushed."

Willow made a deferential little nod. "Except Spike."

"I did not desire his death. He was stubborn, would follow his leader. Three times I repelled him as he rushed the portal. Then when I returned for him here, he was gone. He is a rebellious pet, and will take much taming. I will restore his more pleasing appearance and take him to my Seat, where he will distract me from this grief."

"So I was right," Willow said. "Spike wasn't a coward."

"I care for no coward!" Illyria gestured at Spike, raising his paralyzed form to hover again in the air, then letting him go. He came down with a swimming motion, roaring, and barreled at her, sinking a punch that would've staggered even Buffy. Illyria took it like a tap.

"Blue Bitch! Sayin' you did this?"

Illyria tossed her head, the blue hair flaring out. "You have heard me." He came at her a second time; she froze him again. "Do not annoy me, half-breed."

Buffy tried to go to him, but though she could move, and there was nothing explicitly blocking her way, she couldn't get anywhere close.

The situation though, was clear as clear.

"Spike, you heard her. You weren't a coward. She kept you from following Angel."

"You will not speak to my pet. You females will depart."

"I'm not your bloody pet. You cheatin' murderous twat." He came at her again, and this time Illyria turned him aside with a gesture that was almost tender.

"I will set you as the lord of worlds, to amuse you. You will know pleasure and beauty in my service. Come, we are done here."

Oh shit. Buffy stepped forward. "Majesty! Spike is my mate."

She turned, her head cocking with that unnerving insect swivel. "He is a half-breed. He cannot mate with your kind."
"Not in the fertilizing my eggs sense, okay. We're lovers. We cherish each other, the way ... the way you cherish Wes. If you take Spike to console your grief, you will cause endless grief to me and to him. If Spike is grieving, how can he distract you?"

"I know that he will. I care not for anything else."

"But is that really the right way to honor Wesley? To separate Spike from his beloved? The way you and Wes—"

"It is not for honor that I claim my pet. What means honor to one who is no more?"

Buffy handed off the axe to Willow, and presented herself to the god open-handed. She'd put Spike just behind her, and once again stilled him. Buffy couldn't even catch his eye, and she was afraid that he wouldn't have looked at her if he could. "You loved Wesley, didn't you? You ... you wanted to be with him, to ... enjoy him."

"There was no opportunity."

"And that makes you so very sad."

"This will never end. It is eternal, as am I." Illyria's voice was low, but Buffy heard something thunderous in it, a melancholy as huge and unassimilable as the bad space they'd traversed to get here.

The bad space that was inside Spike's mind. That this god had somehow consigned him to when she opened her portals and caught him in her wake—purposefully, or as some careless side-effect of her huge inter-dimensional act, impossible to know.

"I'm sorry, Majesty. But Spike can't really substitute for Wesley, can he?"

Illyria frowned. "You have found him and think to appropriate him, but he was already mine."

"Um ... I didn't just find him. I've known him for years. And I'm not appropriating—"

Illyria seized her by the throat. Buffy kicked; the god's small hand squeezed her windpipe.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Spike move. "Oi! Blue, leave off!"

Still holding Buffy at the end of her outstretched arm, Illyria's head turned towards him.

Spike rushed at her, striking out. Buffy felt him pass through the god; for the moment that she phased, the clutch at her own throat was gone and she began to fall. Then Spike bounced off the brick wall behind, and she was once more arrested in mid-air, struggling for breath.

She kicked out again, and this time, the god let her go.

Spike confronted Illyria, fully fanged out, growling. "You did all this! You kept me from going with him! Took a snit an' killed my sire!"

His rage didn't seem to reach her, the energy of his passion somehow dissipating in the air, as if it came from something small and barely noticeable. He swung out again, and again his blow phased through her. She blinked slowly.

"I had no urge to punish you. You had no reason to choose death."

"You don't bloody know my reasons."
"This is of no importance. You will come with me now." She gestured, and once more Spike was forced to his knees.

"I won't. You may be able to squeeze my little mind like a bloody sponge. But you can't make me yours. You spared me, yeah, so you'd better spare me altogether. I've got work to do, won't be your toy."

"Mating with this female, that is your work?"

"No. My mating, an' this female, are none o' your concern. The work—you know what that is. What Wesley died for, an' Angel, an' Charlie-boy. The mission. You won us this battle—an' I thank you for that much. But the war's still on, an' there's fewer warriors to step up on the side of right."

"This world is no more concern of mine. I will not revisit it for a billion billion billion centuries. You will forget it too, and be happy in my service."

Buffy tried to move towards him, but again, though there was nothing holding her back, she couldn't get close. "Will—what is she doing?"

Willow shook her head. Magic sparkled at her fingers' ends, but dripped off, ineffectual. "This is for Spike only."

Spike growled at her. "Y'know what Wesley would say if he was here? He'd tell you this was wrong. You know he would, an' you know you'd have listened."

Illyria's eyes closed. It was like fitting a hood on a hawk. For the moment that they were covered, Buffy was able to draw breath.

Then she opened them again, trained them on Spike with a terrible will.

He still struggled to rise. "The same pain you caused him, when you snatched Fred's life just when she'd begun to love him at last ... that's what you've got now. Some call that karma, but you an' me, pet, we know it's just how things are, yeah? Payback's a bitch, even for gods."

"Wesley would not summon this agony to me." For the first time, Illyria sounded less than sure of herself.

"You let in love an' you let in sufferin'. That's love's underbelly. That's how it works."

Illyria stared at him. She was holding him in place, even as she allowed him to argue.

Now she gestured towards Buffy. "You love this female?"

Spike didn't even glance. "S'the Mission I love. Love the Fight."

Illyria's mouth opened, but Buffy never heard what she said. Some invisible twister shook the alley, turning the air hot and dense and opaque.

When she could feel again, think again, Buffy was lying on the roof of a parked car, its alarm whooping. Sliding off, she saw Willow sprawled on the sidewalk a few yards off. They seemed to be streets away from the old hotel.

As she ran to her, Willow sat up.

"Are you okay? What was that?"
Willow coughed. "Pretty sure Illyria's left this dimension. Talk about snits."

"Where's Spike?" Buffy pulled Willow to her feet, looking around. The block was mostly light industry, a couple of streetlamps dark, parked cars. She concentrated into the night air, feeling for vampires, but there was nothing. "Did she take him?"

After inspecting the alley—Willow was satisfied that the traces of portal-energy were gone, no hot-spot remaining, but also no sign of Spike—they walked. It felt random. Willow didn't say anything; Buffy cradled her axe and was grateful for that much. She felt caught in the moment when the dirty bandage is torn from the seeping wound.

They crossed some streets, came into a more brightly-lit area. Willow glanced at her. "We should find some place to get cleaned up a little. Pee." Skin and clothes were battered and dirty.

They rounded a corner, to a wider boulevard with some traffic even at this dead hour of morning. Buffy looked at the street-sign. "I know where we are. I spent a summer here back in high school." They were close to the stretch where Anne's diner was, not far from the efficiency she'd passed on to Chantarelle at the end of that summer. "We can get coffee a couple blocks up."

"Think we could all use a drink."

Spike seemed to materialize out of shadow. It was only when he stepped forward into the yellow streetlight glow that Buffy noticed the dumpster-lined alley they'd been passing.

Like them, Spike had been through the whirlwind, his exposed skin pitted with little red cuts, his clothes tagged with tears.

Buffy saw herself thrusting the axe into Willow's keeping and throwing herself into his arms. He'd catch her and lift her to his mouth for the long restorative kiss that would make everything right.

A couple of breaths passed before she recognized that she wasn't actually doing this, and neither was Spike; he remained at a distance, hands thrust in his pockets.

Willow said, "A drink sounds good."

"There's a bar round this way won't raise the alarm at the likes of us." He shrugged towards the corner. "Passed it as I came along."

"What happened back there?" Willow said.

Spike's shoulders rose; Buffy could imagine he was going to deny any knowledge of what she was talking about. But he said, "Seems to have decided I wouldn't be such a good pet as all that, an' buggered off back to her new kingdom." Then, as if it had only just occurred to him, he said, "You two all right?"

Willow said, "We've been worse."

"Been lookin' for you. Knew you weren't dead, nor gone." He tapped the side of his nose.

He was subdued, a little slow; Buffy wondered if his mind was finally intact. In the alley Willow had said the energy that had bound Spike and bifurcated his mind was erased, but that didn't mean he was whole again.
"C'mon, then." He walked around the corner without waiting. Buffy bounded after. A couple of doors down on the sidestreet was a darkish front with a pink neon sign Cocktails; Spike was already opening the door. The darkness inside was dense; for a few seconds she was blinded; Willow bumped up against her.

At the bar, Spike asked for a bottle of Jack and three glasses. She performed an awkward pas-de-deux with Willow, who was trying to give her the stool beside Spike's as Buffy tried to make her take it—she was full of nerves, and thought he wouldn't want her sitting right beside him.

But Spike slipped onto the stool himself, and the women found themselves on either side of him. The barman looked at them, at the shiny red axe, and their dishevelment, with an expressionless glance that yet took in everything. Spike knocked back one shot and poured himself another. On her stool, Buffy realized she was trembling.

Willow picked up her glass and took a slow sip. Then she slid down. "Gonna hit the jakes, be right back."

Buffy wanted to tell her to wait, that they'd go together, but she was already walking off into the darkness.

She'd never been in such a dark lounge. The only light seemed to come from behind the rows of bottles themselves; there was a murky mirror behind the array that barely even reflected her, not that she wanted to see herself right now. Some kind of slouchy jazz played low. Apart from them, the place seemed empty. Spike was already on his fourth shot.

When he spoke, his voice seemed to come up from the floor, rather than beside her. "You all right, Slayer?"

"Are you?"

"Need to get very very drunk."

"But are you—"

"Pieces all connected, yeah."

She tried to answer, but it was as if she'd had a blow to the belly. This was relief. She couldn't breathe around it.

Then Spike's hand was on her shoulder. "Steady." He let her go, and nudged the shot glass closer to her. "Drink up."

"Spike—"

"Need time."

The words, rather than being heard, seemed rather to appear to Buffy, branded red into the black air in front of her. Hanging there, sizzling a little at the edges, for contemplation and reference. Need time. They looked like a rebuke, and also a plea, and also a dismissal, and also an assurance. She couldn't sort that, so she squeezed her eyes shut on them, picked up the little glass, and swallowed.

"She didn't have to kill him. She didn't have to do that." He poured another shot for himself, and her.

Buffy wasn't ready to think about Angel, about the realities of how he'd died. She was still processing Need time. She thought she'd be processing that possibly forever. If she didn't just wink
out, between one burning sip and the next, one airless breath and the next. Beside her on his stool, Spike was a whip made flesh; she believed she could feel the furious energy of him singing along her flank. It amazed her that he could sit still and drink with such wrath churning in him.

"Didn't have to interfere with my fight."

"She liked you." As soon as she said the words, she wished she'd been quiet. They echoed back at her, inane, gormless.

"You like me," he corrected. "She— Wasn't a she. It. A god. Angel hadn't managed to clip her wings like he did, she'd have swallowed this world like a hard-boiled egg." He downed another shot. Buffy had lost track of how many he'd had, but the bottle was only half full, though Spike was no looser. She longed to touch him but didn't dare. She thought that any second now he'd rocket up, announce that he was going, and be gone.

"Do you really expect her to commiserate with you because Illyria didn't let you get annihilated?"

Buffy hadn't heard Willow return; she asked her question as she slipped back up onto her stool. "Because neither of us are going to do that." She leaned forward to catch Buffy's eye. "I put a glamour on the ladies room, but you'd better get in there now."

"A glamour?"

"To make it clean and sweet-smelling. It's not going to last."

Buffy got down; the floor was farther off than she'd thought it would be; her knees contained springs. She steadied herself on the bar. Spike swallowed another shot. "Don't expect anything."

This made her want to grab him, shake him, shout in his face. Expect! Rely! KNOW! She mumbled, "Will you watch my axe please?"

In the ladies room, the lights were pink and bright, and everything had a glowy sparkle to it. She used the toilet quickly, holding her breath even though it was, as Willow had promised, not stinky. Washed her face and hands—the soap was silky and smelled like Chanel 19—and used the clean new brush that was sitting on the shelf beneath the mirror. Her reflection startled her; she'd forgotten that her face was a purple cluster of bruises. The swelling had gone down some, but she had the addition of pebble-cuts she'd seen on Willow and Spike; they began to smart as soon as she saw them. She breathed, counting backwards from twenty. Soon, her face would be back to normal, smooth and pretty. And soon, Spike would ...

Fear seized her. She'd been shunted off to the bathroom so Spike could make good his escape. Willow was going to help him disappear. Dropping the brush, she dashed out. The cry died on her lips when she saw them, two slender figures folded onto their stools, arms propped on the bar. The bottle of Jack was almost empty now. Spike held his glass up to his lips and tipped it in. Willow murmured, "Save me one more shot."

Buffy fingered her axe. She didn't want to resume her seat. The whiskey churned around in her stomach. "Can we go home?"

Willow and Spike lifted their heads in unison.

Willow said, "Spike was just telling me he's not quite ready to—"

He interrupted. "Can't go back to your castle now."
"Where ... where do you want to go?"

Willow spoke again. "I was just telling him I don't think it's a good idea for him to be alone. I mean, I get the not wanting to be around all those slayers. The energy there is maybe wrong for how things are now. But being all by himself ...."

Buffy felt stupid, like she'd been conked in the head. "So ... what? Spike, you're not going to leave us?" She wanted to say me, but swerved at the last second.

Need time. Need time. The words hovered, renewing themselves with every fresh blink.

As she looked at him, she could see how quietly, deeply drunk he'd become. The bottle was empty. His eyes were red, a little watery.

"We could go back to the retreat house. How would that be? We could ... I mean, you could. I don't have to go. Maybe Dawnie could spend a few days with you while you rest. Or—Bakhita? She's a slayer too, but maybe ... or Xander? Xander could use a little break, he hasn't had a holiday in ...." Her babbling played back through her head; she bit her tongue.

"Was thinkin' I'd go to Cleveland for a bit. Work with Faith an' her lot while I sort myself out. Classic hellmouth conditions, could do me good."

"But that's another houseful of slayers, it's—" Again she stopped. This wasn't really about the slayers at all. It was a little bit about the castle in Scotland, its isolation—Spike needed the mission—classic hellmouth conditions—that meant plenty to stalk and slay every night, which the Scotland situation didn't offer. But mostly it was about her. Spike wasn't ready for her. He needed to get out from under her anxious yearning impatient presence. She could feel how it must be for him, how exhausted and overwhelmed he was and how she pressed. She stepped back a little along the bar, making space. "That sounds like a good idea. I bet Faith and her girls would be really glad to have you."

Spike's shoulders dropped. It was the first hint she'd seen that he cared at all for what she thought. He let his eyes meet hers then. "Won't lose touch, Slayer. Won't disappear."

Again she wanted to cry out. She fist the axe, its smooth heft reassuring her the way his touch would have, if she'd had that. "You promise?"

He gave the slightest of nods. "I promise."

She reminded herself that he'd always stuck to his promises. And that the tighter she tried to hold onto him, the worse they both would feel.

As if to demonstrate, she spread her fingers wide on the polished wood rim of the counter. "Are you going now?"

"I can drop him there," Willow said. "Unless he—unless you want to get there some other way, Spike."

"Suits me."

Before Buffy could think of anything else to hold off the moment, Willow was linking a hand around each of their arms. "Let's move."

Buffy threw up her whiskey on the stones of the castle courtyard. A moment later Willow appeared, looking pleased with her two-places-at-once teleporting feat in the few seconds before she put on her sympathetic face. "It'll be okay, Buff. He'll be back. I bet he'll be back sooner than you expect."
"I don't expect anything." When she said the words, she remembered that Spike had said them, just a few minutes—and half the world—ago.

Willow linked her arm again, pulled her close. "C'mon. Let's get some rest."

Cleveland, while grittier, was not unlike Sunnydale. Every night there were vampires and demons to slay—stupid amounts of them. He'd almost forgotten what a real hellmouth could be like, how they flocked to it like moths to a porch-light. Mowing them down provided him a physical satisfaction, familiar and easeful in the flex and thrust. In the shabby rowhouse where Faith lived with her crew, there were girls who stared at him or ignored him or flirted with him or tried to provoke him into a display of fang, or a real fight. He had a rickety cot in the basement, right next to the furnace, which was delightfully cozy for an undead thing like him. Faith visited him there in the early afternoons, which was when they were both first awake, logy and slow. She brought down coffee and shared her smokes. They talked about Angel. Faith's perspective on him was singular—he'd never betrayed her, there was no ambiguity in her past with him. He'd turned her from an enemy into an ally; he'd believed in her when no one else had. She related how he visited her in prison, and when she talked about that, she became almost soft.

"You reminded him of himself. He wanted to spare you any more of it. I mean, the dark."

"Well, duh." Faith chuckled, lit another cigarette off the end of the first. "He sure did know his murder and his atonement. Son of a bitch ... he fucked up there at the end, though." She shook her head. "For his kid, I get that ... but still."

"Hard to wrap my mind round that. Darla with child. Angel with a son. That boy better turn out to be worthwhile. Traded off some good people for him." He thought of Fred, how she'd suffered, how Wesley suffered—he could identify with that, the torment of love unanswered, love answered too late. Thought of Angel's choices, the rottenness of his options.

His dreams, after nights of whirling dust and bottles of Jack, were rich and populous. It took a while for him to realize that they were all centered on the far past. Asleep he found himself a child again, a schoolboy, a student, a young clerk in Whitehall, hoping to rise to confidential secretary, to marry for love. Always struggling and caught off guard, lots of running around, frustration, storm. But he never dreamed about Buffy. It was as if his sleeping mind was refusing to let him off so easy; he wasn't going to be able to process the recent past through the medium of dreams.

He thought of her most while he was on the hunt. While he fought, because combat was Buffy's medium—every one of her moves and expressions and quips was stored in his memory, coming back to him in a fertile rush when he was in action—it was as a fighter that he'd first come to love her. As an adversary.

But all of that was from before, from Sunnydale. It was harder to deal with the last few months; those events at the castle made a sort of pentimento, realities and scenes piled on top of each other, their distinctions running together. He'd lived them all but in the absence of his whole self they seemed curiously flat, denuded of full meaning.

He'd fallen in love with her right away when she'd fetched him in L.A., a powerful, attractive stranger. He'd set out to seduce her, to woo her, and succeeded with an ease he'd never experienced with anyone else, as man or vampire. Of course she'd been primed, because she loved him already, or so she asserted. He believed her, but still wasn't sure. The way she'd come to him, when he was shut off from himself, troubled him, and at the same time he was troubled by his own trouble—it was wrong to blame her, to be suspicious. What chance had he given her to come to him any other way?
He'd kept his existence a secret.

Slayer had for once followed her heart, and hadn't he wanted her to do that from the very first? Hadn't he yearned and fantasized about that for years?

He knew what he felt wasn't fair, but it dug at him.

He felt embarrassed, churlish, recalling how she'd taken his blows. How eagerly she'd made love to him. Her pleasure at being bitten. At being submissive in bed.

Could all that be all right? Or was it—the idea dug its claws into his mind and could not be torn loose—was it that her painful career had so warped her that she was ruined for a real man, real love? Her desire for him the principal symptom of a terrible, an unfortunate, pathology?

One afternoon in the fourth week of his stay, when the house was quiet and empty, Faith came on to him on his cot, beside the ticking furnace.

She took him by surprise, engaging his tongue, her kiss tasting of tobacco and tabasco, her hand possessing his groin, squeezing him through his jeans.

He lifted it off, and held it. She was staring into his eyes, her face so close it filled his vision. Breath snuffed from her distended nostrils. He brought her hand to his lips, kissed the fingers one by one. "You're a good girl, Faith, an' it's not that I wouldn't like to afford you—both of us—the pleasure—"

She smiled then.

"Know you belong to Buffy," she said.

"Do you?"

She cuffed him—gently, for her—on the shoulder. "Mostly I did this to remind you."

"You imagined I forgot?"

Faith smiled, shook her head. "Guys are situational. They forget what's not right in front of their nose. But you ... you might be unusual in that respect."

"Dunno. Tryin' to make some sense of myself, which I've never been much cop at."

"You're probably thinking too much."

"Never been much good at thinking at all."

"B thinks too much. She was always such a goody-two-shoes. Hell, if it was me for you back in Sunnyd, I'd have been on you like white on rice and I wouldn't have let go."

"You ever been in love, Faith?" He knew she'd been with the slayer's son for a little while after the apocalypse, but Wood had left Cleveland, and Faith never mentioned him.

She frowned, and started to shake her head.

"You loved Angel," Spike said. It felt a little cruel to say it out loud.

"That was never going to happen. There's no call to be talking about it."

"Yeah, all right. Just ...."
"B was crazy about you. Do you still not get that? I think you still don't get that." Faith turned his head so he was looking straight at her. "In her house. Those days before the battle. How she looked at you. How she didn't look at you when everyone was all together. It was obvious. Sure, she was freaked out about what was coming, but my God Spike, you were on her mind twenty-four-seven, and I'm not talking about how she was counting on you as a fighter."

"Maybe I didn't know."

"You sure didn't." Faith was certain.

"Was focused more on what I had to do. On makin' sure she got to walk away."

"We can be such morons." She picked at a hole in her jeans. "Everything makes perfect sense, when it's too damn late to do anything about it."

Later that day, he went up into the house, borrowed a phone from one of the girls, and sent a text. Talk f2f? Meet Glasgow or w-ever u say. Spike.

The phone purred as he was handing it back. Its owner answered it, then held it out to him.

The sound of her voice poured down his spine, made him squirm, heated his flesh.

"Spike?" It was a long time since he'd been on the phone with her; he didn't realize how little-girlish she sounded through the tiny speaker. "Spike."

"Slayer." He swallowed around a sudden knot in his throat. "Buffy. How are you, pet?" He was aware suddenly that the girl whose phone he held was staring at him, that she was blushing, and that that was because there were tears starting down his cheeks. He turned his back on her, sidled into the corner. "Shouldn't you be sleepin' now, love?" He'd never meant to talk to her this way at all, but here he was all flushed with tenderness, the endearments slipping by all his censors.

"Do you really think I can sleep, when you're so far away?"

He couldn't come up with an answer.

Buffy said, "Can I come there? Can I come now? I'm going to go wake up Willow."

He tried to speak, but his throat was closed.

"Spike? Are you still on?"

"Just to talk, yeah?"

A little silence on her end. Stubborn, sad, angry, he couldn't tell. His head was spinning.

"Come on then, Slayer. I'll put on a pot of coffee, meanwhile."

It was only after he returned the phone and wandered into the kitchen that he realized the timing wasn't going to be conducive. Soon the house would be full, girls coming back from school and jobs, fixing overlapping dinners, camped out at the big dining room table and in the sitting room with meals and homework and gossip, the TV blaring. There was no privacy for him except in his cellar, and he hardly wanted to bring Buffy down there for their reunion.

He thought about ringing her back, but before he could ask to borrow another phone, one of the girls tapped him on the arm. Her smile was arch and amused. "There's someone waiting for you out on the stoop. A lady caller."
"Outside? Why didn't you bring her in?"

The girl shrugged. "She didn't want to come in."

Somehow, taking the short walk to the front door felt like the hardest thing he'd done in years. The alley was a doddle in comparison.

A knot of slayers were crowded there, peeking out through the side windows, whispering to each other. He heard one say, "I thought she was supposed to be a blonde."

They cleared off when he appeared. He gathered himself, and flung open the door.

The woman standing half-way down the steps turned to look up at him, her long red hair streaming out in the snappish wind. "Hey Spike."

"Willow!"

"Hope you're not disappointed."

Disappointment wasn't the right word; he felt a little unbalanced. He came down so as to stand level with her, one step lower. Willow smiled. She had a kind smile when she wanted to.

"Buffy thought maybe she came on too strong just now on the phone. She doesn't want to crowd you. She sent me on ahead to make sure it's okay."

"Is she okay? What's she been up to?"

"Working. We were in Peru for a week, weird situation in the Andes, we just got back two days ago." She tugged his sleeve. "Walk around the block?"

"Is she here?"

"No. She's waiting at the castle."

That made him feel a little easier. He followed Willow down the stoop, paused at the bottom to light a cigarette.

"She make you memorize a little speech to say off to me?"

"No. She just wanted me to gauge what's the what. See if you need more time."

"Not sure what time's gonna do. Steered clear of her after Sunnydale because I thought it was best for both of us, yeah? She tell you what she said to me, down in the hellmouth when I was startin' to burn?"

"She told me what she said, and what you said. But that was a long time ago—why are you acting like the last couple months when you were lovers, hello! never happened?"

"Don't quite feel like they did happen. Not exactly to me." The admission made him feel even more off-balance. They stopped at an intersection to wait for the light to change. "Remember it all, but it's like it happened to someone else. Like I was a sort of made-up toy for Buffy. Simple an' innocent. Easy for her to give herself to, easy to hold up in front of the others, because what did my past matter if I didn't know any of it?"

"I sympathize," Willow said. "I do. But as someone with a rotten past—who hasn't been presented with any do-over opportunities with her best honey—I strongly encourage you to shut the fuck up
about that and deal."

"Oi—"

Willow held up a hand. "Okay, I get that it's not exactly the same thing. And I'm not telling you have no right to have some issues, or to air them out. But answer one question. No caveats: are you still in love with Buffy?"

"Willow, I don't want to hurt her."

"Yeah, well, she doesn't want to be hurt."

"That's the thing, don't you see? Dunno if love's enough."

Willow stopped, giving him a wary look. "You know, you still have to talk to her—I'm not going to break up with her for you."

"Don't expect that! Was me proposed to meet, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, okay. Just ... shit. You're not really going to break it off, are you? I thought you'd always love her."

"Love her, yeah, care for her. But I'm not the same as when I was out of my head just now. All I knew about then was her. Bein' at slayer's service."

"Are you worried about hurting her only? Or about you getting hurt? You seemed completely willing when you got involved with her. You two, you just have something, that strong attraction. I'd say the chances of you both ever being in a situation where you'd be able to keep your hands off each other is slim to none."

"Well, what about the future—her future? She's not the one girl in all the world anymore. What chance does she have for a proper home an' kiddies if she's mixed up with me?"

Willow looked a little startled, before she rolled her eyes. "I haven't heard Buffy talk about wanting anything like that, not for years. But she misses you and wants you, all the time."

"That's because the life's ruined her for proper men. Vampires—even ones with souls—aren't fit lovers for—"

"Oh shut up! That's old-school Angel-talk."

"Maybe Angel was right about that much. Thought he was, when I was with him in L.A."

He was sorry he'd begun this at all. Should've slipped off one night and disappeared. Kept Buffy where she belonged, a fantasy he'd never have to live out. Never have to fail at.

"Just not sure if I'm her man."

Willow stopped under a street lamp and squinted up at him. "She knows you're her man."

"Like I said, dunno if that's enough."

Willow thumped him. "Don't you make a fool out of me!"

"Eh?"
"I told Buffy you weren't a coward. That you'd never been and never would be. But here you are—"

"Not cowardice! Scruples. Proper caution, because—"

She jerked at his sleeve. "Scruples? Caution? Hello, can I talk to Spike please?"

"Willow—"

"You started this, Mr William Pratt. You fell for her when nobody, including Buffy, wanted you to, and you won her. If you pull this on Buffy now you will ruin her. All the men she's ever loved have walked away. But not you, Spike. Really, not you. You know you don't want to."

He felt like his clothes were full of ants. He wished he was that simpleton, who didn't remember the assault in the bathroom, who was no more aware of his soul squirming in him than of the tongue in his mouth, who knew nothing of decades of bloody murders but was brimful of memorized poetry. That fellow was an apt one for Buffy, if she had to have her pretty undead toy instead of a real live husband at her side for what looked like being a real-life-sized life. Should've left it alone when he had the chance, not started in with the magical cures. Not that Willow's attempts had had much effect.

He fiddled with the contents of his pockets. "Just tryin' to see the right side of it. Tryin' not to be selfish."

"Buffy would like someone to be selfish about her right about now. She'd like—she needs—someone to lay claim and refuse to let go."

"Someone?"

Willow smiled a gotcha smile that showed all her pink gums around her pretty teeth. "Well, duh."

Giles still kept a flat in Bath, not in one of the pretty old rows the tourists gathered in front of, but on a quiet stretch removed from the High Street. Its windows overlooked a tangled rear garden, still green in early winter. When Willow brought him there a couple of hours after their conversation in Cleveland, they materialized into a cold morning rain, mist camoflaging the backs of the house rows. Spike pulled up the collar of his duster.

"She's inside. Go on."

"You're not staying?" He couldn't think when he'd last felt so uncertain. Not at all like a lover triumphant, confident of his reception. Already he missed his simple little cot and the furnace in the Cleveland basement. How easy it was, to just kill vampires, get drunk, sleep it off, do it again. Simple and a little boring, but his inner life had been so fraught for so long it felt good to shut it off. Except that he was supposed to have used that time to work it all through, get himself sorted, be ready. And he hadn't. He wasn't ready.

"You don't want me here," Willow said. She laid a hand on his arm, went up on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Go be Spike. Spike's good heart. It'll all work out."

She was gone before he could reply, leaving him in the downpour next to the wrought-iron garden table. He faced a house-back that was renovated into big swatches of modern window, all covered in blinds or curtains, the entrance a pair of french doors, their glass similarly swathed in fabric. He'd expected Buffy to be waiting right there, if not outside then in the open door, but there was no sign of her. The curtains didn't twitch. Getting soaked now, he went up and tapped on the glass.
Wondered what to expect. What she expected too. Just let it work out.

His knock rang hollow in the empty room on the other side. Then he felt her approach; he could hear her hesitantly descending a carpeted staircase, her heartbeat getting louder. She paused, and he wanted to call out Know you're there! but he waited. The rain splattered his leather back. Then the knobs rattled, and she was in the doorway.

His first impression of her was pale-under-tan. She'd gotten some sun in Peru, but that didn't keep her from looking chalky, under-slept, bleary. The bruises he'd inflicted on her were gone. Her hair was brushed to a shine, hanging free. She wore a dress, a dark rough silk, simple and well-cut, her legs bare, boots on her feet. No perfume, no jewelry. She smelled like fatigue and a little bit like vomit, and very much like toothpaste. He put a hand up on the doorframe, feeling unobtrusively for whether he was free of the place. But he couldn't put his thumb around the edge. He'd have to be invited in.

There was a tinge of relief in that. He wasn't sure he wanted to go inside right away.

"Hello Spike."

"Hullo Slayer."

She didn't quite meet his eyes, was subdued as a shy girl greeting a blind date, not like herself at all. He felt for her, after how open she'd been with him, all that intimacy with his partial self. That fellow had felt perfectly free to follow his heart, whereas those adventures, all that he'd done and said and felt in that state, left him now stymied, embarrassed, confused.

"Look at you," she said. Her tone was almost off-hand, absent. She didn't actually look at him, except for his boot toes, which she stared at as if they were completely absorbing. A dog barked in a garden further off, and in all the houses round, people, children, animals slept. He listened to her heart thub, and the steady patter of the rain. Wanted to say something reassuring. He was seldom at a loss for speech, even if it was inane, but he couldn't come up with anything.

Buffy reached out and stuck a finger into one of the buttonholes on his duster. Balanced on one foot, the other hooked behind her ankle, she worked her finger slowly in and out of this tenuous connection. She blinked, and he focused on the fluttering of her eyelashes.

"You're all wet."

"You'll notice it's rainin'."

She didn't seem to. She stood in her one-legged stork-pose, plucking and twisting the buttonhole. Tugging his leather, but not so as to draw him inside. She seemed to sense that he wasn't eager for that. She stared at her hand, at the placket of his coat.

"You went back to the old look."

"Works for me."

"Yeah." Pluck, twist, tug. Concentrating on the buttonhole like it held the key to the whole moment. She whispered, "Do you think you'll stay with me, Spike?"

Before he could react, she pulled her finger free of the coat and pressed it to his lips. "No, that wasn't fair—too quick. I take it back. I take it back!"

She flushed hot, and he felt her starting to withdraw. At that moment he heard music, faint but plain,
coming from the kitchen of the next house down—improbable music, a glittery Strauss waltz. He caught her hand, drew her across the threshold.

"Dance with me, Slayer."

"What?" She glanced around wildly as she emerged into the cold downpour, as he took hold of her in the waltzing pose and began the box-step. Their feet collided; he put her right, began again, and this time, though she was looking away, back into the house as if hoping for some intervention, she moved with him. Someone somewhere had taught Buffy Summers the rudiments of this dance, because she got it in a beat or two, and then they were moving with an easy rise and fall, across the slick short wintry grass, towards the bottom of the garden. Her breathing was louder than the music, edging towards frantic, and it wasn't until they'd nearly reached the wall and he'd whirled them back the other way that she brought her face around to look at him. She seemed bewildered and sad, but now her eyes were engaged with his, she kept them there. They lacked their usual light, their spark, yet at the same time she danced with a smoothness that suggested practice but must really just be her inherent grace.

The music faded before the end of the piece; they kept moving for another few steps, and he'd have gone on, humming for her to the established pace, but she stopped. Her hair was dark with the rain, her face lined in trickles. The silk dress was turned black, plastered to her body. She shivered now she was still.

"What are you doing? What is this?"

"Dunno—just—heard the music—"

She balled her hands into fists. "Have you been sleeping with Faith?"

"The hell I have!"

"Yes, I've been waiting for you—waiting for you—you're not telling me what I need to know!"

"Haven't even touched myself since I left you, let alone Faith. She an' I talked a bit. We mourned some. That's all. Buffy, you know that."

She pulled free. The rain poured down her face mixed now with tears.

He drew her into the tiny summer house that took up one corner of the garden. Here it was drippy but substantially dry. Taking off his duster, he wrapped it around her.

She shivered under the heavy leather. "Forgive me ... I'm tired. I haven't been sleeping much. I know you didn't touch Faith."

"Never mind that."

"I forgot to even ask you how you are."

"I'm well enough."

"No, really. I want to know. Willow said—"
"She repeat everythin' we talked about to you?" He wished she had—it might make this go better. So far he felt like he was groping around in the dark, not even knowing what he was supposed to say, or want, or how to act.

Buffy shrugged. "I don't think so. She said you were troubled. Which I'd figured out already."

"Troubled. Stupid word, makes me sound like a naughty schoolboy."

She didn't answer. She faced away from him, looking out into the soaked garden. The seconds slipped by, drawing out like a spider's silk, until a whole long minute had passed in silence.

Then she said, "I thought you wanted to talk."

"I did. I'm just ... havin' trouble gettin' started."

"I've been trying to imagine what it was like for you. The last year. The battle, the amnesia. Angel dying. Getting jerked around by a god with the face of someone you liked, someone who got killed. Then what we did together while you didn't really know what we used to be to each other. I don't blame you for resenting me. I knew you would. Because if it was the other way around, I guess I'd have resented it too."

He found himself smiling. "You? Know just how you'd be, fierce thing. You'd have been furious, an' you'd have smited me down for givin' you all that pleasure an' comfort."

It took her a few seconds to understand that he was trying to lighten the mood. "Pleasure and comfort. The is that all it was? was clearly implied in her tone. She turned again to stare out into the rain, holding the duster closed around her throat.

"I thought I understood why you didn't come to me after Sunnydale, why you didn't call. You'd bowed out. And your dedication to the mission—I respect that like whoa. But I don't quite understand the hesitancy now. Getting all your memories back, does that really cancel out the time we've had together? Everything we said and did? Are you really that pissed off about it?"

"I'm not."

"You're angry at me about something."

"Just not sure I'm the same man you gave yourself to."

"I gave myself to you. It was so sweet. It was ... I don't know when I was ever happier. Which is kind of pathetic, but we both know my love life is a big broken trail of pathos."

"Don't talk about yourself that way."

"Why not, it's true. Spike, I wanted you to be whole. Didn't I say so, over and over, didn't I show you? I knew that was the only way our love would be completely real. I gave you my all and now you're in one piece again, you're not sure you want it. So what's wrong with me? Or is it you?"

She was angry herself. He didn't blame her.

"Slayer, where d'you see yourself bein' in ten years' time?"

The question startled her. He wasn't sure where it had come from—it wasn't the sort of thing he was accustomed to thinking about for himself or anyone else. She glanced around at him, eyes wide, with a sound halfway between a guffaw and a choke. "Ten years? You know I'll be dead and gone." She
was matter-of-fact, as if reminding him of something he should perfectly well know.

"You still believe that? Even now?"

"I may no longer be the slayer, but I'm still a slayer."

"Buffy—"

"Spike, don't. The Pollyanna stuff fits you like a hat on a chicken. We met because you were plotting my death, remember? Later, you were outraged at my resurrection. You've always been honest and direct when it comes to me—don't ruin that now by pretending this is about releasing me to lead a more normal life."

She faced him then. "You know, I've finally gotten to the point where I know for sure: I'll never not be the slayer, but apart from that, I'm free. I'm free to live how I need to live, to love who I need to love. I mean, I might as well, because my job is harsh, and my life isn't going to be long."

"Harsh, yeah. An' when we come together, it always leaves marks. I leave marks, on you." When he thought of how she'd borne them, how she'd convinced herself they were proofs of her devotion. He thought of the bite, that she'd seduced out of him.

"I'm confused here. What is it you're not telling me? That we're—literally—dancing around? Anger, I can deal with—we've been angry at each other before. But I don't know if you still assume I don't really want you. That you somehow still don't deserve me."

"No."

"Then you just don't want me anymore. You've been exposed to the full Buffy, nothing held back, and ... I was too much. Even for you. If that's it ... just say so. Just say, so I can quit wasting my time, and move on."

"You're wrong. I'm not ...." The words stuck in his throat. He closed his eyes, wishing himself away.

"Where do you see yourself in ten years? Hell, forget ten years. Ten days. Where do you see yourself? Cleveland?"

"Need to be right down in a city, yeah, ear to the ground, some place I can do some good, on the street, every night. Takin' a territory, being responsible for it. But not Cleveland. Cleveland was good, but it wasn't mine."

He could picture being dismissed by her, or dismissing himself. Leaving her there in the wet summer house, in his wet leather, going out through the garden gate, making his way into the town center and then away somewhere. He could see that happening far more clearly than he could envision entering Giles' house with her. Much less returning to the castle. That ivory tower.

"Guess I see myself back in L.A., in honor of my old Captain. Know the territory pretty well already. Plenty there to keep me busy."

Buffy's hand emerged from the leather flaps of his coat, hovered in the air between them, but didn't make contact. "You know what's weird? Right this minute I feel like you probably did, that night ... thinking that if you just grabbed me, got me going, you could make me see things your way. Remind me of how we connect. God, I'd really like to just hurl myself at you right now, knock you down and take you until you remember that you're mine. But that would be another big mistake. Here, take this back." She shrugged out of the duster, pushed it at him. "I wish you well Spike, in all your future evil-fighting endeavors. I'm going inside before I freeze."
She'd taken a couple of steps out into the rain before he lunged after. Seized her elbow, pulled her back. She tried to wrench free, and for a few terrible seconds they struggled, as they'd struggled so many times before.

The words poured out of him, unplanned, unimagined until that moment. "Slayer—would you come with me an' be partners? Would you do that?"

She dug her fingers into the sodden sleeves of her dress. Her hair hung in soaked rats around her face. "Partners? What do you mean by partners? You suggesting a business model, or—?"

"Business model? No! Want you to come down out of your castle an' work with me night after night at what you do best. Bloody hell, I'd ask you to marry me, if that wasn't absurd." He heard himself say this, and was astonished, and yet he knew he'd finally managed to bypass his racing brain, that the words came from his soul.

"Why would it be absurd?" She was entirely, almost terribly, serious. Her gaze fixed on his, burning with attention.

"Dead man, vampire. Can't—" Even as he stumbled over the words, a crazy awe rising in his heart, he found himself sinking to his knees. Purpose swelled in his breast. "Slayer—Buffy. Buffy, would you—"

She knelt too, as if drawn down by his own movement. Disconcerted, he gestured. "No, you're supposed to—I'm proposin', an' you're supposed to be—"

"I don't want to stand above you." Her knees almost touched his. She leaned in so her face was inches from his. "Isn't it better like this?" She was still sodden and pale, her face glowing greenish white in the rainy murk, but the change in her energy was unmistakable. Her eyes had come alive.

"All right then." He breathed in around the great knot that had formed in his chest. "Buffy, would you come to me an' be my wife?"

There was no lag between question and answer—she'd opened her mouth to reply even as he was speaking. "Yes I will." Then she was in his arms, the ache of their mutual restraint exploded. Her face and lips were chilled, but her mouth when it opened against his was warm. She wriggled into his lap; they tipped back against the wall, gorging on kisses.

Gradually he realized that she was shivering, and that no matter how tightly he wrapped her in his arms, he couldn't warm her.

"You're wet through."

"You're wet through, Mrs Pratt." She'd grown light, her voice like a low clear bell. She rose, and pulled him to his feet. "So are you. Come inside now."

He followed, his hand in hers, back across the garden, and into the house. As he fastened the doors—he couldn't get them to catch—Buffy picked up her phone from the kitchen table.

"What're you doin'? Should get out of those wet things first thing."

"I need to call my sister. I have to tell her I'm going to be a bride."

The word struck him like an off-side blow. Bride. He'd pictured, as their marriage, the nightly fighting they'd do together, and how he'd watch her back and keep her strong, and how they'd have some little place they'd retreat to together after battles, some vague warm nest with a cozy bed and a
The actual wedding hadn't occurred to him at all.

"Bride. You're gonna be my little bride." He lifted the phone out of her hand, held it out of reach. "Tell me some more about that."

"Tell you? You just asked me." Have you changed your mind already?"

"Tell me 'bout this wedding of ours. When shall it be? How shall it be? It's got to be quick."

"Why quick? Are you pregnant?"

She hadn't joked with him in so long. "Don't want to be kept waiting. Want to take you home an' get down to it. I mean, to life. Our life."

"Where's home?"

"We'll find us one. I had a cellar flat in L.A. but I don't suppose it's mine anymore."

"No cellars."

She was pressed up against him now, sparkling, teasing. Reaching for the phone. "Give it. I need to brag. Buffy's got her man."

He held it up higher. "No phone calls, not 'til you're warm an' dry."

"They're waiting to hear from me. Don't you know they're all wondering how this reunion is going?"

"Let 'em think that no news is good news." He pitched the phone onto the top of the kitchen cabinets, and swung her up. Upstairs he turned on the electric fire set into the old grate, and tugged down the bedclothes, even as he still held her against him with one arm. She let him move her around, put her arms up like an obedient child to have her dress stripped off. He towed her hair into a moist fluffy nest, and peeled off her silk underclothes, that were plastered to her body, and her boots, and tipped her into bed. Took off his own, and tossed the ball of wet things into the bathtub.

When he came back to her, Buffy was sitting up, her arms outstretched over the bedclothes, flexing and curling her hands. With her mussed up hair and bare breasts, she looked wild and pleased with herself. Her smile was entire. He thought of that other time he'd asked for her hand, when they'd been moved by magic. First time he'd touched her, kissed her, really tasted her. How happy they'd been.

This was like that, but magnitudes better. All magic cleared out. Reality in the saddle. "Haven't answered my inquiries. Tell me 'bout this bride thing."

"I want to be beautiful for you."

"You can't help that."

"Spike." She reached for him. "The strangest things get you hard."

"You. What's strange about that?"

"Wedding talk. Me in tears. Look at you." She was starting to cry again. The sound of it, the salty aroma, made him sob too. She cuddled in close, her mouth against his neck, kissing his throat and under his ear. "Are you really all right now? We should talk about ... well, there's so many things."
She was suggesting they talk at the same time that one of her hands was wrapped around his prick, possessive and imperious, working him up. It was a little bit confusing.

She said, "Tell me you're all right."

"Pet, I am now."

"I was so frightened. I thought ... I knew that if you let me go, I'd just shut down. I'd be the slayer but I wouldn't be Buffy anymore."

"Don't say that. Nothin' could do that to you." It could though, he knew; love could change you the way the sea changed things. In his instance it had made him from a monster into something very like a man. For her it was different. She'd learned disappointment from her lovers, inequality and resentment. And yet somehow in the midst of those harsh lessons, she'd allowed herself to trust him.

"I want to do everything to make you glad. I'm going to be such a sweet wife, you'll see."

Tipping him backwards, she threw a leg across his thighs. She pulsed heat, but her hands and feet were still chilly. He touched her everywhere; she gasped when he put a hand between her legs. Her clit was already a fat pearl, slick against his thumb. Buffy wriggled on his hand, sucking her lip, and in a moment came with a long whining shudder.

"God I love to watch you spend."

"I need you on me," she whispered. "Fuck me."

He rolled her under, the quilt bunched around their bodies in a warm cocoon. Her legs curled tight around his flanks. She sobbed as he settled in her, welcoming him with a deep press of her inner muscles, feeding her warm breath into his parted lips.

"Slow, yeah?" he whispered.

"Let's take forever."

A little while later she chuckled. "We are perfect when we do this. Spike, we are perfect." She still whispered, as if respecting a holy silence.

"Think I was born to fuck you?"

The suggestion made her smile; she nodded. "You were made for me, yes. And me for you."

The electric fire made the room hotter and hotter. Her hair gave off the scent of the downpour they'd stood out in. The aroma of her gathering sweat was glorious. On the other side of the windows, the wind flung rain against the glass. They stretched it out, taking long trembling pauses to savour their deep drenched connection, the soft internal rocking of her heart, the rhythm of her breath. He couldn't get enough of looking at her.

He murmured in her ear. "You're a sumptuous fuck. You're the finest there is."

"You remember all the other times?" she said.

"That we've done this? Yeah."

"It's always good, isn't it?"

"It is."
"I want you to know that I've loved you for a long time."

"You've told me. I know it, I do, pet."

"You remember all that?"

"Everythin'."

"I'm going to make it up to you, Spike. How I made you wait. How I put you down."

"No, love. Nothin' to make up. Was all necessary, yeah? Part of my education."

"Your education."

"To fit me for you, for the mission. Though I'm still not ... still not up to snuff. But we use what we've got. Anyway, you've been nothin' but good to me lately, you know you have. Sweet an' patient through all this mess."

"I saw things about you that were always hidden. So many aspects of who you really are. And I admired them, I liked them all. Not to deny the demon in you, Spike, but you turn out to be so much more than that."

"You wouldn't like me so well without my demon. Gives you what you require." He demonstrated with a hard swivel that made her curl and cry out; then there was no more talking, the languour broken. He took her hard, and she fucked back with deep tense pulls, arching into him, grunting.

Later, in a limp heap in the bedclothes, she drowsed. He held her as she slept, and thought of what he'd done, how eagerly she'd agreed. Had it ever happened before, a slayer marrying a vampire? He'd never thought of himself as a husband, even in all those decades with Dru—she was his girl, eternal, as he'd believed then, and he'd considered himself bound to her, until she shook him off. But not married. Angel and Darla, much as they played the stern parental couple, were never spouses either; it wasn't the vampire way. Yet now he'd asked for her and been accepted, he felt that this was where his love for Buffy Summers had been leading all along, this strong urge to be responsible for her, to belong with her, acknowledged in the sight of everyone they knew. It was fairly boggling though, how she'd accepted without hesitation. He saw it again in his mind's eye, that moment when she dropped down to face him, how her eyes were full of eager love. He felt like a fool for ever doubting her, even as he wondered if fucking and fighting were enough to make a marriage on. Enough for her.

She wriggled against him, her lips parting into a yawn. Buffy opened her eyes. "Still here. Good."

"Did you think I'd leave?"

She smiled. "I dreamed that you and I were going to get married. It was a good dream."

"Was it, now?"

She didn't answer; he could feel her thinking. Then she whispered, "Spike you never were married before, were you? When you were alive? Did you leave behind a wife when you were turned?"

"No pet. I loved a girl, but she refused me. An' the less said about that, the better."

She blinked. "Was that your undoing?"
"Was the making of me."

She blinked some more, processing this. "So if this other woman had said yes, we'd never have met. You'd have lived and died—"

"Long ago."

"Huh. I don't want to think about it, because I can't imagine my life anymore without you in it."

He wished there was a way to take a spoken line and freeze it into the air, so he could hear it and see it again and again, whenever he wanted to. He'd never have imagined the slayer would say such to him, and mean it. He knew she meant it.

Buffy went on, "When I was young, I used to imagine getting married to Angel. I saw us in a big church, and me in a foofy white dress, yards and yards of tulle and lace, and a veil. I never really thought about what would happen afterwards, though. I guess because I knew it was just a fantasy. I didn't think about what we'd do, how we'd live. I knew it would never happen."

"How d'you want to live, Slayer?"

She sighed. "No one has ever asked me that before."

"Think you're exaggeratin'."

"Well, maybe, but it never felt like my answer would make a damn bit of difference. I'm always swept along by circumstances—my mom, the next apocalypse, mom's death, another apocalypse, the end of Sunnydale, then Giles deciding we should use the castle. What's that bit in Alice in Wonderland, when the Red Queen says, it's as fast as you can run, just to stay in the same place. I never get to stop running, to choose."

"It matters to me. How you want to live. Have your choice."

"If I said I wanted to retire from the slayage and open a nail salon in Dubuque—?"

"Been to Dubuque. You wouldn't care for it." He petted her hair. "Not likin' the idea of L.A.?"

"I didn't say that."

"Want you to say it if it's true. You an' me can't be partners if we don't tussle things out."

"I like the idea of letting you lead for a while. It's only fair, right? You've followed me for years. You followed me to your death."

"If L.A. feels like death to you, Slayer, we'll settle somewhere else. We can talk about it. Nothin's decided for now, yeah?"

"Right now we're taking our pleasure," she agreed. As she spoke, her stomach gave off a sharp growl.

"When was the last time you ate?"

She frowned.

"Can't remember, can you? That's no good. You stay here, I'll bring you your breakfast."

"No, I'll come too. We'll do it together."
Once they were in the kitchen, it was barely a moment before she'd scrambled up onto the counter and retrieved the phone from where he'd thrown it. She danced away when he tried to snatch it from her, and her laugh was worth being denied. He made no more attempt to stop her, and burrowed into the refrigerator. While he assembled a big skilletful of eggs and sausages, Buffy made her call. He hadn't heard the sisters sound so girlish and excited together since before Buffy's death—Dawn's voice was a happy buzzing out of the mobile's tiny speaker, otherwise incomprehensible to him over the spitting of the fry-up. Buffy wandered away as she talked, into the sitting room, but a minute or so later she came back, still talking—it sounded like she was on with Xander now—and came to stand behind him as he worked at the stove, resting a hand on his waist. She said, "Spike can't quite believe he's connected with so much happiness. He's not used to making anyone happy."

He realized this was true. There had been a kind of happiness, cruel and sharp, that he'd shared with Dru, when things were going their way and she was being kind to him. But it wasn't a feeling he'd been nostalgic for, since receiving his soul. To find the last happiness he'd really known as such, other than his fierce sacrifice in Sunnydale, he had to cast back to the days when he'd been a student, before his mother took sick, before he ever saw Miss Cecily Addams. And he hadn't made either of those ladies happy, in the end, at all.

"I need to go now," Buffy said into the phone. "Spike's cooking my breakfast." There was something in the way she said this last sentence, something sweet, a little surprised, a little smug, that got to him with a whooomph. He turned to her, and she reached up to encircle his neck, to kiss him, with a smoothness as if they'd practised it together over and over. She held his head in her hands, drawing him down to press her lips against his temples. "All's well in there?" she whispered. "Everything more or less right side up again?"

"More or less. Don't let me burn these eggs."

She stepped back. He slipped the whole mess sizzling from the pan onto a plate. Poured out coffee, sat her down. She began to eat, ignoring the flatware, using her hand. Bringing his own chair close beside her, he caught it, sucked her greasy fingers into his mouth.

"There's blood for you in the fridge."

"Am I botherin' you?"

"No." Laughing, she began to eat instead with the other. Still sucking her fingers, Spike gathered her across into his lap. She settled against him with a little sigh, still working on the food as he caressed her, teasing her breasts until the nipples were tight, petting her flanks and belly with slow appreciative strokes.

"Are you trying to drive me crazy?" she said.

"Could eat you up."

"You could. I'd like it." She turned to look at him then, her eyes wide and serious. "Am I bringing this up too soon?"

"N-no."

"Spike, you don't have to. But I want you to know, you can. If it would feel good to you. If you want me that way."

He'd have blushed if he had the blood. "Noted."

"Now don't you be shy about it. I won't bring it up again until you do." She broke a sausage with her
thumb thumbnail, fed him a piece. He ran a hand across her thigh, cupped her sex. She spread her legs, still scooping bits of egg from the plate to her mouth, even as he explored her with his fingers. Her clit was hard within its soft curly pooch; he ran a digit through the bacon grease on her plate and brought it back to roll against the taut flesh. Buffy laughed again, wiggling, reaching for him. He was wearing a towel looped around his waist; his hardening cock was trapped beneath it, against her ass. "I think," she confided, "that I ought to be fucked."

"Do you?"

"As long as I'm sitting here. Yes, I do."

He lifted her up by the waist; she pulled the towel away, rolling the crown of his prick between the greasy tips of her fingers, giving it an exquisite tug before she guided it to the mouth of her cunt, and sank slowly down, squeezing and relaxing, wiggling, leaning back against him so he took her weight on his chest, her tangle of hair brushing deliciously over his bare skin.

"Christ. Christ."

"You like that?"

"Your cunny. Yeah. Christ. Like your cunny."

She turned her head, and they were kissing. He strummed her tight clit, the motion making her clench him harder, a tense rhythmic milking that he had to bite his tongue to withstand.

"My beautiful Spike." She whispered the words against his lips, feeding him. "My sweetheart. My sweet man. My husband."

He spent with a long shudder.

After that there were some hours that melded for her into a volcanic physical meltdown, their passion flaring up into the kind of propulsive heat she remembered from their sessions in his old crypt, when they'd grapple and grab and struggle together as if the great need was to climb inside each other's bodies. They were on the floor in the study, where Giles' threadbare old Persian rugs were piled three or four thick. Spike had her screwed to the floor, her legs opened wide and high, grinding and swiveling into her, a tight sharp pumping barrage that rubbed up her arousal into an almost unbearable abrasive urge. When she wasn't gnawing on whatever part of him she could reach, she heard herself groaning and crying out as if the sounds came from somewhere else. When she caught sight of his face, his eyes were gold, staring through her. Language had left them, crowded out by propulsive force. She twisted beneath him, around him, meeting each of his thrusts with a tight inner wringing; he made a noise as he fucked her like a wolf, like she imagined a wolf would sound, covering a bitch. Sweat covered her as if she'd been dipped; ticklish rivulets running down her flanks, into her armpits, seeping through her hair. Her face was awash with sweat and tears; Spike didn't so much kiss her as sip her, she felt his teeth along her cheeks, her jaw, against her mouth. Each place he touched her burned and itched, aflame with need. The rugs bunched up under back, scratchy and burning.

Later she couldn't remember how they'd gotten there, but they were back in bed, wreathed in silence except for the dripping of water from the eaves and gutters, and her own ragged breathing. Spike was wrapped around her, his body still cool and dry despite his exertions, his cock still hard, pressed into the sore seam of her. She sobbed a little, from exhaustion and the inexhaustability of their desire. Gratitude beat through her with her pulse. Her body ached, she was tender between her legs, and yet
she didn't want him to stop touching her. She realized that her wrists, where he'd held her down, were braceleted with darkening bruises.

She showed them to him. "You know I belong to you." She was glad he knew it, that he didn't hold back. "I love being a cunt for you. I love being your fuck." She'd never spoken this way to him; the words sparked a light in his eyes. He took her hands in his, kissed the palms and the rings of bruising with an opposite, apposite delicacy.

"An' I love bein' your big hard cock."

She snuggled closer, and they lay listening to the silence.

After a while, Spike said, "Rain's stopped. Can feel the moonlight."

Without discussion, they rose, dressed. Went out into the last quadrant of night, ostensibly to patrol for any late, hungry, rain-averse demons, but really to walk down the center of the quiet streets, hand in hand, looking up at the emergent stars, breathing the fresh wet air. Everything was closed and sleeping, and there was no one, alive or undead, outdoors except for them.

"Bath's a pretty town, but too quiet."

"I guess that's what Giles likes about it."

"Ever been to Paris, Slayer?"

"You know I haven't."

"Will take you there, for our honeymoon. Maybe, if you like it, we can stay a bit. Plenty of work there for the likes of us, I reckon."

"You're taking me on a honeymoon? To Paris?"

"Didn't I just say?"

"I keep thinking maybe this is a dream. A wonderful dream."

They paused by a low stone wall, ringing a wooded square. Spike drew her into his arms. "We're wide awake."

She leaned against him. The wind played with her hair. He stroked it down, tangling his fingers in it.


There was some relief in kissing, for the overfullness of her feelings, kisses that brought the tears welling up.

"It's been hard for you," Spike said, "but I'll make things good for you yet awhile. You'll see, pet. Gonna make you so happy."

"I am happy. It wasn't that hard ... you were there."

"All those crazy shards of me."

"I liked them all. You were so full of surprises." She raised her face, showed him her smile. "All that poetry. All that gentleness. And Arabic. And I learned your true name. I think in a way, we met for the first time. I liked everything about you. I even liked ... it was kind of good, getting to talk to old-school Spike again, for a little while."
"He beat you up."

"I let that happen. I had my reasons, I know you understand why."

"I know, yeah. Poor girl, wantin' to be good to the likes of me."

"It's all your tenderness that makes it so amazing when ... when this happens." She held up her bruised wrist. "I need both. I'm so lucky, I get both."

They kissed some more. On the far side of the square, a dog barked, and the wind went calm.

"How shall I marry you? Would you like to do it at the castle?"

"Could we? And then everyone can be there. Do you ... do you have anyone you want to invite?" She felt herself blushing. "I'm sorry. Your friends ... your friends are gone."

"They are. I'll make do with yours. Willow an' the Bit are my good friends. When can we do it?"

"I need to find something to wear. And ... make a few arrangements. You know. Ten days?"

"Suits me."

She smiled. "Suits me, Mrs Pratt."

"Always hated that name."

"It's a perfectly good name. William Henry Pratt. Buffy Anne Summers Pratt. I like it fine." She squeezed his hand. "You were the one, a few weeks ago, who didn't want to be Spike. You shaved off your yellow hair, and changed your clothes, and wanted to be known by your real name."

"Yeah."

"Did you change back only for me? Because I want you to know, I don't require you to look and act a certain way, if it doesn't fit you anymore."

"I know it. Nah, I did it for myself. Comfortable with it."

"You were very uncomfortable, when ... when you saw yourself. When you realized what you are."

"Yeah. Well, there's always a bit of me feels the horror of it. Bein' undead, all those crimes on me. But at the same time ... I wouldn't trade it away."

"Like Angel wanted to."

"Right. I'm not like Angel. He signed away his last chance for that sans-shoe, a few days before he went down. He thought maybe the gift would pass to me, if I survived, but I wouldn't have wanted it."

She pondered. "Why? Because you think you couldn't be good for me, if you were a live man?"

"Everythin's about you," he teased.

"Okay. Okay!"

"Well, it is that, a bit. Strength, an' a kind of freedom. An' I wasn't a happy fellow, when I was alive. Not much there I'm nostalgic for." He sniffed the air. "Be gettin' light soon. Let's go back. We're
both hungry, too."

It was raining again a week later. Sitting in the window of a coffee bar in Chelsea, Spike waited. London rain always made him think of his first months as a vampire, when he always seemed to be out skulking in filthy weather, bruised from Angelus' fists, hungry because he was still learning the proper way to hunt and not be caught out. He'd stopped dressing like a gentleman, changed his accent, tried to act like he'd always been a tough from some rough district like the Borough, even though Angelus and Darla mocked him for his pretence. He'd hated that they knew anything about him, even though they'd made him. Wanted to bury his human past as deep as it would go.

All kinds of memories had surfaced since the encounter with Illyria that cleared his disordered mind. Things he hadn't thought of in a hundred years came back to him, as if called in from the far corners of distant dimensions where she'd scattered his wits with her time-bending tricks. He was ready to share some of it with Buffy. It only remained to do what he'd planned this evening.

Willow and Xander materialized on the other side of the glass, beneath the awning. She gave him a little wave, as if this was a random meeting. When they came in, Willow stepped right up to him and folded him in her arms. "I am so glad for you, Spike. Congratulations! Didn't I tell you it would be okay if you just followed your heart?"

"You did."

"Darn tootin'."

He glanced at Xander, from whom he still didn't expect much. That Harris had come to his summons was by no means to be taken for granted, so he was surprised when he offered to shake hands, and seconded the congratulations. "What are we here for that's secret from Buffy? If it's about planning a bridal shower, we could've done that from the castle."

"Asked you both here because we're goin' to see my solicitor."

"You have a solicitor?" Willow said. "How can a vampire have a solicitor?"

"Brabant an' Company have always handled things for the Aurelian line. They're an old old firm."

Xander said, "What things?" He was frowning again, after his initial softening.

"Property. Wills. That's what I'm up to tonight. Need to make some arrangements, an' I want you to know 'em, an' be my witnesses. Let's go, they're just round the corner."

They followed him out into the early-evening stream of passersby. Despite the rain, the high street was busy with people doing errands on their way home from work. Willow conjured a big black umbrella for her and Xander. Spike just flipped up the collar of the coat, and hastened. He hadn't been to this address since soon after the Second World War, but the quiet square of late 18th century houses was substantially unchanged, as was the light glamour that cloaked the facade of Brabant & Company, to conceal it from the notice of ordinary humans. Willow let out a little grunt of surprise and appreciation when she perceived the magic; Xander seemed bewildered about why they were turning in at a spot that he clearly didn't perceive at all.

The clerk who received them was the same fresh-faced young man in a tailored grey suit who'd opened the door to him and Drusilla in 1946. "Sir. Come in, sir."

"I don't like this," Xander muttered. "Why isn't Buffy with us, anyway?"
"Gonna tell her all about it later tonight. They wouldn't let the slayer in here, anyhow, no matter how I vouched for her."

Xander bridled. "They wouldn't—"

Willow hushed him. "They're all vampires here," she murmured. "But we're not in any danger. Are we, Spike?"

"This place is all business. They don't feed on the premises."

Willow nodded. "I guess there's something to be said for continuity across generations, in a firm of solicitors."

"That's their specialty. The affairs of old families, both undead an' human. Brabant's been lookin' after the Aurelians since the Master was a young 'un."

They were ushered into a study, the walls lined in ledgers, books, and document boxes with marbelized fronts. The heavy drapes were drawn against the night, coals glowed in the grate. The Brabant behind the desk was also the same one Spike had met before. They exchanged greetings, introductions. Xander was still hinky as a wet cat. Willow looked fascinated.

Old Brabant steepled his fingers. "Well, William The Bloody. You've changed your circumstances since last we met."

"A bit, yeah. Still an Aurelian, though, soul or no."

"Of course. I wasn't suggesting otherwise." His answer was completely smooth, level, and yet Spike knew the old demon must be repressing some shudder of disgust at the idea of his soul. Not that he cared. "I have your letter here. I understand you are contemplating an alliance."

"I'm gettin' married. To the slayer. Buffy Summers. You know about her."

"We do keep track of these things, yes." Brabant had queer milky eyes, and blinked them very slowly. If he was curious about how it came to be that William the Bloody was announcing his intention to marry a vampire slayer, he didn't betray it.

"Then you also know that Darla an' Angelus are no more."

"You're the head of the family, now, indeed." Brabant tapped his pale fingers together. "Miss Drusilla—"

"Miss Drusilla an' me have parted ways. I'm not responsible for her any more."

"I was going to say that Miss Drusilla has not drawn on her account in a long time. We've been unable to trace her. The requisite time hasn't yet elapsed to declare her no more, but it's likely. Of course, due to her ... eccentricities ... she was never in line to be head of the house."

"Don't know anything about her whereabouts, an' I'm not likely to. Don't need to touch what's hers, in order to provide for my new wife."

"Of course not." Brabant leaned forward. "In what sense will be you taking this 'wife'? A conventional turning, of course, entails—"

Xander jumped up. "Turning!"

"Settle down, Harris." To the lawyer, he said, "You know I'm not proposing to turn the girl. Taking
her round to the registry office to marry her like a regular fellow, in front of her friends."

"You're not a regular fellow," Xander said. "Buffy's not really going to be married in the legal sense, not to you—you're dead."

"Know that. Which is why we're here." He turned back to the solicitor. "I'm claimin' my portion of Darla an' Angelus's estates. Want to give all the income to Buffy, for her to draw on all her life an' be able to pass on as she likes. An' for my own, want to make a will, so she or her children will have it if an' when I go to dust. There won't be any Aurelians to provision after me. Not makin' more. I'll be the last."

Brabant nodded. If any of this astonished him, he wasn't showing it, but then he was paid, and very well, to be unastonishable. He rose and excused himself, leaving the three of them alone with the soft crackling of the coals.

Willow was shaking her head. "I can't believe you have money. You've had money all along? Then why did you—"

"I always preferred gettin' along on my wits to drawing on my allowance like a bloody ponce."

Another thing Darla and Angelus used to mock him for—they'd always been happy to pay cash for their comforts—warm rooms, fancy clothes, wine, horses—if they could be had no easier way, whereas he'd relished the underground shadowy existence. The freedom of not pretending to be anything else than a demon.

"Where does this money come from?" Xander asked.

"Where does any old family fortune come from? Comes of grubbing round in low places, exploitation and theft. But it's been ours for hundreds an' hundreds of years, an' now it'll be put to good use, lookin' after Buffy."

"She's not going to take demon lucre," Xander blurted.

Willow said, "If you always had access to money, why didn't you help her when she needed it back in Sunnydale?"

"How d'you know I didn't try?"

"I ... oh. I guess I don't."

"Offered, 'course I did, but she insisted on going her own way then. Wouldn't even listen." He pouted. "'Course she was right. At the time."

"How much money are we talking about here?" Xander said.

"Not the king's ransom, but enough for her to have a proper home an' nice things about her. Enough so she needn't take the Council's shilling."

"What do you have against the Council? We're the Council."

"She can suit herself there," Spike said. "Just sayin', she'll be free to choose."

"See," Xander complained, "I knew this was fishy. He's trying to separate her from her friends. Just like always."

"Uh, if that's true," Willow said, "Why'd he ask us to come here? I think it's perfectly natural that
Buffy and Spike don't want to start married life at Saint Trinian's."

Xander looked blank at this; Spike laughed. "That's about it. Buffy's always been a oner. Don't think she really fancies bein' part of the pack. Even though she's the queen of it. An' she wants her own house. Think she's missed that."

Brabant came back into the room then, with a long wide brass box under his arm. "My clerk will be in shortly with drafts of the documents you requested. Meanwhile, your letter also mentioned that you wished to review the items you keep with us on deposit. A gift for your bride?"

"That's about it."

The lawyer set the box down on a round table in the corner, with a velvet cloth, and switched on a lamp.

Spike slid the cover up. Suddenly he wasn't so sure this was a good idea.

Xander said, "What's in there? Your trophies?"

"Not trophies. Things I took from ... when I left home." He hadn't looked in this box since the first time he'd been here, with Darla and Angelus, just a few days after he'd been turned. It was Darla who had persuaded him to leave the things at Brabant's for safe-keeping, rather than traveling with them, and once done, he'd hardened his heart against the impulse that had led to his taking anything out of his mother's house in the first place.

He was very much aware of Xander and Willow's attention as he lifted out the box's contents. Packets of letters wrapped in ribbon, photographs in frames. Some books. A gold pocket watch wrapped up in felt. A silver rattle, tarnished black. A leather jewelry case. He'd brought all these things out of the house after he'd staked his mother, prompted by Drusilla who told him that once he crossed the threshold, he'd never be able to go back in.

The catch on the leather case stuck; he fumbled with it.

"Let me," Willow said. She said a couple backwards-sounding words, and the box opened easily. She gasped. "Oh my God. This is ... treasure."

The jewelry, so long unseen, struck him as lustreless, disappointing. He'd somehow expected that the sight of it would summon up the essence of his mother when she was whole, and wholly herself, her sweetness and devotion. That it would connect him to her, carry her forward into this new association he was about to make. But it was just lay there, dull, reproachful, reminding him of his own foolishness and mistakes.

"Can I?" Willow asked, reaching to touch. "Are you going to give all this to Buffy?"

"Not ... not all. Most of this isn't her style. There ought to be some rings, though, will need those. And then I thought ... you'd help me see if there's ... perhaps she'd fancy the pearls." He found himself unwilling to touch anything, but Willow was reverently lifting the pieces out, ear bobs and brooches first, then, in the compartment underneath, bracelets and necklaces. The rings he was thinking of were at the very bottom, knotted into a thin handkerchief with his mother's initials embroidered on the corner by her own hand. She'd never taken them off in life, but she'd removed them when she rose up, undead; it was Dru who had come across them lying on the mantelpiece in her room when it was all over, and she'd been prowling about the house. It only occurred to him now to wonder why his mother had left them off, and why Dru had neither begged them from him or appropriated them without asking. Perhaps she simply hadn't fancied them, or what they symbolized.
It was stupid to think she'd somehow known they were eventually to belong to someone else.

Spike unpicked the knot, and there they were: a narrow plain gold band, and a ruby in a plain gold setting. His father had been relatively poor when he gave these; later in life, when he'd prospered more, he'd given his wife better jewels. But she'd never wanted any other rings than these.

Spike said, "Maybe Buffy would prefer a diamond."

"This is your mother's engagement ring. Her wedding ring?" Willow said. "I think Buffy will be very proud to wear these. Not that ... not that I'm trying to talk her out of having a diamond. Don't tell her I persuaded you not to get a diamond!"

Spike smiled. "I'll keep schtum about that, don't worry."

Xander was examining a jet brooch. "Is this—it looks like there's hair beneath this crystal."

"My father had that made from my sisters' hair, when they died. But my mother seldom wore it. Didn't like to be reminded."

"You lost two sisters?"

"They died when I was an infant, from scarlet fever. Grew up by myself." He took the brooch from his hand. "Buffy wouldn't like this fusty stuff." He glanced at Willow. "What do you think about the pearl choker, for a wedding present? Or these gold pieces?" His throat had gone tight and painful; the necklace and earrings Willow held were the ones his mother had worn nearly every day, in the last three years of her life. He'd bought them for her himself, six months after her husband's death put him in possession of the Pratt family estate. At the time he'd thought she would go out into society, marry again, but it wasn't long afterwards that she took sick.

"These are very nice. The pearls are wonderful, for special occasions, but the gold—yes, I could see Buffy wearing these all the time."

He wondered if he could see it, if he could bear to. He glanced up; Willow was completely focused on the baubles, but Xander was looking at him, a quiet regard that penetrated.

Quietly, he said, "Or you could sell the whole lot and get her something new, something that's just hers."

Spike felt a throb of gratitude, that Harris, Harris of all people, understood his struggle. But the suggestion brought his ideas into line. Sell all of it? He couldn't do that. Not after having preserved it for so long. Not when he considered how his mother—his real mother, not the demon he'd caused to infect her—would've been so proud of him. For his journey back to his soul, to his love. He couldn't introduce her to Buffy, but he could connect these two women, the supreme women of his life, with this gift.

"The gold for Buffy's bride-gift, yeah, that'll do." He glanced over the rest, his eyes alighting on a pair of garnet ear-bobs. "An' these for the Bit." He slipped them into his pocket. "Leave the rest for now."

Brabant returned then, followed by his clerk bearing print-outs of the long legal documents.

Angel and Darla had left behind considerable nest-eggs, the income from which would, as he'd hoped, provision Buffy for a comfortable life. Willow, glancing over his shoulder as he inspected the papers, let out a little whistle.
"You never thought I'd bring more to this marriage than my good looks, did you?" Spike said. "You approve? Satisfied that I'll take care of your friend as she deserves?"

"I think Buffy will be floored."

"It's only right, isn't it Harris, that the demon lucre should go to the slayer in the end? That's justice, isn't it?"

"I guess so," Xander said.

"She'll be free now, to agree or disagree with Rupert an' you lot, however she sees fit. An' never be in such a corner again that she's forced to grub away at somethin' she hates."

When the documents were perfect, they followed the old lawyer into a different room to sign and witness them. Along with the clerk who administered the pens, there was a mage who performed a simple spell, pressing two small flat clear jewels to the base of Spike's throat as he chanted. The jewels began to glow.

The mage handed one jewel to the clerk, who affixed it with melted wax to the bottom of the will, and the other to Spike, who put it in his pocket with the rings.

"What's that do?" Xander said.

Willow answered. "It provides proof of death. When ... if ... Spike dusts, the glow will die, and then the will can be executed."

"Right," Spike said. "Buffy won't be left to wonder, should anythin' happen to me when she's not there to see it with her own eyes."

As they left the lawyer's premises, the clerk met them at the door with a case. "The things you wanted to bring away are here. The remainder were returned to your lock box."

Willow unfurled the big umbrella. The rain was still coming down in gusts. "Thanks for including us in this."

"Yeah," Xander said. "It means a lot, to see you taking this so seriously."

"Never been nothing but serious about the slayer."

"Right," Xander said. "We know. But this ... this is a whole other kind of serious." He frowned. "You're not gonna make the mistake I made, right?"

"Gonna marry the girl, an' stick by her."

Willow's glance grew nervous. "No one doubts that. Xander ... you don't really doubt that."

"S'all right," Spike said. "Harris just wonders sometimes how he slipped up himself, yeah? But he'll get another chance to nail it. You will, you know."

"Will I?"

"S'early days," Spike said, smiling. Relief was coursing through him, making possible all things, including compassion for Xander. "Look, I was supposed to meet our girl at the station for train back to Bath, why don't you lot come with me an' we'll all have a drink? Expect she'd like to have you there, when I give her this ring."
"You're going to do that tonight?" Willow's eyes lit up.

"No time like the present. Don't say anything about the necklace an' the earrings—those I'm keepin' for our wedding day."

"What are you guys doing here? What's up?" Buffy leapt up from her bench when she saw them. "Please tell me there isn't some new bad breaking out—the wedding is the day after tomorrow!" She wielded her bouquet of shopping bags to ward off trouble.

"No bad. We came to help Spike with some stuff."

"Stuff, Xander? What stuff?"

Willow couldn't remember the last time she'd seen Buffy so twinkle. In the midst of the dreary lighting in Paddington, the litter, low-flying pigeons, blaring advertisements, she shone like a movie star, and barely had eyes for either of them, so fixed was she on Spike.

"Business, pet. I'll tell you about it. Thought we'd all get a drink."

He tucked her under one arm; Xander and Willow grabbed the bags, and followed them out of the concourse and around the corner. They passed the pubs overflowing with inebriated business types, and turned in at a quiet doorway that gave onto a flight of stairs up to a quiet wine bar on the second floor. Willow could only conclude that Spike had found it by following his nose, but he made it seem like he knew every bit of London as if he'd never left it.

When they were settled into a cozy back booth with the shopping bags stashed under the table, and glasses in front of them, Buffy tugged at Spike's sleeve. "What's this 'business' that you're all plotting behind my back?"

"Family stuff."

"Family? Whose family?"

"Mine. Ours, to be."

She stared at him, bemused, a little apprehensive, completely focused. Willow held back her urge to blurt out the whole story of their evening herself, to reassure Buffy that everything was okay.

Spike reached into the case he'd brought away from the solicitor's. "Have a few things to show you. Startin' with this."

She took the flat wooden box he held out, but didn't look away from his face. "What is this?"

"I was lucky, I knew your dear mum, an' can think maybe she'd have welcomed me as her son if she'd lived to see us now. You can never meet mine, only ...."

Buffy's eyes went wide. She opened the box—it was, Willow saw then, a hinged picture case, about four by five, containing two shadowy collodian prints. Willow released a little ball of light from her finger's ends, to hover over Buffy's head, so they could see better. One picture showed a woman seated, a young man standing beside her, both swathed up to their chins in the composed elaborate costumes worn by prosperous people in the 1870s. In the other picture, the man posed alone, seated in the same chair, legs stiffly crossed.
Buffy said, "This is your mother? Wow ...."

The only inkling they'd ever had that Spike had a mother, a human past, was when they'd been trying to de-activate The First's trigger, and then all they'd heard about it was that there was a little song she'd sung to him. It seemed unlikely that Spike had told Buffy more than that, and Willow knew it was even more unlikely that she'd asked.

"And who is ... oh my God. Spike, is this you?" For a second Willow was afraid that she was going to laugh—it was possible to find the images funny, so earnest were they, completely devoid of irony, completely removed from the relaxed informal present. Laughter would be a disaster. But Buffy didn't; she shifted closer to Spike, pressing in against his side, holding the pictures up to the light, comparing them to his face hovering beside her. "This is you. I see it now, but I don't think I'd have recognized ... and your mother was lovely." She gave the pictures her minute attention. "So this is the real William Pratt. I guess I'm not so surprised now, having met him recently." She smiled at Spike. "You sure kept him under wraps. I'd never have guessed before, that this could be you." She glanced up at Xander. "Would you have guessed?"

"I would not." Xander played along good-naturedly. Buffy tore her gaze from the images. "Where did this come from?"

"I've kept a cache of old things, at my solicitor's."

She reacted the same way Willow had to the word solicitor, laughing as if it must naturally be a joke. But Spike told her about it, describing the business he'd transacted that evening, the financial arrangements he'd made for her. Buffy listened, open-mouthed, casting looks at Willow and Xander for confirmation.

"Don't want to hear any nonsense about refusin' it, either. It's right that the money should pass from vampires to the slayer. Most of the money was Angel's, since Darla died. An' he'd have wanted you to have it."

To Willow's surprise, Buffy nodded. "He offered to help me, when ... when I met with him, after they brought me back. I wouldn't take anything, and he told me I was being a fool. I never thought about where Angel's money came from. This is kind of amazing. It never occurred to me that you had anything ... I thought you just stole."

"Well yeah, I mostly did. Was too proud to spend such easy money—my Aurelian birthright. But all that's from before I got my soul. You really thought I'd ask you to be my wife, an' bring nothin' to you?"

"Nothing? What nothing? I'm going to have you." Buffy looked to be on the verge of tears, but she smiled, and prodded him. "Anyway, you're a pretty cheap date. Most of the time I don't even need to get you liquored up to get a good time out of you."

"Whoa," Xander murmured, "Verging on TMI."

"Spike knows what I mean."

"We all know what you mean."

"Wasn't goin' to marry you an' not provide for you. Hard an' dangerous your life is, but I'm here to make sure you're never in want, an' never lonely."

At that Buffy did begin to cry, and she was still crying when Spike took the little ruby ring from his pocket, and slipped it onto her hand.
"What—what is this? Oh my God. Spike?" She held it up in the light, turning it this way and that so the stone glimmered. "Is this my engagement ring?"

"If you like it. Was my mum's. They went in for colored stones in her day."

"If I like it! Oh Spike!" She took him in her arms; they sank back against the banquette, absorbed in wordless but not silent communion.

Willow caught Xander's eye, and they grinned at each other. "This time I had nothing to do with it," Willow mouthed.

"At least she's not talking about 'The Wind Beneath my Wings'."

That brought Buffy's attention back. "I hate that song! No, really! This wedding isn't going to be cheesy. Is it? No cheese!"

"You like cheese," Willow said.

"Well, cheese to eat. There could be a cheese platter. But no ... no cringe-worthy moments. We're going to keep it simple, right?" She glanced anxiously at Spike. "You prefer simple? What are you going to wear? I bought all my things today."

"Guessed as much. Lots of bags there."

"You can't see any of it. Not until I have it on."

"Wasn't gonna try."

"Please tell me you're not going to wear these clothes at the wedding. Not that there's anything wrong with ... I like you however you are."

"Thought we'd stand up before all assembled an' say our vows naked. Like Adam an' Eve, yeah?"

Buffy went still and glassy. It was all Willow could do to repress her guffaw; Buffy clearly didn't spot the joke in Spike's tone, in his tender glance.

"I think ... do you really? ... it might embarrass some people. Not me! The guests ... But if that's what you really want ...."

"You really would," Spike chuckled, bringing her hand to his lips. "You good girl. You really would, if I asked you to."

"I—Oh. You're not serious."

"To deprive you of your bridal finery? Not a bit of it. Anyway, would spoil my pleasure in takin' it off you later on."

"And we're back in TMI-land," Xander said.

"I love this ring. I love it." She held it up to admire some more. "This is just ... I'm kind of overwhelmed. I didn't expect any of this. When were these photos taken? What was your mother's name?"

"Eighteen seventy-seven. Anne Frances Witkins Pratt. She'd have been taken with you, Buffy."

"You think? She looks kind of ... she's awfully proper. She probably would've thought I was fast. A
hussy. Maybe even a bad influence."

"She was a lady. But not a stick. She'd have been delighted with you."

"I'm more interested in whether she was delighted with you. Did you get along? Were you close?"

"Close, yeah. Close as could be, 'til we died."

"You—wait. You and your mother died at the same time?"

Spike shifted uneasily. "Wasn't sure if you knew the story, if Robin Wood told you."

"Robin?" Buffy's eyes narrowed. "After he and Giles tricked us both and tried to kill you, we stopped chatting. What might he have told me?"

"That I turned her."

Xander looked a little sick. Spike twisted his glass in his hand. His admission had such an air of inevitability about it, Willow wondered that this had never occurred to her before. Wasn't that what vampires were always supposed to do? They went after their families first.

"Guess I've spoiled the mood here."

Buffy was grave, but she put a hand on Spike's, drew his fingers away from fiddling with his glass, and held them. "I'll say when the mood's spoiled."

"Yeah, well. Was time you knew. Don't want to keep secrets from you, if we're to be together."

"Okay. I'm listening."

"She was a sweet creature, the best of mothers, we were devoted to each other. Wanted to share all my new power with her. She was ill, an' I thought if I made her to be like me, she'd be strong an' well and we'd be together forever. Only it didn't work out like I'd imagined ... the demon wasn't her at all. The demon was the opposite of all she was in life. Dishonored an' defiled her, letting that loose in her body." He paused. "She was the only vampire I ever made. Never wanted to repeat the experience."

"So what happened?" Intrigued, Willow leaned forward.

He twisted his hand from Buffy's. "Staked her same night as she rose."

Buffy leaned back, sighed. "Now you've told me this, am I supposed to shriek and toss the ring back in your face? Is this the one thing too far that's supposed to make me reject you? Oh my God, I'm engaged to a vampire!"

Spike looked flummoxed.

"I mean—I get that you want me—us—to know the truth. But I'm not keeping score on your undead past, Spike. You have your soul, you died to save the world, you atone every day, yadda yadda yadda. I'm much more interested in what you and your mother were like in life. And I think that's what you're more interested in too. Which is why you've shared these pictures, and given me her beautiful ruby. You wanted me to know something of her, and how she died is the least important thing."

Willow could forget, often, that Buffy was more than fighting chops and quips and occasional "blonde" remarks. She could also be incredibly sensitive, astute, and breathtakingly loving. It was
plain, from how Spike's expression broke, that she'd surprised him too.

"That's right, pet. Thanks." He gathered up her hand, pressed the palm reverently to his mouth. Buffy's own mouth wobbled; her gaze was fixed intensely on her hand in Spike's, on the winking jewel.

Xander slapped his thighs. "This has been both fascinating and fun, but I've got a training session with eight girls that starts in precisely eight hours. Time to beam me up."

Willow glanced at her watch. "You guys missed your train. I could drop you—"

"No!" Buffy waved her hands. "I mean—thanks, but really, it's fine, we can get a room here in town. Right, Spike? Maybe you could take my packages back to the castle, though."

To Spike's look, Xander said, "Teleporting makes her barf."

"Ah. Well, let's not do it, then. Actually, there's a last train to Bath goes at 12:15. Slow one, but we're in no rush, are we, love?"

"No rush at all. All we've got to do for the rest of tonight is snuggle."

As Spike slept, Buffy sat up in Giles' bed—their last day there—and pored through the letters and keepsakes Spike had brought in the leather case from Brabant and Company. She marveled at her own interest in these old things—she'd never been a big fan of things more obscure than black & white screwball comedies on late night TV. Now she was reading the love letters exchanged by Spike's parents during their engagement in 1843, handwriting in neat copperplate, brown ink on crisp sheets, with the same compulsive attention she paid to the new weekly issue of Heat. His own letters to his mother, written from Cambridge, full of references to poetry, to friends designated only by their initials, to certain teachers and lectures attended and birds seen while punting on the Cam, filled her with wonder and mystery—it was a world she didn't really identify with, more of a Giles kind of world—but the sheer ordinariness of it floored her. Spike, her demon lover, her night creature, her great warrior, had once been a mild young man who covered his sandy curls with a boater hat in the summer months (there was a photo of him, posed on the river bank with two friends and their punt poles) and wrote poems that he sent to his mother (though there wasn't a scrap of his poetry amongst the papers—had it been destroyed or was Spike keeping it from her on purpose? There were other letters, exhaustive diary-like descriptions of walking tours through the Lake District, and in Cornwall, chockful of detailed descriptions of scenery (she skipped those), and vague lonely romantic longings, and after college, the grand tour through Europe with a friend referred to only as F. Anne had kept every scrap from her son's hand, the letters arranged in order, bound in ribbons. A few of her own replies were mixed in—William had apparently been more careless about keeping his mother's letters—and reading these made Buffy's eyes smart, plunging her into memories of Joyce, with whom she'd never had the opportunity to write exchange letters. She was almost sad that people didn't do that anymore.

She looked over and over at the few photographs. Spike's face never seemed less odd, staring out of them, in those strange clothes and hair. She fingered the ring he'd given her, thinking of questions she wanted to ask, recalling the glimpses she'd had, during his amnesia, of the more Williamish layers of his personality.

As she retied the ribbon on one packet of letters, she noticed he was gazing at her from his pillow.

"Good morning, sweetheart."
"How studious you are. There's no quiz, you know."

"Have you been watching me a long time? I thought you were fast asleep."

"I love watchin' you. It's sheer heaven to me, lyin' beside you, looking at you. Breathing you in."

The compliment made her tingle, flush. Spike put a hand up, cupped her bare breast, rubbed a thumb over the nipple.

"Now you've read those, you see what a silly milksop of a mamma's boy I was."

"You two were very good friends."

"Poor lady ... was a sad sort of life, really. Lost her little girls, widowed too young. She was consumptive the last few years, we both knew she hadn't long to live, an' her dearest wish was to see me married and to hold a grandchild in her arms, but I was too much of a bloody mooncalf to see to that."

"Why?"

"Set my sights too high. Loved a lady who was too haughty to look at me. Never gave a thought to any of the girls I could've had, though there must've been plenty."

"Well, I'm sorry. But not that sorry. I don't like to think of you having been married before."

"Come here, Buffy." He sat up. She gathered up the letters and pictures and stowed them carefully back in the bag, then moved into his waiting arms. Spike was quiet and rather solemn, and she knew that they weren't about to make love; he was going to talk to her.

"You know I've fixed it so you'll always have money to live on. It's yours, no matter what happens." He reached for something in the drawer on his side of the bed, a small clasp envelope. "In here's a copy of my will. An' this little glowy bit," he shook it out onto his palm, "long as it shines like this, I'm alive. Soon's I dust, it goes dull."

"No dust."

"Hopin' not. But you pay attention. Got this so you'll never be in doubt, since I'll leave no corpse if I'm killed."

"Yes, I see." She took the little jewel in her fingers. "I'd like to wear it against my heart."

"Better to keep it somewhere safe, don't want to lose it. Though they have another just like it at Brabant & Company, if you do. We'll get a deposit box at the bank."

The sight of the crystal, winking in her palm, brought up her tears, that were ever ready these days to flow. "Spike, you can't die again. Not before me. Promise me you won't put me through that again."

"Not if I can help it. Hush. Don't cry. You an' me, we're goin' to work the mission together for a long long time."

"Yes."

"An' keep house, an' enjoy ourselves in our big bed. Yes? Show us a smile, pet."

She lifted her head; he lifted the tears from her eyelashes, sipped them from his fingers.
"Now listen, there's something else. Been thinkin' how to say this. I hope we'll never be parted by anythin' short of death, an' like we just said, that won't be for a long long while. But I want you to know ... should it ever come to pass, that you need somethin' else, somethin' more ... that you're sorry you tied yourself to me ...."

"What? Stop. No. No."

"Buffy, listen—"

"Don't you hear what you're saying? That you wouldn't fight to keep me, if I got some stupid notion in my head to leave you, which hello, is never going to happen? Because you still believe, deep down, that somehow you don't deserve me! Spike!"

"Is that what I'm saying? Don't think that's it. Will you listen, woman?"

"It is! It's how it sounds to me. I'm not going to let go of you, and you'd damn well better never let go of me."

"But if ... one day you might want to be a mum yourself, an' it would be wrong of me to stand in the way of it."

"How would you stand in the way?"

"You know I can't give you a baby. An' even if I could, how'm I fit to be a—"

"You think I'd leave you for that?"

He half-nodded, half shook his head, his eyes taking on that far-away stare that she'd become too familiar with in the weeks of amnesia, when he'd fall back into confusion. She feared he was doing that again now.

"Spike?" She took his face in her hands. He focused on her. "I trust and love you enough to want you for my husband, so why wouldn't I trust and love you enough to raise a kid with you? Not that ... I don't know if I'll ever be ready for a kid. It's never really been on my radar, y'know?" A new thought prodded her. A few minutes ago he'd mentioned how his mother had been denied grandchildren. "Oh ... is that what you want?"

"I'm just sayin' ... don't want to be an obstruction to you ...."

"Sweetheart, I probably wouldn't even be alive today if not for you. How many times have you saved my life?"

"Love takin' care of you. Makes me feel ...."

She leaned into him, foreheads together. "Alive? Spike, you're the most vibrant person I know."

"Just promise me, Buffy, you'll tell me what you want, whatever it is. Never want you to be unhappy."

"I can't promise to never be unhappy. But I'll try ... I'll try to never bottle myself up."

"An' if you get broody, you'll say so."

"Oh God. Yes, I do solemnly swear. But don't hold your breath."

"Got no breath to hold."
"Well, that's convenient."

"There's something else."

"I'm not sure how much more of this I can take." She tried to laugh, but it was more of a sob.

"Think you won't mind takin' this." He drew something else out of the bedstand drawer. "Dunno what your wedding dress is like, but I hope these'll go with it." He opened the square box, to show her an elaborately worked gold necklace, with earrings to match.

"Oh—I've seen these before. In your mother's portrait."

"I gave 'em to her. They're yours now. If you—"

She rushed to cut him off with a smile. "If I like them yes. Yes I do. God, they're gorgeous. Can I wear them now?"

"You're naked, Missus Pratt."

"Does that matter? Can you still fuck me, with your mother's things staring you in the face?" She was already putting on the earrings. "How do they look?"

"Wondrous."

She held up her hair, and he clasped the necklace around her throat. "Like your bride gift?"

She rose and went to the mirror. A shiver took her, seeing the jewelry from the sepia-toned photo on her own body, the old good gold emitting a warm shimmer against her skin. "Very much. Thank you."

Spike followed her; passed his arms around her waist. In the mirror, her hair stirred where he burrowed his nose into it, to press kisses against her ear, down her neck. "Thank you," she repeated. "This is perfect."

His erection prodded her back. She turned to face him, took it in her hand. "I don't have a present for you. I ... I forgot I was supposed to get one."

"Mine's right here." He slid a hand between her thighs, gripped her sex. "You keep it for me."

"I can't believe my sister is getting married, and I can wear whatever I want."

Willow nodded, adding another pin to Dawn's calla lily corsage. "It is kind of disorienting. How's that feel? Secure?" They both glanced in the mirror.

"Yeah, it's fine. It just doesn't feel like a real wedding without a dress the color of a blender drink, and shoes dyed to match."

"This is a real wedding! Stop saying it isn't a real wedding!"

Buffy appeared in the doorway. "You two are supposed to be helping me dress. Don't make me call Xander up here instead."

She stood in the bedroom doorway, hair already done in an updo with strands that floated down around her neck, in her high-heeled shoes and underwear, a bra and panties so tiny and sheer that
Willow, after the initial look, averted her eyes as heat rose to her cheeks.

Dawn grinned. "Buffy—wow."

"I promised I'd be beautiful for him."

"I don't think that's gonna be a problem."

There was a knock at the door. "Slayer! You dressed yet?"

"Spike!" Dawn called. "You're not supposed to see the bride in her dress before the wedding."

"That's why I asked if she's in it yet."

Buffy called out, "Not yet!" She'd gone tense as soon as she heard his voice.

"Lemme in then. Just for a minute."

The women looked at each other; Willow was inclined to send him away—the ceremony was in an hour, and there were things to do—but Buffy gestured at her sister to open the door.

Spike stood there in his usual black jeans and teeshirt. Willow opened her mouth to ask if that was really how he was going to appear at the wedding when he jerked a thumb at her and Dawn. "You two lovelies—out. Come back in fifteen minutes."

"You said one minute."

He raised an eyebrow. "I lied."

Buffy started forward. "Spike, what is it?" She'd gone pale under her sheer glowy make-up. "Is something wrong?"

At sight of her, he froze. A wolfish grin took him over. "Nothing, pet."

Willow plucked Dawn's sleeve. "Let's go. Fifteen minutes."

Spike said, "Make it twenty," and shut the door on their backs.

Buffy's ankles were watery, it was all she could not to stagger on her delicate heels. The sight of him now was piercing, as if they'd been separated for a long long time.

They'd agreed to sleep apart the last night. Buffy had lain alone in bed thinking about Spike, elsewhere in the castle, and much as she tried to focus on their future together, on the high-minded aspects of their mutual mission, she couldn't get the one nagging thought out of her head, of him alone, his hard cock in his hand. She'd come three times against her twisting pinching fingers, picturing him wringing himself out over her.

"Bloody hell, look at you."

"You're not supposed to be looking at me. This is for after the party. What is it, Spike? Is there some —"

"Just couldn't wait 'til after. That's hours away. Need you now."

"Oh Spike ... we can't."
He'd come close to her, crowding, dancing her around so he could back her up to the armchair, tipped her into it. "Spike, we're supposed to be getting ready."

"Tell me to go away." He dropped to his knees before her. "Tell me you don't want me to touch you. Tell me you don't want to stand up in front of all of them in a few minutes' time, still tremblin' an' wet an' flushed from what I'm gonna do to you. How beautiful you are when I've made you come an' come. Want 'em all to see you like that."

"Oh God." She was quivering already, before his cool hands even made contact with her bare legs, parting them, ghosting along the insides of her thighs.

"Need your pussy, love. Can't put it off for later."

"Just don't tear my—I got these things for you. For later."

"Beautiful little nothings they are. Can see you right through 'em."

She arched obediently as he slipped the panties down, leaving them to dangle from one ankle as he leaned in between her legs. "You wanted me too, been consoling yourself," he murmured, his tone rough and tender. "You smell like love."

Her groin was heavy again now, her head swimming as the blood rushed there. "I always want you. Spike—hurry."

"Ssssh. No rush. Oh love, look at your pretty cunny, poutin' at me." He teased the folds of her labia with his fingers, spreading the dewy moisture that was already collecting from inside. "Couldn't stop thinkin' of it. Your delicious little snatch."

"Please. Pleasepleaseplease." She was already half way there, bowled over, helpless, nearly breathless with her own desire. Spike held her hands pinned against her widespread knees; this light restraint stirred her up higher; she mewed.

"Sweetness. Ah, look at this. You're twitchin' for it." He kissed her belly, her thighs; her muscles jerked and rippled. He breathed into her curls, lipping along the crisp edge where they gave way to bare wet flesh. "You're mine, my little wife."

She groaned and thrashed her hips when he tongued her taut clit, surged against his mouth, and dissolved with a harsh cry.

"Yes, all mine. Hot little cunny an' warm little heart an' all."

"Yes. Yes. Yesyesyes." His words seethed in her head. "I'm yours. Fuck me, Spike. Please, now, please. Fuck."

"Thought there was no time."

"I don't care. You have to. You must be aching by now." She tried to reach for him, but he was still holding her wrists down. She could've easily broken his hold, but it was exciting, incredibly exciting, to be ruled by him. Instead she pleaded. She knew he liked that. "Or do you want me to suck you? Your big cock in my mouth. Give me your cock."

He peeled back his flies; the shaft jutted out, curved up towards his belly, the crown bright red. She was free to reach for it, but she went on pretending she couldn't, gripping the chair arms to hold herself back.
"I was thinking about you like this all night. You with a hard-on. Getting yourself off."

"Gonna make you worship that, by the hour, when you're mine."

"I'll worship it now. Put it in my mouth, I want it."

"Not yet." He moved in closer to her, rubbed his erection along the slick channel of her spread labia, the head prodding her clit with each forward motion. "Here's our dance, yeah?"

"Our favorite one."

"Ah, Christ. You're so soft."

"Put it inside."

"Not yet."

She was aware of the minutes slipping by, of her dress hanging up behind the door, of the dewy glow that had broken out over her whole freshly-showered and perfumed body, of her sister and her friend impatient to come back into her rooms, of all the denizens of the castle who were gathering in the big hall below to see her and Spike married. At the same time her attention was completely trained on what was happening right here, the euphoria that tingled all through her, the playfulness of what he was doing, and the intense seriousness of it too, as if this was somehow the ceremony that would marry them together.

Spike leaned in and pressed wet kisses on her nipples through the thin silk that covered them.

"Oh! Ohhh ...."

"Thought I forgot these little darlings?"

She smiled. "We both know you're not so much a tit man."

"Love your pretty tits. I'll make you come, just by kissing them."

"Not now. We don't have time—!"

"In Paris. We'll have all the time we need there. I'll give them such a time, then." He was still rubbing his cock against her, pressing it with his hand so that the big vein and fat spreading head worked the whole length of her clit, tight against the root.

"Are you going to come on my belly?"

The suggestion seemed to please him. "Shall I?"

"Let me touch you now."

"Kiss me first."

"Dawn and Willow are going to come back—!"

"Kiss me on my mouth. Kiss me."

She threw her arms around his neck then, and he buried himself against her, tongue in her mouth, body to body; she felt his cock pulse, and the thick splash of his spending. He was still kissing her as he gathered up his spunk, brought it up to her mouth; she licked it off, until he took his wet fingers
away and brought them back to her cunt. She came again hard as the knocking began.

"One more kiss," she said, even as she was pushing him away. "God Spike, this was crazy! Get out of here!"

"Don't wash. Put on your dress now."

"Out!"

He looked exultant himself, putting his cock away, pulling down his teeshirt. She hauled herself up, retreating into the bedroom again as he let in her two bridesmaids, who scolded him as they shooed him out.

In the mirror she saw the wild just-fucked flush he'd spoken of. There was no time to render herself once more pristine, but she decided that Spike was right, she preferred to appear this way, and wouldn't have undone the last twenty minutes for anything. Panties back on, she was reapplying her lipgloss when Willow came up behind her.

"I guess the groom had some very important last thoughts to impart while you were both still single."

"We ... we really aren't single anymore. I think we're married now."

Willow crooked an eyebrow. "You're a very dirty girl."

Buffy nodded. "It takes one to know one, right?"

"You are so happy," Willow said. It wasn't a question. She pressed a kiss to Buffy's cheek. "Spike's an extraordinarily lucky vampire."

"He's the luckiest vampire in the whole world."

Dawn peered in. "I have your bouquet here. Can I look at you, or am I gonna be too embarrassed?"

"C'mon in, Dawnie. Let's dress the bride." Willow took her gown from the hanger.

"You can look." Buffy began to laugh. "Spike wants everyone to look at me."

Her dress, of a brilliant white silk, was bias-cut to hug her curves down to her feet, sleeveless, with gathers at the bodice where the seams framing her breasts were edged in the narrowest bands of fine burgundy lace, had been a lucky find at an exclusive London boutique—custom-made for a similarly-small woman who'd had second thoughts about her own nuptials. A few alterations had made it hers. As Willow dropped the gathered silk over her head, and it coursed down over her almost bare body, nipples and belly moist, the vee of her thighs still throbbing, Buffy knew she was aglow all over.


"Do I? Oh I wish—" She caught herself. Wishing aloud was never a good idea.

Dawn nodded. "Mom, right?"

"I'd have liked to have her here."

"She knows, Buffy. I think she knows, and she sees us."
The sisters hugged, and with her eyes closed, Buffy could imagine it was Joyce who was holding her.

"It's time," Willow said. "They're all waiting on you."

She followed Willow and Dawn out of her turret rooms, down the stairs towards the great hall where everyone was waiting. Her heart boomed in her chest; her thighs were slippery, and the hand that held the bouquet of dark burgundy callas had gone numb. She had to remember to breathe, while at the same time, she felt like she was floating.

Spike was already there, a black pillar in the center of the circle of colorfully-dressed guests. She found it hard to look at him; she was dazzled and strangely shy at the assembly of slayers all looking so intently at her, at the sight of Andrew and Xander and Giles standing together, suited and tied, of Faith in a dark green satiny dress—Faith! she'd forgotten to invite her, and yet she was here!—smiling like she was the one who was so very very happy.

Spike seemed to go in and out of focus; the passage across the long room took a very long time; the balls of her feet burning as she tripped along on her thin-soled sandals, and the silk moving around her legs was cool and smooth like the skin of Spike's belly and thighs. The closer she came, the farther off he seemed to become. He didn't seem to have changed his clothes, to have changed anything since he'd fucked her a few minutes ago. Everyone was smiling at her. Some kind of music was playing—was it the music she'd asked for? It must have been, but she didn't recognize it. All the girls were bright-eyed; her glance pinged from face to face. In the center of the knot, Spike stood regarding her with an expression she'd seldom seen. Not smiling, but not solemn, exactly. As if he was waiting to tell her some important, marvelous secret, that was going to burst from him at any moment. She tried to hasten towards the welcoming hand he held out to her. The guests were murmuring—they were admiring her, her dress, her beauty. Dawn kissed her cheek and relieved her of the bouquet, and Willow kissed her again, and then she was moving forward the last little way alone, towards her groom's outstretched hand.

She could see him better now. He was not dressed the same. His black now was a suit, cut slim and close out of fine wool; beneath it a white silk shirt, the collar open; black shoes, long and squared, instead of his boots. A blood-red calla like those she carried was pinned to his lapel. His hair stood in disordered tufts just a little more artful than how she'd left it herself, when she'd tugged on it with both hands.

She steadied; felt herself smiling. Spike held her hand up, as if they were about to begin a minuet, and took her in, his gaze hot and appreciative and possessive. His lips moved, forming inaudible words. "Hello, cutie."

She broke out into smiles, flushing all over. The music faded then. They stood facing each other in the center of the circle, hands clasped. The crowd of guests, the vast room around them, faded back, and he was all she could see, the limpid blue of his eyes, looking into hers with an expression that beckoned her and knew her, a gentle conspiracy. The silence opened out around them, and for a long moment she thought this was it, that they would marry themselves without a word, because what really needed to be talked about? Everyone understood why they were here, and they themselves were brimful of one another, in complete accord.

Spike returned her reflexive grin. "Been thinkin' what to say to you in front of all these people. Half of 'em think this wedding is some sort of sham, slayer an' vampire, woman an' dead man. One or two maybe believe you're makin' the mistake of your life. But we've known each other a long time now. We knew each other even when I was out of my mind, yeah?"

She nodded, her eagerness welling up into her glowing skin, her fluttering smile. Spike nodded back,
This speech, and the powerful palpable force of his gaze, held her on a long caught breath before she could begin her reply.

"You've always been so good at honoring your promises to me. And at telling me the truth. And now it's my turn. Here's my truth, and my promises. I've been so lucky, as a slayer, to have friends who've always helped me and stood by me." She glanced around then, at Willow, at Xander, at Giles. "But you, Spike, you weren't like them. You started out as my adversary, my enemy. You went on to become my ally, and my firmest friend. You allowed yourself to suffer for me, you allowed yourself to suffer for me, you allowed yourself to love me when I had nothing to give back to you. You made my battles yours, you took responsibility for me and my family even when there was nothing for you in return. You've taught me so much about fidelity and attachment and the power of an open, yearning, vulnerable heart. Spike, I admire and respect you so much. I trust you with my whole self." She paused; from behind her, Buffy heard someone sob. She herself was trembling, and had to think about taking a deep breath before she could continue. "I love you, and I am going to love being your wife. I promise to share with you all my joys and sorrows. To keep you from being lonely and alone. To make a home for you where you will always be comfortable. To honor you and please you and stand up for you and lie down with you ... as long as I have breath in my body. My sweetheart, my best friend, my Spike ..." Her vision fogged, so for a moment she couldn't see anything but light, or feel anything but his cool fingers clasping hers. She was aware of the circle of people surrounding them, as if they were bearing her up, floating her on their attention and benevolent thoughts.

Then Willow stepped up to them, and there were the rings in her palm—both yellow gold, one that once belonged to Anne Pratt, another larger one that Buffy had chosen a few days ago at a London jeweler. She looked up at Spike again. He wasn't smiling now, he seemed rather stern as he picked up the little ring. Stern, and serious, but with a depth of joy in his eyes that filled her with awe, as he slipped it over the first joint of her finger, holding it suspended as he spoke. "With this ring—an' with my whole soul, an' body, an' mind, an' heart—I take you, Buffy Ann Summers, to me as my wife. Never more to be parted." He guided the ring the rest of the way to its seat, and brought her hand up to his mouth, pressing a moist kiss into her palm. She could feel him, overcome, forming her name, Buffy, Buffy, against her skin, whispering it into her flesh.

And then it was her turn. Willow handed her the other band. Buffy inhaled, looking up into Spike's face. There was so much in it, that for a moment she forgot everything else, in the pleasure of just taking him in. She swallowed, and inhaled, and smiled. "With this ring—and with my whole heart, and all my love, I take you, William Pratt—Spike—to me as my husband. Never to be parted." Sliding the ring home, she brought his hand to her lips.

Then Spike caught her around the waist, bending to find her mouth, and they were kissing. Buffy's eyes were closed tight, her arms joined around his neck. Beside her, she heard Willow clear her throat. "Ladies and gentlemen." Another clearing, and it sounded like Willow was trying not to laugh. "Ladies and gentlemen—you two, save some of that for later—Everybody, I present to you Mr and Mrs Summers Pratt."

The applause and cheering—Buffy hadn't expected either—flowed around the room like the noise of a great swirl of birds. Through tears, still holding onto Spike, she glanced around, absorbing the
sound, the warmth, radiating from the whole gathering.

Then Dawn, in tears, plucked at her arm, and pulled her into a tight hug. "Oh my God oh my God that was so beautiful." To Spike she said, "You take care of my sister. Take good care of her—she's the only family I have."

"You'v got me, Bit. Aren't I your brother now? Haven't you always been my little sis?"

Dawn kissed him, and turning, Buffy found herself clasped to Giles's chest. "My dear, I hope you'll have every happiness." Giles put her back a little, to look at her, and she saw that he was in tears. He took Spike's hand then, with a tight, hearty grip. "I hope that between us all bygones are bygones."

Spike nodded. "No need to speak of it again."

"Then it only remains to offer my warmest congratulations. You've won something most precious, Spike, most rare."

"I know it. Don't I know it?"

"You do. Take care of our Buffy. I know there's no one who could it better."

The gathering had formed an impromptu receiving line; next it was Xander, embracing her and kissing her and telling her she was gorgeous, sounding like he meant it when he told her he knew she'd be very happy with Spike. Then she was hugged, or her hand clasped, by a succession of slayers. At her side, Spike received the same treatment, congratulations and embraces. Bakhita spoke to him in Arabic, squeezing his hands. Music was playing now, and Buffy began to smell the food laid out in the next room, as the doors were thrown open.

Last to appear was Faith, in her low-cut green silk, her twisted knowing grin.

"So, B. B for blushin' bride." Faith offered no hug, not even a touch, but she was the least guarded that Buffy had ever seen her, and her smile smoothed out and became wholly sincere.

"I never thanked you for taking Spike in when he needed a place to rest."

"Sure."

"I'm really glad you're here. Thank you for coming."

"To see you marry your sexy vamp? Wouldn't have missed it. It's one for the annals, right?"

Buffy nodded. "Right."

Faith leaned in close to her and whispered. "Be happy, B. You've fuckin' earned it."

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"So many things I never thought I'd do," Buffy mused.

"Marry a vampire?"

"Eat snails. And like 'em." She sipped at her espresso. "I've been eating like a little pig this whole time, haven't I? I might've gained a few pounds."
"That's what Paris is for. Love watchin' you feed with a good appetite. Remember days gone by when you never ate at all, were too thin, too pale. An' you fuck better with a bit of flesh on you."

"Eating and fucking. God, this is like a dream."

The rain dripped off the edge of the awning that extended a couple feet past their marble-topped table. The tall heaters spaced here and there kept them warm against the rain and chill. Since they'd arrived the city had been covered with a thick low cover of grey cloud, allowing them, when they could bear to tear themselves apart and dress, to go about in the day. They'd established a routine: afternoons walking all around the city, hugged together under a big black umbrella, long late boozy suppers in smoky restaurants, and afterwards, fruitful patrols among the local vampires. Spike said that Paris hadn't had a slayer in over a century; the vampire population was consequently arrogant, lax, and easy to apprehend, even while tipsy and in high heels.

The rest of the time they spent in the big bed in their hotel room, listening to the hum of traffic and the beating of the rain, making love, chatting, dozing and waking to do it again and again. They went at it so hard that when she got up and walked, she was aware with every step of her swollen sex, of the bruises where Spike had gripped her, the places where he'd sucked her flesh into little welts that stung beneath her clothes.

Between the rough couplings, he gentled her sore flesh with soft slow seductions he seemed to invent on the spot, as lordly and controlling as they were tender. Reminding her over and over that she was his, setting up his dominion over her body with glancing touches that made her shudder and plead and pant. Lightly caressing her swollen pussy or just holding it in the cup of his hand, with a possessiveness that made her feel cherished and even agreeably helpless. That morning he'd actually made her come, a shivering, gasping spend, just by clasping her sex securely in his palm as he kissed her and murmured to her with maddening understated patience, not allowing her to move, making her submit to his languid motionless example.

He seemed to know, without discussion, that though it wouldn't always be this way, she craved submission, here and now.

Spike sipped his aperitif, and said, "Not to me."

"No?"

"Better than any dreams I'm likely to have."

She knew he was referring to the nightmares that sometimes visited his sleep. A few times since they'd been here he'd awakened game-faced and snarling, or in tears. His ugly past, he told her, was so vivid in dreams.

Still, he assured her, he was glad to have his memories, all of them, intact once more. "S'really me with you, this way. All our history clingin' round us, wouldn't trade that away for worlds." Not for worlds, she agreed. She wouldn't part with even the worst of it.

"And," he curled a hand around hers, "nothin' like I ever dreamed would happen to me. Havin' a wife like you. The mission, this life. Never dared imagine the like."

She laid her cheek against his shoulder. "You should have. I'm still not done being peeved at you, for not imagining it, for not coming to claim it—me. I should have told you, when ... but you should've known. Spike, you should've known."

Shifting to look into his face, she found him cool and solemn. She gazed into his blue unblinking
eyes, and her little flare of upset died out.

"It's all right now, though," he said.

"Yes," she agreed. "It's all right now."

It was after that conversation that, as she thought of it later, the last little piece slotted into place for them. Without discussion, they rose to return to the hotel. Spike stopped a taxi, and as he held the door open for her to get in, bent to murmur in her ear, "Gonna have you." He said nothing else, but there was no need; she understood the special sense of those three words. Her excitement flared up so hot she had to hold her breath to keep herself sitting still. They rode without touching, both pretending to look out the window at the rain-smeared lights. She knew he could smell her fervor, hear the beating of her blood; she imagined she could sense his own stirring, though she didn't even look at him for the ten minutes the ride lasted.

As soon as the door closed behind them, she pushed into his arms. Spike's hands tangled in her hair, his mouth opening cool and moist against hers, warming as she pressed into it. A low growl bubbled in his throat. He put her back against the door, crowding in, one thigh up between hers, pinning her hands. Her heart felt like a ball shooting up through water, everything in her body rising with it. She was vibrating now; they'd stopped kissing and she was panting hard against Spike's mouth, which somehow was even more intense, as if she was feeding him her breath. As if her heart was beating for them both, their two bodies on the verge of melding, even though nothing had really happened yet. She wanted to cry out against this lull, but Spike seemed to be listening to her, to be feeling into her in the silence.

Then he stepped back, releasing her; for a moment she felt like falling. He stripped off his clothes; after a moment's hesitation she matched him, fumbling, inelegant, but he didn't see that because he was striding in his lordly nudity towards the bed. His cock was hard, curving up so the bright red tip touched his belly. He was in game face when he turned and held an inviting hand out to her. His hard golden eyes glittered; a hot little icicle of fear trailed up her back as she looked at him. When he smiled, he was wolfish and handsome, but ghastly too, the terrible fangs divulged. She'd been craving this, and trusted him completely, so the fear was only a kind of echo, a might-have-been. Everything he'd ever been was completely bared in this moment—the vampire who'd sought her out, who'd desired her death, who'd ultimately desired her so intently that he'd remade himself.

She came to him, took his hand, his fingers still a little cool from the cold outdoors. He nodded once, his nostrils flaring. "What you want, yeah?" His voice a low rasp. "The true Spike."

"More than anything." She whispered it, and came closer, right up against him, repeated the words, "More than anything" against his throat, kissing him, encircling him in her arms. He chuckled a little, a sound that was half a snarl, and took hold of her; the next moment she was flat out on her back on the mattress, his body heavy on hers. The wet crown of his cock dipped against her belly, teasing in and out of the tuft of her mons as he kissed her face and throat and breasts with his jagged mouth. These motions broke her open; she arched, spreading herself wide for him. A bubble of sound broke loose from her, a wordless kind of keening song that he matched with more of that chuckling growling snarl that effected her like a softening drug.

He hovered over her then; she looked at him, taking it all in, the golden monster's eyes, the hard ridges and planes of his face, the evolving grin, his tongue appearing and disappearing in flickers between his lips. She knew he wanted her to see him, to comprehend him and welcome him in this state; it was what she'd been longing for all this time and at last he was ready to accept it.
"Please," she gasped. "Oh please. Oh love. Oh love. My husband. Spike. Oh please." He'd pinned her hands over her head, but she stirred her body beneath his, trying to incite him as she gave him back his deep stare. She didn't know how long this delicate strange negotiation went on, only that the anticipation, his silent demand, was making her nearly crazy with her need to be possessed.

Finally he slipped one of her wrists loose. Carried her hand down first to his mouth, where he kissed the fingers, and the palm, a wet licking kiss that made her writhe as if her pussy was there. Then he drew her hand down between their bellies. "You join us together now."

A seething sound escaped him as she wrapped her hand around his taut shaft; she gave him a long deep squeeze, feeling the dense length of him, caressing the wet spongy flaring head. Spike was breathing now, broken and jittery, his body in a tense arch over her.

"Come inside me, my sweet beautiful monster. Come inside me, give me everything." She rocked up to catch him, teasing at first before she let him sink all the way in. Spike was past ready; she could feel his control slipping, the urge to grind lapping up into wild hip snaps, little grunts. But he stilled, letting her feel how they were snugged up tight together, his pelvic bone crowded against her clit, his thick cock filling her up, it seemed, all the way to the heart.

"That what I am?" he murmured. "Your monster?"

"Yes. My wonderful monster." Some other time he might not have liked to hear this, but Buffy sensed that it was the right thing now, that he was at last bringing forth the demon in all his force to become part of their union, to receive her love. She was pulsing with it, the affection thick and sweet and red in her, great billows of it giving down. Spike was kissing her now, the sharp teeth nipping at her lips. She began a deep rolling fuck, pushing up, inciting him out of his restraint.

"Take," she whispered. "Take. Take. Take me." Her free hand was in his hair now, gripping and guiding.

He released her other wrist. "Hold me, Buffy."

He drew her legs up higher, changing the angle a little bit as he fucked into her, and she encompassed him in the span of her arms, his long muscled flanks smooth and powdery under her sweeping hands. He wouldn't break into a sweat like a live man but she'd long learned to feel the more subtle signs of his escalating excitement. There was a faint mushroomy scent that came off his skin when he was wrought up, that she associated with his physical surrender. His skin, always smooth, seemed to go positively pearly to the touch as he lost himself in pleasure. She was aware of that now, as against her throat, his teeth and sharp demon tongue made blind soundings, scraping at her skin, nicking her, tantalizing. What was he waiting for? She mewed, caressing him, rocking into his thrusts. They were lashed together so tightly she could imagine them never pulling apart. Never wanting to. "I've got you, my Spike. Always."

He was on a downstroke when the bite happened. She seized up, back arced in the act of meeting him, her whole body dissolving first into the shock of it, the harsh penetrating pain. But then came the other sensation, the one she'd so much wanted, of being enveloped, enjoyed in a way that filled her with joy. A cottony pleasure took hold, emanating from her throat, ethereal and tingling. The sensation of her blood flowing into his mouth, of him slowly sucking and swallowing, brought out her tears. He went on fucking, a little slower now, as if they were both listening to what was happening, letting it wrap them up in a prolonged moment of silence broken only by her gasping breaths, his purring growl. He warmed in her arms, and seemed to expand a little everywhere, muscles and breadth and heft. Her own energy, despite the bleeding, redoubled. When Spike began to move faster, careening towards release, she felt powerful and perfect.
Afterwards, his harsh sobbing cry of release echoed in her with that sensation of perfection, reverberating through all her slackened muscles and her slowing thubbing pulse. Spike's fingers were pressed to her throat, he was heavy and slack on her slick depleted body. When she opened her eyes to see him again, he was still fanged out, the gold eyes unfocused, blinking slowly. He looked stoned and rather endearingly stupid. He shifted a little to take some of the weight off, his cock slipping free of her with a wet squelch. He circled her with one arm as if he really thought she was remotely likely to pull away.

Drowsiness crowded in on her like an infusing drug. Spike's thumb was the only thing that moved, making a soft circling against her shoulder. She let her eyes close, her sensorium closing in to become nothing but the earthy aroma they gave off, and that one spot at the top of her arm. She thought of things to say, thank you, or I love you or wasn't I right about this? But there was no need to say any of them.

~Epilogue~

"So, Missus Pratt."

He found her sitting on the back porch.

"So, Sleepy Mister Pratt."

Still yawning, he dropped down beside her. It was just after sun-down; the neighborhood dogs were barking at each other across the fenced-in yards after another unseasonably mild day.

"Been doing some more unpacking, I see." She was wearing her scuffed-up jeans, and the dusty sweatshirt that had been her uniform for the last week.

"I don't know why we have so much stuff. When we got together, you only had the clothes on your back, and I—"

"Could've stayed on in Paris another year, we were snug enough there."

"I loved Paris. But you know it was too easy."

"An' you wanted yourself your own little house on the hellmouth."

"With a porch in front and back, and demons that speak English. Cleveland is going to be good for us, I can feel it. Commensurate to our abilities."

"Well, here's to it." He brought it out then, the bottle of chilled champagne he'd been holding behind his back.

"Oh!"

"What, did you think I'd forgotten today's our wedding day come 'round again? You did, didn't you?"

"No, I just ...."
"Could feel you simmerin' with it all this week, wantin' to remind me. Ta ever so for holdin' back."

She raised her eyebrows. "I was never in doubt. Happy anniversary, Mister Pratt." Accepting the bottle, she took a long swig, but instead of handing it back, she darted in to kiss him, spilling wine back into his mouth.

Spike laughed. "If we're goin' to play that game with a three hundred dollar bottle, let's do it inside where we can strip off."

"You paid three hundred dollars for this?"

Spike shrugged. "That's what it goes for. Course, I snaffled it."

"You—!"

"Gotta keep my hand in a bit, pet. Practice. Skills like that, come in useful, yeah?"

"Spike—"

He shrugged and grinned. "I'm a bad bad vamp. 'Spect you'll have to punish me."

"You want me to—"

Snatching back the bottle, he sprang up, went for the door. "I want you to. C'mon, Slayer. Bring it."

END

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