### Crimes

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**Crimes**

by [Valyssia](http://archiveofourown.org/characters/Valyssia)

**Summary**

My goal when I began this project was to replace the events of No Future for You with something perhaps slightly more compelling. Where I ended up bears almost no resemblance to the root story. Instead of replacing a mere four books in the series, I replace something closer to six. It’s a mess…an extremely controlled, intentionally created mess.

The first act is primarily composed of a cutesy romance. There are, of course, elements that defy that description, but the core story is a romance wrought with your standard coupling angst. I never lose sight of that even when stuff goes straight to hell. That’s what second acts are for, right?

So, if you’d like to see one of your favorite characters spread thin like too little butter on dry toast, this is the story for you.

Should you want to know more before you read, [this entry](http://archiveofourown.org/entries/231681) will better explain what I had in mind.

**Notes**

This story may be read as a standalone novel apart from the Another Thirteen Steps series.
Raindrops splash my head and shoulders. My clothes are soaked again. At least when they’re wet they don’t stink so much.

I look down, playing that kid’s game, avoiding the cracks as the sidewalk passes under my feet. This part of town’s pretty run down. There are lots of cracks. My heels click an offbeat rhythm against the steady patter of the rain.

Pulling my hand from my jeans pocket, I reach up to slick back a clump of hair that’s plastered across my forehead. Cold water pours down my back. That’s just what I was missing, something to make me miserable.

Christ, it sucks out here tonight! I shiver and put my hand back.

Yeah, it sucked last night too. And the night before. And the night before that.

Ohio just sucks. I mean, really…Sunnydale wasn’t bad, but Ohio? Whose bright idea was that?

Why not the Bahamas? Or if there just had to be a second Hellmouth in the States—kind of makes sense, what with the States—Key West might’ve been nice.

Hell, even Boston would’ve been better. Not for me, but—

Kind of goes without saying, but whoever made that call was one evil bastard.

I glance up. This is sort of new. My timing’s actually working out. Up ahead, at the end of this block, the residential neighborhood lets out. I’m nearly there.

Time’s a bastard too. Kind of weird how stuff blends. Kickin’ around, mindin’ my own…in all the right places at all the right times. One day I look up and the hours have turned into days.

And the days into weeks.

Has it really been weeks? I search, looking for a clue. Huh. Maybe it is has. I shrug.

Eh, whatever…I sound like one of those nine-to-fivers who can’t remember what they had for lunch on Tuesday.

Yeah, that’s me, a real working stiff.

Not even close.

At least our calling comes with three hots and a cot now. That is if you bother to stick around.

Shit. That’s almost like progress. Trouble is—the sticking around. That and the death sentence. I’ve been trying for years and I’m still not over that part.

Residential turns commercial and not a moment too soon. My destination’s in view. A pair of loading docks along the street make it look like a warehouse, but it isn’t. It’s actually a Chinese grocery store.
I hang a right, enter the alley behind it, move just out of view and pause to listen. Through the white noise of the rain and traffic on the ninety, I hear a muffled clip-clop. The sound’s a little heavier than mine, but then, so is its owner. It’s also much more regular—an even, metered pace—nothing like my bullshit stagger.

Speaking of…

I’m almost glad I noticed the notice. Noticing might even mean that I avoid that death sentence.

I have mixed feelings about that.

As my stalker draws closer, I stare blankly at the cross street ahead. I’m not even gonna try to figure it out. Not now. There’s no point. Me surviving will piss them off and that’s enough.

A car cruises by, glinting under the streetlights and I look down. The tips of my boots are outlined by a puddle. Lightning crackles to my distant right, making the water on the patchy brick street shimmer. This alley’s trashed in ways you only find out east. Urban renewal’s skipped over it for the last couple centuries. Yet somehow the flashes of light make it look cool.

I’ve been at this way too long.

Y’know, I get that I asked for it, but this is seriously cutting into my drunken stupor. It’s really rude. I haven’t been this close to sober in…

No telling.

I should seriously fix that.

I snicker and sing the first thing that comes to mind, The Ramones, *I Believe in Miracles*, really off key, belting out the words. Not that I remember them. “Oh, oh, oh…” Who gives a shit? I should be singing *I Wanna Be Sedated*, but that’s way too predictable.

Besides, it’ll be a goddamned miracle if I walk out of this alley alive. Dae’s coming. Figures he’s in no hurry. Smug asshole.

Sluggishly putting one foot in front of the other, I bellow, “I believe in miracles ’cause I’m one,” switching to, “Twenty, twenty, twenty-four hours to go…” without changing pitch. Predictable or not, there are just certain things.

I knew that bitch’d send someone. I just don’t get why it had to be him.

Oh well. If I screw up, maybe someone will find something nice to say over my grave. “I wanna beee…lieve in miracles.” I’m not counting on it, but stranger things…

A blue dumpster sits off to my left. It actually looks newer and nicer than the painted block wall behind it. That’s not saying a whole lot. Clambering onto the dumpster’s lid, I butcher a little more of the song. “I’ve been blessed with the power to survive.” But that’s doing nothing good for my head. It thuds as I stand, facing the grimy, peeling, once-white paint. I think I’m done. I’d kill for an aspirin.

And maybe some b-vitamins.

Nah, that’d just be asking too much.

I jump, trying to grab for the roof’s edge and miss. My knee hits and the dumper’s lid bangs like a
big plastic gong.

What kind of a name for a vamp is Dae?

Yeah, like asking the same rhetorical question over and over is even close to constructive. It’s just…there’s a point where things skate right past ironic into an entirely different camp.

I drag myself upright. Sucks that part of this is an act and part is just the mother of all hangovers. I’d probably be better off drunk. Another bounce on the lid and I grab for top of the wall. This time I get it. Pulling myself up, I rest my hips on the ledge and swing my legs over.

Anyway, fucker’s a complete pain in my ass. I wish he fought as campy as his name.

This is fun and all, but I gotta keep my eyes on what’s in front of me. Trouble is, what’s in front of me reminds me of that scene from Clerks—the guys playing street hockey on the roof of the neighborhood Quick Stop. It’s the same sort of place. And fun…that movie was fun. This isn’t.

Snickering, I make it to my feet and stare across the street to the north. There’s a narrow red sign with squiggly golden letters. Hell if I remember what they mean, but the food’s not half bad.

Who knew that Cleveland had a Chinatown?

Who wanted to know?

On the other side of the forgotten restaurant, the ninety stands on huge columns. And behind that is Cleveland’s skyline. It’s not a bad view, but I don’t have time to enjoy. I gotta get a move on.

Blinking away the city lights, I turn right and run. I run right out of roof, diving for the fire escape ladder on the building next door. It’s another one of those places. Three stories of dilapidated ocher brick, pre-nineteen-fifties architecture, a war era factory that needs to be torn down. And for now at least, home sweet home.

Funny thing, I’ve done this completely wasted. Maybe not so funny. I don’t remember it going this well. After a certain amount of clattering and clumsiness, I pull myself up on the rusty metal rung and climb to the roof.

Really, I should be all pounding heart and sweaty palms. I just can’t seem to care. This is just another thing in a long chain of things. If I die, who’ll miss me?

No one.

Least of all me.

But I still gotta make myself try, if for no other reason than the ass-wipe deserves it. He’s made it to the alley. This part has to be good, or I’m done. I stagger to the door and open it, passing by as it shuts. There’s a plastic bag on the other side of the—

Shit!

These things have a name. I know they do. I’m just clueless what it is. They’re like a little building on top of the building for the roof access door.

Whatever, right now its cover. Cover’s close enough.

I reach into the bag and grab an aerosol can. He lands on top of the dumpster. The fire escape ladder barely makes a sound when he hits it. As he climbs, I skirt around the edge of the roof back
to the ladder. There’s just enough wall above roof-level to hide me. All I have to do is be quiet. It’s lots to ask, but I think I’ll manage.

I hope.

I glance at the aerosol can. Making sure it’s not pointing at me seems useful. Once my shit’s together, I poke my head up.

He’s there, right at eye level.

I smile.

He reaches.

I spray.

He screams and goes for his eyes.

Quick, easy, simple…all the things I like. It’s nice when a plan works out. Really weird, but kinda nice. I could almost get used to this. Not that I will ’cause it’s so rare. I revel in the rareness, laughing as he tumbles backwards.

On the way down his head hits the top of the block wall. It’s a two story drop right into one major migraine. Now we match. The blow throws him forward and his face bounces off the factory wall. He ping-pongs back and forth, landing face down in the walkway between the two buildings.

Yeah, y’know that had to hurt. I’m amazed he’s still screaming.

It’s really fascinating the kinda crap you can get at your local hardware store. I glance at the label, *Gumout Xtra Concentrated Carburetor Cleaner*. Shit’s gotta be worse than tear gas.

I need a smoke.

It can wait. Smoking around this stuff wouldn’t be smart. Safety first. Wouldn’t want him to get all dusty and boring. And setting myself on fire…

That’d be classy.

I go for my bag, stash the can of carb cleaner inside and climb down the ladder. Dropping the last ten feet, I stoop down.

He reacts by rolling over. Even fucked up, he’s quick as hell. Huge shock, he has a gun.

I still don’t know about vamps and guns. It’s pretty wrong. Call me an old fashioned slayer, but I prefer a straight fight.

Considering that he can’t see, it’s pretty damned easy to disarm him. Just turn out of the line-of-fire, grab the slide and twist down.

At least he tried. It’s the thought that counts, right?

I pay him back for his trouble. Blood sprays from his mouth when I smack him with the butt of the gun. Really don’t like guns, but I have to admit it makes a good club.

I toss it aside and roll him onto his smashed face. First things, first. This coat’s too damned nice for a scumbag like him. It might be a bit opportunistic, but really—
He tries to grab me as I pull his coat off. “What the fuck are you doing?” he asks, sounding like complete shit. I might feel bad if I felt anything at all.

“Same thing you are. Everyone’s gotta eat,” I reply. It’s the cold, hard truth. The coat pulls free and I step back to look through it. There’s bound to be a wad of cash here somewhere. They all have one. No sense in taking a chance on it burning up.

“Well, actually drink. I’m dying for a beer,” I mumble, completely preoccupied by all of the pointy things in his pockets. Something to eat wouldn’t hurt either, but I gotta have my priorities.

While I’m rifling through his shit, Dae rolls over and tries to sit up. Again, he doesn’t make it very far. I plant my foot across the bridge of his nose and he flops back.

Kako should’ve sent backup with her boy, but so far all I’ve heard is the pitter-pat of the rain and him. At least he’s over the screaming. It was on my last nerve.

There’s nothing in his damned coat…expect a small weapons locker. It’s heavy as hell. I put it on and look down. Poor ol’ Dae wasn’t bad looking. Now he’s a puffy, bleeding mess. The yellow and pink eyes are pretty freakish. One of them’s hemorrhaged, making the look that much better.

While I’m on the subject, I grab the can of carb cleaner and hose him down. It’s good to be sure. He opens his mouth to yell and I give him a reason not to. This is gonna get gross. I move out of the way. He spits, spraying the shit all over. Glad it’s him, not me. All those open cuts must hurt like a bitch. He clutches his face, writhing and moaning.

There’s a bulge in his jeans pocket.

Score.

I snap another kick to his face and bend down. He tries to stop me. It’s pointless. I just break his arm and do what I want. When I locate the lump, he barks, “Hey! Nasty, fucked up bitch!”

That really wasn’t what I was looking for. And he thinks I’m fucked up…?

“Okay, so…you gonna just tell me where your cash is, or—?” I grumble, going for the carb cleaner again.

I spray down the lump and he yowls, “Where you think it is, crazy fuckin’ cunt?” He has priorities too. His hands go from his face to his groin. When I smack him with the can, he gets confused. Sputtering, he finally arrives at his point, “Alright, alright, it’s in my goddamned wallet!”

Wallet? “No shit?” I exclaim. “Really?” This is new. “You carry a wallet?” I’ve never seen a vamp carry a wallet. When he rolls his hips and tries to fish it out, I lend a hand.

“What the fuck’s your problem?” he asks as I rise.

I pull the cash out, pitching the wallet over my shoulder before bothering to reply, “Which one?” His question’s so lame it barely deserves an answer. I give him one anyway. “Could be that you tried to kill me.”

I pause to count the pile of bills. Huh. Nice take. I could pretty much go where ever I want on a couple grand. Stashing the cash in my jeans pocket, I roll my eyes. “Nah. That scenario’s so tired. It’d be easier to list who hasn’t tried to kill me.” Sad part is that’s true.

No, the sad part is, it’s mostly my so-called friends who pull that trick. It gets even sadder when I
consider how often it’s happened. For some of them it’s practically become a hobby.

I bend down. My little bag of tricks rustles when I open it. It makes him nervous. At least he’s not stupid.

He shouldn’t have gotten me started. I move on to the next bullet point on my list. “Maybe it was that slayer you did a few weeks back?” I pause to mock-ponder again. “Shooting fourteen-year-old Mary Ann from Hoboken Kansas isn’t exactly the best way to get on my good side.” I really wish I could remember her name.

It’s gone.

He’s got nothing but drool and blood, not that I expect anything. A mouthful of whatever noxious shit carb cleaner is probably wouldn’t make me chatty either.

I take out a pair of handcuffs. I had to seriously look for these. They aren’t those cheesy ones, like the cops use, with the chain. They’re the kind with the hinge between the two bracelets. I couldn’t break them. I doubt he’s gonna.

“Might be the need you and your people have to act like major boneheads,” I say with a snicker. “Imagine that.” It’s hardly funny. More like kindergarten humor. But then, there are the ridges.

“Have you ever seen the inside of a Hellmouth?” I ask, seizing his right wrist. The cuff snaps closed and I ratchet it down past the point of painful. “They aren’t the homiest places.” Using the empty cuff as a handle, I plant him on his face. “I doubt your dimwitted disciples would be so thrilled if they had a clue.”

His left arm still works. He tries to twist free when I grab it. My knee digs into his lower back. I wrench his arms into place and close the second cuff as I consider, “Or maybe it’s the busload of preschoolers you vamped last week.” I’m not even sure it was last week. It might’ve been the week before. There’s this thick haze between here and there. But ‘last week’ sounds good, so I run with it. And—smart boy—he doesn’t try to correct me. “I dunno. Lemme think about it. I’ll get back to ya.”

I torque the cuff down before rendering a verdict, “Yeah, I think it was the definitely kids that did it. That was some sick ass shit.” Lacing my fingers through his short spiky hair, I make a fist. “You didn’t think they’d send some green little girl, fresh off the bus to clean up that clusterfuck, did you?” I rip him over onto his back.

His eyes are unfocused. I’m pretty sure he can’t see me, but I still make eye contact before I growl, “No, they sent me.” Strange how just admitting it makes me feel a little better.

I walked into the house and this pretty little girl with long red curls was sitting on an old recliner. She might’ve been six. Her legs were folded underneath her. There was an old quilt draped over her shoulders. She said ‘Hi,’ and before I knew it, I was surrounded. It was so weird. Like something out of a bad horror flick.

They were already dead.

Yeah, that’s been my story. And so far it’s been helpful. The only time I don’t see her face is when I’m too trashed to see anything at all.

As I reach into my bag and take out a bundle of rope, he finds something to say, “I just follow orders.” He cackles. It’s pretty weak, but still a laugh. It makes me want to hit him. I’ve always had this problem with impulse control, or so the shrinks tell me. But this time, I’m just a little slow.
Before I can shut him up, he gets out, “It’s not like all those brats wuh—”

It’s not news that he wasn’t alone. It shouldn’t be news to him that I’m just warming up.

I put the noose over his neck and pull it tight. “I don’t give a shit,” I mutter as I toss the bundle of rope over my head. It hits the roof of the grocery store and I walk away. I know he can hear me, so I keep talking as I climb onto the roof, pull the rope tight and lash it to a pipe. “Oh, don’t worry. I’m not gonna kill you. I know this’ll sound completely tired, but I need you to send a message to the others.” I giggle. “Death is coming…” And bust up laughing.

“Yeah, whatever…this isn’t some goddamned movie. It’s my life. And I’m sick of you assholes screwing it up.” I look over the edge of the roof. Predictably, he’s sitting up. He can’t quite stand, so his neck’s stretched out. He’s half-hanging by it. Pretty much what I was looking for.

I drop down. Stooping to reach into my bag, I say, “Y’know, I’ve been wondering something.” I pull out a bottle of liquid drain cleaner and turn to show him. “Now the way I’ve got it figured, if you’re upright, this won’t kill you. I could be wrong, but—”

Ah, it’s nice to see we’ve finally reached an understanding. I’m surprised he can see. But through all the puffy gore, he looks mortified.

I picked the nastiest stuff I could find. There are warnings on the bottle about this shit eating your chromed fixtures. Like I have chromed fixtures. I have vamps. I have vamps coming out my ears. Vamps who think it’s funny to shoot at little girls. Vamps who’re adept at social networking.

Needless to say, I ran out of patience a while ago.

I gotta hand it to him—he doesn’t grovel. He probably gets just how pointless that’d be.

Setting the bottle aside, I grab a shop rag out of my bag and stuff it in his mouth. Wouldn’t want him to spit on me. He gags when I push a funnel in next to the rag.

This is a real test of my remaining patience. It’ll be worth it, though. He tries to shake his head and I hold him by the hair. He smokes, retches and stinks as I pour. Some of the caustic shit comes out his nose. This doesn’t look good for our villain. His skin bubbles where it runs.

I manage to get about ninety percent of the crap down the hatch without wearing too much. My hands are the worst of it. I rinse them in a puddle, wipe them on my jeans and reach for the next item: duct tape. It wouldn’t do for all my hard work to come back up. I tape his mouth and nose first. The smoke rolling out of them is just plain nasty. He’s so wet and slimy it takes a full wrap, but that’s kind of the plan anyway.

And look at that…there’s just enough left to do his eyes. He does his best impression of a flounder when I empty the bottle over his face.

Perfect. There won’t be much of this prick left by morning. I cocoon his head in a thick, tight layer of tape. Way I got it figured, dickhead’s got a choice: either rip a hand off, or—well, all that gas is gonna have to go somewhere.

Reaching into the bag, I pull out a butter knife I borrowed from the forgotten restaurant across the street. “If you’re smart, you’ll start now,” I say, leaning down to put it in his hand. He tries to take it, but he’s at that stage where there’s so much pain that his body just shakes. I’m nothing if not helpful. I press the handle into his palm until I feel him take hold.
Again, horror movie cliché, but there are just certain things that make sense.

Giving him a hacksaw doesn’t make sense.

Now for my message…

I pull a small, grubby cardboard sign from my bag. The guy I got this off of looked like he could use the help. A few bucks saved me the trouble of making my own. I hope he didn’t spend it all on booze. On one side the sign says, ‘Will work for food.’ What it says the other side’s a little more direct. I hang the sign around Dae’s neck, ‘fuck you’ side out.

After policing the scene, I return to the roof, dropping the plastic bag in the dumpster on my way past. It might be time to move. Have to say, a hot shower and a warm bed hold some appeal.

Untying the rope, I make a run at the fire escape and climb up. There’s just enough slack to reach the top. It comes to me that I’m not alone as I pull the rope tight.

From behind me someone asks, “You don’t intend to leave him that way do you?” The someone is male, English and really, really condescending. Two guesses—

I don’t need this crap.

“What business is it of yours, Giles?” I growl. This fucker’s heavy. And he’s thrashing around. It’s annoying. I tow his cumbersome ass up another couple of feet and grumble under my breath, “Look, if you really want to help out so much, I could use a hand with the dead weight.”

Giles ignores me. “Well, I’m pleased to see that your rehabilitation has paid off.” Snark from the bloody British comes out positively desiccated.

I haven’t got time for this. Cutting through the bullshit, I ask, “What do you want?”

“I’m here to offer you a job,” he replies. He’s closer now. Not quite close enough to reach out and touch, but too close.

Pulling on the rope, I remark bitterly, “I’m retired.” I wedge my right hand in next to the wall so I don’t lose any ground. “Get Heaven to do it. She’s the new two-one-six chosen one.” Rolling my eyes, I grumble, “Heaven,” hissing distastefully. Just what kind of drugs were her folks on? Hell if I know. I guess whatever drugs they serve in bum-fuck Arkansas. Considering that Bentonville’s major contribution is Wal-Mart—

I’ve got more important stuff to worry about, like hauling this two-hundred pound worm up the side of this godforsaken building. I get to it as Mr. Wizard predictably corrects me, “I’m afraid you’re mistaken. Firstly, retirements are granted, not taken.”

I have to interrupt, “Retirement also indicates a paying gig.” But it’s like I’m not even here.

The truly annoying part is he doesn’t even raise his voice when talks over me. “Furthermore, simply because Robin Wood has romantic designs on a young woman doesn’t qualify her for a leadership role. Your replacement arrived on Monday. She was hand selected by the Council.”

I’m sure she’s a real piece of work. I wonder if Giles has a clue that I don’t give a shit. I care so little I’m not even sure what day it is. Does it really matter?

Not a whole lot. Not to me at least. Might to Wood. He’ll probably be in the bitch’s pants by
Friday. Fucker’s worse than I am.

I stop to say, “I quit, then.” The rope bites into my hands. I should’ve worn gloves.

Giles chuckles. “You truly believe it’s that easy?” A metallic clacking sound comes from behind me. I don’t have to look to know. It’s the bolt of a gun snapping into place. I’ve heard that a lot lately. That Frasier has one too isn’t terribly surprising. Everyone does. Smug as hell, he says, “You have a decision to make, Faith.”

I peek over the edge of the roof as he remarks, “You can either refuse my offer.” This piece of shit’s above the level of the grocery store. As far as I’m concerned, that’s close enough. Gripping the rope for all I’m worth, I turn.

There’s a vent pipe that should hold him right next to Giles. He backs off when I go for it. Crossing the short distance without dropping the prick’s a complete bitch. I finally lose it when I try to loop the rope around the pipe. The fucker drops about five feet. But once the rope’s in place, things get much easier. If I were smart…

I’m not.

Giles is rattling, “…your unconscious body on the steps of that local sheriff’s office.” I missed most of that, but—

It’s pretty much what I expected. Doesn’t matter what I do, the past will always haunt me. Again, it’s not like I’m surprised. I did some pretty shitty stuff.

Sitting on the wet roof, I brace my legs against the pipe and pull the douchebag up. Giles waits for me to finish. Once the rope’s tied off, I stand. Being upright just sucks. If it’s possible, I’ve found new things that hurt. And my hands are a mess. I look them over before bothering to face Giles. At least it’s only a tranq gun. I figured as much. He really isn’t the type to destroy something that could be useful later.

Funny, for all his attitude, he hasn’t glanced once at the rope. And he didn’t try to stop me. He really couldn’t care less.

At least there’s that.

I fold my arms and listen to option B. “Should you arrive at the sensible conclusion, I will see to it that you retire with a full pardon and compensation for your services. You will be a free woman. I’ll even throw in a passport and airline tickets to the destination of your choice.”

I have to admit that sounds one hell of a lot better than that first thing. What I heard of it. But he hasn’t said what the job is. If there’s one thing I’ve learned—

That doesn’t matter much to him. He says, “Now come along. We have things to attend to,” letting me know that in his mind this is a done deal.

Really, he’s right. Here’s the bottom line: unless he’s got an infant he wants me to drown, this can’t be any worse than the last order I got from Wood. And that’s just not Giles’ style. Provided he hasn’t found the Antichrist, I should be straight.

I guess that means I’m in. “Alright,” I reply. But I can’t make it that easy. I just have to add, “On one condition.”

His eyes narrow. “You’re in no position to bargain, Faith.”
I laugh. “Chill, Giles, I just want a beer.”

That earns me a smile. “Ah,” he says. “Well, I believe we can manage that.” He turns to head for the door, motioning me on. “Shall we?”

I’m probably gonna regret this.
They say the real trick to gambling is knowing when to walk away. It’s an art.

I look at the mirror above the bar, checking out the little blonde who just walked in the door. A lump of ice moves in where my gut’s supposed to be.

This is the first thing I’ve felt in weeks. Figures it’d be panic. I try to swallow, but my throat catches. I cough and grab for my beer.

Yeah. And my hands are shaking so bad I almost knock it over. That’s right, make a scene, draw attention.

Fuck! This isn’t happening.

My throat won’t stop tickling. I cover my mouth to hide the fact that I’m hacking up a lung.

I finally manage enough control to take a swig of beer. My eyes are watering. I mop them with trembling hands.

Alright, one more glance, just to be sure.

Well, she’s put on a few pounds. Not many. Go figure, ten pounds took ten years off her face. She actually looks healthy now. Her dark blue cocktail dress clings in all the right places. It shows off enough cleavage to make spotting the gay guys in the room completely mindless.

That’s her. Sickeningly perfect body, baby doll cute…her hair’s a little shorter than last time, but—

It’s time I firmed up. This is happening.

But it’s not happening to me. Not if I can help it. Giles can find some other stoolie.

Slouching, I dig into my pants pocket. It takes all I’m worth to get my money out. Let’s see I’ve had, uh…

I’ve had beers. No telling how many. Too many to deal with this.

I’ve got no time to wait for the check. I pull a bill from the roll, motion to the bartender and lay it in front of me. A c-note should more than cover my tab.

He sees the money and nods. That’s my cue.

It’s a real blast from the past to ask this, but since when is she the bad slayer? That’s what this crap’s about, right?

That’s what Giles said. He also said she’d find me. He didn’t think me knowing what she looked like was crucial to the mission. And now I get why.

But I thought the bitch was in Scotland. Silly me. See what I get for thinking? Here she is having a glass of wine with the owner of a riverboat casino in Newport, Kentucky.
What the fuck’s up with that?

Did she bail too?

Looks like.

Whatever. I’m sure there’s a story. And I’m sure it’s good. But I’m sure not sticking around to find out.

She’s between me and the door, so I take off around the bar. I want to run. I need to, but I can’t. That’d just be stupid. The second I’m out of the room, I lose it and bolt. The few people standing in the aisle are smart enough to get out of my way. I dodge between slot machines and roulette tables in a mad dash for the exit.

The first rule of gambling is never bet more than you can afford to lose. When it comes to B., I’m strapped. I cashed out years ago.

It’s cool. I’ve got plenty to disappear on. I’ll just keep moving and pray they don’t find me. That’s what I should’ve done in the first place, but stupid me—

I open the door. Icy air hits me. Shivering, I turn to look over my shoulder as I step outside. Good. No one’s following me. I’ll have to come back for my coat. No big.

When I face forward, my heart doesn’t quite leap out of my chest. B.’s standing right in front of me.

My heart hammers, like it’s still looking for a way out. And so am I. Too bad there isn’t one.

Y’know, plans rarely work for me. I should know better. All I’ve got now is rabbit.

My only other option is to cold-cock her. But things haven’t spiraled quite that far yet.

Give it time.

I have to head back the way I came. I’ll smack her down if she tries to stop me.

I turn to do just that and she says, “You aren’t leaving without saying a word, are you?” She draws in a shaky breath. “I thought we were friends.”

Huh. Now there’s a radical interpretation of the text. “Look B., I noticed you. You noticed me,” I reply. “But that’s no reason for us to pretend that we’re friends.” Door handle in hand, I glance over my shoulder. She looks every bit as hurt as she sounds. “We aren’t.” We never have been and she knows it. Sometimes the truth just sucks. “All I want to do is leave. I’ve got nothing against you, but—” My own radical interpretation falls short.

How she came up with two glasses of wine so quick is anyone’s guess. Offering me the one in her left hand, she says, “It’s okay. You don’t have to stay. Just please, have a drink with me.”

Shit. “Alright, whatever,” I reply through a sigh and open the door. Let the spiral begin. If this goes like usual, we’ll be pounding the snot out of each other inside an hour.

I can hardly wait.

Once we’re inside, she hands me the wineglass and says, “It’s pretty good.”

Mixing beer and wine is never good. That is unless you like living dangerously. And look at me
I manage to plaster on a weak smile. Thankfully, she turns to lead the way. I’ve got nothing to say. I follow her through the casino back into the lounge.

One of the waitresses sees us come in and gestures to a dark corner booth. As we work our way across the room, the ice in my gut thaws. B. stops to say, ‘Hi,’ here and there. She’s so friendly it’s hard to see the person I knew. Wonder what happened to her.

When we finally reach our table, she’s got the eyes of half the room on her. I could live without the attention. But it occurs to me as we make the rounds that I do have something to say.

I make eye contact and she gives me a warm, inviting smile. Yeah, I wonder what she did with the old B. Oh well, time to see if the attitude adjustment holds. “What are you doing here?” I ask.

She sips her wine, lingering to enjoy the bouquet. Or that’s what your average wine nut would say. After setting the glass down, she replies, “Chances are, same thing you are.”

Whoa. Back the bus up. They sent us both?

This chick must be—

I cut myself off by picking up my glass. Good answer, but it’s not really an answer at all. It still doesn’t tell me anything. It’s as leading as my question. Guess I’ll have to find some other way.

I take a sip, mimicking her behavior. I don’t know a damned thing about wine, but this isn’t horrible. I never liked the stuff. It was always too sweet or too tart. This isn’t. It’s got a little bite that hits the back of your throat. And there’s a smoky hint that’s kind of strange. I could actually drink this. “What is this?” I ask, gesturing to my glass as I set it down.

She replies, “A local pinot from some winery across the river. Richard turned me on to it.” Smiling, she gives the owner a discrete wave. He’s friendly enough, but preoccupied. She’s interrupting his downward mobility. Poor guy. The new girl who’s fawning all over him isn’t half as pretty. “I always ask him what’s good when I come in,” she concludes with a shrug.

I stare at my glass. Shit looks like blood. Maybe that’s why I don’t like it.

Yeah, this is fun and all, but I need to redirect. I just wish I had a clue how. I really can’t without laying all my cards on the table. It doesn’t help that my brain feels like it’s been pickled. Wine’s the last thing I need. I’d like to drink up and bail, but that’d be an epic mistake.

One involving memory loss, sleeping face-down in a gutter, puddles of barf…and other assorted ‘not so much fun’ things. I could live without the rerun.

She has another sip and her expression turns thoughtful. “Y’know, Faith, I get it,” she says.

You do? Care to help a ‘friend’ out, ’cause I’m clueless?

I look up as she lifts her glass again, adding, “Or I think I do.” Savoring’s a thing of the past. She swallows half the glass in one large gulp. I think she’s as bad as I am.

She licks her lips and sets her glass down. Still cupping it in her hand, she says, “They expect more of us because of who we are.” She gets up and offers me a hand. I guess we’re done.

Well, her speech isn’t over, but I may be getting my wish. “Thing is, they don’t have a clue.” Not
exactly the way I wanted, but that’s typical.
I take her hand and she guides me to my feet. As we head for the door, she says, “They think because of who we are we can handle more.” We enter the lobby and she lets go of me.
I’m curious where she’s headed, so I go through the motions. She flirts with the clerk. I just pass him my voucher and twenty bucks to cover both of our coats and a tip. This is a game to her. She’s all smiles and giggles. Funny, he doesn’t notice how fake they are. I don’t bother. There’s no point. I accept my coat and offer a muffled, “Thanks.” I put mine on as he helps her into hers.
She pushes the door open, reclaim my hand and escorts me off the boat. Once we’re on the pier, she gets back to business. “The thing they don’t see is that it’s just the opposite.” She’s not wasting any time. I have to all but run to match her pace. Only B. could charge up a flight of stairs in those heels and barely make a sound.
Huh. I guess that means I’m getting over it.
“There’s such a thing as too much,” she says, letting out a cold laugh. “And we’ve seen it. We’ve seen that and more. More than anyone should.” Pausing at the top of the stairs, she gives me a sidelong glance. Her expression’s dark and haggard. She’s turned a one-eighty since we stepped outside. I knew that was all a show.
I just didn’t get how much show.
“Because of what we’ve seen, we can’t handle as much,” she says, gesturing either way down the street. I point left and she takes off. “We shouldn’t have to. And they shouldn’t make us.”
I follow her lead, replying, “I’m not sure about can’t, but I see your point.” It almost sounds like I’m defending them. I’m not. I just don’t like the implied weakness. I shrug.
Really, she’s got a point. It’s not a point I ever thought I’d ever hear her make. I still have to wonder what happened to the sanctimonious bitch I met back in Sunnydale.
She mumbles, “I’m just so tired.”
Can’t really say I miss her.
Her pace slows to crawl. She veers left, stopping at a metal rail at the edge of the levee. Thing’s made of galvanized pipe.
We’re in Kentucky.
I take the cold pipe in hand and look across the river at the city. Cincinnati’s a pretty place, especially at night. The skyscrapers downtown rise up from the river valley partially obscuring the lights of the ghetto behind them.
Some guy told me this place was settled by a bunch of Greeks. They built a canal at the base of the hill. It’s gone now, but it left a mark. Everything on the hill past it became known as ‘Over-the-Rhine,’ like the canal was some sort of replacement for the Rhine River.
She has her arm around me. I ignore it.
Goes to show, people need familiarity. The name and her arm are both just symptoms.
And smoking can be educational. That old man was kinda cool. I bummed him a smoke and he
told me a story. It was a pretty fair trade.

Ironic doesn’t get much thicker. Over-the-Rhine is the nation’s largest historic district. Most of the buildings are over three-hundred years old. The fronts are all covered in ornamental cast iron, leafy patterns, vines and shit. It’s kinda neat looking. Prettiest slum I’ve ever seen.

It’s a shame. The bangers and squatters are fucking it up. There’s graffiti all over the place. Some of the buildings are so far gone it’s hard to picture what they once were.

Really, it’s not that much different here than it was in Cleveland. I’m not even sure why I like it. But I guess that’s the point. It’s different. It feels different.

Thing is, I didn’t start off hating Cleveland. It was kind of cool at first. I did the tour. The Rock ’n’ Roll Hall of Fame was the high point.

Give it a few weeks. Once the tour ends, I’ll probably hate Cinci too. It just seems to go that way. It’s not the place. It’s what happens in the place. Shit goes sideways and—

“What do you feel?” she asks. Her voice is so soft the question is nearly lost in the breeze.

I don’t know. I feel a little cold and I’m pretty drunk, but somehow I don’t think that’s what she wants to hear.

I shift my weight forward. Leaning my forearms against the rail, I clasp my wrist. As she moves her arm, I ask, “What do you mean?”

She replies, “It’s just…I feel so numb.” She’s crying. I hear it in her voice now. “And when I’m alone…” She backs off, but I can still feel her. “I don’t like to be alone.”

“Yeah,” I mumble. I wish I had more for her, but I don’t really mind being alone. Actually, I prefer it. I do get the numb. I get it a little too well.

A riverboat returning to the pier holds my attention. It lazily drifts past the concrete columns of the interstate bridge.

“Look at me,” she whispers, adding a feeble, “Please,” when I don’t immediately turn around.

I do as she asks, but can’t bring myself to face her. I stare at the ground in front of my feet and lean back against the rail.

It’s weird. I’m almost jealous. I haven’t been able to make myself cry in—

I’m not even sure. It’s been years.

I cross my arms and wait for whatever’s next.

She closes in, gently coaxing my arms to unfold. When she has my hands in hers, she asks, “Do you think there’s any hope?”

“For what?” I reply. I wish she’d stop being so damned vague.

“For us,” she says, like it should clear the whole thing up. I sigh and meet her eyes. Maybe there’s a clue—

Y’know, rules work great for games. The rules are just the rules. That’s how it is. There aren’t any exceptions. If you don’t like the rules, you don’t have to play.
In life, rules are pointless. Exceptions happen all the time. There aren’t any rules, just a thick gray haze and a bunch of judgment calls.

I feel like an idiot, but she doesn’t notice. She puts her arms around me and rests her head on my shoulder.

I had this talk with Giles. He insinuated some things that made me uneasy.

I told him I’m not gay and I meant it. I’m really not.

Here’s the exception.
Foundation: Scene 3

Three…

I haven’t been here twenty minutes and I’m already up to my neck in smelly mud. It’s almost like old times. I just knew this was gonna go well.

S’pose it’d help if I understood why, but I’ve wasted enough time on that little conundrum. And so far…

Last night all I wanted was to get away. That’s still the smart call.

Yet, here I am. Like a glutton.

I sigh. And the punishment…

Whatever. I may as well enjoy it. I mean, why not? Everything else is a nightmare. I would’ve sworn on a stack of Bibles that last night was.

That is until I got up. The pink lipstick smudge on my cheek kinda killed that theory.

And finding the business card in my pocket killed the rest of my morning. I blew the entire thing off, drinking coffee and agonizing over what I should do.

I’m done agonizing. It’s time to go with this and see where it leads. The smell’s a little hard to get past, but at least it feels good.

Weird, but good. I’m not even sure where the bottom is. I know the tub has to have one, but I haven’t found it.

Madeline, or whatever her name is, whispers my name and touches my face. She peels the crap off it a little at a time, blotting the residue away with a cool cloth.

I’m not sorry to see it go. I thought the shit would never dry. And before it did, the stench was almost worse than the mud. Or maybe it was just the two together. Anyway, it was nasty.

Weird squishy sounds off to the left make my eyes snap open. It’s pretty messed up that the first place my brain goes is ‘chaos demon.’ It’s nothing like that. B.’s out of her tub, naked and coated in something that looks a little like half-mixed Nesquik.

She grins at me. We’ve barely exchanged two words since I got here. She doesn’t need to talk. I’d be fine with her just standing there for a while.

It’s a shame. She and what’s-her-face, uh…Gabrielle, I think…wipe the Nesquik off, or most of it and leave the room.

Anywhere else, these two would be Maddie and Gabbie, but here—

I’m so out of my league.

I would’ve blown off this circus if I wasn’t so damned curious. That’s really the best reason I can find for the masochism.
I’m not even sure what to be more curious about. There’s a list. Starting with: why didn’t she kiss me last night? She sure looked like she wanted to. Instead, she melted down. I got a peck on the cheek and a ‘thanks’ for my trouble before she bailed. I have no idea what to make of that.

At the time I was pretty sure it was an accident. Maybe she was thinking about someone else when she looked at me. Or maybe I just imagined the entire thing.

Now I’m pretty sure I didn’t imagine anything, which just adds to the pile of questions.

Why now? What’s changed?

And I’d still like an answer to my first question. Why here?

They just keep stacking. At this rate, by the end of the week, I’ll have a dozen or so unanswered questions. Won’t that be fun?

“We should get you out of there,” Maddie whispers. I figure I don’t need the help. That is until I try to move, then I’m happy to have it. My muscles are so relaxed and the mud—well, it’s mud…warm, smelly mud. I could get out on my own, but the hand helps.

When I finally find my way out of the steaming quicksand, she attacks me with cold cloths. It’s not exactly what I expect, but I guess it feels okay.

Really, it’s more than a little weird to have some strange chick touch me. But it’s not like I’m modest and Maddie seems alright, so I blow it off. I take a cloth from the stack to wipe my face and the back of my neck. I’m sweating like a pig. She’s almost done. Before we leave the room, I just have to ask, “Does she bring many people here?”

Her brow furrows. “Buffy?” she asks.

No, Princess Margaret.

I must’ve let the attitude show ’cause she spills in hushed tones. “Sometimes she comes in with her roommate, but they’re both regular customers. Otherwise, no, you’re the first guest she’s had.” I guess she probably isn’t supposed to talk about the clients. It’s cool, though. She’s grinning.

I cock an eyebrow. There’s more, but she’s not gonna share. And I don’t press. I don’t want to get her in trouble.

Besides, I probably just learned more from Maddie in a minute than I will from B. in a week. I should be grateful for the straight answer and the bonus round.

If not completely shocked…

So, B. has a roommate. That’s not all that surprising. I don’t think she’s ever lived alone. But I have to wonder who it is. And there are all the standard questions: male or female, platonic or pelvic…

Knowing B. it’s probably some nerdy chick who couldn’t get her naughty on with—

Maddie smotheres my muse by saying, “We should get moving. Buffy’s waiting.” Poor little muse, but Maddie’s enthusiasm’s more telling than anything she said. Add the grin and Simon says I might just be in trouble.

Good thing I like trouble. The truly twisted part is that I like being curious too. It never ends well,
but I like it.

She leads me to a shower stall in the adjoining room. The water’s already running. I step in. It feels good. I could hang for a while, but she’s right. The only reason I’m here is to figure out what’s up, so I hose off as quick as I can and get out.

After helping me into a robe, Maddie leads me down the hall to the next phase of the torture. She taps on the door before opening it. B.’s alone in the room, lounging in a hot tub. She smiles when she sees us.

The room isn’t much bigger than the tub. By using light colors and mirrors they’ve managed to make it seem open and airy. A few tropical plants just kinda add to that feel. This isn’t a bad place.

“I’ll be back in about twenty minutes,” Maddie says and tries to bail, but B. stops her by saying her name. ‘Madeline’ it is.

Doesn’t matter, she’ll always be Maddie to me.

“You think you could send one of the girls in to do Faith’s manicure?” B. asks.

“Oh, certainly,” Maddie replies. “I’ve got time. I just thought you two might like to be alone.” When B. gives her another charming smile, Maddie concludes, “Get settled. I’ll be right back.”

Once she’s gone, B. focuses on me. “That’s okay with you, right?” she asks.

I shrug. This is her deal, not mine. Though I do get the want. Time on the street did nothing good for my hands. I don’t think they’ve ever looked worse.

But really, this is just adding to the wait. I’m not a fan.

It came to me this morning what I could ask without tipping my hand. If I hadn’t been so plastered last night, I might have more of a clue. This just isn’t that hard. I walk around the tub and drop my robe in one of the two wicker chairs behind her before I ask, “What’d Giles tell you?”

I kinda want to see her face, but it’s cool. The question makes me getting into the tub less of a show.

Yeah, she isn’t very interested in me. I slide in on her left without so much as a glance. The water feels nice. And she’s just funny. She looks so thoughtful, but all that comes out of her mouth is, “Uh, not much.”

Picking a mirror to her right to stare at, she whispers, “Look, Faith, I don’t want to lie to you.” Safe bet, she can see me in it. She clears her throat. “I had pretty much the same talk with Giles that I had with you last night. Since then, things have been a little different for me.” She faces me. Her expression’s earnest. “Can we just not? I mean, I get the worry. Things are just…” She searches for the right word and fails.

I force a reassuring smile, hoping it’ll put her at ease. “It’s cool. I’m right there with you, B.,” I reply with a snicker. “If I had to put a label on ‘things,’ I’d have a hard time too.”

It works. She lightens up, facing me and returning the smile. “I just want this to be about us if that’s okay,” she says.

She never really hits nervous, but her avoidance doesn’t sit well. It’s not like that was a hard question.
Last time I talked to Angel he said something about seeing B. at some club in Rome. He wanted to know how she was.

He’s concerned. I suppose it’s sweet.

I played along. No sense making him worry. But as far as I know, B. wasn’t anywhere near Rome at the time. And she sure wasn’t out clubbing then. Giles would’ve had a heart attack.

The whole thing was a little strange, but I blew it off.

One day I was just sort of doing my thing and it clicked. I wouldn’t put it past them to have body doubles. It makes a lot of sense. B.’s way too important. And when people get too important…

It’s not like they tell me shit. But why would they? If there are dupes, advertising the fact wouldn’t be smart. It’d kind of make them useless. Or less useful.

I know it’s a stretch, but she could be one of them. It’s an easier answer than some magic trick gone sideways. But that’s always possibility too. Sad, our lives are just that screwed up.

Thing is, I don’t think Giles would send me for that. I’m not qualified.

But he’d totally send me after a body double. What would she be? Some confused, probably scared, young slayer who just needs help. I’m extremely qualified for that job.

That kind of *is* my job. Or it has been for the last year.

I don’t know.

If that is it, I’m seriously impressed. She’s three feet away from me now in good light. It’s B. She moves like B. Sounds like B. Acts like B. Whatever’s up, I have to assume it’s up with B.

That’s not a comforting thought.

Or maybe it is…

She *has* changed. But I can’t say I’m hating it. She used to look at me and it was like…I could see it in her eyes. She thought she was better than me. That’s the thing. That’s why I couldn’t stand her.

That’s gone now. She looks at me and she’s happy to see me. She missed me. I don’t know what changed. But sorry, I have to see that as progress.

Unless she does something really whacked, I’m gonna keep an open mind and hope she’d do the same for me.

We’ve both seen our share of how fair and impartial the Watchers Council can be. It may be under new management, but the rules haven’t changed. It’s still a bunch of lame guys using us to fight a war they don’t have the ass to fight themselves. They’re far from perfect.

Could be she told Giles to go get bent. It wouldn’t be the first time. And that totally fits the definition. It’s certainly not above them to ask for some pretty shitty stuff.

Yeah.

The little girl looms in my mind. And of course, she decides to hang out. Her and her ratty old quilt.
It’s time to switch subjects. I may as well ask, “So, what changed?” It’s the question of the hour. Maybe B. can distract me.

She whispers, “Nothing,” pausing to sigh. “And everything.” Her focus shifts when Maddie taps on the door. “Later, okay?”

I give in and nod.

*Great.*
Foundation: Scene 4

Four...

I’ve made some pretty crappy decisions in my life.

This isn’t one of them. I now know how cats feel when they lay in a pool of sunlight. Yet another burning question answered.

At least that’s one.

This room’s a trip. Not what I expected at all. I figured a massage table or two in a box with more plants. This is more like a high-end hotel room. There’s nothing box-like about it. The walls on either side are right triangles. The exterior glass and most of the ceiling is one quarter of a circle, set inside the triangles. It’s like being inside a bubble.

Clouds drift by. The sky has a wintery cast, but there’s still plenty of sunlight. I can see why B. likes it here. It’s almost the same as being outside minus the chill.

Actually, this sort of reminds me of a burger joint I used to go to back in Southie. They had a dining area that was similar, but not nearly as nice or high up. And obviously there wasn’t a bed.

This place is all about the bed. It’s the focal point of the room. Following the theme, it’s this huge round thing on a stepped platform that takes up most of the floor. It’s comfy. Add a few more plants and that’s pretty much the tour.

No wonder the staff’s so tight lipped. I bet this place is really popular with philandering execs. It sure beats the hell out of the local Motel 6. Course, things might get a bit sticky if the little missus comes in for a facial.

B. sits down next to me. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather…” she whispers. This is first time I’ve heard her actually sound nervous. It’s not a huge surprise that she doesn’t finish.

I reply, “Nah, it’s good. I’d rather be alone.” It’s funny, we’ve been together for a little over an hour now. Neither one of us has had a stitch on for most of that time. And she’s just now getting around to being nervous? If me nearly naked on a bed stresses her out, she seriously needs to stop giving me those looks.

It’s a pretty safe bet the looks aren’t going to end anytime soon. At least I hope they aren’t. I’ll take ‘lust’ over ‘contempt’ any day. But it might be easier if she was looking at my face. She’s not.

“Alright,” she replies. “But I feel it’s only fair to warn you.” This is just too weird. Her fingertips trail over the front of my robe. “Those rumors you’ve heard…” She pauses to contain a laugh and loosen the belt of my robe. So much for nearly. “The ones about my alleged goodness. They may’ve been slightly exaggerated.” She lays my robe open without even touching me.

I wish she would. She’s driving me nuts. But I guess that’s part of the game. I mumble, “I think I’ll live,” as I wriggle my arms free and roll over.

I may.

No thanks to Blondie.
She touches my shoulders with oily hands. It feels good. Between the mineral bath and the mud, my skin’s so dry it itches like hell. A massage is part of the package.

I bet Maddie wouldn’t torture me like B.’s gonna.

Nah, she’d be totally professional. And where would the fun be in that?

Enjoying the attention, I ask, “Care to answer my question now?” I don’t really want to ruin this, but if I can just get her talking…

She’s in no hurry. Actually, she’s more interested in my shoulders. It’s nice. Her touch is a lot firmer than I’d expect, given the size of her hands. But that’s not a surprise. What’s surprising is, after being hit by her so many times, I wouldn’t expect…

She knows exactly how to use her strength. Just enough. Not too much. She knows how to touch.

It never would’ve—

“Which one?” she replies.

Still pretty lost, I say, “The last—”

She doesn’t let me finish. “Look, I know you’ve got lots. I sure would.”

I kind of thought she’d just rub a little lotion in and call it good. She’s not. She stops to apply more oil. “Just relax. We’ve got plenty of time.” Moments later, her oily hands return to the small of my back. Using them both, she kneads my right side as she whispers, “Or I hope we do. But that’s really up to you.”

I’d be a fool to make her stop. I’m already pretty much a puddle, but this is just—

Even the oil smells good. It’s usually really sweet and flowery. This stuff isn’t. It’s got sort of a spicy smell.

She says, “You’re probably wondering if I’m the one Giles sent you after,” as she works her way down to my hip. Somehow, she finds that funny. But it doesn’t stop her. She speaks right though the snicker, “You may even be wondering if I’m really me.” Still concentrating on my right side, she moves back up my ribs. I feel a shrug translated in her touch.

Yeah, see, I knew I was right. At least she’s giving me credit.

“I could answer both of those questions for you,” she says. “But would my answers really matter? You’re gonna believe what you want.” She fills the gap with a sigh. “I guess we could call him.”

I hear the ‘wouldn’t that be fun’ in her tone and have to agree. “I think I’ll pass. I’ve had enough of Giles for one week.”

I wish I could see her face, but I’m pretty much stuck staring at a plant. At this rate she’s gonna put me to sleep. Giving up, I close my eyes and mumble, “But you’re right about all of that. Thing is, he knows I’m not a company girl.”

She stops caressing, making me fall silent. Her fingertips rest just below my shoulder. She’s looking at something, probably a freckle. It’s a reminder. This is an examination too. That’s one of the reasons she’s moving so slow.

When she starts back up, I finish what I was explaining, “I doubt he would’ve sent me if he didn’t
want whoever came to judge for themselves.” Her hands are getting dry again. I add, “So, we’ll assume there’s slack and run with it,” as she reaches for more.

If there’s any tension, it vanishes. I’m not even sure there was. Maybe it was just me.

She lays her hands on the right side of my ass. Now it really is me.

“Alright, that’s good. I don’t want to fight with you,” she says through another sigh. “I’ve had enough, Faith. I’m sick of fighting.”

I can tell. It’s a struggle just to breathe right. She’s not being rough, but as she works the muscle everything around it moves. It feels, uh…

“What changed?” she asks. I hope she doesn’t want anything. It’s comes as a relief when she answers herself, “Not a lot. Not like you mean.” She’s dangerously close to—

Worst part is, I know she’s not really trying. Thank God. She’s running out of slippery stuff. I may have time to figure out how to breathe again.

“Or I guess that’s what you meant,” she says and withdraws.

She may as well be speaking Russian or French or…for all the good it does. I hear what she says, but—

No clue. I’m way more concerned with resisting the urge to roll over and…

Impulse control still isn’t my strong suit. And it’s been—

Things clear up when she fills in, “Why the sudden gayness?”

Oh, yeah…that. Pity I’m not really worried about that now. But I should—

I may not get better chance, so I admit, “Yeah, that was part of it.” B.’s pretty much been a role model for straight chicks everywhere. The Beefstick was a complete trip, missionary position and all. He was definitely a major sign that she’d be switching teams soon.

Here I thought Red was safe in her role as the token ten percent. She may have to move over. We’ll call it twenty. I wonder how she’ll feel about that.

Swapping sides, B. crawls over me, without touching. Good. My brain may not melt. Any trouble I’m having putting things together really isn’t an issue. “There’s been no sudden anything. Not much has changed.” It’s not all that hard to keep up when all they do is repeat the same things. She snickers. I’m glad she’s having fun. “Just my perception.”

Her voice so soft, I nearly miss that last bit. It’s good that I don’t. That might be the most interesting thing she’s said so far. I could probably make an afternoon out of trying to suss out what she means.

Hopefully, I won’t have to. For someone who likes to talk, she can be a real pain in the ass to figure out sometimes.

When she goes for more oil, a few drops drip from her hands, splashing the base of my spine. I gasp in unison with her, “Oops.” No surprise. She sounds less than sincere.

This should be fun. I get to listen to more of her ‘business as usual’ speech while too warm oil
trickles down my crack. Thanks, B. You’re a peach.

She dabs at the oil with a towel, cleaning most of it up as she says, “It’s just…I don’t want to talk about the past. Kinda makes this hard, y’know?” Reaching over me, she pours more oil in her hands. The craning adds an edge to her voice when she finishes her thought. “I’m afraid I might say the wrong thing.”

That’s the last thing I want. It’s kind of hard to say ‘sorry’ when what you did was—

I was a little less direct about it, but I tried to kill her. And she tried to kill me. Somehow, ‘I’m sorry’ just doesn’t cut it.

It’s so weird learning forgiveness from a vamp. And how to deal with regret. Not what you’d expect, but couldn’t have asked for a better teacher.

And I couldn’t be sorrier if I tried.

“That’s why I tried to skip out on ya last night. I don’t want that either,” I reply. My voice is too funny. I barely sound lucid.

One of these days, we’ll have to talk, but now’s really not the time. I’m glad she thinks so too.

“’Kay,” she says. It’s funny. There’s relief in that one little word. That’s good ’cause, while I may be set for grunting, anything more complex could be a problem.

“Umm…lemme ask you this—and don’t worry, I don’t want an answer,” she says.

Will be a problem. She doesn’t stop at the top of my hip like she did on the other side.

This is really hilarious. I snicker. She’s completely wrapped up in explaining. And I’m completely wrapped up in not wanting to drool on the bed.

“How many guys have you been with in the last year?” she asks. An involuntary groan slips out. I try to catch it, but fail miserably.

I’m so screwed. What’d she ask?

I struggle to remember.

It’s gone. My body trembles. It’s as controlled as the groan. She seriously needs to stop that.

But I sure hope she doesn’t. Figures, she does. She moves up to the small of my back. I draw in a shaky breath.

When she asks, “Okay, now…how many more than once?” the first question comes back.

Oh, yeah. Gossip. We’re discussing my not-so stellar love live. ‘How many guys in the last year?’

Hell, I don’t know. Being a convicted felon seriously cut into my social life. Besides, I was under the misguided impression that Wood actually gave a shit about me.

Between the annoyance and the fact that she’s done playing with my ass for the moment, the fog clears. She asks, “Not that many, right?”

I shake my head. Not that many at all. Actually, just the one. I never cared much for romance. I should’ve—
She reaches for more oil, asking, “You ever wonder why that is?”

The thing that pissed me off the most about Wood was feeling like I’d been played. I wanted to kill him. But I’m a good girl now.

A good convicted murderer. Yeah, that fits.

She doesn’t let me dwell. I’d like to think, or I wanted to—I hoped—that when she got to my legs…

Yeah, this is worse. She might get another groan if she doesn’t stop that. See? I knew she could distract me.

Moving down, she says, “I can’t make a relationship last. I’ve really tried and they just don’t.”

I almost remember how to breathe. Oh jeez. She’s gonna expect me to roll over.

I’m had.

I guess I’ll worry about that when the time comes. Right now she’s concentrating on my calves and it feels good.

I feel kinda bad for her when she says, “It’s gotten to the point that I don’t even think it’s them.” It’s sad that all she wants is someone to care for. And someone to care for her. That shouldn’t be that hard.

Clearing her throat, she reaches across me again. She’s down to my feet. At first, she plays, trying to figure out if I’m ticklish. Hate to disappoint, but I’m really not.

She goes back to rubbing and talking, “You have to figure when people are looking, what they want is something familiar.” She shrugs. “Similar traits.”

Honestly, she could just stay there for a while. I swear I’d be fine.

Talk about your major life changes. It’s not been a week since I was sleeping in a gutted warehouse. Now I’m lying on a bed in some chic spa with Buffy Summers rubbing my feet.

I love having my feet rubbed. If the goal’s to turn me sloppy and useless, this might be the quickest way. But I think she’s picked that up.

I look down. She’s wearing nothing but a big ol’ grin. I’m not sure when she lost her robe, but—

What the hell am I doing? There could be actual drool this time and I—

“What’s actually similar to us?” she asks.

Huh.

Y’know, I really hadn’t considered that, but it’s smart. Rational even. Thing is, relationships are anything but.

She does have a point.

She starts the toe pulling thing. I grin and she moves on to the obvious stuff. “Well, if you want the scruffy face and other related parts, you’re pretty much stuck with vamps and a few demons. Until someone gets the bright idea to whip up some male slayers, that’s how it’s gonna be.” A hiss of a snicker escapes before she mumbles, “And let’s face it, things are already too interesting with just
the girls. I’m not sure we’d survive that.”

A few moments pass. Finally, she says, “I wonder if the kids would end up slayers,” pausing again to ponder. We both arrive at the same place. At about the same time. She’s just the one that has the nerve to say it, “Yeah, I’m pretty sure we wouldn’t. Survive it, that is. That’d just be bad. The last thing I want is to be responsible for creating the master race. Things are already screwed up enough.”

I’m over it. I was kind of on the fence, but I need to just get real. She sounds like B. Unless they managed a personality transplant…

I still don’t know what she’s doing in Ohio. But then, I’m not sure what I’m doing in Ohio, so we can just call that part even.

She gives up on my left foot and moves to the right, reaching for more oil in the process. And somehow, she picks up her train of thought. “Outside of the pulp paperback scene, demons just aren’t really known for romance.” I’m impressed. Thinking straight may not happen for me for a while. “Funny, they aren’t inclined to send flowers…especially to the enemy.” I turn and glance just in time to see the eye roll. “There are one or two exceptions, but—”

Completing the turn, I roll onto my side. The sun felt good on my back, but my robe’s starting to stick. And I may end up with a permanent terrycloth stipple if I don’t do something.

Propping my head in my hand, I move so I can see her. She’s completely unaffected. Somehow, I thought she’d be more modest. Mindlessly playing with my foot, she says, “Anyway, you see my point. It doesn’t end well. It really can’t end well.” Another one of those humorless laughs slips out and she grumbles, “If anyone knows that, it’s me.”

I remember when we first met. I wonder if she understood how much I wanted her to like me. I wanted to fit in. I sigh, hoping it sounds contented. Really, I am. This is nice.

I just tried too hard. And of course, I blew it.

I couldn’t have screwed up worse.

“I don’t ever want to wonder if I hurt someone like that again,” she whispers. She’s pretty much gone. Lost in her head. “Physically, not emotionally. That’s awful too, but physically is almost worse.” I turn onto my back, close my eyes and just listen. “Guys won’t tell you. Their egos get in the way.”

It surprises me when she moves my right arm, placing it across her lap. I want to touch her. When I don’t, she begins to caress it. “Next comes that thing where they act all intimidated. They try to hide it, but stuff just gets weird. There’s this feeling of inadequacy on their part. Like they can’t keep up,” she says and shakes her head. The movement transfers. I can almost see the eye roll, even though mine are closed. “That’s always fun.” She takes a deep breath. “In a really not kind of way.”

Yeah. That’s part of the reason I never bothered. ‘Get some, get gone,’ always worked for me. It’s comparatively low stress. But I can see the appeal of coming home to the same person, having them around to just hang with. I get it.

That life’s chock full of complications, but the pay off might be nice. That’s what I was hoping for with Wood.
And that went so well…

She stops to look at my tattoo. Tracing the pattern with her fingertip, she says, “There was this girl, one of the slayerettes. She was different, y’know?” She goes back to working moisture into my skin. “We started hanging out. She was totally into me. So I figured what the hell. I’m twenty-four.”

I snicker. It’s easy to see where she’s going with this. Why not screw up now?

And after a laugh, that’s exactly where she goes. “You’re supposed to make a bunch of stupid mistakes in your twenties, right? Be adventurous. Get it out of your system so you can be boring in your thirties.” She places my arm back at my side. Letting go a cold snicker, she snaps to the obvious, “Like I’ll make it to my thirties.” I’d be disappointed if she hadn’t. Neither one of us was supposed to see our sixteenth birthday. I think it annoyed them when we lived.

I, for one, plan to annoy them as long as possible.

Well, I wonder where she’s headed now. There’s only so much of me left to avoid. This should get interesting from here.

Oh, and she liked it. That’s why she’s here in this ultra-conservative, peanut butter candy loving, culturally deprived, backwater, bullshit town whose only claims to fame are P&G and a bad seventies sitcom that wasn’t even filmed here.

I smile when she says, “It was, umm…” She swallows. “Nice.” I open my eyes and give her a look. “Really nice,” she stresses, getting one of those goofy looks on her face. They never quite look goofy on her. Her smile’s still kind of pretty even if it is quirky. The smile fades and she admits, “No one’s touched me like that since—”

Huh. I wonder which ‘since.’

It’s cool. She can keep that to herself. I get the idea. The chick was in love. Sounds messy.

B.’s actually embarrassed. It’s about damned time. She hides her face. It’s cute. In a totally hot kinda way. She doesn’t need to continue, but I don’t stop her when she does. “I made sure she knew what was up before we went there.” Her hands drop to her sides. “That was just stupid, I know. Her having a clue didn’t make a bit of difference.”

I prop myself up, on my arms and say, “It’s cool, B. I think I get it.”

Shrugging, she says, “I felt awful, but what could I do? It just wasn’t that way for me.”

I’m not sure I should interrupt her again. I get that she feels bad, but— “There’s one thing I don’t get,” I say.

The big news is that she wants anything to do with me at all. It may take me a while just to get over that.

And that’s nothing. She really thinks we could work out? Again, I say ‘huh.’ And not in the normal, ‘I didn’t hear that,’ questioning sort of way, but in the flabbergasted, ‘I’m completely stumped by this’ way.

I have her attention. It might help if I said something. I clear my throat. It’s a solid stall tactic, but it doesn’t last forever. I force myself to ask, “Why haven’t you kissed me yet?”
Figures, I sound like complete shit. My face is actually hot.

“I’m not gonna,” she replies and my heart sinks. I turn cold so quick I almost miss the next part. “I need you to make the first move.” But I’m happy as hell that I do.

She gives me a warm, encouraging smile. “And if you do, I need it to be because you feel the same way.”

Huh.
What a day.

Expectations are pretty iffy things. They work about as well as rules. I figure if I have one, I’ll always get the opposite. Or close.

But that sounds suspiciously like a rule.

Really, it’s more of a system. An imperfect system that makes it a little easier to see my way clear sometimes.

Big disappointments are kind of rare when your expectations amount to ‘imagine the worst.’

It’s when I don’t know what to expect that things usually get fun.

And I get stressed.

I stare at the mirror, barely recognizing myself. The dress B. got me is pretty, tasteful, elegant… and about a dozen other things that really just don’t cover it.

I care so little about this stuff that I can’t even begin to describe it. It’s not sexy. Not really. At least I don’t think that’s what they were going for.

And if they hadn’t forgotten the back, they might’ve even succeeded.

Whatever.

I guess what I’m looking for is that it’s more formal than that.

That she got me into this damned thing is a miracle. Some girl at the spa did my hair and makeup. Talk about camouflage, I look like some rich, snobby bitch set for a night at the opera.

I can’t stand opera.

It’s weird. I could easily feel like some doll B.’s playing with, but I don’t. I never thought that for a minute.

Maybe it’s because she never acted that way. She’s been treating me like I matter. Like she really cares about me.

Thing is, you can play dress up all you want with someone like me. You’re not gonna change who I am.

I’m coal. No matter how much you polish me, I’ll never be a diamond. I think B. gets that.

Actually, she seems fine with that. This is the last thing I ever thought I’d feel, but I think she likes me the way I am.

She said she just wanted something different, a night out with some pleasant company and a good meal. She’d made reservations for us at some ritzy joint downtown.
They could use another name. Arnold’s just doesn’t cut it. That makes me think ‘fifties diner.’

And some better help. The waiter really wasn’t in it for the tip. Or it was figured into the tab. It’s pretty shitty when they do that.

I’m holding out for tomorrow night. She promised me beer and pizza. She even said ‘good pizza,’ but I’ll reserve judgment. People from California don’t know crap about good pizza.

No clue what’s up with that. Bread, sauce and cheese just shouldn’t be that hard.

I reach and pull the combs from my hair. It falls around my shoulders. I set the combs on my nightstand, scruffle my hair and grin.

Hopefully it’ll turn out better than tonight. It’s weird to think that might’ve actually been a date.

If so, it was my first. Figures I’d—

The expression on the waiter’s face when I tapped the bottom of the ketchup bottle was just too funny. It was being stubborn. He looked like he’d swallowed a bug.

B. offered to help. She was nice about it, so I let her. She got the stupid thing to pour without even trying. I don’t get how some people do that.

Maybe it’s just that I like to beat on things?

Imagine that.

It was cool, though. She didn’t even bat an eye when I poured ketchup all over my steak and fries. The waiter wasn’t impressed. We got the, ‘Is everything satisfactory?’ treatment.

It was more than satisfactory. I told him that it was the best damned steak I’d ever had. And I meant it.

Somehow that didn’t make things any better.

Taking a step back, I sit on the edge of the bed, unbuckle and slip off my shoes. It feels nice to be out of them. My feet are sore. I rub them one at a time and stare at myself in the mirror. It’s still a trip.

If B. was playing some sort of game, that probably wouldn’t have gone over well. I wasn’t looking to piss her or anyone else off. I just have this talent.

But he’s not the first person who’s ever looked at me funny ’cause of how I like my steak. I can’t help that ketchup’s good. He should leave me alone and just try it.

Actually, I don’t give a crap about him, I’m just glad she didn’t care. She seemed pleased that I enjoyed the food. And I guess that was the goal. Mission accomplished. I’m stuffed and that was damned tasty.

I stand and reach around to unhook and unzip my dress. It slips off me. I catch it and step out.

Laying it on the bed, I go for the hanger and plastic cover in the shopping bag B. gave me for my clothes.

Suppose I could try to write this off as lust. But that’d just be too easy. B.’s never had the hots for me before.
Besides, if all this is *is* just plain lust, I wouldn’t be alone right now.

She wants more than that.

Strange. So do I.

It isn’t like we both didn’t know the score. There were some looks…a couple touches, but really… she did alright. The problem was me. How messed up is that?

Guess that’s why she was so nervous. She wanted the help to handle it. And I can’t say that I blame her. That would’ve been lots easier.

But we had a few things to settle. And we kind of did, *so*…

I don’t regret my decision.

When it came my turn, I tried to be nice. It didn’t work out that way.

Yeah. There’s no such thing. I think she trembled more than I did. And her voice…

I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or—

I wanted her so bad. That ‘want’ turned into a serious ‘need’ as the day went on.

I feel like I’m gonna pop. After hanging my dress up, I flop on the bed. I *seriously* need to fix that. She’s gonna drive me to drink. Like that’d be hard.

Just knowing that she had on more jewelry than clothes really wasn’t helpful.

She wasn’t wearing that much jewelry.

I paid more attention to her than I did to my plate. At least I wasn’t the only one. I think she gets that a lot. She just kind of shrugs it off.

This is so weird when you consider our past. We flirted at first, but it was never anything more. Then things got—

And that’s *exactly* it. That’s the thing. You don’t hate like we hated and not—

There *has* to be something more.

And there is.

It’s strange to think that she could be right.

And I couldn’t be more wrong. This is all the opposite of what I expected. Yet somehow it’s not worse.

I close my eyes, remembering. It’ll be hard to shake this. She let me know how things are without being pushy at all. It was one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen.

She was rubbing the muscle and the tendon inside my thigh. It could’ve been nerves, but—

She wasn’t exactly looking at my face. Her throat moved. It was really slow. A thick kind of swallow. And her expression was just—

I shift my panties aside. No surprise, they’re damp to the touch. Everything’s so swollen and
tender. I never let myself get like this. It’s always been easier to just fix the problem.

I imagine how that might’ve felt. Her lips are so soft. There’ve been guys, lots of them, but even if they wanted to, I never let them go there.

I don’t know. It’s weird. That feels too intimate. That and they expect—

There’s no way I’m going down on some strange guy.

I didn’t have the nerve to say anything, to ask or whatever. I probably could’ve just guided her. I’m not sure, but I don’t think it would’ve taken—

A tingle runs down my spine, slow like sweat trickling over my skin.

What the hell am I thinking?

I jerk my hand away, but the tingle keeps coming. Shit!

Stop!

All of my muscles tense. My brain goes cloudy. I clench my fists, digging my nails in. The haze clears when I take deep breath. This can’t be the same. There’s just no way.

She’s not some guy. She’s not gonna fuck me, get off and go away. She’s gonna expect—

And I’m not sure I can do that. I’m not even sure what I want. I mean…

Fuck!

I know what I want, but I don’t know what it’ll be like.

How can I want something and not even know what it’s like? How do I even know if I’ll like it?

What if I hate it? What then? Will it just make things worse…”cause that’s exactly what I need? Groaning, I comb my fingers through my hair and make a fist.

It’s not like I don’t give a shit about her. But it’d be easier if I didn’t. What if I can’t handle this and it hurts her? What happens then?

Yeah, it’s a little late to worry about that now. I spent the whole day leading her on. I’m screwed.

Yanking my hands free, I put my panties back and spring to my feet.

My scalp hurts, but I couldn’t give a shit less.

I need to get dressed.

Hell, what I need is a cold shower.

And maybe an icepack.

God! I’m such a retard! It’s sad how I get myself into this shit. I don’t even have to try. It just happens.

Half-stomping, half-stumbling, I head for the bathroom, rinse my hands in the sink and dry them. My bag’s on the counter. Rifling through it, I pull out the first things I lay my hands on that aren’t made of denim or leather: sweats and a tee-shirt. I don’t give a damn what I look like. I just want
something on.

I glance at the shower and think better of it. Somehow ‘cold and wet’ holds less appeal since Cleveland. And ice—

Yeah, ice is a profoundly bad idea. I can only imagine what she’d do to me with ice. I’m not sure I could return the favor, but—

Funny how she always does this to me. Even when she’s not trying. I never know which way’s up. She spins me every damned time.

I stare into the sink. The water’s still running. I scoop up a handful and splash my face. Cold water drips off my chin and nose, running down my neck.

Screwed up as I am, that’s probably part of the attraction. I get off on—

There’s no makeup remover, so I just use soap to wash my face. As I scrub, the soap turns gray. I rinse and repeat. It’s a little better the second time around. After rinsing off, I stare at myself in the mirror. Of course, I look like a drowned raccoon. I should seriously try to fix that, but I don’t care.

Yeah, whatever…there’s no sense worrying about any of this now. It’ll keep till tomorrow.

What I really need is some shut eye before the fun starts again. Maybe my brain will even spin down long enough for that to happen. I’m not hopeful, but—

I rub my face dry, leaving black marks on the towel and toss on some clothes. When I finish, it’s like the makeover of the damned. Add some curlers and I could pass for poor white trash.

Fitting.

Leaving the bathroom, I turn the covers down and get into bed. It’s amazing how stressful de-stressing can be. I’m done.

Hopelessly horny, trashed and done. I snicker.

Trashed?

I could only be so lucky.

Reaching up, I grab the extra pillow. The fake body helps, but not nearly enough. I wish she was here.

And I s’pose that’s what’s important. That’s what I really want. I might even be able to get my head on straight if she was.

Yeah. The details will sort themselves out. They kind of have to. It’s not like we have much choice. And with any luck, we won’t kill each other in the process.

I thump the pillow and toss my thigh over it. For all my love of solitude, I don’t sleep worth a crap alone anymore. Imagining I can still smell her perfume, I twist my shoulders, reach and turn out the light.

I close my eyes, but that doesn’t last. My cell phone’s sitting behind me on the table by the patio doors. Stupid thing’s blinking. I try to ignore it, but it’s useless. The little yellow light flashes and I see the faint reflection on the wall in front of me.
Figures I walked out of here without my leash this morning. It didn’t even occur to me. Work’s really the last thing I want to think about right now. I’ve got enough trouble without their help.

Actually, I’ve got enough trouble because of their help. I didn’t come here on my own. All of this is pretty much bonus angst.

Thanks Giles.

I shut my eyes to block it out, but just knowing it’s there is enough to bug. I open them in time to see the flicker. I’m not gonna be able to sleep with that. Sighing, I stretch to flip the light on.

Odds are, any hope I had of getting a half-ass decent night’s sleep just went out the window.

It’s probably Wood wanting me to execute a Girl Scout troop or something. I just know those cookies are evil. They have to be. Nothing that addictive can be good.

I grumble, “I’ll get right on that,” as I slide across the bed. My feet hit the floor. I go straight for my goddamned phone. Big surprise, the message is from Giles. It says, ‘I warned you that there would be repercussions.’ And there’s a picture attached.

I open it and stare unblinking for a second or ten, trying to get my head around what I see. The picture’s really crappy. It looks like Giles used his phone to take a picture of another picture that was almost as bad.

A man hangs above the doors of the school. He’s dressed in red shorts and a stained white tee-shirt. I can’t see his face for the duct tape. And there’s a cardboard sign around his neck that announces, ‘Faith’s dead.’

My skin crawls.

When I blink, the phone pops in my hand. I look down expecting to see it. I still feel it, but it’s gone. Something hits my toe. I stare at a little, rectangular part. It’s wrapped in blue plastic. There are two wires, one red, one black, coming out of it with a tiny white plug on the end. On the blue part there’s a symbol, a drop and a hand. The hand has a chunk missing, like a little bite’s been taken out of its side.

My mouth hangs open. I close it, clench my jaw and look up. About halfway across the floor is the screen to my phone.

When I see it, I feel the pull on my shoulder. I threw my phone? Why’d I do that?

My stomach churns.

I need to see that picture again. There’s no way that’s right. I must’ve missed something. The drywall’s dented where my phone hit it. I look at the broken pieces strewn across the floor.

Acid stings the back of my throat. I swallow to keep from choking.

The picture forms in my head, the sign, his dark skin, the duct tape mask, the noose, his bloated belly, the crotch of his shorts. That part’s darker than it should be. It looked like a shadow at first, but—

I didn’t miss a thing. The knot in my gut tightens.

I sprint to the bathroom, drop to my knees and heave.
Chunks splash as I grab the toilet bowl and cling. My body shakes.

It lasts forever. I retch until there’s nothing left and collapse on the floor.

Drenched and freezing, I tremble.

The truth’s right there.

Some vamps develop a signature kill. Angel had his ‘make the girl crazy’ routine. Kill her pets, her family…anything that means anything. Spike had that stupid thing with the railroad spikes.

But I’m not sure how stupid it was. Having a railroad spike driven through your body…pick a spot—it’d suck.

Kako’s one twisted bitch. I’ve found more than one piece of her handy work. She likes to bite a guy’s dick off and feed from the wound.

Keeping the girls out of that was fun. Last thing we needed was for some newbie to stumble across one of her victims.

I could snow myself by saying that there are lots of black guys in Cleveland. There are, but there’s only one that means shit to me.

That was personal. He was wearing my name. He was strung up just like—

‘Repercussions’? Fuck you, Giles!

But why? I don’t get it. After that show…

Bastard totally faked me out. I thought for sure he’d fat-fingered the remote when the trunk popped too. Slick sonuvabitch even opened my door for me. I got in like it was nothing. He walked around the back and…yeah.

Fucker.

I didn’t even make it out of the car. Man, I was pissed.

So how’d Kako know?

No clue. But what does it matter? The fact is she did. And he did. And—

Shit!

Wood was the one who used to hassle us about staying in the barracks at night. The place was a goddamned school. He knew better! Best we could do was protect the place where we slept. That’s where everyone who wasn’t on patrol was supposed to be after dark.

But no…he just couldn’t stay put. That wouldn’t be any fun now, would it?

Stupid bastard!

I roll onto hands and knees and use the counter to pull myself up. I’m not standing so good. Bracing myself, I turn on the sink. My mouth tastes like shit. I rinse it, splash my face and rub the back of my neck.

Catching the doorframe to keep myself upright, I stumble into the room and pass through it. I’ll be
Alright, once I get outside. I nearly make it to the door. The need for a coat and some shoes stops me. I run around the room, collect stuff and bail.

I have no clue where I’m going. Some guy gives me a look when I stagger out my door. He thinks I’m drunk.

Not yet. Give me time. I find my legs and prove it, bolting down the hall. An elevator ride would just make me crazy right now. I shove the door open and jog down the stairs. Slowing down, I enter the lobby almost like a normal person. Bet I don’t look normal. Actually, I probably look sick.

That’s not a stretch.

At least I know where I’m going now.

Well, not right this minute. I need my shit. But I’m going back to Cleveland. And when I find that skank, I’m gonna—

Yeah, and going off half-cocked would just get me killed. First I need to get my head on straight. Right now what I need is a drink. I’ll worry about the rest tomorrow.

I push the door aside and get going. I make it halfway to the street before someone yells my name. Oh Christ! It’s B.

What the hell’s she doing here?

In no mood to deal, I spin around and she asks, “Where do you think you’re going?” Her hand’s on her hip. What reason does she have to be pissed off?

Shit! Her timing just sucks!

This is pointless. I turn and keep going, glancing back to reply, “Out.” It comes off a lot harsher than I mean for it to. I’m not mad at her. I just want—

Her heels click against the pavement. She’s coming after me. Like that ever ends well.

Stopping again, I face her in hopes of smoothing things over. “Look, B., I’m sorry. Not now, okay? I need some space.” I put my hands up to let her know I don’t want a fight.

She catches up, reaches into her shopping bag and pulls out a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag. “This kind of space?” she asks, passing it to me.

I don’t have to look. The bottle’s an obvious shape. I’ve definitely handled enough of them. It’s a fifth of Jack. That, or Jim Beam. Is it sad that I’m pretty sure it’s Jack?

A little.

“Yeah, I guess that’ll do,” I reply with a nod and she takes my hand.

Making a beeline for the hotel doors, she says, “C’mon.” I twist my hand free, but follow her anyway. “Can I get that?” she asks, motioning for the bottle. When I reluctantly give it up, she says, “It’s cool. You’ll get it back. I just—” Nodding at the entrance, she stashes the bottle in her bag before we enter.

It’s okay. I get it. These places don’t exactly like parties in the rooms. And that bottle wasn’t alone.
It clanked against another when she put it away.

“Fair enough,” I reply and follow her in. She hasn’t changed one bit since dinner.

Once we’re inside the elevator, she says, “I made it as far as my car.” That she has a car is news to me, but I let it slide.

She reaches into her pocket, pulls out her phone and hands it to me. It takes me a moment to figure it out. Her phone has this tiny little trackball thing on the side. It’s really weird. I find the list of text messages. Most of them are from Giles. Of course, I get curious, but the last one’s all she wants me to see. I read, ‘I was regrettably terse with Faith, but she must understand that her actions carry consequences for us all. You know what this means. Please see to it.’

The same picture’s attached. It didn’t improve with age. I hand her phone back.

As the elevator doors slide open, she whispers, “I’m sorry.” She leads me straight to my room and waits for me to open the door. That she knows exactly where I’m staying isn’t really much of a shock. Earlier this evening it would’ve thrown me, but now—

I just open the door. She slips past me when I lean against the wall in the entry hall next to the closet.

Ignoring the mess, she strides across the room and sets her bag down next to the table. All I want is that bottle. The pieces of my phone hit the trash as she makes herself at home. She places the bottle on the table.

It’s Jack. Standard black label stuff.

Yeah, that’s truly sad. I would’ve won the ‘Bourbon by Braille’ contest.

I cross the room and sit down. The second my hand hits glass, she says, “You have a decision to make.”

I really don’t see that, but—

She sets a wine bottle next to the Jack and steps back. “I get the need. Trust me I do, but—” she says, turning away and moving to the closet. “I need you sharp.” Her fur trimmed coat slips off her shoulders. She hangs it up while she explains, “They’re gonna be coming for you. If you really want to hurt these bastards, all you need to do is stay put.”

I pick up the bottle and ask, “So where’s the decision?”

“It’s simple,” she replies as I break the seal and unscrew the top. I start to take a drink, but she crosses the room and stops me, placing her hand over mine. “Wait. Please don’t,” she implores.

I glare at her. I don’t think she gets it at all.

She doesn’t let go. Looking a little desperate, she says, “I’ve only got one thing to offer. If you pour that out, I’m yours for the rest of the night. I’ll do whatever you ask.”

I don’t get why this is so important to her. I demand to know, “Why?” It’s not like I can’t fight with a buzz. There has to be something else.

She turns her back on me and walks away. “I just can’t deal with this,” she says, stopping at the far corner of the bed. “Every time something bad happens, you hide inside a bottle.” This sounds like
an intervention. Bile rises in my throat. Cocking her hip, she rakes her fingers through her hair. “I’m not gonna put up with—”

“Fuck you,” I snap.

She spins around and snaps back, “No!” Her eyes narrow. She’s mad as hell. Closing the distance between us, she rages, “You can’t expect me to stick around and watch you destroy yourself.” I turn my head, unable to face her. “I want more than that. I deserve more!” She puts her hands on my biceps and shakes me, forcing my attention. “Look, I’m either worth it to you or I’m not.”

She backs off, leaving me to pick up my jaw. Destroy myself?

I need some time to get my head around that, but she doesn’t give me any. At least she cools off a little. “I’m not asking you to be an angel. Like I said, I get the need. Tonight’s been bad.” She goes for her bag. A hiss of a snicker precedes her admission, “I need a drink too.”

So, she doesn’t want me to drink, but she wants to drink with me? Uh…

As she heads for the bathroom, I ask, “What exactly is it you want?” I’m out of patience and it shows.

She sets her bag on the corner of the bed before giving me an answer, “I’m just asking for you to follow my lead. That’s all.” She reaches back to unzip her dress. “Sorry. This thing’s making me crazy. It itches.” That last part’s completely offhanded. But I can see it. I’d probably be climbing the walls if I was still wearing mine.

But her dress is different. It looks really uncomfortable. It’s a little like the fancy lace tablecloths my grandmother used to use for special occasions but stretchy with sheer silk between. The lace just kind of strategically covers what it needs to. She pulls it over her head. It’s not covering anything now. She’s down to a light copper-colored lace garter-thong, nylons and heels.

And I’m down to one of the two things that really kept me from really enjoying dinner. Funny, I’m not mad anymore. All that anger just kind of slipped away. She spun me again.

It’s no wonder considering…

My body does all kinds of fun things when she bends and twists to lay her dress on the bed. “I have a couple of conditions,” she whispers. “I want you here in the room until dawn. And you’ll drink only what I pour for you.” She picks her bag. “Don’t worry. I just want my fair share.” She makes me feel like a complete push over, but offers don’t get much nicer. Glancing over her shoulder, she all but purrs, “Do that and I’ll give you whatever you want.” Leaving me alone to stew, she disappears into the bathroom.

When the toilet flushes, I feel sick. She shouldn’t have had to do that.

I stare at the bottle in my hands. It’s no mystery what she’s after. I know she’s read my file. There’s a solid family history of substance abuse. I’m not sure I qualify, but I can see the concern.

Fact is, she means well. And I get what she’s saying. I wouldn’t want to be with me either if—

So, let me get this straight…

I can either spend my night miserable and dwelling on a bunch of bullshit alone. Drink this crap and probably end up hugging the toilet again. That or doing something painfully stupid. Jack and me—we aren’t fast friends.
Or I can share a bottle of wine with her and…

Not much of a choice. Screwing the cap back on, I put the bottle on the table untouched and get up. My mouth still tastes like shit. I cross the room and lean against the wall to wait my turn.

She comes out a few moments later and I can’t help but laugh. Her white cotton Hooter’s cami leaves her stomach bare. I tease, “There something I should know?” She even has on the orange shorts. They fit her like a pair of boyshorts might. Bet this is what most guys wish Hooter’s girls really looked like.

Grinning, she says, “Oh, yeah. There’s a lot you should know.” She laughs. “But we’ll get to that later. You make a choice?”

Slipping past her, I reply, “I’m in. First thing, I want is a picture of that.”

When she says, “Oh, no,” I stop just inside the bathroom door and turn to give her a look. She a little freaked. It’s kinda cute.

I say, “Don’t get your panties in a wad, B.” But I doubt she’s got any on. “It’s for me. Last thing I want is for the gang to know that much about your tits.” I don’t wait for the eye roll. I’ve seen plenty of those. More than my share. Brushing my teeth sounds like more fun. The patio door opens while I take care of that. It makes me curious, but I finish up.

She crouches next to the interior door when I come out. Why there’s a water balloon hanging from my doorknob seems like the thing to ask. I don’t get there. After balancing an empty bottle on the doorknob, she points out a string and says, “The bottle falls—” She touches a sharp, knurled ring that hangs around the mouth of the balloon. It looks sort of like a lock washer. I’m not even sure what it is, but its purpose is clear. The string connects the ring and the bottle.

I finish her thought. “And the ring busts the balloon.” It’s a simple trap, but I still don’t see the point. “What’s in the balloon?” I ask, trying to imagine what you could put into a balloon that’d make a bit of difference. It’d have to be something that wouldn’t hurt us, which pretty much narrows the field.

Standing up, she replies, “Sunlight,” through a mischievous smile. “Well, sort of.” I follow her back to the table and she gives me the rest of the answer, “Will’s been trying to create artificial sunlight for years. She finally got it figured.” She sits in the chair closest to the corner. “It’s really hard to make or we’d be using it all over. She sends me a little every now and then.” Leaning to take something else from her bag, she concludes, “Call it peace of mind.”

That’s pretty slick. I guess we’re set for the rest of the night. I don’t bother to ask why it’s not glowing, but it seems like it should be.

I sit across the table from her. “Are you gonna—?” I ask, pointing at the bottle of Jack. She may have a point. I still want a shot.

She’s more interested in the box in her lap. “I trust you,” she replies.

Well, that makes one of us. I grab the bottle and get up. It hurts a little, but I unscrew the cap and pour. The whole experience can’t end soon enough for me. Really, it shouldn’t take that long to dump a fifth of whiskey. And I guess it doesn’t, but it seems like forever. The smell makes my mouth water.

Now I really need a drink. I chuck the empty bottle in the trash and wash my hands. It worries me that they’re shaking. My mom’s used to do that.
All the lights are out when I enter the room. There’s a candle on the table and two glasses of wine. I guess the picture can wait.

If I was smart, I’d probably just go to my chair. But I’m not smart. That’s not news. I’m over it. I have been for years.

She looks up when I get close. I place my fingers under her chin and gently lift as I lean in to give her a kiss. Our lips brush and somehow it all feels worth it. Just once. Not much more than she gave me last night. I need her to know. Her mouth tastes like raspberries and wine. It doesn’t exactly mix great with the toothpaste, but at least that’s cinnamon. Peppermint would’ve been—

None of that matters. She still sends a shiver down my spine. I pull away. She wants more. We both do. But that’s enough for now. Plenty in fact.

I have her full attention. She looks as needy as I feel. Shaking it off, she picks up a box that’s sitting next to her on the floor and passes it to me. “I thought this was kind of funny,” she says. The box is from the wineglasses. I glance at the words, ‘tenth anniversary,’ printed on it as she fills in, “But it’s not like I had lots of choice. Something to sleep in was about the same story.”

I set the box next to my chair. Point taken. Shopping after midnight here has its limitations. I pick up my glass, taking a sip before I inspect it. I think the wine’s the same stuff from last night. It tingles on the way down. I might even get a buzz. The bowl of the wineglass is cut to look like a flower. Lack of a choice aside, it’s kind of pretty. “I’d say you did alright,” I whisper and set it down.

She smiles.

So I can have anything I want. I’ve already been over this once tonight. I’m not sure what I want. Or I’m sure, but—

“What do you want?” I ask. For an impulsive question, it’s not half bad.

“World peace,” she replies, brandishing a sunny smile. Too bad her answer’s less than stellar. I feel like I should be humming Miss America, but B.’s just not that vacuous.

I shake my head and say, “That’s not something I can give you,” unable to hold back a grin.

Lifting her glass, she whispers, “You,” and takes a drink. Maybe it’s her answer or maybe it’s the tone of her voice. Doesn’t really matter. One of them or both sends another shiver through me. I flinch and she gives me a funny look.

When my brain reengages, I counter, “Why?”

She replies, “That’s a little more complicated.” So is she. It’s strange how she changes one moment to the next. She continues her thought, even though I’m lost in my own, “I explained part of it earlier. Most of it, actually. But I think what you’re asking for is ‘why now,’ right?”

Nodding, I add, “Yeah, and why here of all places?”

“Because it was easier for me to come to you,” she whispers. The nervous tension builds. “I don’t want you to hate me. I’m just afraid—” She has another drink of wine instead of finishing her thought. That seems like a fine idea. I join her.

At least the toothpaste taste is pretty much gone. This isn’t half bad. Swirling the wine in my glass,
I try to reassure her by saying, “I don’t hate you.” But again, I just can’t leave it alone. “Not anymore, at least.” Not that that’s bad. But it would’ve been better left unsaid.

“You might,” she replies and looks away. Her throat moves. It’s another one of those thick swallows. Maybe that was just nerves? She whispers, “I played you. You’re here because I wanted you here.” No, I’m here because Giles sent me here. I don’t bother. She can finish. “Really, you’re here because I thought it’d be good for both of us. This isn’t just about you, y’know?”

I guess.

She says, “Look, Faith, this isn’t easy.” And she was doing so well up till now. I was cooling off. Getting comfortable. Those words have never been followed by anything good in my experience. I’ve heard them a lot. They’re supposed to soften the blow. Maybe generate a little mutual sympathy. They just make me cringe. I hate the fact that she said them.

I take another sip of wine to wash away the bitter taste as she goes on. “I know what happened in Cleveland.” Part of me wants to ignore her, but I stick it out for morbid curiosity’s sake. “That thing I told you last night. The thing I told Giles. I was talking about both of us. All of us, actually. All of the Sunnydale alumni. We’re all—” She clears her throat instead of saying ‘fucked up.’ That’s okay. I got that blank covered. “It’s scary that we’re leading this—whatever it is. We all need a vacation bad.”

Sad part, when she finishes, I have to agree with most of what she said. Knowing that she doubted my ability to handle a situation isn’t easy. And she’s right, I’m not overjoyed.

She glances at me, checking to see how I took it. I give her nothing in return. She shakes her head as I lose my glass. Holding onto it’s bad. The stuff’s not horrible at room temp, but any warmer and it’d just be nasty. “I tried to talk sense. Get Wood to send someone else. I got the obvious ‘who else do you suggest?’ There wasn’t anyone,” she says.

“What makes you think I needed your help?” I ask, letting the anger come through in my voice.

She replies, “It’s not that I thought you couldn’t handle it.” She springs to her feet. It’s funny, even in that silly outfit, she still pulls off threatening. I’m not even sure it’s her goal, but she puts me on the defensive. “That’s not what this is about. I don’t doubt you for a second. I know if this falls apart, neither one of us would—” Smart girl. She holds her tongue and takes her seat.

Drawing in a deep breath, she gets back on point. “It’s that I knew it would screw with you.” She gives me glance, locking eyes for just a sec. “I know it’d screw with me. I couldn’t think of another single soul who could handle that and not—”

She pulls legs up to her chest and hugs them. Now she looks really small. “There wasn’t anyone else,” she says. Her voice is small too. It gets smaller when she adds, “I felt like suggesting Wood, but—”

When she falls flat, I supply, “Dumb son of a bitch would’ve just gotten himself killed.” The statement makes my blood curdle. That it’s true makes it worse.

There’s this thing about kids. They’re more agile than adults.

Actually, it’s a couple of things. There’s the sympathy too. I’ll never admit it, but I was lucky to walk out of there alive.

“That wasn’t your fault. Wood was—” I hear the words and want to scream. That’s what she’s supposed to say. I’m just glad she doesn’t finish.
I can’t believe the asshole’s dead. Her saying that only makes it more real. I set my jaw, biting down instead of—

She considers what to say next. Or maybe how to put what she has to say. Who knows?

Who cares?

There’s a list of things that make this shitty. Shittier than usual. Things like this are never easy, but—

At the top of that list is how he died. His death might not be on me, but how he died…

Picking up her thought, B. says, “Wood put himself alone in a room with Spike.”

A tear slips down my cheek. I wipe it away with a trembling hand. My face is wet. I open my mouth and croak, “Stop,” but she’s already on it again.

“Can you think of another single human being who could be so tragically stupid? Spike’s not—”

I give up. Any more would just draw attention. And I’m pretty sure I don’t want that. What I want is to dig a hole. I want to fall into it, pull the ground in on top of me and go to sleep…forever.

Completely unaware, she goes for the obvious, “We’re pretty evenly matched. The only reason Wood walked out of there alive is because Spike let him.” She turns to toward me and I hang my head. My bangs fall in front of my face. I just hope she doesn’t notice. She mumbles, “And Spike let him go…” Her voice loses strength as she firms up.

Taking her glass, she stands. Her movements are really deliberate. It’s like she doesn’t want to alarm me. I can feel the debate. She knows I’m crying. What she chooses to do about it is walk away. I’m not even sure why, but I’m grateful. She sits on the edge of the bed farthest from me and says, “Anyway, when Wood wouldn’t listen, Giles and I started trying to figure out what to do. How to help. I came here to be close to you and—”

Clearing her throat, she whispers, “I’m sorry.” Her glass makes a faint clinking sound when she sets it down. I rub my eyes and look up. My hands are still shaking. “We both knew you wouldn’t come without a mission, so—” her voice catches “—he lied to you for me.” She probably thinks I’ll hate her for that. I suspect she’s crying too. When she adds a second apology, “I’m so sorry,” I hear it in her voice. “I wish there’d been another way. I was just worried about you.” She wipes her eyes. “Please try to understand. I needed to know you were safe.”

I really want to be mad. I have every reason in the world, but I don’t think I have it in me. I feel so numb. And really, this is just more of B.’s brand of caring. She’s never been good at letting things go.

I guess that’s lucky for me. I have every reason in the world, but I don’t think I have it in me. I feel so numb. And really, this is just more of B.’s brand of caring. She’s never been good at letting things go.

I guess that’s lucky for me. I wasn’t done. I’m still not done. Not by a long shot. But without her, I would’ve just kept going until—

That might’ve been me hanging there instead of Wood. I can think of better ways to go.

At least this way I can get my head on straight before—

Like that’s gonna anytime happen soon.

Well, I’m done leaking. I wipe my eyes and go to splash my face. When I return, she’s curled up on the bed. I kick off my tennies and slide in behind her. She pulls the covers over us as I wrap my
arms around her.

It’s so strange. The numbness is literal. I feel her move, but—

She turns onto her back. There’s a question in her eyes.

“Just hold me,” I whisper. “That’s all I want.”

I think I’ve had enough for one day.
Six...

White, frilly curtains billow in the warm breeze, reverse shadows in a dusky room.

I lay on my side, curled up on the end of the bed, watching her. She lounges in a corner chair, doing the same. Her hair’s darker than I remember. She has on a thick, white turtleneck sweater that extends to her mid-thigh, dark jeans and suede boots. I wonder why she’s dressed so warmly. It feels nice in here.

Neither one of us has spoken, but that’s fine. She still doesn’t need to talk.

This must be what comfortable silence is like. I’ve never found silence comforting before. Not when I’m with someone. Talking about something, anything, even if it really amounts to not much at all, passes the time.

Lightning flashes outside the windows on either side of her chair. This room must be at the corner of a house. I’ve never been here before, but it feels like home.

Thunder crackles in the distance. The silence afterward doesn’t last. She whispers, “You know one of us has to go, right?”

I wish it’d lasted. Silence was better.

“I know,” I reply. I’m not even sure how I know. Strange how something can simply feel true. There’s not a shred of supporting evidence. I just know in my gut that she doesn’t belong here. The fact that I don’t like it is pretty much meaningless. “I wish you wouldn’t,” I add, hoping it’ll matter.

“It can’t be helped,” she replies and I know that’s true too. I hate it, but—

The storm’s moving fast, getting closer. Gentle breezes become violent gusts. Curtains swell and shadows churn. Brilliant pulses drown out the twilight. There’s something not quite right about them. The light should be white. Maybe it’s the walls that aren’t white? Lit up they look like pages from one of Giles’ old books, minus the chicken scratches.

Now they’re just gray.

She rises to her feet, saying mid-stretch, “A storm’s coming.” I don’t know why she says it. It’s not news.

I try not to snicker. I can’t help it. B. looks nothing like Linda Hamilton. The laugh catches in my throat, broken off by more ripples of light. It has an orangey cast now. And the thunder doesn’t sound like thunder at all. It’s hollow. Each report resonates. So concussive, I expect to smell gunpowder. All I smell is her.

Really, it’s a blend of us. Faint traces of her perfume and shampoo…and my body wash mingle with the musky smells of sweat and heat.

Where’s the cold? If this really is a storm like she said, the temperature should be dropping, not climbing. I could be wrong about the smell. That may just be me. But she’s dressed for a part in
**Northern Exposure**, yet somehow she hasn’t even broken a sweat.

She takes a step towards me, a flash goes off and I freeze. Strobes of light echo her progress. My heartbeat quickens. Every footstep reports with a clap. I wish she’d stop! As the sounds get closer together and the flares grow brighter, redder and more intense, the color washes from her hair. When she reaches the bed, the claps have become one solid roar and the light…

Fiery light pours in through the windows behind her, obscuring her face. A fine, smoky haze distorts the borders of the room.

What the hell’s wrong with her? She didn’t even notice that her little stroll teleported the house from the Midwest to the Sudan. Or somewhere beneath Jerusalem. Whichever…we’re not in Kansas anymore.

She sits down next to me, like nothing’s wrong. Reaching out to caress my cheek, she says, “I envy…” Her voice muddies. I can’t make out a single word. The rumbling’s just too loud.

Her hand moves to my neck. She leans in. I see her lips move now. Intently watching them, I long to hear what she says. Blonde hair haloes her face. It smells like wildflowers.

Her breath tickles my ear when she whispers, “I love you.” Hearing her voice comes as more of a shock than what she says. If I stopped to think…

I draw in a ragged breath. The racket fades to static as I let it go. Am I going deaf?

No, I heard her voice. It must be getting better.

Warm and moist, her lips caress the cleft of my ear and suddenly I don’t care. The light’s so intense now I have to shut my eyes. Even behind closed lids, it’s not dark.

Moving down, she nibbles my earlobe and kisses my neck. I wrap my arms around her, interrupting the kiss. Her skin’s so soft. I wonder where her sweater went. Her head comes to rest on my shoulder as I turn onto my back.

Lacing her fingers through my hair, she cups the back of my head. Her other hand strokes my thigh. She rolls on top of me, parting my legs with her knee. I touch the small of her back. My hands creep lower. It’s getting harder to move them. I should probably be worried, but I just make do.

And the way this feels…it’s worth every ounce of effort.

Our lips meet, but she nips and plays. When I reach up with my right hand, wanting to end the tease, her lips crush against mine. My nails dig in reflexively and she mashes into my crotch. I’m so soaked, her thigh slides against my pussy.

Pulling back, I whimper.

How long have I been naked?

She forces her tongue between my lips. Her mouth tastes sweet, like she’s been eating candy.

I relax my grip on her ass and she shifts her weight. Her hold on my thigh loosens. Funny, I didn’t even notice it.

She moves so fast I couldn’t stop it if I tried. Her fingertips skim over my clit, slip between my vulva, and push inside me. I almost flinch, expecting it to hurt, but it doesn’t.
Just the opposite.

She thrusts, using her whole body to deepen the stroke.

I groan, but there’s no sound. I remember now. There’s something wrong.

Light fills my closed eyes. My arms lay limp at my side. Even with all my strength, I can’t move them.

But she’s moving just fine. She leaves a trail of kisses down my throat. Her body writhes against mine. Flies buzz in my ears. Her fingers plunge and retreat.

I should be quaking, but nothing happens. It’s like everything I can do—

All that I am…

…is buried.

Buried?

That’s sort of it, but not. Being buried would involve gravity. All of the pressure would come from one side. This isn’t that.

Her weight lifts and I barely notice. She bumps my arm. The damned thing moves easy enough for her.

What the fuck’s wrong with me? Being crushed from all around seems like it should hurt.

It doesn’t.

Maybe it’s what she’s doing? Pain and sex don’t exactly mix.

Well, they mix. They mix great in fact, but—

And why not her? How’s she so special? She can still move. She proves it by nibbling, licking and sucking a path to my right nipple.

With everything else, it really doesn’t seem like I should feel that.

I do.

Breathlessly, I struggle. My lungs won’t work.

Yeah, I’m putting up one hell of a fight. I lay perfectly still, but my whole body crawls. Now if my brain would just explode, we could call it a day.

Her thumb presses into my clit. The pace she sets is slow, but very firm. Long, deep strokes with a harsh push at the end.

This must be what it’s like to be shrink-wrapped.

I never wondered what that’d be like.

Good to know. Thanks!

Her mouth closes over my nipple. She drags her teeth over the tip.
Noiselessly, I gasp. No air comes.

This isn’t making me any brighter. And Lord knows I need—

She pads her teeth with her lips and clamps down. Her tongue curls around the tip, flicking, striking…

Scarfing’s one kink I never got, but I can sorta see the appeal now. My brain’s past mush. We’re to the point where I’ll be lucky to drool once for ‘yes’ and twice for ‘no.’

I can’t see how she doesn’t notice. She moves and it moves me. I don’t move on my own. I should be panting, crying, begging. Hell, an ‘Oh God’ would sure sound nice right about now. It’d be appropriate. I hang on right on the edge of a nervous collapse or a mind-blowing orgasm. Tough call. It’ll probably be both.

Mind-blowing’s right. Blood dribbling out of my ears wouldn’t seem out of place. If I’m lucky, I’ll just pass out.

I lost track. She’s moved on. Her hair drags over my ribs. She kisses my stomach.

Her hand moves in a tight orbit, crushing and pulling away. The rhythm is faster now, but just as firm.

She’s so close now. Her chin scrubs my pubes. Breaking contact, she whips her hair back. Her thumb lifts and her fingers slip free.

I don’t have to see her move to know. I can feel.

I need. The list is too long to go into.

I’ve stopped trying.

It’s so weird. Out of place. She kisses the back of my hand.

When she touches me again, it’s amazing. Another finger joins the slippery mass. It’s stubby, but so thick. She stretches me open.

And I was right about her mouth. I expected some sort of warning, a preamble, like a test lick or something, but she doesn’t screw around. A cool breath blows over my pussy as her mouth envelopes it. I’d shudder if I could. Her tongue sweeps across my folds, swirling, turning, and slashing up. She parts my lips, thrashing my clit.

The pressure lifts.

My ears pop as I draw in a starved breath and cry out.

The relief’s so fleeting. I open my eyes. Fire blazes all around me, lapping my skin.

As I stare into the raging inferno, my body goes numb. They say that happens. That it’s agony to burn to death, but it doesn’t last. There’s too much stimulation. A fatal case of T.M.I. The brain just can’t take it. It overloads, nerve endings sear and there’s no more pain.

Where is she?

I lift up and look down, peering through the flames. We lay on a bed of coals. I expect to see charred flesh, but neither one of us has a single burn. Her bangs are clumped and plastered to her
Our foreheads touch. The lower half her face is nestled between my thighs. We’re both drenched with sweat. Flames reflect off of our wet skin. It’s a really glamorous look.

But honestly, I don’t think I’ve seen anything more beautiful in my life. She said she loves me.

What I can see of her face is kind of pinched. But that’s an awful way to describe it. The little lines around her eyes are kind of cute. She’s lost. The only thing that matters to her now is me.

She notices me watching. When our eyes meet, my body wakes up. She draws a tight circle with her fingers, pressing up with the pads. I gasp. Ripples of pleasure wash over me.

Her hand lurches to life, stabbing inward. I shut my eyes and throw my head back. My elbows dig in, causing my back to arch. I cling for all I’m worth, balling the coals up in my fists. They’re so soft. It makes no sense, but it’d be a serious waste of time to ask why. I’ve got my hands full just dealing with her. What she’s doing is...

I feel it all, her lips, tongue and hands. One of her arms—the left one, I think—is threaded under my thigh.

That’s the real trouble, I can’t think. I’m doing well just to feel.

Her left hand’s locked around my hip, holding me down, keeping me from trembling away. The right one pounds an erratic rhythm inside me. Her lips press into tender flesh. They’re soft too, but firm. She suckles my clit. I even feel her breath. She pants greedily between lashes with her tongue.

She finally gets her ‘Oh God.’ At least, I think that’s what it was. I’m not the one in control. She is.

It’s funny. I don’t think she wants me to cum. This feels so clumsy, but that’s the last thing it is. She pushes hard and fast for just two strokes, then slows down for the next three and turns around to pound me again. Three, then two, then two, then three. Each set’s a little different. She varies pressure and speed, playing me like an instrument.

If she wants me to beg, I don’t disappoint. She gets the full show. I’ve never been fucked with such inept precision. Maybe that’s been the problem all along. She’s evil.

My head throbs. There’s so much pressure. All of my muscles are locked. I shake like I’m dying. My body’s on fire.

Uh...

I find the strength to open my eyes. The fire surrounding us isn’t as intense. There’s less churning ash and smoke. I can see through it now. The walls and ceiling are gone. As far as I can tell, we’re just hanging here.

It figures…while I’m having one of the best fucks of my life, Satan’s interior decorator moves in and remodels the room. That’s just my brand of luck.

Oh well, she should feel right at home.

I stare into the distance, debating the pros and cons of consciousness. I could be missing something really good. Or I might just find the perfect reason to be humiliated when I open my eyes for real.

It’s a crapshoot. I think I’ll hang. Being on the edge of sleep like this feels good. What she’s doing feels better. Or maybe all of this is just a fantasy and I’m stewing in my own juices.
Either way, I’m in no hurry.

A speck catches my eye. It draws closer and attracts friends. Burned scraps of paper swirl in the fire.

Two of the frail slips touch and their edges knit together. More pieces get caught in the dance. They fill the gaps and two tattered sections become one.

At first I don’t get it. It’s just gray chunks of ash, fluttering around. But then, colors bleed through and part of a picture takes shape.

Okay, so…it’s a brick wall. Why’s that important?

I follow a section, watching it merge. Its edges are torn, white and ragged. When it joins with the whole, they blend, leaving a glossy finish behind.

All this fire and my blood goes cold. I may actually be losing it. I take it back! I want to wake up.

That’s great! Now if I only knew how. I have no idea.

The torn photograph flattens, enlarges and expands. When all I can see is it and the fire, the picture comes to life.

Wood’s legs twitch. He kicks the wall. It’s probably just a death throe, but it swings him on the rope.


Some strange girl hisses in response, “Fuckin’ worthless little twat.”

Kid’s got some serious anger issues.

And a foul mouth.

I look down. That’s no kid. Kako approaches my position. She’s hard to miss. Her waist-length black hair fans out behind her, whipped by the breeze. She wears a red cocktail dress that makes her look like she’s dressed in her mommy’s clothes. I don’t know the story, but she must’ve been turned pretty young.

Really, she looks like a strong gust would carry her away until you get to her face. The pointed ears work, but the rest—

She’s got a permanent case of game face. There comes a point when it just never goes away. Makes me wonder if that happens over time or if one day they change and they can’t change back. Kind of adds a new twist to that tired parental line, ‘You keep doing that and your face’ll stay that way.’ I can see some sire—

I find a snicker…somewhere, though there’s nothing funny here.

Her nose is the worst. It must’ve been really smallish ’cause all that’s left are a few ridges between her big dark eyes and two slit-shaped nostrils.

It’s a real head-turner.

And that was no response. She doesn’t even know I’m here. But the stupid little cunt was talking about me.
I hadn’t even heard her till now. I wasn’t missing much. She may look like she’s twelve, but she’s got a voice like she’s six. It’s creepy.

I’m surprised she got her hands dirty over this. I must’ve really pissed her off.

Is it sad that all I can think is ‘good’?

Wood’s still a dumb motherfucker. A past tense ‘dumb motherfucker.’ Doesn’t matter how you slice it. Screwing with a vamp who needs four small rectangles in the space where it says ‘age’…

For me, that’s not smart, but for someone like Wood, it’s absolutely insane. Still flips me out how he died, but B.’s right, the fact that he had a death wish isn’t my problem.

Kako passes beneath me and I turn around, expecting to see the vacant field across from the school. It’s weird enough that I’m floating in midair inside a huge fireball. But when I face the other way, I’m standing on the rough wooden floor of an abandoned building. The only thing that doesn’t change is the fire.

The place is similar to my last two-one-six address. The corner I stare into has bare, grungy red brick walls. Decades worth of black dirt and ruddy brown fuzzy dust rests on globs of mortar that squeezed through between the bricks when they were laid. The ruddy brown comes from the tattered insulation that drapes from the rough beam ceiling.

Off to my right are the remnants of a few modernish offices or storerooms. It’s the wallboard that makes me think ‘modern.’ The drywall cubes look like ruined building blocks. They’re a little out of place. What makes them fit is they’ve been shredded by looters looking for copper scrap.

It’s a classy place. Lots of room to move around, but so disgusting and busted up the only moving around you wanna do is just what it takes to leave.

Leaving sounds awfully good. I don’t have a stitch on. And I still feel B. I’m not gonna look down. Seeing her kneeling between my legs…

This feels messed up enough. I don’t need the visual.

Gaps in the rotted gray floor boards bring back fond memories. They let the chill in and rats out. Makes sleeping in places like this lots of fun. And the image of B. that much more disturbing.

All this really narrows it down. There are hundreds of these places in the Greater Cleveland Area. And we need to narrow it down.

Soon!

A stack of crates sits between the corner and the new construction. They’re marked with every single symbol you least want to see in the hands of a psychotic, ancient vamp who’s bent on your destruction. It’s a fun picture. Words like ‘caution’ and ‘explosives’ are stenciled on some of the crates. Others just have the red diamonds you see on gas tankers.

And here I am standing in a fiery maelstrom. If this was real, any issues would sort themselves out. And level a few city blocks in the process.

Suddenly, I’m not alone. This cake really needed some icing. The room fills with uppity white boys. They materialize out of nowhere one at a time or in small groups. It only takes a few seconds and I’m surrounded.
The only real icing here is that they don’t notice me. Half the residents of Elkton could’ve just dropped in and it wouldn’t look much different.

Well, no one’s wearing prison O.J., but that’s minor. The major is the sea of muscle-bound, bald-headed dipshits sporting jailhouse tats and bandannas.

Glad this is a dream. I’d be so screwed.

Kako yells, “I’m done fucking around,” drawing their attention. She stands on the highest crate. The boys cheer.

She raises her talons to call for order. The hands and feet are the first things to go when vamps outlive their expiration date.

Someone seriously needs to fix that.

When the commotion dies down, she says, “Bring me the head of a slayer and you’ll join me. I’m granting your wish, boys. You can be like me. And the one who brings me the head of Faith Lehane will sit at my right hand.”

Now there’s a real treat. All the baby rapers in the room will be lining up to fill that vacancy.

Who am I kidding? As whacked as these boys are, they might just think she’s a prime piece of ass. The Aryan tats I notice here and there are even more icing. This picture just keeps getting better and better. Now we have Nazi skinheads with bombs and god knows what else bent on our destruction.

Yay!

She jumps down and the idiots make way, clearing a path for her as she leaves. One of them passes right through me. It’s completely cringe-worthy. After that, I avoid them, dodging and weaving to reach the open aisle.

Bitch has a real flair for the dramatic. She stops in the open bay door, glances over her shoulder and barks, “Now get to work!”

I roll my eyes and almost miss the surge. As the boneheads rush the crates, they depart with less grace than they entered. The room comes apart.

My eyes snap shut against blinding light. That doesn’t end the barrage of images. They appear so fast I can’t even keep track.

A deafening roar fills my head. I bring my hands to my ears to block it out and snap upright in bed. The splitting headache makes me queasy, but at least I’m awake.

At least I think I’m wake.

My right hand goes from my ear to my mouth without being told. It really doesn’t help that my fingers are sticky and smell like pussy.

I’m awake.

I let both hands fall to my lap. Worst case: I puke and piss off the maids.

The dream ended with the usual montage of faces, places and things. I open my eyes. Y’know, it’d
be helpful if whoever the shitheads are who choreograph these things would show me the backs of the flashcards too. ’Cause as it is, I almost never figure out where any of the shit fits until after the curtains are closed.

All that takes a solid second to…

B. sits at the end of my bed, hugging her legs and looking horrified. Her eyes are glassy with unshed tears. She finds the nerve to look at me and a stream of ‘I’m sorrys’ pours out. The second round gets a ‘so’ tossed in for good measure and the third an ‘Oh God’ before just for fun.

I get it. ‘She’s sorry.’ I just don’t get what for.

I consider breaking up the repeat-o-girl act, but she snaps out of it on her own. “It looked like you were hurting yourself. I just—” she mumbles, planting her forehead on her knee.

No clue what she means, but I’m not exactly with it, so…

As I mull things over, a couple more pieces of the dream crop up. There was a digital display with four places that all read zeroes and about four or five different gargoyles. Weird, creepy little guys. One of them had water coming out of his mouth.

Helpful stuff.

It takes my mind off B. while it lasts. She’s a totally different story. A truly disturbing story. She’s falling apart like she thinks she hurt me. Or I guess that’s it. I just don’t see how she gets that. It’d be great if she was the only one. I might stand a chance of getting it figured and help her out.

But—

I’m way too screwed for that. My head feels like a balloon. A big, throbbing, aching, ‘about to pop or float away’ balloon. And no wonder. That was my first erotic nightmare. I really didn’t think those two things mixed.

And they really, really don’t.

The P.T.B.s just had to stick their noses in and make things that much worse. Or I guess that’s how that works. Whatever.

However.

Stupid slayer dreams are so real. You’ve got no control. Whatever it is—whoever it is that runs that show—they don’t let up till you’ve seen the credits.

I may need therapy.

What I should do or say’s kind of a mystery, but I need to make her understand so we can fix this. Digital numbers—never a positive sign.

Not exactly cryptic either.

Giles has to get the girls out of that place. I could just say that, but she’d think I’m crazy.

I may be, but that’s so not the point.

My head hurts like hell and moving just sucks, but I’m not as sick at my stomach anymore. I slide to the end of the bed, reach out and cup her face in my hands. I have to coax her to meet me
halfway. A few gentle shushing sounds when she opens her mouth and a request, “Kiss me,” do the trick.

It’s completely messed up. Another mystery, but—

I smell better on her than I do on me. And the taste…

It’s really faint and I really don’t expect it. But it’s also pretty unmistakable. I guess she—

So that part of the dream was real?

Or close?

Or—?

Hell, I dunno, I guess it must be something like that. I can’t even imagine, but this isn’t your standard morning breath unless I’m really missing something.

On her the combo brings another issue sharply into focus: my pussy hurts almost as much as my head. And that’s seriously saying nothing good. She might have a point.

I let go. I’d really like to keep this up and see where it leads, but right now…

She doesn’t look upset anymore.
Y’know…maybe it’s all the Saturday afternoons I spent in front of the tube, but I got the impression that walking a gauntlet would be a little less twisty.

And there’d be lots less climbing involved.

I raise my foot to the next tread. It lets out a threatening groan when I apply my weight. Doesn’t help that I’m loaded down like a mule. As I creep forward and up, my duffle scrapes either the wall or the column the stairs wrap around. It’s a real drag. The only place I have room for the stupid thing is at the corners where the steps are triangular.

Thank God there’s room there. I’d have gone over backwards a couple turns ago. And I’m not exactly clumsy.

I thought spiral staircases were supposed to be round. This stupid thing’s square, like it’s built into an old elevator shaft. But it probably predates the elevator enough to be declared either a national landmark or a serious code violation. My opinion leans toward that last thing.

But really, these stairs aren’t even the fun part. They’re nothing but another obstacle course. I’ve seen plenty of them. Which leads me to mistaken impression number three: usually my goal’s some dot on a map—a finish line—not the little blonde right in front of me who’s all loaded down too with her ass in my face. This’d be easier if the ass in question had something else on it besides a lace doily…

Yeah. Fun.

Can we skip the fun for now? A shower would be better. We didn’t exactly get one of those before we left the hotel. That was more of a snatch and dash, what with the potential bomb threat.

I don’t see why we couldn’t get another room somewhere else. This place is, umm…

And the smell’s a little—

It’s more B. than I’m used to. Yet somehow, that’s not as bad as it sounds.

I get that bailing was the thing to do. Once I got my head back on straight, what I saw made it pretty clear that the hotel and the school would be targets. Not that I needed that part spelled out.

There are a couple of things that still don’t fit. It’d be nice if whoever had explained those instead. Figures we’d get a guide who’s both sadistic and unnecessarily cryptic.

Speaking of…

Giles could’ve been less helpful. I’m not sure how, I just know he has it in him. He did his job, of course, but being told to sit tight?

Sit tight and do what?

I don’t get him at all. There’s all this other stuff and he wants me here? He knows about B. It’s not
like she’s gone over the wall.

Unless he’s—

Oh now, there’s a cheery thought I’m not even going to entertain. I’ll pass. The idea that Giles might be the one with the problem really isn’t—

Thing is, he said I could ‘retire’ after this job.

What job?

I must be missing something because if I take what I’ve been told at face value, what I was sent to do is making my mouth water. And other stuff.

Talk about taking one for the team.

A thick swallow gives away just how relaxed I am. Good thing she’s not looking. She’s got her hands and everything else full just rounding the next corner. She deserves solid points for doing this in heels.

There’s just no way it’s that easy.

Not the climbing—that’s a bitch—but for me the sitch is worse. Call me skeptical…

Hell, call me whatever. Point is, shit only goes down this way for other people. Not me. Not ever.

Really, I should be up north dealing with damage control.

But he did have a valid point. Me being here does split Kako’s focus. And no battle can be fought on two fronts. Not if you want to win. So I guess I stay put and find the…

Amid my sigh and the creak of the stairs, I almost miss the faint thump of the front door shutting. B. follows it up with a question, “So what’d you think of Maeve?”

Another sigh would fit in nicely. I really, really want to. I was pretty proud of that mental block. I’d almost completely managed to forget something traumatic that happened only a few minutes ago. It wasn’t easy. Slogging up these goddamned stairs helped.

This just sucks. I’ve got nothing nice to say. Of course, that never stopped me before. But I’m trying to be—

I hate trying.

Glancing longingly back at the door we just passed, I reply, “She was, umm…” I bite my lip while I work out just the right word. The best I’ve got is, “Different.” Not the kind of person I’d ever imagine B. hanging with, let alone sharing an apartment.

At least the place is huge. We started off on the second story. Now we’re headed up the home stretch to the nosebleed seats by my count.

Not that I’m in any kind of hurry, but—

“You’d be surprised,” B. says.

How about not?
Can I skip the surprise? They have this nasty habit of ending in violence for me.

Completely ignoring how she looked…

And that’s not easy. She had on a pink vinyl babydoll dress and enough makeup to be the entertainment at some kid’s birthday party. Her haircut made me think tragic accident involving scissors and a ponytail. And just that would’ve been fine, but she had all the luck. She followed that up by taking a header through a bucket of hair gel into a weed eater. The big pink bow on top of her head was just—

I’m not even sure what that was.

Yeah I am. This chick completely missed the irony.

I normally don’t judge people by how they look, but she was, umm…

‘Different’ works.

But the truth is, I probably would’ve let that all slide if it hadn’t been for the look she gave me.

And the way she touched B. when they hugged. That wanted to be your standard friend stuff. It was for B., but on Maeve’s end it was just a touch too friendly.

We round the next corner and I catch sight of a door. Part of me wants to be happy. It’s almost over. The part of me that has any sense at all understands that the fun’s about to begin.

I don’t know. Maybe I’m being too hard on her. This wouldn’t be the first time I’ve been jealous over not much. Maybe I misread her?

Maybe.

I really didn’t expect—

I can’t see B. striking up a conversation with someone who looks like that. Suicide Girls aren’t exactly her type. The bad tit job alone…

They weren’t huge, just unnatural. There’s a certain smush-factor that should’ve been there, what with all that rubber.

“Is she a slayer?” I ask. It’s the only reasonable solution I can come up with.

“No,” B. replies, tackling the last couple stairs before she elaborates, “She’s a massage therapist.”

Guess that takes care of how they met. Maeve must work at the spa. Safe bet she doesn’t dress that way for work. That would explain the look…or rather, B. not being put out by it.

Not that I think she’s stuck up.

Well, maybe I do, a little, but she’s changed more than a little. Anyway, the image didn’t fit. Now it does.

There’s nothing fancy about this part of the house. It used to be the attic. At least I hope ‘used to be’ applies. A painted wooden floor with a plain railing runs the width of the stairwell. B. leads me to a door at the end, briefly setting her shopping bag down to open it. “Actually, she’s just a sweet girl who’s had a really crappy life,” she says. Her duffle bag clanks against the doorframe when she steps inside. “Not a new story, I know,” she adds, taking off across the room. “Thing is, she
kind of reminded me of Will, so…”

I stick by the door. Something about not being invited in. May as well cling to the last few scraps of manners I have left. Or maybe I’m just stalling.

It’s probably that.

When I drop my duffle, B. says, “Oh, you can come in,” like she thinks she might’ve done something rude. She sets her stuff next to a trunk on the far wall.

These old houses are cool. There’s a round, stained glass window behind her, purple irises framed in cut lead crystal. It’s pretty.

“That closet over there’s empty,” she says, facing me and motioning to the first set of folding doors on my right. There’s no shortage. The area under the eaves got turned into closets. Four of them total, two on each sidewall. “Make yourself at home. I know it’s not much, but—”

It is, but it isn’t. Her room has this ‘just passing through’ look about it. Other than a bed, there’s not a whole lot here, just a large area rug, a trunk and a chest of drawers. And the bed’s really just a big, square mattress in the middle of the floor that’s made up like a bed. The room pretty much swallows everything except the mattress and the rug.

But the lack of stuff’s not that surprising considering those stairs. I wonder how they got the mattress up here. Bet that was fun.

Above the closets on each sidewall, the ceiling slopes. With the white walls, even now, this place is bright. Whoever finished it decided to add skylights too. There are three of them evenly spaced on each of the sloped ceilings.

This isn’t exactly what comes to mind when I hear the word ‘bedroom.’

Sunlight shines down on the mattress through the skylights. That’s becoming a theme. I wonder if it’s B.’s theme or Maeve’s.

I reach down to pick up my bag. “Maeve thought they could use this as a band room when she rented the place,” she says, watching me as I go to the closet. “That plan kind of fell apart. Can you imagine hauling amps up and down those stairs?”

I don’t answer. Her question’s kind of pointless and probably rhetorical. Besides, I have one of my own. And I’m not really looking forward to it. The sad part is that I already know the answer, but I still have to ask. My life just wouldn’t be complete without a little misery.

Not facing her is better. I slide the closet doors open. Look at that. It’s a closet. I could hide in here. Might be a plan.

Big surprise, the ceiling of the closet matches the slope of the roof. But that’s just a meaningless detail. I’m wasting time.

Dropping my bags, I hang up my dress as I struggle with the words, “Are you and Maeve, uh…?” Just saying them makes me feel stupid.

“What?” she replies through a giggle.

The giggle doesn’t help. “I don’t know. Maybe I read things wrong,” I mumble.
She speaks right over me, “No. I told you what I want.” The sharp edge to her voice isn’t all that
shocking. But it is. Anyway, it’s less than helpful. As I shut the closet doors, she announces, “I’m
gonna take a shower. I’ll be right back.”

I’m glad to see her leave. No clue when she undressed or put on a robe. Not that undressing
would’ve taken any time.

So now what?

Now I wait.

‘Wait’ is pretty much all I have to do.

Well, not really. I take new cell phone out of the shopping bag she had, remove it from the
packaging and plug it in. We’re not even together…or not really—at least I don’t think so…and
B.’s already taking care of me. She made sure to save the SIM card from my old phone when she
picked up the pieces. Is it wrong that I could get used to that?

I don’t know. We’ll have to wait and see. More waiting…

Things have gotta get better.

It’s not like I even want the stupid phone. I need it. Giles said he’d send a couple of slayers here for
support. We’re supposed to get bios on them when the selections are made. I don’t see why he
couldn’t just bring them with him on Friday.

Really, I don’t get why he needs to come here at all. Not that I won’t be thrilled to see him. It just
seems like he should be busy with Cleveland…and everything else. But he wants to see us, so…

More stress.

I should find clothes. Hopefully, a shower’s in my immediate future too.

The door opens while I’m going through my duffle. I glance over my shoulder and she says, “Your
turn. I put towels out for you.”

Wow. That was quick. I glance over my shoulder. Her hair’s not even wet, so…

“Thanks,” I reply, picking up the cotton shorts and camisole I located in the pile. It’s a pretty
random pile. I’m amazed I found anything that matched. It’s not like I had scads of time to pack.

She moves to her closet and opens the door. On my way out, she says, “Oh, there’s one other
thing.” I stop at the door and turn to face her. Leaning out of the closet so she can see me, she says,
“If you run into Maeve later, please don’t umm…” Her pausing to find the right word makes me
just that much more nervous. What’s next? “It’s just, she’s kind of sensitive,” B. mumbles.

Mostly I just want to go get cleaned up.

“You probably don’t,” she informs me. And rightly so. It’s not like I put lots of thought into that
answer. While I’m playing around, B. fills me in, “Maeve has cancer.”

That’s not at all what I expected. “Oh,” I mouth. Pretty much everything I had up to now needs
some work. Okay, a lot of work.

Is she even working? It’s impossible to say. Guess I’m back to square one on the roommate.
Where’s Maddie when I need her?

B.’s expression tinges with sadness just before she disappears back into her closet. “It’s pretty bad,” she says. Hangers scrape the metal rod. “Just don’t stare, ’kay?”

Alrighty then…check, no staring at the roommate. She should seriously think about a wardrobe change if that’s what she wants.

Huh. Maybe that’s the point. She’s giving them a reason. I might do the same thing if—

I nod—like B. can even see me—and get while the getting’s good. A shower sounds fantastic. And the stairs aren’t half as bad without all the crap.

I’m not gonna dwell on my earlier question. That’d just make me feel like more of an ass. B.’s got enough heart she could be here just because. And that’s fine. I’ll butt out. It’s none of my business anyway.

My business is to get clean and face whatever surprise she’s got in store for me next. I should just throw out everything I know and start over. If I could, I would. It might make things easier.

Passing through the utility room door, I hang a left and enter the bathroom. I got the brush-through tour when we arrived, so…

The shower’s a bunch of chromed pipes attached to an old clawfoot tub. The tub’s kinda huge and inviting. I debate the merits of a bath for about three-point-two seconds while I turn the faucets. The idea starts to sound better when I have to mess with the lever to get the showerhead to stay on. A good jiggle gets me what I want, ending the debate. I pull the curtain closed and strip.

The bathroom’s tiny and kinda packed. It’s pretty obvious just looking around that the occupants are women. Every available space is covered in brightly colored poufs, bottles and boxes. Not that there are many. There’s barely room left for the tub. The toilet seat’s the only place to set stuff, so my clean clothes go there on top of the towel and the dirty ones end up balled up on the floor. It doesn’t matter. I could pitch those old sweats and it wouldn’t be a loss.

Why I’m in rush I don’t know, but once I’m in, I don’t mess around. It feels good too. I catch myself lingering a little longer than I should on parts I shouldn’t.

I can’t help it. If something doesn’t give soon, I may snap. The real bitch is how tender they are. But it feels great once it stops hurting.

And that’s about the time I give up.

This is still pointless.

Talk about contradictions. I’m scared to face her, but I can’t wait to get back there. The most messed up thing is that being scared pisses me off. It always has. There’s no in-between. I feel the first thing and it instantly becomes the second. So I’m pretty much intense, overreacting to every little thing and just biting my lip.

What’s worse, I know it. Well, it’d be even worse if I didn’t, but not being able to do a damned thing just isn’t fun.

There’s actually a pile of ‘worse’ to match the contradictions and the misleading impressions. Part of me thinks we should wait. That we’re rushing this and it’s going to end badly.
Maybe that’s just because I’m scared?

And more pissed off…

When have I ever wanted to wait before in my life?

When has it mattered this much? I didn’t wait with Wood. That was supposed to be…

I was gonna check out how the other half lived. Maybe that’s part of the problem. If I’d—hell, I dunno.

What I do know is…add the fact that when she smiles at me, it makes me stupidly happy and…

I need a quiet space, something kinda small and dark to crawl into so I can come unglued.

So much for rushing through my shower. I’m just standing here, letting the water flow over my shoulders. At least it’s getting rid of some of the tension.

It’ll be back before I make it halfway up the stairs. I have faith.

I snicker and stoop to turn off the water.

I’m clean. Time to go face—

Shit.

Sliding my clothes aside, I grab the towel off the toilet seat and rub myself down. I’d like to think ‘dry off,’ but it isn’t working that way. And it isn’t gonna. The bathroom’s so steamy that the idea’s pretty much laughable. An exhaust fan would help. It’d be nice if there was one.

I give up and throw on my clothes. Of course, it’s less of a ‘throw’ and more of a ‘pull.’ They stick, stretch and fight me every inch of the way. I sigh and wrap my hair in a towel. That’s not gonna get any better either. I don’t see a blow dryer. You’d think B. would have one, but—

Oh well.

The air hits me when I open the door and I’m instantly chilled. I plod from the hallway into the utility room and back up the stairs. It’d probably warm me up if I could get moving.

I can’t. Every step brings me closer to…

Round and round she goes…or would that be ‘square and square’?

The thickest contradiction here is my name. Cancer Girl could take a lesson in irony from me.

When I finally reach the room, B.’s curled up on the bed, bathed in sunlight. She’s wearing a light blue, stretchy cotton teddy. It’s pretty and very girlie…and a little like those things the girls in gymnastics used to wear when I was a kid, without the tights. I don’t remember what they were called, but the coverage is pretty much the same…

Except not.

Her cleavage is almost framed in sheer lace. She’s on her right side so her breasts are—

Gravity works. It works so well that about half of her left nipple’s bare. It’s, umm…really hot. Similar lace borders the tops of her thighs. And the cotton’s not very opaque either.
Who needs an imagination?

Personally, I think it’s overrated. At least I do now.

The appeal still escapes me. She’s one of the girliest girls I know and I’m so not into girls.

Thing is, she’s got a lot more going on than that. Buffy’s also one of the strongest people I know. Strong women are usually ignored.

She isn’t. I think it’s the mix. The two things work together. I wish I had that.

Anyway, it’s pointless to question. It just is.

When I swing the door shut with my foot and lean against it, her attention comes to rest on me. “Have you ever built something up in your mind?” she asks.

So I guess this is it. Time to put up or shut up.

That expression’s just funny in this case. She no more shuts up…

“You get an idea and it sounds like just the thing.” No, I’m the mute. And the next item on the menu. “So you go for it.” She makes me feel like a particularly fat canary. “You do all the scheming…and all the planning.” The cage door’s open. “Of course the idea gets bigger.” And her head’s inside. “There’s this whole ‘fantasy’ thing that happens. You create all these expectations about how it’ll be.”

And in a couple short statements, she’s just B. again. It’s like she deflated. She gives me a quirky half-smile and says, “Things just can’t be simple.” Even the tone of her voice changes, just that fast.

But cynical’s more my thing. I’m not sure I like it on her. Thankfully, that goes away too.

Something else that’s gone in a flash.

She should come with a warning label.

“The moment arrives and you wonder.” She finds this funny. What I find funny is that she’s looking right at me. I know she sees me, but she’s way too wrapped up. “The idea that might’ve been good goes from ‘fabulous’ to ‘just plain stupid’ in that moment.”

Now all the funny’s gone.

My neck won’t cooperate. It’d be nice to hold on. To look my opponent in the eye. I can’t.

She can’t be having second thoughts, can she?

Go figure, I’m still not important.

She keeps going, without missing a beat. “It’s weird. Nothing’s even happened and still—” It seems like my feet should be puffy and red. They aren’t. They’re still just my feet. “You build it up just to tear it down without ever knowing.” That’s what happens when all the blood drains, right? “Was I wrong?” My face feels clammy. That ‘draining’ thing has to be it. “Did I make all this up just to…?”

Hissing with disgust, she proclaims, “It’s stupid.”

No, I’m the one who’s stupid. I get all worked up and stress myself out. And for what?
“What—?”

She sounds confused. I glance without moving my head, half afraid of what I’ll find.

Her brow’s creased. Searching my face, she stammers, “Why are—uh, what’s wrong?”

What do you mean ‘what’s wrong?’ My feet may be bloated, but at least they aren’t cold. I can’t look. This is so bad.

“Oh, would you stop it?” she snaps, snatching my attention. I’m not sure what’s more shocking; that she finally saw me or that she’s pissed.

But when she follows up with, “Look, Faith, you’re overthinking things again,” I get that she’s not mad at all. Weird. I even catch a little of that ‘pot calling the kettle black’ irony in her tone.

I missed it. She was talking about something else. Something she did that she feels silly about. Now I want to know what, but she doesn’t spill. Instead, she continues chiding, “You need to quit that.” Like I need it. “It’s not all that hard. I’m not gonna change my mind.” I’m hard enough on myself without her help. “I just need to know one thing. How do you feel about me?”

My face is hot. The blood’s back. Sounds like progress, but it’s not. I clench my jaw. My head hums with pent up angst. I want to snap, but—

It’s her question. Finally, she asks something that isn’t rhetorical. And if I were to answer it truthfully now…

She irritates the holy living shit out of me!

I want to scream, but I bite my lip…and my tongue. The truth is—the other truth—the one that actually matters…I care. If I didn’t, I sure wouldn’t put up with all of this crap.

I won’t tell her that I love her. I don’t know if that’s what she’s looking for. Probably not. She knows me. Good thing too. I’ve only said that a few times in my life and it…

It’s pretty sad that I might. I don’t know yet. I need time.

Another glaring contradiction jumps out…she’s probably said those words to more people than I’ve called ‘friend.’ Well, that’s not so much a contradiction as…we’re just different. Two very different people.


No, the truth usually gets me into more trouble. Proving my point, she whispers, “Show me.”

Shit.

There are five steps between me and the bed. Taking them should be easy. It’s not like I don’t know what I want. I just—

I do.

That doesn’t keep each step from being a little harder than the last. And each one gets a token, unspoken curse. I finally found my gauntlet. At least the trudge, ‘shit,’ trudge, ‘fuck’…kinda takes my mind off the impending doom. I have to find a new cuss word for each one. It’s fun.
And that so doesn’t matter. It doesn’t help. Or it doesn’t help nearly enough. Five cuss words really aren’t a challenge for a girl like me. When I reach her, I’m all but trembling. I’ve never been —

The really screwed up part…

Not that there’s any shortage of ‘screwed up’ here. This whole situation’s…

She kneels on the edge of the mattress in front of me. I lean down. She asked me to show her. A kiss is the simplest way. It’s easy. It’s just everything else that’s—

I cup her face in my hands. It feels so good. She tastes like raspberries again. Her hand rests on my chest above my breasts. I don’t want to stop, but she pushes. Her hand slides down between my breasts as she guides me to stand. It comes to rest just above the waistband of my shorts.

She looks up at me. Considering where she is and what she’s doing, it seems like her smile should be wolfish. It isn’t. She’s genuinely happy. “I think it should be my turn to lead for a while, if that’s okay,” she whispers. Her attention drifts lower. “Not that last night wasn’t a blast.” She’s a little distracted now.

Happy, hungry, horny…she’s got all those H’s and more.

Figures I missed something. I usually do.

I nod.

She’s bound to do better than I did. It wouldn’t take much. “That wasn’t your fault,” she tells me. It’s nice of her to try and reassure me, but we both know the truth.

Reaching around with her other hand, she hooks her index fingers into my waistband and pulls down. Her remaining fingers trace a line over my pubes and…

“I know it’s confusing.” Her breath makes me shudder. She’s so close. “It’s right for you to be a little wigged.” I inhale. The air catches in my throat. I sound like someone’s shaking me. And she is. She needs to be closer. “Just trust me.” Lots closer. My shorts fall around my ankles. I want to take her head in my hands, but I don’t get the chance. Not before she—

Her mouth closes over my pussy. My knees turn to mush. I grab the sides of her head. She licks and sucks, pinching my clit between her lips. I push…or is that pull? I’m not even sure. I just want more. It doesn’t matter that it hurts at first. More is better. Just when the aching ends, she slips from my grasp. How I’m still standing is anyone’s guess.

Her fingertips come to rest on my clit. Playing with me, she says, “You’ll do exactly what I ask?”

These are the kind of choices I’m actually good at.

When I manage another nod without landing on my ass, she directs, “Take your shirt off,” and I do. Anything else would be dumb. “Now lay down.” I’m done being dumb. For a mattress on the floor, the bed’s not half bad.

She lies on her side next to me. I turn my head to face her and she rewards me with another kiss. What starts simple grows. I’m not sure which one of us gets there first. It’s like a mutual agreement. Our tongues entwine. She rolls on top of me, but holds herself up. Her attention’s split. What’s she up to?
The top of her teddy ties at the back of her neck. I play with the bow, feeling her move. She doesn’t let go. I tug on the end of a string and the bow slips free. Her top falls. I know it does, but I don’t get to watch. It’s a damned shame. She’s relentless. Our lips caress. Our tongues dance. I wish she’d touch me.

After a few moments, she does, but it’s not her. Smooth plastic slides between my vulva, pressing inside me. As I break the kiss to moan, she says, “Please don’t laugh.”

I blink, wondering what the hell she’s talking about. I’m not laughing. She thrusts her hips, burying the dildo inside me and smiles.

It takes a moment for the trembling to die away. She holds still, giving me time to get used to—

She didn’t skimp. My body just reacts. It’s not—

It doesn’t hurt, but—

“I just—” she starts and falls flat. It’s funny. After all that, she’s the one who’s blushing. I kinda get why, but she spells it out. “I—I—you do get how silly these things are, right? It’s like the worst fashion accessory ever. I feel like a complete idiot.” Every word she said when I entered the room makes sense now. “I just wanted you to be comfortable.” She licks her lips. “I wanted—”

I place my finger against her lips and make a gentle hushing sound. It’s funny. For all her confidence, sometimes B.’s just—

“I get it,” I whisper. “You’re fine.” I want to reassure her more, but I think the best way to do that is…

Pushing her teddy up, I grab hold of her ass and tilt my hips back. She’s right. The leather straps are kind of funny.

The funny lasts about as long my smile. About as long as anything else.
Foundation: Scene 8

Eight…

There’s nothing new about feeling like I’ve been fucked a couple dozen different ways. It’s a running feature. What I’m not used to is liking it.

I take a deep breath through my mouth. My nose is hopeless. I’m drowning. Yet somehow, that’s not horrible.

I sort of thought it might be, what with the descriptions. Whoever came up with ‘tuna’ should be beat. I don’t see that at all.

I’ve heard other people try to talk it up by using the word ‘sweet.’ Yeah, that fits too. If anything, it’s a little tart. And I guess kind of salty. Not quite like sweat. Not as strong. And more, umm…

More.

My head rests on her thigh. I’m so spent…sleepy, happy and a ton of other good things. Imagine me happy. Even the sticky’s kinda nice. I could pass out.

She’s so quiet, I just have to look. When it got dark is a complete mystery. But it’s really not all that dark in here. The light’s just cool and blue now.

The first thing I see is my own hand. I’ve been running my fingertips through her pubes. For how long, I’m not sure. They’re so soft. It’s soothing. I stop. ‘Soothing’ for me is probably ‘annoying’ for her. It goes that way. I ask, “Is that it?” mostly because it feels like the sort of thing I should ask, even if I already pretty much know the answer. We don’t fit, so…

When you’re faking to make something work, the combinations are pretty much endless.

But this isn’t all that different, really. The combinations are normally endless. It’s unbelievable that some people get stuck in a rut.

Using my index finger, I trace a line from her pubes to a mark I noticed earlier. We do fit. She’s just much cuter than I’ll ever be. Even in the dim light, the little freckle shows up. There’s no way this is just a freckle. It looks like one, which probably means part of it is, but the rest—

I’m not buying it. Heart-shaped freckles just don’t happen. I feel for the poor guy who got this job ’cause maintaining a professional attitude…

Yeah, umm…I’ll pass.

“Uh…” She sounds really with it. “That was about a quarter.”

A quarter of what?

A quarter of nine? Yeah, I guess that’s about what time it is. Sounds close enough. If you mean that other thing…

Unless I’m just dense, that seemed like the full ten rounds to me. I prop myself up and cock an eyebrow. This should be precious. It takes a few, but she finally cracks. “Don’t look at me like that.
So I read a book. What’s wrong with that?” And all I have to do is wait. I let a little of the smirk show. “Well, mostly read, there were pictures too.” I bite my lip.

God, I love her. Umm…

Years of practice and I almost lose it over three little words. I’m pathetic.

She doesn’t even notice me. Her face flushes. “Oh,” she exclaims. “It really wasn’t like that. I—”

I might. I dunno. I hang my head. This is hard. I really need time. I’m just not used to the warm and *fuzzy*. That’s the last thing I usually feel.

Anyway, I don’t bother to hold back the snicker. With the head shake, it reads totally different. Like I think something’s sad. I do. It’s just not her. I probably could’ve milked this for more, but—

I’m hopeless. “Well, not really. They were like diagrams,” she explains. And she’s still just hopelessly cute. Yeah, that makes a huge difference. It takes her a moment, but she eventually gets there too. I look up, mask already in place. She has to look away. Recovery for her doesn’t come nearly as easy my shit-eating grin, but when it does, she whispers, “That was just the parts that sounded like the most fun. There’s more. A lot more.”

Well, B…look at you. It might be my turn to blush ’cause the image of her sitting around, thinking about me, reading some lesbian sex manual…it’s not half bad. And ‘planning’ as a euphemism…I thought I’d heard them all. That’s good. Nice and simple. I like it.

I lean down to kiss her freckle and my stomach grumbles. Stupid thing. Of course, she says, “We should feed that thing.”

A ‘thank you’ for the ‘planning’ was more what I had in mind. Gotta love a good euphemism…

I focus on what I was ‘planning.’ It’s a little surprising how different we are. Not that I’d ever given it much thought. It makes sense. Our hands are different. Why not this?

It’s just—

I never imagined that I’d find something like this appealing, but it is. Perfectly symmetrical, thin, delicate…

We’re exactly the opposite. I have this thick, swollen bundle of need between my legs. She never gets like that. Even now, after all that fun, she’s still…

Her skin’s a rosy shade of pink. It’s so pretty. I never would’ve guessed.

When she says, “That’s not exactly what I had in mind,” I grin and look up. Busted. She slides away, rolling her eyes. “I’ve created a monster.”

I reply through a laugh, “And you expected…?” Oops. I really didn’t mean to say that.

Getting up, she flips on a light and goes for a box that’s sitting on her chest of drawers. While her back’s turned, she mumbles, “Pretty much that.”

The truth gets me every time.

She faces me with the box and a hairbrush in her hands. No surprise, letting B. into my life means she gets to play with my hair. “Sit up,” she says. Honestly, I’m glad for the help. It went from the shower, to a towel, to…my hair’s a complete disaster. Maybe she can do something with it. All I’ve
got is ‘take another shower,’ which really isn’t a bad idea considering.

Sliding in behind me, she whispers, “I’ll tell you what, after pizza, we can check out the next quarter.” She sections off a little of my hair, gently brushing the tangles out.

That’s not quite what I had in mind. I liked the first quarter just fine. I just want my turn. Starting with…

Is it wrong that I really want to fuck her pretty little blonde brains out?

Uh…

_Yeah._ I guess her brains aren’t really blonde. Or pretty for that matter. She stops brushing long enough to ask, “What?” when another snicker slips from my stupid mouth.

They say they’re kind of gray and squishy. I’ll happily take their word for it. I’ve seen enough shit to last me a lifetime. I don’t need any more.

I should’ve kept quiet, but that would’ve been too easy. It’s time to bail myself out. The usual reply would be, ‘Oh, nothing.’ I don’t even go there. As she moves on to the next clump of my hair, I get back to the good stuff. “Alright, you got a deal, but it’s my turn to look silly.”

I expect it to take her a second, but she surprises me. “That’s fair, but on one condition: I want to go out.”

Her answer’s less than helpful. This image of her clinging to a balcony railing in that dress from last night flashes through my demented brain. I’m behind her. The pervert show only lasts for a second, but that’s just long enough. Unable to resist the urge, I mumble, “Public performances aren’t exactly my—”

She swats me on the hip. Were I standing, that would’ve been a swat on the ass. She tries…and she pulls my hair. All at the same time, she cuts me off by scolding, “That’s _so_ not what I meant.”

Yeah. If I don’t stop, I’m gonna end up with a well deserved concussion. I guess pizza and beer it is. And to think I was actually looking forward to that. Now I’m a lot more interested in dessert.

I wonder if she works the same way I do. My guess is ‘no.’ I always want more. And really good sex…that ‘going at it like there’s no tomorrow, serious rock ’em, sock ’em, claw the covers off the bed’ sex, makes me want _lots_ more.

That’s one of the biggest reasons monogamy’s never cut it for me. If they were worth a second shot, I’d just wear them out. Course, it might help if I had some self control, but—

I really don’t.

What can I say? I’m as much of a dog as your average guy. And what’s good for the goose…

Sad, it rarely works that way.

Why’s that expression even exist? It’s older than dirt and it suggests some equality that I know didn’t exist back then. Hell, it barely exists now.

She’s almost done turning my rat’s nest into something a little more presentable. I don’t want to interrupt her, but I have another sudden urge. I don’t even know why. Maybe it’s more of those manners I’d forgotten I had cropping up. Or maybe I’m feeling guilty for razzing her. I can’t help
it. She’s just too funny.

Anyway, it’s not a bad thing, so I run with it. Slowly turning my upper body, I reach around and touch her. She follows my lead, accepting the kiss. It doesn’t need to be much. Just a little and I break it off, whispering, “Thanks, B.”

As I face forward, she smiles and asks, “For what?”

“Where do you want me to start?” I reply. I hope she doesn’t take that for smartass. It’s just…she’s been pretty great and there’s a list.

“It’s my pleasure,” she replies, sweeping my hair back, brushing from my hairline to the tips in long, full strokes. Here’s another thing I could get used to. It feels nice. She must understand that because she brushes long after all of the tangles are gone.

Nothing good can last forever. And things that are good for a while can get boring. She abandons the brush, rests her thumbs just above my temples, and using her forefingers, draws back, collecting a lock of hair on either side of my head. She twists them both and holds them with her left hand as she moves on her knees to face me.

The change of scenery’s nice. I lose interest in everything except for what’s right in front of me. They’re pretty. When she leans forward to reach behind me and clip my hair in place, I take advantage of a good thing. It’s not hard. I barely have to move, just cup the closest part in my hand and latch on. The left one wins out. I run my tongue over the tip of her nipple. Her breathing labors just a bit, but she finishes what she’s doing. I let go when she leans back.

No surprise, I get scolded. “Food first,” she says, taking my chin in her hand. “I’m starving, ’kay?” She tilts my head up. I want to say, ‘So am I,’ but I fake distraction instead. Not much faking to it, but hamming it up makes her grin.

She’s having none of it. My grin gets me another eye roll and a snarky, “Oh, please.” After giving my hair a quick once-over, she stands up.

I take the hint and get up when she goes to her closet. Hangers scrape behind me. She’s looking for something to wear. Glancing over my shoulder, I fold my closet door open as I ask, “No shower?”

She replies, “We probably should, but I’m not sure I care that much.” Living out of a bag just sucks. I unzip the damned thing and stir the contents, looking for panties and a bra. Something that actually matches might be novel. “Besides, I kind of like smelling like you.” She sounds a tad sentimental. “I sure waited long enough. I think I deserve to enjoy it.”

That’s sweet, in a quirky kind of way. It might be a little gross too, but I’ll let that part slide. We’ll call it ‘sweet’ and ignore the fact that it’s not exactly the sort of thing I’d expect from B.

Repacking might help. I put on the first pair of panties I find and keep digging, setting aside a pair of black fake-leather pants and a red, ribbed Henley sweater. My panties are white. This shouldn’t be that hard.

“Anyway, we’re going to a pizza joint. The air’s yeasty enough. Who’s gonna notice?” she says as I lay hands on a white bra. Wouldya look at that?

Now that she mentions it, I guess the smell is a little yeasty. Not really something I wanted pointed out, but it fits.

I stand up to put on my bra, turning around for a peek. Now this is something I’d expect from B.
I’m lucky to find things that match and she’s…

She’s a fucking knockout. She always did dress nice, but not like this. At least, not that she shared.

Her back’s turned, so I take advantage, watching as she hooks her bra. It’s a black lacy thing to match the garter-thong and the tops of the stockings she has on. The thong has a short lace skirt attached that just covers her ass. Using the word ‘cover’ is a bit of a stretch.

Of course, my mind’s only got one track. All I want is to take it off her. Or maybe leave it on for a while and just work around it.

I bite my lip hard enough to hurt. This is fun and all, but the sooner I get my shit together…

When she moves to her closet, I turn around and stoop for my pants. There’s nowhere to sit, so putting them on is amusing. A belt’s probably too much to ask. I’m not even sure I packed one. It’s pointless. I didn’t see any. I give up. If this lasts long, I’m gonna have to go shopping. She’ll love that. Careful not to mess up my hair, I slip on my shirt.

When I turn around, she’s watching me. Her blue-gray, turtleneck sweater dress could pass for conservative in somebody’s book. Somebody—not me. It has that classy kind of look. And if I couldn’t pick out every major muscle group in her body…

Puckers at the sides cause it to wrinkle across her hips, stomach and thighs. Everywhere there aren’t wrinkles, the dress clings like a glove. It’s damned sexy.

She says, “I’m gonna go wash up.” I watch her leave. Her dress is even better in action. Yeah, getting used to this is gonna be tough, but I’ll muddle through somehow.

Turning around, I dig a pair of socks out, grab my boots and sit on the corner of the bed. She’s gonna be a while. I use the extra time to pick up the room. We kind of trashed it.

The strap-on’s so B. it’s not even funny. If something like this can be…

It’s pink and decorated with little white hearts cut into the leather. No wonder she felt silly. There’s no way she found this in some catalog. Figures she’d want a designer dick. A one-off.

I can see her thinking that’s the last thing she wants, which explains the smooth shape of the dildo. And I’m right there with her. If I wanted a dick, I’d go pick up the entire package.

I have no idea where she keeps this thing. And I’m not gonna snoop. Best I’ve got is ‘get it up off the floor.’ It’s a trip hazard. And tripping over this…

My luck I’d land funny and break my neck. Not exactly like slipping on a bar of soap. The obit would be, uh, hmm…

I place her dick on top of the weapons trunk. Seems like a reasonable spot to me. The rest of the mess is just our clothes and the bed.

Oh, and there’s the box and brush. B. was a little spacey. Not surprising.

It all goes quick enough. When everything’s squared away, I grab my makeup bag out of my backpack and head downstairs.

She’s already in the living room talking with Maeve. Before hitting the bathroom, I poke my head in to say, “Hi.” B.’s attention comes little quicker then I expect. She’s sitting sort of sideways on
the couch, facing Maeve. All she really has to do is look up to make eye contact. “I’ll just be a
minute,” I add, hoping she doesn’t feel chatty.

Wow. B. wasn’t kidding. Chemo really wrecks a body. Baldness notwithstanding, even with her
back to me, it’s obvious that Maeve isn’t well. The view doesn’t improve when she half-turns to
look over her shoulder. I wish she wouldn’t. She doesn’t need to.

It’s weird, without all the shit, I feel like I recognize her. I’m not sure from where, but that doesn’t
matter. When she says, “Hi,” too, I offer a friendly smile. I want to be nice, but really, that’s my
cue to bail.

B. calls after me, “I’m ready when you are.”

It only takes me a few minutes to pee, blow my nose, wash my face and put on eye makeup.
Washing my face hardly matters. I still smell her. It’s strange, but I’m kind of glad. I was just
getting used to it.

I duck down the other half of the L-shaped hallway that wraps around the living room to give them
more time. The TV’s on, but I catch enough to get that they’re talking about some guy named
Aaron. Maeve seems pretty upset.

I’m amazed I didn’t notice it earlier. The downstairs has that smell. It’s not really obvious. Air
fresheners, incense and B. pretty much cover it up, but it’s there. That ‘sterile death’ smell that
makes hospitals such fun places to be.

At the end of the hall, I catch the word, “Marriot,” on the TV and freeze. B. stops talking too. It
sucks. I was almost distracted enough to forget. The stupid reporter pretty much kills that for me.
“…led local police to discover a device which was later disarmed without incident. Covington
Police Chief, Harold Mitchell, had this to say…” The story breaks down to a press Q and A with
this cop who sounds too much like Deputy Dawg to take seriously. I don’t even waste my time.
The upshot is that no one else was hurt. That’s all I need to know.

B. and Maeve pick up their conversation as I go to the closet in the front room for my coat.
Damned thing’s still heavy. I really shouldn’t have left this down here, but she insisted and I didn’t
take time to explain. She has no reason to suspect that there’s a small arsenal stashed inside. When
we get back, I’ll snag a hanger and take my coat upstairs. Putting it on as I go, I walk to the door.

And of course, as I get closer, the TV gets louder. So do B. and Maeve. Of the two, I’d rather
listen to the TV. “…hotel in downtown Covington. Though terrorist activity is suspected, no one
has come forward claiming responsibility for the device.” If they only knew…

I can even see the picture now. Not that there’s much to look at. The reporter reminds me a little of
a younger Jerry Orbach. “Were it not for the anonymous tip received by the police, this story
might’ve had a very different ending. Back to you, Ed.”

Oh well. I did a good thing. It sucked, but I did it. Kudos to me. Funny, Ed thinks so too. “That was
quite story, Henry. I suppose we should count our blessings that the tip came in when it did.”

“Yes we should, Ed,” Henry agrees.

Ed replies with the obvious, “Though, I am curious to know how the caller came by their
information.” A little birdie told him.

Ed’s insinuation isn’t exactly veiled in concrete. He’s suspicious. Henry’s suspicious. The cops are
suspicious. Everyone’s suspicious. What else is new? Good things usually make people
suspicious.

While Ed and Henry banter back and forth, failing to put a human touch on the report, I boil the whole thing down. What I did doesn’t mean shit. Fact is, there wouldn’t have even been a bomb if it wasn’t for me. Being given a chance to keep more innocent blood off my hands…

It was damned nice of the Putas That Be to spare me that.

And in breaking news, watching the news is still worse than watching golf. It’s hard to believe they get by with calling that shit drama. There’s as much drama in your average golf game as watching that old car in the dirt lot behind the school rust. Y’know eventually there’ll be nothing left but an orangy spot on the ground. Same as y’know someone will eventually win the U.S. Open. Sure, it’ll happen. Doesn’t mean I wanna see the play-by-play.

I’m tempted to step outside for a smoke. I’ve had about as much of Ed and Henry as I can take for one night. B. doesn’t let me get that far. She stands. Stretching, she asks, “Need anything while we’re out?”

I don’t have to be psychic to predict Maeve’s answer. “No thanks.” People who are that sick usually only want one thing. And it’s not pizza.

I’ve gotta give her credit. I had no idea how things were when I got here. Anyone who’s tough enough to go to all that trouble to hide something like that deserves my respect.

B. goes for her coat, slips it on and ties the belt as she walks my way. I manage to split my attention long enough to get the door for her. Life can be rough sometimes.

Her coat’s like a smaller version of mine, a black leather duster that covers her to her mid-shin. The matching just adds to the impression that I’m her butcher half. And not the kind that parts out cows.

Now there’s a role I never saw myself in. I’d be more comfortable with the goddamned cows. But I guess I may as well face it. The drooling’s a pretty solid clue.

She takes my hand. We walk around the railing and down the stairs. I get the door for her again, further cementing my role. It’s a little chilly out here, but there’s no sense in complaining. Her mind’s made up. As I pull the door shut, she strides across the porch, explaining, “Maeve broke up with her boyfriend. She doesn’t want him to see her like this.” She descends the stairs to the sidewalk. “It’s a shame. He’s such a sweet guy. I don’t think it’s fair to him, but she’s the one who’s sick, so…”

I catch up. “That’s tough,” I reply, taking her hand. This still isn’t any of my business, but honestly, I can see Maeve’s point. I’m not sure what I’d want. It’s impossible for me to judge. I guess it’d depend on the situation. But I’ve never had a relationship that lasted much over a few months, so…

We make it to the street. Instead of turning down the city sidewalk, B. crosses and I follow her lead. “How long were they together?” I ask.

I don’t think anyone visited when I was in the hospital. But then, I didn’t exactly give them a reason. And it’s not like I would’ve known if they had.

“I’m not really sure. Off and on for years,” she replies. That makes a real difference, but it’s still not my place to judge. Besides, B. gets that as well as I do.

The sidewalk on the other side of the street’s a little wider and newer. She steers us left. This is a
nice neighborhood. The street’s well lit. There are lots of trees. All of the houses are occupied except one up ahead with a realtor’s sign in the yard. Pretty much every other porch light is on. The places are old, but that just adds to the charm. There are even toys in a few of the yards. It’s quite a change from what I’m used to.

As we slowly descend the hill, her heels click. She’s not trying to be quiet. Her mind’s too wrapped up in her friend’s problems. She says, “It doesn’t surprise me. Maeve did the same thing when she was first diagnosed. The cancer went into remission and she got back together with him. But I don’t know if that’ll happen this time.”

She makes it sound like she’s known Maeve for years. Or maybe that’s just an impression. What’s going on is really intense.

Makes me wonder, would B. want me around if she was hurt really bad or sick like Maeve is? It’s way too early to think about stuff like that now, but—

Maybe it’s the fact that B.’s a stranger. That might actually make things easier on Maeve. It’s just a thought…and not an unreasonable one. Once Maeve gets her old life back—if that happens—she can move on without B. to remind her of the bad times.

I wonder if B. sees that.

I doubt it. She’s just not that jaded.

I actually doubt both. I can’t see B. wanting me around. Not yet at least. She’s got other people who are lots closer. She has a history with them. She loves them.

It’s kind of hard to miss.

And that’s one of the things that’s been bugging me. In the world of vamps and demons and slayers, there’s a fourth option. One that’s in no way normal. Someone who makes a hell of a lot more sense than me. Someone who already loves her. Hell, someone who’s already gay.

It seems to me if Red can wiggle her nose and whip up a slayer army, that one slayer and her little plastic happy shouldn’t be much of a challenge at all.

That’s where my mind would go if someone told me that B. was seeing a chick. All that was stopping that was her.

Maybe I’m missing something? Maybe it’s not that way anymore.

Yeah. Who am I kidding? Everyone who got close to B. had some sort of crush on her. And Red was the worst of all. She was like this poster child for unrequited love. There were even a few times those last weeks in Sunnydale they were bickering and I wanted to tell them to get a room. Like we had any to spare.

It doesn’t take keen powers of observation to see that the feelings are pretty much mutual. If I’d really wanted to fuck B. over, I would’ve gone straight for the redhead. I didn’t, not that bad, so…

But really, there just isn’t a better way to hurt her.

I sure didn’t expect to ever compete with that. Yet here I am. And it makes no sense.

“I’m not sure what to say about Maeve. I wish I had something, but it’s not really my place,” I explain to wrap up the previous topic. Hopefully, B. ’ll take the hint.
“I get that,” she says. “It’s just hard. I want to be there for her, but saying that’s a whole lot easier than actually doing it.”

“Well, all you can really do is listen. And it seems to me you’re doing that,” I reply.

“Yeah, you’re right,” she mumbles.

Good. That’s done. Or I hope it is. Now all I need is to find the nerve ’cause, face it, as much as I want it to, this isn’t gonna go away. I stop to light a smoke. She turns to face me, not quite tapping her foot while she waits. Yeah, I know you don’t like it. Sorry, B.

Once I have my coffin nail, we get moving again and I go straight for the pointless bullshit. What better way to set myself up? “I had this friend back in Southie who used to say, ‘Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. The bastard might sneeze’.” Jeff was such an idiot. I let a laugh slip. The last thing I am is happy, but the memory isn’t bad.

We’re almost at the end of the street. There’s a barricade up ahead, a narrow thicket and beyond that the lights of a main street. B. cuts across the street we’re on, heading for a narrow dirt path that leads through the thicket.

Keeping pace with her, I take a drag, exhaling the smoke as I say, “I’m not trying to question a good thing.” Bullshit’s right. That’s exactly what I’m doing. I should have my head examined. “Yeah, really I am. Thing is, I have to question until all of the questions are gone. That’s the only way I’m gonna get right with this.”

That was great. Now what?

Well, at least we’re making progress one way. When we leave the thicket, she turns left onto the sidewalk. The intersection just ahead is Ludlow. That’s where we’re going. I just don’t know where on Ludlow. The four or five block section immediately right of us is a major strip. There are at least a dozen restaurants and a bunch of small businesses catering to the college crowd.

I stifle a sigh and give her a sidelong glance. She looks too, holding my gaze for just a sec. Oh well, it’s not like I can take it all back. She’s way too interested for that. But maybe if I can drag this out long enough, there’ll be enough people around that she won’t yell. Best plan I’ve got. The last thing I want is to get into a screaming match with B.

I’m not even sure what makes me think that’s gonna happen. She’s been cool so far. I’ve just got this bad feeling.

That might be the problem. Things have been too good. Me ‘getting the worst’ is a solid trend. No surprise, I’ve come to expect it. And when it doesn’t happen—

Of course, I don’t cut my own throat fast enough for her, so she prompts, “Go on.” My heart rate jumps the second she opens her mouth.

I can’t compete. That’s just a fact. There’s no way. Red’s this amazing person. She’s got her life together. What do I have that she doesn’t? A murder rap? An arrest warrant? A G.E.D.? Shit, I’m looking at more time and she’s probably got her degree by now. I don’t get what B. sees in me. I’m a train wreck without the thrilling explosions.

I manage to follow my first stellar performance with, “It’s just—” Yeah, stammering’s really helpful. I’ve gotta get my shit together. Like that’s such a new theme.
Okay, so…I should go with the obvious. She told me why she made the move. Letting her know I haven’t forgotten might be good. “I know what you told me, but it just seems—” I clear my throat to stall. The five seconds that takes, buys me all of nothing. “I don’t know. I just—” I need a new brain. This one’s probably been dropped too many times.

I take puff off my smoke. My hand’s cold, clammy and trembling. Yeah, I’m a wreck.

And it’s no wonder. We just hopped out of bed after sex.

But not sex, sex. Not just any sex. That was pretty amazing sex. What I’m trying to do now is just...

The walk light comes on, she follows instructions and I follow her.

*Insane,* that’s what this is. I just scored the winning lottery ticket and I’m trying to give it away.

B. runs out of patience as we cross whatever street this is. “Look, Faith, I’m not a telepath.” Clifton I think. I glance at the sign. Yeah, it’s Clifton. “You have to say what’s on your mind for me to understand. It’s called communication.” She releases my hand. It’s so sweaty I’m surprised she held on this long. I shove it into my pocket so it doesn’t freeze. “I get that you’re nervous, but you should try it. Who knows, I might even be able to help.”

Good things always come with complications.

Well, there’s a Skyline Chili behind us. I don’t get what’s up with chili around here, but it’s a major thing. The only other restaurants I see are a Thai place and a gyro shop on this block. I’m screwed. I have to say something. “I just don’t understand why you care.” I’m not gonna mention Red unless I have to. Boil the whole issue down and what you get is pretty much this: “Of all people…why’d you pick me?”

Dickhead had a pouch of throwing stars built into this pocket. I take one out. Holding it with my middle finger through the hole, I rotate it, pressing my thumb into the points, one at a time. Between the smoke and this, maybe I won’t bite my nails.

She replies, “You make it sound like some sort of choice,” as I take another drag. “Like I pulled out a rolodex, flipped through it and went, ‘I know, I could seduce Faith. She’s probably bored.’” They say this shit calms your nerves. I’m waiting. Any time now would be nice.

It won’t happen. This is where things head south. I’ll disagree kinda like this, “It was a choice. You told me that yourself,” she’ll snap defensive and *presto:* instant fight. To my credit, I do everything I can to keep the peace. It just doesn’t get much more conciliatory than a weak mumble.

The upside is that things are exactly like I’d hoped. This is a busy little street. There’s a steady flow of traffic. Not lots, but enough. And there are a few people out. Considering the cold...

I don’t get how B. does it. This has to suck for her. It’s in the low forties and even with this coat, I’m sort of cold.

“Okay, it was, but it wasn’t.” She sounds normal enough at first, but as she goes on her voice picks up tension. At least she’s not yelling. “You don’t get to pick who you’re attracted to. You know that. It just happens.” She stops talking. I glance. Her brow furrows. I take a drag and she goes off, “Why are you doing this?” I knew it. “Did I do something to upset you?” I hate being right.

This is the last thing I need. I’ll chance my nails. After sliding the throwing star back into its pouch, I say, “No. You didn’t do anything. I just don’t—”
She cuts me off, “I did do something wrong, didn’t I?” It’s hopeless. I wish we could stop, but I know she won’t. Thing is, it might help if I could look her in the eyes. “Why do you do that? You act like nothing’s wrong when—”

That does it. I snap, “B., you said ‘slayers.’” Funny, for a snap my voice is still pretty weak. “There are lots of slayers now.” She has to see the sense in what I’m saying, even if I don’t say the name. “I just don’t get why you’d pick me. Wouldn’t it be better to pick someone who’s not…” I let her have the blank. She can fill that in while I rack my brain for a replacement. “What about that girl Red was seeing? She’s kind of hot and—”

Go figure, she laughs it off. “Who? Kennedy? She’s an annoying brat. You know that.” Yeah, I do. It was lame. But the idea isn’t.

“Alright then, someone else,” I reply. It’s not like this is rocket science. “There has to be another slayer you like. I mean, there are two-thousand of us now.” The worst part—

She says, “You really didn’t like it.” The hurt comes through in her voice. “How can you look at me—?”

I feel like a major shit cutting her off. I just hate the fact that she’s making this about her. “That’s not it. I just think—” I don’t know what I think. Shit! “B., I’m a fucking nightmare! Can’t you see that? Of all people, how could you want to be with me?” I keep saying that… ‘the worst part,’ or at least thinking it. But if this whole fucked mess has a ‘worst part,’ it’s this…

I thought for sure when I took Angelus down that I was gonna die. I was ready. No one was more surprised than me when I got up. Except maybe Lorne. Poor guy almost had a heart attack. The look on his face was…

Except…well, I’m not really sure Pylean demons have hearts. Fred said his brain’s in his…

Whatever. Reliving the bad anatomy lesson really isn’t helping.

It’s hard to believe that was almost three years ago. I moved on. Went where I was needed. None of us thought we’d leave Sunnydale. We were all prepared to lay down our lives to stop The First. And some of us did. But some of us survived. Or parts of some of us survived. After that, I just went where I was needed again. Cleveland was a total—

“So this is about you?” she says, but she’s not buying it. “I so don’t buy that.” She even says so. “You were trying to make it work with Wood. What makes him so much different than me… besides the obvious?” None of this is her fault. Wish I could get that through her thick skull.

It’s me.

Just my luck, I get to Cleveland and end up toe-to-toe with another vamp who’s older than dirt and batshit crazy. I was ready to die there too. I still am. And that’s the thing, the ‘worst part.’ I’ve spent so much time waiting to die, I think I’ve forgotten how to live.

“It’s not you. I think you’re sexy as hell,” I reply. For a really short time Wood made me feel alive. She makes feel the same way. How can she think I’m faking that? “It’s just—” I’ve gotta do this. If I don’t, things are only gonna get worse. “I don’t see why you’d want to be with me when there’s someone else. Someone who’d be so much better for you.”

A gust of wind blows through the intersection. I shiver as she asks the obvious, “Who?” She stops to check for traffic. The walk light’s not on, but it’s late enough that she just keeps going.
Tensing to shake off the cold, I follow a few steps behind her. It’s no small deal for me to say her name. I feel I’m giving B. up when I do. “Willow.” It comes out weak and broken, but I say it.

She exclaims, “Oh, you’ve gotta be joking? That’s what this is about?” She’s so loud I almost jump out of my skin. We even get a look from some guy who’s standing on the street corner. It’s great.

My cigarette’s practically burning my fingers. I drop the damned thing. I don’t remember smoking the last half, but I guess I did.

I’m such a stupid— I actually plead with her to see the sense, “She’d be better for you than I would.” It’s the last thing I want. “You two have this really special thing.” The last thing right next to hurting her, or dragging her down into this shit heap I call a life. “I mean, it’s obvious you care. And she’s—”

She doesn’t let me finish. “Here’s a better idea, Faith. How about I pick someone?” I take another peek. Oh boy. “There are lots of people in my past, right? Surely there has to be another candidate.” Here we go. If she wasn’t pissed before, she is now.

No wonder my life’s a shit heap. Look at the decisions I make.

She asks, “How about, Jenny Calendar?” That name rings a bell. “She was a little before your time.” I just can’t place it. “She was almost my mom’s age, but that shouldn’t matter.”

Some of her anger fades, but her voice keeps that snarky edge. She’s pricking with me. “The fact that she was totally into Giles might.” Oh Jesus! That’s the chick who— “She’s also dead because I couldn’t just be with the man that I loved.” Shit, B. That’s almost as bad as me suggesting I look up Allan Finch and see if he’s up for a good time. Not that she— “No, I’m way too special for that. I turned him into the monster who snapped Jenny’s neck just for spite.” It’s the same difference. She feels responsible for the death.

Turning sullen, she says, “It’s gotten better, but I’m still not sure Giles is over that.” Yeah, that had to suck, but I don’t see the point. “You want to compare nightmares? I don’t even have to really screw up to be poison. I just am.” She’s the one who said she didn’t want to talk about this shit.

I hope she’s done. “Oh! There’s Anya.” No. Not even close. It just took her a moment to locate the next barb.

I have to try, “It’s okay, B. I get it,” but sneaking a word in edgewise just doesn’t work.

She talks right over me, “Too bad she died because she stayed to help me.” I give up. Hurricane Buffy’s just gonna have to run her course. “But you were there. You saw.” Really, she’d make a better earthquake. “Xander’s, umm…he’s been pretty…” Too bad they don’t name those.

Under a maroon awning just ahead of us, a door swings open. A well-dressed, middle-aged man steps though, followed by an attractive woman in her mid-to-late twenties. He holds the door for her and takes her hand. They do the ‘we’re so in love’ pantomime as they walk our way.

Is it sad that I envy them? If I’d just kept my damned mouth shut, that’d be us.

I file in behind B. to make room for them as she says, “I know. How about Tara? She was even gay.” The guy gives us a snotty look. Asshole.

Okay, so…not really us. B. adds, “And totally in love with Will,” as we pass up the red state special.
Fuck it! I have to try again. “B., please, I get it.”

Figures, I don’t even put a dent in her rant. “They had a rough time. Will had a lot of problems to work out.” I have to speed up to catch her. She’s actually walking away from me. “But they were so in love. And she was getting better.” Taking my place at her side, I match pace. Like it’s my place. “They were just getting back together when Tara was killed by a bullet that was meant for me.” She looks terrible. And of course, I feel like more of a shit for upsetting her. I promised I wouldn’t bring up the past. Looks like I stepped right in it without even knowing.

“But then, I guess you sort of missed that part,” she grumbles. “So if things seemed a little intense around the house when you came back, maybe now you’ll get why.” Well, that’s just great, but my role as an asshole isn’t quite complete until she adds, “You also should get that there are things that people just can’t forgive.” Wish I’d known. Some of the stuff that happened makes a lot more sense now.

Stopping under the maroon awning, she faces me. “You say you’re a mess? Well, look at me,” she demands. I wish I could, but I can’t. “You’re one of the few people I can think of who might have a shot at surviving me.”

My mouth’s so pasty I don’t get the impulse. It makes no sense, but I follow it anyway, reaching into my coat for a smoke as she says, “I just don’t see why you won’t hear me. I’ve tried like—”

Something hits me when she cuts off. I totally blew it. Not just a little bit blew it, but I completely screwed the pooch. I couldn’t have fucked up harder if I’d tried. She’s in such a snit she can’t even finish a thought and all I can smell are these stupid things.

Oh well, done’s done. I place the nasty thing between my lips. There’s no going back now. I may as well make it worse. That’s what I’m best at.

The gold ‘Uno’s’ logo on the glass to her left catches my eye as I light up. I suppose it should remind me of Chicago, but it doesn’t. I’ve never been. There was one near a mall I used to go to back in Boston. She’s right, they make a good pizza. Too bad I—

“This isn’t some sort of compromise for me. I actually want this. Yeah, I thought about it, but that doesn’t mean that I—” When she stops short, I look up. I can’t believe my luck. Instead of telling me to go get bent, she combs her bangs back. Holding them at the crown of her head, she explains, “That doesn’t change how I feel. This isn’t something that happened overnight. I’ve been really attracted to you. I just had to think about it to get that.” She lets her hair go. Her hand falls to her side. “Now, I’ve tried to tell you. I’ve tried to show you, but you just won’t believe me.”

That was never an issue. Y’know what? I’m gonna end this. Or try. I say, “But I do—”

When she cuts me off with a firm, “No,” I raise my voice.

“I just needed—”

It doesn’t matter. She wins out. “I’m sick and tired of playing games, Faith.” I lower my eyes like a whipped pup. “I’ve told you how things are. I’m done. If you aren’t into me, I want to know right now.” I guess she has every right to be mad. It’d just be nice if she was mad for the right reasons.

Now’s really not the time, but it’s the only time I’ve got. I have to do something or I’m gonna lose her. I just never thought—

And that doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter why either. Fact is, the idea makes me sick. I can figure the rest out later.
I drop my smoke. Damned things are evil. I hope she doesn’t care.

Yeah. That’s really bright. I know she does, but like everything else, there’s not a lot I can do about it now.

“This was never about you. I’m so sorry, Buffy,” I say, taking a step toward her. “I just don’t want to hurt you.” At least she’s finally listening to me. I pull my hand from my pocket and move another step. “That’s all I’m really good for.” I take the final step. It surprises me when she lets me hold her. I figured it’d be harder, but she just puts her arms around me. I whisper in her ear, “You deserve to be happy.”

Actually, she’s holding me so tight it’s like she’s afraid I’m gonna try to get away. I guess I’m forgiven. I pull back enough to see her face. There’s so much sorrow in her eyes it’s—

It hurts.

I whisper, “If you think I can do that…”

Her lips are cold. But then, so are mine. Even cold, it’s still nice. I tilt my head, wanting more and she responds. Her mouth opens, mirroring my own. Our tongues touch. They’re chilly too at first, but everything warms in time, even her nose.

It’s strange. This has always been about sex for me. About getting worked up. A way of making the juices flow. But this isn’t like that. All of the hunger’s been shelved. But even shelved I kind of feel it. I feel like all I’d have to do is push and she’d—

I don’t. That’s the last thing I want. Letting her lead, I echo her movements. Every touch is a caress, gentle and slow. The acrid taste dulls, turning sweet.

Barring the misunderstanding, she must have a lot more faith in me than I do. Where it came from is anyone’s guess. I sure haven’t done anything to deserve it.

I do know one thing: I’m done questioning her this time. I need to be grateful she does. That’s the important part.

A low rumble in the distance causes me to break the kiss. It’s the last thing I want, but I have to stop. I’m not sure she gets why. Hell, she might even be mad at me for the stereotype. Trouble is, it’s mostly true.

There are two kinds of car owners. The first kind might have a car that sounds like this for a few days, but they see it as a problem and they get it fixed. The second kind makes their car sound like this on purpose because they think it’s cool. They’re mostly young guys who believe it’s perfectly fine to use the word ‘fag’ in casual conversation. And not to talk about smokes.

As loud as this car is…

We should bail. And soon.

Completely oblivious, she rests her head on my shoulder and whispers, “I’m sorry too. I didn’t—”

She sighs. “I mean, I know that was hard. I probably made you pretty mad. Thanks for not—”

When she pauses, I tell her, “It’s okay.” Her hand moves from the small of my back. I look down just in time to see her brush a lock of hair from her face. She’s so pretty.

“It’s just—” she tries, but it’s her turn to come up short. Her hand comes to rest on my side. It’s a
little surprising to see her so vulnerable after all that. I don’t know why, but it makes me feel good. “Your timing was awful. It’s not like I’m—” She swallows. “I knew you’d ask about Will, but I—”

We need time to talk. I wish there was someplace we could go, but there really isn’t unless we go home. I let her have as much as I can. “This is all so new to me. I don’t know what I’m doing. I thought I’d—I mean, I knew I hadn’t, but—” She sighs. “Oh, I’m not sure what I mean. You acted like—”

Gently pulling away, I give her another kiss to say ‘it’s okay’ again. She needs to understand that. I take her hands and say, “You didn’t do anything wrong, B. It was…” I smile. What else can I do? It was, uh… “It was nice.”

She smiles too. “Just nice?”

“It was really nice,” I reply. I’d add a few more ‘reallys’if I thought it’d help, but I think she gets the point.

Letting go of her right hand, I turn and open the door. I’m not even sure if it’s conscious, but her body language changes. She falls right into the routine. Everything gels and we’re a couple. How I ended up in the male role is anyone’s guess, but I’m fine with that. I’ve certainly had worse.

Really, I just want to protect her. I’m not even sure why. It’s just this weird compulsion. I guess the reason doesn’t matter. It works. We fit. She’s used to playing fem and I’ve never really done that. She can have it.

As the car passes by, I follow her inside. Putting my arm around her feels natural, so I run with it. The guy working the lobby looks up from writing something on the seating chart and smiles. It’s pretty cool. We might actually be okay.
She’s cold.

I don’t even know if that should matter to me. We’re slayers. Being uncomfortable pretty much comes with the territory.

Actually, it’s amazing that no one’s tried to kill us in the last few hours. We’ve had some peace. I may start feeling neglected if this keeps up.

Nice try, but it doesn’t help. I have to look again. Her jaw’s set and she’s all hunched over against the wind with her arms folded tightly across her chest. A gust of wind whips her hair. She brings her hand up to tuck it behind her ear. A couple hours have turned what should’ve been a pleasant evening stroll into something more like the Iditarod.

That’s the Midwest for ya. Sending her here was just plain cruel.

But I guess she sent herself. I just wish she’d stop dressing that way for me and… At least, I think that’s what she’s doing. Maybe she’s just that—

Yeah, using the word ‘dense’ wouldn’t be very nice, especially if it is for me. Although with Buffy and clothes, it’s impossible to tell. She’s got this thing.

Besides, who knew the temp was gonna drop ten degrees while we were in the restaurant? It feels like snow. The air has that bite. It’d be a fluke to get a storm this late in the season, especially here, but that’s really what this place is all about. There are cushier hell dimensions.

I pull more strands of hair from my mouth. Even with it back, that’s been a regular thing. The chili place is just ahead, but I’m tempted to duck into one of these alcoves to warm up. At the very least, not eating my hair for a few minutes might be nice.

She says, “Huh?” when I put my arm around her, but she gets the idea and follows. That’s the first thing she’s said since we left the restaurant. Go figure, it was about one notch above a grunt. Neither one of us has been feeling overly chatty. There’s something about fighting that just takes it out of you.

I kind of enjoyed the quiet. It was nice. And some of the looks she gave me were—

They were really nice.

It’s not exactly quiet here. The wind howls as we move under the cover of the storefront. Look at all that glass. This wouldn’t happen in Cleveland. There’d be a cage over this whole damned thing. Once we’re back in the corner, as out of the wind as we’re gonna get, I open my coat and wrap her inside it with me. There’s enough room through the shoulders and across the chest that she almost disappears when she bows her head. Or that’s how it seems.

A little late, I reply, “I just need a moment, B.” She probably needs it more than I do, but making it about me…

I rest my lips against the crown of her head and breathe in, kissing her just because. She smells
The smell has layers. There’s crisp, damp air, but that’s not her.

She smells like—

The top three buttons of my sweater are open. She nuzzles it out the way and kisses my chest. Her lips are chilly at first, but they warm up as her breath rolls over my skin, all hot and steamy.

I really can’t place the smell. It’s a little musky. Kind of spicy. Whatever it is, it blends well with us. She still smells like me.

Well, I’m warm now. Among other things.

She finds her way under my shirt. Her hands are cold just like her lips were. She’s hesitant to touch me. It’d be okay, but I never get to say so. She doesn’t let me. Her attention never leaves my chest. If I could communicate that with a moan or maybe write it out in drool, we’d be set. It’s good, though. Her hands warm up quick enough. She bundles them into my shirttail. A car cruises past as she pulls them free and starts to caress my back. Magically, we trade places. She stops shivering and I start. Uh…

It’s more like trembling, but who’s—?

She whispers against my chest, “There’s something else.” My heart flutters when she looks up. I focus on her mouth, watching her lips move. “Another reason.” My breath catches in my throat. I want to be annoyed, but I can’t. This is all just way too, umm…nice. “I’m just not sure I can explain it.” I look into her eyes. When she got so serious is a complete mystery. “I know I wouldn’t stand a chance with the others. There’s too much stuff to get in the way. They wouldn’t hear me.” She sighs and it sends a tingle rippling through me. “And that’s actually a big part of it.”

This is pretty bad. I don’t think she meant to get me started. Oh well, at least my twisted brain didn’t go skipping off to wallow in the gutter this time. I may be getting better. I take a deep breath to clear my head.

Alright, so…she wants to explain something. I caught that much. Why she waited till now is anyone’s guess. And there was something else about it being complicated. I’m so screwed.

I don’t reply in time, so she rests her head on my shoulder and says, “It’s okay. We don’t have to talk.”

“Oh, no,” I reply. “It’s oh—it’s cool, B. It’s just—” I start off spun, but miraculously manage to level out. “I was just—” Half-blinking, half-scrunching my eyes sort of does the trick. “I was just, uh…a little distracted.” The next part comes out almost okay, even if she does giggle. “I’m all ears. Give it a shot.”

I’m still a dog, but at least I amuse. She says through a smile, “It’s about Spike.” It doesn’t sound like she’s smiling at all. Her cheeks are pink, but it’s probably the cold. A curtain of hair falls in front of her face when she hangs her head. Or it could be—

“Gawd, I hated him!” she groans. “He was the most frustrating, two-faced, lying, sack of…evil. He was just evil.” Funny, I don’t remember this part. “Even when he tried to be good, he was just plain evil.” Last time I saw those two together, she had out the pompoms trying to sell him as part of the team.

Yeah. She’s playing this up too much. Something’s up.
Something…

Oh, *well*, fuck me. That was true? She was actually—

Jesus. It’s amazing what you can learn when you’re banished to the smoking lounge.

You learn to take it all in stride. I figured he was just blowing smoke up my ass, stroking his tiny ego. Not that I cared. I just played along.

It figures my worthless brain tries to form a picture. Not the sort of thing I want to see. I can’t imagine her letting him stick his dick inside her. The idea makes supper sit like a rock.

Considering what I saw, it doesn’t fit. I close my eyes and remember how she touched me. Even just a couple minutes ago, the way she kissed my chest. I can’t see her doing that to him. The two things don’t mesh. She’s so passionate and tender. Strip that away what’s left?

*Me.*

The answer stinks, but at least it’s honest.

Why would she do that? For her, this completely blows the profile.

I feel her move and open my eyes. She meets them. Her expression tells me that she’s waiting for me to get it figured. I need to say something.

What?

What the hell can I say?

Now there’s a great question. Add a ‘when’ and a ‘where’ and I’ll have the full set.

Yeah, whatever, I just need to get her talking again. Anything’ll work. Plastering on a cheesy grin, I tease, “And you liked him.” It’s pretty lame, but so am I.

She grumbles, “Yeah, *yeah*, I did, dammit,” letting out a token sigh. I raise an eyebrow and she looks away, mumbling, “I still do.”

I snicker. It makes me sound less bitter. “He does have…I dunno.” I force a smile. “He’s one charming bastard.”

Make that ‘one charmed bastard.’ Her sallow little sweetheart’s still kickin’. I wonder if she knows.

Probably.

“Yeah, that’s exactly it. But it’s not—” she says, glancing up to briefly meet my eyes. “It’s not just that.”

I stare vacantly into the street, but my attention’s really still on her. The way her body feels pressed against mine. Her fingertips moving over my skin. It’s still *really* nice. I need to get over this. So she knocked boots with that Cocky Cockney Corpse. That’s got nothing to do with us.

She lays her head on my shoulder. As she whispers, “Things got bad,” her breath flows over my neck. “They got so bad I didn’t have anyone I felt I could turn to. I wasn’t even sure I wanted anyone.” This is strange, strange in a *really good* way. In spite of the chill, the harshness of the lights, the concrete, glass and steel…this feels so intimate.
I’d like to return the favor and rub her back too, but I can’t and it sucks. My hands are full keeping us warm. Of course, the cold’s doing them no favors, but—

“It’s funny,” she says. “We hated each other so much. I didn’t care what Spike thought of me. It didn’t matter what I said, so I talked. It surprised me when he actually listened.”

I crane my neck, twisting to kiss her cheek. I don’t mean to interrupt. A smile tugs at the corner of her mouth, but it only lasts for an instant before she moves on, “And dunno... it turned into this thing. I could talk to him about pretty much anything and I knew he wouldn’t judge. He’d just listen.”

Her eyelids flutter when I ask, “I guess it wasn’t like that with the others, huh?” She’s already said it wasn’t. Or isn’t. But this about the past and I’m not clear just how far ‘past’ she’s talking.

Stirring, she lifts her head and looks into my eyes again. “No. Not so much,” she replies. “And I’m not even sure why that happened.” I lean back and rest my shoulders in the corner. She moves with me, placing her feet between mine. Her hands go to my sides. Just that little shift gives me enough extra to overlap the front of my coat so I can hold it with one hand.

I put my free hand to good use caressing her back as she goes on, “Well, there are some obvious reasons, but even before that, I used to talk to Will about everything and then things just...” She nestles into the curve of my shoulder. “They changed. They got complicated.” ‘Good use’ is an overstatement. There’s too much leather in the way. I doubt she can even feel it. “Now she barely even looks at me. And the story’s not much different with Xander.” I’m half tempted to get going. This is making me a little crazy. I want to touch her.

I should let her finish. After—

I can’t even think it. Anyway, after that last bombshell, there can’t be—

“I couldn’t even make them understand what I saw in him,” she says. Well, this should be interesting. “It wasn’t his soul. Actually, it was what his soul meant. He didn’t do that for me.” She sighs. “Well, he did, but he didn’t.” I wish she’d talked to me then. It might’ve helped. “Really, he did it because he never wanted to be that thing again. He looked at what he’d done and he just couldn’t live with himself. He had to change.” Okay. I’m missing something. “And he did.” And it’s not a small something. “I just can’t let go of what happened. The way he—”

She falls flat, leaving me another puzzle. I hate how she just assumes I know this stuff.

Watching me intently, she waits for me to catch up. Or ask, I guess. Maybe, but I’m gonna try to put it together myself.

I turn to stare at our reflection in the shop window. My cheek touches the cold glass. She looks so small hiding inside my coat.

My hand falls to my side. I turn back to scan her face, searching for some clue, but she doesn’t leave me searching for long. “He tried to rape me, Faith.” Uh...

Christ! My jaw tightens. I’m damned to do anything about it.

And he had the nerve to back come around after that? No wonder the gang was tweaked.

This shit just keeps getting better and better.

Fuck!
What do I say to that? No clue, but I need to chill.

The hand that was free hurts. I was rubbing her back. I don’t remember stopping. Now my nails are cutting into my palm. Knocking that off might be a good place to start. Not grinding my teeth would be even better.

Okay, so…deep cleansing breath. Fuck me. Now what?

Well, I have to say something. ‘I should’ve fucking staked him when I had the chance’ won’t exactly work, so…

“That’s not something you’re supposed to forgive.” It beats I’m gonna rip his head off and shit on his ashes.

That threat gets a bit screwy with vamps.

I look into the gray car that’s parked on the street in front of us. A red light flashes on its dash. It’s one of those fifty-fifty things that’ve become so popular, not quite a sport-ute, not quite a car. Really, it’s just a station wagon, but because those screamed ‘soccer mom,’ someone got the bright idea to make them look like trucks. It’s not a bad trend.

She said ‘he listened.’ Yeah. My ass. The word ‘no’ must’ve been too complicated for the fuckwit. Goes to show there’s this huge difference between us and him.

First off, we’re human. Not that that really means anything. On the one side, just look around. On the other, Angel’s not. But he’s actually got a heart. More than most of us mere humans.

With Spike that’s questionable. He reads ‘slimy.’ So he got his soul back. Look at the huge difference that made.

I suppose I should be nicer. He did save all our asses.

Thing is, there’s a really simple way of looking at this that clears it all up.

B.’s still here because people love her. Several someones cared so much that they couldn’t let her go.

I’m still here because someone thought I deserved another shot. Angel saw something in me he thought was worth saving. Clueless what, but I’ll always be grateful.

Spike’s still here because someone wanted to hurt Angel. They thought having William the Bloody around to deal with would throw him off his game. Considering the source, you can pretty much bet they thought they could corrupt the bastard too. Whether they could or couldn’t doesn’t matter. The thing they saw is still there.

She squirms.

Spike may be pulling for the good now, but he’s—

Her nails dig into my lower back as she squeaks my name. I blink away the pulsing light. My arms are wrapped around her. I thought I was just holding her, but I guess it’s too tight. I pull away, unable to look. Imagining’s bad enough. I mutter, “Sorry,” under my breath.

Stepping away, she says, “It’s okay. I get that you’re stressed.” I just let her go. I should’ve—

Shit.
I sigh and hang my head. Goddammit. I can’t do anything right.

Small conciliation, but my shoulders were starting to hurt anyway. I turn out of the corner and rest flat against the window.

“It’s hard to believe that Riley was my last real relationship,” she says, leaning next to me. “It’s been years.” She’s standing so close I feel her shrug even if I am looking at my feet. “With him things started off complicated. There were so many expectations they just got in the way of everything. Once we both knew the truth, we could barely even look at each other.”

This isn’t something I need to hear. I witnessed that firsthand. He touched me the way she touched me. Or whatever. God, that sounds screwed up.

Yeah. That’s because it is.

She whispers, “I mean, we tried, but really…” Hanging her head, she rubs her eyes. “I wanted it to work.”

I mumble, “He loved you, B.”

“I know,” she replies. I wait for the shit the hit the fan, but she clams up. I’ll just be over here counting my blessings that’s all she has on the subject.

Her study of the concrete slab looks every bit as thrilling as mine was. I think we may’ve found the point where this is just gonna be too much fun to continue.

I shift my weight, itching to get going. No clue where she was headed. I may never know. Ignoring the trauma, what she’s said so far is that she could talk to Spike.

Good for her, but it doesn’t change—

The sound of her voice takes me by surprise. “There’s this thing that happens.” My attention snaps to her. “I’m not even sure why.” She’s still studying the sidewalk, like it holds some sort of answer. She exhales through her nose. It wants to be a sigh, but it comes out lacking. “I’m there—wherever there is at the time—I know what I want to say and I just…”

She stalls, but she doesn’t need to say anything else. Shit happens to me all the time. I’m not big with sharing. It only ever gets me hurt.

“The words won’t come,” she says, fidgeting with her belt. “It feels like there’s a wall between us. It doesn’t matter what I do, I just can’t make myself…”

I don’t have much choice but to watch her. Between our reflections in the glass and the fact that she’s between me and the street, it’s her or the sidewalk. Besides, she’s just so…

“There are all these people around me. They love me. I know they do. But I’ve never been more alone in my life,” she mumbles as her leather belt passes between her fingers. “I went from actually knowing peace to so much pain.” Her snicker’s almost lost to a gust of wind that whistles into our alcove. I fail to see what’s funny. “That was bad, but the truly twisted part…this life was a gift. All of my friends, they loved me so much they couldn’t let go.”

The level of her voice drops. I have to concentrate to hear her. “And the walls grew higher and thicker. There wasn’t a single one of them I could talk to. I couldn’t tell them how I felt. Hell, I could barely even look at them.” She finally looks up, studying us in the glass for a moment before she concludes, “Hell’s about right.”
It comes as a relief when she tugs on my sleeve and says, “C’mon. Let’s go.”

I set off with her, keeping pace, watching the sidewalk pass under my boots and listening to her. “The thing with Spike was messed up.” I choke the snicker before it sneaks out. Yeah, that’s one way to put it. “I didn’t love him. I still really don’t. Things got so out of control, but there wasn’t once I couldn’t speak my mind with him.”

I glance at her. She stooped into the wind again. I wonder if she gets that this could wait. I guess she does, but she obviously doesn’t want to. “It doesn’t even seem right when I say it, but that’s how it was.”

We’re almost to the corner. Once we get back in the trees this shouldn’t be so bad. It might help if I actually talked too. “No, that makes sense,” I reply. “You were probably afraid you’d hurt their feelings.” It’s a little obvious, but at least she knows I’m listening.

“Yeah, that was part of it,” she says. “Thing is, Spike taught me something. What I want is that. Not the bad parts. I mean, obviously, not the deadness, or the violence, or the loneliness, or the complication. What I want is someone who I can really talk to. A friend, but…” The wind picks up causing her to fall silent for a moment. “I don’t know. It seems to me you should be able to put that part first.”

Huh. I wondered what she was getting at. Now she says it that makes complete sense. It’s a little messed up how she got there. Not to mention really unpleasant. But it’s good. She’s right. That might be alright.

I give her a quick peek and ask, “And you think we can have that?” It surprises me that she’s grinning. This hasn’t been the most cheerful talk.

When I look again, her grin’s gone. She says, “Yeah, I think if things hadn’t—” She stops to collect her thoughts. “We were so young and things—” It doesn’t really work, but that’s not all that surprising.

We could’ve been friends.

It’s not hard to find something reassuring to say this time. “Things did get pretty twisted up. I’m sorry. That was mostly my fault.” We stop at the corner to wait for the light. I smirk. This whole thing has that kind of Twilight Zone feel to it. We’re actually discussing the past and no one’s screaming. Part of me wants to look for the catch. This is just too good to be true.

I can’t.

I won’t.

I just listen. “They did. It’s okay. It was me too.” She squeezes my hand. “I didn’t know what I wanted. Or I couldn’t accept that I couldn’t have what I wanted. Maybe if I’d tried harder or—I don’t know…”

The light turns. She takes a step into the intersection. I follow, offering up more of the truth. “There wasn’t anything you could’ve done.” But that shouldn’t be news. “I was seriously screwed up and headed for one helluva crash. I would’ve just taken you with. I tried to anyway.” Time and distance. That was almost cold. I must be over it. Or almost…

She must be too ’cause she says, “Yeah, I guess.” We turn onto the sidewalk next to the chili place. “But yeah, I think we have a real shot if we can put all that behind us.”
“I really like you, Faith,” she says. “Even with all that other stuff, I guess I always have. Or I wanted to. It hurt. And you really pissed me off, but—” She stops short and I fill in the blank. But that’s over. It takes her a sec. Finally, she adds, “Noticing a theme?” It’s prime bait. I have to take it.

I glance and find that she’s looking right at me, waiting. We make eye contact just long enough for me to reply, “Drawn to the bad?”

She says through a smile, “Not exactly a positive theme.”

No, it really isn’t, but I don’t say that. Instead, I offer the truth again, or at my brand of the truth. “You do know that you can’t save us, right?” I pause to consider and notice something. We’re not alone. There’s a parking lot behind the chili place. An older black guy in rent-a-cop blues is huddled in the guard shack. Giving him a nod, I continue, “Not all of us, at least. It’s not the healthiest thing to even try.” Typical. He isn’t paying any attention.

“No,” she replies. As we pass by the shack, he looks up. I glance and smile, but he still doesn’t notice me. He’s straining to see something else. Something far away…past us.

I should look too, but this is more important. I have to ask, “So what part of that was hard to understand?” It seems pretty easy to me.

Her hand lifts just a touch. I think that wanted to be a shrug. “None of it, I guess,” she replies.
Something brushes my thigh. The bed gives way and I fall. Breathless and scraping for…

I catch myself. Part of me springs up, snapping back into place.

Goddammit! I hate that shit!

I’m not exactly sure what part it is that lets go, but for a moment my insides feel like a dangling Slinky.

B. slides between my legs, resting her head on my left inner thigh. My stomach’s still figuring out where it wants to be when she whispers, “Sorry.” Her breath tickles.

A shiver starts at my lower back and works its way up. When it fades, I’m not sure what she said. Umm…

Was I just, uh…?

I was stressed about something, wasn’t I?

I even don’t remember moving, but I obviously did. Or maybe she moved me?

No clue.

My right leg’s bent, leaning propped up on her hip. Her breasts are crushed against my thigh. If I have to worry about something, I’d rather it be—

She steals my hand when I lift it. Hey, I was, uh…

I try, but she’s not giving it back. Alright, that’s cool. It’s probably for the best. My fingers are—

I’m not sure whether it’s a feature or a flaw that my arm’s just the right length and bent in all the right places for them to end up…

A few minutes ago, I would’ve probably thought ‘flaw,’ but…as she passes my fingertips over her lips, tasting them with her tongue, my opinion changes. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

Good thing I’m used to that.

I remember being curious about the time, but I didn’t have the energy to look. Really, I didn’t care that much.

That wasn’t that long ago either. Or I don’t think it was. What with the falling, I can’t be sure.

Now I care, just not about that. It’s nighttime. That’s close enough—

Her teeth scrape the tip of my middle finger. I feel it all the way down. My toes actually curl. It’s another one of those things. I think I’m just defective.

I should move while I still can. I suck it up and open my eyes. Nice night. It’s not half as dark as I
thought. Framed by the skylight, stars twinkle overhead. The hand she holds hostage slips free when I haul my sorry, lazy, worthless…

I lean in. As I help to lift her, she asks, “Is this okay?”

It’s more than okay. I try to say so, but stammer, “Umm…” instead. Half asleep and horny as hell, I make George Bush look like he didn’t just buy that diploma from Yale.

Her lips crush against mine when I give up and nod. I may be in trouble.

She massages my back as we kiss, if it’s fair to call this that. Our tongues spar, looking for an advantage, one pushing the other out. The tilt of her head randomly changes. I match, mirror, shadow…more like just scramble to keep up. Her hands move rhythmically with our heads, our tongues, us…one side up and the other down. It’s dizzying.

Intense.

Overwhelming.

I wind her hair around my hand. Her nails bite into my shoulder and side when I pull away.

There was something I wanted and I’m going to take it. Otherwise…getting rolled up, even by her, even like this, just doesn’t sit well with me.

Warm and tingly, my lips throb as I kiss her cheek. She breathes a series of soft sighs, gasping when I reach her ear.

That’s probably got nothing to do with this. I mean, yeah…I’m sure that the nibbling’s nice and all. Her earrings click against my teeth. I like them. They feel hard and bumpy between my lips. It goes nice with the tingle.

The problem’s my right hand. It’s developed a mind of its own. I don’t notice where it’s wandered off to until she gasps. Her nipple pops from between my slippery fingers. I circle the tip, smearing the moisture around. She seems to like it, so…

Umm…

I’m sure my hand’ll find all kinds of no good to keep it entertained. Damned thing usually does.

Moving on…

Moving down. Her ear’s so tender. This isn’t. Less nibbling, I follow the path set by my delinquent hand.

It amazes me how much stuff changes. I’ve always been a real meat-and-potatoes kind of gal.

This isn’t that.

Or I guess it can be, but not exactly. Not really.

It’s more like filling up on appetizers. Each taste is different. Different textures. Different smells.

I never would’ve gone there without her. And now that I have, I can’t picture anything…

I need her.

As much as I can’t imagine not doing this, I can’t image doing this with anyone else, so…
I’d be lost without her.

She says my name through a groan. The sound sends a chill down my spine, calling me back.

Lost.

I focus on that muscle, the one that bridges her neck and shoulder. What I’m doing to it isn’t very nice. No wonder she…

I stop.

She frets as I nuzzle her nipple, dragging my lips over the hard little knot, letting it slip between them…

My index finger dips into her belly button. I give my hand a nudge so it doesn’t stick around to play. That’s just annoying.

Drawing her nipple into my mouth, I suckle and flick, then let go. She trembles when I exhale. Tasting even a hint of myself on her skin is…

My right hand reaches its goal. So soft, like the petals of a flower.

That’s exactly it too. She’s just like a flower. I can even picture the one I mean, but damned if I know its name. It looks sort of like a curled up sheet of paper.

And that’s probably the tiredest simile ever. Even I’ve heard it and I don’t—

I don’t know. That part’s not supposed to be pretty, is it? I never expected to think that. Not about anyone. But somehow B…

Still kind of mindlessly teasing her nipple with my lips and tongue, I part her folds, fondling…

Skin smooth as warm butter flows beneath my fingertips…

Supple?

*Supple* works. And slippery…

And warm. And…

And…

And…

And distracting…*severely* distracting…

It still blows me away. Every inch of her is *just*…

We’re both somewhere between here and gone. Her body’s so rigid, she shivers with the stress. I move up to find—

She draws in a desperate sounding breath. It’s amazing that something so small can—

Her hand touches mine. She’s shaking like a leaf, but the contact helps. She pushes, directing me back…

Guess she thinks I’ve screwed around enough. I take the hint and she takes over, cupping my
cheek, guiding me to face her. My fingers push inside her as she kisses me. What starts with a few frantic pecks becomes—

I think this is the sort of thing people write sappy poetry about. I lose track as it grows, falling into…

Every move she makes sends a ripple through me. Pressure builds, white static at the base of my skull, radiating out, warm and blurry…

She draws in breathy little sighs between, umm…

My hand’s lost too. Leave it alone for a moment and…

Figures it fell into a rut. My fingers move back and forth rather than in and out, in sort of a subtle ‘come hither’ gesture, but with three instead of one. As my hand closes, I swirl my fingertips. This is something I do to myself. It’s soothing, but not—

The goal’s not—

It’s not what she wants.

Her hands move to my hips when I slide down. She steadies me and nothing changes. My fingertips turn the same tight circle as I focus on her stomach. I’m impatient, but I—

I take my time, tasting the salt on her skin, feeling her warmth against my lips, just enjoying…

Lingering.

I hold my leg out, swinging it wide to miss her hair before I plant my knee. She guides me to where I want to be, but I hold back. I kind of took over. It’s her turn. My eyes drift shut as she threads her arm between my legs. I concentrate on my hand, just feeling her.

Just feeling her is pretty amazing. I could get lost.

I did get lost.

As she eases herself down, I compensate, moving with her, then she kisses me. It’s exactly like that too.

And I’m pretty sure that’s stupid. What else would she do?

But this just isn’t what I expect. She takes a single lip between hers and tastes it. She doesn’t bother trying to cover her teeth. And that makes it that much…

It’s painful, but not. I ache, wanting more, but more than that, I want her. Just breathing in her scent makes me—

My mouth waters. I open my eyes and my breath catches in my throat.

Cool light creates sharp contrasts, highlighting the golden tufts of her pubes. Below them there’s a dimple with a fine pleat of skin centered inside. What I want hides behind that perfect piece of creamy flesh.

Perfect.

I swallow.
It calls to me as her lips find another fold. She’s so tender, but I’m so tender…this is gonna send me up—

Her tongue slides down fast, swirling. Pushing everything out of the way, she clamps down, singling out one spot. Somehow she finds…

My brain turns to mush. I slump against her. In the time it takes to blink, she reduces me to twitching, trembling, breathless heap. I hold on. Or try. I’m not even sure—

She’s pinched the whole wedge of flesh between her lips. Her tongue presses down. She swirls it again. And just when every nerve ending in my body tries to escape, she lets go. Her tongue pushes inside me. She could back up and I…

I can think straight and I’d really rather not. This is just…

I don’t know. *Not.* I mean…it’s not like I hate it. I just can’t see anyone wanting that much of—

I’m no flower.
What Lies Beneath: Scene 2

Nine

She stakes! She scores!

Shit.

Bastard keeps coming. Embers flow over my skin.

Yeah, that wasn’t lame. The only way out is through.

Ashes pelt my face. Crap gets in my eyes. Again. It burns.

Oh well, at least he’s gone. My eyelids flutter. I rub them…like a dumbass. The room blurs. That was bright! This sucked before, but now…?

Fuckin’ ay! This is just great! Wonderful! It’s great when a plan comes together. B. sent the little prick right at me. Tag team slaying. Just like old times. Too bad—

A chill creeps down my spine. My eyes snap open. I can barely keep them that way. They itch and burn. I can’t see shit. Whatever. I’m gonna have to fake it. My guy’s back on his—

I see the kick coming and swing my arm down. That wants to be a block when it grows up. His foot grazes my forearm and connects with my thigh.

Fucker kicks like a mule! The room spins. My knee buckles. I crash into the wall. Lucky me, I don’t go—

The head rush wipes me out. It’s all I can do to catch myself. That’s a mistake too. Another one.

My stake goes flying. It skips away as I smack the ground face first.

At least I’m still in the same fuckin’ room. At least I think—

Yeah, who gives a shit what I think…or where I am?

I’m screwed. That’s where I am. What I think—?

I think my leg should—

I think this should—

I gasp. This blows! My leg should hurt.

And it does. It hurts like a bitch, but—

I clench my teeth. It’s just—

It’s cool. I’ll be good if I can—

It’ll pass. I just need to breathe.

And not puke. Not puking would be cool.
He must’ve hit a nerve bundle. This hurts so bad it’s almost—

It’s—

I can’t—

It’s almost numb.

It’ll pass. It has to. I just need time.

And time’s the one thing I don’t have. I want to move, but—

Uh…

This is gonna suck. I roll onto my side and hug my right leg. Moving just that much makes the left one—

It throbs and jabs. Pain, sharp and dull both at once. My teeth grind together.

I cringe or flinch. Or cringe and flinch both—

Mistake?

Yeah. Total shock. That was another goddamned mistake.

I want to roll my eyes. I’m not sure I can. I draw in a breath. It’s pitiful, all trembly, broken and shit. At least my head clears. Some. Not much.

Doesn’t matter. I’ll take it. Anything in the plus column works. I’m seriously not picky. Something tells me if I make it outta here, aspirin’s not gonna cut it this time.

God! I’m such an idiot! Dropping my guard was a monumentally stupid thing to do. But it’s not like I had much of a choice. I had to take a chance to get the job done. Passing that little shit back and forth was just gonna get one of us—

I try to laugh and end up hacking up a lung. One of us did get hurt. What-the-fuck-ever. It’s done. He’s gone. That’s what matters.

You were right, B. Bet she’d love hearing that. Like it was hard to predict. Shit doesn’t get much more obvious.

I didn’t care. I wasn’t gonna let go. I had to push.

And that’s just so unlike me.

Yeah.

Oh well. Best I’ve got now’s ‘play dead.’ I groan. The effect’s good. And damn it, I need it. I’m sure not gonna get up. My leg throbs, warm and prickly, right on the edge of really goddamned painful. Moving again would be a—

Maybe the ceiling will cave in. That’d be just my luck.

A hard chunk of debris gouges my cheek. Crap sticks to my face. This place was trashed before we showed up, but now…
Old construction like this doesn’t go without one hell of a fight. The floor’s covered in dust, ashes, broken boards, hunks of plaster strung together with matted clumps of coarse black hair, slivers of wood…

All of that wood and not a scrap in reach. Unless there’s something behind me, but it’s not like I can look. An epiphany wouldn’t go amiss right about now.

It’s fine. I’ll just go with what I know. What I’ve got.

That is if he ever gets around to—

Christ, Buddy! Take your time why don’t you? You’d think—

Goddamned gorilla’s been on me like stink on shit since we got here. He’s got a serious grudge. Or he had one. Figures now that I’m down he wants to ‘savor the kill’…or whatever.

Maybe he got lost. Stupid fuckin’ vamps.

The little Jackie-Chan-looking motherfucker B.’s been fighting’s got it just as bad. They trade blows so fast it’s almost hard to watch. Not that I can. Everything’s pretty much a blur.

B. gets a kick in. He goes reeling through one of the holes in the wall. She doesn’t even notice me. I’m glad. As she goes after her guy, my guy slips his hand under my chest.

I bite my lip to stifle a snicker. Instead of giving myself up, I go for the blade stashed at the small of my back as he lifts me. It’s just a better plan.

He doesn’t feel a thing. It all plays out perfect. Just like in the movies. When he has me almost sitting—surprise, surprise—I turn and gut him.

Fact really is stranger than fiction. If this wasn’t just some pretty little dagger B. handed me, it’d be curtains for my guy. Sweet gesture, but a stake might’ve been more useful. Depends.

His hand closes over mine. He tries to stop me from driving the blade in deeper. I grab his hair and force him to meet my eyes. “So where’s your boss?” I ask. His other hand’s on my shoulder. He pushes. I’m not giving in. I want an answer. He just stares.

Clammy blood flows over my hand. No clue why, but it strikes me as strange that it’s tepid. Maybe it’s just how gross it is. Ashes would be better. Course with ashes there’d be less—

A crash comes from the next room. He jerks. I shove. The knife sinks in. Hope that was a good crash. The gasp didn’t sound—

He says, “I don’t na—”

“Bullshit!” I snap. Zero thought. All kneejerk reaction. I wrench the knife for all I’m worth. It plunges in up to the hilt. That’s what shuts him up.

It’s kinda pointless to say, “You know exactly who I’m talking about.” There’s just no way he doesn’t. Sad, the bovine glaze reflected in his pissy yellow eyes says different. It’s hard to believe, but he might actually be that dumb.

That dumb or that smart. Too smart to talk. But he doesn’t need to talk. A twitch will do. “Little thing, smaller than B.” I tilt my head in the direction of that last crash. “Looks like she’s twelve going on twelve-hundred. Calls herself Kako.”
He still looks short-bus stupid, but I get my twitch. The name does the trick. Fucker’s got a choice now. He can spill his guts or I’ll do it for him. I twist the knife and he screams, “Fuckin’ bitch!”

“Yeah, that’s what they all say,” I grumble. “Usually happens about the time they get that they’re screwed.” He trembles so hard my voice shakes. It makes me sound scared. That’s the last thing I am.

I clear my throat. “I think it’s time we got a few things straight.” My voice sounds a little stronger. “You’re probably thinking that because I’m a slayer that means I’m one of the good guys. That’s a common misconception.” I tug the blade down. The change of direction catches him off guard. I gain a few inches.

“Let me clear things up for you. If you wanted the good slayer, you picked the wrong one. I’m not her.” Easing up while I clue the bastard in doesn’t go so well. He fights me. The knife twists again. “Never have been,” I grumble as I clamp down to regain control.

He’s at that point. Dead or not, instinctively he’s in so much pain that he’s fighting for his life. It’s kind of funny actually. There are certain things that are just ingrained.

Whatever, I just don’t want him to pass out on me. That’d suck.

“She’s in the next room kicking the shit out of your boy. He’ll get a clean death. But something tells me you’re not gonna be so lucky.” Grinning around gritted teeth never goes well. I can just imagine how I look. I know how I sound. Each word takes more effort than it should. My muscles quiver under the strain as I point out, “Frankly, I don’t think you’re that smart.”

I may be wasting my breath. He’s getting weaker. It’s impressive. His complexion’s actually pastier. If he was human, he’d be sweating. I’m really glad he’s not.

I hate having to repeat myself. “So let’s start over. Where is she?” I give him a sec to respond. Yeah, I may’ve broken him. Oh well, maybe if I make it simple. “Get this right and I may not have to open you up.” I pause to change the angle of the blade. “Get it wrong and I figure seeing your own guts strung around the room should jog your memory.”

He spits at me. My eyes snap closed as he screams, “Fuck you!”

Nice.

I’m not that easy. I use my shoulders to mop my face, meet his eyes and say, “I’ve got nothing but time.” The blade catches on his ribcage. I leverage the handle down. He chokes, bringing up a little bit of blood.

The thud’s too loud. Too close. I can’t—

My attention snaps to my right as she grunts, soft and feminine.

It’s B.

Black hair frames her face. I blink.

It’s not B. I blink again.

What the fuck?

Smashed nose, crinkled brow, yellow eyes…
She blinks. It’s Kako. How’s it—?

She looks terrified.

Uh…

No way.

*No way* is this right.

Her beige cable knit sweater stretches over—

I stare at her tits. I can’t look at her face. God! Today’s just been tweaked, turned around, fucked up backwards! I need a vacation. It’s not—

This isn’t right. But her tits *are* right. Everything from her neck down is *right*. It’s B. I know it’s B. I know—

For Christ’s sake! I watched her get dressed.

That’s the same brown coat. Same fur collar. A flash of sense memory takes over. I remember how the fuzz tickled my cheek.

Her head turns. I shut my eyes to avoid meeting hers. I can’t. This is just another—

This isn’t real.

It doesn’t matter. I can’t face—

If I’m wrong, she can kill me. I’d rather die. I just can’t—I *can’t* see that. It’s wrong.

I take a breath. Nothing touches me. Nothing moves. There’s no more pain.

I open my eyes. It’s B. I was right. It’s *my* B. And boy, does she look pissed.

It’s good.

Well, it’s good enough. I hate my goddamned brain!

Yeah, and my brain hates me. I don’t know what the hell’s up with—

B.’s shoulders twitch. I know what’s next before it comes. She rocks, kicks off and springs to her feet. I find the sense to close my mouth. I’m sure I look like a complete idiot. Not that she notices. She dives back through the hole, leaving me alone.

And I really am alone. No clue what just happened. My hands lay useless in my lap. Even after I drop that knife, I still feel it. It clatters against the floor. I tremble.

A bed frame sits broken and twisted a few feet away. Another casualty of war. Its stained mattress and box springs are a few feet farther from me, stacked in a skewed pile, still half on the frame. Cold air drafts into the room through an open window behind them.

My guy bailed while I was—

Shit! Nice timing, B.

The blood on my hands…
My skin crawls.

I can’t think about that. It’s good. I’m fine. I stash my knife. Bloodstained clothes are nothing new. At least it’s not my blood this time.

Getting up is a little tougher for me. No big deal, right? Just put one foot flat on the floor and stand. Yeah, that’s exactly what happens, sharp pain and all. I turn around and pull myself up with what’s left of the wall.

I should be completely flipped out, but I’m not. That was so real. Well…not real, but—

It felt familiar. So, stupid me, I gotta ask. What would terrify Kako?

I have no idea.

And I think I’m glad. I should just accept for now. Move on. Be grateful. B.’s totally right. I don’t remember for a reason.

None of this is new. My reaction’s not new either. It’s painfully stupid. Worse, I know it’s stupid. I just can’t let go. That’s not who I am.

The smart thing would be to go help her out. More crashes, gasps and grunts come from the next room.

I should really go help. No surprise, that’s not what I want at all.

My guy knows something. I know he does. He was the only one wearing a normal face when we busted into the room. That usually means that they’re old. They have more control, more connections. They know more. And I have this nagging need to know.

“You doing okay?” I ask, already knowing the answer. She’s good. I know those sounds. That look. She’s got it figured. Her guy gave something up. She’s just waiting for her moment.

“Oh, I’m just—” she gasps “—I’m peachy.”

Yeah, you are. Among other things.

I’m fine too. My legs are fine. They were fucked this morning. Covered in welts and—

But that was this morning. Now they’re kinda numb. They throb a little. But they’re fine. I’m gone.

B. yells my name as I sprint across the room, bounce off the mattress and go out the window. When she adds a, “Shit!” it makes me smirk. Just like old times.

Cool air flows over my skin. My coat puffs out like a sail. Running felt good. I’m fine. I’ll roll. It’ll be good.

And this is just a blast. I fly away from the house, clearing the sidewalk no problem.

It’s a blast alright. Until I hit the ground. I tuck and—

My legs cave. I splat like a bug.

I think—

I think I’m gonna be sick.
My legs aren’t fine. They’re fucked. They—

They suck.

But we were only on the second story!

I take a breath. The stabbing pain in my chest makes me regret even more.

This is complete bullshit!

I lay flat on my back in the middle of the street. Wile E. Coyote was more graceful.

Hell, Xander would’ve been more graceful. Maybe a car will come along and put me out of my misery.

The clock ticks and no such luck. All I hear is the drone of traffic on the freeway. I’m alone. That much is good. I’d make a nice snack now.

It hurts to sit up. Something clatters against the concrete. It’s my knife. I thought I put that up. So how’d it—?

Shit. I can’t win.

I pick it up and put it back, lingering to take out a smoke. I need one bad, but I’ll probably burn myself. I’m having that kind of night. Placing the cigarette between my lips, I light up.

S’pose my guy really was old. They get that way by knowing when to bail. After taking a hard pull off my smoke, I flick the ash. That’s a trick I obviously haven’t mastered yet.

But I’m not old, he is. I’m just a stupid slayer. We don’t get to be old.

At least I don’t have to worry about cancer. Smoking is…

“What the hell did you think you were doing?”

…the least of my worries.

Oh boy!

I’m not alone anymore. Ten-to-one she has her hand on her hip. Twisting hurts, but I just have to look.

Yup.

Is it sad that I think that’s kinda cute now?

I take a drag. Yeah, it’s sad. I’m so screwed up. I can’t even look her in the eye.

But somehow lower’s fine?

It’s so not like me to stare at some chick’s tits. And if she was just some chick…

She’s not. She’s—

The sense memory’s different this time. I know all of those sweet little sounds she makes. All of her tender spots. A tingle runs down my spine. It doesn’t stop at my spine.
Great distraction while it lasts. She kills it by moving. Crouching down next to me, she focuses on my legs. The look on her face isn’t promising, but least she’s done yelling.

At least I hope she’s done yelling. When she doesn’t point out what an idiot I am—stupid, stupid me—I have to prove it by looking too. And of course, the moment I see the bloodstain on the left calf of my jeans, the pain really sinks in. It’s about the size of my palm. Imagining what’s underneath is worse. I tore that cut open again. My stomach knots up. I need to puke…proving once and for all exactly what an idiot I am.

So much for my smoke. I flick my middle finger and send it sailing. It bounces a couple times, showering red sparks on the street. Figures, the instant it’s gone, I want it back.

I roll my eyes. Whatever. Waking up beat to shit and having no clue how—

I’ve had better days.

And I just can’t let go. I know if could, the shit’d eventually come back. Like it or not, it always does. I’m not helping a damned thing by—

I’m just making a fool of myself.

A face drifts to the surface of my muddled, blurry, twisted mind. This is one of the few things I remember. It’s not really a face. Dude’s wearing a mask like some Mexican wrestler. I’ve never seen him before. At least not that I remember. Could Kako seriously be afraid of this dork? I doubt it, but he’s mixed up in this clusterfu…somehow. I mean—

Oh, I don’t know what I mean. Whatever his deal his, he gives me a wicked case of the creeps. No idea how he fits.

B. wasn’t doing so hot herself this morning. Maybe we got Ren and Stimpyed by Granddaddy Lout and she’s just too embarrassed to talk about it.

Unlikely, but funny. God knows I’ve had those nights. A little too much tequila and what might’ve been a good time turns into a vacancy. Like mental Swiss cheese.

Then there’s the barrage of embarrassing stories from people I barely know.

So where are all my stories? I’d love some right about now. I could use a laugh.

She doesn’t say shit. She won’t. Just the obvious. “We need to get you home.”

Maybe she doesn’t remember either. That’s not the impression I got, but—

She stands and offers me a hand, asking, “Can you walk?”

Hell if I know. Guess we’ll find out. My right leg’s bent at a funny angle. I move it. I’ve had worse. It just looked weird.

Ignoring her question, I ask my own, “You take care of Jackie?” One of them playing Casper’s bad enough. Getting jumped on the way to the car really would be worse.

She doesn’t move. “Jackie?”

“Young guy,” I reply. “He looked a little like Jackie Chan.”

“Jackie Chan’s Chinese, Faith,” she says. “But yeah, he’s gone.” Her voice is dry as hell. She’s not
amused.

And that doesn’t matter. It’s still funny. I gotta take that where I can. My head may explode if I don’t.

She finally catches up. It’s good to hear her laugh, even if it is just a snicker. “I guess he did look a little like Jackie Chan.”

Her fingers twiddle impatiently. She wants me on my feet and that’s probably a good idea. Beats sitting in the street. My ass is cold.

I look up, take her hand and wink. “He did,” I reply. My teeth grit as she hauls me up. Sharp, stabbing pain pretty much kills the funny. Here I was thinking ‘outtakes from Buffy meets the Drunken Master.’ Wonder if she could do that thing with the ladder. Could be our ticket to fame.

Was that in the Drunken Master?

I don’t remember. I was thinking about trying it until I watched the gag reel. It looked damned painful.

Now for the hard part, which leg to favor? They’re both pretty screwed.

Blood dribbles down my left calf. It feels weird. A little like warm syrup, but really distant.

Well, that cinches that. Right leg it is. This is gonna be fun. More like old times. The nostalgia’s killing me.

Putting my arm around her, I take my first step. She clutches my side. The pain’s kind of hard to get past. I wince. My jaw tightens. The worst part is the cut. It opens and closes when I put pressure on my leg. I force myself to focus, breathe evenly, look at where I’m going, all the shit you learn. The crest of the hill’s so far away, a flat notch on the horizon between two little tufts of trees.

We still have that unspoken thing. I wouldn’t think twice about picking her up if the tables were turned. She just lets me struggle. She probably wouldn’t like it either, but she’d put up with it to make me happy. And I’d want to take care of her. I bet she wants to take care of me, but—

It gets easier as I limp toward my goal. My legs get kind of numb somewhere between the jolts of pain. I figure out just how much weight I can put on the left one and avoid that. Or at least dumb it down a little. Relearning how to walk never gets old.

“We did the best we could.”

Her voice throws me. I didn’t expect her to say anything. I almost don’t hear her. Just putting one foot in front of the other is plenty. I reply, “I guess,” turning my attention to the ground at my feet.

I wish she’d talk to me. More than a few words. More than just the obvious. The fact that she won’t…or doesn’t, or whatever…it—

This is something really bad. It has to be. Mask guy, Kako, all the bruises…

My stomach tightens. The knot comes back.

I don’t bruise. Not usually. Not easily.

Shit!
The cut—it’s wrong. I know it’s wrong. I just don’t want to accept it.

It’s the kind of cut the other half gets in the kitchen. Straight, clean, deep…only the angle’s bad. It runs up my leg. Not across. Face it, the only way I got a cut like that is if I let it happen or I did it myself.

Maybe I was kicking somebody and they got in a lucky shot?

No. It doesn’t work that way and I know it. Something like that would be one in a million. Fact is, that cut should go the other way.

I’ve been a lot of things in my life. I’ve done a lot of really stupid things, but I’ve never cut myself. Not on purpose.

I remember those girls. They made me sick. Pathetic drama queens. Such a waste of flesh.

The part that really screws with me is that I’m happy! I’m happier than I’ve been in—

I don’t even know. No clue. I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy.

Why would I hurt myself?

The only thing that comes to mind—

Hell, the only thing that makes any sense at all is that I was protecting her. That’s it.

So, I cut myself to protect her? How does that make sense?

It doesn’t. That’s the trouble. Nothing makes—

Her shoulders dip. That might’ve landed me on my ass…if I was actually moving. I’m really not. I haven’t been. Not enough to make any difference at all. Pressure at the back of my knees tells me one thing: she’s sick of waiting. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, “It’s just—” lifting me into her arms. “I need to get you back to the car so I can look at that leg.”

That’s the trouble with unspoken things. You really don’t know. She has no idea how grateful I am.

My left foot’s wet. It squishes in my boot. I don’t sweat. Not like this. Not when it’s this cold. My right foot’s dry. From there, the math’s pretty simple. It’s blood.

Maybe she does get it. The signs wouldn’t be that hard to—

I don’t hold back. I latch on, twisting my upper body and wrapping my arms around her. It’s not something I even have I think about. I crave the contact. She feels so soft, but so strong, so good, but so small. It’s amazing that someone so tiny—

This feels really strange. It’s not like me. Trust isn’t something I freely give out. “Just take me home,” I reply, staring back the way we came. It’s sad. I didn’t even make it half a block.

Her fuzzy collar rubs my cheek, tickling me as she moves. This feels like something from a dream. Her hand grips my side. It wasn’t a dream. The bounce of her stride, the faint pat of her footfalls, the soft pant of her breath…it’s all familiar. This happened last night. I may not remember, but it’s not that hard to figure out.

At first it hurts a little…the movement. I tense up, trying to hold my leg still. It’s useless. Dead,
prickly twinges shoot through my calf with each step. A lump forms in my throat. I swallow it back. The view distracts me. Sort of. In the distance I can see downtown. It’s pretty. Skyscrapers jut up from a grid of twinkling lights.

As she builds speed, things get better. We level out. I relax. My eyelids drift shut.

I’m safe. I know I am. And knowing that’s enough.
I’m no flower.

Yeah, and all I have to do to fix this is raise my head. It’s not that damned hard.

As I lift myself up to focus on her and forget, a gloved hand clamps around my throat.

It strangles away my gasp, flipping me up and flinging me back. I hit the ground, sliding across—

Kicking and scraping, but I can’t stop. The crown of my head cracks—

Pain blinds me.

My neck buckles. My shoulder folds. I crumple against the wall.

Before I can grunt or groan or…he’s on me again. I grab his wrist as he goes for my throat. It’s no use. He jerks me upright. My head smacks into—

Another white flash and more sharp pain drowns everything out. Splotches of light dance with shadow streaking my view. They leave behind a blurry blob when I try to blink them away. The inkblot looms inches from my face. I shut my eyes. My ears ring as I bear down, hoping something will change.

Goddammit! Can I just go back to the part where—?

Where the hell is she? You’d think she’d be pissed. I know I am.

So, I’m not there?

Or she’s not here? Wherever here is.

He didn’t throw me that far. I should be—

I should’ve gone through the wall. I should be in the back yard. As hard as I hit…

The way I was thrown, from where I was on the bed…I would’ve hit beneath the window. And the wall…

Sharp edges cut into the back of my head. That isn’t drywall.

I’m definitely not there.

Well, fuck! Maybe if I knock my heels together…?

Nope. That’s out. My legs are screwed.

I’m screwed.

Guessing games are out too. Last time I felt this bad, some cocksucker used my skull to bust a tombstone. I swallow. My stomach’s so queasy I may—
If I think it, I’ll probably do it, so… I get around to cracking my eyes a little sooner than I want.

_Shit_. It’s the same _son of a bitch_ from the other night, doubled. Just what I needed: two-for-the-price-of-one masked mystery villains. They must’ve been on sale.

Squeezing my eyes shut doesn’t do a damned bit of good. I’d rub them, but I’ve got my hands full keeping Mucha Lucha from throttling the shit out of me.

So, two it is. He’s got a jagged yellow stripe down the middle of his face. Seeing that twice is really special.

Wonder what he calls himself. Sparky? Or maybe Bumblebee?

I’d laugh, but I think my head might fall off.

Struggling’s pointless. He’s got a grip like a vice. I can’t even pry one of his fingers up.

My elbow touches the wall when I draw back. There’s no room to swing, but I have to try. Focusing everything I’ve got two inches behind the target, I unload. My fist cracks against his ribs.

He barely moves. His impassive mask just hangs in a cloud. A cloud of fog I created because he gave me some slack. I suck the cold air in like each breath might be my last. I need to get my head on straight. My hand throbs as I clutch it. This is just sad.

And screaming…? “I said _no_!” Oh yeah, that helps. A sharp twinge shoots from my temple to somewhere behind my right eye. What’d be truly helpful is knowing the— “If you think cracking my skull’s gonna get you shit, you’re stupider—”


What’s really sad is that’s mostly true. Feeling it build, hearing myself scream and having no clue what or why is plenty enough mindfuck for me. The rest of this is pure bonus. Tasting blood is only thing that doesn’t come as a shock. I spit and two identical red globs splatter the crappy, overlapping yellow stripes.

He yanks my hair and sends me flying. The in-flight scenery includes a jagged, vaguely oval hole in the brick—not drywall—wall and double the rubble littering the floor.

But it’s the abrupt, bone jarring, deep-tissue-bruising stop and the accompanying white flash that really suck. I flop flat on my face.

My shivers turn to shakes when he snatches me up. I have all the coordination of a ragdoll, but I really don’t need any. He just pins me by my throat again.

My scalp feels wet. That’s not the best sign. But when I check, it’s actually dry.

_Huh_.

Well, at least the fireworks are pretty.

I let my arms fall. Anything else would be a waste. I can’t do shit. And I can breathe, so…

This could be so much worse. I mean…

I guess.
It’s slim consolation, but at least no one ever taught Sparky the Wonder Troll how to dish out pain. There’s a point where more of the same’s just kind of…*duh*, the *same*…and pretty much pointless.

We blew past that a while back. I’d be easier for me to pick out the parts that aren’t screwed. I think the big toe on my left foot’s fine.

Or maybe it’s my right foot. I’m still having a hell of a time telling what’s what below my waist.

Point is, there is no point. Shit just goes numb when you wail on it. I’d roll my eyes, but I might pass out.

I’m still breathing hard, almost panting. Wouldn’t want him to think he’s actually getting to me, so I force a deep, calm breath.

One breath gets me a whole lot more than I bargained for. But it’s not the breath, it’s what I smell. I have trouble making sense of it. The sweet, vaguely floral scent just doesn’t match the carnage.

One isn’t enough. As I inhale slowly, just enjoying the smell, a weight lifts.
What Lies Beneath: Scene 4

Chapter Summary

The character Alex is from a Buffyverse novel Go Ask Malice: a Slayer’s Diary by Robert Joseph Levy. An intimate knowledge of the plot will not be required to understand my story. Those of you who haven’t read Malice but wish to do so may want to avoid this. In order to make things track, I’ve had to reveal the Alex’s back story in rough detail, which may spoil the book for some, but others may be encouraged to pick it up. One thing has little to do with the other…and depending on your personality type it could go either way. Rest assured, if I couldn’t twist Alex so far from the source material that she bares almost no resemblance to the original character, I wouldn’t have touched her.

Nine

B.’s got this down. I’m impressed.

Actually, it’s kinda sad, like she knew I was coming. Most people would’ve just baked a cake. She picked up a suture kit. It even looks like she knows how to use it.

No idea what that says about me.

Nothing good.

She says, “I always wanted Mom to teach me how to sew.” Her voice is so soft…comforting, but not. “But I dunno, there was just something about it. She enjoyed doing it for me so much.” The bed feels good. At least that much just is what it is. “It didn’t seem right to change what we had.”

She stops long enough that I consider checking to see what’s up. Good thing she beats me to it. “It figures I’d learn how to do this instead.” I’m a little buzzed from the local she gave me. At least she’s over the doom and gloom.

That makes one of us.

I imagine the smirk I know is there. I’d love to smirk too, but there’s just something about hearing her talk about Mrs. S. that’s—

I can’t. Buffy’s mom was never anything but nice to me. And I really wasn’t nice to her. Not last time I saw her. Now it’s, uh…well, I must love guilt. I sure racked enough of it up.

Thing is, it’s not just that. It’s everything. B. must’ve given me Lidocaine. Or that’s how it feels. My heart thuds a tight rhythm in my chest. I’m completely relaxed on the one hand, but on the other…

I hate this! It’s like I’m being pulled in two.

Every move she makes sends a twinge through my leg. I feel it, like spiders on my skin, scuttling under my skin. She pulls on the thread and it pinches.
It’s not really thread. Sort of ironic, it looks like spider’s silk when it comes out of the package, but it wicks up blood and turns black. It’s nasty.

This whole thing’s nasty. She tugs and the bottom of my left foot—my lower back—they twitch. I have to concentrate not to tense up.

Just dealing is enough. Staying distracted, but not really distracted. I have to focus. It’s all I can do not to pull away.

People say crap like ‘it makes my skin crawl’ or ‘it sets my teeth on edge.’ Neither of those things really covers this. It feels almost like being tickled, only nastier.

Yeah, ‘nasty’ is the best I’ve got. There’s a sick feeling in the pit my stomach that goes right along with it.

It’s nasty.

Each moment becomes an eternity of preparing for the pinch. My nails dig into the palms of my hands. The pain’s actually good. It takes my mind off of everything else.

That’s one half. The other half of me is happy to be clean. The terrycloth robe feels soft and warm. I’m still a little damp from my bath.

She’s totally ignoring herself. Talking care of me is just more important.

That’s pretty messed up, but I get it, really, I do. That’s how we all are, us slayers. We focus on what needs to be done and nothing else matters. We get this wicked case of tunnel vision.

Like tonight, the vampire, the knife, all that blood. You’d think I’d learn, but that’s what went wrong. That’s what always goes wrong for me. My robe sticks to my skin kind of like my shirt did when…

I feel it coming. This time I’m grateful for the interruption. She pulls. My teeth grind together. Not really bad, but bad enough.

The wave of thrill-less chills finally passes and I swallow. That’s a lot more work than it should be. My mouth’s pasty. Stupid drugs again.

I wish she’d say something else. I really don’t care what. She could talk about the latest Cosmo and it’d still beat the shit out of this.

It’s pretty bad, like a part of my brain’s set to sabotage the rest. Anything good gets shredded.

I focus on just breathing, searching for some trace of good, taking in all of the smells, the human ones and others that we think of as human but they really aren’t. Stuff like dryer sheets, shampoo, laundry detergent. Sweet, artificial smells that are no more human—

Something really pinches. I gasp. My eyes pop open. I tense my leg to keep it still. My stomach lurches. I manage to focus just in time to see her tie one those slick one-handed knots. She makes it look too easy.

In the moment or two it takes for me to remember that I need air, she snips the thread and starts to pick up. Thank God that’s over. Now all that’s left is the gift wrap. Maybe if I’m a good girl she’ll give me a pretty bow.
“Or a lollipop.”

“I’ll remove these in a few days,” she says. “Till then you’re gonna have to take it easy.”

So much for my lollipop. Figures I’d get the same tired story instead. When she saw the cut, it was over. She lectured me half the way home. It wasn’t the first time I heard how I made something ‘so much worse.’ And it probably won’t be the last. I’ve got this gift.

All she says now is, “We’ll have to find something else to keep you busy.” The look on her face tells me she has something in mind.

I really don’t get her. It’s not like I’m complaining, but I thought for sure she’d start bitching again. I desperately deserve it.

Thing is, it’s not like she ever really bitched. She seemed more concerned about me than anything I’d done to her.

I’m not even sure how to take that. I completely trashed her day. Most people would be pissed.

I don’t know. I s’pose I shouldn’t question it. Sometimes it’s just good to be wrong.

She gets that smirk before I shut my eyes this time. She earned it.

Her pillow’s right next to me. It smells like her. Not just her shampoo and perfume, but her, the human smell. Something good. I wrap my arms around it and breathe in. It’s a little different than I remember, but that’s not surprising. People change. Their scent can change with even the simplest things. Stuff like onions and garlic make a big difference and she barely touches them now. Not that she went overboard before, but—

We were at one of the best pizza chains in the states last night and what’d she order? A salad with shrimp on it and a little bowl of fruit. I was seriously worried that estrogen poisoning had damaged her brain until she went for the table bread.

She cleans around the cut once more with a sterile wipe. It chills my skin. Of course my leg’s so numb that it feels really weird.

It’s messed up. That’s one of the last things I remember. We talked. I do know that.

From there, all that’s left are pieces. Some of them are just impressions. It’s like my brain’s playing hide and seek. I remember being worried about her. She was freezing. And I remember seeing the sign for that stupid chili place. That’s probably the last thing I do remember. How fucked up is that? I have mind like a steel trap for inane details.

Anything else?

Well…

It’s cool. I’m not going to worry about that now. She’s right. It’ll come back. I need to trust her. She would’ve said something if—

If things were really that bad, if there was really some reason to worry, she’d say something. I have to trust that. I know it’s true.

Paper tears. The tape dispenser squeaks. One of those nonstick pads touches my skin. It feels strange. Weirder than that last thing. I have to look. It’s not what I expect. It’s some sort gauze, but
with a waxy coating. Clueless what it is and I don’t see the wrapper. Guess she already pitched it.

“I did my best, but you’re gonna have a scar,” she whispers as she tapes it in place. Then she
glances at me like she expects something. Or maybe she’s just nervous? Who knows? I wish I had
something for her, but what can I say? ‘What else is new?’ ‘Yeah, I got that.’ ‘It’ll go well with all
the rest.’ None of those things really work, so I keep my mouth shut and nod.

She completely misses it. A single glance was all she had for me. She’s all wrapped up in my leg
again.

Well, not wrapped up in it—a cause that’d just be—but wrapped up in wrapping it up.

Fuckin’ ay, she must be rubbing off. And I wasn’t gifted with an overabundance of smarts to start
with. This is definitely worse. Thank God she’s too busy to notice. Bet my expression’s priceless. I
fix that and mumble, “It’s cool.” I truly don’t care about another scar.

She glances again. The stress shows for just a sec. She covers it up with a smile and goes back to
work, tearing open a roll of gauze.

I just wish she was done. This has been a couple dozen different kinds of not-fun ever since she
announced that those little white plastic strips weren’t gonna make the cut. Or fix the cut. Guess I
really outdid myself this time. And all she wants is a shower. I could take over from here, but it’s
pretty pointless to interrupt her now. I’m not even sure how she’d take that. She’s so close to
finishing.

She lifts my leg to wrap a layer of gauze around it. Holding it up is about the most useful thing I
can do. I need to chill. I’m starting to annoy myself.

I shut my eyes and breathe in. I love the way she smells. It’s not just her pillow. The whole room
smells a little like her. Not so much that it’s off-putting. Just the opposite.

Actually, it’s kind of a blend of both of us. The lingering fragrance of sex. A tingle comes with the
memory this time. I can almost taste her, feel her skin under my fingertips, the way she trembles,
all those soft sighs and…it’s nice. I bite my lip to snuff out a shit-eating grin.

And on the other hand…

Crap.

It’s time I got real. I’m such a killjoy.

This isn’t like me. I don’t get attached. And I sure don’t pine for…

There’s just something about her. The more I see, the more I want. I need to just admit it. I’m
screwed.

That’s such nice way to put it. She’d hit me if she knew. Good thing she doesn’t. She hits like a
truck.

Yeah, well, truth hurts. That’s how I feel. I sure didn’t plan for this. This wasn’t even something I
imagined. Not in my most twisted dreams. I wondered what kind of drugs she was on. And now…

People try to sell how great love is, but it’s really only good for one thing in my book: getting me
hurt. I’m not ready to reprise my role as a doormat.
All heart-fluttery, giddy, ‘grinning like an idiot’ happy and fucked up, nervous as hell, afraid you might sneeze wrong. Put those things together and I think they call that ‘crazy.’

I just don’t know what to do about it.

I suppose could tell her the truth. Wouldn’t that be fun? I can just imagine the look on her face if I told her that I’m afraid. That I’m terrified I’ll say or do the wrong thing and she’ll go back to being the same old B. And leave me a total wreck.

Makes me want to just get that out of the way. Hit the road and not look back.

Like running ever got me anywhere before. It only makes things worse.

No clue where my brain was. You’d think I had a dick.

Well, it’s too late now. The choice is made. I have to deal with whatever happens next…whatever happened last night. And I feel I’ve been split right down the middle. One hand and the other…

But not just that. That’d be too easy. I’m being pulled in more directions than that. There are too many pieces to count.

One of my many pieces wants to tell her not to waste her time. I’m hopeless. I keep tripping over the same old shit. You’d think I’d learn.

Yeah, that’ll be the day. I really need to hit something.

Hell, I’d settle for a smoke. But just laying here, being quiet, trying to look relaxed…I’m losing what’s left of my mind. If I could just cut loose, things would be—

The tape thing squeaks again. They’d be exactly the same. Let’s face it. Anything I ‘cut loose’ on right now would have to walk up to me and hold really still. Yeah, that happens all the time.

Light pressure transfers through the gauze. It amazes me that I feel it. I guess that means she’s done. Now maybe she’ll take care of herself.

I don’t know. I don’t know about any of this. I’m probably just flipping out for no reason. It’s not like she—

The bed jiggles. A few more things hit the trash.

She knows what she’s getting into. If anyone can see me for exactly what I am, it’s her. Maybe there a chance this can actually—

The blue disposable mat brushes my calf. She wads it up and stuffs it into the trashcan as I put my leg down.

‘This can actually’ what? What do I think’s gonna happen? We’ll get a place in the suburbs and settle down? Maybe we could even put in for the token two point three kids and a loveable mutt named Spot.


I blink. Between my arm and her pillow, there’s not much to see, just the top third or so of the stained glass window. The bright purples, pinks and greens are deep and dull now. It’s dark as hell outside.
I wish she’d just let me go. That none of this had ever happened. It’d be better for both of us if I was a couple of states away. She’d be safer. Which for B. is pretty damned incredible. And I could just worry about myself if it wasn’t for her.

Like I was doing such a great job before she showed up. Truth is, I’m kidding myself if I say I don’t need her…that I don’t want her around. That’s bullshit.

I just don’t want to see her get hurt. There’s the truth. I don’t think I could handle that. I’ve done enough to screw up both of our lives.

She stands and picks up the first aid kit. Faking it must be working. I’m invisible. She walks around the bed without a word or a second glance.

I really don’t get her. She tried to explain. And it was nice. Sweet, in fact. But this still doesn’t track. Not with our history.

Nothing’s changed. I sure as shit haven’t. And last time I saw her she was the flipping ice queen. By my count, she should still hate me.

There’s enough chemistry that a fling wouldn’t come as a shock. That could’ve happened years ago, but it would’ve been—

It would’ve been totally hot, but painful as hell. We would’ve fucked each other senseless, just because…

Her closet door opens.

…because we couldn’t stand each other. It sure wouldn’t’ve been this. This—

This seems insane. I mean…

Things have changed. I get that. I could maybe see her wanting some sort of a friendship, but this?

This is a complete one-eighty.

The clattering and grumbling almost makes me grin. I’m just too fucked up to let it happen. She could be less of a packrat.

Yeah, and I could fix my head.

That does it. The smirk wins out. I even snicker. Good thing she’s too busy trashing her closet to notice me. Having to explain would just suck.

I roll my eyes. Back on point…

She doesn’t hate me. The one-eighty obviously happened. And she’s spent a lot of time trying to explain why. Dwelling on stuff she said she didn’t want to talk about. So…

So, I dunno. I guess…

The way things went down in Sunnydale was an absolute clusterfuck. She had a vamp pulling for her and no one else. At the time that looked pretty bad. After last night, ‘pretty bad’ doesn’t even begin to cover it.

The reasons are different, but…hindsight…
I had no idea. It doesn’t really matter whether he stopped or she stopped him or whatever. I don’t need the details to know that the damage amounts to the same. Something goes missing when that happens. No wonder she was such a wreck.

Some heroes we were. We really had her back. No one jumped on board until they had no other choice. And we still thought we were screwed.

The hero of the day came out of there with a few estranged friends. Her reward for saving all of our asses…and everyone else was a bunch of girls who either resented her for a choice she had to make or worshipped the ground she walked on.

I got a little of that myself. It sucked. I can’t say that blame her for wanting out.

But ‘wanting’ and ‘getting’ are two different things. That second part was pretty pricey.

What she got for the ‘getting’ is a dying woman she barely knows. That has to be impossible for her.

Shit. I shake my head. She’s still tunneling to China, so…

With her history, anything would be better.

And here I am, ‘anything,’ but at least I’m familiar.

More significant to us, she’s just as screwed up as I am now. Somehow we met in the middle. We match.

Well, that’s a little cold, but it works. It almost sounds like by questioning the reasons she cares, I’m questioning whether she cares at all. That’s not it. I don’t think this is some sort of game. Not even close. Point is, B.’s not really a ‘me’ person. She needs someone else to care about. That’s part of who she is. And someone with similar flaws is just…

Huh. And here I thought she was just talking about slayers in general. I grin. And this time it’s genuine. It feels pretty good. I think that’s what she’s been trying to tell me all along. She’s just way too polite to say, ‘You’re as fucked in the head as I am.’ Like ‘polite’ matters. Well, I guess it does to a point, but I’d rather she just be straight with me.

She puts the trashcan back by her dresser before she walks around the bed to my side. She’s leaning down, already in her bathrobe when I twist my upper body and open my eyes. I close them and she kisses me. It’s just a peck, but it’s really sweet.

What did I do to deserve sweet?

“I’m gonna go grab a quick shower. I’ll be back,” she whispers. Not exactly news, but her breath on my cheek feels nice.

I reply, “I’ll try not to get into any more trouble while you’re gone.” My voice is even reasonably calm. Kind of a shitheaded, but I sound convincing. Things might just be okay. I top the whole act off with a smile. Sad, I’m still not sure myself, but she buys it.

Yeah, but if memory serves, B.’s not half bad at this game herself. She might just be shining me on. Not like it matters, but—

The naughtiest thing I have planned is to sneak off for a smoke. She probably won’t be thrilled. I think the idea was for me to stay put once she got me here.
I shut my eyes as she stands up. Sorry, B…not gonna happen. I snuggle up to her pillow again and turn onto my side, expecting to hear the door.

No such luck. Drawers open and shut, things clatter and bump. What the hell is she doing?

Clueless. S’pose I could look, but there’s a limit to my curiosity.

Besides, knowing won’t change anything. I still have to wait till she’s gone. If I don’t, she’ll just want to help and—

I’d rather wait.

She’s probably stalling. If the tables were turned, I might be afraid to leave me too. I’m a nightmare.

Yeah, so…

Self-analysis is fun! I spent much more time alone in my head and—

Fuck it.

It’s the only way I’m gonna get shit straight.

So where was I?

Huh. It’s funny. Clean it up and that little trip down memory lane I just took could be from some textbook. Or a Watcher’s Diary. It was skewed enough.

Not that that stuff’s not true…from a certain point of view.

What I failed to mention was that Little Miss Perfect sounded insane. Probably because she was about six and a half years past due for a vacation.

Perfect?

She’s not.

But I don’t think she thought that. I know she doesn’t think that now. It’s just…

We were all wicked stressed and trying to see our way clear. The difference was, most of those girls were only in it to save their own hides. Sunnydale was B.’s turf. She felt responsible for them and everything else. Situations don’t get much shittier.

Her intentions were good. I clear my throat to cut off a snicker. ‘Good intentions’ are as much of a trap as ‘hindsight.’

Truth is, B. was like a tyrant in training. ‘Humorless’ begins to cover it. ‘Sanctimonious’ hits a little closer to the mark. So glad she chilled. She was headed for a coronary…or a nervous breakdown. She’s almost a completely different person now. Maybe it was the humble pie?

A snicker slips out, but I cover it with a sigh. I can just see her saying ‘me…oww’ like she used to. I miss that B. She was funny. She grew up. Grew old…

She’s right where she put herself. Tough lesson. I know.

Even now there’s just something about her. I should’ve seen it then. But I guess I always did. She
used to annoy the piss out of me. I thought her luck would eventually run out. I didn’t want to be
around when that happened, so I followed my gut and a lot of people got—

It sucked.

Lesson learned. B.’s—

The door shuts. Huh. She’s gone. Cool!

I open my eyes, turn onto my back and sit up. I don’t know why, but half expect to see blood. That
I don’t is a good sign. Doesn’t stop me from needing a drink. Standing makes me want one that
much more. The stitches pull when I bend my leg. And my calf’s so numb…

I can practically taste that drink.

There’s just no way. She really would flip out. I’ve pushed my luck enough for one day.

There’s no way I’m digging through that bag either. I’ll just borrow something of hers. I doubt
she’ll mind. About that at least.

I barely feel the floor underneath my left foot. What starts with me limping deteriorates to me
hopping pretty quickly. It’s just easier. I’m sure I look like a dork, but at least I won’t fall and bust
my ass.

Or worse, my stitches.

Yeah, I’ll pass. B. really would kill me. And I’d just have to let her.

I reach her chest of drawers, bend down and open the bottom drawer. All I need is something
warmer than this robe. From there, everything’s negotiable. There’s a pair of blue sweats on top. I
grab them and move to the next drawer for a shirt.

Getting dressed is no fun. I have to put weight on my left leg once. It doesn’t exactly go smoothly.
But there’s no bloodshed. That’s what counts.

Thank the Powers for small favors. It’s always the little stuff that’s sucks. Just getting from point
’a’ to ‘b’ can be a major hassle. I jack a hoodie from B.’s closet, pull it over my head, slip my arms
through the sleeves and bail. I start off dreading these stairs, but the fact that they’re cramped
actually works in my favor now. I use the center pillar and the wall to brace myself. The corners
are a little tricky, but really…

It’s mindless. I hold my bad leg out, press against the walls and hop. Move my hands down, press
and hop. Getting back up them might be entertaining, but—

Yeah. This isn’t a problem at all. It’s just monotonous. The real problem is my goddamned life. I
need a new one. Or at least a refund.

Wouldn’t that be nice? Too bad they don’t hand out refunds for shit you’ve broken. I sure did a
number on…

…and press and hop…

…pretty much everything.

I think it’s hard enough for normal people to stay clean. Feel good about themselves. Not doing
anything questionable or just plain wrong. Toss ‘it’s my job to kill shit’ into the mix and things get
fun.

Who am I kidding? They get really twisted up really quick. Even B. has trouble keeping this crap straight and she’s a whole lot saner than I am.

The ground rules say ‘only kill to save a life.’ Sounds simple enough, like ‘kill the things that deserve it’ or some shit, but it doesn’t always work.

Tell me how a bunch of kids deserve it? Remembering quilt-girl really isn’t helpful, but that’s where all this bullshit started.

And with such a great start, huge surprise that everything went sideways.

Though, truth is, it wouldn’t’ve mattered what I did, things were gonna go straight to hell after I took out Dae. How it happened didn’t matter. I only hurt myself by—

Guess I hurt Wood too. I laugh. It doesn’t sound anything like a laugh.

Yeah, bringing him up is helpful too. Maybe I could rip off a few scabs for an encore. I’ve got a nice one on the palm of my left hand that just bugs. It could go. And bleeding…

That never gets old.

I still say the dumbass would’ve died anyway. But the way he died…there’s no sidestepping the fact that that one’s on me.

I hop down the last few stairs and into the hallway. My smokes are in the coat B. gave me. I have no idea what happened to mine.

Well, I can guess. Kako’s mixed up in this somehow. It’s a pretty safe bet she took it. The damned thing did belong to her man after all.

It’s cool. I don’t need the reminder. And I sure don’t need some trophy.

That wasn’t it at all. I was just cold.

I pause by the bathroom door for a moment. The shower’s running. Tea’s not normally my thing, but a cup sounds good. I’d like to ask B. if she wants one, but I don’t want to bother. She’s gotta be enjoying her time off. I’ll just make her one. I should be able to make tea and have a smoke before she gets done. I move on to the coat closet, being careful not to make too much noise.

Here’s another fact. One I don’t want to hear. Things were bound to turn ugly with or without me. An ancient, petulant brat-vamp wanted a war.

Snot-nosed little bitch got one. Imagine that. All I did was hand her the targets.

But really, we were already targets, so…

Maybe?

Hell, I don’t know. I guess that works. Maybe I should just keep saying ‘it’s not my fault’ until I believe it. Building a nice case of denial could help pass the time.

At least I’m alone with my denial. Putting on a face for the roomie wouldn’t end well tonight. It’s been hard enough with B.
I grab my smokes and head for the kitchen. This is the tiniest room in the house next to the bathroom. It still takes me a second to remember where the cups are. From there, I’m golden. I stumble onto the tea while I’m opening cabinet doors. There are like twenty different kinds. I’ll let B. decide what she wants, but I’m gonna go for some Constant Comment. I’ll take all the ‘soothing’ I can get.

No surprise, I’m not alone in that. It looks like the house favorite. There are two boxes. The open one’s on the top of the first stack. I take out a packet and fill the cups.

Gimping from the sink to the microwave with two cups of water isn’t any fun. Three minutes should be plenty. The microwave beeps as I enter the time. Once that’s done, I duck out the back door into the little screened-in patio just off the kitchen.

I bet this is nice in the summer. It’s too cold now. I can see my breath. But this is as good as it usually gets for us smokers. There’s even an ashtray.

Flipping the pack open, I take out a cigarette and my lighter. My feet are already cold. I should’ve worn shoes, but that would’ve required some planning.

I’ll be fine. There’s a braided rug by the door. It’s chilly in the way that only dense fabric gets chilly, which is not really. Not unless it’s wet and this isn’t.

I lean against the wall next to the door and light my cigarette. My eyes drift shut as I slowly let the smoke go. For something that’s so bad for me, this feels pretty good.

Maybe it’s just good to be alone? This little patio could be anywhere. The only entrance is from the kitchen. It’s a box on stilts twelve feet off the ground with trees on two sides and the house on the other two. The only signs that I’m in a city are the smells and the sounds. Mostly it’s regular traffic. Car tires hum against pavement, engines rumble. Thankfully, the air quality’s got nothing on L.A.

A couple more drags and all that’s left are the sounds. No great loss. I’d rather smell tobacco smoke than city any day.

I’m actually glad things went down the way they did tonight—B. landing where she did when she did. I thought it sucked at the time, but it was actually perfect. Her timing was perfect. I don’t need to go down that road again.

Me, getting hurt was perfect too, almost like I was sabotaging myself. Who knows? Maybe I was. I do know what that does to me. I need to get my head straight. Now I have no choice.

I just wish I’d made it easier on B.

Leaves crunch in the neighbor’s yard to my left. Sounds like a squirrel. The rhythmic crackle turns to scraping. Yeah, it’s a squirrel. If I cared, I could probably spot the little bastard, but something else has my attention, something high-pitched behind all the other familiar sounds.

This one’s familiar too. That’s why it bugs. I can’t place it. I lean my head back, resting it against the siding, straining to listen, trying to put my finger on what this is. It’s making me a little crazy. Doesn’t help that it isn’t constant. I just know I know it, I know I’ve heard it, but I have no idea where or when.

What I do hear sounds almost like someone’s stroking the rim of a wineglass with their fingertip, making it sing. It’s not the same, but that’s the closest thing I can think of. It’s not exactly a ‘city’
sort of sound.

My arms are folded. I don’t remember doing that. The right one’s just free enough to let me mindlessly puff on my smoke. No clue when I put my cigarette pack in the pocket of B.’s hoodie either, but my forearm brushes it when I make myself relax.

Moments slip by and not a single screech. Doing nothing doesn’t sit well with me. I want to get moving. Find out what that is. My nails tap against the siding. I force myself to stop.

As I take another hit off of my smoke, I catch the faintest hint, just a trace of that sound. It’s so soft, I wonder if I’m hearing things. It’s probably wishful thinking.

There’s a car approaching on the main drag. It’s slowing down. The only turn is the one that leads back into this neighborhood, so…

I expect them to drive past the next turn, but they don’t. They bang another left, headed this way. 

*Great.*

It’s dumb as hell. I’ve already heard all I need to. But I don’t know. I feel like if I can just hear that sound once, without anything else to get in the way, I’ll know exactly what it is and everything—

But *everything’s* working against me. A car alarm goes off somewhere to my right. Each honk completely blocks out any chance of me hearing the shriller, fainter and even more distant sound.

*I need* to hear it.

The car passes the front of the house. It figures that the person driving can’t parallel park. They need a couple of trial runs before they hit their mark. At least they don’t hit anything else. That really would be worse.

Yeah, this is just dumb. One little sound isn’t going to make any difference. All this shit isn’t gonna suddenly make sense just because…

Still, I can’t help racking my brain, trying to remember where I might’ve heard it before.

It’s sexist as hell, I should be ashamed, but it doesn’t surprise me that I hear two female voices when the car doors open. It’d be fairer to think that any street around here’s gonna be a bitch to park on after ten.

I’m too annoyed to be fair.

The car doors click shut one at a time and their bullshit chatter drowns out *everything*. I could give a crap less about some guy named Roger. I’m sure he’s a real stud, but can’t you two shut the hell up for a sec so I can…? Heels click against pavement, drawing nearer as I struggle to ignore the interruption.

I don’t get why this is so important. I just know it is. I can feel it. And I’ve lost it because of Roger.

Fuck Roger.

The car alarm continues blare in regular, even pulses. A door opens and shuts. It’s the front door of that same house, the one to my left with the squirrel in the yard. The squirrel’s gone. And thank God, those girls are gone too.
Well, they’re not exactly gone. They move around inside the house. The patter of feet accompanied by the occasional creak of a floorboard is much easier to overlook. Their voices are reduced to a twitter. The TV’s a little worse, but I can deal. Or I think I can.

My head throbs. Probably the start of a headache. I’m due one. Goddamned Lidocaine. I hate that shit. It’s easier to just deal with the pain.

The microwave chirps in the kitchen behind me. I’m so focused on finding that sound again that I almost jump. It’s really gone. But as I massage my temples, straining to listen, something else takes its place. Something nearly as strange and unlikely: laughter.

Not that laughter’s unlikely. Those idiots next door have been giggling like a couple of schoolgirls since they pulled up. But this isn’t like that. It’s a soft trill. It fades and blends with the drone of their voices, getting lost in the noise from the TV. It’s a child’s laugh. After midnight on a weekday, I’d call that pretty unlikely.

If the horror movie cliché isn’t enough to send a chill down my spine, what first springs to mind is. Kako laughs like that sometimes. But with her it comes off like she’s pleased with herself…like she’s done something naughty. This isn’t quite the same.

My instincts really aren’t the best. If I was smart, I’d go back inside. I’m not. I creep forward until the screen’s right in my face. I can see the ground below me from here. There’s nothing there except for greenish-gray grass, scattered leaves and a few pools of light from the first floor apartment. Gnarled branches sway in and out of the blackness in front of me.

She’s out there, somewhere, but this isn’t her. It’s something different. I just know. I feel it in my gut.

My breath hangs in my throat when I glimpse my playmate. It’s just a light blur between the trees at the back of the yard. I sink. Not literally, but I get that fucked up feeling that everything’s about to go completely wrong. I want to run, but I couldn’t move now if I was on fire.

As she teases me, hiding, allowing me quick glances, just enough to freak me out, I realize that something’s missing. There’s plenty of giggling. She’s happy as hell. But there’s no crunching. The closest thing is the tree limbs rustling in the breeze. She’s running around without making a sound. It’s creepy. She’s a ghost, a phantom from my past in a blue gingham dress, all ruffles and bows. Her dark braids almost reach her waist. They whip behind her as she plays.

Alex.

I close my eyes. I don’t need to see any more. I couldn’t be more screwed if I tried.

The owner of the car finally gets his shit together and shuts off the stupid alarm. It figures, there’s nothing left to hear. I know what this is all about now. I see her smiling face. Her hazel-green eyes twinkle with mischief. It never occurred to me before, but that’s probably why I never liked Willow. Their eyes are so similar.

I should at least try get away. Thing is, if she’s here to send me to some hell dimension, that’s not exactly gonna help. The screen presses against my forehead. I catch myself on the window ledge, locking my elbows to hold myself up. The board presses into the palms of my hands. I twist my arms, curling my fingers around its edge.

Maybe she’s just got the munchies and she’s hoping she can trick me into singing the Oscar Mayer Weiner song. Bet she thinks I’d look good on a bun.
I really have lost my mind. I’m up shit creek, but somehow I manage to find the nerve to grin.

She mocks me. Her giggling turns to humming. She’s on the move. There’s nothing I can do. Just listen as she closes in. She hums through the first part of the jingle, but last part she sings, “…so Faith Lehane would be in love with me.” It’s weird. Her voice is so pretty, yet it almost sends me out of my skin.

She’s behind me. I snap from terrified to pissed off. As I spin around, she says, “She’s not real, y’know?”

“She who?” I demand. My voice is anything but pretty. All that’s left is a low, threatening growl. I clench my fists so hard my knuckles crack.

Here I thought B. made me feel conflicted. She’s got nothing on Alex. Part of me wants to rip her apart. Another part—the smart part—knows if I try, she’ll end me.

But that’s not even the bad part. Part of me wants to see the little girl. My imaginary friend. I feel like I’m threatening someone who’s only ever tried to help me. Somebody who doesn’t even exist.

And of all the stupid, senseless, lame-brained—that’s the part that’s winning. She’s just so sweet and unassuming. I’m a dumbass. That feeling doesn’t last. It goes away the second she opens her mouth. Her lips purse and I see it coming. She makes the ‘bu’ sound before I cut her off, “She’s more real than you’ll ever be.”

What I say doesn’t set her back an inch. But why should it?

Alex asks, “Are you sure?”

No, I’m really not. I’m not sure of anything. She seems real enough. If that’s true, she’s only got a few thousand years on me. She only tricked me into a grudge match with her worst enemy. The worst of the worst…and his legion of rabid bitches.

I want to roll my eyes, but I can’t. Even my snark has limits. That little smack-down cost me my watcher. Miss Dormer might’ve been a tight ass, but she actually gave a shit about me. Not many people have. It sent me running cross-country. My life went spinning out of control. This little cunt’s the whole reason my past is such shitty subject.

I can’t even look at my own arm and not feel sick. I’m still branded with his goddamned mark. ‘Father,’ my ass.

I need B., but what am I gonna do, call her? The shower’s still running. I can just see her busting through the door in her bathrobe to kick Carol Anne’s scrawny little ass. I guess it wouldn’t be the first time she’s kicked a demon’s ass in her bathrobe. But it probably would be the first time the demon was just out of diapers…and oh, so cute.

No, I can’t put her in the middle of this. She’d just get hurt. Better me than her.

I reply, “I’m pretty sure.” It’s just a gut reaction. And it’s not even right. As the words cross my lips, I realize I’m clueless. It’s true. I’m not sure of anything. Alex has changed. She’s lost a little of her baby fat, mostly in her face. She’s taller too. This kid isn’t six.

None of that matters. I still have to run my mouth, “What the hell are you doing here? I know I’m pretty beat up, but does it look like I’m about to croak?”

It’s pointless. She just stares. Vengeance demons don’t age. Or I don’t think they do. I’m not sure
about the kids. But if that’s true, then she really is just a product of my defective brain…an apparition.

As the hot pressure at the back of my head trickles away, I get that I’m still trembling. And I still feel like my stomach’s learning the cha-cha. Everything’s changed, but nothing’s changed. I’m still screwed. It just might not be the way I thought.

My knees turn to mush, landing me flat on my ass. I couldn’t care less that my stitches pull. It’s only pain. This is so much worse. She stands over me. I have to look up to meet her eyes. She’s too damned tall.

Reaching out to touch me, she says, “I’m not what you think I am.”

I want to shy away, but there’s nowhere for me to go. I flinch when her hand meets my cheek. She’s so warm. It doesn’t hit me exactly how cold I am until she makes contact. She caresses my temple with her fingertips. It feels nice. I really don’t want it to.

“Just touch me,” she whispers.

I reach up to put my hand over hers. It fucks me up when what I feel is my own cold, trembling fingers against the side of my face. All the warmth’s gone. It’s like her hand dissolved. Reflexively, I try to grab her, but my hand passes through her chest.

“See? I’m all up here,” she says, pointing to her temple. “Think about it, Faith.”

My hand falls to my side.

“If you were an ancient, powerful demon, would you bother helping a little girl cope with her nightmares?” She smooths her dress beneath her as sits down in front of me. “Wouldn’t it just be easier to take advantage of something that was already there?”

You mean Alex was real?

Christ!

No! That’s not what I mean. I know the one from—that thing, Malice—I know she was real. I’ve got the scars to prove it. But there were two? The other one was actually real?

Well, not real because if what you’re saying’s true, I made her up. But there really was a good fairy who helped me out when I was little? Like something from a bedtime story?

And you’re her?

Yeah, I’ve lost it. The fact that she nods makes it even worse. I didn’t say a goddamned word. Shit like this is a first-class ticket back to Belmont.

And that’s if I’m really, really lucky. Belmont was practically a country club. There are much worse places. I know. I’ve been. And I don’t have ‘Belmont’ kind of luck. Not anymore.

No, the way my luck runs, I’d end up in Danvers…or wherever they lock up the criminally insane here in Ohio.

Can we back up a little bit? I liked it better when my brain was just playing hide and seek. I can deal—

“You’re not insane,” she says.
That’s comforting.

She’s got all the answers. I don’t even have to talk. I intend to ask her to stop, but instead, I snap, “Just leave—” My voice cracks before I finish. “Leave me—” I fall apart. It’s fucking pitiful. Sniveling and bawling, I plead, “Why are you doing this?” I draw in a shaky breath. My head feels like it’s gonna explode.

It doesn’t even feel like me when I lash out, screaming at the top of my lungs, “Why can’t you just leave me alone?” Of course, my hand just passes through her. I’m such a waste. Tears drip off of my nose and chin, splashing onto the knees of my sweats. I hug my legs. I wish she’d just go away. Why won’t you go away?

She replies, “Because you won’t let me.” The warmth returns. She tries to lift my chin. I can’t look. I just wish she’d stop. She doesn’t. “Faith, I’m not here to trick—” Go away! “I’m not gonna warn you—” This is just insane! Go the fuck—! She raises her voice, “There’s not gonna be an apocalypse. Not today at least.” Fuck! “The reason I’m here is to help you face your worst enemy.”

What the hell is she talking about?

I find the strength to meet her eyes. ‘Worst enemy’? The only one I know of is Kako. Alex is here to help me take her down, ’cause that’d just be great. The imaginary girl is gonna help me—?

When, predictably, she comes off with, “Yourself,” I feel like a complete schmuck. I played right in. She mumbles something else while I’m kicking myself. Did she just—?

I look up and she repeats herself, careful to stress the words, “Kako’s gone.”

This kid’s got some nerve. I mop my face with my sleeve. ‘You’ve gotta be fuckin’ shitting me,” I seethe. “You expect me to believe that?”

She looks hurt. I don’t know why I care, but I do. I’ll just add it to the pile of crap I don’t understand and go—

She asks, “Do you even remember me?” Her brow furrows. “Not that other thing, but me?”

Why she bothers is beyond me. She knows I don’t. I shake my head. The best I’ve got are impressions. I remember she used to make me feel safe. That’s why it was so hard when she showed up again. I trusted her.

But it was more than that. She was a part of me. I trusted her like I trust myself. It wasn’t like I was even making a choice, handing out trust. It was automatic. And she used me like a cheap whore.

I expect her to correct me, to deny what I said…or thought. All she does take my hands. And I let her. There’s another thing for that pile. At this rate I’m gonna need a shovel.

“I need to show you something,” she says.

She wants me to shut my eyes, so I do. No thought, just instant trust again. What the hell is my problem? I’m seriously setting myself up for a Darwin Award.

I know I’m still sitting on the porch. My knees are pulled up to my chest. I get that. But I’m also on my hands and knees. The sensation is more than a little disorienting. I can’t really feel my body, but I can tell from the position of my head. And I sort of see my hands and arms. There’s something around them.
None of that bothers me half as much as the thing I can’t see. It’s right in front of me. It’s all blurry and it stutters when I try to look right at it. I feel like if I can just…

Struggling against whatever this is makes me kinda queasy. Let me see this! Someone’s there. It’s a person. I know it is. I can kind of make out their shape. Or maybe it’s people? Anyway, it’s important. I need to see who—

“Stop it!” Alex snaps. Her voice rings in my head. I’m not even sure if she actually yelled it. That might be the most disturbing thing yet. I go from kinda queasy to downright nauseous when she goes on, “Faith, I’m here to protect you. You want to know why Buffy’s being so nice? Well, here it is. She knows the same as you do. If you remember all of this at once…”

I take a deep breath and swallow. Both things help. They connect me to the me that’s on the porch. I kind of get it. This isn’t where I was looking when this—whatever it’s gonna be—happened. I’m trying to see something I wasn’t seeing at the time.

“That’s part of it. But think about what I said,” Alex replies.

“It’ll hurt me. I can’t handle it. That’s why,” she says. “You need to trust me. I know that’s impossible right now, but try. I’m not asking much. All I want is for you to look the other way. If you can’t, then just open your eyes and I’ll make it go away.”

I direct my attention to the wall on my right. This is what she wants me to look at. It’s just a plain old, grubby brick wall. Haven’t I seen enough of these for—?

“Thank you,” she says.

“Yeah, don’t mention it,” I grumble. That headache—the one I was getting—it’s moved in to stay. My left eye threatens to fall out…or explode as I stare at the stupid wall.

The room comes to life. It begins with the sound of laughter. There’s no mistaking this time. It’s Kako. She’s almost directly in front of me and little to my left, exactly where I’m not supposed to look. Why am I staring at this goddamned wall?

Low rumbling comes from outside the room. Crumbled concrete rains from the ceiling. It sounds like a truck’s crashing through the building, first one wall, then another, then another…

Guess that explains my fascination. What the hell is—?

Kako runs right in front of me as the wall comes apart. Bricks fly. Dust fills the air. I have to blink, and when I do, she gets lost.

The next time see her, mask guy has her. She’s hanging by her ankle. He holds her out, but she latches hold of his right leg. That doesn’t end well for her. He drops to his knees as she tries to bite him. It’s almost hilarious. The crown of her head crashes into the floor. She lands flat on her back. Before she can move, he grabs her throat and stands up. This is—

Kako’s expression pretty much says it all. I saw it earlier. That same terrified look. It’s like I was trying to tell myself…

This is the problem with puzzles. The more pieces you add, the more places there are to put shit. Who is this guy? And why the mask?
Alex picks one hell of a time to get chatty, “I can’t show you everything. It’d be too hard. If you don’t trust me, just ask Buffy.” I completely miss it. He’s gone. And Kako’s gone right along with him. They disappear back through the hole in the wall while she yammers. I didn’t even hear what was said.

I open my eyes. “That’s it?” I ask.

“That’s all for now,” Alex replies. “Oh, and he said, ‘We need to talk.’”

“That’s all he said?” I ask, hoping she’ll toss me another scrap. There has to be more. She nods. “But that sounds like they had something going on. Like maybe they knew each other,” I suggest. I’m not sure so I tack on a, “Maybe?”

“Maybe,” she replies with a shrug. I feel cheated, but she pushes things along by saying, “There’s not much time and I have a few more things to show you.”

Shit.

My eyelids feel heavy. They drift shut.

That entire thing—all ten seconds of it—had a ‘daddy’s pissed’ kind of vibe. So that means Kako’s seriously working for this clown? I didn’t think a vamp that old would work for anyone. But then, she might not have a choice. For a dweeb who borrowed his look from the funny pages, he’s pretty damned scary.

Hot pressure builds inside my skull, causing my ears to hum. It makes my headache all that much better. My face is burning up, but I’m cold. Shivering and sweltering all at once. I feel like I have the flu. That’s just what I need.

With the heat comes light. Behind my closed eyelids the black turns to gray. I want to look, but I—

Something tells me I shouldn’t. It’s not done. No clue. I’m not gonna fight it. The light continues to warm, growing brighter and yellower. Dawn isn’t for hours, but that’s how this seems.

As this impossible sunrise takes place, the hum fades, pushed out by another sound. That first sound. The one I couldn’t place. I know what it is now. It’s a goddamned train yard. Other stuff fills in around it. In the distance there’s the constant drone of a freeway. More cars pass on nearby streets. Birds twitter overhead. All around me children play.

Some guy shouts, “Jimmy! Supper!” as I open my eyes and blink, trying to take it all in. Everything’s changed. It’s like Al—

Her name’s not really Alex. I’m not even sure what to call her. She’s still sitting in front of me. We haven’t moved a muscle, but everything else—

She answers, “It’s Alicia.”

Helpful, but I already knew that. I just—

To my left a little boy whines, “Aww, Dad, just a few more minutes?” James Duncan. I haven’t thought about him in years. He was a rotten little shit. He’s playing with some other boy, Steven something…maybe? I don’t remember his name. They’re moving the dirt and wood chips around at the base of the jungle gym with Tonka trucks.

“You couldn’t say my name when we met,” she reminds me.
Yeah, I know that too. I remember watching her write her name in one of her coloring books. I sounded it out. She’s probably the first person I ever nicknamed. It sort of figures that trend started because of a speech impediment.

Yeah, I’m a real hard case.

I was four. What did you expect?

“I didn’t expect anything,” she replies. “I was just happy you wanted to play with me.”

So was I.

I’m too screwed up to do much else, so…

Ah, drama. Jimmy goes for the full blown, flamboyant sulk when his father says ‘no.’ Mr. Duncan starts across the lawn, making Jimmy’s decision for him.

I expect a parting shot. Something witty like, ‘What are you looking at, dorkface?’ but he breaks tradition. Maybe I’m too big now? Or maybe he doesn’t see me at all? I don’t know. Anyway, without giving me so much as a glance, he grabs his toy truck and stomps off toward his dad.

Jimmy was one of those kids. He was bigger and older. And he knew I didn’t belong. I was just some poor kid from Southie.

But really, he was just a bully. I’d seen plenty of them already. My problem was—

God, this was almost twenty years ago. It’s like my little friend went rummaging around in the back of my head to see what she could dig out of the dust and the cobwebs. I’m amazed it’s all so clear. This is a five-star hallucination. The sunset paints the horizon in a palette of colors from pale pink, about the color of cherry blossoms, to a deep orangey-peach. It’s dusk, not dawn. And judging from the wildflowers that sprinkle the lawn, it’s springtime.

I may belong in Belmont.

Or worse.

We’re sitting in the middle of a neighborhood park. One of those places where all the kids come to play. There are swings and slides and a merry-go-round and teeter-totters and trees… It’s all bordered in kind of a rough triangle by the backs of houses.

A couple of minutes ago, if someone had asked, I’d’ve sworn I’d never been here before in my life. But I’m here. I’ve been here. I know this place.

This has been…

Shit.

It’s been one bitch of a day. I’ve been catching phantoms out of the corner of my eye. Hearing things I know aren’t real. And now I know why. It’s that goddamned sound.

Strange, it’s kind of like music…shrill, atonal, haunting music. The rails sing as the train cars slide to a stop. The whole thing ends in a crash when the cars couple.

It reminds me of this place, Beacon Park’s just across the ninety from here. Cinci’s the same way. There’s a train yard just across the seventy-five from where I really am. It’s a little farther away, but—
This doesn’t even feel real. Like maybe it happened in another lifetime. But I know that’s not true. I remember now. This is where everything fell apart.

I stare at her face. Alicia’s face. That doesn’t even sound right, but what am I supposed to do? I have to call her something. Figures a trivial detail from my childhood would come back to bite my ass now. I couldn’t get past the ‘sh’ in her name. I tried. Her dad used to call her Lesha. But I can’t stand him either, so…Alicia it is.

Besides, that’s just one tiny thing. There are too many to count. It’s fucked up. I spent four summers here. I remember getting excited when it started to warm up. That meant I could come here and see my friend. She’s part of my life. She helped me through—

She helped me through some really awful shit. And I—I didn’t even remember her name. We used to talk for hours. It was—

It was really sweet at first. But I don’t know…

That changed. Not really, but—

Life has this way of getting complicated. My third summer here I ran out of stuff to talk about, so I listened.

She asked me what was wrong. Telling her meant explaining and I couldn’t. I couldn’t bring myself to—

The more she asked, the worse I felt. She just wanted to help, but I couldn’t do it.

It wasn’t really her, but it was. She had this perfect life, a good home, nice parents…and mine was…

My life was anything but nice. I was ashamed. I figured she’d see the real me and that’d be it. I couldn’t make myself talk.

It’s not like I didn’t need to. I wanted to. But there just wasn’t anyone. It wasn’t till the next summer that things…they changed. I couldn’t believe that she was just like me.

Well, not ‘just like me’…I was the ping-pong kid. A mistake that nobody wanted to own. My mom was too fucking high to care where I was. And that was actually good. It was better that way. I just couldn’t get my head around—

It’s so seductive…the idea that privilege can make things better. The problem is you have to want to change for that to happen. I couldn’t believe that they wouldn’t even help their own daughter. I guess I was naïve enough to think that the grass might actually be greener, but people really are pretty universally fucked up.

Her parents were the sort of people who liked hospital corners. Everything had to look just so. And Alicia upset their perfect world. Turning a blind eye was just easier than dealing. Something so horrible would never happen under their roof.

I didn’t think I’d ever told anyone about the shit that happened to me. When Alicia finally broke down and told me that her cousin scared her, I—

I lost it. That was first time I ever wanted to kill someone. I was eight. Talk about the model for the well-adjusted child.
After that, there wasn’t much left to tell. And that became a game. It was kind of like Truth or Dare. ‘Penny for your thoughts?’ And if there weren’t any thoughts…

I think people kind of do what they know, but this was different. It was better. Alicia was the first person I ever kissed. The first person I touched. The first person I ever wanted to touch me. I really cared. We were just kids, but—

That made it worse. I put myself out there. I didn’t even think.

I didn’t think—

My stomach turns. I was so stupid. As much as I’d already lost, I didn’t think they could take away what we had. I stare at my hands because I can’t face her. My fingers are laced in my lap. I clench them to stop the shaking. Typical childish shit…I thought we could just run away. I thought—

No wonder women make me nervous.

“That’s the problem with you,” she whispers. “You only remember what you want to. You pick and choose. And the things you do pick…”

Oh, cut me some slack. That’s not fair and you know it. It’s not that I didn’t want to remember. I just didn’t. They acted like something was wrong with me. I went from having friends and staying with relatives to social workers and foster care. My whole life changed. And all I did…

It’s no wonder I didn’t want to remember. I didn’t do anything wrong and my life went straight to hell. I became a joke. One of those kids who—

I wish she’d just shut up, but she doesn’t. And I can’t exactly ignore her. “You twist the memories you do have. Turn them into some sort of story. If what’s there doesn’t sound quite cool enough, you get creative.”

It’s not bad enough that I feel regret. Or shame. No clue why I feel ashamed now. I didn’t then. They expected me to. Past the initial shock, I couldn’t. And it’s really no wonder. Look at the adults in my life. I was a goddamned angel.

They thought I was sick. I wasn’t sick. None of this was sick. I needed her. I needed to know that someone cared. And she needed the same thing.

I cringe when she whispers, “I guess I wasn’t cool enough.”

Everything’s a blur. I reach up to wipe my eyes. My cheeks are wet and slimy. I crane my neck and rub the sides of my face on the shoulders and sleeves of B.’s hoodie.

What happened felt natural. There wasn’t any sense of urgency. There weren’t any goals. We just knew it felt good. The same as we knew it felt good when we were alone. It was soothing. We played, but it was never more than that. I almost felt okay when I was with her.

But it wasn’t just that. We held hands wherever we went. We kept each other’s secrets. She was my first and last best friend, but not just…I couldn’t imagine being without her.

“Eventually, after you talk shit long enough, you don’t even remember the truth.”

She’s right. Sometimes I don’t. A little creative editing can make things easier to swallow. I’ve pretty much quit doing that, though. My life sucks. End of story.
The night Gran caught us—I didn’t forget that part. I thought I was just messing around with some other neighborhood kid. I didn’t know—

I didn’t know she mattered. The two things didn’t line up anymore.

I remember the look on Gran’s face. It figures that part stuck. Disappointment, rage, hatred…all rolled into one. She hit me. She’d never hit me before. It hurt, but I didn’t care about that. It was the other part—the disappointment—that’s what I couldn’t get past.

I thought Mrs. Grant actually cared about me. I don’t even remember how we were related now. It was obviously distant enough that she didn’t have to think twice about throwing me out. I never saw her again after that night.

“Then there’s that other problem,” Alicia mumbles. “The gaping holes because you can’t deal with what’s happened.”

Helpful.

She’s just being mean. No clue what I did to earn it, but—

Some woman in a suit showed up to get me the next day. I freaked out. A little piece of me died when I finally got what was up. It didn’t matter how pissed off Gran was. Nothing really mattered.

Alicia’s right about one thing, I couldn’t deal. The nightmares came back. Things clawing at my skin, chasing me… I woke up screaming. I needed someone, so…

I need a cigarette. No clue what happened to that last one. My thighs are still pressed against my chest. I let them go. My jaw tightens. My left leg’s completely asleep. I let it down easy. It doesn’t hurt anymore, but I don’t want to make it any worse.

The sweatshirt fabric rubs the back of my hand when I reach into my pocket. It feels good, fuzzy and soft. I pause for a moment before flipping the pack open and pulling a smoke out along with my lighter.

So, why now…after all this time? I snicker or sneer…or both. It’s not funny. Why’d you have to pick now to show me this?

“Oh, please, you know exactly why.” It figures, she busts my chops again. I ignore it.

It’s because of B. I needed to see this. It’s part of the reason—

It’s why she’s so special and everyone else—

It’s why she scares me so damned much.

And to think I ranted at Giles about being straight when he sent me here. I was. The last thing I wanted was…

Yeah. I’m not sure what I am now. And I’m pretty sure I don’t care. I’m a lot of things. None of them are very nice. This is the exception.

I’m little better. My heart’s stopped trying to leap out of my chest. I can breathe again. I just feel limp and soggy. Like someone sucked all the life out of me.

The first thing Alicia said comes back. ‘She’s not real.’ Really? “What’d you mean?” I ask.
“Nothing,” she replies.

That’s what sucks about this. She’s a phantom buried somewhere deep in my twisted brain. I might be able to figure out what she meant, but probably not tonight. No, I have to ask again, “Really, what’d you mean?” It’d be nice if the same rules applied for both of us.

Quicker too.

Alicia places her hand over mine. For a phantom, she feels pretty real. “I was just stating the obvious,” she says. “You’ve been questioning this since you got here.” I look up. She’s grinning. “It’s your fault. I knew it’d piss you off.”

I roll my eyes. That’s another problem with her.

Her smirk fades. She puts a finger to her mouth, mock pondering as she asks, “What was it tonight?” Point taken. “She smells different. She’s ‘a completely different person’.” Doesn’t matter what I think. She just has to rub it in. “The real problem is that you don’t believe yourself. Things can’t just be what they are. You have to search for some sort of catch.”

It got dark. I’m not even sure when. We’re back on the porch. I’m freezing, but that doesn’t matter either. It’s not like I can take this inside. B. really would tweak over me having a conversation with my imaginary friend. Having to explain…

Now that’d be priceless.

I lean back against the wall, close my eyes and smoke my cigarette. Alicia’s gonna run her mouth. I may as well let her. She asks, “Would it really matter?”

No, it wouldn’t. Funny, I don’t even have to think about it.

“I’m not saying that anything’s going to happen. I don’t know that. I just have to wonder why it matters so much. You love her and she loves you. If that doesn’t change, then…?” I glance in time to see Alicia finish by turning her palms up to imply a shrug.

And sometimes she makes me feel like a real idiot. I don’t get why—?

“Why I’m being so mean?” she asks. I nod. “It’s not me. It’s you. You’re mad at yourself. I’m just a reflection. Remember? I don’t even exist.”

I tilt my head up, exhaling first, letting the smoke drift away before I admit, “I’m sorry.” I feel like a shit, but there’s only so much I can do. Just getting used to this—

“Oh, don’t bother. You’re right. I don’t exist. You made me up,” she says. “If you just need to apologize to someone, save it for her.” It strikes me as a little weird that there’s not even a hint of bitterness in her voice. She laughs, but I don’t find what she says amusing at all, “I’m probably just some used-up girl, still living in Allston, a couple blocks from her folks with an abusive husband, two kids and another on the way.” It’s pretty sick actually.

The truly disgusting part is she’s probably right. Alicia was one of those good little Irish Catholic girls. That made things so much worse all around. It’s amazing how religion tends to do that. For something that’s supposed to comfort, it sure causes a lot of pain.

Our last night together was hell. It might’ve been okay if Gran had only kept her mouth shut. No surprise, she didn’t. The real shock came early. She didn’t throw me out onto the street like I was. That’s what I expected.
What she did do was worse. She couldn’t leave it alone. My life became a joke after that. Like *White Oleander* with less curb appeal.

God, I hated that movie.

The major difference was my mom wasn’t in jail. She never paid for a single thing she did. I was always the one who paid. Another year would pass and she’d show up on some new program, talkin’ shit, saying ‘It’ll be better this time.’

It never got better.

People like to pretty shit up. Put a nice glossy coat of paint on it. But it didn’t matter what color they painted us. I was still defective and she was still a drunk.

Yeah, Alicia probably did exactly what her parents programmed her to do. I did.

“I don’t know,” she whispers. “Maybe I was smarter than that. Maybe I understood that what we had was special. That it wasn’t what the adults saw: two kids diddling each other under the covers at night. It wasn’t something dirty. You really wanted to make things better for me. I felt like someone cared when you held me.”

I think we both know that’s not true, but she goes on living the dream. “Maybe I let go of the pain and moved on, but I managed to hold on to what we had. Maybe I waited until I found something like it again.”

Nice story. It’s the hardest thing in the world to get off that path once you start down it.

“Maybe I saw that sex isn’t something to use like a drug. It’s not supposed to be ‘popped’ to dull the pain of the moment.” I’m so wrapped up in feeling like a waste that I miss the topic shift. When I catch up, it just makes me sick. I hang my head, but she doesn’t let up, “Get off, lead the latest trick to the door and toss him his clothes as he stares at you dumfounded.” I see a dozen nameless guys as she speaks, all wearing the same stupid look. I used to love that look. Not so much now.

The reality check’s helpful. My sensibilities are intact. Like there was ever any doubt. Hearing even a vague recap of my sex-capades from a kid is enough to completely squick me.

It’s actually worse. I get why I was doing that now. And it really wasn’t because I loved myself. I could live without the reminder.

I hold back a cringe when she starts in again, “It can be something so much more when you take time to listen. When you care about how your partner feels. When you realize that by *listening*, you can sense some of what they feel, like a voice in the darkness. That that can be so much better than anything you feel yourself.”

Hearing that from her is pretty strange, but it’s not gross like the other. I hadn’t even tried to put how that feels into words. I’m not sure I could’ve explained it better.

“Oh, course, that’s nice too, but this other thing, it’s like a reflection.” She pauses thoughtfully for moment and it occurs to me that I sort of just did. “Or maybe an affirmation. Anyway, there’s something profound about it.”

That’s really it. One of the things that makes B. so special. Hearing someone say it aloud feels almost like an epiphany.
I look up, but Alicia isn’t paying any attention to me. She’s focused on her hand. It’s still resting in mine. “But I don’t need to tell you that,” she mumbles.

She missed something. When B. touches me, sometimes I feel…

I don’t know. It’s like an echo. It’s weird…and umm…really hard to describe. I guess…

I guess I get a sense of what she’s feeling. Like…well, that’s what Alicia just said, but this different. I’m not sure how to put it.

No. It’s not weird. That’s not fair. That sounds so negative. This isn’t. ‘Profound’ kind of covers it, but I’m not sure I like that word. It’s, uh…it sounds so pretentious. This isn’t that. Not at all. For all the complication, this is actually pretty simple.

It’s beautiful.

Yeah, that works. One thing’s for sure, I wouldn’t trade it for the world. She’s right, it doesn’t matter.

Alicia lifts her hand. I know what’s coming before she opens her mouth. “It’s time.” That doesn’t make it any easier. I want another minute or two of just this. I feel okay, even if I am so cold that my teeth are chattering. I know she gets exactly what that means. How rare this is.

“We can’t wait any longer.” No rest for the wicked. I drop my smoke on the porch. I’ll pick it up later. I focus on her as she tells me what I already know, “There’s more I have to show you.” I shut my eyes, but I still see her face. It’s strange that I forgot her. “It’ll be better this way. We can take it slow. You already know you won’t like what you see, so…”

The train song returns. It starts off soft. She whispers, “I’m sorry.” A few seconds tick by and it grows louder, like it was in the park, but I’m not there. I know I’m not. I’m still too damned cold. I take a breath. The air’s dank. I feel like I’m going to shake right out of my skin. I cross my arms and pull my legs up. Tensing helps a little, but it doesn’t make the shivering stop.

Nothing’s changed. My patience is wearing thin. I’m about to ask what’s up when I realize that something is different. It’s just not what I expected. There’s a sickeningly sweet smell. It’s like someone cracked open a coffin.

The smell starts off faint, just like the sound. As it grows stronger, Alicia’s eye color shifts, turning sea-green. It’s not just her eyes that are changing. Everything else is blurred. It’s like I’m standing too close. Her complexion’s darkening. I do get that.

A cracking noise joins the chorus. It’s loud now. I could be standing on the overpass, above the train yard and this wouldn’t be much different. The new sound doesn’t fit with the rest. It’s too regular. Tree limbs rustle in the wind. That part’s real, but it’s just a faint clatter next to the rest.

Steely blue eyes peer into mine. B.’s face comes into focus. The only surprise is the look on her face. I know it. She’s so pissed. But that’s not it. That’s not all. This doesn’t feel real. It’s like I stepped back in time. It’s like that night Angel—

The inside of my index and middle finger—my right hand—it burns. I jerk away. My elbow smacks something. The crash accompanies a sharp pain that cuts through my shoulder.

My eyes snap open. I focus on the splash of red sparks. It’s just my cigarette. But—

Why’s—?
I blink. Everything’s turned sideways. It’s—

How’d I get here?

I’m on my side in front of the door. My head throbs when I turn it. I hit the screen door. That was—the crash—that’s what it was.

I was wrong about the doormat. My left side’s damp. I sit up and lean forward, reaching for my cigarette butt. Stretching hurts. There’s not much left. The cherry burned into the filter. No wonder it—

I look around. There’s only one butt. I know I smoked two, but—

So, I passed out?

How long? I stare at the filter.

Five minutes, maybe? There’s no way that’s right. Didn’t I hear the microwave? That was ages ago. It’s been at least half an hour, probably longer.

I toss my cigarette butt into the ashtray. It’s the only one. Huh. That’s messed up. I remember—

I was supposed to relax, right? I think?

Yeah, that’ll happen. I’m freezing, my head’s pounding and my tongue’s stuck to the roof of my mouth.

Licking my lips is a total waste. I remember—

B.’s face surfaces from the haze. I know that expression.

The kitchen passes by in a blink. I don’t remember opening the door. I guess I did.

I hope I did.

I don’t even remember getting up.

I grab the doorframe. My arm pulls tight. I turn.

I don’t feel anything at all. I see her. I can’t see all of her, but what I do see is enough. She flinches. It’s so subtle. Her shoulders barely move.

I sprint toward the bathroom door. This hallway’s so short. It’s too dark. I remember—

One detail’s enough. She’s so arrogant, so determined, so angry…it’s the same righteous indignation that made me want to rip her face off when—

I can’t see. I’m too close. I can’t tell. I think she’s wearing the same dress. The one she had on last night. That’d track. It’s torn open in the back. The neck drapes down.

Her dress moves. I don’t know who moves it. Someone jerks it down. Her breasts jiggle and sag. All I can see is the top part—the part just below her collarbones. The rest is—

I don’t need to see. My imagination fills in the rest. Kako rips her bra off and—

I need to stop!
I extend my arms just before I hit the bathroom door. They collapse. I stop.

The door swings open. I opened it. The doorknob’s in my hand. I don’t remember—

B.’s standing next to the tub with her right foot resting on its edge. In the blink of an eye, she goes from drying her leg to clutching the towel to her chest. Her mouth falls open. As kneejerk reactions go, I want to think it’s silly. I might if my heart would start beating again.

I need to see. I need to know. I can’t even breathe. All can do is stare.

Her back’s—

They didn’t just beat her. They beat the crap out of her. Her back’s covered in welts. There are dark red ones and pink ones with little bits of scab. Some of the marks are a mix of both, red on the outside with a pink, raw-looking stripe down the middle.

The door’s the only thing holding me up.

Everything that didn’t seem right today—it was all because of this. This is what she was hiding. The way she was dressed this morning when we woke up. That was the first thing. She had on two shirts and pair of sweats. That was the first time she’d worn anything to bed since—

It didn’t make sense. It does now. I wish it didn’t. She took care of me and didn’t have anything left. She put all of that on so she wouldn’t bleed on the bed. So I wouldn’t see. So she wouldn’t scare me.

What else is she hiding?

Turning to face me, B. says, “It’s okay. I’m alright,” as she wraps the towel around herself.

I can’t believe her! She’s not alright. Not even close. This is my fault. She should be screaming.

When she says, “Just go back to bed, Maeve,” I’m torn by what to do. She adds, “We’ll be fine.”

I want to shout, ‘No we won’t!’ I can’t. I can’t even make myself move. I can’t take my eyes off of B.

I need to look. I feel Maeve behind me, like static on my skin. I can’t believe she snuck up on me.

Maeve babbles, “But—” I feel her breath on my neck and want to hit her.

I don’t.

B. says, “Just go back to bed. I’ve got this.” She looks so calm now.

How’s she calm?

I step inside the bathroom and slam the door. She tries to stop me, but I rip her towel away.

She’s fine. Pissed off, but fine, beautiful, perfect…

And I’m staring at her tits again. I’m such an idiot.

My nails are digging into my palms. I ease up.

She backs off, stooping to pick up her towel. I’m sorry. I—
I see her shoulders. My breath catches. I’m a fucking idiot! She’s not fine! Her—

My stomach churns. Acid burns my throat. I gag, push past her, drop to my knees, flip the seat up and stare into the toilet. I—

A knot hangs in my throat. My stomach muscles clench. I retch. Teardrops cling to my lashes. I blink and they fall, hitting the water. Ripples stir the surface. I’m so fucked up!

Her hand rests on my back. She whispers in my ear, telling me it’ll be okay, making gentle hushing sounds. How can she say that? It’s not okay. I—

I can’t breathe. This is my fault. I brought this on her.

I can’t—

I need—

My stomach heaves. I need to puke. I can’t. Even a finger down the throat’s useless. I choke. Nothing comes up. There’s nothing left but this goddamned lump.

It’s like my eyes. They leak. They’re just as useless as the lump. I draw in a breath through my mouth. The cool smell of chlorine makes me gag again. My body shakes. It’s useless. I cling to the toilet to make it stop.

I’m useless. My head feels like it’s gonna explode. I wish it would. We’d both be better off.

I rest my forearm on the toilet seat and mop my face on my sleeve. She rubs my back and whispers. She’s protecting me.

What the fuck is wrong with me? They beat her to a pulp, yet somehow this is about me? I should be—

Fuck!

I rest my forehead against my arm. The sweat soaks in. Some of the pressure lifts.

I can just imagine what she thinks. I shake my head and giggle. I really am an idiot. A bona fide idiot.

She asks, “Are you—?”

Seriously? She wants to know if I’m okay? No surprise, she can’t finish the question.

I need to move. I sit up really slowly so I don’t hit her. She needs a second. I give her time. Standing isn’t fun. She helps. It’s good. I’m barely standing, my ass is wet from the floor, I’m falling apart, but I’m good.

She’s not. She didn’t even put on her robe. I reach around her and grab it off the door as she does the ‘I’m a dumbass’ dance, hanging her head and refusing to meet my eyes.

She doesn’t get it. I didn’t even put on her robe. I reach around her and grab it off the door as she does the ‘I’m a dumbass’ dance, hanging her head and refusing to meet my eyes.

She doesn’t get it. I’m the dumbass. I’d love to ask the same thing. I want tell her that I’m okay. Just lie to her. Reassure her. Make her feel better. I can’t. I can’t make myself speak any more than I could make myself puke. I open my mouth. Nothing comes out. I know if I force it, I’ll wind up on my ass again.

I drape her robe over her shoulders. She slips her arms through the sleeves. I stare. That’s all I’m
good for. As she ties her robe closed, I open my mouth only to shut it again. Not a peep. My throat catches and more tears come. I need to tell her.

Something.

Anything would be good.

In a stunning display of grace and contradiction, I shake my head ‘yes.’ I give up. Guess I can’t lie to her either.

It’s cool. I don’t really want to.

Moving sucks. My legs are numb, heavy and stiff…like the rest of me. I slip past her and turn on the sink. The mirror’s fogged up. I don’t know if I care enough to do anything about it. I suppose I should. I already know it’s gonna be bad. That’s no mystery. I wipe a spot in middle clean with my sleeve and stare at myself as I wash my hands. It’s bad.

I cup my hands under the tap, splash my face and swish some water around in my mouth. My face is little wetter now then it was before. Not much. My skin’s just as blotchy. The dark circles under my eyes look like they were painted on. And that’s all okay. How I look doesn’t matter. I reach for a towel to dry off.

Her towel’s still on the floor. I turn the sink off, grab the towel and toss it into the dirty clothes. Leaning down’s a mistake. The pressure in my head shifts. I don’t hit anything or anyone. She moves with me, staying out of my way. And I don’t fall over. But the look she gives me is—

She’s worried. I don’t blame her. I’m worried too. My chest feels tight. Breathing sucks. And thinking straight…

That’s a joke. It’s like I’m standing in a storm. Everything’s coming apart around me. But right here…

I’m okay. I know one thing. And that one thing’s all I care about. I know I wouldn’t change her if I could. She’s perfect just the way she is. I love her. That kind of clarity’s such a rare thing. I wish I could explain. I can’t.

I take her in my arms. After all that, it’s a little surprising she comes willingly. I’m a mess. My cheeks are wet again. I rest my hands below the belt of her robe. I don’t want to hurt her.

I lean forward. Some of the tension lifts when our foreheads touch. She’s so warm. I open my mouth. This time the words come, “I’m sorry.” They don’t come easy. I sound like complete shit, but that doesn’t matter either.

Right now, the only thing that matters is…I need to take care of her. I need to show her. She needs to know that I’m good for something besides causing her pain.

And I need to know that too. Probably more than she does.
What Lies Beneath: Scene 5

As I inhale slowly, just enjoying the smell, a weight lifts. And the pain goes with it. It’s such a cool feeling. The smell’s her shampoo. My damaged brain even forms a picture and for a moment, I see B. A light breeze tousles her hair like in a commercial. She looks amazing.

The upshot is: I didn’t go anywhere. I’m still in bed. I can almost feel her in my arms. Safe bet I’ll be fine unless Sparky here gets out a Ginsu glove.

I should be so lucky. He gets preachy instead, “It might pay you to reconsider my offer.” Oh, please, the voice too? Idiot sounds like he’s auditioning to do ads for the Whole Truth. “I can’t see you believing that your life’s worth…”

He’s too late. I’ve had enough of his bullshit. My legs are back. I tune him out and stand, but he doesn’t move an inch and neither do I. I leave myself behind. It’s like David Lynch has taken up directing my dreams as a hobby. I just wish I’d gotten the dancing midget instead of this douchebag. Little guy looked like he knew how to party. We could’ve had a time.

Backing slowly away is probably the thing to do, but seeing even part of what the me on the floor sees is just too trippy. Sparky’s mask elongates as he rants, but his voice is too hollow and muffled. I can’t make out a single word he says now.

I should probably count my blessings. Wonder if he gets that the jackboots and trenchcoat make him look like a deranged perv.

Or a Gestapo hitman. He’s truly scary, but fanatics always are.

Yeah, I’ve heard enough.

I look like hell. Fat lot of good those fake-leather pants did me. It looks like he hung me waist-deep in cage full of badgers. A wide scratch on my stomach peeks out from a rip in my sweater. There’s a deep gash along my cheekbone. And I’m not even going to start counting bruises. I’d be here all night.

There’s no way any of that would’ve been healed by the next day. I was pretty bad off, but I don’t remember being this bad.

I’d probably be cool if that was it, but it’s not. There’s a lot here that doesn’t make sense. Starting with: why am I so lucid? Dreams are all about going with the flow. Accepting what happens at face value. And if it’s something really crappy…

Even slayer dreams just are what they are. Your average nightmare on crack. Getting my head chopped off was fun. But there wasn’t any bouncing. And I didn’t end up staring at the inside of a basket or my decapitated corpse.

So why didn’t I wake up this time?

Asking ‘what if I can’t?’ would just be masochistic. I’ll pass. But it sure makes that Freddy Krueger joke seem a whole lot less amusing.
My best guess is that this is more of what Alicia did to me. But without her here to explain, I’m stuck fishing. For all I know, someone slipped me a mickey. That’d fit with not being able to wake up. But B.’s the only one who would’ve had a chance and I can’t accept that she’d do that. There’s just no way.

So, if this is a memory, how does Kako fit in? Did Sparky come back to finish me? Or did he feed me to her? That wouldn’t make any sense, what with the big rescue.

But neither thing makes sense. And where the hell’s B.?

For that matter, who’s doing the forcing? My tour guide’s M.I.A. and I could seriously use her help.

Even seeing myself like this doesn’t exactly scream ‘memory.’ If that is what this is, then I’m coloring way outside the lines. This is like one of those stupid—

Shit.

I blink, but nothing changes. This completely takes the cake.

Is this just the most wickedly real, blatantly formula, half-assed, contrived, poorly concocted dream ever?

The blood streaming down the wall behind the other me’s head would seem to say ‘yes.’ At least I think it’s blood. That’d track what with—

I look up. Black shit dribbles out along the crack where the grubby brick wall meets whatever that other black shit is they used for the ceiling. Maybe the ceiling’s bloody too? It’s tough to tell without much light. But whatever—

I’m done. My brain’s definitely been dropped too many times. I turn away.

If this just has to happen, I’m onboard for a rewind. A little realism sounds nice, tossed in with some deeply smutty, erotic fantasy. No repercussions. No recriminations. Not even a funny aftertaste. Sign me up. Now how do I get back there?

The floor’s collapsed in the middle of the room. As I head over to give it a look, a friendly male voice calls out, “You should’ve listened. The man had a point,” hard to believe, but I don’t recognize him until he calls me, “Firecracker.”

Great! This is just great! So, instead of Punky Brewster, this time around I get life coaching from Roy Stoner?

Man, I watch too much TV.

I look from one blood-streaked wall to the next as he rattles off some crap about ‘my elders’ and having ‘taught me better.’ Make that a disembodied Mayor Stoner. What’s he supposed to be? The Ghost of Villains Past or some shit?

And why’s he so ticked? I’m not even sure I said anything. Is he in my head like the kid was? I hope not, ’cause that’d just suck.

Whatever. He can run his mouth all he wants. He skipped the ‘little’ this time, but that other thing—the first thing he said—
Mom was screwed. It’s easy to overlook that things were good once or twice. Him calling me that always brings back…

I stare blankly at the floor remembering the good times. It’s not much more than a few impressions. My memory isn’t the best. But there were a couple of evenings when she cooked for me and things seemed almost normal.

I’m not sure how to feel. Anything besides resentment or blind indifference gets confusing.

She trashed my life, but I loved her. That’s as good as it gets.

He trashed my life too, but there’s just something about the old guy that’s—

Why do evil things have to be so goddamned charming?

Thankfully, most of Mayor Wilkins’ charm goes out the window when he opens his mouth this time, “You know you were wrong.”

Do I?

I drop the debate and head for the hole. This is fun and—

Dammit.

I blink out of pure habit, but I don’t expect the view to improve. It hasn’t so far and it doesn’t now. The upper half of the wall’s streaked in black and red. The highest points in the center shimmer in the faint light that shines in through the hole behind me.

See what I get for thinking about David Lynch? My twisted brain snapped up the idea and mangled it. The blood’s not pooling on the floor. And where it’s run together, it’s gathered up like fabric. The bleeding velvet drapes pretty much wreck any allegory.

But who needs symbolism, really? I like the direct approach. Cross this line and you’ll end bloody.

The one major up is this looks cool as hell. I’m tempted to hang out and watch. I don’t. I’ve got better things…

The bottom half or so of the drapes are still ragged. Blood trickles from the ends. It looks sticky, like some kind of candy. Taffy maybe?

No, not taffy. It’s stringy like that, but—

I dunno. Fake blood usually has Karo syrup in it, so the candy angle isn’t bad. It’s just…

Umm…

I know what this is like. It’s like when you sneeze. You cover your mouth and sometimes—well, it’s just gross…the way the snot webs between your fingers. This isn’t clear like that, but that’s how it looks.

As I take the half dozen or so steps it takes me to reach the hole, two tattered edges meet and cling, like sticky shit does. A few more dribbles and presto a thin new fold of velvet puckers out, glistening as it catches the light.

And this is happening all around. Hollywood’s got nothing on me.
The hole’s a bust. There’s nothing here. Just a few broken floorboards folded down between two steel support beams. The boards hang into darkness so deep it’s fuzzy. This is like staring into the mouth of a cave.

I should watch the walls. They’re cooler. But I have to look. I just know that any second now a light’s gonna come on and something will happen. And that something will make all of this crap make sense.

It doesn’t. Sparky’s the thing that starts making sense. “Just look at yourself, Faith. Eventually, she’ll tire of you.” Or at least he stops sounding like he’s in the next room talking through a fan with his mouth full of peanut butter. The ‘sense’ part’s debatable. It’s more like he’s jerking my chain. Spewing the obvious. Preying on my doubts.

Yeah, I’ve got some. What of it?

The Horrible Mayor Wilkins has to get his shot in too, “He’s right, y’know? As sure as the sun will set, your little chickadee is going to fly the coop.”

Yeah, yeah…keep going. So, of course, he does, “There’s no sense in lying to yourself about something that’s as clear as day.” He’s right next to me now.

I’m actually more concerned by the little bit of this dress I can see than anything they say. I’d been ignoring it up to now, but morbid curiosity takes its toll.

Besides, it beats granting His Honor an audience. Anything’s better.

Still half-focused on the hole, I look at the antique floral print that covers my chest. And I do mean covers. This is the sort of thing a ten-year-old might wear to church. I hold the skirt out like chicks do in the movies when they curtsey and grumble, “Look, if you clowns really want to set me off, start in on this rag.”

“And when she does, I’ll be there,” Sparky rasps, pretty much drowning me out.

Yeah, I’ll make note that Team Evil thinks I’m screwed too. But fact is, I couldn’t give a shit less what this fuckwit does or where he’ll be. If this thing with B. goes the usual way—straight to hell—he’ll be the least of my problems.

The mayor’s hand closes around my upper arm. He poses half behind me. I still don’t bother. It’s pointless. He speaks over my shoulder into my ear, mentoring me like the father I always craved, “I have good feeling about this young man. He has potential. He shows initiative. I believe he’s really going places.”

It doesn’t play. Even his breath on my cheek and the faint smell of peppermint—he always smelled like peppermint—none of it works. If he’d say something worth hearing, his act would be perfect. But what he’s pushing is complete bullshit.

“Oh, no. He’s not getting to call me a fool. Not for this. I give him a scathing over-the-shoulder glance and cut him off, “Yeah, he looks like a real winner.” I’ve been a fool. I’ve even been a fool in recent memory. But not over this.

I try to pull away, but he holds tight, scolding me like a spoiled child, “Now, Faith, I’ll admit his fashion sense is a bit misguided, but the clothes don’t make the man.”
That tears it. I snap, “A bit? This jerk is afraid to—”

He talks right over me, “Mark my words, you’ll regret this. I thought you were smarter than—”

Screw this! I yank my arm free as I turn on him and shout, “If he’s all that, then why the mask? What’s he hiding?”

“Does it matter?” he asks, gesturing to something behind me. I just glare. “You threw away a golden opportunity. And for what?” He’s the picture of patience. Even tone, subtle smile…in short, he plays the politician. Imagine that.

And I end up feeling like a horse’s ass. Not about Sparky. I’m right about him. I’ve just got such a soft spot for Mayor Wilkins.

He keeps glancing over my shoulder. Finally, I crack. I should know what’s back there. We’re standing right next to the red velvet drapes. My back’s practically pressed against them. They’re not nasty anymore. Actually, they look perfectly normal.

Well, alright. Go me! I made imaginary drapes.

Hey, maybe I can whip up an imaginary door while I’m at it. And get my imaginary ass out of this dive.

I turn and look past him. The act of turning moves me. Or maybe it moved me when I looked at the drapes. Whichever, whatever…I didn’t go anywhere, but now we’re on the other side of the hole. And on the far side of that, Sparky’s leaned over me. My shirt’s ripped open. His hand glows against my chest.

See? I knew he was a perv.

The mayor blocks my way when I try to go look. “You don’t need to see that,” he says.

Yeah, I do. I need to know what that fucker’s doing to me. But before I can even get clear, Sparky picks me up and chucks me into the hole in the floor like I’m nothing.

And I guess he’s right. I am nothing. I’m a limp, lifeless, beat up thing that just drops from view like so much trash.

After pitching me, Sparky bails. There’s nothing left to see. As I turn to follow the mayor’s lead, I hear an echo, “I’m doing you a favor.”

God, I remember that. That’s what the bastard said right before I passed out. I have no clue what he did to me or what happened next, but that much…I remember.

Stepping through the drapes doesn’t quite live up to the metaphor this time. I just go from one dimly lit room to another. But the light here’s bluer…less ‘city light,’ more ‘starry night.’

What first catches my eye is a round, stained glass window, like the one in B.’s room. The vibrant purples and greens are deepened in the starlight. The darkest shades are almost black. It’s beautiful.

But that isn’t what I should be looking at. The mayor clues me in by grumbling, “Would you look at yourself? This is just disgusting.”

B. groans my name as I direct my attention toward the floor. I’ve come full circle. Well, not really.
I’d have to figure out how to put myself back together for that. But I stand at the edge of the mattress, overlooking us.

What I see doesn’t disgust me at all. It’s pretty creepy, but only because someone who could’ve been my dad is right next to me bitching. That’d creep anyone out. He sure has a lot to say. Awful stuff, like how we’re ‘rutting around’ and ‘behaving like animals.’ Predictable stuff. Stuff that’s not worth my time. I tune him out.

So, this is how we look together?

I guess, short of taking pictures, this is as close to knowing as I’m gonna get. And that really does creep me out. I don’t get why people do that.

I hold B. cradled across my lap. Her hand slips between us as I nibble her neck. I vaguely recall that, but it was over so quick. She found an opening and used it to stroke my nipple with the edge of her thumb.

But I guess I missed quite a bit. Like how she’s caressing the small of my back with her other hand. I got so wrapped up I glossed over it.

And no wonder. Sometimes she takes my breath away. I can’t believe she’s mine. That she’s with me of all people. I end up feeling like I’m thirteen again with the worst crush ever. All butterflies and giggles. It’s truly pathetic…I snicker…in a really, really wonderful way.

Her hand—the one that was between us—playing with my nipple, returns to where it was behind my neck. She laces her fingers through my hair. It looks almost like she’s guiding me. She’s not. We just both want the same thing.

As my head moves down, she turns hers and kisses my neck. I gave her just enough room and she took advantage. It’s sad. I don’t remember that either. It was really sweet.

When reach her breast, her head falls back and she groans. The gravely edge to her voice sends chills down my spine. Even here. Even now with…

I don’t want to think about him. He pisses me off.

Disgusting?

You want to see disgusting? Check your tie.

Or that suit. I can’t believe I ever looked up to someone who’d wear such cheap-ass, bargain basement, thrift store—

My hand moves down her stomach. I swing my leg out of the way, folding it beneath me.

She rests her hand over mine. I can’t see what’s happening, but I know. I’m sliding my fingers up and down.

I bite my lip. Echoes of something like sense memory affect me. My eyes drift shut. I almost feel—

There’s a knot in my gut. Stupid butterflies flutter around it. What if I hurt her?

That doesn’t hurt me, but I’m not her. She’s—

I have to be sure.
But what if I do something else wrong? What if this doesn’t feel good?

And y’know, I never worried about any of that before. The last thing that mattered was them. I knew they were getting off. That was cool and all, but I didn’t give a crap.

With her, even the small stuff throws me. Like…I don’t know…that time—the first time we…she gasped. It was one of those. A sharp sound, like she’d jabbed her finger with a needle or something. I couldn’t see how I’d hurt her, but it sounded…

I thought for sure I’d screwed up. I hadn’t. Her expression was priceless. I felt like an idiot.

That’s the problem. I don’t always know with her. And I can’t take any chances. I might nick her with my nail or something and…

It’s—

I love her.

When I open my eyes, all I see is that. None of the other stuff shows.

No. He’s wrong. There’s nothing disgusting here.

Except for that suit.

“What would you know about this?” I ask, turning to face him. I want him gone. The idea that he’s watching us makes me—

I’d like to slap that sour look off his face. I can’t. Part of me still—

He replies, “Not one single thing. This is—” His face twists like he just tasted something nasty. “But about love, commitment, the sanctity of marriage? I know more than you can imagine. I was with my Edna May—”

Oh, yeah…I remember this spiel. The big evil guy has a heart. Heading for the door, I stop him cold by snapping, “Then why are you asking?” There’s no reason for me to stick around. If he doesn’t get that I love her…if he can’t figure out that B. means the same to me as Edna May did to him, screw him. I’m gone.

He calls after me, “Well, excuse me for my concern. But rest assured, little missy, this thing’s bound to blow up in your face. You’re backing…” The door clicks shut, muffling his voice. “…the losing filly.”

It’s bright out here.

I turn around. The door’s gone.

I’m standing in the middle of a rolling lawn.
What Lies Beneath: Scene 6

Nine

Something’s tapping to my left. Not just one sound, but two. They’re distinctly different. I don’t recognize the softer sound. It’s too erratic. But the steady rhythm of the louder one’s easy enough to place. It’s a pencil eraser hitting something, uh…not paper, like a notebook. It’s not loud enough for that, but—

I don’t have to open my eyes to know. It’s B. She’s sitting beneath the window. I feel her.

Drifting off to sleep again wouldn’t be hard, but I don’t want to. I want to just lay here and enjoy this. The room’s dark. I have no idea whether it’s morning or evening. I either slept two hours or twelve. I’m not sure which.

And I really don’t care. Twelve would be unlike me.

Hell, twelve would be unheard of. Coma notwithstanding, I don’t think I’ve ever slept twelve hours in my life.

And I still can’t seem to care. All that really matters is that the bed feels good. I’m a little chilly, but it’s nice. A heater or something stirs the air. What flows over my skin isn’t warm, but it isn’t exactly cold either. The blankets lay heavy across my wrist and hips. I obviously pushed them down while I was sleeping. I should pull them back up, but I’d have to move for that.

I don’t want to move.

My left hand’s above my head. It’s tingly. Not quite asleep like my legs, but close.

Asleep’s the last thing my right hand is. It’s been way too busy for that. The tips of my fingers are wet. My skin’s warm and slippery. And so swollen that it’s, uh…

I should seriously stop, just because, but I need to pee and if I do…

I really don’t want to move.

Not yet.

The tapping stops. A click makes things plain. B.’s playing with her computer. Her attention shifts. I’m being watched.

So, should I be embarrassed?

Probably, but I’m not.

The pencil drums again. Safe bet she doesn’t get that she’s doing it. I take it that means she’s nervous. Or preoccupied. Maybe still worried. That’d track. Last night was pretty bad. Any night that ends with a little white pill’s bound to be bad.

I slept well. Deep, sound, dreamless…

No complaints here. And even if there were, I probably wouldn’t remember them for long anyway. I’m way too burnt out for that.
I’ll have to thank Maeve for the Ativan. Shit’s like an eraser for your brain. Just what I needed.

Or not. I’m not sure how that’d go over.

A few moments slip by before B. sets her laptop aside. She stands. I still haven’t opened my eyes. I feel her closing in. It surprises me when she pauses to put something down and walks right past the bed.

“I’ll be back,” she says. The door opens. “Just give me a sec.” She bounces down a couple of steps. “Don’t go anywhere.”

I wasn’t planning to. The patter from the stairwell’s fast. She must be running. I hope the fuss isn’t for me.

I pull my hand from under the covers. The slipperiness fades when I rub my fingers over my thumb and down onto the heel of my hand. A few passes and it’s gone. I stretch. My ears ring as the tension builds. A warm, muzzy flash blots everything out. I ease up and yawn. It feels great. When I tilt my head, putting pressure on my neck, it pops. I’m awake.

I open my eyes. I was right. The only light in the room comes from B.’s laptop where it sits in front of her trunk. The glowing white apple on the lid strikes me as silly. I wonder if computer companies get just how dumb their branding is.

Apparently not.

Footfalls echo from the stairwell. B.’s coming back. I wish she’d slow down. I’m in no hurry.

I place my hand under the covers, resting it on my hip as she enters the room carrying a mug. The fashion show’s been cute up to now, but today’s a little different. It’s nice, still cute, but more what I’d think of as the usual B. Anything different about how she looks is because the styles have changed.

Her calf-length boots and long, loose-fitting cardigan are both dark-gray. They roughly match, but her boots are a little darker. The white scoop-neck shirt she has on could be a holdover from high school, but I somehow I doubt it. Anything she wore back then is at the bottom of what scientists are calling ‘a sinkhole caused by instabilities in the San Andreas Fault.’ They’re still baffled by why the damned thing doesn’t fill up with water. Considering that it’s mostly below sea level, I can kind of see their concern. You’d think…

It’s another one of life’s little mysteries, unlike her shirt. That’s just a standard. She fills it out better now. Or maybe that’s just her bra.

Could be my developing appreciation for all things B. But whatever it is, it works.

It works well. On me.

Her clothes leave a strip of skin bare below her midriff. I want to kiss her there. Feel her softness with my lips and tongue. Pop the three tarnished brass buttons of her jeans free and…

Change is good.

I think that’s the point. One I’d missed up to now. The education’s truly helpful.

She walks around the bed and bends down to hand the cup off. “Morning,” she says with a smile.
It’s not, but that’s okay. I play along, saying, “Morning,” too as I sit up to take the cup. She’s managed to pick up enough to get that I need a couple of these to function in the morning. I have a sip. It’s perfect, bitter and just a little too hot to drink.

I don’t get why people think that coffee’s a dessert. It’s not. They can keep their steamed soy milk and sugary chocolate syrup. It’s better plain.

She kneels down next to me as I turn onto my side. I prop myself up on my elbow, hold the cup to my mouth and blow across the surface, breathing in the steam. It smells good. And the heat feels great. I guess I was a little cold.

As she studies me, her attention drifts from my face, lower. I’m glad she’s still not shy. One more sip’s enough for now. I lean forward and put my cup on the floor. She picks up her own from near the corner of the mattress and has a drink too. She barely looks at anything else but me as she does.

I wonder how long she watched me sleep. Obviously long enough. It’s not just me. The tension’s clear, thick, heavy… She wants to touch me. She’s wanted to for…

She leans forward to kiss me. I close my eyes and reach up, lacing my fingers through her hair. Our lips meet. This wants to be something quick, another peck, but I keep her longer. My tongue parts her lips. She tastes like chocolate. I may have to rethink that thing about coffee. It’s kind of nice. On her.

Her hand moves from the small of my back. She squeezes my ass. Her nails bite in. I turn, trying to get away and she rolls on top of me. I’m not sure if it’s her or me, but the blankets end up piled at our feet. I think she did it. Made me move and used the momentum to—

She used it alright. Her right hand’s between us. She cups my breast. Her thigh grinds against my crotch as she tweaks my nipple.

My stomach tenses, forcing us together, putting more pressure on all the right parts. I break the kiss long enough to gasp. It’s not enough. I need—

She trembles. Her body crushes against mine.

I respond…my body responds. It’s good. Everything’s fine, except I—

Her jeans soak up the moisture and pull. They’re rough. It almost hurts. The pain—it’s perfect.

I want this. So why am I falling apart? My face feels hot and tingly. Like there’s something covering it. Nothing’s there. I should be fine, but I can’t catch my breath. Her lips caress mine, so tender…and gentle. I don’t want to scare her again. I take what I can between kisses, but this is way too close to how I felt last night.

Never mind that I can hold my breath for nearly five minutes. I know that, but this…

Each breath just isn’t enough. They’re too shallow. It’s worse than not being able to breathe at all.

I should be remembering all of those things. There’s this thing she does with her tongue that’s just… Why am I…?

I should be able to—

I can’t. With every passing moment things get more and more…
Her tongue’s in my mouth and all I can think is that if it wasn’t, if she wasn’t on top of me…I might be able to breathe. I’m losing control. My heart beats a frantic rhythm, thudding in my ears. I need air. I want to turn my head. Shove her away. I try to make myself move. I can’t.

Or I could just let go and drown.

I don’t. She lets me go.

No. It’s not that. Her left hand slips from beneath me as I gulp for air. She’s not looking at me. Not my face. She kisses my neck.

She props herself up on her elbow. Her right hand leaves my chest. It moves lower, down my stomach. She’s watching that. She reaches just below my navel before I find the strength to move. I lift up on her right shoulder and roll, flipping her onto her back. She hangs on, taking me with her.

As she smiles up at me, I remember. She thinks we’re playing a game. The shortness of breath is normal. This all feels normal to her. She normally lets me win.

I don’t know what the hell’s wrong with me. This is crap. Maybe if I just take control, it’ll…?

She gives me a funny look, like she’s trying to figure me out. I stare at her throat, watching it move when she swallows. There’s a spot, just below her hairline, right above her scar…

I move with her when she sits up to take her sweater off. She’s undressing, so fast, so willing…she practically tears at her clothes. I guess I must be okay. Or she thinks I am.

This isn’t what I want.

She stops right in the middle of whipping her shirt over her head. She pulls it back down and stares at me. I—

What just happened?

Oh.

I said that out loud?

Oh shit! I stammer, “I—” I need to say something. “I need to—” I sit up and hang my head. I guess I still need to pee.

I should stop her, but she slides off the top of the mattress. She’s on her feet, bending down for her sweater and I still don’t have a single thing to say. I wait till she has it on to look up, but she doesn’t wait for me. She walks over to my closet and opens the door. She has my robe in hand before I make it off the bed. I sigh as she helps me put it on. Maybe I could—?

Shit. No, no, I can’t. She just snapped from ‘red hot and ready to go’ to frosty. And who can blame her? What I said was…

It was pathetic…stupid and pathetic, not to mention way out of line. I can’t believe I did that. I sure didn’t mean to. I need a smoke. Or something. I need something.

Getting over feeling smothered by craving a cigarette—not the smartest thing I’ve ever done. I should have my head examined. That’s what I really need.

She walks over to my side of the bed. Her boots are on the floor. No clue when she took them off, but—
I scan the room, looking for a missing pack of Marlboros. They have to be here somewhere. Last time I saw them they were in the pocket of her hoodie. They didn’t just disappear. We came up here, undressed and went to bed. That’s first time I’ve ever gone to bed like that. It felt strange when nothing happened.

It was strange, but nice. *Really nice.* Just feeling her body pressed against mine, holding her…

That sure is painful now. I shouldn’t have stopped her. I just—

She’s next to her dresser, holding my cigarettes up. “Looking for these?” she asks.

“Uh, yeah,” I reply. Smooth. I looked right at them not more than a second ago and didn’t see them.

She puts them in her sweater pocket, walks over to our cups and picks them up. “I’ll be on the porch,” she says, pointing at my closet. “I hope I did okay. I—” She walks out the door without finishing her thought. Whether she says it or not, what I hear is, ‘I tried.’

I—

I don’t get her.

Worse, I don’t get myself. The second she’s gone, the pressure lifts. All of the…and the…

Seems like so much drama over nothing.

But that wasn’t *nothing.* The look her eyes was just—

I’m not sure I can do this.

Yeah, take away the angst. And what do I replace it with?

*Nice.* Is that really it? Am I getting cold feet? Or could it be that I just made a complete ass of myself?

I don’t even get why I’m here. I mean, it’s obvious she wants me here. She’s gone to a lot of trouble. My bag’s sitting empty on the shelf in my closet. All of my clothes plus a bunch more are hanging up. She moved me in. I just don’t understand why.

I could ask her. Wouldn’t that be fun?

Yeah, I can just imagine her answer. I’ll pass. How about I get dressed instead?

I wonder what she did with my underwear. Best guess…I limp over to her chest of drawers. My leg’s better. It itches, but that’s good. Or so they say.

I’d be willing to argue the point. It’s messed up. The stupid thing doesn’t itch until I look at it. But whatever, the bandage is clean. It’s a little rumpled, but—

The bottom drawer’s still full of her sweats. The next one up hasn’t changed either. But the center drawer’s mine now. That’s obvious too. She must’ve noticed that I have a thing for black. I take out the first bra and panties I lay my hands on that aren’t black. It’s easier. White lace trimmed satin is a little frilly for me. And the bra’s one of those strapless, underwire, push and scrunch torture devices. But go figure, they match. My robe gets in the way as I stumble through putting them on.
When my shit’s finally together, I grab a pair of socks and head for my closet. First thing’s *last*…I put my stupid robe up. I should’ve done that before I started, but that would’ve made too much sense. Why not fight it?

Yeah, because fighting’s always fun. And useful.

I need to just tell her the truth. *Shit.* Like I even know what that is. Hearing myself grumble just sets me off. I’m not even sure how much of that I said. I heard ‘shit.’ But before that…?

I don’t have a single clue. What I *need* to do is get a grip ’cause one thing’s for sure: this weird thing I’ve got going on between my mouth and brain just isn’t gonna fly. Not when I’ve pretty much screwed myself into a heart-to-heart. I suck at those enough without the handicap. I really wish I didn’t, but maybe if I start with what I know I can…?

Umm, yeah, I guess…I mean, maybe…I don’t know. That’s as good a place to start as any. It’d help to have a clue. So, what do I know?

Besides that I’m a walking tragedy, not a hell of a lot. I need more coffee. There’s something I definitely know.

*Yeah.* The sooner I haul my ass down there and fake it, the sooner…

*The sooner…?*

Other than dread, I’ve got nothing. I’m really not naïve enough to think this’ll just work out. Not much does. And the few things that have…I’ve got a scar to show for each and every one. This is gonna be a bitch.

The first top that catches my eye gets snatched off the hanger. It’s not exactly what I have in mind. I want a sweater. What I end up with is a white, soft, stretchy, knit-cotton body suit with a boat-neck and three-quarter length sleeves.

I guess I could look for something different, but why bother? It’s not worth the effort. I put the top on and snag a pair of jeans. No surprise, I look like a mall store mannequin when I’m done. All I need is a colorful scarf to tie around my neck. The rub is…I kind of like it.

Bet B. thinks the Internet’s evil. That or she thinks it’s great and Giles thinks it’s evil. Yeah, that’s the better story. It’s kind of funny. My heart bleeds for poor, poor Giles.

Sighing, I sit down to put on my socks and shoes. How I look still isn’t important, but—

Why’d she do this? I wouldn’t last five-minutes on the street dressed like this. Someone would just have to prick with me.

Guess it’s a good thing I’m not on the street. I pull on my socks and reach for some shoes. I’ll forgive her the new Doc Martins. Mine were getting pretty beat up.

And there’s the little matter of the blood. I hope she pitched them. There could be an upside to all of this. Forgetting the better part of yesterday wouldn’t be bad. Not having the reminder’s a start.

Standing up’s a pain. There’s no sense in rushing. When I make it to the stairwell, I do the same thing I did last night: press and hop… It’s safer. I don’t need to—

She doesn’t deserve to go through that again.
I duck into the bathroom to pee, wash my hands and brush my teeth. That first part takes forever. I have to relax and that doesn’t come easy.

The last part’s arguably a waste of time because I head straight for the back porch to smoke right after I rinse my mouth. She’s sitting on the glider close to the door, rocking. There’s a cigarette lit in the ashtray beside her. I look around for someone else. There must be someone in the house who—

I can’t believe it when she winks. She has to actually say, “We’ve all tried it, Faith,” for me to firm up. “I don’t hate it half as much as you think I do. It just isn’t me.” She smiles.

This really isn’t—

I catch myself mid-thought.

I don’t know her. There’s the truth. I never really knew her. We didn’t take the time. Or drop our guards long enough. Alicia’s right. If I hang on every single thing that seems a little off…

I’m right. Alicia’s really me. Or some buried part of me. It’s hard for me to get my head around that, but that doesn’t make it any less true.

B.’s right too. If we cling to the past…

If I waste my time measuring her against that, I won’t get to know her. This is bullshit. It needs to stop.

Besides, she dealt with Spike somehow and he wasn’t exactly big on hygiene.

“If I’d known this was going to be half as much fun…” she teases, trailing off when I let the screen door close. I’m over it. I move around to face her, lean down and take the arm of the glider. She stops rocking and lets me kiss her. She tastes like smoke and chocolate. I’m not even sure what I think about that.

It doesn’t mix well with toothpaste.

I have to stop, and when I do, I see that something’s wrong. Her eyes are puffy. She’s been crying. How’d I miss that?

It surprises me. I touch her face. She doesn’t shy away. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, caressing her cheek with my thumb. “It’s just—”

“It’s not your fault,” she says. I’m grateful she doesn’t let me flounder, but I don’t see how she gets that. I reach for my cigarette and flick the ash as she fills in, “I had a bad day. Maeve’s doctor appointment was this morning.” When B. looks down at her hands, I back off. She doesn’t need me hanging over her.

“She’s always so sick after,” she mumbles. I lean against the wall, facing her with my back to the screen. “I spent the first part of the day in a waiting room dreading the rest of the day we spent in the bathroom. Or that’s how is seemed.”

Well, that explains it. The last thing she needed was for me to flip out.

I glance down. My coffee’s on the window ledge next to me. Am I really that predictable?

S’pose I am. But it seems to me…I’m gonna spent a lot of time staring at my feet if I stand here. I
grab my cup and take a sip.

Snagging the ashtray, I move my stuff to the table at the other end of the glider and sit down. She gives me a sidelong glance when I rest my left arm behind her. It’s an invitation that doesn’t go unanswered. I’m glad. She curls up next to me, nestling against my shoulder.

She whispers, “She’s asleep now. I’m glad things…” Her voice loses strength as I stroke her hair. This worked last night too. She settled down and went to sleep. It was sweet. And it feels good. Kind of mindless. Her hair’s so soft. To be perfectly honest, I’m not sure who put who to sleep.

I’m not sure what to say about Maeve either. The whole thing sucks. It’d probably be best just left alone.

I take hit off my smoke to postpone the inevitable. I have no clue where to begin, so I go with what I know. What we both know. Maybe if I can just get myself talking… “This has always been about —” But I can’t even finish my first thought. My cigarette casts a faint red glow across my knuckles. I focus on that, searching for the right word. All that comes to mind is ‘fucking.’ I tap my smoke against the rim of the ashtray. I don’t want to say that. I avoid saying that. It makes me sound so—

‘Sex’ would be better. ‘This has always been about sex for me.’ That works, but it’s not as accurate. Sex can be nice, fucking isn’t.

During the debate, I stammer, “Uh…” For something that really isn’t a word, it sure sounds dirty. I glance down. She’s grinning. Another of my many skills rears its ugly head. I can make anything sound dirty. At least I made her smile.

I really need to get laid.

Hey. That would’ve been a good one, but I think she takes my meaning. I should find a point before things fall apart. This needs to be different.

Not bad, but what comes out is, “I want this to be different.” I have to fill in, “I need it.” More specifically…I say, “I need for this to be about you.” But I’m pretty sure she won’t get what I mean. I have one last puff off my smoke and crush it out. I’m done. We could go back inside, but this is nice. I caress her cheek, working toward her neck. She’s relaxed. Patiently waiting…

I snicker.

…for me to make sense.

Glad she’s comfy. This could take a while.

I tried with Wood. I was ready for something else. Making it about him wasn’t an issue. He loved that. The problem was he was like me. He wanted a fuck buddy. When I tried to make that about something more, he wanted me gone.

The sad part is that I wasn’t sure about anything. I just knew the ‘same old, same old’ wasn’t cutting it anymore. I needed better. I hoped he was it. And that turned into another tired, old cliché come true. It just wasn’t meant to be. I thought he might actually give a crap about me, but he didn’t.

Yeah. And who really cares? I don’t want to think about him. This isn’t the same and I say so, “This is different.” She probably thinks I mean because she’s a chick. It’s not that.

Well, it is, but it isn’t. That’s part of it. Let’s face it. It’d be stupid to say that doesn’t make a
difference. It does. But it’s not just about that.

I take a drink of my coffee. It’s cooling off really quickly out here. I need to finish before it gets cold.

“This part’s always been about how I feel. I’ve always—” I stop cold. Should I admit that I’m selfish? Why not? It’s no mystery. “I’ve always made this about me. I controlled things, made the other person…” Used the other person…

That’s pretty much all I know. I can read people and play them when it comes to sex, but anything more and I’m done. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know anything.

I turn and crane my neck so I can kiss the top of her head. What I do know is this: “I don’t want to do that to you,” I whisper.

“I didn’t think that,” she replies. “I thought we were having fun.” She leans away just enough to look up at me. “That’s part of it, right? It’s supposed to be fun.”

I should tell her that I’m lost, that I have no idea what I’m doing. That’d be honest. What I do say is so much bullshit, “Yeah, but you always let me win.” That’s true enough, I guess, but it’s also misleading and unfair in a couple of different ways. Besides having nothing to do with anything, there’s only been the one time. That’s not much to—

“We could try not,” she says with a grin. “Would it be better if I didn’t let you win?”

It figures, she flirts. Cute, but that’s just about as useful any of the garbage I’ve said. This is going well. I don’t get why, but as my perverted brain toddles off, remembering that first time, she shuts down. Eventually, she surfaces enough to mumble, “What if I want to let you win?”

That kills it. All I’ve managed to do so far is to hone my already exceptional avoidance issues. May as well chicken out and change the subject. “We have to meet Giles tonight, right?” That helps. If there was ever a solid substitute for a cold shower, it’s Giles.

“Yeah,” she says, pulling away to stretch. “Yeah.” She glances around like she’s looking for something. “What time is it?” It takes a shrug from me for her to remember she’s the one with the watch. When she glances at it and says, “Shit,” I take that as my cue to rise.

I grab my cup and down the rest of my coffee. It’s too tepid to be good, but maybe it’ll wake me up. Hanging my cup from my pinky, I put my smokes in the same hand and head inside. I don’t know if it’s possible. And doubtful that it’s smart. But I need to know, so as I hold the screen door open for her, I ask, “Do we have time for me to look at your back before we take off?”

She passes me, glancing over her shoulder to reply, “Not really, but we’ll make time.”

I move in behind her when she stops to put her cup in sink. Reaching around her, I do the same after dropping my cigarettes on the counter. With my left hand, I brush her hair from her neck. My left hand trails a path across her shoulders. I wrap my arms around her. She tries to turn, but I hold her, kissing right above her scar.

After what just happened I should probably… “It’s not you,” I whisper. When my breath makes her tremble, I give in. I’m not sure what it is about slayers and their necks. Her pulse quickens as I play, feeling her skin between my lips, caressing her with my tongue. I nibble and her breathing labors, tightening and becoming shallow. I think we’re all this way. I could take a poll. That might be fun.
Whatever it is, this works like magic. She melts against me. Her hands meet mine. She guides them lower.

Really, there’s no trick to it at all. Getting bit and living through it feels wrong, even if it is just play.

And there’s my problem in a nutshell. If only I could’ve been so eloquent a few minutes ago.

I pause to whisper, “What about Giles?”

“He’ll wait,” she replies. Her hands rest over mine. My thumbs are hooked at the top of her jeans. My fingertips are…

I want to force the issue, but there’s no need. I kiss her neck again, lingering to nibble before I ask, “And Maeve?” This is a little wrong. We should go upstairs.

I don’t want to. It might be a little mean, but teasing’s just more fun. As my teeth brush her neck, she groans, “She’s out.” Her hands close around mine. She twists and pulls. The buttons open, one at a time. She gives me exactly what I want. My hand slips inside, beneath her panties. Soft hair and moist skin meets my fingertips.

“I—” I want to tell her how amazing I think she is, but I can’t. The words won’t come. She tries to turn. “I need this too,” I whisper, rotating my wrist, matching the angle of her body, allowing her to face me. That’s not a lie. Maybe I can show her the rest.

I place my left hand behind her. The edge of the counter’s so hard. I want to shield her from that.

My eyes shut. I concentrate on her. Damp, silky fabric clings to the back of my hand. My fingertips part her open. Warm, slippery skin flows beneath them. She kisses me. Our lips caress.

I hold my fingers together, forming a triangle with the tips. This is too much, but too much is good. I know it is. I push, applying careful, even pressure and she stretches tight around me.

Our kiss is broken when she breathes in. My hand cups her, holding her. My fingers—

I roll the heel of my hand, grinding against… It rests a little too high. Her pubic hair clumps beneath it. It feels nice. Soft and a little damp, but it’s not enough. Her skin drags against mine when I push making my movement jerky. She takes a sharp breath. I don’t know if that…

I open my eyes. Hers are still shut. Her mouth’s open. Her hands—the right one cups my ass. Her left hand grips my shoulder. She pulls. More contact. More pressure. Yeah, that was good. I should know. I remember exactly how that feels. It’s—

It amazes me that she lets me touch her like this. I could just—

Carefully, I part my fingers, stretching the skin that envelopes them. Her eyes open. She looks…

God, she’s beautiful. I could just stay like this for…

Her muscles reflect my movement, bearing down, squeezing my fingers. I whisper, “This is…” I search for a better word and end up with, “…nice.” There has to be a better one, but eloquent as ever, I can’t find it. I’m too caught up in her. The flood of moisture as her body reacts. The way she looks at me like I’m…

I pull back and her eyes close again. I—
I want to taste her.

She kisses me. I could drop to my knees and get lost in her smell, all of the textures, sensations and sounds. I’d do that for her without a second thought. I just can’t do that to her. It doesn’t seem right. I get lost in this instead. The feel of her skin, the way it seems to flow around me, the gentle crush, the taste of her mouth…

She moves, moving me. I follow. Or try. Her hand leaves my shoulder. She brushes my hair away and turns her attention to my ear.

We stand skewed. Her right foot’s between mine. My wrist presses against my hip, just above the top of my thigh. It’s not quite symmetrical, not quite what I’m used to, but perfect still. I don’t get why it feels that way. It’s—

I don’t move quite the way she wants, so she guides me. Her hand returns to my shoulder. She tightens her grip. Her actions become sharper, harder, more insistent. She uses me. Our bodies lock together. Move together. Her breath on my neck is…

I have no idea what happened to my pinky. It’s gone. My wrist is bent at an angle that almost hurts. That’s not what I focus on. Everything else disappears. Every move she makes, my right hand—what I can feel of it—it’s in heaven. It doesn’t seem like this should be so intense. My palm’s wet. My fingers…

She grinds against one hand and the sharp edge of the counter cuts into back of the other, balancing everything out. There’s a cost. And something about that feels right.

My left hand cups her ass, putting pressure at the base of her spine. She pushes and I push too.

She kisses my neck, suckling, then biting down. Her muscles clench. She’s close. Her strokes are so firm. It worries me. I curl my fingers a little more. I’m afraid I’ll scratch her.

My body aches. Hers tenses. She shudders. Her hold on my neck gives out. She groans. She takes that same word—the one that isn’t—and make me look like an amateur. The sound sends shivers down my spine.

I feel like I’m on the outside looking in, swept up by the magic of a show. It’s so seductive. But the truth is, I’m not watching anything at all. My eyes are closed. I feel everything. I’m so numb. My body moves. I feel it, but I feel disconnected from it. I’m not in control. I hear her, smell her…she washes over me, pulling me in.

The tension and numbness consume me. What felt so good a few moments ago is now crippling. I freeze, standing rigid, like a statue. A stupid, trembling statue. I can’t even get that right.

She pulls, urging me on. Her muscles contract around my fingers. Crushing me, holding me, gripping…

I gulp for air. I need to stop. I’m hyperventilating. Knowing that is truly helpful. It’s these little moments of lucidity that just make things—

The counter digs in. My left hand’s pinned. I feel like an animal caught in a trap. A trap I made. I can’t breathe. I can’t move. There’s a hard knot where my throat used to be.

She reaches between us, taking my hand as I stare at the wall behind the sink. My reflection’s almost clear in slick white tile. I need to move. My skin crawls when she tries to move me. She wants more. My wrist and fingers fold. My nails dig in. She—
My knees buckle. They must have because they strike the floor. My hands fall to my sides.

What if I can’t feel anything at all?

The pressure in my head’s just brutal. My eyes burn. I lick my lips and try to swallow. The knot doesn’t move.

Shit!

Everything is just shit! I’m gonna cry again. This is un-fucking-believable. What’s the hell’s wrong with me?

I can’t even bring myself to face her. I can’t raise my head that much. And what I wanted is right in front of me. What I want is…

I spring to my feet. I can’t do this. She tries to stop me, but I yank my arm free. She says something as I round the corner and sprint down the hall. I don’t care.
The door’s gone.

Shit.

I shade my eyes with my hand.

There’s no sign of the mayor…or anyone else, for that matter.

He might’ve had a point about some of that. There’s no way of knowing. But that last part…

“She kicked your ass,” I mumble and take off across the lawn. I don’t even know where I’m headed. Just away works for me. But after a few steps, it occurs to me. That’s not quite all. For the record, I add, “And mine too.”

So that’s it? After all that…

Nice.

Oh, man.

Shit. I got back there and I left like a moron.

See? I knew my priorities were whacked. I should’ve sent him packin’ and…

Yeah. So much for my gratuitous fantasy. I’m stuck here now, wherever here is.

The grayish, overcast sky and hot, dry air positively scream Southern California in the summertime, so I’ll go with that. Not that it matters. I’m in the middle of a big ass yard. The nearest tree is—I swing around—just on the other side of that hill. Looks like as good a direction as any.

Figures the bastard put me in heels. They drag in the grass as I walk. I’m tempted to take the stupid things off. My skirt flows around my legs. That part actually feels nice, even if it does look like something from a sixties sitcom. But the heels just suck. I make it about ten feet before my foot lands cockeyed, my ankle turns and I damned near stumble.

Me. I haven’t stumbled in…

I have no idea.

I end up looking at the ground just because. I’m standing half on a headstone. At least I get where I am now: a cemetery, but not one of those things like they had in Sunnydale. I don’t even know what happened there. This is a regular cemetery with headstones that sit level with the ground. No clue which one. They kind of all look the same. There are usually more trees, but—

That’s it. I’m done. I stoop down and unbuckle the straps. Kicking the stiff, annoying, useless, pointless, awkward, goddamned shoes off is best thing that’s happened so far except…

I can’t believe I left!
Dammit!

That I ended up in another godforsaken, lame-ass graveyard just figures. I stomp off toward the tree, paying more attention to my feet. I have to walk at an angle through the graves. Stepping on the corner of one would suck more than those stupid shoes, so…

I’d like to know who came up with skinny heels. Who started that? And what moron thought it’d be great to wear them?

Someone had to actually wear them. And other people had to actually jump on board. How’d that become a thing?

Strapping boards to your feet would be more comfortable. And unless you’re walking on a smooth surface, they’re a nightmare! Even for me! And I’m no klutz.

I’ll leave—

Dammit! I can’t believe I left! I’m stuck here in some fuckin’…

I left!

I’m the moron.

Whatever. B. can have being a girly girl. She’s just so much better at it than me.

The ground levels out. There’s an old black guy sitting on a park bench beneath the tree about twenty feet away. When I look up, he smiles and waves like he knows me. His face is familiar, but I can’t place where I’ve seen him. The nape of my neck prickles, branching out to my scalp and shoulders. I tense. He could be a vamp for all I know. Broad daylight, but—

He makes me just that edgy.

I don’t get how B. did it. Even the big guy sets me off sometimes. And I love him. I owe him my life. But I can’t see—

What does she see in me?

Some day—probably soon—she’ll remember all of the terrible things I’ve done. She’ll see all of the stupid mistakes I’ve made and all of the horrible things I can potentially do. She’ll see all of that and what a liability I am will hit her.

“They’re right. She’s going to leave me.” Hearing myself mumble throws me off completely. I didn’t mean to say anything. It’s just—

“You’re selling her awfully short, aren’t you?”

Getting an answer’s even worse. I spin to face the speaker ready to—

It’s just Willow. She’s sitting on a park bench next to a grove of trees that by my count shouldn’t be there.

What else is new?

I seriously need to lighten up. She didn’t even get to complete her thought before I was all about killing her. That’s pretty much the epitome of rude. I chill out as she goes on, “Buffy may be a lot of things, but fickle isn’t one of them. She doesn’t give up on the people she cares for.”
Nice sentiment, but she lost me somewhere between her pink shirt and pastel violet skorts.

They still make skorts? And tights? She’s seriously wearing fuzzy white tights like some little girl?

But what really tears it is the white cartoon kitten on her tee-shirt. I vowed to never take anyone in a Hello Kitty shirt seriously.

It’s rude as hell, but I have to look away. I just can’t. Considering…busting up laughing really would be worse. I just can’t get past the…

She looks like a great big wad of cotton candy. I’ll lose it if I…

I really can’t.

And true to form…

We’re next to a lake. The eye roll just happens. Shit changing every time I turn around is getting pretty tired.

Doesn’t matter that it’s pretty. Or that the temperature dropped at least ten degrees when I turned. The air’s a little crisp, but not quite chilly. And it’s not that thick shit. Breathing actually feels good now.

There’s this grassy stuff growing along the shore. A breeze stirs it and creates ripples on the surface of water that’s as clear as the air. Sunlight catches the ripples making them sparkle. Little white flowers dot the opposite shoreline.

It’s all that and more set against a backdrop of forest and mountains. There are even ducks. This is some serious picture-postcard shit.

It doesn’t seem right that I’m alone. A place like this should be crawling with tourists. At the very least there should be a sailboat on the water.

There isn’t jack. Bob Ross should be here with his easel, but it’s just me and the ducks. Willow even left. Either that or she clammed up. I’d look, but I’m not up for a change of scenery just yet. It’s nice here. And ‘alone’ means there’s no one to hit me or call me a ‘filthy, disgusting animal.’

I could use the slack.

As I enjoy a moment’s peace, clouds cover the sun. Or I guess that’s it. The sun’s somewhere behind me and I—

I really deserve some slack.

Anyway, the shade I’m standing in grows. Even the snowy mountaintops in the distance get duller.

Weird how it feels cooler when this happens.

I wish she’d say something. That is if she’s back there. I can’t feel her, but that doesn’t mean much. She’s always been kind of strange. There were days when it was hard to even be around her. She’d totally set me off. My skin would prickle just like it did with that old guy—I’m glad he’s gone—and other days we’d be in the same room together and I wouldn’t even notice her.

Like any of that means anything here. I should just forget what I think I know. None of it applies.

What she did say was nice. I think she was trying to help. But I’m not willing to call her an
authority on the subject. She and B. have always been tight. That hasn’t really changed. And it’s not going to. Willow isn’t like me.

The sun hasn’t come back out yet. If anything, it’s getting darker. I feel dizzy, but not bad. It’s a little like I’m drunk. I want to sit down, but—

Seeing movement out of corner of my eye is…

I want it to stop. I know that nothing’s there. Colors streak for no reason. It’s similar to that thing that makes you feel like the room’s spinning, but both sides move the same way. I resist the urge to turn my head. That really does make it worse.

It’s actually more like being in a car, without the car.

Or running.

It’s about that fast, but I’m not moving. There’s no bouncing. I haven’t gone anywhere. I look down. The water’s edge is still about three or four feet from my toes. The sandy soil around them isn’t moving either, but the angle of the blur changes when I tilt my head. It’s weird as hell.

The ducks forage in the grassy stuff right along the shore for whatever ducks eat. They’re not more than ten feet from me. It’s like I’m not even here. There’s a big one and four little ones. The babies look almost like miniature versions of their mom, but they’re still fuzzy…and kind of cute.

They’re solid distraction. And I sure need one. Everything around me’s moving. But it’s all the stuff I can’t see. I cling to what I can. I can’t help it. This place is peaceful. I don’t want to leave. I don’t even blink for fear it might change. But the blur is…

It’s getting worse. Where I am is like some distant point on the horizon. Even if I am standing right here, the world speeds by. My eyes do as much as they can to keep up, but the blur is…

It’s nauseating, disorienting and a couple dozen other things, all of them fucked up.

My eyes tell me that my hair should be whipping around. My cheeks should be flapping or plastered against the bones of my face. I should feel something. Wind should be roaring in my ears. But I’m stuck here.

It’s not just that. It’s everything. While I watch the ducks, the sun sets and my little oasis is momentarily lit orangey-red. I don’t even get that that’s what’s happening until it’s over. The moon’s already up when it hits me. Its silver sliver travels like a satellite. Actual satellites move so fast that they look like shooting stars.

Or maybe that was a plane. It was gone too quick. I couldn’t tell. This is like watching one of those time-lapse videos, reflected on the surface of the water.

But the ducks still swim like they should. Leaves rustle in the same light breeze that tickles the little hairs on my arms. Crickets chirp. My little picture postcard world goes on largely unaffected.

“You missed something.”

Willow’s still here. I see her reflection when she stands, but I can’t see her face, just the dark shape of her silhouette.

“Don’t I always?” slips out before I really understand. She didn’t say a word. Not really. She’s here with me. Really here. And she’s ashamed.
Most people don’t get that when a nine millimeter bullet impacts the human body, it’s travelling at roughly twelve-hundred feet-per-second. To put that in a way that’s easier to visualize: unhindered by gravity and friction that same bullet would travel a mile in about four and a half seconds.

I don’t know why I’m so nervous. Other than—

Now, that’s not really realistic because gravity and friction do play a part, but at close range the effect is…

I blink and the lake’s gone. There’s this big dorky looking guy in front of me, trussed up with vines between two trees. And Willow—

But saying that is still sort of meaningless. It sounds really impressive, but it doesn’t lead to a clear picture. Typically, all we have to tell us how that’d be are movies and television. But the pictures they paint are inaccurate. They’re glamorized. The hero never gets hurt as badly as he should and the villain…

This villain had exactly that to go on when he pulled the trigger. Not that he cared.

I feel like I know him, but I don’t. Not really. He’s just familiar.

And I really wish he wasn’t.

I hate him.

That’s another thing we trivialize. It’s hard to appreciate what hate actually means until you’ve felt the deep burning rage.

I’m not nervous anymore. This feels so familiar. It’s almost comfortable. I lived like this for years.

I lived on it. It made me feel powerful and alive.

I hate guns too.

And not just average hatred. Not that banal term we use frivolously. Meaningless bullshit.

I despise them.

Now I’m all for convenience, don’t get me wrong, but taking a life should never be easy. Killing should be personal. Guns make the act mindless. A little pressure on one piece of metal—just a twitch—and another tiny piece of metal does all of your dirty work for you. No muss, no fuss.

This villain won’t do that again. I hold a piece of metal. It’s an insignificant thing. A scrap that I pulled from the chest of someone I love.

She’s coming. I really wish she’d mind her own damned business. But it isn’t like Buffy not to meddle. She just has to stick her nose in, even where it doesn’t belong. She thinks she’s helping.

I’m not really holding the bullet. I don’t understand how I’m doing it, but it floats, spinning closer and closer to his chest. As near as I can figure, I hold it by sheer will.

My hatred holds the bullet. It seems easy, but I know it isn’t. This feels horrible. Like that night when—

The initial impact—the act of touching—starts a cascade. It’s called hydrostatic shock. But that’s just a fancy way of describing the same thing that happens when you drop a pebble into a pond.
It’s the same effect…amplified a thousand fold.

I make that happen. His ribs snap. Not all at once, but gradually. I want him to really feel this.

The fluids in his chest, blood and mucus…and all that gory stuff that should stay on the inside, move with the shockwave, like water sloshing in a tank. Cell membranes burst, tissues rupture and the bullet has barely even broken his skin.

His nerve endings light up like the Sunset Strip at night, sending signals to his brain. His amygdala stimulates his hypothalamus to release a hormone called CRH or corticotropin-releasing hormone. Because sciencey things always have cool acronyms. It makes them easier to remember.

Or forget.

Or confuse with other stuff.

Or whatever…but the CRH in his system causes his pituitary gland to release another hormone, which in turn stimulates his adrenal glands to release yet another hormone.

But not adrenaline. Not yet. First it releases cortisol to help him cope.

That chemical soup swishes around for another microsecond before his eyes well up and his cheeks billow out. But he can’t really beg. I got sick of his whining and sewed his mouth shut. The desperation makes him look like a great big puffer fish. His muscles tighten. He’s in way over his head and he knows it.

And that makes me happy.

Or as happy as I can be with this gaping hole in my chest.

I ache, but I—

I can’t stop to think about that. The quiet…

I tear the stitches from his mouth and he shrieks, “Please!” He takes that simple single syllable word and makes it sound like twelve. I nearly crack a grin. “God! Please. I did wrong…”

Yeah.

Sure you’re sorry.

I concentrate on his chest. The bullet just pierced his sternum. As I twist and mangle and rip, turning his insides into a gooey paste, the cavalry arrives. I nearly sigh when Buffy shouts my name.

Uh, boy, I’m really in for it now. Mommy’s here.

What she thinks doesn’t matter. But stupid me, I glance over my shoulder, see the disbelief in her eyes and I almost feel…

Something.

An unpleasant little twinge. It passes.

And the sad part is, I think she gets it. I truly believe that if anyone can understand this, it’s her.
There’s just one slight problem. She might understand the loss, but she’ll never understand what
I’m doing and why.

People are shaped by loss. By tragedy. The good times—all that warm, fuzzy stuff—yeah, it
affects us, but not the same way.

It’s how we deal with the pain of loss that really molds us. That’s why we remember those things
above all the rest.

That’s just how we are. Trauma leaves a lasting impression. Call it a flaw if you want.

And Buffy’s first major loss—the big one—

Well, to be fair, there were lots. And they were all big. She’s had a rough life. But that first one…

The only one she could blame for that was herself. And because of that, deep down, she hates
herself…

…not quite as much as I hate Warren.

He begs, “When you get caught—” stammering because I think he gets that this isn’t the most
persuasive argument “—you’ll lose them too. Your friends.”

What if I don’t plan to get caught?

His sweat and his tears…

Should I hemorrhage his brain? That happens sometimes, but it’s pretty rare. That’s a lot of fluid to
displace. The impact has to generate closer to one-thousand p.s.i.

“You don’t want that. I know…” When I come to my decision—huge shock—the pathetic,
dribbling, inconsequential piece of shit loses his voice. Blood bubbles up in his throat. He
practically gurgles his final words, “You’re in pain, but—”

You know nothing.

I say, “Bored now,” for the benefit of my ‘friends.’ The rest happens with a casual thought, just like
pulling a trigger.

This is no dream.

I feel the same resentment. That revulsion I used to feel when I looked at B.’s face. Only I’m not
feeling it. I can completely relate to what she’s going through. Willow just peeled that guy like a
banana.

Giles told me back in Sunnydale that things had been rough, but—major understatement—that’s
about all he said. No one else was jumping up and down to share, so…

And no wonder. That’s not something you see every day.

I desperately want to say something to Willow. I need to tell her that I’m sorry. I need for her to
know—
What Lies Beneath: Scene 8

Ten

I slam the bathroom door. The first thing I see after it’s locked and the lights are on is me. It figures, I take the easy out and end up staring at my own pasty face. There’s an old wooden framed mirror hanging on the wall opposite the door. I’m shaking like a leaf. My cheeks are streaked with tears. I’m breathing like I’m dying. My heart’s trying to pound its way out of my chest. In other words, the usual.

I’m so sick of this bullshit! What’s wrong with me?

What do I think I’m doing? What’s the plan? Am I just gonna hide in here?

A tap at the door answers my question. Jesus H. Fucking Goddamned Christ! Why do I do this shit to myself?

I tear my attention from the ghoul in the mirror and turn to unlock the door. As it swings open, I head for the sink. Just what I need, another damn mirror. I avoid looking at the stupid thing until B. pokes her head in the door. She’s so timid. I don’t get that. “I can go meet Giles if you need—” she says.

I reply, “No,” cutting her off. The last thing I want is for her to protect me. Right before that—the next to the last thing—is seeing him. In this battle of evils, John Harker wins.

I reach for tissues on the back of the toilet. What is it with women and tissues on the toilet tank? It’s universal. The first one I take sticks to my hand. As I ball the tissue up, clutching it in my fist, my damned hand aches. I take another tissue to wipe my eyes and blow my nose. Her scent’s so strong. It’s just…

Why’s this so…?

My cheeks warm. It makes no sense. Even as screwed up as I am, she makes me weak. I toss the wad of tissue in the trash can.

I’m so sick of hearing myself say these words, but damn me, I have to. “I’m sorry.” I’ve never used them more or meant them half as much. That doesn’t keep them sounding hollow. I just wish there were better. Something else I could say. Anything. It’s—

I’m gonna lose what’s left of my mind if this doesn’t stop.

The most disgusting part of this entire pitiful mess is that I know exactly how she’ll reply. This is so predictable it’s sad. She’s gonna tell me it’s alright.

We’re so far from alright…

I turn the faucets on and cup my hands under the stream. The water’s icy cold. That doesn’t stop me. As the frigid shit hits my face, she doesn’t disappoint. “It’s okay.” It’s almost ridiculous how nervous she sounds. She doesn’t buy it either.

That’s right. Sure it is. Say it again. That won’t make it any truer. At least the shock hides my cringe. The reaction seems almost normal. Or I hope it does.
She could stop right now. “Look, I get that this isn’t going to be easy.” But she just has to make things that much better by slathering on the platitudes. “Nothing good ever is.”

Good?

I rest my forearms on the edge of the sink and hang my head. She still doesn’t see.

“I think you’re worth it,” she whispers.

Water drips from the tip of my nose, splashing into the shallow basin. I just hope she’s done. I shut my eyes. Ambient sounds are all that’s left. Mostly just running water. I can live with that. The door could open any moment now and that’d be fine by me.

Just as I get my hopes up, she works up the nerve to add, “I’m not going anywhere.”

Why?

Why’d she say that?

Maybe she does. Poor, broken, fucked up Faith. Yeah, she does see. She can keep her goddamned platitudes.

I look up, resisting the urge to punch the worthless sack of shit in the mirror. I want to so bad, but I can’t do that to B. It wouldn’t be right.

She turns away. “I’ll be upstairs,” she says, leaving the room and pulling the door closed behind her.

I splash my face again. The water’s warmer. Some of the tension bleeds away as I rest my hands behind my neck.

I can’t fix this if don’t know what I’m fixing. I don’t even know where to start.

Right when things get good, my brain falls out. And not in the happy, healthy, horny, kind of way.

That’s the pattern.

So, this has nothing to do with her? It’s all me, right? That’s it? I’m the problem?

Well, that much fuckin’ figures.

Screw this!

Smelling like her is driving me nuts. I bust through washing and drying my hands and face, shut the sink off and attack my hair. I don’t think that anyone in right mind would call this brushing. The pain…

I fuckin’ deserve it!

The truly funny thing is that when I finish, I look better. Red-faced, but better.

Fuck!

You’d think that the stress would shake something loose. I mean, if this has something to do with the crap Little Lily Munster pulled, you’d think…
But I don’t remember a goddamn thing. This is like one of those campy movies where the guy hears or sees the right wrong thing and snaps. At least there aren’t bodies piling up—

I’m not even gonna go there. Besides, if I’m reading this right, my trigger more than makes up for anything else that might be missing. Talk about evil. This is just plain sick and fucking wrong.

Nothing about this feels right. Everything fits, but I don’t remember because—

Well, shit. Y’know, feeling like an idiot really helps. If I never do another damn puzzle again in my life, it’ll be too soon.

I turn away from the mirror. I’m hopeless. I need to get this over with. Go through the motions. Deal with Giles. And from there…

I have no idea. Leaving the bathroom might be a good start. I’m not gonna fix this mess without makeup. And for that I have to go upstairs.

Maybe if I can get my shit together, I’ll catch a break and Little Miss Hide and Seek will come out to play. I want a word.

Yeah, imagine me catching a break. I shouldn’t even think shit like that.

I open the door. The trip upstairs is mechanical. I really am just going through the motions. There’s nothing left. My leg’s a real treat. I have to move slow. The bandage drags my stitches, reminding me it’s there as I climb, making the whole thing itch and the entire experience just that much more enjoyable.

I’d really like to grab my makeup and get going. Not that I’m in any hurry to see Giles. I just need more time to myself.

B.’s sitting slouched against her weapons chest when I open the door. Her legs are bent. Her laptop’s propped between her thighs and stomach. She clicks the touchpad, shuts the lid and looks up. Those two clicks pretty much tell me how this is gonna go.

Things never work out the way I want. I’ve given up on even trying.

But I don’t know anything for sure. There’s just something about the way she moves, like she’s crabby maybe. And with so little reason…

Is that really it? I don’t think it is. Her expression’s neutral enough. Hell, I don’t know. Maybe she wasn’t done with whatever she’s doing. Killing time turned into something more…and I blew it.

Yeah. I need to stop. This is above average dumb, even for me. Wondering what she was up to makes it that much worse.

She does seem a little put out maybe, but that’s probably all in my head. I feel like—

“Do you still want to see my back?” she asks.

I don’t need the mind fuck, but my answer’s still, “Yes.” And that’s probably the best clue yet.

I meet her halfway. She sits near the head of the bed. I push the pillows over and sit down turned sort of behind her. It’s good. My shoes stay on the floor where they belong. I wouldn’t care if it was my bed, but it’s not.
Walking on pins and needles is such a joy. Everything I do is wrong in my head, even if it’s right.

She doesn’t touch her clothes at all. Oh goodie. I get to undress her. As I slip her sweater from her shoulders, she says, “I’m sorry that…” She trails off to pull her arms from her sleeves. Or maybe she’s collecting her thoughts. Either way, I don’t see why she’s sorry. I’m the one who—

“Downstairs, I meant what I said, but it sucked,” she explains. “I’m so lame sometimes. I just couldn’t…” She falls flat again when I lift her shirt.

I hear ya, B. Guess I’m not the only one who feels a little foolish. It just seems like I have so much more reason.

I raise her shirt the rest of the way up and focus on what I should. Well, her back’s healed as much as it’s going to. There’s no redness left. But it’s still, uh…

She was seriously worried about me? I’ll have one little scar, maybe two. This is…

“It’s just hard,” she mumbles. “I don’t know what to say.”

That’d make two of us. I pull her shirt back down. I’ve seen enough…to make me feel like a real turd.

That was the goal, right? I needed to make myself feel more like shit. I needed another reminder that I’m helpless. What’s done is done. There’s nothing I can do to make anything better.

I pick up her sweater and hang it over her shoulders. A tear trickles down my cheek. I wipe it away as she goes on, “I don’t want to screw up and say the wrong thing. I’m not sure what you remember.” She puts her arms through the sleeves.

I can’t take this. I’m not even—

She turns toward me. “This started off—” When she gets a look at me, she falls silent. I can’t face her. She rests her hand in mine. And she’s so damned coy about it, I can’t even pull away. “They’ll fade. You know that. In a year or so, you won’t even be able to tell.”

Her tone’s so matter-of-fact it’s infuriating. The worst part is she’s right. I know she’s right. Nothing ever sticks to us. The scars on her back are already white. They look at least two weeks old now. Her body’s doing what it does better than I expected.

Everything else is meaningless. What matters to her is that I’m okay. How does that work? I wish she’d just yell at me.

“I know you blame yourself for everything that’s happened, but none of this is your fault.” She sighs and I want to scream. I bite my tongue. Instead of going off, she’s holding my hand and telling me that everything’s fine. I’ve been granted a pardon. This is…

She touches my chin, trying to coax me into look up. “I keep saying that. I feel stupid repeating myself, but it’s true and you just won’t see it.” She sounds frustrated too. That gets worse. She draws my attention by granting my wish. “Here’s the thing, Faith. The regret you’re feeling…’’ she brushes her hair back “…that tells me everything I need to know.” She glares at me, holding her hair in her fist. She’s pissed, but for something completely…

Finally, she lets her hair fall and stands. Offering a hand down to me, she says, “Now let’s get this over with. Giles is waiting on us.”
Following her lead, I get up. I make it halfway to my closet before she asks, “Are you attracted to me?” When I turn and look at her like she’s nuts, she says, “Then what does it matter?”

It takes me second to get what she means. She’s still talking about her back. I thought we were done.

She averts her eyes and mumbles, “I really don’t want to think about this, okay?”

I guess we’re done now. “I get that,” I reply.

She goes on like she didn’t even hear me, “I just don’t know what to think about you.” She takes shaky breath. “If you can stand…” It’s surprising that she continues. I was pretty sure this was over. I just wish she’d look at me.

The rest isn’t any surprise at all. I could try finding something relevant to say. Something besides a rote response. Or I maybe I should just learn to keep my mouth shut.

What I should do is knock her senseless. That way she’d have an excuse. The idea that I might not be able stand to look at her is just…

It’s sad.

At least, I think that’s what she meant when she mumbled. It’s hard to tell.

Sadder still, I really am just that stupid. I take the bait. “It matters because I can’t look at your back without feeling like I did something awful.”

“Well, you need to stop. It wasn’t you,” she snaps.

“Yeah, but I didn’t do anything to prevent it,” I reply. “I should’ve at least warned you.”

It takes her a bit to answer, “You’re right.” And when she does, most of her anger’s gone. “You probably should’ve, but it’s not like I didn’t know. I went into this with my eyes wide open.” There’s something on her dresser that holds her interest. It makes me crazy that she’s avoiding me. She has to see that I’m right.

I ball my fists and yell, “And that doesn’t matter! Damn it, Buffy, I should’ve protected you!” Why can’t she see that it’s me? I’m the problem. I’m always the problem.

She says, “You couldn’t. And you can’t blame yourself for that.” It gripes my ass that she’s so calm. Her mind’s made up.

I’ve had enough. I mutter under my breath, “Watch me,” before I pull my head out of my ass and actually make it to my closet.

The moment she says, “Faith, I can’t take this,” I get that I’m not alone. I’ve heard that tone before. I blew it. She’s done. “On top of everything else… I don’t want you to look at me and feel guilt or grief. How do you think that makes...” She sounds exhausted.
I mumble, “I don’t know.” I wish I could just take it all back, that I hadn’t let her sucker me in.

And naturally, I screwed up again. I can tell from just her sigh that I went too far. “This is bad enough without you too,” she grumbles, building up a head of steam. “I can’t stand for you to look at me like that. That’s worse. If no one else sees this but you…” She’s so upset she has to stop.

And what am I doing now? I’m staring into my closet, itching to leave. I may be right. I’m not cut out for this. I just can’t take it.

I go to my bag and open it as she finds her voice again, “I don’t want them to. I want you. And if you can look at me like…” Her voice cracks. “Then things might just be okay. I may be able to deal with this. Get over it. Maybe I can even…”

The desire to run eats at me. I unzip one pocket after another, looking for my makeup. When I find it, I don’t even look up. I’m out the door so fast that the guilt doesn’t even catch up until I hit the stairs.

At least she doesn’t follow.

Yeah. And this is still all about me? God, I’m such an asshole!

Oh well, at least I may have time to get my shit wired tight before the next round.

About halfway down the stairs it hits me just how bad that was. She’s as stressed out as I am. She’s just hiding it better.

But really, all she was saying was that she wants to feel desirable. That’s such a basic thing. What any woman wants. And I stormed out over that?

I should turn around and haul my ass back up there. I don’t. I trudge down a few more stairs instead. This way I get to torture myself over every step I take. What could be more fun?

Turning around and pointing out what an idiot she is—that’d be lots more fun. She desperately deserves it, but I think I’ll take a pass. My head might explode. If she can’t see that this isn’t about how she looks, I’m not sure I can help. I mean, it doesn’t hurt that she’s a major hottie, but—

There are lots of pretty people in this world. I could pick and choose if that’s all this was about. It wouldn’t even be that hard. Actually, it’d be a damn sight easier than any of this. I’m not in this for ‘easy’ or the eye candy or…

I don’t know. The attraction needs to be there, but past that…this is about who she is, not what she is.

Maybe I’d feel different if her ego was more fragile. But it’s not. I’ll make this up to her later.

I hit the landing, round the corner and take the last few steps to the bathroom. Again, the first thing I see is me. I look like hell. That mirror just sucks.

I drop my makeup bag on the toilet seat and unzip it, digging straight to the bottom for my foundation first. The only time I ever touch this shit’s when I get rolled up by something bigger, meaner and nastier than I am. That’s such a rare combo, I have no clue how old this is.

I check the bottle for a date. I’m not sure what happens when makeup goes bad, but I don’t really want to put this crap around my eyes if it is. The date’s stamped on the bottom. I’ve still got six months before I’ll need a new one. I should just buy another. With any luck, it’ll be six months
before I need this crap again.

Yeah, I’ve noticed something about my luck here lately. Pushing it wouldn’t be smart. I take the lid off the bottle, put my index finger over the opening and shake as I assess the damage. I usually use this stuff to cover up major bruises. My eyes aren’t as puffy as they were. The dark circles still suck, but this’ll be cake.

I look down long enough to find a place to set the bottle. When I look up, the wall behind me’s dark blue. There was an alcove that the door opened into. I guess there might be a closet in Maeve’s bedroom that cuts into the bathroom. That’s gone. The wall’s flat. The blue wallpaper’s printed with cheap paisley. It’s the kind of shit they use in places that want to be upscale, but that’ll never make the cut. The white, gold, maroon and green print just looks gaudy. I blink and it goes away.

That was strange. The alcove’s back. The walls are white. Everything’s how it should be. I blow it off and spread my new skin tone. When I look down again to get a little more foundation, a childish, feminine voice whispers from behind me, “You’re missing the point, Faith.”

My life would have to be a lot more normal for this to come as a shock. I’ve just got one thing. “Am I still awake?” That one thing seems like one hell of a thing to ask, but considering our history, the question’s totally valid.

“Yes,” Alicia replies as I look in the mirror, trying to find her. I have to twist my upper body. She’s sitting in the alcove against the wall facing me. I see her in the mirror, but when I turn all the way around to look, she’s not there. “We don’t really have much time. You should just get ready,” she says.

This is completely—

“You’re right, it is fucked up,” she cuts in, scolding me. “I wouldn’t be here right now if you’d just look at the details.”

Jeez, not you too. Can’t I do anything right?

Obviously not. And I’m the one who should be mad, but I just can’t find it in me.

It doesn’t matter. I get back to it, locating my powder to appease my prepubescent conscience. That’s probably the sickest irony so far. My conscience is a—

Completely blowing me off, she explains, “Buffy watched the whole thing.” Half a chance might be nice. “She said as much herself, remember?”

I do.

Now I just feel like a shit again.

And of course, Alicia just has to rub it in, “Don’t you think that might be bothering her a little?” My mind paints a picture, but she immediately tears it down. “Kako was trying to break you. Do you really think she just raped you? That’d be way too simple.”

Honestly, I hadn’t given this much thought. I haven’t had the time. I was just getting used to the idea that that slutty little freak might’ve touched me.

I look up from the brush and the compact in my hands to find Alicia in the mirror. The expression on her face is…it doesn’t belong on such a sweet girl. I have to look away.
She’s right. I’d’ve gotten over it. Thanks to her, I have all of these freshly recovered memories to
work with. The stuff seems like it happened yesterday. That’s more than a little disturbing. Which
makes it go well with everything else.

We got off to a pretty rocky start. Both of us were looking for something that neither of us could
give. We both cared too much. It took a while to get that figured. But those experiences would’ve
made this a whole lot easier.

I don’t know what to expect now. I just go back to doing what she told me to do. Keeping my
hands busy is good. Maybe I won’t break anything.

“Kako didn’t rape you in the usual sense,” Alicia says, pausing out of frustration. She’s cutting
hairs and she knows it. “I’m just saying. It wasn’t that simple. You didn’t want it, so it was rape,
but it’s not like you think. She played with you. She did all of those things that you secretly desire.
The stuff you won’t let anyone do because it doesn’t fit your ‘leave them sloppy and confused’
modus operandi.”

It’s not hard to imagine what she means. Heat rises in my face. Not that it shows much. The
torment continues as I blend the camouflage down onto my neck. “You’d have to give up way too
much control. But whatever, that doesn’t matter. The point is that it worked. You got off while her
minion beat your lover. You can kind of see how that might—”

I want to snap the brush, but I’m good. I put it up and get out some blush. There are a couple of
shades. I go for the more subtle of the two. I’m going to end up looking like a painted doll if I
don’t tone this down somehow.

“Do you remember the two slayers that Giles sent here?” Alicia points them out and I see what’s
coming. The caveat’s clear enough. “You need to ask Buffy what happened to the other girl,” she
says without elaborating. I’ll call that a small favor.

“Wait. Only one?” I ask and angle my body to look at her in the mirror.

Alicia nods. Her expression hasn’t changed a lot. It pretty much suits how I feel. She’s upset. She
sounds it too. “There wasn’t anything you could’ve done. Remember the smell? She was dead
before you got there. I just hope the other girl lived.”

I’ve heard enough. I want to get the fuck out of here. I slap some color on my face. It’s an
immediate improvement. I look almost healthy. Funny, I feel like utter shit.

“I’m not sure if that’s the kind thing or not,” she mumbles. “There was so much blood.”

I spin around. I want to hit her. That feels even stupider when I end up staring at an empty patch of
floor. “I’m sorry. I just want you to understand.” It’s weird, hearing her in my head. The broken
ends of the brush handle gouge my hand. I drop it in the trash as she says, “I don’t see any point in
you remembering this crap. I’d like to hold onto it, if you don’t mind.”

If you can do that, knock yourself out. You’ll get no arguments from me. I turn around and put my
blush up. I wish you could do the same for B.

“Her life hasn’t been like yours. She doesn’t have the same defense mechanisms,” Alicia replies.

I know. I just wish you could.

I get the stuff together to do my eyes while Alicia speaks her mind, “Kako was just softening her
up.” I still can’t exactly stop her, so… “She didn’t do anything else to Buffy. I think she was saving
Well, that much is good. That probably would make me snap.

“She played you and the other slayer against each other. Made you feel culpable for what happened. You know the game. You had an orgasm and she…”

At least hearing this delivered this way dulls the sting. There’s nothing to connect me, so it sounds like a report. I guess once it finally sinks in, I’ll feel different, but for now…

“I think her plan was to turn the tables once the other slayer was dead. Maybe she wanted to make Buffy feel responsible for your death? Or she may’ve just wanted to drive both of you insane. I can’t tell. But either way, she didn’t get that far.”

I just highlighted the area under my eyebrows first. That’s the last thing I normally do, but—

“So what happened to my leg?” I mumble.

“You got really upset and broke whatever was holding it down,” Alicia replies. “I have no idea what it was. I know that it hurt and that Kako taught you a lesson, but by then you were too traumatized for anything to really matter.”

Well, that explains the weird angle and why it’s so deep. I consider asking what upset me, but think better of it. I know enough. I can’t imagine what Buffy’s going through. No wonder she’s been so distant. I shouldn’t have touched her, but it’s too damned late now. I stare at my reflection. There’s no way I’m going to paint this away. My expression’s pretty grim. I need to finish up and try to put on a face on for her.

“You need to tell her the truth,” Alicia replies.

Yeah. You’re right. She deserves that much. But it’s not going to be easy.

Alicia mimics B., “Nothing good ever is.” She snickers. “Sorry, I couldn’t resist.”

Yeah, that’s what they say. I play at putting on my eye shadow the right way. I want this to look softer, maybe a little more natural. It doesn’t. I’ve got on too much makeup for anything to look that way. I just run with it.

So, what was the deal with that crappy wallpaper?

“Oh, that? That was nothing. Just afterward. The closest place that was open was the McDonald’s that’s just across the Western Hills viaduct. Buffy took you there and called for help. You were both so bad off. She carried you into the bathroom and held you.”

Alicia lets go. This doesn’t feel like nothing to me. I mean, it feels like a regular memory. There’s nothing flashy about it. Really, other than the mirror and that awful wallpaper, it’s mostly a sensation. Being held and feeling safe, but I’m still really scared. It’s confusing. And the pain is…

“These memories are a real pain to deconstruct. It’s hard to find things that won’t upset you. There’s just so much. That was something simple and safe.”

I don’t even try. There’s still a chunk missing, but that feels a whole lot more comfortable now.

“Unless you have something else, I’ll leave you alone to finish up,” she says. Hearing her stand is just too weird. My brain’s playing games. She’s getting ready to go, so it fills in the obvious. I see
her in the mirror without twisting or turning. “You look pretty, Faith,” she says through a smile. “Will you do something for me?”

I don’t know why. It’s a little dumb, but I expect the door to open. I stammer through a reply when it doesn’t, “Sure. I mean, I guess. What?”

I look down and she says, “Try to smile. I know it’s hard, but it’ll help.” She’s gone. The tension eases. It’s weird to think that’s hard on me, but it must be.

Her request seems pretty whacked considering, but she’s right. It’ll help B. if she thinks I’m handling things okay. I plaster on the best I’ve got. It looks phony. I’ll have to work on that.

All that’s left is the usual stuff. Just eyeliner, mascara and lipstick. That goes really quick once my head’s in the game. But I could probably do this in my sleep. I probably have done this in my sleep. I know I’ve done it drunk.

I grab a tissue and wrap it around my finger. As I use it to soften the edges, B. comes downstairs. I look okay when I’m done. Funny, I feel like I’ve been sucked dry, but it’s been that kind of night. She passes the bathroom up, heading for the front room. When I meet her in the hall, she hands me my coat and a belt, mouthing, “I thought that’d look good.”

I don’t even bother. It’s not worth the trouble. The hallway’s pretty dark and it’s not like I there’s a mirror. I just humor her by handing my coat back long enough to put the thing on. It’s wide with a heavy buckle. It probably does look good. I’m in no position to start questioning her taste now. Not when everything I have on, she picked out. I follow her to the door, putting my coat on as I go. First thing, my hands go in the pockets. My smokes are there. I want, but I’ll wait. She opens the door and holds it for me.

When she turns to face me after locking the deadbolt with her key, I pin her. I don’t intend for it to come off to be quite as rough as it does. Oh well, I got her attention. “Don’t ever think that you’re anything but gorgeous,” I whisper and kiss her. She doesn’t resist at all. I don’t know why I expect her to, but I do. I guess it feels like we should still be fighting. She must be over that because she’s really into this. She puts her arms around me. Her tongue brushes my lips. I open up, giving her what she wants, mirroring her movements. It’s, umm…nice.

She smiles and takes my hand when I release her. We’re magically somehow still a couple in spite of all of this shit. There might be hope.

I follow her out to the car, patiently waiting until we’re both inside to ask, “What do you remember from when you were a kid?” This is the easiest way I can think of to start. It feels like I’m opening another can of worms before I have a handle on the last. But Alicia’s right, B. deserves to know that I don’t have a plan. Or a clue. I’m just going wherever this takes me. Not that any of that’s a mystery. I just owe her the truth. Maybe it’ll help her make sense of some of the stupid shit I do. There may even be an off chance she can help.

I can hope.

She starts the car and faces me. Like clockwork she replies, “Lots of stuff.” At least her curiosity seems genuine.

I fill in the obvious, “I do too, but—” In the world of cookie cutter conversations, this is going great. I need to cut the crap. “I had an imaginary friend.”

That was truly beautiful. I hang my head. I couldn’t have come off lamer if I tried. It surprises me
when she doesn’t laugh. I might not be so nice. But that’s just B. She is nice. I mumble, “I know that sounds pretty dumb,” to break up the awkward silence. And let her off the hook.

I want to add, ‘Things didn’t start off that way,’ but she doesn’t let me. I barely get the ‘th’ out before she talks over me, “No it doesn’t.” That’s cool. I was mumbling. She places her hand over mine, murmuring a sympathetic, “That just means you were lonely. There’s nothing dumb about that.” She’s turned in her seat with her right leg folded, facing me. She has sweetest smile on her face.

I have to look away. What she’s doing feels forced. Kind of like a guidance councilor or a shrink. But I probably asked for that. I speak my piece, “She didn’t start off that way,” the tiny bit I have, hoping to turn things around. That’s likely. Using the pronoun feels better. More correct or something. But whatever, I probably am just lame. I don’t know what made me think I could do this.

In an effort to make me comfortable, she asks, “What happened?” She caresses my knuckles. That’s more of the same. I’ll get right on that.

This feels like beating my head against a wall, but I have to try again. “My mom was a drunk.” The words come out strained. I remember saying similar shit just to watch her expression change. Now that I’m not…

I turn away from her. Maybe she’ll take the hint. The porch light’s on at the neighbor’s. The girls are probably out trying to score with Roger again. I wonder if they plan to double up or play the boyfriend swapping game. Chicks are so messed up.

And on that cheery note, I get to talk about the most twisted bitch of all. “She was a way more interested in booze and pills than she was me.” What an admission. “I spent about half of my childhood being bounced from one relative’s house to another. I used to call that ‘relative hopping’ because that sounded flip, like I didn’t care. It made me seem like something I wasn’t.”

I wish we were still on the porch. I could use another cup of coffee.

Yeah, boo-hoo. I need to quit crying and just do my time. It’s probably sad this feels that way, but does.

“Where I spent my time was a matter of whoever had room for me, whoever would put up with me. Mom would take me back when there was no one else.” Tossing in a, “That always went so well,” sort of helps. It’s amazing how a little sarcasm’ll do that.

What I want is a cigarette. I should just get out of the car and burn one. It’d make me feel better.

I don’t.

“She had a different guy every time. You can imagine. Most of them treated me like I was an inconvenience. Just like Mom.” I get closer to my point and things get worse. My hands tremble. I clench my fists to keep them still. “But there was one who actually seemed to like me. He was nice.”

What I say is almost sentimental. My voice isn’t. I clear my throat, hoping to sound a little less like a psychotic Janis Joplin and more like myself, then I pick up where I left off, slathering on the saccharin, “He brought me candy and played games with me. I thought he was really sweet.”

I have to stop. Just thinking about this bullshit makes me want to rabbit. It takes me a few to work up the nerve to add, “Until he wasn’t.” And that’s enough of that. B. should be able to fill in
what’s missing.

Her silence is a good sign. Or it starts off feeling that way, but then it just drags. She’s not facing me anymore. Her hands are both resting at the bottom of the steering wheel. She’s looking at them, waiting on me. And I don’t have the slightest clue what to say next.

I turn away to stare at the car in front of us. It’s strange. I want to be straight with her now, but I’m not sure how. I almost wish she’d say something stupid. If she’d ask another of those useless little questions designed to persuade me to talk, I’d have an excuse to go off. That’d make this easy. I could be an ass. Snide, irritable, priggish… But now…?

People are way more comfortable couching this crap in metaphors, cryptic doubletalk and colorful euphemisms. I can’t really say anything else without spinning it. Or I could just tell her a dirty joke.

Yeah, that’d be helpful. I wonder if she’s heard the one about the janitor and the priest.

Or here’s another solution, I could try owning up to how things were. That’d be different. Otherwise I’m stuck. I can’t really tell her about Alicia without telling her about…

“Look, B., with stuff like this…it doesn’t so much matter what happened. What matters is how we take it,” I say. What a great recovery. Except that I’m getting ahead of myself. I need to back up so she’ll understand.

“This wasn’t as bad as it sounds. It scared me at first, I mean…of course, but then I just felt stupid. He used me. I felt like I’d been played.” I get that out and reach for door handle. This is going to make me crazy if I don’t do something. “But I guess it wasn’t just that. I was ashamed too, like maybe somehow I’d asked for it.” I open the door. “I thought it was my fault.”

Taking my hand, she asks, “Where are you going?”

I reply, “I’m dying for a smoke.” It’d be nice if she’d just cut me some slack, but that might be too much to hope for. I’m halfway out of the car and she’s hanging on.

She doesn’t let go. I already got the ‘no smoking in the car speech,’ so… Now she says, “It’s fine. Just roll the window down.” Wonder what’s up with that.

I sit back and shut my door. It takes me a few to get settled. I have to remember which pocket my cigarettes were in, roll the window down and get one lit. While I’m screwing with that, I mumble, “God, I don’t even remember the bastard’s name. I think it was Carl. But whatever, there were so many. Who could keep track?”

What hurts most about this has almost nothing to do with my so-called childhood. Anyone could say the same shit about me now. And I’d be plastered too if wasn’t for B. The only real difference between me and dear old Mom is that I was never dumb enough to get saddled with a kid. And that…

Part of that’s on Carl, or Clyde, or Cal, or Cary or whatever-the-hell the bastard’s name was.

I want to call this. Maybe I could change the subject?

Nice thought, but I have no clue how.

No. I really can’t, so I dig a little deeper. “I got hurt. Typical kid shit. I scraped my knee and he tried to help. Or that’s what I thought he was doing. I didn’t understand. Things got out of hand.
And Mom was passed out, so…” I bite my lip. Here’s the part that really sucks. I was so goddamned gullible. “I just wanted him to like me. That’s the real reason it happened.”

That hurt.

I take a drag and blow the smoke out the window. It’s a good excuse not to face her. “He…” I’m fresh out of euphemisms, but the gesture works just fine. It’s either that or…

Whoever came up with ‘confession’s good for the soul’ was probably never molested.

“I was scared, so I ran. I locked myself in the bathroom and didn’t come out till morning.” That sounds way too familiar, but she doesn’t say a word. This is pointless. It’s ancient history. I’m over it. All except for…

And that’s just too pathetic for words. I give up. I can’t finish. Hot air blows in through the vents. I don’t see how she’s not sweltering. My face and hands are chilly, but the rest of me…

When I glance at the dash, she goes for the controls, turning the blower off. I guess she hadn’t noticed.

This is so sad. I wish she’d do something, but we’re both locked in. She’s waiting on me, being patient, giving me space, going for that ‘understanding’ vibe… She’s doing all the right things and I’m…

I just had to dredge this up. But what else could I do? Normally, I’d have to be in a really shitty space to even go here. Now I’m just kind of stuck. I have to figure out how to say what I need to without sharing the rest.

Truth is, it scared the hell out of me. All I could come up with was that he was sick. I thought I might get sick. I didn’t know how anything worked, so thought he’d peed, but it didn’t feel or smell right. It was too… That seems so stupid now, but not really. With the kind of skeazy guys Mom brought around…

I wanted to wash up, but I could hear him. The last thing I wanted was to be in the tub. I kept thinking he’d pop the lock and…

He never did. I used a washcloth to wipe most of it off except for what was in my hair. That was hopeless. It was such a tiny place. Something kind of snapped that night as I listened to him fumble around. My mind ran riot over all of the…

I know I’m not the only little girl to spend a night huddled in a box. Hell, that image is practically a pop culture staple. The boxes may be different…under the bathroom sink, in a closet, beneath the floor…and the classic under the bed…but it’s all the same.

I’m probably not the only one to come up with a weird phobia over something like this either. I bet there are a lot of claustrophobics. That’d be normal. But me…I just can’t be normal.

“T’m practically a poster child for safe sex,” I whisper and shrug, knowing that she won’t have a clue. The double meaning hits me a second too late. “I mean, besides the obvious.” Yeah, who wouldn’t want a kid like me? But that’s not the point. “I don’t know. I just think its weird how that worked out. All of those things got mixed together. It’s all the same to me.”

She stammers, “Huh?”

I have to look. Her window’s open. She’s sitting with her back to the door. Well, that explains how
she’s not burning up, but the rest is just…

She’s actually blushing. Confusion’s expected, but… She hangs her head. Unbelievable. How’s she —?

Uh, well…I guess that fits. The B. I first met would’ve turned twelve dazzling shades of red over any of this shit.

So, there’s some of her left? It’s hard for me to see that now after…but okay, whatever, I’m over it. I might even think it was cute if I didn’t feel like…

Getting hit by a car was easier.

Alright, so…time to salvage this mess. This might actually mean something to her, so I clear things up, “If it’s not wrapped in latex, I won’t touch it.” Her brow crinkles. I give her another moment to connect the dots. When that doesn’t go so well, I add, “Not the whole package, just the…” She fills in the second ‘package.’ I should really have a camera with me for stuff like this. Her expression’s precious.

Not to ruin a good thing, but—

“That goes for everything, oral sex too. But I usually won’t even go there. That’s just not something I do unless the guy really means something to me. And so few of them do. That’s almost never been an issue.”

“But what about…?” Her voice is really weak. Now we’re getting somewhere. I pencil the ‘me’ in for her. That’s where she was headed. I can’t see her arriving at dental dams without some serious help, so…

It hurts a little, but I admit the truth, “I’d like to tell you that it didn’t bother me, but it was a serious stretch. I didn’t know if I could do it. It actually scared me. I didn’t want to lead you on.”

“And now?”

I already have an answer for that. I don’t even have to think about it. “I love everything about you, B. It wasn’t a stretch for long. I got over it.”

“You got over it?” She has this cute little grin on her face. She’s still sheepish, but that question…

For a rerun, that’s pretty dangerous stuff. I don’t think she’d ever get over the idea that I tolerate oral sex just to make her happy. “I’m really over it,” I reply. I stare at the car in front of us. It’s funny. I put on my best wolfish grin for just a sec and then hang my head. My hair hides my face. It’s a good act.

But it’s mostly not an act. I’m the one who’s blushing now. I can practically taste her. She’s still wearing the same jeans. It’d be so easy to…

If that wasn’t so damned hard. Today was a complete nightmare. She has to be thinking—

“You love everything about me?” Or maybe she isn’t. That much is good, but she really needs to get over repeating what I say. Especially when she’s just fishing.

I turn to look at her. Bet I can make that smirk go away. “Well, everything except for that self righteous streak you’ve got going on.” Yeah. Made her pout. This is just too easy. “But even that’s kind of cute sometimes.” Not to mention, fun. “It depends on how preachy you get.”
“Hey!”

“Mostly, I just find it funny.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

My smoke’s a total loss. That’s okay. I ditch it. This is so much better. One moment I’m telling her about one of the worst experiences of my life, the next we’re laughing and trading barbs. And there’s nothing fake about any of it. This is so rare. I have to enjoy it for another moment. Basking can be good.

I reach out and touch her lightly under her chin. When I lift up, she faces me. And the next moment she’s kissing me, like she really means it, like I really matter. She actually cares. That’s a beautiful thing. I think I get why I love her.
B.’s holding my hand. We’re walking together. We round the corner by the chili place and the wind dies down. It’s easier to hear her when she says, “But yeah, I think we have a real shot if we can put all that behind us.”

We’re almost home and I really, really, really want to be there. I’m tempted to pick her up and just go for it. I want to be warm and safe in bed, holding her. I long to feel her body pressed against mine. I want hear her whisper, instead of almost shouting. I need to feel her breath caress my ear as she talks, not this bitter wind.

I don’t really even need anything else. Just that’d be fine.

Boy, don’t I sound—?

“I really like you, Faith,” she says. “Even with all that other stuff, I guess I always have. Or I wanted to. It hurt. And you really pissed me off, but—” The pause is funny. I remember this. She’s so cute. Finally, she adds, “Noticing a theme?”

She’s looking right at me, waiting for me to snark, “Drawn to the bad?”

“Not exactly a positive theme,” she replies like clockwork, but her smile’s so sweet…

A little sap can be nice. I wish I could let myself get sucked in. This was so good. But I can’t shake the feeling that something awful’s about to happen. I try to shrug it off. I play my part. I have no choice but to think that it isn’t. I have to point out, “You do know that you can’t save us, right?”

But we’re not alone. And if my hunch is right, that’s only going to get worse. I recognize the older black guy who’s huddled in a guard shack behind the chili place. It’s the same guy from the graveyard. And he gives me the same wicked case of the creeps. But still I nod to him before I say, “Not all of us, at least. It’s not the healthiest thing to even try.”

He’s not supposed to notice us. That’s how this went down. But now he turns to me, meets my eyes and says, “I don’t think Buffy’s the problem. It’s her.” His face changes as he speaks. It isn’t the old man who’s looking at me now. It’s Wood.

Completely unaffected, Buffy follows the script, “I know.” She’s not really here. She doesn’t know what’s happening.

I guess it’s good she doesn’t see the hatred in his eyes.

But he’s not indifferent to her. He actually looks right at her when he says, “I wouldn’t count on anything that bitch says. Give it few months. She’ll walk away and leave you hanging too. That’s all she’s good for.”

I blink. When my eyes open, he’s strung up by his neck from a rafter in the little shack. His head’s wrapped in duct tape. The guard uniform is gone. All he has on is a pair of blood soaked red shorts and a grubby white tee-shirt. The insides of his thighs are crusted with blood.

I need to be sick, but I can’t. I’m not in control. I wait to blink again, praying that he’ll go away.
And when my eyelids flutter, I actually catch a break. He does. The guard sits there, normal as you please. And he’s not interested in us at all. Something down the alley across the street has his attention. He leans forward, straining to see what it is.

I should follow his example, but instead I ask right on cue, “So what part of that was hard to understand?”

Why’d I say that? It was so unnecessary. God, I need to—

“None of it, I guess,” she replies.

I should—

The guard’s eyes are bugged out. He’s on the right page. Or close. He’s still not running. We should all be—

I’m frozen. Locked in. And my heart’s somewhere around my shoes. I’m having one those empty, vacant ‘oh shit’ moments. Holding my breath, hanging on, waiting for my world to come apart…

But her hand’s in mine and part of me feels happy. I walk like I haven’t got a care in the world. On the surface, I’m contented. Underneath, I need to scream.

Her heels clicking against the pavement, like the second hand of a watch. Counting down…

It’s killing me. I can’t make my voice work. I can’t—

We need to move!

The thicket we cut through to get home is just right there. Another three yards and we’ll be okay. We can make it if we run.

We need to—!

My arm yanks tight. She whips me around. I don’t know how I keep hold. My shoulder wrenches and pops as my feet leave the ground. The backs of my legs smack something solid. My head snaps forward. It feels like she grabbed hold of a passing train.

My eyes are shut. I don’t remember closing them. I’m just glad I did. Shit hits my head, my arms, my back, my legs…

I lose track. But the random flashes of pain fade after a brief eternity and I find enough control to lift my head.

The guard shack’s a pile of kindling, cracked boards and twisted metal. And there was a fence on that one side.

But we’re not—

The shack’s not that far away. I should be…

We should be in the next county.

The guard springs to his feet. He was buried in the pile. I’m amazed he’s moving. Moving’s right. His hair could be on fire and he’d—

My right boot touches down. Whatever it hits makes a hollow metallic thud. Funny, I hear that.
Nothing else gets through. A car horn blares. I look down just as my calves slam into the windshield of a white truck.

Something gouges my side. The guard runs into the middle of the street as I spin.

My free hand touches something. No clue what, but I latch hold. It’s something smooth and cold…something metal and it feels pretty solid. A thin part, like a wire or—cuts into the side of my middle finger as my arms pull tight. We stop, but only just barely. The snapping pressure on my shoulders and arms—

I groan or…almost drowning out B. when she says, “Oh, I dunno. I’d say she’s doing alright.”

But it’s not really B. Or it is, but it’s not my B. She’s stretched out somewhere between me and whatever this thing is that has us.

The other B.—half of my impromptu, out-of-context pep squad…who lean casually against the back of a red Dodge parked across from us—

This is half-past twisted and getting worse. The car horn sounds muffed. Everything’s—

I’m not even gonna think about Willow. She’s—

I’m not sure—

Maybe I’m just screwed in the head, but she looks like the Ice Queen, Winter Witch, White Witch…or whatever else from every classic fairytale on the planet. The only thing spoiling the look is her clothes. She should be dressed like some ren-faire reject. But wardrobe really blew it this time. She’s wearing a blue sweater, jeans and white tennies.

That’s trippy, but Buffy’s even worse. The last time I saw that face was in a mirror. The black tank top and brown pleather pants she wears…I picked out. The red lipstick—that was me too. She’d never wear that shade. Her hair’s not really fixed either, not like she’d do it. I just picked the tangles out, clipped it back, slapped on a little war paint and went. I was kind of in a hurry that night.

If this is some sort of headtrip—major points to the prick who thought it up—it’s totally working. Seeing that face makes me feel more like shit than I already did. And that’s quite a feat.

Hearing her defend me…

My B…her hand slips in mine. I almost let go of the metal thing, but she clamps down.

My hand pops. She may’ve broken it, but that doesn’t matter. I’m glad she did. I want to stop this, but losing her isn’t an option.

Spectator B. says, “Yeah, that looks like it’s gonna suck.”

I have no clue what she’s going on about. All I’ve seen so far is her and—

“You’re not seriously buying this act?” Wood taunts. I can’t see him, but he’s close. “That’s how things were with us at first too. She cared so much.” He has to be somewhere around this truck. I want to find him, but instead, I look up.

Judging from B.’s expression—the one I’m clinging to for dear life—we’re screwed. I peer past her, hoping I can tell what’s got us. The angle’s bad. All I see are feet. There are lots of things with
This thing with feet says, “It’s touching to see you girls getting along so well.” If the lugged soles of his boots didn’t give him away, the metallic rasp of his voice does. It’s Sparky. I should’ve guessed. And if I’d had a moment’s—

“Why didn’t you let go?” Willow asks.

Uh…

I wish I could answer. But I, umm…

She’s seriously freaking me out. Being this close to her makes me feel like I’m standing next to a power transformer. And not one of those wimpy things they mount to the poles. The kind they have in the relay stations outside of town. She’s just plain scary. All of the fine hairs on my body prickle, my skin tingles…

It’s messed up. And that’s only part of it. Sparky’s trying to draw and quarter me. Or draw and half me? Something like that.

My arms shake with the strain. But it’s not right. This only lasted a few seconds. But that’s—

Anyway, Willow isn’t helping.

And like I don’t have enough to deal with, spectator Buffy chimes in, asking the same damned thing, “Yeah, why didn’t you just let go, Faith?” I kick, looking for something to snag hold of, but my legs are— “It would’ve been so much easier. You could’ve dropped to the ground and walked away. No big.”

What is this? Are we gonna have a moment? I know…let’s all share our feelings. That’d be—

How ’bout not? I’m a little busy now. This kick is taking for-goddamned-ever. It’s like I’m stuck in molasses. Or a rerun of The Bionic Woman. Can I put this off till the next time I get off? Now’s not really a moment I want to savor.

But somehow hearing the question from her makes it different. I still can’t answer, but I can’t brush her off either. How do I explain that it makes me—?

My boot finally strikes metal. I get that I had to try, but that couldn’t have been more pointless. And I’m still stuck, waiting for my legs to…

Her question’s hanging too. And even considering why makes me panic. How should I answer? What would she believe?

Can I even answer? I try to say ‘I don’t know,’ but Wood has to get in another shot.

He says something about me just ‘doing what comes natural.’ And I guess if I’m honest, he might have a point.

But I miss most of that because Willow talks right over him, “It’d leave a great big gaping hole in your chest, wouldn’t it?”

It’d be great if she’d just say it. I might have a chance to deal. But she doesn’t. It’s the same story as before. She’s not really talking. The line’s even kind of stale. She said something close when she wasn’t talking about that other thing.
The funny part…I feel better after she says it. Or doesn’t say it. That’s just—

But someone else understands.

I understand. Yeah, needing to fight was probably part of it. I don’t take shit like this lying down. But that’s not it. This is when it happened. This was the moment I really knew. I couldn’t let go. I knew that it’d be like cutting a piece of myself off if I did. I had to stay with B. What it might cost me didn’t even enter in. I didn’t care.

Spectator Buffy looks me over. It takes her a long, uncomfortable moment to size me up.

I catch a little slack. My head tilts up toward my B. as the other B. goes off, “Look, Wood, I’m sorry for what happened to you. I really am. It sucks. But sticking your head out during a shit storm —” from the pause, I’m guessing there’s a face “—you should expect to get some on ya.”

She’s not the only one. I still can’t believe she’s defending me. “Whatever else was up really doesn’t…” Sparky picks a fine time to yank our arms “…matter.”

And time picks the same time to unglitch. “You should’ve stayed in your bunk and you know it,” she concludes as I check out what’s ‘gonna suck.’ I’ve been clinging to a goddamned bicycle wheel, like that’s gonna do a damn bit of good.

Yeah.

We’re so screwed. The bike’s mounted upside-down to the roof of one huge boat of a sport-ute. Morons. Shit makes no sense. They get eight gallons to the mile driving the family assault vehicle to the—

I’m the moron. While I’m on that, bad things go down. As the rim ovals, spokes pop and bend. I don’t let go quick enough and my hand gets folded in the stupid thing. It does suck. The metal cracks when it folds. Sparky surges forward, ripping my hand free and open.

I end up like the teddy bear that kid with the glasses had in Peter Pan, dangling along for the ride. As the streetlights at the back of the parking lot whiz past, everything goes back to normal. The car alarm blares. And that stupid guard gets his shit together. He’s finally headed the right way.

I swing around and reach up, hoping for a handhold. I find the belt of B.’s coat and latch onto the knot.

Wonder what he’ll tell the cops. Should be goo—

A tree limb whacks my shins.

This isn’t—

Air whooshes past me the wrong way. My stomach’s in my throat.

I’m falling. And my hand—

The stop should rattle my teeth. I brace for it, but—

My legs don’t even flex when I land. I’m in an alley. I don’t even feel like I fell. I’m fine. My legs are fine. It’s everything else—

I know exactly where I am, but it’s not anything about where I am that gives it away. I recognize stuff, but—
It’s not Buffy either…or the fact that she’s crouched over someone.

My heart’s got the right idea. It runs rabbit. I want to join it. Instead, I stand frozen, numb…like an idiot, repeating the same three pointless words, “I didn’t know.”

The stake I held clatters against the concrete. The sound sends a chill down my spine. Ants crawl over my skin. The tension breaks enough for me to—

As I turn, Allan Finch says, “You people are kidding yourselves if you think she’ll ever be anything more that a filthy, stinking, mindless animal.”

Animal?

What is it with you guys?

But he might have a point. I froze up like one. The flight response takes over and I bolt like one. My heart just got there first.

B. talks right over him, repeating the same stuff I remember, telling him not to move. But when she notices I’ve gone, she shouts, “Faith, wait!” a little too soon.

I don’t. I know I should. I know that’s—

Leaving early doesn’t change much. I sprint down the alley the same way we did. I dodge the same old trash. The sirens are just a little farther away. And she’s not with me, trying to talk sense. When I don’t stop, she reverts, saying, “I need a rag…something to…” But I barely hear her over my lungs laboring to suck in the same stale air…

The rattle of chain link as I hop the fence…

My feet pounding the pavement…

Not that it matters now, but I was right. What B. didn’t get is that the moment they figured this out, it’s gonna be game over. If something didn’t change, they’d use this to take us both out. The powers in this town weren’t stupid. They were just waiting—

But something did happen. I betrayed her.

As I duck around the first corner, Willow shouts, “Faith!” from somewhere behind me.

I glance over my shoulder and run headlong into that other guy. Hell if I can even remember his name.

He grabs my upper arms, looks me straight in the eye and says, “She’s a coldblooded killer. That’s all she’ll ever be.”

He’s right. My hands are sticky with his blood. I want to wipe it off, but I—

This guy wasn’t like Finch. That fucker was dirty. This guy’s just some scientist. The mayor wasn’t even sure he’d be a problem, but what he knew was inconvenient. It was the possibility that got him…

I was only doing what I was told. I—

Turning, I jerk my arms away, push past him and run. This isn’t the way I went, but I hang a left at the next intersection. A long alleyway reaches between two vacant warehouses. It isn’t very wide
and there’s a bunch of crap blocking my path. I weave past trash heaps, skids, a dumpster…

What I needed—why I—

None of that makes one single bit of difference.

The fact is, I did. And I didn’t care that there were people who loved him. I didn’t know. I still don’t. I’ve never had the courage to check. He probably had kids. And they had kids. And they all miss him. I caused them the same misery I—

Why can’t I even remember his name?

There’s some chick at the end of the alley. I’m running right at her. I have no—

While I’m checking her out, someone snatches hold of my arm. I whip around and draw back. I can’t stop.

Angel doesn’t even try to avoid it. I slug him and he doubles over. His hands go to his thighs. It takes him a sec, but when he recovers enough to look up and say, “So am I,” I couldn’t feel more like shit.

Or that’s what I think until I glance over my shoulder. That chick at the end of the alley…I’m pretty sure it’s B. Her hair threw me. It’s at least two shades too dark. But that could just be the light. Or maybe it’s the way she’s done it up. She almost never wears it back like that.

I find a nice piece of trash to examine while Angel goes on, “I’ve been called all of those things and more. But you can’t let that effect you. You’ve done some real good.”

So, either Dingoes are playing the Bronze or some kid lost their dog. The paper’s too far gone for me to tell which. I move on to the next ruined scrap as he lifts himself up, still talking, “Willow’s right. You need to get control. If you don’t, this thing’s going to eat you alive.”

Talking sense doesn’t gain him much this time. I’ve got no clue about most of that and we’re not gonna get into it. I can’t even face him. He’s here again, trying to help me. He’s always trying to help me. I’m like his pet project. I have been for—

Fuck, I dunno…going on six years now he’s been trying to steer me right. He’s been like a brother to me. And how do I pay him back?

I glance at B. and turn away. Yeah, that’s her. She closed in enough for me to—

Just how many faces can one person wear in a dream? My skin tingles, but I shrug it off.

I’ve got so little reason to tweak. This isn’t the same B. I saw back in the alley. And she wasn’t the same as the B. whose hand I held in the parking lot…or the B. who was leaning against the car. It’s crazy.

But none of that means a damned thing. I can’t face any of them now. Why didn’t I see this before? It’s only the oldest story in the book.

The pressure behind my eyes makes me feel like my head’s gonna burst. But I’m not gonna cry. I refuse to. A lump hangs in my throat. It doesn’t budge when I swallow. That’s as useful as anything else I’ve done. I dart past Angel, back the way I came. I don’t care what happens. They can have me.
B. wraps her legs around me. The strain and the pressure on my ribs throw me off. I’m back where I was. Funny, I still hear Angel calling my name. But that fades as she pulls me up. We’re towed through next batch of branches. They whack my legs so hard I have to clench my jaw to hold in a yelp.

So much for not crying. My eyes leak as we’re batted around like a piñata. The cold makes them sting. But they’re nothing compared with my legs. I try to lift them, but they just get smacked around. It’s useless. I can’t avoid this. After a few seconds or minutes, or…hell, I don’t know. I have no clue what’s up with them. They’re one big burning…

But I guess I know what happened now. Above my legs, B.’s pretty much got me covered which means…

She’s still trying to protect me. I really wish she wouldn’t. Things might’ve turned out different if she’d just worried about herself.

Sparky doesn’t even want her. It’s me the bastard’s after. She should just let go. She could probably get away if he had to double back for me. But that’s not like her.

She adjusts her grip. Following her cues, I grab hold of her wrist. The sharp pain’s a solid clue that my hand is broken. Like I care.

I keep expecting to get dropped—hoping it’ll happen—but it doesn’t.

This is about damage. He sticks to the small stuff. Nothing hits hard enough to even threaten to tear us apart. A big limb would. That’s just a fact. After a while, the constant battering just gets monotonous.

That’s what this has all been about. Whoever’s doing this is trying to wear me down. The moment one thing lets up, I jump to the next. It’s been non-stop fun and games.

And to think I thought this was amateurish.

Well, the first part was, but whoever’s doing the rest is a master. They’ve played on all my fears and doubts. They’ve put me through…

Yeah. It’s been a total blast.

What’s worse, I feel better having her with me. I’m relieved that, whatever happens, we’ll be together. In spite of the pain, the contact is comforting.

And that feeling makes me sick. I can’t shake it. It’s part of the memory. I didn’t know then what I know now.

As the beating lets up, I hear trains screech in the distance. I can’t see much except for B.’s stomach, but guess we’re getting closer to—

Huh…

This was planned.

She slips away and I drop like a rock.

Whatever I crash into makes one hell of a noise. The clinking glass and clattering crap goes well with the splat.
I’m not alone. I roll half on top of someone else. We fall again. Before we even hit the ground, the rage takes hold. I feel—

Hot pressure burns inside my skull. My muscles feel like coiled springs. Ready to bust loose and—

And again…I know exactly where I am. Another alley. I swear, I spend half my life—

It figures I’d end up in this particular alley, what with Willow…

Desperation chews at my heels…if I slow down…

But I don’t have to do shit. Just deal. Deal with being on my feet seconds after that fall.

I barely feel it. Tomorrow I will, but now—

Now I have to deal with seething…screaming, “You’re gonna die!” in Angel’s face.

Deal with shoving him to the ground.

Deal with kicking him when he tries to get up.

Deal with that cheap-ass move.

Tomorrow’s not gonna—

But tomorrow does happen. It’s a total bitch. Trust me. I was there.

Angel isn’t like me. He hits the wall. I grab him and yell, “You hear me?” kicking him under the chin. He’s got this real Yoda complex. All ‘do or do not’…discipline and training. I get a second shot in straight to his ribs. B.’s the same way. They’re a couple of regular workaholics.

Me? I just knock the piss out of stuff. Avoid the worst, look for openings and…

He’s giving me way too many. I could back off, but—

This isn’t working. I’m just too—

I grab him and toss him at the wall, shouting, “You don’t know what evil is!”

I need to think. The easiest way is to go with the flow. Control the emotions. Work around them.

Deal with shouting, “I’m bad!” as I wail on him. Punch after punch and he just lets me through. I lose track. Rain falls. “Fight back!” I demand. Don’t you do this to me, you bastard!

I can’t deal. He’s not doing shit!

I had this all planned. Grab Wesley, rough him up a little, just enough to scare him…break a few fingers. No big.

Angel should’ve come charging in to save the day. I thought he’d have no choice. He’d see what I’d done and do what he does. He’s the big hero.

I’m all out of options. I could let the Council catch up. Wouldn’t that be fun?

Yeah, no…I’ll pass. If they’d just man up, it’d be…

But they’re way too flippin’ British for that. I’ve had enough of their games.
There’s nothing for me here. I don’t have a life. They have lives. No one gives a rat’s ass what I…

I can’t afford a moment’s peace and—

Fuck!

Stop! Just stop!

Angel grabs me. He wrenches my shoulder. “Nice try, Faith,” he says as he shoves me away.

I don’t get it. I tumble across the pavement. He’s coming after me.

Maybe he’s—

He’s not! That’s not how this goes down.

He says, “I know what you want.” I didn’t get this then. When he gives me another shot, I play right in.

Now it makes all kinds of sense. He’s screwing with me. I leave myself open and he sends me flying.

As I smack the asphalt and tumble, my chin throbs. I see stars. My ears ring. My head feels two sizes too big, but—

I know he told me he was done. That he wasn’t gonna do it. I wait for a capper that doesn’t come.

Getting clocked by him sucks, but I should be on my feet again, in his face. I’m twice as—

“I don’t believe that you appreciate the problems you’ve caused.”

A piece of concrete gouges my cheek as I tilt my head up and open my eyes. That wasn’t Angel.

The brick wall that comes vaguely into focus isn’t much help. But I’m not soaked anymore and my legs are toast. Good bet I’ve moved on.

What really cinches it is B. Right next to me, moving away fast, she replies, “Yeah, sorry to screw up your plans.” Between breaths and light thuds, she continues, “I’ve been known to do that.”

Something crashes. Sparky growls. “I get that it’s insensitive.” I tilt my head a little more, looking almost straight up. She evades and tumbles, finally finishing her thought, “But I just can’t help myself, y’know?”

Well, not so much ‘straight up’ as into the center of the room. I traveled about two thousand miles, but I haven’t moved much. And the way I feel, I’m not sure I can. I catch sight of Sparky.

Okay, well…I see two of him, both blurry. Anyway, I’m back where I started—in that place—the warehouse. There’s no hole in the floor, but—

I lose track when he rushes the corner to my left, seething, “You silly little girl—”

B. laughs as she whips past me. It almost feels like she brushes me. It’s just the wind. The hole in the wall’s right there, at my feet. Why’d she pass me? She could’ve bailed. She could be—

She’s on my right, hauling ass, still goading him, “Me? I’m not the one dressed up for Halloween. You do get that it’s March, right?”
Jesus Christ, B…enough of the small talk. Please, just run!

She doesn’t. As Sparky stops right in front of me, she asks, “What’re you supposed to be, anyway?”

I stare at the toes of his boots. This close they’re almost in focus. He says, “You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?” Obviously tracking her, he pivots on the balls of his feet. “You’ve created an imbalance that can only end one way.” He stops, so she must’ve stopped too.

She should keep going. Engaging him by replying, “Huh?” really isn’t the thing to do. She could probably lure him from in front of the hole. She has a chance. She could still get out of here.

Fuck!

Talk about ‘a chance.’ She might stand one if I wasn’t so goddamned useless.

Moving my legs is pointless. I was right. I’m done. It only gets me—

“You raised an army,” he says, rushing her.

Something’s cutting into my knee. I can’t—if I fold my legs, it just—

You know what? Screw it. I’m pathetic.

“An army?” she exclaims as she vaults over him. “You mean the—?” Her question’s cut short when he tags her. She’s moving with the punch, so…

It’s hard to tell how bad it is. But she hits the ground, sliding right at me.

She grinds to a halt and I shout, “Go!” Or try. It comes out more of a squeak. Yeah, I’m a complete waste.

She’s not going anywhere. Not that I expect her to. I see it in her eyes before she says, “I’m not leaving you.”

She rolls, picking herself up on her hands and knees. Sparky must be waiting. I turn to look just before she launches herself.

Giving her a moment to breathe costs him. I miss most of it, but what do see…looks suspiciously like her ducking his punch and clobbering him. He confirms my suspicions by flying past me out the hole. Jerk almost hits me.

She comes to stop. Go figure. Her hand’s on her hip.

It takes him a sec, but after a few he calls in through the hole, “Yes, I mean your ridiculous girls.” Maybe he had to cough up a few teeth. “Don’t tell me you expected that to end well.” Can’t hurt to dream.

He flies over me. But she stands her ground long enough to say, “It’s not like I had a choice.” He almost reaches her before she lunges sideways.

He stays with her, not more than a few steps behind, still running his goddamn mouth, “There’s always a choice.”

Even trying to brush the crap from my face is useless. I rest my cheek on my hand as she replies, “Yeah, the end.”
He cuts her off. She tries to dive underneath him, but I from the sound of things, I don’t think it works out. B. says though a chuckle, “Y’know, curtains, the big finish…” Even pinned down, she’s the same old B. When he doesn’t respond, she gets indignant, “Oh, for crying out loud! And you think I’m challenged?”

Sparky smacks B. The crack makes me flinch. But it doesn’t set her back much. It only takes her a few seconds to snark, “You’ve heard of an apocalypse before, haven’t you?”

I feel a little better when he grunts. She must’ve taken a poke too.

“I wasn’t the only one to play the army card. The First brought its own army to the party. We just did what we had to.” The ‘whatever’ couldn’t be clearer from her tone. She’s given up. That last shot obviously did it. If only she’d run…

I wish I could at least see her face, but I’m stuck with a view of his back. I’m sure her expression’s precious.

She draws in a deep breath, but he chokes her off. She struggles to say, “You think—” coughing “—it’s bad now?” He must let up because her voice gets stronger. “Things could be so much worse.”

Okay…maybe not. I’m not sure I can take much of this. This is… Things only get worse from here. She didn’t run.

“Perhaps, but you’ve only prolonged the inevitable.”

Thing is, I could swear that as Sparky gets preachy, B. stands up.

“You’ve created chaos.”

It’s gotta be wishful thinking. She moves right through him. My eyes are obviously useless too. As I shut the stupid things, something next to my head crunches. I—

Huh?

I open my eyes and see feet. It’s a pretty safe bet that Sparky doesn’t paint his toenails. Or if he does, he probably wouldn’t pick that particular shade of pink.

B. sits down. Folding her legs, she lifts my head onto her lap. “It’s okay. This’ll be over soon,” she says as she rubs the grime from my cheek. Her brow scrunches like she’s considering something. She starts to turn, asking, “You don’t want to watch, right? This is more of a ‘listen’ sort of thing.”

I shake my head.

I get that we’ve all got an agenda. But I swear, you’d think this bastard would get sick of his own voice. “Right now a significant number of your girls remain at large.” I am. “Are you naïve enough to believe they’re going door-to-door selling coo—?”

The B. who holds me says through a giggle, “But I dunno…you might want to see this.” She twists just enough so I can look.

From Sparky’s pose…curled up fetal and moaning and her sudden mobility—the other her—my guess, she bludgeoned the family jewels.

Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy. But that isn’t—
I’m not even gonna go there. Instead, I ask, “Since when do you fight dirty?”

“Oh, sometimes,” she says through a bashful grin. “I don’t know. There are just certain people who bring out the worst in me, y’know?”

Do I ever…

She blocks my view again. I turn my head, paying attention to her, trying to ignore—

“They sow discord. They pit the public against you,” he rants. Something wooden cracks and she groans. “You delude yourself to believe you have any chance at all.” He sounds completely unaffected. Not that it’d be obvious through the distortion. “Even the armies of men turn against you. Be assured, your days are numbered.”

In the background she’s in trouble. Part of me wants to look, but—

“Those petty human affairs are nothing compared to the effect you’ve had on the preternatural,” he says.

She resists, but it’s really no contest. He’s just biding his time like he did with me. I can imagine what he said then.

I won’t do it. I won’t make the same mistake twice.

What he says now…

“Your little stunt has caused creatures to amass that would normally be solitary.”

It makes a little too much sense. And that’s just irritating.

And the pauses…?

This asshole’s flair for the dramatic really is bordering on tedious.

“Congratulations. You’ve inspired the underworld to cooperate.” There’s another pause before he asks, “Do you understand exactly what that means?”

I want to think ‘more drama.’ I’d love to write him off, but Kako’s what’s really on my mind. It means things like her.

But I still don’t see how that’s anyone’s fault. We’re just trying to deal too. If this fucker has a suggestion, I wish he’d quit playing around and make it. This bullshit of ‘both ends against the middle’ really ain’t cutting it.

My eyes drift shut as he says, “Even a simpleton…”

Her snapping, “Hey!” makes them pop back open. Even as thrashed as I am, she gets a chuckle. Shame, Sparky’s the only one who seems immune. He doesn’t miss a beat. “…such as yourself should be able to see how this ends.”

Funny, even after all of that, she still has attitude. “So, besides being a total jerk…” she gasps “…how do you fit in?” It’s pretty obvious he has her pinned again. Her voice is weak. She struggles for breath before she asks, “Concerned citizen?” I couldn’t love her more. I grin at the B. who holds me as the other B. suggests, “Lemme guess, you represent a new upstart group: People for the Ethical Treatment of Vamp—?”
It’s obvious from the clap and how she cuts off that he hit her. I want him dead.

“I’m the one who intends to stop you,” he replies, punctuating by breaking a whole lot of shit.

The B. who’s with me mouths, “That’s it. Now don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

Or maybe she said it. Sparky the not-so human wrecking ball pretty much drowns everything out.

The rumble ends. A single board clatters onto the floor below. One final piece. Like she said, that must be it. I mumble, “I should’ve done—”

She stops me by resting her finger over my mouth and asking the obvious, “What?” Her finger slips away, brushing my chin and neck as she says, “This guy was smart. He knew that the two of us would be a handful.”

That just kind of slipped out. I have no clue how to follow it up, so…

And this is just my luck. She’s downright grumpy. “Faith, look,” she says. “Your left ankle’s broken. You have a fractured femur, a concussion, a dislocated shoulder…both of your hands are broken.” She pauses to let that sink in before she asks, “Want me to go on?”

She lifts my head from her lap and pivots onto her knees. I guess we’re leaving. I’ve been looking forward to this. But I get a temporary reprieve. She’s not done lecturing. “If anyone gets this, it’s you. You’ve seen both sides. Caring for people can make you vulnerable. It’s not your fault that he used that.”

I’m no help, but she gets me on my feet. The head rush almost takes us both down. She’s right about my ankle. It’s toast. Just shifting positions sucks, but putting weight on it to try and stop the fall—that’s a real treat.

“We’ve got this if you want to get ready,” Willow says from behind us.

“Yeah, sure, Will. Thanks,” B. says as Willow supports my left shoulder. It sucks, but I grit my teeth and bear it. I’d like to know who—

The red drapes are back. I wonder when that happened. Buffy passes through them as Willow says, “You really had us worried.”

I must be missing something. Who was worried and why?

How are you even involved? And who’s—?

Angel slips underneath my right arm, answering that last question and taking a lot of stress off of…

I can almost think straight now.

Shit.

Well, I guess he knows, so…I stammer, “I’m sorry, I—”

“It’s okay,” Angel says, brushing me off as we move steadily toward the drapes to our right. “Buffy called. She was pretty upset.”

I’m just along for the ride. No control.

Willow picks up his thought, “We just did what we do when one of our own is in trouble.”
It’s a little strange hearing that from her, but I let it slide. I’d like to know what prompted B. to make the call.

I don’t even get there. We stop at the drapes and Willow says, “The last step’s yours. We can’t help.” The pressure on my shoulder eases as she parts the draperies and steps through. All that’s behind them is a whole lot of nothing. As it swallows her, she says, “Just give in to the darkness.”

Taking hold of my sides, Angel steadies me as he turns away from his duty as a human crutch. He lets go, careful to give me time to adjust.

It’s my right femur. Putting weight on either leg’s a major problem, but the right one’s the best.

“Well, I guess this is it,” he says, glancing over his shoulder. “Take care of yourself.”

I want to say something about B., but I can’t think of how to begin. How do I even—?

He rests his hand on my shoulder and stresses, “It’s okay.” Before I can get a word in, he flits past the drapes and disappears.

Well, looks like it’s just me. No pressure. I know that hole’s behind me. We passed right by it. I’m really tempted to take a peek, but I’m not even sure I can get there.

It’s not hard to figure that Kako’s one floor down waiting. We were set up. Sparky was just the delivery boy. Why he came back is the only thing that still bugs, but I’m not gonna learn that here. And if I stick around, I might get sucked back in. It’s my turn to play punching bag.

Yeah. That’s it. I’m just gonna do what Willow said. It’d be great if it made sense, but that’s Willow for ya.

Besides, if there’s more to this than just one really wicked nightmare—and there probably is what with the pain and the—I should probably take the out. I part the drapes and limp past them half expecting to step into B.’s bedroom. I don’t. Willow’s right. It’s dark.

Now I’m supposed to ‘give in to the darkness,’ whatever the hell that means. Sounds like witchy doubletalk for ‘just chill.’

That’s kind of a tall order, but as I do my best to relax, it gets easier. The pain fades. It feels like I’m drifting, then it doesn’t. Stuff comes into focus. Arms are wrapped around me. Hands are pressed over the backs of my own, fingers laced, holding them tight. And legs…they’re tangled with mine.

B. lies behind me, clinging to me like she’s afraid I’m going to get away. The layers of fabric between us are…I can’t tell which of us has what on, but the shirt I’m wearing feels like it’s twisted around me three times.

I open my eyes. As I turn and crane my neck to get a look, she stammers, “I’m sorry. I—” Quickly gaining control, she arrives at her point, “You were hurting yourself. I had to.”

Well, that might explain part of it. It’s a funny thing though…that’s not—

My head’s surprisingly clear. I should have a million questions. I really should care about all of this, everything. But I don’t. In the dark, right here, now, in her bed, what occurs to me is really out of left field…and arguably kind of stupid. It has nothing to do with anything.

That probably just means I’m insane, but—
What’s new?

As her grip loosens, the arm and leg that are pinned beneath me still feel hard and dense. She looks soft. Her skin’s soft, but she’s like me. Over the years we’ve hardened.

And not just figuratively. Our bodies have changed. The difference isn’t huge. What most people think of as tensed, we see as relaxed. The well meant suggestions can get a little annoying, but otherwise…

None of the new girls are like us. It’s just so subtle. It took them for me to even notice. And with her…

I move with her, rolling onto my back. “There’s no need,” I say as I lift my ass up. Seeing her face makes me smile. My legs ache but nothing like they did. I straighten out my tee-shirt and shorts. Wearing clothes I don’t remember putting on is a little strange, but that’s the least of it.

I let myself down and kick back. Yeah, I’m okay. A little sore, but—

So, questions…? Looks like she’s expecting them. I hate this feeling. I remember what happened, but I’m not sure. There are too many things that don’t add up. I guess I could start by asking what day it is. That’s always fun. I could—

Yeah, she’ll get around to filling me in. What should do is say I’m sorry. But this is probably way too complicated for a simple sorry. I could try that, but—

I have no idea. I bunch my pillow up, tucking my arm beneath it. “Y’know that little voice,” I whisper, “the one that nags you when you do something wrong?”

Dealing with a guilty conscience by talking about my guilty conscience—not exactly genius, but it might be place to start.

_Huh._

No, this is good. I may be able to apologize without ever using those stupid words. I just have to find the nerve.

Her brow furrows. She twists away from me and reaches up, looking at something above the bed. She has a glass of water in her hand when I next see it. She sits just enough to take a sip and offers it to me. As I accept it, she offers helpfully, “You mean your conscience?”

It’s completely messed up. All I can think as she goes through that, is I want a place for us with real furniture. I’m sick of cleaning up spills. You’d think all this grace would count for something.

I take a drink and pass the glass back. Maybe we’ll remember this one.

Whatever, I need to stop pretending I’m a regular chick. The whole ‘nesting’ thing really isn’t me. I haven’t had a place of my own since—

“Yeah, that,” I reply, cutting myself off and getting back on track. We both kind of settle in as I explain, “I like ‘little voice’ better because it feels like that. Like those old cartoons…an angel perched on your shoulder, whispering in your ear.” She rests her head on my shoulder. It just kind of happens. And that’s pretty cool.

“That makes it sound detached,” I whisper, pausing to clear my throat. “And I think it is. It’s something we’re taught. Or mostly taught. Some of it just happens.” I snicker. “The guilt…that part
just happens. But I think some of what we feel guilty about is learned.”

I hope she gets this. It’s not exactly to the point.

I think she will. It isn’t exactly an ingenious code either.

“That can get twisted up,” I say, feeling a sheepish smile coming on. I’m damned to do anything about it, so I just let it ride. That doesn’t mean I have to face her...or that I even can. What I see through the skylights is sort of grayish and murky, but close enough—it’s dawn. Another day, another...hell, if I know.

I mumble, “My little angel got bored and flew away.” There’s no reason for me get upset, but my eyes burn anyway. This shit just sort of is. It’s an uncomfortable fact of my past. Nothing more. I wipe the moisture from their corners with my fingertips.

“Funny thing about that little voice,” I say through a sigh. “You ignore it long enough, eventually you push too far and it becomes a scream.”

She says, “It’s okay, Faith. You don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do,” I reply. I need to. But I need to just do it. No more screwing around.

“Look, B., I’m not asking for forgiveness,” I say. “You don’t get to make amends for the things I’ve done. I know it’s not like that.” I swallow, wishing she’d pass me that glass of water again. My mouth feels nasty. My throat’s—

And I don’t give a shit. So what if my voice cracks. I stare at the stupid ceiling and make myself say the words, “All I’ve got...the best I can hope for is that one of these days—” As predicted, my voice isn’t cooperating. It cracks. Not just once, but twice. “When people look back—” Three times. I’m a wreck, but I clear my throat. “When they remember who I was, they’ll see something besides a monster.” And somehow I make it through.

I rub my eyes. Figures they’re wet and slimy this time. Telling myself, ‘I won’t cry,’ rarely works.

I add, “That’s the best I can hope for, y’know?” It just slips out. Goddamn nervous tic. Tensing my jaw, I force myself to shut the hell up.

It’s fuckin’ retarded. Can’t get going for shit. It takes every ounce of everything I’ve got. But once I get started, I’m a total motor mouth.

She turns her head to speak, but nothing comes out. It wasn’t fair for me to put that off on her. She doesn’t know. She can’t. She looks away.

I should say something...or do something. I don’t know. The silence is worse. There has to be—

She faces me again. I don’t want to see her expression. I know she’s gonna look...

And the gray coming in through the skylights is only getting grayer.

She touches my chin, coaxing me to turn. I’m not sure I can. I compromise, shutting my eyes as I let her have her way.

She’s so close. Her breath caresses my lips as she whispers, “You’re not a monster.” A tear drop clings to her cheek. It wets the tip of my nose when she kisses me.
Of Sand or Stone: Scene 1

Ten...

The title score fades in. It’s almost over. I’m not sure how I feel about that. The camera pans past Evelyn and Ninny as they stroll down a dirt road headed back to their car. Travelling across the front of the boarded up café, it comes to rest on the hand painted lettering on the dirty front window, ‘Fried Green Tomatoes.’

When B. said that, I thought for sure I’d be stuck sitting through the crappiest, sappiest chick flick ever. I cut her some slack because she also said that this was something she and her mom used to do. Whenever life got truly shitty, they’d prop up in front of the tube, eat enough junk food to put the average mortal into a sugar coma and just veg.

Who am I to argue with such a solid tradition?

I have to give her credit. The show wasn’t half bad. I just don’t get it.

When the music cuts over and the credits roll, I look down to where her hand rests in mine. We’ve been like this for…

Hell, I don’t know. No clue. I don’t think either of us has moved much since we polished off the popcorn. It’s a little strange that just being together like this can be so comforting.

But yeah, good movie…absolute bullshit, but good movie. Two people who so obviously love each other, spending their lives together like that and not—

I mean, if they just weren’t into each other at all, I might buy it. But any thicker and the subtext would’ve just been text. Nothing ‘sub’ about it.

And it wasn’t just that. They didn’t even hold hands. Not like this. Simple affectionate gestures weren’t even on the menu.

I couldn’t do that. I can’t even imagine that. Living a life of celibacy and denial…

B.’s waiting for me to say something. It’s funny, after all that…I just want a few more minutes of this. The rest will keep. And she practically had to beg me for this. She said that once we started, there’d be no turning back. That all she wanted was one ‘normal evening’ before that happened. She needed it. I gave in because—

Well, just because. It was a bit of a stretch, but if she’s willing to put whatever’s up on hold, why shouldn’t I trust her?

I still need to know what’s in that damn box. I left the room to help Maeve and when I got back, it was gone and B. was wicked stressed. Asking ‘What’s wrong?’ was a total waste of time.

But, yeah…whatever, I’m sure I’ll find out soon enough.

As far as that other thing goes…I’m really one to talk. I can imagine a lot. That part works just fine. It’s everything else that’s whacked. I’m still having a hard time believing she’d want anyone who’s as fucked in the head as me.
She thinks we’ll be able to work it out.

I close my eyes. There was a moment this afternoon. This little window after the worry faded, before I wussed out. I’m so lame. It’s sad. If I’d blinked, I might’ve missed it. I’m really glad I didn’t because…

B. always did wear her heart on her sleeve, but this was different. I could watch her like this for hours. Just her face. I could take in all of the subtle changes and never get bored.

She might be right.

Relating to someone with as little depth as G.I. G.Q. isn’t exactly promising, but I think I get him now. Or at least I understand one of his compulsions.

It’s so obvious how she feels. She still hasn’t said it.

I’m not sure she needs to. The look in her eyes says enough. ‘Beautiful’ doesn’t begin to cover it. I guess I could say ‘gorgeous,’ but that just sounds pretentious.

That’s the trouble with words. Most of the time they don’t even begin...

If something truly is awesome or magnificent or breathtaking or gorgeous, saying so just feels like a letdown. It’s like the stuff that really moves us defies description.

That isn’t the first place your mind goes anyway. Picking your jaw up is usually more important.

It’s strange to think, in a world like ours where we speak impossible things into being all the time that ordinary people can do just the opposite. The more incredible something is, the more they want to talk about it. They try too hard. They say too much. And the really important things get lost in the chatter. It’s a shame.

And me, in love…with her no less…and her in love with me…after everything I’ve done…that’s pretty damn incredible.

The memory doesn’t fade when I open my eyes. I stare at the floor, my lap, our hands…

When I get around to sharing that, I’m gonna make damn sure that it means something. I won’t say it to death. I won’t make her think that I’m trying to convince myself or her. I’ll just say it. Straight up. Point of fact. And I’ll have a reason. Something besides this. Sex is nice and all…

Sex with her is—even this, as frustrating and nerve-racking and broken as it was—this was beyond nice. I wish we could go back. Try again. Maybe with more time I could get it right. And even if I didn’t, at least I’d have...

I’m amazed she was right. That stupid thing actually helped. I got so hung up on how awkward it was.

I guess it’s a natural enough thing to arrive at—what with the sameness—but a strap-on just doesn’t sound like anything I’d ever want associated with my sex life. I’d like to think I’m adequate without prosthetics. But it’s obvious I’m not. I can’t even—

Anyway, it just sounds bad.

It is bad. It’s every bit as retarded and clumsy and—

I couldn’t feel shit. I was afraid I’d pull all the way out and not realize. And push and crush and…I
know that’d suck, so I was more focused on that than I was on…

It didn’t even occur to me that it’d be that way. When she used it, I barely noticed the stupid thing. It was just so intense.

But I s’pose that’s the trouble, this wasn’t. I couldn’t—

The music ends and TV cuts over to the weather guy telling us how miserable it’s going to be tomorrow. More rain, more cold…huge shock, the Midwest still sucks. She presses a few buttons on the remote, shutting him up.

She was so slick I didn’t even notice her taking the stupid thing off. She must’ve done that when—

Like things aren’t bad enough. Thinking about this is an instant turn on. The way she slid out and down, licking and sucking the sweat from my skin. It was just too hot.

Lucky me. I went from mad skills to totally second rate. All I accomplished today was getting myself so worked up I’m tender. I just hope I’m the only one. I probably am. I’m gifted that way. Last time—

She caresses the back of my hand. The tension translates. Our little break between disasters is over. When I let go, she gets up.

Yeah, she’s probably fine. Last time it was business as usual. I was a total wreck and she seemed barely affected. Figures this’d go like everything else.

Whatever, this little trip down memory lane isn’t exactly helping. I need to pull my head out of my ass and get over it.

I should just be grateful she’s willing to put up with my shit. I guess it wasn’t that awful.

It wasn’t that great either.

Or I don’t know. Maybe it was okay. For all of its clumsiness, the puppet show took my mind off the rest. I kept my head together and got to watch…

That can’t be a bad thing. It doesn’t get to be.

The DVD player whirs, plastic pops, the cupboard under the TV clicks and I look up. She really is beautiful.

What I should do is quit stalling. Like or not, I need to get this over with. Summoning more enthusiasm than I have, I ask, “So, what’s up?”

She glances over her shoulder from where she’s squatted down putting the movie away. “We’re leaving,” she says.

Her bluntness throws me. So, we’re running? What was in that box, a finger? I snicker.

That’s not even remotely funny. She gives me a look. I don’t bother to explain and thankfully, she just lets it go. After shutting the cabinet door, she stands up and walks over to the couch. Offering me a hand, she says, “C’mon.” Her fingers twiddle. “We need to pack.”

I open my mouth to ask the obvious and she cuts me off, “I’ll explain when we get upstairs, okay?” I take her hand. It’s her show now. Helping me up, she says, “Trust me. I don’t want to go either, but…” We pass through the doorway into the hall next to the kitchen. I want to stop for a smoke,
but she makes a beeline for the stairs, finishing her thought along the way, “…we’ve outstayed our welcome.”


As we make our way up the first couple flights, she says, “There’s nothing stopping us. We don’t have to be here. We’ve found someone who may be able to help Kim. They’re moving her tomorrow. We can just go.”

Kim?

I almost ask until it hits me and ties my guts in knots. She’s the one who lived. I remember their names from the text message Giles sent before everything—before the last time—the time before this when our lives went straight to hell.

I don’t even know what this is. I just know it’s shit. More shit. Shit happens so much it’s hard to keep it all straight. I have to hope that this shit isn’t as bad as that last shit. But I don’t know that. All I do is know is that this shit is something that B. thinks we should run from. That’s not exactly —

We almost make it to the third floor landing before she just has to try and spin this whole thing positive. “Have you ever spent time in the mountains?”

Fucking predictable. I’m not in the mood…for this or anything else. I stop dead in my tracks, but she keeps going, like she doesn’t even notice.

No. That’s not true. I’m in the mood for some aspect of my life not to suck beyond measure. That’s what I’m in the mood for.

As she rounds the corner and climbs a few more steps, I turn around and grumble, “I’m gonna catch a smoke. I’ll be up in a few.”

She stops long enough to reply, “Alright.” A moment later she adds, hesitantly, “I’ll just come back down if that’s okay.”

“Yeah, that’s cool,” I say, working to keep my voice down without sounding too pissy. Maeve’s asleep, so… But I don’t want B. to think I’m completely bent out of shape when I’m not.

Well, I am, but I’m not—I’m not mad at her. She didn’t do shit…other than bring up a touchy subject. I head down the hallway to the coat closet for my smokes.

I don’t think she meant anything by it. It’s hard to find a subject that isn’t touchy around me.

I must be improving. I remember where my cigarettes are this time. At least that’s something. Opening the closet door, I snag my leather coat off the hanger. As I loop back through the living room and into the kitchen, I put it on. Checking the inside pocket just to be sure, I step outside onto the back porch.

The doormat’s squishy. I take another step to get away from that and let the door close. My bare feet splash the chilly water that’s pooled on the floorboards. I’m a little warm, so if anything, it feels kind of good. Better than that stupid mat.

We got one hell of a rain this afternoon. You’d expect this patio to stay dry, but it didn’t. There’s water beaded up on the tables and the plasticy fabric cushions of the glider. Kicking back really isn’t an option. Not that I planned to. I just need some space. I’d be happy with a few minutes.
It figures that I end up alone barely long enough to light up. B. shows up empty handed as I pocket my smokes and lighter. I sort of wish she’d brought that box out, but I guess I’ve waited this long, so…

The screen door clacks shut and she says, “I’m sorry. I didn’t think—” Her voice weighted like she wants to say more, but she keeps it to herself.

“It’s okay,” I reply as she takes my hand. I just let her have it. It isn’t her fault I’m a total nutcase. Taking that out on her wouldn’t be fair.

I take a hit off my smoke as she adds, “We’ve got time. I just thought you’d—” She sighs. “Oh, I don’t know what I thought.”

She sounds put out or disgusted…or maybe more like frustrated? I don’t know. I have to look.

No. She’s worried, so I try again. “What’s wrong?” Maybe she’ll get around to talking if I keep asking.

But she doesn’t say shit. Instead, she snags my smoke and has a quick puff, passing it back when she’s done.

Jesus. “We must really be screwed if you’re smoking,” I grumble.

Exhaling, she hangs her head. With a subtle headshake she asks, “Do you remember what Giles promised before you came here?” The ‘whatever’ couldn’t be clearer.

I reach around her to pitch my smoke. It sizzles when it hits the ashtray. I don’t want the damn thing now. The idea that it grosses her out so much she has to take the edge off by…

I may quit.

Not now. Later. Quitting now probably would make me actually, officially, certifiably nuts. I’ll just call this one a bad idea and head back inside. It’s too cold anyway. She shouldn’t be out here in her pajamas. I could give her my coat, but really…

I grab the door handle. As I step into the kitchen with her on my heels, looking slightly puzzled, I get around to actually answering her question, “He offered me the felon’s lotto: a pardon, a passport, plane ticket and money. Just what every con wants.”

“Yeah, and just because something sounds too good to be true…” she replies with such enthusiasm that she doesn’t even bother to finish.

_Huh._ So he wasn’t shittin’ me? I don’t see why he’d bother. But that doesn’t matter. I blow her off, heading straight for the bathroom to wash the smoky smell away.

She follows me in and hangs back. I guess she’s waiting for me to say something. But what could I possibly say to that? I should get through this before I even try. I turn on the faucets.

Honestly, if it was on me, I’d probably go back. It’d make me crazy because I know they need me, but I was all set to serve my time. I wanted to do what was right. That got put on hold because Angel needed me. I couldn’t say no to him. After that, he told me to go help Buffy. I’ve been hanging out waiting for my number to come up ever since.

I adjust the temp and cup my hands under the stream. The water feels nice. I let it run for a moment before I wash up.
Now there’s this…

Before her, there wouldn’t have been any doubt in my mind. Now all I have are doubts. I doubt pretty much everything except for one thing: how I feel about her.

I can’t leave. Not unless she tells me to go.

Looking up from the towel as I pat my face dry, I say, “I’m not sure I deserve that.” Answers don’t get more conflicted. I use the towel to cover as much of that as I can.

“I can see how you’d feel that way,” she replies, “but you do.”

Even with the pause, she sounds so sure of that last part that I have to look. Turning back to the sink, I glance in the mirror. She’s right behind me.

She kind of nudges me aside and takes her toothbrush from the holder. Wetting it, she says, “It’s nice when things work the way they should.” She grabs the toothpaste, squeezes a little out onto her toothbrush and passes it off. “No one in their right mind thinks the D.O.C. is one of them.” Her toothbrush then becomes something to gesture with. “Everyone’s in favor of taking bad people off the streets. But once you’ve got them, what do you do with them? Locking them up in a big concrete box isn’t exactly an ideal solution.” And of course, why not?

Leaning against the wall, she says, “And we’ve all seen enough Oz reruns to get that something that should be about reparation and reform comes out somewhere between a dog fight and social networking for scumbags.”

I don’t get why she stepped aside until I look down. My toothbrush is in my hand. She’s giving me space. I don’t even remember picking the damn thing up, but I put it and the toothpaste to use.

“I know there really isn’t a better answer. I wish there was, but—”

As pep talks go, this one’s pretty bland. But there’s no sense in me to going out of my way to interrupt her either. I just get to enjoy the growing discomfort as she speaks her mind, “I guess my point is the best we can hope for out of the whole fiasco is remorse.” I can’t help it. “And you obviously feel that.”

I finish up, dry off, and clear out of her way. Silly me, I feel like putting a little distance between us might make this better.

She meets my eyes in the mirror. I have to look away. “But my guess is prison had very little to do with that,” she says, taking a leisurely, thoughtful break before slathering on the next sentiment. I just want to curl into a ball. “Anyway, I don’t see how you can believe that you don’t deserve a second chance.”

The last thing I need is to pick a fight, but I mumble, “That’s nice, B.” And really it is. It’s nice that she believes in me like that. Doesn’t keep me from wanting to bail. Doesn’t keep my skin from crawling either. I’m right by the door. All I have to do is reach out and turn the knob.

Funny, when I don’t run, my knees give out and I just let them. They’re pretty much over holding me up. “And you’re right—” I slide down the wall. “—if you completely ignore the obvious.” My thighs press against my chest. I cross my ankles and hug my legs.

She’s brushing her teeth. Her back’s turned. I should wait. Give her some time. It’d be easier to tell if I’m pissing her off if I let her finish. But I can’t. Watching her react to this is the last thing I need, so…
I pick a nice white patch of floor to focus on while I make an ass of myself. “They were right about me.” I like this antique tile. It’s small, six-sided like a honeycomb, and flat with almost no grout. Four rows of white tile in, there’s a black border row that runs around the room. It’s kind of neat. Very Victorian.

And it makes sense that I’d be scoping out the tile when our whole world’s turning to shit again.

Whatever. I may as well drag my heels.

The anxiety piles up when I force myself to admit, “I wanted Wood to think I was something special. Our last night in Sunnydale he told me I wasn’t. I didn’t listen. You know how I am. I was gonna show him. I made it my personal mission to prove him wrong.”

Yeah, that’s me, pushing the depths of shallow. I snicker. Moving on…

“That doesn’t mean I didn’t want things to work out. Doesn’t mean I didn’t care. But he never did and I couldn’t make him. First time in my life I wanted something more and he—”

I can just make out what she’s doing. While I blabber, she spits and rinses and splashes her face.

“Man, he pissed me off,” I mutter as she turns to reach for a towel. “I don’t even get to think that he used me. That wouldn’t be right. He never misled me. I always knew what was up. I could’ve walked away at any time, but I stayed.”

She faces me. I just hope she doesn’t…

She leans against sink. I guess that’s close enough. At least she isn’t gonna sink to my level. I won’t have to look her in the eye.

Resting my chin on my knees, I tuck into a tighter ball. “That was all on me,” I mumble. “My choice.” Cold and bitter, I snicker again. “Figures, I’d stick around and play the fool. I made things so much worse.”

My stomach’s tied in knots. Right now I’m pretty convinced that the only thing confession’s good for is scoring tickets to Springer. But it’s not like I can take it all back. I have to finish. She’ll think what she thinks.

“He finally told me to get lost, but we still had to work together,” I say, pausing to bite my lip. I want that to hurt, but I barely feel it. “I looked at everything he did like he was taking it out on me.”

But knowing B., she’s probably got a bad case of the bleeding heart for poor, poor me. That’d figure. She’s always been super stupidly sappy when it comes to this shit.

“When that thing came up, I snapped,” I admit, hoping to fix that. She needs to look past the bullshit excuses and see this for what it is. “I knew he was right. I was the only one. The girls would’ve gone off and gotten themselves killed. I was the only one who could walk into that house and not see a bunch of kids. I was cold enough to see the monsters. I could keep the two things separate and get the job done. I tried to tell myself that that wasn’t a bad thing, but something inside said different. I resented him for seeing me for exactly what I am.”

Summoning every ounce of nerve I have left, I look up. She’s checking out the tile too. At least I’m not alone.

Here’s the kicker…
“You don’t do what I did if you feel some lofty sense of remorse.” I start off deadpan, but I can’t keep that up. “I got drunk and I stayed drunk. I ran. I hid. And when it came time, I behaved like a monster. I should’ve been better than that, but I came off exactly like the thing I was supposed to be against.” Shit builds until I’m not really even thinking about what I’m saying. All I care is that it feels good to go off. “Giles was right to doubt me. And I don’t see what’s changed. He should still doubt me. I took all that out on—”

She butts in, demanding, “Would you do it again?”

I snap, “No!” I’m not even sure if I think that’s true. I just know that’s what she wants to hear.

She’s pissed. Finally. And for some ungodly reason that makes me happy. It’s fucking perverse. I think one thing and do another.

I feel better when she yells, “So, you’ve had trouble. We’ve all had trouble. We’ve all screwed up. That’s got nothing to do with this.” Her anger fades. She pleads with me, “You have changed. The Faith I knew years ago wouldn’t have regretted any of this. She wouldn’t have given this a second thought.”

She should still be angry. I egg her on, “Why do you fight, Buffy?” She doesn’t answer. Instead, she just stares at me like she’s waiting for me to ask something worthwhile. “You fight because it’s right, don’t you? You keep going because you believe you can make a difference.”

When she replies, “I try,” I let her have it.

“I fight because I like it. I always have. It’s not some big noble thing for me. I do this because I get off on it.” Textbook. Predictable. Bullshit.

She looks away, reaching for the doorknob. She’s leaving. As she turns it, I arrive at my point. “And because of that…I—” My voice cracks, but I keep going. “It’s my fault. I dragged you in. I pulled you down. I—”

Facing me again, she drowns me out. “And you think I don’t enjoy it?” She throws her hands up. “Really? You think I don’t get off on it?” They fall. One of them claps against her thigh. “That’s good.” The other one rattles the doorknob. “You’ve gotta stop blaming yourself. I don’t.”

She pauses to take a breath and then repeats, “I don’t blame you,” carefully stressing every word, like maybe somehow saying them more clearly will cause them to sink in. They’ve already sunk. My cheeks are hot. I feel like a complete ass. “We’ve been over this how many times? I’ve told you that. None of this is your fault. I knew what kind of a chance I was taking. Why can’t you just accept that?”

I could live without her rubbing it in. But she’s frustrated as hell and I can’t blame her. I’ve said this before…all of it, every last word, almost exactly the same.

She mumbles, “Yeah.” This time there’s no mistaking the fact that she’s leaving. She lingers just long enough to look at the hand she holds the doorknob with and say, “Never mind. I was wrong. You haven’t changed one bit. You’re still a great big pain in my ass.” The funny thing…she’s smiling. Not much. It’s more of a smirk. She’s definitely amused.

You’d think I’d eventually listen. But I keep going over the same shit. And she keeps telling me it’s cool. That’s gotta get old.

I move my feet when she opens the door enough to slip past, boxing me in, shutting me out…
In my defense, it’d be great if I remembered.

Before she hits the stairs, she comes off with a parting shot, “Come find me when you get over yourself.”

I shove the door out of my face, closing it again. I didn’t. Not until she said something. But that doesn’t matter. Even good excuses are still just excuses.

I should go for a walk to cool down or maybe have that smoke. I don’t bother with either. Why would I? Both things make way too much sense. Giving her some time to chill might make even more sense. Instead, I get up, open the door, flip the light off and head upstairs.

The first tread creaks when I put weight on it. I know it does. I always skip it, but this time…

What does it matter? We’ve made enough noise to wake the dead. The idea that Maeve slept through any of that is laughable.

That’s the funny thing about guilt. I think it’s addictive. If I’m not feeling enough, I always manage to make more. Tear the scabs off the same old wounds…and for what? Because I enjoy misery?

That’s about it. I thrive on the shit. It’s great.

Sad, that sounds almost like progress if you look at it the right way.

Except that it isn’t. It’s pathetic. It’s just more of me taking my sick fuckin’ problems out on people who don’t deserve it.

I trudge up the stairs careful to remember the others that squeak. When I get to her room and open the door, the first words out of her mouth are, “I’m sorry.”

I come back with a quick, “No. Don’t be. It’s cool,” giving her an out.

She doesn’t take it. “I shouldn’t have lost my patience.” She sits cross-legged on the bed. The box is right next to her. It’s empty now. Its contents are lying across her lap. Somehow I didn’t expect another box, but that’s what it is. Or guess that’d be more of a ‘case.’ It’s an ugly, old, brown leather case, just a little shorter than my forearm and about as wide. It’s hinged along the spine like a jewelry box. She has it angled so I can’t quite see over the lid.

She looks up. I half expect her to snap it shut before I get there, but she doesn’t. Grinning, she says, “I can’t stay mad. You’re just so hopelessly cute.”

“Hopeless and cute all in the same breath?” I reply, totally hearing the word ‘frustrating’ in there too. “Alright, well, I guess that’s better than what I had.” She’ll eventually get there.

I’m not sure where any of this is coming from. That case freaks her out. And I can completely relate when I lay eyes on the glass syringe and a vial of something that looks like flat, putrid beer.

“Yeah,” she says, “cute and sweet and…”

I’m such a retard. I just can’t resist offering up the word of the day. “Frustrating?” Like she needs any help. I should be slapped.

“Oh, yeah…completely frustrating,” she agrees a little too enthusiastically.

I suppose it’s that when I look down at her, I see what’s in her lap. I react to it. I think that it looks like something some rich junkie might buy from an estate sale. I stand at the edge of the mattress,
looking past her smiling face, feeling ashamed that the sum of my experience led me there. I’d like to believe that I could come up with something better, but that’s the best I’ve got.

When she looks up, all she sees is me. She doesn’t even think about the shit in her lap. She can completely blow that off and concentrate on exchanging witty repartee.

I keep up my end, ignoring the goddamned case as best I can. “It’s the dimples, isn’t it? People with dimples always get ‘cute’.”

Yeah, now I’m smiling too. But I won’t be held responsible for what happens if she pinches my cheeks.

“You think I don’t know about the ‘cute’ thing?” she says. “I say I’m five-two, but that’s not right. It takes tennies to get me there.”

She must think I’m looking at her. And I am. I look at her as she speaks, thinking how pretty she is, wondering how she got mixed up in something like this. “That’s three and a smidge inches from being the only girl you’re ever gonna date who can dust a vamp or two before dinner, still manage cute in an affordable yet stylish outfit and qualify for disability.”

“It’s gross. The tawny liquid in the vial’s almost the right color. The cloudiness isn’t right, but it could be smack.

Through a grin she adds, “Take it from someone who knows. I have years of practice averting tragedies and barely pulling off cute when what I was going for was something closer to total knockout.”

I’m not sure how to take that. So I’m a tragedy?

She answers, “You’re cute. Live with it.” Funny, I didn’t even ask. And if I had, I would’ve expected her to just agree.

But I have to figure that skipping being a complete shithead might go over better this time. I can’t help grinning too when the reply comes to me. “Okay, I really only caught two or three things. The rest of that, I’m not sure about. I’ll just have to take your word for it. But how about: ‘You’re the only girl I’m ever going to date’? You could stop there. You’re the only one I want. And I think you’re a total knockout just the way you are now. I’ve never not. I sort of hoped we were past ‘dating,’ but—”

“You know what I mean,” she says, hanging her head.

I do, but—

I wish she’d had a few to enjoy that for what it was. I meant it. But that’s not how the world works for us. Bashful gets her exactly what I’ve been dealing with. She remembers the stupid case or box or what-the-fuck-ever. I watched too many people flush their lives down the toilet over this garbage. I have to wonder what it’d do to someone like her.

Judging from her reaction, nothing good. No surprise. That shit never does anything good. What she’s doing with it is anyone’s guess. I’m not sure I want to know. I wish she’d put it away…or better yet, throw it out.

“You don’t recognize this do you?” she asks, looking up to gauge my reaction.

Of course I recognize it, but she’s got something specific in mind and I’m obviously missing the
context.

She studies me for a moment before she concludes, “Yeah, why would you? They couldn’t do both of us. Not without—”

‘They’? ‘They’ who? I don’t get a chance to ask.

Her attention returns to box. “We would’ve talked and that would’ve ruined the surprise,” she says. “So lucky me, I got to have all the fun.”

I should’ve just blurted that out, but I’ve been trying to cut back. Blurting only ever gets me trouble.

When I finally manage to get a word in edgewise, I go for the straight approach. “So, what is that?” Expecting a straight answer would just be dumb.

It doesn’t surprise me when she replies, “An answer,” like she’s feeding me some kind of riddle. I wonder how she’d look in tweed.

“If that’s an answer, I’m pretty sure I don’t want to know the question,” I mumble and turn to flop down beside her.

As I get settled, she says, “It’s a long story. We’ll get there, but for now I just need you to hear me.” She shuts the case, dropping it into the cardboard box and pushing the whole sickening mess off of the bed. “I don’t expect you to get better today or tomorrow.” Out of sight, out of mind. “Or next week for that matter. But I do need you to understand that I don’t blame you for anything that’s happened.”

“Yeah, I got that,” I reply. I’m not sure I understand it, but I definitely get that she feels that way. And this time I may even try to remember it.

Taking my hand, she says, “I want to say I understand, but I’m pretty sure that wouldn’t be fair. I’ve never…”

I guess she’s satisfied. That makes one of us. I’m nothing if not consistent. As stupid, reckless, impulsive responses go, wanting to touch her ranks pretty high. But that’s it. That’s where my mind goes.

She says, “But believe me when I tell you, I know all about guilt.”

I wish she’d just cut to the chase. Her talking about that thing might actually be good. She might even be able to make me do something rational. That’d be new.

But no, she’s got other plans. She wants to talk about her feelings. She should know that’s the last thing I want. “I may not know exactly how you feel, but I’d like to think I can kind of relate.” She sighs. “That might be presumptuous. I’m sorry if you think so, but—”

I reply, “No, you’re fine.” Again, that makes one of us. It’s never a good sign when I’m not sure why I want something. That usually means that my motives are hinged on some deeply buried, traumatic bullshit. Now I just have to figure out what. That’s always fun.

Taking my hand back, I scoot around behind her as she says, “I get that you lost it and that’s not good.”

No. This is insane, but that doesn’t stop me. I may as well screw up while I mull things over.
She doesn’t stop me either. She just keeps talking, uninterrupted when I reach around her, fumbling to untie her housecoat. “I’d like to think that I wouldn’t have done the same thing.” The silky fabric slides through my fingers. “But I don’t know that.” I find the ends and pull. “I’ve done some pretty awful things.” The bow slips free.

“We gave you plenty of reason to be upset,” she says as I part the front of her housecoat and go for the buttons of her pajama top. She’s so warm. Too warm. She should be sweaty, but the satin doesn’t stick to her skin. As I work through the buttons one at a time, she rests her hand over mine, stopping me. She says, “What happened, happened. We can’t change that.” I slip my hands free, using the opportunity to cop a feel.

Okay, so…in all fairness, I’m not that bad. I stroke the undersides of her breasts, working down to her sides and stomach. The thin, smooth material and her warm, firm body feel good in my hands. I wonder if she enjoys this half as much as I do. For me this is almost as much of a turn on as…

But it sounds like what she’s working toward is another apology. I wish she’d just stop. That makes what I’m trying to do even worse.

“It sucked,” she whispers. “I’m sorry. I wish I could’ve stopped it. I just didn’t see that freakish flying tribute to comic book culture coming.” Hanging her head, she shakes it. “But who would?”

That was definitely an apology. And like an idiot, I push some more. Now I’m just trying to piss her off. I seriously need help. But I think I get why now. And big surprise, it’s childish and stupid. I want to feel like she slighted me. Like this, whatever this is, is more important than me.

“What was it you called him?” she asks as I sweep her hair aside.

My fingertips trail from just below her ear down onto her shoulder before I reply, “Sparky.”

“Yeah, that’s good,” she says and I hear the smile in her voice. “I’ll have to remember that. It’s funny.”

She doesn’t even try to stop me when I kiss her neck. “Like he wasn’t a massive, flashing neon sign screaming, ‘Time to regroup’,,” she says, placing her hand over mind, the one that’s on her shoulder. “Not that I could. I couldn’t move you and I wouldn’t leave you, so…” My other hand rests innocently in the crease between hip and thigh. I’m a little surprised it hasn’t inched its way toward delinquency yet.

“It was either that or the obvious, ‘You need a vacation’,,” she says through a snicker. “It’s a little hard to tell with these things sometimes.”

She’s taking this really well. Of course, it’s not like I’m nibbling. It was just a couple of light pecks…the tender sort of thing couples do in public all the time. They were even completely drool-free. I should quit while I’m ahead. But where would the fun be in that?

I kiss her neck again.

“Anyway, I’m not sure what it’ll take to make things right, but whatever, I’m in.”

Her breath catches as she speaks. She struggles to finish. That’s because I’m not being good anymore.

She twists around, facing me and I let go. Busted. But her response isn’t anything like I thought it’d be. She doesn’t yell at me. She doesn’t give me a chance to focus on her scars. I know they’re still there. I didn’t dream them. I wish I had. I wish I could dream them away. I can’t. Talk about
guilt…

She doesn’t feed any of that. What she does is meet my gaze. Looking every bit as needy as I am, she whispers, “You don’t know how much I want…”

And no wonder. I’ve been slowly driving both of us nuts. Something has to give…and soon.

My stupidity holds when I look down. Her shirt’s twisted too. She let me unbutton one too many. It’s a pity. She sees where I’m going before I get there and fixes the problem as she laments, “I could blow off the rest of the night and just…”

She rests her fingertips under my chin, urging me to look up. It takes her a couple of tries, but I finally give in. My consolation prize is a couple of tender kisses and big sad eyes. “After, I swear,” she says, “after we finish talking and packing. After you know what’s up, if you’re still into this…”

She’s not helping. I look away again.

“There should be time,” she mumbles. I need to cut the crap. There’s no reason for her to guilt over my bullshit too. Trying to let me down easy, she whispers, “I wish things were different, but we have to be on the road no later than—”

I meet her eyes and say, “Please don’t.” Of course, I come off too harsh and she takes that exactly the wrong way. It’s messed up. We’ve both apologized too many times tonight for this to…I doubt she’ll even hear me. But I can’t think of anything better. I need her to look at me, so I say, “I’m sorry,” struggling to make those two pathetic words sound like I mean them. Really, I do, but—

Now that I have her attention, I don’t know what to do with it. I open my mouth only to let out a gasp and close it. I’m such an ass. I started this, but hell if I know how to finish it.

I tell her the truth, “I’m not sure I could even…”

“Doesn’t matter,” she says. “I just want you to touch me. I don’t care if—”

“Well, I do,” I snap. My attitude fades when I let more of the truth slip. “You shouldn’t have to—”

“It’s not the first time,” she replies.

“And that so doesn’t matter,” I say, shutting my eyes. I need to think. What might help? That’s the real question. Us batting this back and forth sure isn’t.

Stupid me. I can’t help thinking that if she’d push me, if she made me, this’d get better. But that’s just the same shit from this afternoon. And the idea hasn’t improved with age. I still can’t see her doing that, but I haven’t got anything better.

I can’t help it. That’s just where my mind goes every time I think about how out-of-control this feels. I remember the same thing: jumping off of a bluff. Falling’s one of two things. It’s either scary as hell or it feels amazing. It all depends on how you take it.

Well, maybe she’ll surprise me. I pick an example she’ll remember and try to explain, “Do you remember when I jumped into that manhole?” She does. I see it even before she nods. About the same time I see that this isn’t going to end well. “The look on your face was…” I’m screwed. I wipe the smirk off my face. It isn’t helping. “I remember how flipped out you were. I think you cared about me even then.”
Looking down, she says through a sigh, “Yeah.”

I place my hand over hers. Hoping to reassure her, I say, “I know. I should’ve been more careful, but the thing is, I didn’t.” She accepts the gesture. “I do now. I care what happens, if for no other reason than you.” And better yet, she accepts what I’m saying. “You were right. That was a truly boneheaded move. I won’t do it again.”

I shouldn’t enjoy this, but the tension gave way to confusion. She’s just too funny when she’s confused. Now I’m stuck with the worst job in the world. I have to clear that up. “I know that this isn’t going to hurt. I know that nothing bad’s gonna happen. This is a lot like that, only the monsters are all in my head.”

This was nice while it lasted, but she catches on before I finish and tries to pull away. I hate being right. She wants to say ‘no,’ but I don’t give her a chance. “Can’t you see that’s what I need now? I need you to push me. I know that’s probably not something you’re gonna be able to do, but that’s what I need.”

“We should get started,” she announces, completely brushing me off. “It’s getting late.” I let her go and she heads to her closet. Sliding the door open, she says, “I’ve had a lot of time to think about this.” Hangers scrape as she slides her clothes aside and takes a suitcase from the end. “I’m not sure it’ll help, but I want you to know that you didn’t do anything wrong.”

Sounds like same old song, but it’s not like I have anything worthwhile to add. Or at least, I sure can’t seem to say anything right, so I follow her lead, going to, opening and surveying my closet.

“I think that part of the problem is that you believe I saw something that grossed me out,” she says over the ruckus as she moves stuff around. “You may not even recognize that, but I think it’s there. You know I watched.”

She’s a great distraction, but what I know right now is something completely different. All of this isn’t going to fit into—

I grab my duffle down off the shelf as she says, “And you’re right. I saw a lot of things that were just too disgusting for words, but none of them had anything to do with you.”

I unzip it, mentally separating what I brought with me from what she bought for me on the rack. Nope. Not even if I stuff this thing tight as a drum. But packing the stuff I brought with me seems like a good a place to start.

“I hadn’t really thought about that,” I mumble. “I just know how I am. This isn’t something I deal with well.” Now there’s an understatement. I get pissed just thinking about it. And of course…I go off, “Trying and failing. And trying and failing. It sucks! I think it’d be best if you’d just—”

“Well, I don’t!” she snaps. “I can’t believe you. Don’t you see what you’re asking?” She throws or drops something. “You want me to—”

I glance, but nearly fast enough. No clue what that was, but there’s no crash, so…

She tries again. “You’re asking me—” This time she’s way too upset to ignore. She sweeps her hair from her eyes. I feel sorry for her poor scalp. “I can’t do that,” she says, biting each word off. “I don’t care how long this takes. I’ll wait.”

“I didn’t—” I can’t finish either. She’s on the verge of tears and I put her there.

We’ve tiptoed around just about everything serious we’ve talked about, but this takes the cake. The
thing she couldn’t bring herself to say is probably ‘rape.’ Or maybe she was going for ‘violate,’ but that’s not much different. They’re both too harsh. This is something I’ve fantasized about. Being tied up and…

I think I might even trust her enough and that’s pretty astounding.

But I guess her take’s just a more radical interpretation than mine. She’s talking about hurting me and I’m talking about fixing a problem that’s driving me out of my ever-loving mind. It’s embarrassing and frustrating and…

I search for another thing to call this and come up short. ‘Frustrating’ is still the best I’ve got. I’m totally in touch and out of inspiration which makes none of this any easier.

I may not want to admit it, but she’s probably got a point. At the very least, I can’t hope to spin this. There’s nothing left for me to say. The reason I want what I want is because I’m fucked up. She wants me to be less fucked up. I can’t claim that’s bad, but that doesn’t stop me from trying. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Yes, you did,” she replies and goes back to packing. As I do the same, turning to fill my duffle, racking my brain, looking for a way to put this right and drawing the usual blank, she says, “You may not think that much of yourself, but I do.”

We pack our things in silence for what seems like forever. I seriously screwed up. She doesn’t even act like she notices me until I finish with my first bag. When I start to ask, she whips me another. That’s as friendly as she gets. I’d prefer it if she’d just knock some sense into me. It’d be easier.

Or I could do us both a favor and pull a Greg Louganis off of the nearest bridge. Not that I think that’d work. I’d probably just wake up a week or two later chained to a bed with a chart as thick as the local phonebooks, more x-rays that look like a jigsaw puzzle and yet another pack of very confused doctors. It goes that way with me.

Speaking of extreme sports…I’d like to eventually pack my underwear. But for some reason the idea of getting that close to her makes me edgy. Could be worse than the bridge.

Finally, I scrape together the courage to mumble, “I just don’t want to play with you. That’s not fair to you.”

I didn’t think that was funny at all, but somehow she laughs. She looks up from her mound of suitcases and boxes and says, “I like it when you play with me.” She’s seriously flirting after all that?

Between packing stacks of brightly colored, lacy things, she says, “I know how hard this must be for you.” Her tone’s lost its playful edge. She transfers another handful from her drawer to her luggage before she goes on, “It’s gotta be awful. The fact that you keep trying after everything that’s happened says more to me than…” Words fail her, but that’s cool. I get it. And that smile’s fair compensation for anything that’s missing.

Enough time passes before she adds, “I’m sorry, but I’m failing to see the bad,” that I kind of get that idea that we’re done and get back to work. When I glance over my shoulder, she’s got her hand on her hip staring at a pile of boxes she’s just unearthed. “Except for these shoes,” she grumbles.

Now she’s just being silly. I let her have it. I guess if that last thing didn’t make me feel better…

“Why did I buy so many?” she asks. “Seriously, you need to stop me.”
My closet’s almost empty. Another bag and I’ll be set. I feel bad for her. She may dig out by dawn if she’s lucky.

But *seriously*, it does. I feel about a thousand times better. The way she’s looking at this is…

Well, she couldn’t be much cooler about it if she tried. Grateful to be off the hook, I reply, “I’m not really seeing the shoes as a problem.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s a thing,” she says, sounding frustrated. “Really, it’s the clothes. They’re the problem. I find an outfit I like and I just have to have shoes to go with it. Doesn’t matter if I already have some that’ll work.” Taking a breath, she adds as an afterthought, “And a purse to go with them.” From there everything goes to hell. Annoyance turns to excitement. Apparently, breathing becomes arbitrary whenever fashion’s involved.

I could probably follow this, but really, she just makes my head hurt. I get the full spiel on this matching that. Oh, and that can’t show. And while I understand the desire for matching bras and panties, my world doesn’t end when I fail to pull that off.

I hear the word ‘frilly’ and my brain comes dangerously close to dribbling out of my ear. I totally get ‘sexy.’ She’s got that going on in spades, but I’ll never understand ‘frilly.’ I have to stop her.

“B., please, I get it. You said something about being on a tight schedule?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” she mumbles. “How about some coffee?” One thing really doesn’t go with the other. The fact that she looks self-conscious now only completes the picture.

Eyeing her disaster, I reply, “Sure, if you think we have time.”

“Yeah, we’ll be fine,” she says, “but I’d like to take that with us…” her attention turns to the chest below the window “…if you think we can get it down the stairs without making too much noise.”

I walk over to it. That’ll depend on how heavy it is. I lift one side before I answer, “Yeah, I think we can manage.” It’s not half as bad as it looks, but the thing’s big enough that it’s going to fill the backseat. “Not to burst your bubble, but how are we gonna get all of this in the car?”

She joins me, taking the other side. As we start out the door, she says, “We’re not. We’re just gonna take what we can and they’ll ship the rest.”

Okay, that doesn’t make sense. We’re leaving a forwarding address? Unsure how to put that, I stammer, “But won’t that—?” I glance over my shoulder to avoid the pile of boxes and bags. “We’re running, right?” We’re gonna run right into the bed in a sec.

Turning to hold the trunk in one hand, I pick my way past all the crap and get the door opened as she explains, “We’re going to hold over for a few days in Chicago. They’ve got a car we can use. Some sort of four-wheel-drive something or other. I don’t remember what Giles said it was, but it’s bigger.” She slows so I can get through the door and around the corner. “First things first, right now we’re just getting out of here as fast as we can. It’s not safe anymore.”

I ask, “What makes you say that?” Gotta love the leading questions.

“Like I said, it’s complicated,” she replies. “We’ll get there. I just need you to be patient, okay?” Figures, this one gets me jack.

I say, “Sure.” Again, that’s the last thing I feel. This doesn’t make sense. I guess it’s just not that bad. If it were, this stuff’d be the last thing that mattered. “Would you mind uncomplicating things soon? I’d like to know what’s got your panties in a wad.”
I could’ve chosen my words more carefully. Too late now. She doesn’t look impressed. Considering the fact that I’m backing down a twisty staircase with a huge-ass, heavy, cumbersome trunk between me and her, it might pay for me to be polite. It’s a stretch, but I know I’ve got it in me.

“Yeah, no problem,” she says. “That’s part of the point of taking a break.”

It feels almost like payback when she asks, “There are a couple of boxes in the trunk of the car. Would you mind getting them while I make coffee?”


“Just get them and bring them inside,” she says. The look she gives me pretty much cinches it. She needs to spill…and soon. “I know you probably want to smoke, but don’t stop, okay? Please?” It really doesn’t help that she’s way too intuitive for my own good. That and the worry doesn’t fade. It’s a great mix. Goes well with the bickering and manual labor. Finally, she adds a guilty, “I should just get dressed and do it myself.”

“No, it’s cool,” I say. “I’ll go out and come right back in.” I want to add, ‘What’s the worst that can happen?’ but I figure that really would make her blow a gasket, so I switch topics, going back to the last thing I said to upset her. “You know I didn’t really mean it that way, right?” Like that’s even remotely smart.

Maybe I just want a fight. Could be I really am that damaged. Or maybe I just hope she’ll actually talk now that she’s had some time to cool down. A little progress might be too much to ask for, but a girl can dream. It’s not ridiculous to think that we might accidentally make some. I mean, after all, what she said was really sweet. It’s possible…

She looks puzzled until I explain, “That other thing…y’know, the pachyderm we keep chained in the corner?”

“Oh, that,” she says, making me wish I’d kept my mouth shut. “I know what you meant, but how am I supposed to take that?”

A little of the iciness thaws during the lag between comment one and comment two. Not nearly enough. It really doesn’t help that she clams up as we wrestle the trunk around the next corner. But I guess doing that without smacking the wall does take a little effort. I mumble, “I’m sorry for bringing this up again. It’s just…”

“It’s okay,” she says. It’s hard to tell what’s up with her. She sounds put out, but that could just be the strain.

Things finally level out enough for her to ask, “You remember how upset you got earlier when you talked about feeling like you’d become like them?” Not that anything’s level now, but we’re between corners.

“Yeah,” I reply.

“Well, that’s what you’re asking me to do,” she says.

Her answer’s so firm that it’s off-putting. I start to speak up, “How—?”

But she interrupts, “And yeah, I know it wouldn’t be exactly the same, but it’d still be me forcing you. It’d be me upsetting you and ignoring it, making you feel helpless and frightened. I can’t see
how that’d be good.”

My back hits the wall just in time to turn. The stupid diagonal cut of the corner steps almost throws me. I need to pay more attention, but she’s pretty much got that. I should’ve waited to bring this up.

She lets me get a handle on what I’m doing before she continues, “You probably think you’d be able to deal. That you’d just put that aside and forget about it. But I’m not sure you could. I think it’d come back to haunt us.”

I don’t think so, but I keep that to myself. I still don’t want to upset her.

“It’d be a whole lot better if we take things slow. You need to work this out in a way that’s good for you.” I don’t really feel like things are cool until she grins. “And by ‘good for you’ I mean ‘healthy’.” Another short flight of stairs passes by and she stalls.

Alright, so…maybe she has a point. I can’t know how I’ll feel. It might be smart to err on the side of caution.

That’s just not my style.

Once we negotiate the corner, she picks up her train of thought, “You have heard of ‘healthy’ before, right? Because what you want wouldn’t be that at all. It’d be the antithesis of ‘healthy,’ whatever that is.”

After dropping a bomb like ‘antithesis,’ she goes wanting. It’s like the obvious is just too obvious. Or maybe she worked too hard to come up with that and her brain needs to reset. No clue. I just think it’s kind of cute, even if she is teasing me. Eventually she gets there, concluding, “What you want would be really bad for you.”

I’m still not sure I agree, but I let her have it. Her mind seems made up. I say, “I’m just worried about you.” I can’t help it. I know how she is. She’s inclined to sacrifice for people she cares about. I don’t want her doing that for me. I don’t even get how I rated that.

“Well, don’t be. I’m a big girl,” she says. “This is just another hardship—” Funny, the look she gives me doesn’t exactly say ‘hardship.’ “—one I’m willing to bear. I think it’ll be worth it in the end.”

We’re playing pack mule, talking about something that’s, to my mind, in no way fun and she somehow manages to flirt again. This might be a new low. Or maybe it’s a high? I don’t know. Depends on how you look at it.

As I consider the lows and highs, she leaves me behind. “There’s always a learning curve with new relationships. It takes time to get the other person figured. This is just that, but it’s a little different because…” Catching up just makes me happy she dropped the ‘because.’ She glosses right over it with a brief silence. “We’ll get this all worked out and things’ll be better because we spent time making them that way.”

We’re nearly there. I concentrate on getting down the last few stairs before I reply, “That’s really sweet of you.” Yeah, there’s nothing I can say to change her mind. This is what it is. I have to deal with it as it is. Get over it and make do.

Of course part of my problem could be that it’s a new day. Today’s senseless drama will be brought to you by the letter ‘L,’ the number ‘two’ and the word ‘impatience.’

I just want this fixed now. But maybe she’s right, letting things work themselves out might be
better for both of us. All things considered, I guess it can’t hurt to try. Or more accurately, not try…

“After today, that might seem like some sort of twisted double-standard to you,” she whispers as I steer us toward the kitchen. I don’t want to pass by Maeve’s bedroom door with this thing. This hallway’s pretty narrow. It’s a little tighter squeeze turning through the living room door, but we manage. We set the trunk down next to the coat closet before she goes on, “If I thought you were asking because you thought it’d be fun, I’d probably be fine with it.”

She goes to the closet for her keys. I know that’s what she’s doing, but they aren’t in there. Her purse is sitting on the end table in the corner of the living room. I grab it, leaving her to hunt and explain, “I’m not saying it’ll never happen. What I am saying is that ‘I deserve it’ will never be a valid reason for something like that.”

After fruitlessly searching, she turns around and I hold out her purse. She only looks annoyed for as long as my grin lasts.

“What I did was different,” she says as she digs through her purse. “Like I said, that was for you. I thought it might help you get over some of the…” She’s concentrating too much on what she’s saying and not enough on what she’s looking for. “I’m not even sure what to call it. ‘Trauma’ works, but it’s not just that.”

This could take a while. I grab my coat and put it on anyway.

“You were having so much trouble being touched. I just figured if I couldn’t, it might help. I’m sorry if that confused you.”

I reply, “I wasn’t confused.”

She says, “That’s not exactly what I meant.” The stress comes through in her tone. “I’m just not sure how to explain it.” She gives up on the search long enough to straighten out her thoughts and conclude, “I didn’t mean to mislead you. That’s not me. I’m not—”

I want to help, but I think the best way to do that is to shut up and let her figure it out. She’ll eventually get there.

It doesn’t take her long to recover. “There aren’t many other reasons I’d go there. But it’s not like I had trouble dealing either. Actually, I kind of enjoyed it once we got past all of the—” She cuts off when her keys jingle and hands them to me.

Enough said. I don’t see any reason to wait around. I reply, “So did I,” as I open the door and glance over my shoulder. She looks worried. I assume it’s not over that last thing and offer a reassuring, “I swear I’ll be right back.” Yeah, that’d be it. She doesn’t look happy when I shut the door.

She’s gonna tell me what’s up soon or…

I go straight to the car, just like I promised. Pressing the button on the key fob, I pop the trunk, grab one of the boxes and head back inside. They’re more like trays. And I can totally see what she’s thinking. They’re made to fit inside that chest we just hauled downstairs. Each one’s stacked full of all of the tools of the trade. I could put down just about anything with what’s here.

There’s only one thing missing. I’ll have to ask her what happened to that shiny red axe she picked up in Sunnydale. I bet she’s got it stashed away somewhere. I wouldn’t leave it in the trunk of a car if it was mine either.
Otherwise, this is pretty much the perfect setup. The trays fit side-by-side in the trunk. All she has to do is pop and grab. But the medieval weapon’s locker might not go over well with the natives. Better to do this at night when no one’s watching. I’m not looking forward to wrestling that thing down those stairs tomorrow, but that’s really the only way to be discreet with this much stuff.

I drop off the first tray, opening the trunk to put it inside on top of the one that’s still in there. *Huh.* The bottom tray looks like a game of Pick-Up Sticks for perverts. I consider switching the trays around. I may when I get back.

She pokes her head around the corner, stammering, “I, umm…” when she sees what I’m doing.

I’m a whole lot less surprised than she is. I got the message earlier. When she unpacked her bag from the spa, most of it went in there.

Opening the door, I turn to wink at her and say, “It’s cool, B.” I could get some serious mileage out of this, but there’s no sense in starting in on her now. Hell, I should just leave it, say, ‘Well, alright, B.,’ and pray that whatever part of her mind she’s lost never comes back. Giving her a reason to get all uppity and straight-laced really isn’t in my best interest.

Nothing catastrophic or even remotely interesting happens as I fetch the other tray. Of course, it is after midnight on a weekday, so…

Yeah, and in my ever-so-limited experience that means absolutely nothing. If there’s a reason to stress, she’s totally right to go there.

Once I’m back inside, I swap the trays out, putting the fun stuff on top. It’s hard for me to admit that might be a tough sell. I wasn’t convinced by the whole ‘sex toys’ thing in the first place. And that looks really awkward. More awkward than that other thing. But who knows? Maybe two heads really are better than one.

Doesn’t look like she’s convinced either, considering the fact that she picked up more than one of the same type of thing.

From where I stand…if things ever get back to anything resembling semi-normal, I’m pretty sure I’m not gonna want that. I like touching her too much. The idea that she might be more adventurous than me is hard to get my head around. But if the big fat hint in that chest is any kind of clue, I may end up having to pass her the crown.

The smell of coffee draws me into the kitchen, but the gurgling preps me for disappointment. It’s still brewing. I snicker when I see that she’s leaned against the counter eating a low fat yogurt. I don’t know what it is…

Maybe she’ll take the hint if I humor her. “I’ll brush my teeth.” Not that I’d mind her coming out, but her smoking is just too weird. She needs to stick with her yogurt. I open the patio door.

It takes her a few to join me. I get just enough peace, cold, dank air and quiet. My head actually shuts up. It’s nice while it lasts.

When the door rattles, I help her out. She could use a hand. At least she wore a coat this time, but trying to balance two cups of coffee and open the doors is a little much. Once the catastrophe’s averted, she asks, “Do you remember how it was after we left Sunnydale?”

I take my cup from her, but that question pretty much does me in. We had about two or three minutes. That’s all the peace we got. It’s like she was the glue that was holding us together. It went away when she fainted.
It wasn’t her fault. She’d lost so much blood that, once the adrenaline wore off, she was done. And so were we. Willow caught her and Xander carried her onto the bus. Between the two of them and Dawn, I thought…

But it wasn’t just them. There was a crater between us and nearest hospital. There was no going around it, so we had to head northwest through the mountains to Bakersfield.

Buffy was in and out. She got more confused as time went on. But I couldn’t help with that. All I could do was listen. I had to take care of Wood. But I couldn’t do much for him either. Just keep pressure on his wounds and make sure he stayed conscious. That’s all any of us could do.

It was hell. We’d just done the impossible. We saved the world. We should’ve been on top of it, but we got a dose of desperation instead.

“You’re thinking about right after, aren’t you?” Her tone is cautious, timid even… She understands.

I shake it off, mumbling, “Yeah, that wasn’t good,” and realizing that my cigarette’s almost gone. But that’s nothing new. Smoking’s just one of those habits. I flick the ash away.

My throat’s dry. She agrees, “No, it wasn’t,” as I have a sip of coffee. “But I meant the first week or so after that.”

I whisper, “That was bad too.” I had nothing to lose, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t get it. I watched. I understood that they’d lost pretty much everything. Again, we should’ve been partying, but it’s impossible to just get over something like that. We tried. We started to pick up the pieces. We even let lose a couple of times because it was the right thing to do. But it’s not like you can really let loose if that’s your reason.

Xander got wasted and kind of stayed that way. I joined him. But drunk and brooding…?

_Oh, yeah._ Good times.

She says, “We did our best.”

I’m sure she has something else. She wouldn’t just bring this up for no reason, but I interrupt to ask, “What happened to the scythe?”

“It’s upstairs,” she says. I take another hit off my smoke as she thinks better of that. “Well, not really.” I didn’t mean to upset her. “Willow has it. They made me a prop so I’d look the part. That’s all I’m good for now.”

I crush my cigarette out. I’m done. We could go back inside, but she’s not. Not even close. “It’s in a garment bag between my discount Ralph Lauren and my fake Versace.” She gets progressively more uptight as she goes on. “God, I loved that dress. I couldn’t afford it, so I looked everywhere until I found something close.”

“I’m sorry brought this up,” I mumble, but I don’t think she hears me or at least, she acts that way.

She says, “All I have now are fakes.” I accept the hand she offers. “You’re the only real thing in my life.”

That’s nice, albeit a little weird, but I’ll let that part slide. The sentiment’s still sweet even if it does make want to check for labels.
The rest of that’s just sad. She made this sound like a vacation when we talked before. But now, it’s pretty easy to see the other side of that. If I’m reading her correctly, she feels like she’s being punished.

I ask, “Why does she have it?” I may as well. Our conversation’s been spiraling since I first opened my mouth. I really can’t make it worse.

Well, I could, but—

“She’s trying to do something to help,” she replies as I get the door. When I stop to top off my cup, she says, “Look, Faith, we’ve got a lot to cover and not much time. I’ll do what I can to explain, but I really need to just get this over with.”

On that note, we both walk through the house, stopping to hang our coats and flipping off lights as we go. I even swing through the bathroom and brush my teeth as promised. The irony doesn’t go missing. All of that happens in silence. Whatever’s wrong, it must suck.

When we reach the room, she goes to the closet. Taking down a garment bag, she lays it over her open suitcase. There’s no mistaking what it is. The bag conforms to the shape of the scythe. She unzips it, revealing the blue dress she had on the first night we met. Her hiding place is just about perfect, even if it doesn’t matter. It’s the kind of thing I’d expect her to do with something like that.

The blue dress must be the fake. The tag doesn’t say, ‘Ralph Lauren,’ so that’s a fair guess.

I say, “I got the message, but I have one thing I’d like to add if that’s alright.”

“Okay,” she replies.

She takes the bag, hangs it and adds more to it while I share my thought, “I don’t care what you say about that dress. It’s great.” Her ego really doesn’t need more stroking. She knows she’s pretty. But ‘pretty’ and ‘wanted’ are two different things. “When you walked into the club that night, no one cared about your dress. They weren’t trying to figure out who designed it. It was you they were looking at.” Maybe this’ll help. “That thing’s smoking hot, but it’d never get there without you in it.”

Casting a glance over her shoulder, she says, “Thank you.” The fact that she’s smiling makes it worth it.

I come back with a quick, “Oh, don’t thank me,” as I set my coffee down next to hers on the chest of drawers. “I should be thanking you. It’s true.”

It didn’t occur to me before tonight that the closet beside hers is just full of bags and boxes. That’s all that’s in it. I thought there was other stuff, but there’s not. She’s been planning this for a while, probably since she got here. And I thought she was settling in.

As I walk over to grab another bag, she says, “Willow thinks she can make more. Or that’s what she said.”

There’s something about the way she says that. Like there’s a catch. Not that I have any clue what she means. Maybe if just let her talk, she’ll start making sense. It’d be nice to know who’d send such a thoughtful gift. And what made them think our heroine might enjoy heroin.

She asks, “Do you remember Willow saying that she couldn’t feel the scythe?” I open my mouth only to get cut off. “No, you weren’t there.” I love it when she does that. But at least I know what she’s talking about now. The way she acted I thought we were done with this.
I don’t bother correcting her. Truth is, I heard that. I’m not sure when or from who, but it really doesn’t matter. We were living in a house full of teenage girls at the time. Keeping something secret wasn’t gonna happen.

“Well, she can now,” she says. “She got pretty close to it bailing us out. I guess it rubbed off.” She’s gone back to work so I may as well look busy.

I was going to pack my underwear. I was even going to do it right. But I’ve been standing around, watching her, waiting for some miraculous flash of insight. I unzip my bag, pull out the drawer and dump it. That seems like kind of a shame after she folded everything, but its underwear. I don’t care if it’s wrinkled. In fact, I don’t even think it gets wrinkled.

As I take a quick sip of my coffee, grab my bag and cross the room, she asks, “I wonder what that says…if there’s something different about us.” She struggles enough with how to put it that I expect something more interesting. “Well, not us, but what she feels when she’s around us.” It’s just a silly rhetorical question. They’re cool and all, but I wish she’d move on.

She must think the same because she shrugs it off and does just that. “I think she’s afraid of it.” I set my bag down and start pulling clothes off of hangers. “She raised an army with that thing. She says it’s dangerous and I’m in no position to argue. In the wrong hands, it might be.”

And that would be the catch. I can’t say that I’m impressed.

Well, I am, but I’m not. I’m impressed that my plan to let her talk had a shelf life of maybe a whole three minutes. But Willow should’ve minded her own damn business. She had no right butting in. I have to ask, “So basically, Willow just took it from you?” That’s all I’m going to ask.

B. replies, “Yeah, I guess if you want to put it that way.”

I nod. That’s nice. We’ll argue less if I just pack my shit, so…

She waits for me to say something else. Or I guess that’s it because there’s near silence from the other side of the room for a good minute or so. A few hangers scrape and some stuff like that. Finally, she states the obvious, “I don’t think she plans to make any more. That wouldn’t make sense.”

No, it wouldn’t. I probably shouldn’t, this really is none of my business, but I can’t help resenting Willow.

It doesn’t help when B. says, “Obviously, I was told to keep this quiet, but I wasn’t going to lie to you. I don’t want to. Besides, it’d be pointless. All you’d have to do is touch the stupid thing to know the truth.” She zips her suitcase closed and works on piling it and the others by the door as she admits, “There are a few more like this. It’s kind of a trademark now, so they’re passing them out like party favors. All you have to do to get one is look enough like me.”

I mumble, “That’s just depressing.”

It surprises me with all of the noise she’s making that she hears me. But she must because she defends Willow. “I really can’t argue. Her instincts have been right so far. She’s the one who first noticed.”

I finish folding and stowing my last few things while I wait for the report on what meddlesome little Willow noticed. But B. holds off. It’s not until I go to stack my bags with hers that she says, “That first week she said what we needed to do was to try and get control of the business.”
I almost ask, ‘What business?’ But there’s no point. She’ll get around to it. Instead, I try to look conspicuously out of work and wait for her to tell me what she needs.

But she’s too busy slipping her shoes into one of those things that looks like a garment bag to notice me. “I thought she was just looking for something to do to take her mind off of things, so I said sure. I didn’t think…” She gets quiet. I’d love to know what going on in her head.

And the best way to accomplish that is still to keep my trap shut.

When I don’t derail her, she asks, “Did you hear anything about how that went?”

“Rumors mostly,” I reply, determined to keep my answer simple. “I know it didn’t go well. I steered clear of Willow. She was pretty ticked off.” I’m not even sure why. I didn’t bother to ask. But given the mood of the moment, her behavior wasn’t that unusual.

B. finishes with her shoes and gets up, glancing at me as she heads for her other closet.

Well, I’m not gonna stand around looking like a Mexican out in front of a Home Depot any longer. She’s almost done anyway. The duffle she just grabbed should be enough to finish. I’m honestly surprised. Other than that trunk, she doesn’t have that much more stuff than I do. Mostly it’s just shoes and doing away with the boxes really cut the bulk.

As I snag my coffee and sit down on the bed, she says, “It was a mess. I wish I could’ve ‘steered clear,’ but I was stuck.” She takes a handful of shirts and sweaters from her closet and lays them on the bed. Turning to get another, she says, “At least it didn’t last long.”

I put my coffee on the floor and pitch in, taking shirts off of hangers and folding them. She piles more next to what I’m working on and sits down.

Moving the bag between us, she says, “You can imagine that an organization as old as the Watchers Council probably had some pretty deep pockets.” She mentions the council and it clicks. I think I see where she’s going. “They certainly never seemed to want for anything.”

Yeah, the others have been flipping out over cash for a while now. That and ‘deep pockets’ really don’t mix.

She says, “Just the places that were destroyed when the First tried to take them out were a pretty solid clue.” And that cinches it. I’m a little disappointed in myself. I should’ve seen this earlier. I probably would’ve if my head hadn’t been so firmly lodged up my ass.

“Tried?” I ask. That’s the real gem in that sentence. I don’t need to see her nod to know. My brain spins. The implications are… This is bad. No wonder she’s tweaking.

It takes a few, but I get my head straight enough to ask, “So the council still exists?” There’s a problem with my question. I stammer through clarifying, “Their council, not our council.”

“That’s what we think,” she replies.

Shit.

She goes on, “Of course we can’t confirm that,” but I lose track of what she’s saying. The idea that those fuckers are still around doesn’t exactly thrill me. Getting free of them was the only good thing to come out of that crap in Sunnydale. Now she’s telling me that’s wrong?

I pull myself together in time to catch the last part of what she says, “Whoever it was, they were
scary in a super geeky sort of way. We’re talking nerd concentrate. They pulled an end-run around Willow with a computer. And I’ve never seen a computer that could do that, much less a person.”

I’m not sure that made sense, but I take her point. Willow’s a brainy girl, annoyingly so sometimes.

Neither one of us is doing anything now. As I reach for my cup, B. adds, “Oh, and Andrew. Can’t forget about Andrew.”

I take a drink. My coffee’s lukewarm. It sucks. But getting more is completely out of the question now, so I pick up another shirt. Maybe if I keep my hands busy…

“Believe me,” she says, “I’d love to find a better theory, but I don’t think the remaining members of an organization whose collective head has been placed on a chopping block by a bunch of handicapable monks controlled by a smugly sarcastic, ancient evil would be—”

I lend my two cents just to help her out, “I don’t think they’d be worried about the money either. I think they’d be all about finding a deeper hole.” We’re finally in agreement. It figures that it’d be over something as severely twisted as this.

She sees what I’m doing and takes a sweater from the pile before stating the obvious, “Yeah, so… there was only one reasonable thing left to assume. The people at the top never came out of the shadows.” The smile she gives me never quite makes it to her eyes. I wish she looked happier, but I get why she doesn’t when she says, “Shadow men. Funny, how they dropped that little hint and we never picked up on it.”

Here’s an ugly thought: I wonder if she’s considered where the crap that happened to us might fit into all of this. I have to ask, “So, do you think Sparky’s connected?”

“I’d considered that,” she replies, “but honestly, I don’t know.”

I manage to get the shirt I’ve been holding forever folded. I drop it into the bag and grab another.

“It wouldn’t be the first time the council’s used a vamp to do their dirty work.” She sees the flaw and corrects herself, “Not that Sparky’s a vamp.”

I try to slip in, “Yeah, I got that.”

But my reply gets buried as she finishes her thought, “Or even necessarily connected to the council.”

I guess what she’s saying is that he’s evil. It’s definitely not above them to use evil things to do their bidding. The rest of that…

I can see why she says it, but if he is one of them, that’d explain the mask. Their identities would be secret. A secret they managed to keep from the oldest evil. It wouldn’t matter if he was someone we knew or not, he’d still want to hide who he was just in case we made the connection.

And motive…he’d have shitloads of reason to screw with us then. The council wanted one girl they could use as a puppet. We gave them a few thousand. Nothing screams ‘obedience’ quite like hordes of whiny teenage girls.

Yeah, I don’t like it…which means it’s probably true. It sure makes them more threatening than a bunch of tweed-wearing English librarians, even with the MI-6 vibe.

The question is how many of them are like him? If there’s more than one, we may as well get out
the white flags right now because we’re done.

But my guess is he’s something different. Something new. I mean, if they’re all like that, why would they need us?

Why would they need anything? They could just go all Terminator on anything that got in their way.

She’s waiting for me to say something. Or maybe she’s just waiting for me to not look like I’m doing long division in my head. Either way, I wouldn’t want to disappoint her, so I come up with a snarky comment, “Why settle for one freak show when you can have the whole carnival?” It occurs to me that maybe I just want this all to fit. A huge conspiracy would give what happened to us some meaning. In spite of that, I force a snicker and finish my thought, “That’s how things usually work for us, right? We’re just special that way.”

“Yeah, yeah, we are,” she replies. The sweater she took five minutes ago is still in her lap. She picks it up by the shoulders and does the mall store fold so fast it makes the wait seem comical.

I smile and join back in. I’m one to talk. I’ve got a sweater in my lap too. It’s kind of cute. I’m tempted to put it aside. I’d like to see her in it.

Placing the sweater in the bag, she says, “So, here’s what I know: Willow and Andrew managed to follow just enough. They got a few aliases, some account numbers and a little money to start, but only a small fraction of what they speculated was there.” She takes another shirt and folds it between thoughts. “We sort of dropped it after that. There wasn’t much we could do.”

Once she gets started, she just goes, mindlessly folding as she explains, “When this thing came up with you, Giles and I discussed what we could do to help. We both felt we’d dropped the ball. But there weren’t any easy answers. It’s pretty obvious that none of us are on Arnie’s social calendar.” She pauses long enough to sip her coffee and make a face. Hers must be cold too. “If the council excelled at one thing, it’s making stuff happen that shouldn’t. And we still had those names. We decided to take a chance. I mean, what harm could it possibly do to ask?”

Apparently, enough. I look down. That’s handy. The case is right next to me where she left it. She called this thing ‘an answer’ earlier. Picking it up, I ask, “So I can assume this isn’t a flu shot?”

“No,” she replies. Well, at least I made her smile. And this one even made it to her eyes.

She probably doesn’t need the nudge, but impatient is something I was hours ago. “So why don’t you enlighten me?”

There’s one shirt left. Picking it up, she sighs. As she folds it and stuffs it in the bag, she says, “It’s for this bizarre rite of passage the council used to put us through. They called it the Cruciamentum, and trust me, it’s every bit as pleasant as it sounds.”

Well, that’s enough for me. I get the picture. They drugged her, and naturally, because they’re such nice guys, they tried to get her killed. I missed my turn and now they want to make it up to me. I think I’ll pass. We’re almost done here and I’m convinced we should just keep going. Load the car, hit the road and not look back.

She doesn’t need to say any more, but I just let her go. “A week before my eighteenth birthday, Giles wanted me to start doing these meditation exercises. He was always ragging on me about my concentration, so I didn’t think anything of it.”

When I deal with the shirt that’s in my lap, she gets up. It kind of surprises me. I look around.
There’s nothing left on the bed. Our closets are both empty except for the hangers. She clears the rest of them away and zips the bag closed, putting it with the others, all while I’m catching up and she’s explaining, “I should’ve. Focus exercises are supposed to make you sharper, but these left me feeling wiped out. I was forgetting stuff and losing blocks of time. But it was Giles, so…”

I move over to my side of the bed and get comfortable.

She still has a few things to do. There are a couple of jewelry boxes on the chest of drawers and some odds and ends. She makes her way around the room, collecting them as she says, “The test was meant to destroy my relationship with him. He should’ve been the one person I trusted. That’s how it’s supposed to go, but I’m just special…not to mention kind of stubborn.”

I shut my eyes and listen. There’s another thing that surprises me about all of this. Her voice is so neutral. There’s no emotion. I’d be pissed if this happened to me. But maybe it’s just been so long ago.

“He was ordered to strip me of my power by slowly poisoning me and feed me to the wolves. They always pick really special wolves to do their dirty work. The kind of animals that leave nothing behind. But that doesn’t matter. What matters is he did and he made me think I was the one with the problem.” Her act is good while it lasts, but the fact is, it doesn’t. “That mattered for a long time after. In some ways, it still matters.”

Well, at least I know she’s okay. Her saying that with the same chilly indifference would’ve really bothered me.

She’s quiet for a moment. When her story continues, she has a handle on her emotions, “If everything had gone according to plan, the council would’ve swept in to save the day. They would’ve claimed that Giles had acted alone.”

She drops the last bag and her laptop case off by the door. Curling up beside me, she goes on, “The idea behind the Cruciamentum is something like brainwashing. They villainize the last person you trust and step up to take their place. But by then you’re already trained, so there’s no worry about any troubling emotional connections after that. What they want is to make a tool. Something they can point in right direction and sit back to watch the carnage.”

I grumble, “God, get a TV,” and she laughs.

“Anyway, I got really interested in history after that happened. And you should know me well enough to put together just how bad it was from that,” she says, rolling onto her back.

I turn onto my side to look, propping my head in my hand.

Her face is drawn with stress, but her voice still sounds detached. “I dug around until I found a couple of cases they deemed successful. It wasn’t easy. The success rate was about one in twenty…or so…give-take. It’s hard to say. But I needed to see a couple to understand what they had in mind.”

I thought she was cool when she laughed, but she’s really not. My first instinct is to hold her, but she’s got that prickly, standoffish vibe going on. I turn away to give her space. Maybe she’ll work it out if I just let her talk. “You’d think they’d give up with that kind of failure rate. Any sane person would.” I wish there was more I could do. “But that’s the thing about us. We have no value. Failure was just a way to start over. It was easy for them, especially if they’d managed to separate their victim from everyone who cared.”
The reason she’s so upset comes clear when she shares, “The worst case I found was of a girl in the eighteen-twenties who was so severely beaten and raped that they determined her to be unstable without even giving her a chance. They murdered her right after she dusted the vamp.” She swallows. It’s a thick, awkward sound that makes me wish I could get her a cup of coffee. “She passed and failed both at once. Just surviving wasn’t enough.”

That’s mostly because I want to leave. I want to help, but I want to leave. A coffee run would be like having my cake and eating it too. But she needs me to listen, so I stay.

And so does she. She even makes herself continue, “Her watcher couldn’t live with what he’d done.” I’m not sure how she does it. “I kind of picked up on that because the pages were bloodstained. It was awful. The account was a suicide note.”

I’d have to be fool not to see the similarities. But I don’t know what to make of them. I don’t know how I should feel.

She says, “Now I know I don’t need to tell you what any of this means. That’d be a complete waste of time.” And I get that the right response would probably be fear. But I don’t feel that. Maybe I will tomorrow. I don’t know. I don’t feel much at all.

She’s quiet for such a long time that I get up and go to get us coffee. I tell her, “I’ll be right back,” but she doesn’t react at all. I make my way downstairs, skipping all of the bad steps, dump the cold stuff out, rinse our cups, pour more and get her creamer. I even remember to add the packet of Splenda to her cup.

I should be all torn up. But really, I’m more worried that I’m not worried. And that’s about dumb.

When I get back to the room, she propped up on her side, facing the door, waiting for me. The difference in her appearance is like night and day. It throws me. Sometime during my absence, she got a serious attitude adjustment. And I wasn’t gone that long. I hand her cup off and she says, “Thank you.” She takes a sip, smiles and puts it down.

I don’t know what to say, so I hope she has something. It takes her a moment, but she doesn’t let me down. “When stuff like this happens, people say that the best revenge is just to survive.”

I mumble, “Well, that’s probably a good start.” Sounds like we’ll have our hands full just doing that.

“Yeah, okay,” she says, “but I think that’s complete crap. It’s like high drama cliché at its worst. I like to have some standards.”

It shouldn’t surprise me that she disagrees. We agree on so little.

I’d like to go to my side of the bed and lay down, but she looks so relaxed that I don’t want to disturb her. As I sit in front of her on the floor, she continues, “They also like to say that living well is the best revenge. And I think that’s probably, as you said, ‘a good start.’ But I’ll always come down in favor of anything that sounds like it might involve copious amounts of shopping.”

I smirk. She’s just funny.

Taking my hand, she says, “Finding happiness is the thing that rings closest to true in my book. But there’s a problem with that. If you really have a reason to want revenge, happiness isn’t gonna happen. So basically, all of those statements are just stupid.” She takes a deep breath. “The only one that’s actually possible is the first one. But wouldn’t you prefer to have something that doesn’t sound so totally desperate?”
That’s just a given. Who wouldn’t want something more?

She doesn’t give me a chance to offer that opinion. Tugging my hand, she pulls me on top of her while rolling onto her back. It’s kind of a minor miracle that I manage to miss both coffee cups. I keep going and end up on my side next to her facing the door.

As I prop my head up and meet her eyes, she says, “The only way we’ll ever find happiness is to make peace with this and move on. That’s what I want. Whatever it takes…”

It’s funny, when I hear that, most of the things she’s done lately that just seemed strange at the time make sense. That was the missing piece. I get her now.
I chance a glance at her as we inch forward, following the cars ahead of us. She’s more interested in driving than anything to do with me. But I guess it’s no wonder. Traffic’s thick and the lanes are cramped. I could practically roll down my window and touch the guy next to us.

She’s doing great. So much better than I am. But if I’m honest, she’s probably better at pretty much everything than I am. Her driving’s even better. She drives me nuts sometimes, but she also follows the rules and doesn’t do anything sudden or crazy.

Her arm rests next to mine on the console. We’ve sort of been sharing the space. She hasn’t moved or shoved, so I take a chance and place my hand over hers. I don’t even know what makes me do it. I should still be pissed. She should be too. But I guess she isn’t because she lets me. I just wish my hand wasn’t shaking. It sucks.

That does it. I need to trust her. She’s got this. I shut my eyes. Focusing on how her skin feels beneath my fingertips is a much better waste of my time.

Her hand turns. She wants to slip away. I jerk like I’ve been scalded, beating her to—

My eyes snap open just as she catches my hand. Returning it to the console, she says, “I’m sorry.” I stare, watching her caress the side of my pinkie with her thumb. “I shouldn’t have said that. I just…” She takes a breath like she’s gonna continue.

When she doesn’t, I have to look. She presses her lips together and exhales through her nose. It comes out like a frustrated sigh. There’s even a little grumble at the end. It’s cute.

It’s also dead obvious she wants to say more, but doesn’t know how. Or maybe she’s afraid to. Either way, I’ve been there, so I give her some slack by turning my attention back to our hands.

After most of forever and half of next week, she says, “I don’t want to make excuses.”

“It’s cool,” I reply. “Don’t worry about it. I was just thinking about how great you’re doing. I know this is hard for you.”

“No, it’s not that,” she says. “I mean it is, but—”

She’s a little annoyed, so I lower my voice, “This is hard for me too.”

“I know,” she says. “It just feels like—”

When she falls flat, distracted because the car in front of us surges forward, I finish my thought, “Actually, there isn’t anyone around us who enjoys this shit.” Funny, for such an obvious, trivial little statement…it’s a bitch to get out there. I mumble under my breath. My palms are wet and my throat’s dry. It really sucks.

I don’t get nervous. Not like this.

Not over bullshit like this.
But in the plus column: we might make it through the light this time if she pushes it.

Someone needs to slap the snot out of the reject who designed these intersections. Two major streets meet here and both dead end one way. Westbound Calhoun is funneled over onto—I think this is Main—using the last thirty feet of southbound Clifton. It’s a complete clusterfuck.

And a booming commercial district. Great combo. Good planning.

As we turn, I take a look at the street sign. It’s McMillan. My memory’s for shit.

There’s enough room for us to squeeze in and not block the intersection, but the light up ahead is red, so…

Once we’re stopped, she goes on, “I only know one way to do this. I—” Or tries. Her voice breaks. The ‘I’ becomes a gasp. She shuts her eyes and scrunches them tight, blinking them open again.

I mutter, “Just say it,” hoping to encourage her. But I come off impatient instead, so I take another shot, “I’ll try to keep my mouth shut. I know I’m—”

“You’re fine,” she replies, cutting me off at the pause. “You have every reason to be upset. I should’ve been more honest.”

Go figure. I stalled because I wasn’t sure what fit best. “Yeah, you should’ve,” I agree, forever ending the debate by proving that I’m decidedly a pain in the butt.

And I’m probably just inviting more misery. What she said—that first thing—it didn’t exactly sound positive. But I want her to have her say, so I encourage her again, “Just tell me what’s on your mind. I’ll try to be cool about it.” It could be worth it. Maybe if we have this out, things will take a turn for normal.

Whatever that is.


The clock ticks. I can’t actually watch it—digital clock and all—but it flips over to the next minute as we sit in silence. Someone really needs to sweep these eggshells off the floor. This is getting tedious.

She’s probably just trying to get it all straight in her head.

Or more likely, she knows exactly what she wants to say and she’s just repeating the same shit over-and-over, trying to come up with the nerve.

I can’t imagine why. I’ve been the model of patience. I just went ballistic over going to the hospital.

Just going.

She didn’t have to tell me I could wait in the car. I should’ve seen that myself. I mean, unless she was planning to hoggie me and drag me along.

Not that she even bothered to tell me which one. We’ve passed two so far. I have no clue where we’re headed. I stare out my window at a U-Haul truck that sits in a parking lot along the side of the street. If I was driving, we’d be on the seventy-four headed for Indy by now. The longer she makes me wait, the crazier I get, the more I—
I’m not even sure what I was upset about now. I take my cheek in hand. It feels chilly, but I know it’s not. My face is burning up. I feel like an ass. I need to straighten up. Fuck off and get over it… before I end up doing that by request.

The light changes. It takes a solid fifteen seconds for the movement to reach our position. And once we get going, we only make it a few car-lengths before the idiot in front of us signals left. He can’t seriously think he’s gonna parallel park in this shit.

He does. And she actually hangs back to let him. That’s a hell of a lot nicer than I’d be. No surprise. The asshole behind us honks.

The guy backs up. He’s good. He hits the mark first try. No bullshit. We pull forward once he’s clear. I’m a little surprised to see that ‘he’s’ a ‘she.’ The difference isn’t obvious until she gets out of her car. Chick’s wearing one of those skirt-suit things I wouldn’t be caught dead in.

As I check out the townie’s tragic fashion sense, B. says, “There’s just so much between us that needs to be behind us for this to work.”

Being a model of corporate refinement costs this chick. She has an umbrella. Fat lot good it does her. The wind buffets it around as she dashes for a storefront halfway down the block.

“I have to forgive you and move on. Forget all that and concentrate on who you are now. It’s not fair to you if I don’t.”

B. doesn’t need to explain this stuff. She knows I get it.

The light turns red. We missed it. As we take our position in the herd, she concludes, “What I said about Giles was just not—” She squeezes my hand. “It wasn’t that.”

It figures she can’t make her point without scratching a scab.

“I really am sorry,” she mumbles.

You’d think once the anger faded, she’d have the good sense to give it a rest.

I’m so sick of fighting. I take a deep breath to clear my head and try to smooth things over. “Don’t be.” For a practiced liar, I suck today. My cheeks flush. I look down to hide my face with my hair and grumble something closer to the truth, “I haven’t exactly been a blast to be around.”

Giles ‘did his job.’ That’s what she said. B. implied he ‘watched’ the whole thing. I remember how I felt that night, the cold, the rain, the booze…and those were just the minor points.

Dae deserved to die as much or more than any of the other vamps I’ve offed. I did what I had to.

Until I did more than I had to.

I can just imagine what Giles had to say. He probably thought I was the one who needed saving. They probably both did. That’s exactly how they’d see it.

He sent me off, chasing after myself like some idiot child. Now she’s sticking by me with the same dogged determination she shows to anything she believes in. Or anyone she wants to save.

And this is exactly what set me off before. All she said was she’s sorry. There’s an outstanding reason to fly off the handle if I’ve ever heard one.

I need to get over this. It’s bullshit. I promised I’d be cool.
I set my jaw and look up, focusing on the traffic signal in the distance. Not the part that’s easy to see. That won’t tell me shit, except it’s not our turn. The lights for the cross street are what I’m interested in.

I just can’t believe she’d want anything to do with me after that. That doesn’t seem like her.

The inside of the crosswalk’s light hood reflects a red pulsing light.

Apparently I misjudged her.

Ten flashes. Ten seconds. Almost…

Why I’m in such a hurry to get someplace I don’t want to go is the real mystery.

What I should do is stop worrying about ‘why’ and just accept that she’s on my side. Be grateful that she thinks I’m worth the hassle. I may actually have something going for me now.

That’d be new.

Maybe it’s just that I’m not used to relying on someone so much. Could be that’s part of what’s got my nose out of joint. She’s the only thing that’s been keeping me coloring on the right page.

Inside the lines might be nice, but—

One thing at a time.

She lets go of my hand when I lift it. I reach around to touch the left side of her face and lean in. All I want is to give her a peck on the cheek, but she turns and I miss.

It’s the best miss ever.

She lingers, enjoying my miss. Her face is so soft. And her mouth…

Her lips…

Her hands…

And that tongue. It’s—

Someone honks and we both jump. Her foot slips off the brake.

She almost hits the gas. Good thing she checks. The car in front of us hasn’t moved yet. She gasps and stomps the brakes.

But once the initial ‘oh shit’ moment’s over, it’s over. She just brushes her hair back, takes my hand and says, “I think you’re an amazing person, Faith.”

That’s really sweet. I start to say so, but the guy ahead of us finally gets his act together and she keeps up. Figures, it’s the asshole behind us who wakes him up by hitting his horn.

At least one of us is with it. Between that kiss, which was pretty ‘wow,’ and this other guy who’s tragically stupid, I lose track.

The brain trust is on foot, holding a soggy, folded up newspaper over his head. His light-gray overcoat’s streaked with water, growing darker and wetter by the second. B.’s leaving enough room between us and the next guy to park a stretch limo. We haven’t broken fifteen miles-an-hour
in blocks. So guess it’s no surprise when Rain Man walks out in front of us.

She mashes the brakes. Trouble is, no one in the other lane is feeling half as generous as she is. Now where I’m from, brain damage like this would be rewarded with a string of obscenities and rude gestures. The fact that B. doesn’t seem to care is just—

With the exception of one short pause, she talks right through the whole thing. She even waves to the doofus when he puts his hand up and retreats. By the time she finishes, all I have is that she said words, lots of them, most of them a little too fast. I catch her parting shot, “We both made mistakes.”

I reply, “I know,” just to keep up…or with any luck, make her believe that I am.

Lemming aside, things go pretty well this round. No one decides to parallel park and only one car slows down to turn. We almost make the light.

As we roll to a stop, she says, “People screw up. We don’t mean to. We just do.” She licks her lips, drawing the lower one in to nibble. For a nervous tick, this is pretty hot. She doesn’t let go so much as pull her lower lip from between her teeth before she says, “And it’s not a matter of ‘if’ it’s more a matter of ‘when’.” That was even hotter. “Whether you mean for it to or not, it happens.”

I expect her to say more, but she just turns to look out her window. She picked a hell of a place to leave off, especially with that ‘you’ in there. It’s like she thinks I’m gonna screw up again.

And again. I smirk. Like that’d happen.

All the time.

I’m sure she didn’t mean it that way. She’s probably just kicking the next thing around before she brings it up. Eventually she proves me right by mumbling, “If someone falls off a building, is it the last step that matters or all the others it took to reach the roof?”

I answer, “Both,” without a second thought. For something totally random that leaves me wishing I’d paid more attention, I sure come up with a snappy reply. It just feels like a no brainer. Each step would be a bitch if their goal was to jump.

Thing is, she never said that. Maybe I should—

“Okay, so…same roof,” she says, “only more people. Say a group of friends is up there and one of them falls. Whose fault is that?”

I answer a little more carefully this time, “I’d need to know more to really judge, but if no one was pushed, I don’t see where it’d be anyone’s fault.” I even qualify my answer to avoid the same trap, “Could be the one who fell was just clumsy. Or unlucky.” I shrug. “Or maybe they wanted what they got.”

“That’s nicer than I’d be,” she replies. “But looking out for my friends is kind of an obsession for me.” As I open my mouth, ready to get all defensive, she plays peacemaker. “That didn’t come out right. It’s not that I think you don’t care.” I’m glad she does ’cause I wasn’t sure what to say.

I could point out that the only times I’ve fallen like that it was my call. The little swan dive I took to get away from her comes to mind. Somehow I can’t see her enjoying the reminder. Besides, I don’t think she’s talking literally. It figures I’m screwed up enough to have something literal to jump to.
She asks, “What if just one person led everyone else up to the roof, but wasn’t the one who fell?”

Another unrehearsed answer slips out, “I don’t see where that’d matter.” It just seems so obvious.

But she obviously doesn’t think so. “It does,” she says. The only thing that’s obvious now is her frustration. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe this isn’t—” I don’t get why she’s so upset. “I should find another way. This is such a sucky analogy. It really doesn’t fit.”

There’s only one car ahead of us. We get to go at almost the same instant the light changes. If no one turns, we might even cover more than one block.

But that’s just too much to ask. As we slow with the car in front of us, she says, “Willow was the one who fell.” Oh. No wonder. “And you know her, doing anything the normal way just isn’t in her makeup.” It figures she’s so pissy.

But I’m not exactly thrilled myself. The asshole ahead of us just had to pick this particular Kwik-E-Mart to stop at. There are dozens.

Whatever. He only slows her down the one way. She does just fine the other. “Barring the obvious result: death—and you don’t know how glad I am to bar that—a normal person might come away from a fall with a few booboos, maybe a broken a bone or two, something like that.”

Guy probably just wants a smoke. I can totally sympathize.

“Will fell without so much as breaking a nail,” she says. “But when she hit bottom, she tried to split the Earth in two. She’s a really special girl.”

It almost feels like a miracle when we blow through the next light. The real miracle is that B. sees it turn yellow and actually speeds up like a normal person.

“Thing is, we were all up there, dancing on the edge,” she says, growing progressively more bent out of shape. “We saw what was happening, but we were too wrapped up to really…” She trails off to take a breath. “I was too busy trying to fall myself to even notice. Will just beat me to it. To preserve my lame analogy, a gust of wind blew her over the edge. But I led her up there. She wouldn’t have been on that ‘roof’ if it wasn’t for me.”

It’s unsettling hearing her cut herself to ribbons. I have to put my two cents in. “That’s pretty harsh.”

“Is it?” she asks. “Will started using magic to help me.”

“Yeah,” I reply. “You didn’t make her choices for her.” It’s funny, this has nothing to do with me, but I sound almost as aggravated as she does.

“I know that,” she says. “But I didn’t try to stop her either. Not until it was too late. I didn’t really even caution her. That was mostly Giles and Tara. I didn’t do anything. And pretty much everything she did was because she wanted to help me. All the big stuff at least.”

I still think she’s being too hard on herself, but that’s just how she is. “Okay,” I reply. “I see your point.” I’ll let her have that. “But what good does feeling guilty do?”

Another car slows down to turn and so do we. “Guilt is part of it, but that’s not what I’m talking about,” she says, pausing to do something unprecedented for B. There’s a break in traffic in the right lane. She signals and actually moves over. “Will was the one who screwed up, but it was my fault too. She went down that path because of me.”
We still aren’t going to make the light, but I’m still impressed.

As pull up behind the car ahead of us, she says, “Forgiveness is all well and good. It’s great. But without that—” She falters, searching for the right words. What she arrives at seems pretty lame considering. “It just isn’t enough.”

What’s more, I’m not sure she’s even right. Placing fault before forgiveness is actually pretty messed up.

“It’s like when you came to town,” she says. “We were all so hung up on our own issues we didn’t even see. You were out of control and none of us lifted a finger to help. We didn’t even notice that there was a problem until it was too late. Whose fault was that?”


“And we didn’t try,” she implores. “We should’ve done something, but—” Her hand closes over mine. “We should’ve at least noticed.”

“You did notice. It just made you hate me,” I reply. She opens her mouth, but I’m a little more anxious to change the subject than she is to interrupt. “Look, B., it’s cool. I get it.” But even as I say that, I’m pretty sure I don’t. “That’s ancient history.” And that’s okay. The last thing I want is to reminisce. We have plenty of reasons to feel like crap without…

I watch the debate. Finally, she sees sense all on her own. “I guess.” I don’t even have to help. “It just bugs me that when it was all over…”

As I turn to rest my head against my window, forward momentum pushes me back in my seat. The light must’ve changed. Warm air blows on my face. Combined with the chill of the glass against my temple it feels strange, but good.

The view could use some work. I resist the urge to recoil. What I see reflected in the rain spattered window should be me, but it isn’t. It’s the washed out face of that bimbo from the picture she showed me earlier. Just goes to show, magic’s mostly mindfuck. I reach into my sleeve to touch the culprit. Like that’ll somehow make it alright.

I absently play with a little piece of quartz woven into the braided leather band fitted tightly to my wrist. My luck I’ll break it if I fidget too much.

I let go of my bracelet as she admits, “You’re right, I hated you.” She sounds really upset now, but there’s only so much… “I thought that everything that happened was your fault.”

Honestly, I think I’ve done enough. I’m the main reason she’s so stressed. She actually said she was sorry for helping me. There’s a first. People usually only help me when they want something. She did it just because.

But it wasn’t just that. She felt guilty because she couldn’t do more.

“It’s the same thing,” she says. “I thought I was infallible, but nothing could’ve been further from the truth.”

Oh. Oh. I get it now. She’s talking about owning your mistakes.

Uh…
No, not that…or not just that. Owning your part in the shit that happens. That’s totally different.

How’d I miss that?

A switch clicks followed by the tick of the turn signal. She’s going way too fast to turn.

I gasp. “Don’t—”

She does. The back end kicks out. Before I can warn her, she slams on the brakes. The car’s so overloaded and the pavement’s so slick, it spins us like a top.

As the rush hits me, I brace myself.

We come to an abrupt stop. Her laptop case flops against my legs. I guess the curb caught us. We end up still in our lane—the one she turned into—facing the opposite direction.

No one’s in the other lane. The street’s really wide. If she was gonna screw up, she picked the perfect spot.

I let go of the dash. Is it wrong that I think that was kind of fun, like a Tilt-a-Whirl without the ’tilt’?

Probably. I should feel like the luckiest idiot still alive. I know better. We didn’t hit anything, so the airbag didn’t break my arms.

After shoving her stuff against the console with my foot, I release my seatbelt and hop out.

She stammers, “Wha—” as I shut the door. I should get back in and explain, but—

My hair’s not dry from the last time I was out in this shit. Rain that might as well be sleet pelts my face. I’m instantly miserable.

I’ll get there when I get there.

There’s a driveway about three car lengths behind us. Trying to get her to go there would probably be too much. She was white as a sheet last I looked. I round the back of the car. I don’t know how she’s gonna handle me taking over, but one of us needs to do something before some Good Samaritan calls the cops.

That’d be just my luck.

Speaking of…a guy waits at the intersection to turn. He could go. There’s room, but—

I don’t see a cell phone so I guess it’s cool. As I approach her door, I hold my hand up, gesturing for a minute. He nods.

She still looks pretty freaked. I need to be gentle. She starts to lower the window, but I open the door. Looking up, she asks, “Why are you—?”

I cut her off, “It’s cool, B. I’m not upset.” I think she knows that. I just want to make sure. “I love you, but we need to go. Okay?” I don’t know why I said that, but it has the right effect. “Put the car in park, please, and move over.”

She gives me a funny look and starts to say, “I—”

I interrupt, “Please. Just trust me.” She knows I’m right. Nothing was hit and no one was hurt.
There’s no reason for us to hang out.

And every reason for us to leave.

Besides, I’m getting no less miserable. That might actually be the part that does it. Water trickles down my face, collecting at the lowest points, my nose and chin. When I wipe it away with my hand to keep it from dripping on her, she says, “Okay.”

I don’t really care what part works, so long as it does. But she isn’t nearly as graceful at getting over the console as I expect. I feel bad. She even tilts the wheel up and still struggles. I’ve never seen her quite so shaken. Wish I could help, but there’s not much I can do. I just thought this’d be better. I wanted to save her from what I’m going through. As she lifts her legs over the hump and swings them down, her heel snags on her laptop case.

Once she’s untangled, I get in and shut the door. Classy as ever, I unzip my coat and mop my face with my shirttail. It helps, but there’s a wet spot on my stomach now. My hands are frozen. I don’t want to touch her, but—

It’s all good. When I lean over, she takes the hint. Just a quick smooch is all I want. I pull away before I get her cold too. She looks calmer.

“Y’know, there’s something kind of beautiful about us.” Figures I’d get off to such a good start, only to stymie. I want to say something about how we fit. I’m not sure how to put it. I don’t want to add insult to injury by accusing her of being bad at anything, so…

First things first. I fasten my seatbelt and adjust the tilt wheel. I wish I could move the seat back, but that ain’t happening. There’s too much shit in back. So I put the car in drive and weasel us out of this mess. There’s no way to get around scuffing the rims some, but again, I do my best to be gentle.

Once we’re away from the curb, I shift into reverse and resist the urge to look back. Being that dense would just…

Besides, I know where I’m going. I check my door mirror anyway mostly to put her at ease. Turning to her, I say, “It’s just…the things I suck at…” I press the gas “…you’re pretty good at.” I could do this full throttle, but a bunch of reckless, showy shit would only make things worse. What I go for is something more relaxed and precise.

There’s a telephone pole this side of the driveway. I could use that as a mark and pull this off slicker than snot without ever looking. But nothing about my luck’s changed, so I glance in my mirror just to be sure before turning into the driveway.

I leave enough room for the guy who was waiting to pull in beside us if he wants. It’s rare, but some people do like to check. I’m just as glad that he isn’t one of them. As he blows by, she asks, “You love me?” I’ve got enough problems without…

Well, I said I was gonna wait till nothing else was hanging. I guess I did. This definitely isn’t about sex, or anything else for that matter. No one’s coming, so I put the car in drive and pull out before I reply, “I think so.”

Now there are ways normal people answer questions like that. All it takes is her mumbling, “But you’re not sure?” for me to realize that wasn’t one of them. I should’ve said, ‘yes.’ An emphatic ‘yes’ would’ve been even better.

I told her I love her to placate her. That’s beyond bad. But this…?
I’m not even sure what this is.

Traffic’s not as thick. I really don’t need to focus so much on the road, but I do…sort of. There’s just not much to look at right now. The view descending this hill’s usually pretty, but the rain’s reduced the city skyline to murky outlines.

I let off when the cars in front of us slow for another red light. There’s no shimmy or shake. I think the car’s fine.

I’m not, but that’s an entirely different story.

I guess I should count my blessings. She hasn’t blown up yet. She must be waiting to see if I dig myself out or in deeper.

*Yeah.* I’m just a thrill a minute.

Well, I wouldn’t want to deny her the pleasure of watching me squirm, so… “You know how there are things that just come natural?”

It’s a rhetorical question, but I still give her a sec to confirm. She says, “Yeah,” as we come to a stop.

When I find the nerve to look, she appears more thoughtful than upset. That’s loads better than I expect. “I haven’t done this a whole lot,” I admit. “I’ve never been able to afford a car. But the times I’ve driven, it’s always just been…” I shrug “…easy. I don’t even have to think about it.”

I stare at my hands where they rest on the bottom of the steering wheel, listening to rain peck at the windshield, the heater, her breathing, the engine… Through all of that, I pick out the faint sound of the car next us idling.

I take a deep breath, letting go a sigh. “Sometimes when we’re together and you smile at me, I feel like I can’t breathe,” I say. “It’s like I’m too full. Not my stomach, my chest. It doesn’t hurt. Kind of the opposite…butterflies and warm tingly stuff. I feel so stupid. Coherent thoughts definitely aren’t in the picture. And talking—?” I snicker.

“I should avoid that at all costs. I spend half my time worried I’ll say something dumb and the other half scared shitless I’ve said something to piss you off.” As I get this off my chest, I sense her. She wants to say something, but I’ll never finish if I let her interrupt, so… “I’m afraid you’ll get mad. You’ll realize it’s not worth it. That I’m not worth the hassle. I’m more trouble than—” Unable hold it in, I snicker again. “Whatever.”

At least my hair hides the smirk. The tone of my voice doesn’t hide shit. “If that’s love, then…” I don’t even try. “I must just be bad at it.” I shake my head. My hair sticks to face.

I know part of that was funny. That was the point. Or that was what I had in mind. I wanted to gloss over my emotional retardness. How I ended up…I got a little sidetracked, but it makes no kind of sense that it hurts when she giggles.

“You’re not bad at it,” she says, sounding way more confident than I’d ever be. “And I think you’re totally worth the hassle.”

When she reaches for my hand, I look up. The Audi in front of us is still in front of us. The cross street walk light’s still on. We’ve still got time.

I half expect her to say, ‘I love you too.’ Instead, she says, “I just want you to be honest with me. I
know it’s hard, but…please.”

I guess I’m just as glad she doesn’t. It always sounds so cheesy when couples do that shit. Like the second ‘I love you’ is necessitated by the first. And the first is about beating the second to the punch. I don’t think it’s s’posed to be a competition, but it sure comes off that way.

I nod so she knows I’m listening. That’s about all I’m good for right now. I feel like I ran an emotional decathlon. Course, it could be that I haven’t slept in—

“Things will get better. I promise,” she says. “It’s just gonna take some time.”

I don’t remember. When I sleep, I dream. It sucks.

As she caresses my hand, I stare dully at the Audi emblem, kind of half focused on it and half on the slush filled rain drops that splatter our windshield. It’s sleet ing. The wiper blades squeegee the evidence away. I stifle a yawn.

I knew this dude years ago who mumbled ‘olive view’ when the other chick he was banging came off with the occasional, wanton, post coital ‘I love you.’ I’m not sure what read slimier, the fact that he said it or that he told me about it. No wonder I can’t remember the fucker’s name.

The Audi moves on. As we cross the intersection on its tail, she stammers, “Oh, uh…”

I say, “It’s okay, B.,” hoping she’ll take a hint.

She tries again, “I—”

But I interrupt, “You don’t have to say anything. The fact that you’re still here tells me everything I need to know.”

“No, I, uh…oh.” She gasps and sighs, gaining control by saying, “Dammit. I’m sorry. I do, but I wasn’t—” I dunno what throws me more the fact that she’s so flustered or the news that my own stupid assumption is totally wrong. “I was just gonna tell you that the hospital’s not far. Keep an eye out on the right.”

Shit. Romeo and Juliet we ain’t. Or Rosalyn an—whichever, whatever—it’s good. We’re not exactly the double suicide, double tragedy types.

Well, we’ve got the ‘double tragedy’ part down.

God, I need a drink.

Oh, well…at least one thing’s working in our favor now. Traffic gets up to speed without much stress. And once there, it flows along at five above the posted forty. I can focus on that and try to forget.

Some music wouldn’t hurt, but it’s a little late in the game to ask her to break out her iPod. And I’m not quite desperate enough to turn on the radio yet.

The Audi signals to turn into an office complex. There’s room, so I move over and pass him.

Debating the merits of being lulled to sleep by the ambient noise versus the latest hit by some bubble-headed bimbo whose ‘enormous talent’ must be contained in her bra because there’s no sign of it anywhere else carries me far enough down the road that B. squeezes my fingers and murmurs, “Umm…” I spot the sign. “It’s just up here.” I can’t exactly read the damned thing from
this far away, but that sort of sign is a pretty solid clue. Only government agencies and hospitals are sad enough to think that squat, fat, white, square pillars make for perfect signage. Everyone else takes a flatter, broader, more readable approach. Probably because that makes sense.

I signal to change lanes, but there’s a guy in the right lane matching our speed. I have to slow down to get over. As I get over the annoyance and work that out, she says, “Turn after the parking garage.”

We pass by the main entrance with its normal sign, set too far back on the acre deep lawn for anyone to see and make the turn onto Mason Avenue. When I signal to turn again at the first garage entrance, she says, “Next one. I think this one’s for hospital staff or something.”

I don’t see a sign saying that, but I follow her lead, make the turn and grab a parking slip. These places are always a nightmare to get in and out of, unless you’re dying. Then it’s just the ‘getting out’ that sucks. The entrance leads straight to a ramp. At least that keeps me busy. I get to play ‘follow the arrow-shaped breadcrumbs,’ climbing and turning. I’ll never forgive B. if I end up holding a bone out of a cage for some twisted old hag to grope.

I don’t even try to fight the smirk. Though grinning like an idiot for no apparent reason is considered suspicious behavior, I can’t help it.

Yeah, some sleep wouldn’t hurt. Maybe more than five minutes.

A road trip with her should be fun. I was fine with not knowing that Cibo Matto had more than one album out. Now I’m just disturbed.

And tempted. I should pick up a couple of audio books at the gift store. But the way things work with us, those’ll probably put her to sleep. If it wasn’t for her iPod, we might’ve killed each other by now…over music. That’s just sad. But she likes everything on it and I like some stuff, so I’ve been able to pick and choose and get by.

Thing is, she’s done all of the driving so far, leaving me to play around. But she doesn’t do interstates, so that’s gonna change. She wouldn’t even hop on one long enough to get to Kentucky. She parked the car and walked across the bridge every time she went to Newport.

I thought it was kind of cute when she explained that. Hiking to the car the next morning was less cute, but—

At least she knows her limits. Weird they don’t involve walking a couple of miles in heels.

When the ramps finally let out, I hang a right. There are actually quite a few empty spots. No surprise in this weather. As I pull into the one closest to the stairs, she says, “It’s not always easy to see your mistakes.” I put the car in park and shut it off, taking the keys in hand. “And if you don’t see them, you’re pretty much doomed repeat them.”

She unfastens her seatbelt and faces me. I meet her eyes and she says through a snicker, “That’s the thing about clichés. The older, lamer and more annoying, the truer they usually are.”

She’s right, but it’d be nice to know where this is coming from. I ask, “And this is…?” She’s still in a mood. I don’t want to upset her anymore, so I keep that last part to myself, filling in with my right hand by gesturing for more. The keys press into my palm as I swirl. I let them go. They drop, swinging down where they’re hooked over my pinkie.

Taking them from where they dangle, she says, “Nothing really. I was just thinking about the stuff I was saying before I tried to get us killed.”
I bust up. “You didn’t try to kill us.” I shouldn’t laugh. Her statement’s just too funny.

Think I’ll take a pass on telling her I thought it was fun. She already has loads of reasons to believe I’m nuts.

Hanging her head, she laughs along. “I know. It’s just…” she says and soberes with a sigh. “I did everything I thought I was s’posed to, but I didn’t even think about who led who where. I didn’t have to. Tara’s death gave me something to blame…something bigger, uglier and way more obvious than myself.” She pockets the keys and looks at me, then down at her door, reaching for the handle. “It’s no wonder everything fell apart.” She pulls and her door swings open. “I didn’t accept that I was the one who put Will there in the first place.”

Getting out of the car, she leans back in to listen to me say, “I still think you’re being too hard on yourself. It’s not like you had a lot of choice.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she replies. “But I could’ve been a whole lot nicer.”

She’s right. She could’ve been a whole lot nicer to all of us. Bet she’d love hearing that from me.

I think there’s a byline in the ‘girlfriend’ description that says something about ‘being supportive.’ Maybe I should try that for kicks and see how it goes? But that pretty much leaves me with bupkis, so…

I could lie and tell her she wasn’t that bad.

Yeah. No. She’d never buy it. Best to keep my trap shut.

Enough time slips by that she gets anxious and prompts, “Do you sort of see what I’m saying?”

“I know exactly what you’re saying,” I reply and reach for my door handle. “Now let’s get this over with.” I’m not sure why, what’s changed, or whatever, but I get out of the car.

Sizing me up, she asks, “Are you sure?”

The first thing that comes to mind is ‘no,’ but I have the good sense to censor myself. “Yeah, you shouldn’t have to go through this alone,” I reply. That’s as close to a valid reason as anything I’ve got.

Of course, everything else I’ve got is pretty much telling me I’m an idiot.

She pops the trunk. In the echo of my door shutting, I almost miss it. I wish I had. The faint sound makes me cringe. I remember all the freezing and shifting and shoving it took to get that damned thing shut. The trauma left a mark.

She’s digging through a duffle when I join her. Small consolation, but it’s one of the one’s on top. “We’ve still got that little problem with you and cameras,” she says.

Yeah, minor flaw. Mindfucks only work on things with minds. Thing is, things with minds usually believe their eyes, so it’s not really much of a problem.

She says, “Here, put this on,” pulling a sweatshirt from the bag. I don’t argue. There’s no point. She’s right to be cautious. I take off my coat before accepting the shirt. I’m actually tempted to change. My sweater’s damp. A big, soft hoodie like this would feel good, but it’s not worth freezing to death to get there, so…
As I follow her instructions, she gives me more, “I don’t want to take any chances. No one’ll look twice at someone wearing a hood in this weather. Just look down when you get inside.”

I put the hood up to slip on my coat. The damned thing’s so huge I won’t have a hell of a lot of choice. I state the obvious, “This isn’t exactly you.”

She shuts the trunk. From the lack of cussing, I’ll assume it actually shut. I have to tug the hood back to see. Yeah, it’s shut.

“Oh, you’d be surprised what’s me,” she replies. “There are days when all I really want is to find a small… the car chirps “…dark place to curl up and hide. Think of that as a compromise.” She takes my hand. Leading me toward the stairs, she says, “You know you don’t have to do this, right?”

“I know,” I reply. When she first told me where we were headed, I assumed she expected me to suck it up and deal. Now I wonder if she thinks I’m nuts for tagging along. Whatever the case, I follow her like a lost pup. My stomach picks up a serious case of the jitters as we descend. I swallow a little air to force a silent burp. That helps some.

Sick, tingly warmth blankets my face. I swallow again to suppress the urge to gag. I know there’s something to the psychobabble. You have to face your fears to get past them. But it hasn’t been that long. Maybe I’m not ready. I don’t know. I wonder what she thinks. When we reach the first floor landing, I find the guts to ask, “Should I just sit this one out?”

“I can’t tell you that,” she replies and shoves the door open. I follow her to the next door and then outside into a stairwell. The hedges that hide it at ground level make it feel too much like another box. When I glance her way, she says through a smile, “But if you’re trying to prove something, just getting out of the car was enough.”

I reply, “I’m not trying to prove anything,” thinking better of it when she looks away. She was just playing. I came off all serious. But part of her playing was serious too. She was being supportive. And I wasn’t very nice. I mumble, “Sorry,” as I fall in behind her.

“It’s okay,” she replies.

The bitch is, this isn’t just about me and her. It’s more—

My imagination fills in the complication, tying my stomach in knots. A girl’s draped naked across an overturned barrel. Scrapes and bruises mar her swollen face. There’s a gash below her right eye. Blood cakes the nostrils of her broken nose.

Twisted laughter joins her screams. Wrenching my hand free, I run, desperate to find a spot to puke.

The laughter dies out, but not the screaming. Kako asks, “Have you ever heard of a book called ‘Schoolgirl in Concrete’?” She sounds delighted.

My jeans get soaked when I slip through a gap in the hedgerow. I grab the painted concrete wall, close my eyes and hang my head. Nothing comes up. I retch. Stomach acid hits the back of my throat. It burns. My eyes well up. There’s just enough coffee in the mix I may never want coffee again. I heave and spit. I can’t see shit. Just a blur. A big, black, cockeyed blur with a yellow dot on the leading edge.

It’s a car hood. This is the lowest floor of the parking garage, so there isn’t much else it can be. When I rub my eyes, the dot almost makes me grin. I’m one sick bitch. I just puked on some
doctor’s Porsche.

Well, not quite ‘on it.’ ‘On it’ might’ve been an improvement. Shame, I think I hit the gap between it and the wall. Whoever got the idea that Porsche should join the endless parade of companies producing sport-utes was on some serious drugs.

Whoever decided that their sport-ute should look like a nine-eleven in the front was just—

The drugs weren’t working. It ended up with this ugly, bulging, lump of an—

B. touches me, calling me back. “Are you okay,” she asks.

I was. I was distracted by a butt-ugly—

A luggage rack on a Porsche…now there’s something sick. I reply through a sigh, “Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

But that’s rational. My problems are miles from rational.

I had two choices. I couldn’t even control that. I could’ve remembered the picture Giles sent me. She’s a pretty girl, whoever she is. I can’t even—

“We need to get you back to the car,” B. says, trying to coax me to come.

I picked barrel girl. Just considering that makes me picture her again. It’s one of those things. Now I remember, I want to forget, but I can’t.

I can’t shake the feeling that she hates me. She blames me.

That’s not rational either. She’s probably just as screwed up as I am…which isn’t helpful. If she’s screwed up, it’s ‘cause I screwed her up.

But that’s not rational either. I was made to think I made her—

B.’s getting antsy. She gently tugs at my sleeve. Maybe she senses I’m chasing my tail?

I lift myself up and turn around, leaning against the wall. “No,” I reply. “I’ll be fine.” I don’t want to be alone. That’s the truth. There’s nothing brave about this. “Just leave me in a waiting room somewhere.” That’ll be better. She won’t go that far. I won’t fall asleep. And I won’t have to face—

It’s really the only solution.

“Okay,” she replies, offering me her hand. I take it and follow her out of the bushes. I don’t even mess with my hood. I don’t have to. The little bit of not much I can see is just fine. Our feet move through wet clumps of grass as she guides me. Each step sends a splash.

What’s got me twisted up inside—the part I can’t get past…sick-ass shit’s always turned me on. I can’t help it. I’m just broken that way.

My face is hot. At least something about me is. I’m shaking like leaf. B. probably thinks I’m cold.

We step onto the sidewalk and turn. Her heels click.

The girl has long, thick, straight black hair. It’s beautiful. It’s also so typical of Asian women I expect it, but I barely see it. Her head’s held back by it. It’s tied to a hook that’s—
I’m so fuckin’ in the head. That warm down-low tingle turns to nagging pressure the higher up it goes. My stomach’s as nervous as a prom night virgin. The tingle’s more like a tickle at the back of my throat. It hangs there. I could puke again. Easy. My guts are all for it, but I—

Walking and breathing are enough. Ask me to chew gum and I’d choke. Though I could use the gum. My mouth tastes like ass. The only thing keeping me going is knowing that I won’t have to deal. I don’t have to face her.

I need help.

We near the entrance. Light reflects off the wet concrete. I pause as B. opens the door. Placing a hand on my back, she ushers me inside.

A man speaks somewhere to our distant right. The click of her heels grows louder. Acoustics give the place away. I don’t have to see to know we’re in an atrium. I can imagine how the balcony looks based on the shiny tile floor. It’s carpeted in a neutral color, something dark, like maybe emerald green or cobalt blue to contrast the boring walls. Hospital walls are always white, just like this floor. They want everything to look clean. The railings are probably brass and glass to add to the airy feeling.

Imagining the space keeps me busy as we skirt around a tropical garden set in this stair-stepped planter built into the floor. Nice touch. Wide dark-green leaves look good against the tile. But the earthy smells that should be there are overwhelmed by disinfectants. That pretty much kills it for me.

B. leads me to a water fountain at the back left corner of the lobby. I stop to rinse my mouth and take a drink, feeling somewhat better. She moves off, not far, just behind me. I hear a tap. She must’ve pressed the button for the elevator. Finishing up by wiping my mouth on my sleeve, I turn and walk in the direction of the sound until I see the bottoms of the elevator doors.

They open. I was close. The carpet’s teal. I go to the back and lean against the wall. She sticks near the front, pressing another button as she enters.

It’s messed up why it matters, but I need to know which one. When the doors close, I pull my hood back enough to see and look up. I’m relieved that the number three is lit. Without a robe or a net, that’s about my limit on improvised escapes.

The weak smile she gives me pretty much says it all. We’re on the same page. I can’t think of a single thing to say either. I take the hand she offers when the doors open and she leads me left down the hall. We don’t quite make it to the end. She veers right, passing through a set of double doors.

She stops. I guess this is it. The waiting area’s not much more than a wide spot in the hallway. It looks inviting enough, but I’m not fooled, not even for a second. No matter how comfy something looks in a hospital, it’s gonna be cold and hard. I pick the nearest floral print wrapped rock and cop a squat.

Before she takes off, it occurs to me to ask, “Can I see your iPod?”

Opening her purse, she replies, “Sure,” adding, “but I’ll have to find it,” as she starts to dig. She hands me first one thing, then another, and another…all sorts of shit that’s not even close. It’s funny, I basically become a table.

I’ll never understand the deal with chicks and their purses. They pack everything they might need
to solve every imaginable crisis. With B. it’s worse. Add a couple stakes, two or three bottles of holy water and whatever other lethal shit she thinks might come in handy to the basic mix of half the medicine cabinet, makeup, lotion and…other miscellaneous stuff.

To further complicating matters, she’s one of those ‘organized,’ ‘smaller bags inside the bigger bag’ sort of girls. I get stuck looking through the smaller bags.

I don’t remember her being this way back in Sunnydale, but moving around makes some people crazy. I can see it hitting her that way. She was used to having a home and a life.

She asks, “Oh, can I have my phone?”

Smirking, I hold up my hands…along with the shit she just handed me. “I’d love to get right on that,” I reply. There’s not a lot I can do, except feel guilty for spacing it. But I don’t regret taking the damned thing either. That was a public service.

“It can wait till we’re done,” she says, taking out her sunglasses case. That’s gotta be the last of it. No clue why she opens it, but she does, then after giving the inside a quick glance, she mutters, “Shit,” and snaps it closed. Stirring the dregs at the bottom of her purse, she says, “I’m sorry. It must be in the car.”

“That’s fine,” I reply. “I’ll just grab a magazine.” I should’ve had the good sense to do that in the first place.

As we excavate my lap, I reach into my pocket and take out a phone. I’m not one-hundred percent sure it’s her phone, so I check the wallpaper before handing it off.

Pocketing it, she says, “Thanks.” I figure we’re done, but she leans down and rests her fingertips under my chin. When I follow her prompt, she rewards me with a kiss. “I won’t be long,” she whispers.

I wait for her to leave before going for a magazine. The first one on the stack is about parenting. That’s like the last thing…

I grab whatever’s next. It’s no better, but at least Southern Living is more about the perfect home and less about the perfect family. The odds of me ever having either are pretty much slim to none, but the perfect home doesn’t make me feel quite so hopeless.

I leaf through, just glancing at the pictures until something catches my eye. Go figure, it’s food. The last thing I am is hungry. I’m exhausted and wet and cold and sore and nauseous and…but Buffy would like these. The recipe’s for oatmeal peanut butter cookies. It looks pretty good. I’m tempted to snag it. She’s got this thing for peanut butter. And I like to bake. It’s one of the few normal things I do. But I don’t get to do it very often. My life’s too screwed up for that.

I imagine what it’d be like just to do something nice for her. Enjoy an evening together somewhere where we belong. We’re not exactly the Cleavers, but it’s still a good fantasy. I play it out a few different ways. It always ends the same, but never the way I would’ve thought. I can actually imagine us being happy together.

What are the odds?

Over the top of my magazine, I catch sight of her. She’s done? It hasn’t been five minutes. Has it? I look around for a wall clock. There isn’t one, so I put the magazine down and take out my phone to look.
Okay, it’s been ten. *Maybe.* I stash my phone.

Holding hers to her ear, she says, “No, she’s *gone,*” throwing her free hand up. “*Totally gone*—as in ‘not here.’ And the nurses are clueless.” The gesture tells me several things, none of them good, and none of them requiring her to say a single word to me. The message comes through loud and clear. Whoever she’s got on the line is testing her patience. Her hand drops to the crown of her head. She drags her fingers through her wet hair.

I expect her to walk up to me, but she doesn’t. Heading straight for the door, she shows no sign of stopping or even slowing down. I blink and she’s gone. The door swings in her wake. Guess I’m supposed to follow. I hop out of my chair, toss the magazine back on the stack and run to catch up.

She says, “No,” as I fall in beside her. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. The nurse at the desk recognized me. She’s not totally gone.”

Wait. You mean the girl? You just said she *was* gone. She’s either is or she isn’t. There’s no—

*Shit.*

B. hangs a right, shoves a door open and barrels down the stairs. I get schooled. She covers all three flights in under a minute in heels while bitching someone out, “No, that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. Kim’s chart was in the door. They don’t take a patient for tests and leave their chart. I tried to jog the nurse’s memory by showing it to her. That was a complete waste. She’s been—” She postpones her rant to throw the door open.

This could be a post-modern Olympic event.

As we rush through the atrium, she picks up, “Yeah, that’s right, and with the nurse playing ‘If I Only Had a Brain,’ the math just isn’t that complicated.” She says, “Uh-huh, that’s right,” once more before we’re out the door.

At least whoever she’s talking to is catching on. There might be an end in sight. Maybe she’ll actually talk to me when she’s done. That’d be nice.

Once we’re outside, she frees up her hands by cradling the phone with her shoulder. “I think I’ve got something,” she says.

I almost laugh when she opens her purse. She can’t seriously believe—

She does. It’s sad. Digging through the contents as she charges toward the garage, she agrees with whoever she’s talking to, “Yeah, it’s a huge problem.”

I see people like this on the streets all the time. They look busy as hell. I always wonder what they could possibly be accomplishing. If she’s any example…

“Well, whatever you can do, do it faster,” she says. “We’ll head back to the apartment. I’ll catch up when we get there.”

She hangs up her phone. Letting her purse eat it might not’ve been the best choice, but that’s what she does.

I ask the first thing that comes to mind, “Was that Giles?” He’s the usual go-to guy for shit gone wrong, so it seems reasonable.

She replies, “No. Giles can’t do anything. He’s in England. I told you that.”
Oh. Yeah. Shit. She did.

We almost make to the steps before she gives up on her purse. I’m glad ’cause it’s just slowing us down. It’d be nice to be in out of the rain. I actually wait until that’s happened to ask, “So, who was that?”

Leading the way up the stairs, she replies, “It was Cass.” The fact that I’m gonna need a little more translates into a shrug. Simple, effective…if she’d seen it. It’s cool. She explains, “I don’t know whether you’ve met her or not. Probably not. She’s part of the Boulder Valley coven. They were supposed to help us out with Kim.”

I could ask another question, easy. Hell, I could ask a dozen, but it seems ridiculous to point out that what I’m missing outweighs what I know. That’s typical. She’s probably noticed the trend. I just follow her to the car. She’ll fill me in when she gets good and ready.

She goes to the driver’s side with me right on her tail, determined to get in her way. She gives me a funny look when I ask, “Let me drive, please?” so I state my case, “You probably have things you need to do. It’ll be better if I cover this.” Sitting through another round of cell phone roulette is the last thing I want to do.

I take the keys when she holds them up and says, “Okay.” As she goes around to the passenger side, I hit the button to unlock the doors and get in.

The first thing out of her mouth after she joins me is, “I’m sorry. This is all my fault.”

It’s bad enough that we’re both apologizing every five minutes for stuff we actually did, but this is just… “Huh?”

When she doesn’t counter my ‘huh,’ I buckle up, take my soggy hood down so I can see and get going. We’ve got more pressing things to worry about than her martyr complex. If Kim’s missing, it might be a good idea to find her. Once we’re out of the parking space, I put the car in drive and follow the arrows toward the exit.

B.’s awfully quiet. She isn’t even digging through her purse. The only thing she has done is save me the trouble of switching off the blower. I tell her, “Y’know, you can do whatever. You aren’t gonna bother me.”

“Oh, okay,” she replies. “I just figured you’d need to concentrate.”

“No, it’s cool,” I reply. It’s a little tight and kind of an obstacle course, but— “I kind of like these things. Back in Southie we used to meet up in one after hours and hang out. There was always someone with a bike or rollerblades or a skateboard. ’Cause of that we’d get run off by the cops sometimes, but it was mostly cool.”

She doesn’t take the hint, except that she picks up her purse and goes through it. Could be the same old misgivings getting in the way. Wish there was something I could do about that, but I’d say I’ve done enough. Nothing is probably the only thing I can do that’ll help. Or maybe she really does think I need to pay attention. Either way, the next time she speaks, we’re at the gate and she’s trying to hand me a credit card. She says, “Here,” but I wave it off.

“I’ve got it,” I reply as I take my billfold from my coat pocket. We’ve had this talk. It blew up in my face, but that doesn’t mean I was wrong.

I pull a twenty out and feed it to the stupid machine. Of course it spits it back out. This part’s always annoying. I flatten the bill using the edge of the glass and stick it into the slot again. This
time the stupid machine just takes the money.

Thing is…it doesn’t matter where our money comes from. That’s not the point. If our goal really is to disappear, she needs to stop using those things.

The gate goes up as the machine spits my change out. I grab the bills, leave the rest and make the turn.

She must’ve found what she was looking for. No clue what it was, but she’s packing everything back into her purse, so…

As we pull up to the light, I turn to get a better look. Nothing jumps out. It’s just the same pile of stuff I had in my lap not that long ago.

“You aren’t going to like this,” she says in a soft, sulky voice. “I wanted to tell you before, but you had so many questions.” Her purse is the only left in her lap. She drops it on the floor with a sigh. “I just hope you can forgive me. I really screwed up.”

Y’know, this doesn’t have to be complicated. Kim’s gone and someone took her. All I really need to know is who B. thinks is responsible.

Really, I don’t even need to know that. I just want to know because none of the suspects I have fit. I got the impression from Sparky that Kako wasn’t going to be up to much for a while…and ever. He was out for blood. That still blows my mind. But if I take that at face value—which, considering the source, isn’t the best call—that just leaves him.

Thing is, B. was talking about the nurse like she’d been charmed or something. A Jedi mind trick like that usually means ‘magic.’

That or the nurse has been dipping into the pain meds. But for the sake of argument, we’ll rule that out and focus on Sparky.

The only thing magical I’ve seen him do is fly…mostly through walls like a wrecking ball. Finesse really isn’t his specialty.

Hell, ‘finesse’ might not even be in his vocabulary. He’s wicked strong and not especially gifted in the smarts department, which makes me think ‘demon,’ not ‘warlock.’

Or maybe even ‘Hell God’…if we’re really, really unlucky. That thought’s so comforting it comes with a complimentary chill.

B. needs to get talking. Me speculating is just plain bad.

“All I wanted was a normal evening,” she says. “I should’ve known better. I always…”

When she trails off, I mumble, “I hear ya.” A weak smile passes over her face. As it fades, I get back to what I should be doing. The light’s green. I go.

Once we’re through the intersection, in the right lane, headed the right way, she says, “It’s always the same things that trip me up. You’d think I’d learn.” She lets out a contemptuous snicker. “But for Pete’s sake it was only dinner. I figured ‘how wrong could it go?’ ”

Without thinking I reply, “Really wrong.” Not that she could’ve possibly known.

“Pretty much,” she agrees.
I probably just gave her more reason to guilt.

The car ahead of us slows to turn. I glance in my mirror, hoping to change lanes. There’s someone coming. I have to slow down too, but I manage to time it so we don’t completely stop.

As we gradually rebuilt lost momentum, she continues, “What I told you was true. I came here because I wanted to be near you, but I left something out. This was an assignment. I figured it wasn’t a big deal. It sounded like a babysitting job.” She snickers again. This one sounds more laugh-like than hiss-like. That might be a step up. “I was sent here to keep an eye on Maeve.”


“It doesn’t matter how she looks, Faith. She’s two things that are really dangerous together: ‘powerful’ and ‘desperate’.”

Her response comes out of whatever’s past left field. It’s so out there that “Huh?” is the best answer I’ve got. Yet somehow I get around to spelling things out before she does, “No, you were talking about dinner so I just assumed. You mean there’s more?” ‘Desperate’ I get. But ‘powerful’? Really?

When she replies, “Yeah, I think she’s responsible for what’s happened with Kim,” I see my ‘huh?’ and raise it a ‘what the fuck?’ Trying to picture her doing anything like that is just, uh, well… seriously ‘huh?’ She couldn’t find her way out of a wet paper sack. How’s she gonna kidnap anyone?

“You’re shitting me.”

“I know,” she says. “It seems that way, but you can’t really judge a book by its cover.” She stops. No clue what stops her.

The roads are a little slick. And because we’re in the Midwest…no one here knows how to drive in this crap. I’ve got my hands full just dealing with that. Add her and I’m, uh…

She reasons, “Well, sometimes you can,” as we come almost to a stop way before the light. “The pictures are usually pretty helpful.” It beats rear-ending the guy in front of us. “But some of the stuff Giles reads…?”

The last guy I watched defuse a bomb on TV looked less intense than she does now. Barely stopping long enough to breathe, she chatters, “But I guess ‘musty’ and ‘old,’ is pretty much ‘musty and old.’ Do you remember that great big book he had that said ‘vampire’ on the front, only it was spelled funny, like with a ‘y’ or something? Did he show you that? It was like the first thing he showed me. For someone who couldn’t even spell the word, whoever wrote it sure knew lots about them. Great big, ginormous, tedious lots.”

Who cares?

“Yeah, that expression’s pretty stupid,” I agree, hoping maybe she’ll let it go. But she may as well have at it. There are five stoplights separating us from our next turn and they’re all timed for traffic coming down the hill. Add the idiot factor and we’re pretty much screwed.

As we creep closer to the light, following the latest idiot, she replies, “It is, isn’t it?”

If her goal’s to make me understand, she’s there. I get it. Maeve could be more than she appears to be. That might be impossible to imagine, but it isn’t that hard to understand. B. could move along any time now…and actually bother to explain the ‘what’ and the ‘why.’
Of course, she doesn’t, so I look for something useful to do. We’re finally up to the light, or as close we’re getting for now.

Here’s something. I flip on the blower.

Okay, so…

Now I want a cigarette…and a drink.

When—to quote Giles—‘cooler heads prevail,’ she picks up again, “Here’s something a little obvious, but at least it makes sense.” At least she sounds like she’s chilled. “What do you think people see when they look at me?” Of course she doesn’t actually change the subject. Why would she? She’s got a perfectly good one to flog the piss out of.

“Yeah, so…it’s not that simple,” she concludes, taking my smirk for an answer.

Knowing her, she probably just thinks I’m amused because people think she looks like a soft target. What I really do think wouldn’t earn me a cookie, so I keep that to myself. I guess it all works out. As I cap things off by mumbling, “It never is,” something occurs to me. If Maeve really is somehow hitting for the black hats…

I’ll be damned. What was it Giles said, something like ‘one of our fellows’? I assumed he meant a slayer. Leave it to the British. Why tell it straight when being cryptic and weird is so much more fun?

B. says something like, “I thought I was getting through. I hoped that—”

She might actually be getting to something worth hearing. Whether Giles didn’t lie to me or not, doesn’t mean much. Of course, the realization’s written all over my face so she stops to ask, “What’s wrong?”

Oh, well. Nothing’s changed. We still have loads of time to screw around. Once we get past these crappy traffic lights, there’s still that whole intersection from hell clusterfuck standing in our way.

What I actually care about is seeing her this weirded out. Still wish there was something I could do.


As usual, I’ve got nothing.

“What?”

I try to discourage her by saying, “It’s really not important,” but she isn’t having any of it, so I give her what she wants. “Giles is one slippery bastard. He never specifically said it was a slayer I’d be after. He led me to believe that, but he never used the word.”

“Oh,” she says. It takes her moment to put together what I mean. Or I guess that’s it. “I just assumed he’d lied. He said would if he had to, but it’s good that he didn’t.”

“I guess,” I reply with a shrug. The light changes. My foot reflexively travels from the brake to the gas. But I have to wait. The car in front of us is still stopped. As everyone gets with the program, I try to put her back on track. “I’m sorry I interrupted. You were saying?”

“It’s not that simple,” she mumbles, obviously mulling something else over.
This is the last stretch before we’re locked into the standard city block grid. We need to be in the left lane. The roads are bad enough that I take a page from her book and move over while I can without much stress. We may end up waiting for someone to make a left turn, but—

She has her phone out when I finish. Fiddling with it, she says, “I went into this not really even believing it was possible. You know how it is. Someone you trust tells you how something is and you just believe it. It becomes the truth and anything else that contradicts it must be a lie.”

The guy next to us speeds up. He wants to get over. It goes completely against my nature to let him in, but I do. He’s probably going to turn left at the next light. I want to move over into the right lane to avoid that, but I don’t. Conditions are just too crappy to play leap frog.

“Giles told me a long time ago that there wasn’t anything we could do for Mom, so I just assumed,” she explains. “He did the same thing to me he did to you. That wasn’t the whole truth. There are ways to fight cancer magically. But there’s a catch. Anything that works against the natural order is pretty much evil. The disease can’t be cured—he was telling the truth about that—but it can be forced into remission and life can be extended. You just have to be willing to—”

I have to interrupt, “Magically? You mean Maeve sold us out to get a witch to help—?”

“Maeve is a witch,” she replies, cutting me off. “I told you that.”

“You did? Where was I when you told me?” It’s stupid. That just slips out.

No surprise she gets snarky. “The usual place. Within earshot. That makes the telling part lots easier.”

I don’t remember anything like that, but there’s just so much I don’t remember and even more I’d like to forget, not to mention the shit I clearly remember that she’s told me is wrong. Funny how her telling me that something’s wrong doesn’t keep me from remembering it that way.

I’ll just have to take her word for this. I’m sure she’s right. It still blows my mind that it’s been nearly two weeks since I got here.

The conversation dries up. Bombshells tend to do that. I’ve got nothing. I had something. Hell if I remember what now.

I rub my neck as I drive. None of this shit’s helping. The nagging tension’s bound to become headache.

That’s actually not much of a bombshell. Really, it clears some stuff up. Like why we’re here.

B.’s totally sweet. I get that. I could see her caring, no problem. But about some random cancer chick? That part just didn’t wash. How would they even meet? The ‘spa’ thing sort of made sense, but this makes more. B. said Maeve was powerful, so she probably started off a person of interest who became a potential problem.

Whatever, I should get things rolling again. “What makes you think Maeve took Kim?” She hasn’t told me anything so far that makes me half as sure of that as she is.

She replies, “Well, you can imagine how tempting information like that might be to someone who’s dying.”

Yeah, okay…we’ve been over that, but it’s really not an answer, so I ask, “I get that, but how do we know anyone tempted her?”
“We don’t,” she admits. “That’s the problem. Every time I thought for sure Maeve was up to something, something else would get in the way.”

It’s not like I want to argue, but I have to ask, “Then why blame yourself?”

“Because it’s the best answer I have,” she replies. “Whoever took Kim used magic. Maeve is the only witch I know with a motive, so…”

The light’s just up ahead. And of course, it’s red. I let off the gas while intentionally provoking her by saying, “So?”

That does it. “Don’t you see?” she snaps. “If Maeve is responsible, then so am I. She betrayed us and I could’ve stopped her.”

And to make matters worse, who’s-it in the ubiquitous Toyota sedan ahead of us turns his blinker on. Shit. I knew this was gonna happen. There’s no turn lane or arrow, so we’re screwed. The light’ll probably change again before this guy gets to go.

‘Ubiquitous’? Where’d that come from? I’m not even positive it means right thing, but it sounds bad so I guess that’s good enough.

I’ve got enough to deal with just admitting, “No, sorry, I don’t,” as we come to stop. ‘See’ that is.

If someone’s willing to do anything, they can become immortal. That kind of precludes the cancer thing. That’s what I wanted to say before.

Figures I remember now that I can’t really share. She’s too busy shouting, “Oh, come off it, Faith!” to hear me. “I should’ve told you, but I didn’t. I just had to wait. You were little weird around Maeve without the extra added info, so I figured it couldn’t hurt to give you a couple of days to settle in.”

Mayor Wilkins didn’t start off immortal. He was gifted, but essentially he just your average Joe.

Whatever. As I turn my signal on, she adds a snarky, “That went well.”

I left enough room between us and the Toyota to pull out, but all I have is her mirror to tell me what’s what. She clues to where I’m looking and presses flat against her seat.

Looks like the guy behind us has the same idea. The front corner of his car pokes out almost across the line. His turn signal flashes. I may as well give up. There are cars stacked up behind us waiting as far as I can see and it’s gonna be a few before the light even changes.

Besides, if I can get her to change her tune, it’ll totally be worth the time. We could both use a break from the non-stop angst-a-thon. Cancelling my turn signal, I reply, “Yeah, it did and you’re probably right to a point, but I can see why you chose not to.” I turn my hand palm up on the console, hoping she’ll take it. “Let me ask you something.”

She replies, “Okay,” and accepts my offer. It’s a start. Her hand feels nice. It’s a little warmer than mine.

This seems kind of, umm…strange I guess, like it’s too simple, but I ask anyway, “When you decide you’re gonna do something, do you ever give up?” I don’t doubt that she gets this. She just needs a reminder.

No surprise, she replies, “Not if it’s something important.”
I agree, “Neither do I,” intentionally adding her caveat, “Not if it’s important,” so she can see we’re on the same page. “None of us do. That’s part of what makes us special.” Simply seeing eye-to-eye on something is refreshing for a change. “The bigger, badder shit we face is exactly the same way. Once it sets its sights on something, it won’t stop. You know that.”

The light turns green. As the Toyota creeps forward into the intersection, I point out the obvious, “What I did was pick a fight with something that was our brand of ‘special.’ I knew what I was doing. Kako was bound come after me and when she did, only one of us was gonna walk away. I sure didn’t expect it to be me.”

Moving up to give the guy behind us room to pull out, I make a minor concession, “You may’ve sped that up.” I’ll let her have that, but I refuse to give her an absolute where there isn’t one. “But we don’t know that. We can’t. Not unless Maeve gets caught and has an attack of conscience.” She tenses and takes a breath like the wants to butt in. That’s something else I won’t give her. “But does it really matter? I was on a path I chose. The only thing I regret is that I dragged anyone else down with me.”

She tries again, actually getting an, “Umm,” out this time.

Like it or not she’s gonna let me finish. “Look, B., I know you want to. I get that it eats you up to think you might’ve done something wrong. It screws with me too. The idea that anyone might’ve been hurt because of something I did—that you might’ve been hurt…”

The guy in front of us is still waiting to turn, but nothing’s passed on the right in a while. The light’s still green, so I look. It’s clear. As we pull out, she says, “It wasn’t you.”

We could debate that.

“But don’t you see?” I reply. “That’s exactly my point. Blaming ourselves or one another is senseless.” Holy shit! We just made it through the intersection without a fight. “It’s even kind of funny if you think about it. You’re not gonna to convince me it’s your fault ’cause I think it’s mine.”

And she might actually be listening, which is nice. What I have to say seems pretty important. “The best I can hope to do with this shit is accept it.” To me at least. “That’s the only way I’ll ever be able to get right with it. Blame really can’t be a part of that. You were the one who asked me to move on. This is the only way I know how.”

She says, “You’re right.”

I know I am. I may not be right about much, but that—

As we stop at the back of a long line of cars, I say, “You need to realize something else. I probably wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you. That buys you a whole lot of slack in my book.”

I’ve said my piece and exceeded my quota of schmaltzy sentiment for the week. If she has half a clue, she’s probably thinking, ‘Who are you and what have you done with my Faith?’

It’s her turn. We’ve still got plenty of time. It’s doubtful we’ll make it through the light when it changes. Pretty much everyone in this lane is gonna be turning. That always takes longer, so I wait and eventually she asks, “Do you remember the scar you had on your chest?”

“No,” I reply. The idea that there might be more booby traps buried in my head, waiting for the worst possible moment to trip, isn’t exactly thrilling.
She passes me her phone. As I focus on the picture, she says, “It took Maeve forever to remove that.” It’s not what she wants me to look at, but my face is a real attention grabber. No wonder I can’t remember shit. It looks like someone took a hammer to it. “She claimed it had a ‘binding element’ that was meant to keep you from working against the one who gave it to you.”

Above the sheet that keeps me decent is what she wants me to see…a mark that covers most of the rest of my chest. It looks like someone doodled on me with a hot poker. A horizontal line with a broken, almost half circle above it forms a crude sunset. Finer, scalloped lines make a four pointed star to the left.

It’s like I’m looking at someone else. The two things don’t fit.

I have this strange sense I’m missing something. Half-listening to B., I stare at the picture, trying to figure out what.

“None of the other witches could sense it. I figured it was because Maeve was just stronger. But what if she was working with Sparky? What if he did this to you just to give her something else to throw us off? This was what actually made me trust her. I wasn’t sure until she—”

That’s no sunset. The star makes it a sunrise, or dawn. Or I don’t know ‘twilight’?

“What was that?” she asks. The look she gives me makes me think something else is wrong with my face. Something not involving hammers or dorks in gimp masks.

Self-consciously rubbing my cheek, I reply, “I don’t know.” I don’t know how much I said or what she heard. I’m not even sure what part might’ve set her off, but whatever’s up, she’s making me wicked nervous, so I redirect, hoping to distract her. “So basically, you didn’t want to believe at first so you trusted Maeve. Then when you started to doubt, she played the hero to throw you off?”

“Yeah, simped up that’s pretty much it,” she replies. “But none of this is simple.”

Her attention turns from me as she continues her thought, “I thought she’d saved your life.” It’s the first time in a long time I’ve been glad she’s interested in something else. “She probably did, but it’s hard to say that when I feel like I should doubt everything she said.”

I follow her lead and look too. When I see that no one’s in front of us, my foot moves from the brake to the gas. I’m surprised she didn’t say anything. I glance in my mirror as we pull away. No one’s behind us either. That’s why no one honked. We were just sitting in the middle of the street.

She says, “It doesn’t make much sense, considering.”

Sparky said he was doing me ‘a favor.’ I remember that. It was right before he threw me into the hole. He held his hand against my chest. He must’ve marked me. That symbol’s the same as the one on his chest. I guess he figured if he did that, B. would suspect me or maybe reject me. Or maybe it’s what she thinks. He did it to make her trust Maeve.

B. said something else that I totally miss because I—

Whatever the case, my nerves are fried. Nothing a twelve pack and a handful of valium wouldn’t fix, but—

We come to a stop where we should be. There are only a couple of cars ahead of us, but that’s enough. I was right. We wouldn’t have gotten to go.

She says, “Even considering all of that, there’s still something that bugs me.”
Her phone’s still in my lap. I hold damned thing out to its owner and reply, “What’s that?”

Accepting it, she asks, “How long did it take for Kakistos to find you after you got to Sunnydale?”

“A few days,” I reply. “Hell, it took you almost a full day to notice me.”

She says matter-of-factly, “I wasn’t looking for you.”

I mumble, “Fair enough.”

And she goes on, “It took a highly motivated, ridiculously old vampire and his minions days to find you in a tiny place like Sunnydale.” The light changes. The first car goes straight across. Only the Range Rover directly ahead of us is turning. “But in a city of almost a quarter-million it took Kako less than a day to locate and abduct two fully trained slayers.” As we follow it into the intersection, she arrives at her point, “Tell me that doesn’t smell the least bit fishy to you.”

“I can’t,” I admit. “Everything about this reeks. That’s the problem. Nothing adds up.”

The guy in front of us is seriously hauling ass. I stay on his six, but not too close. The spray of dirty water coming off the truck makes it too hard to see.

“Yeah, it bugs me,” she says. “What bugs me more is why she’d want them. Do you think she abducted them just to flush us out?”

“Probably not,” I reply. “It didn’t seem like she needed to.”

She says, “Exactly,” like I hit on something important. No clue what. That much seemed pretty obvious.

Tail lights come on in front of me. I respond to both things at once, going for the brakes as I ask, “So why’d it happen?” I should’ve taken Jefferson. It’s a little late for that now.

She replies, “I don’t know,” as we pull up to the red light in the wrong lane. “The best I’ve got is wild speculation and conjecture.” Her brow furrows. She mumbles, “It’s mostly not even my conjecture.”

“At least you’ve got that,” I reply.

“Wait,” she says. “Aren’t they the same thing?” She goes for her phone.

I’m pretty sure she didn’t hear me. Why I bother to say, “What I’d like to know is why Sparky let us go,” is anyone’s guess.

She’s way too distracted to answer. Finally, she announces, “Yeah, they’re pretty much the same.”

Good to know. Now can we please get back to—?

“Sheories based on a whole lot of circumstantial nothing,” she says. “That’s what I’ve got.” She snickers. “And a dictionary app I picked up to make Giles happy. He seems to think that I should actually know what words mean before I use them. I think he’s just being picky.”

No, obviously we can’t. I guess she wants a break. I should ask her to look up ubiquitous while she’s at it. I would if I cared. Instead, I choose something not-quite-so potentially time consuming to fuel the small talk, “Did he sign you up for that stupid ‘word-a-day’ email too?”

“Yeah, I think he got all of us,” she replies. “He told me that since he was paying, he intended to
‘put this infernal technology to good use’.”

I laugh. Nothing big, but it feels damned good to chuckle even once and say, “That sounds like Giles.” Making fun of him will never get old.

“Today was a total waste,” she says, still playing with her phone. “The word is ‘expunge.’ Not exactly a hard one and I’ll never use it. It just sounds…”

“…like something he’d say.” Finishing her thought feels even better, in a weird, totally Stepford sort of way. At least we’re getting along.

“Yeah, way too Gilesy for casual conversation,” she says, dropping her phone back in her purse. “I’m not sure he even knows what that means.”

I can’t see the stoplight, but the truck’s brake lights go out, so I get set to move.

The truck takes off. As we keep pace, she says, “I don’t think what happened had anything to do with Kako. She was just there to throw us off. Make us do exactly what we’ve been doing. Left to choose, I prefer my enemies confused and frightened too.”

I ask, “So, why’d Sparky let us go?” Maybe she’ll answer if a paraphrase.

She replies, “Obviously he wanted us alive.”

Well, obviously. A real answer was just too much to hope for. Like a fool, I try again. “Why?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” she replies. “Maybe he doesn’t think we’re a problem. Definitely not the standard, but considering the source, it’s not impossible either.”

I don’t buy that and neither does she. I just wonder if she knows about—

“I just know that if Maeve took Kim, she also tipped Sparky off about us,” she says. “One thing suggests the other one’s true. And that last thing seriously suggests the first, so…”

No, she probably doesn’t. How could she?

“Minions always have masters. The ones with any shelf life at all only have one. And the ‘one’ always has some sort of nefarious plan. All of the things that have happened should fit whatever the plan is.”

We blow through another light. I’m kind of lost just following. The truck doesn’t give me much of a forward view. And with the way she’s chattering…

“And no matter how seriously discomforting it might be, the only thing that really fits is what we talked about last night. Can you think of another reason that someone like him would be interested in snatching a couple of slayers off the street?”

Well, maybe because he’s evil and evil things hate slayers. But considering the timetable, I see her point. If it wasn’t Kako and he was the one took them—which seems likely, given—he must’ve wanted them. He snatched them before their bus seats had even cooled. And he didn’t just kill them. He could’ve. He could’ve killed us all and not even broken a sweat.

I don’t bother to share any of that. It’s almost as twisted up and full of ‘ifs’ as the shit she’s been saying. A simple, “No,” works just fine.

This is gonna start to suck really soon. I should get over. I glance at her mirror and signal. “It’s like
that thing bored people do with dominos,” she says, stopping to snicker. “God, I wish I could be that bored.” We merge into the right lane. “That one detail’s a real game changer. A whole room full of dominos topple over.”

I can see again. And just in time. There’s a whole line of parked cars just ahead of us. I put on the brakes.

As we park too, she says, “Denial was so much easier. And look what that got me.”

She’s beating herself up again. I have to put my two cents in, “We still don’t know that’s true.”

“No we don’t,” she replies. “But I can’t think of anything else that makes sense.”

I can, but pointing out that there could be someone else—someone we don’t know about yet… that’d go over well. It’d have to be someone on the inside who knew their itinerary. And speculating…

“Yeah, so…worst case scenario, we’re screwed,” I reply. “Sounds like the usual.” No sense in opening another can of worms. “That doesn’t make it your fault.” Hoping that she’ll eventually see reason is probably too much to ask too.

I expect a comeback, something biting and snarky. She doesn’t bother. She’s too busy with her phone, catching the others up on the haps. I should’ve kept my mouth shut.

Okay, whatever…we’ve only got a few blocks to go before we turn. This won’t be too bad. It’d be better with some conversation to pass the time. Maybe something a little less ‘gloom and doom.’ I’m not sure where I’d find that.

Not here. That much is sure. I should just bite the bullet and admit that the only reason I was interested in any of that is that I wondered if she knew that Sparky tried to recruit me. But the idea makes me nervous as hell. It reeks so much of the past. I wonder if she’ll still trust me.

The light changes. As I keep up with traffic, she takes a break from typing with her thumbs to say, “Cass is going to meet us at the house. They’re working on a portal now. She’ll be able to cast a locator spell.”

I reply, “Okay.” I wish she’d say more, but she does the exact same thing. She clams up and hides behind her phone.

After we stop, time just drags. It feels like forever. It’s close enough that we move again and make it through another light. And all I’ve got to keep me company is guilt. It finally wins out and I mumble, “Sparky asked me to join him. That might’ve been why he let us go.”

Resting her phone in her lap, she replies, “I’m not surprised.” I am. I thought she’d flip. “Giles pointed some stuff out that sort of made sense. He thought the same thing.” She stalls long enough I have to look.

“Think about it,” she says as I set my jaw. Keeping it out of my lap might be good. “You were the last slayer who was called. The last time I died nothing happened. No new slayers showed up. And you’d think—what, with Sunnydale being the home of the perpetually pending apocalypse—they would’ve.” She lets go a cold snicker. “You’re the real Chosen One, Faith, not me…if that even matters anymore.”

All those years I was never more than second best. Turns out—
“I know it seems pretty farfetched,” she says. “But he thinks they might need you to put things back the way they were.”

Not that it matters. She’s right about that. It doesn’t. No clue about the rest. Traffic’s moving again. That’s what I should be worried about. As my foot goes from the brake to the gas, the asshole behind us honks. There’s only a car length to make up. Prick.

It’s really not my fault that we get caught by the last light before the three-way intersection. I guess it helps that everyone in the right lane is turning. The line clears out while we wait.

She leaves me to twiddle my thumbs for so long that her mumbling, “What I’d like to know is why I’m still alive,” catches me completely off-guard. “I’m the one who screwed things up in the first place.”

I’ve got nothing. I don’t even want to think that way. But I don’t want to blow her off either, so I say, “When things are this screwed up, it’s never about just one person.”

She drops it. Guess that means what I said actually made sense. Either that or she’s not into arguing. That’s probably it because she rewards me with more of the mind-numbing same. Half watching her, I stare off to my right at a distant tree until movement ahead of us demands my attention.

As we pass through the last intersection between us and our turn, I notice something. Straight ahead across Clifton Avenue is a church. I saw it last time we came through here, but—

Two three-story wings project from a larger central part. Spires and arches break up the standard boxy building shapes. Other than being just plain huge, it’s really nothing special. There were dozens of these things where I grew up. There are probably dozens of them here.

But for some reason I can’t take my eyes off this one. And as I stare, I get that feeling again. That ‘down in the pit of my stomach,’ ‘prickling at the back of my neck,’ creepy crawly, tense, fucked up feeling that something’s wrong.

Through the rain and past all the cars, what’s setting me off is pretty much a big gray shape behind a wrought iron fence. And that makes the feeling even worse. I just know I’m gonna get blindsided by something. That’s how this always goes.

Or maybe I’m just freaking out. B. hasn’t said anything yet. And if that is what this is, she should be sensing it too.

I’d be nice to have a plan on the off chance that I’m not losing my mind. But there’s nothing I can do. I could tell her I’ve got a bad feeling, but I can’t even tell her about what. I don’t know. She’d ask. And I’ve got my usual nothing to offer.

Yeah, that’d go over well.

The cars ahead of us make the turn one at a time as they can. As we creep closer, details emerge from the haze. The curbside lane becomes a turn lane. I keep right. Pretty soon we’re three cars from our turn and I’m no closer to having a clue.

The light’s about to change when I finally get it figured. There are gargoyles up near the roofline. They bother me, but I can’t place why. Not until I notice water pouring from one of their mouths. When I see that, the rest comes back to me. I scan from face-to-pudgy-fucked-up-face. All of them are there. Every single one. Some of them are in different spots. Above windows and shit.
This is from that dream. The one I had at the hotel. And if part of that dream hadn’t already saved our hides, I’d—

I put the car in park. I should’ve said something five minutes ago, back when I still had time. Now all I can do is wing it. There’s nowhere to pull over. Even if I made the turn, the best I could do is park on the sidewalk. There just isn’t anywhere to go.

I shouldn’t have stayed right. But maybe if I could get back there—

Y’know what? Screw it. I ask, “You know how sometimes there’s just stuff that sets you off?” I do my damnedest to keep the stress from showing. It kind of works.

She doesn’t look at me like I’m completely nuts when she replies, “Yeah.”

The cars ahead of us clear out. Traffic flows steadily to our left. We need to get going, but I can’t. I have to—

“Well, now’s one of those times,” I say. “I’m fine, but I need to go. I can’t really explain. I wish I could, but you’re just gonna have to trust me.” There’s no way that’s gonna work.

A car behind us honks. It’s not the one right behind us, like that even matters.

Much to my surprise, she doesn’t snatch hold of me when I release my seatbelt and open my door.

But as I try to get out, she pins my right shoulder against the seat.

I face her. She’s so much calmer than I expect. It throws me. “I need you to promise me something,” she says.

“Alright,” I reply. Maybe she doesn’t get it.

Pulling me into a tight hug, she whispers, “Just promise if you find something, you won’t try to deal with it alone.”

Another couple of horns honk right in a row. I really don’t want to make a scene…which is strange ’cause making scenes used to be my thing. I was good at it. Now I’m just—it makes me nervous.

I agree, “Okay,” mostly so she’ll let me go. But what if I do find something? I hadn’t even considered that. I just know I need to go. I give it a sec to sink in before I reply, “Yeah, I can do that.” If whoever I run into lets me. I’m still not convinced it’ll be Maeve.

Having a change of heart, she says, “You could stay too. That might be good.”

I reply, “I’ve gotta go, B.”

As I gently try to weasel away, she replies, “I know.” Her hold on me loosens. “But you’ll be alright?”

I meet her eyes. She looks predictably concerned. But when I reply, “I’ll be fine,” she gives me a quick kiss and releases my shoulder. I can’t believe my luck.

We both get out of the car. As she comes round, I say, “Just get back to the house. Do what you need to. I’ll call if something comes up.” Before I take off, I pat my pockets to make sure I have my phone.

She’s actually letting me go.
The lane to our left is clear. There’s no one coming, just the guy behind us…and two other guys behind him. The last guy in line pulls out, around the other two.

With cross traffic stopped and no one turning right, I’m free to run across the street. I take off. Wind whips my hair. Rain stings my face.

She calls after me, “Be careful.”

I shout over my shoulder, “I will.”

When I get to the other side of the street, she’s making the turn. I put my hood up and stand watching as she drives away.

If I needed a hint—and really I did—I just got one. She trusts me.

Thanks, B.
Of Sand or Stone: Scene 3

Ten

‘Hang tight.’

I can’t believe she said that.

Predictably, when someone feeds me that line, the first thing that comes to mind is a great, yawning chasm and me barely hanging on to not much. Though the chasm’s never that ‘great’ or ‘yawning’…or at least it’s not as deep as that implies. Shit like that’s always more threatening if you can make out the jagged rocks in the distance beneath your dangling feet.

And that’s just one of my many charms. For every scenario, real or imagined, I jump to the worst possible…

The wind picks up. I shove my phone into my pocket and tuck myself tightly into a corner of the service entrance alcove.

…conclusion…

It seems to rain sideways for a moment, then the wind gusts the other direction and I get sprayed for the umpteen-millionth time.

…’cause like or not, that’s just how life is.

Raising my left hand, I smear at the latest mist from my face. But I have no real delusions that I’m wiping much if any of the water away. I’m just sicker than shit of water trickling down my neck and under my clothes to where water trickles on me. I have this built in flume. The soggy dam at the bottom cuts tightly across my ribs. I doubt I’ll feel warm or dry again until the damned thing’s gone.

Taking today’s theme into account, I think icy, churning seas and a slippery, algae-covered buoy to cling to might be more appropriate.

And sharks.

Sharks would work, but nothing huge. Getting bit in two would be too quick. Small sharks. The kind of sharks that grab hold of a hamstring and tear.

The rain pounds shimmering ringlets onto the wet concrete inches from my toes. Dusky light plays off of them as I try to imagine what it’d be like to swim with a severed hamstring. With the force of each kick my heel would waggle like the chin of a bobblehead doll.

But that makes it sound sort of cute. It wouldn’t be. Salt water would burn the wound. My flesh would tear each time I thrashed to stay afloat. Blood would gush from my ankle, attracting more sharks.

The real mystery of life, from where I stand, is how it manages to dish up one grossly unfair thing after another with such disturbing regularity and inspired creativity. It should run out of ‘cruel stuff to do, but there never seems to be a shortage. Before I can even get over the latest sadistic thing life has thrown at me, something else always comes up keep me busy.
At least I’m never bored.

I clench my teeth and stiffen to stifle a fresh round of chattering and shivering. ‘Hang tight,’ my ass. It’d be good of her to get the lead out ’cause I’ve about had it.

Yeah, and I need to get over it. She’s not that far away. I feel her drawing nearer…another side effect of the trinket responsible for my mystical makeover. I’d feel her anyway, without it—my natural instincts are pretty good—but the bracelet hones them. I can even tell that she’s not worried. I don’t know why, but I decided a while ago that being worried that she’s not worried is just retarded.

The bottom line is it’s not her fault I’m miserable. I did this to myself. She’s not the dumbass who toured all four corners of this massive monument to irony in an arctic torrential storm.

I’ve never gotten the vow of poverty that priests and nuns take. They turn their backs on the almighty dollar to live in the lavish lap of an institution that’s been accruing wealth with murderous efficiency for centuries. Some people might label that hypocrisy, but I wouldn’t go that far because I believe that most of them have an honest desire to serve.

Thing is…while I get why they take a vow of poverty, I don’t see why it exists. In my experience, if what you want most is to do good, you’re not gonna be scamming for a buck anyway. You’ll seriously have your hands full with that first thing.

My jaw aches from tensing it to keep my teeth from chattering. That moves to the top of my list of major complaints, replacing the tension in my neck because it intensifies the dull throbbing in my temples. I think the mercury should just go ahead and dip a few more degrees, so this frigid, sopping shit can become the blizzard it was destined to be. Not that that would be the least bit helpful now. I’m soaked to the bone.

What I learned for all that fun was that Saint Faustina of the Blessed Sacrament is one story short of being organized religion’s answer to the Borg cube.

And that’s just a little too obvious to actually be amusing, but whatever…

There wasn’t a single open window in the whole goddamn place. Not one. The doors are all either locked or guarded or both, which I suppose isn’t that surprising for an inner-city school…especially since this appears to be a boarding school.

Loitering at the service entrance closest to the dumpsters was the only plan to sneak inside I could come up with that didn’t involve cold cocking two or three people, one or more of them nuns. That’s not gonna happen. Keeping up what few standards I have left is important. And I’m proud to say that I’ve never been the sort of degenerate who’d deck a nun.

I take one last hit off of the half-soaked, mostly forgotten cigarette. It’s done, just like the rest of me. The filter’s so wet I can’t even get a good draw off the stupid thing. I flip it out into the parking lot. It hits the pavement without so much as a sizzle or a wisp of smoke.

Probably the most stunning part of the whole nightmare is that slogging around the building actually got me somewhere…besides just back to the beginning.

And fuck me, I almost wish it hadn’t. This place is seriously setting me off. I feel like something bad’s gonna happen.

My brow tightens. It does nothing for my throbbing temples or aching jaw.
Or maybe something bad already is happening, right now, right under my nose…and I can’t do jack about it.

I shut my eyes. My ears rumble as I bear down. When I blink my eyes open, I actually catch a break…some of the tension eases.

It’d be so much better for my frazzled nerves if we were following B.’s lead. Mine has this history of being, umm…

I make this stupid sound, something like ‘ta-huh.’ That wanted to be a snicker. I hang my head. A smirk stretches my lips. They’re so cold and chapped it almost hurts.

Saying I’ve got bad judgment would be a serious kindness. I’m the sort of person who can cause a nun to eye me suspiciously just by telling the truth. That takes major talent—all the wrong kind. Of course, after the sister decided that I wasn’t quite the headcase she had me figured for, she actually managed to say something useful. No thanks to me. I was too busy making an ass of myself.

My fleeting, shitheaded happy passes. I don’t remember if I told B. about the support group or not.

Eh, it actually mattered, so probably not.

Anyway, that’d give Maeve opportunity. According to B. she has motive too, so…

I take out my phone and press the spacebar to check the time. It’s almost one. I’ve been here nearly forty minutes freezing my tits off. No wonder I’m a couple dozen different kinds of miserable and only getting worse.

I stare at the last text message from B. ‘I hope you’re getting somewhere. This has been a total bust.’

I should text her and tell her about the stupid ‘support group’ thing, but I really don’t feel like it. My fingers are numb.

How I managed to do better than her by saying a name that’s more commonly taken than given and describing every terminal patient in every oncology ward in the—

Shit.

Y’know what? This hasn’t been for nothing. What with her mistaking a four-door sedan for a moving van, there wouldn’t have been room in the car for me anyway.

Huh.

Well, alright, so…I guess it all worked out. It sucked, but whatever…

Her part should’ve been simple. She should know exactly where she’s headed by now. Instead, she’s coming to me because she hasn’t got any better ideas.

We’re so screwed.

Best I can figure, either Maeve’s a real piece of work or Cass isn’t worth her salt…or—who knows—could be a little of both.

At least I won’t have long to wait. The new witchy lojack is telling me that B.’s not even a block north and moving my way fast. I almost feel bad for Cass.
As I pocket my phone, some big guy in a brown fedora emerges through a break in the hedges at the farthest end of the parking lot. I expect to see B. Not seeing her feels really weird. It worries me. I wonder if this thing’s just whack. I feel her. She should be there.

It isn’t until the big guy bends down to duck under the limbs of a small tree between the hedgerow and the curb that I catch sight of her. She was completely eclipsed by him. My new take on the sitch is that I’m the one who’s whack. The man isn’t a man at all. That’s gotta be Cass.

She stops to hold the tree limbs up for Buffy and falls in behind her. Once they’re past the parked cars at the back of the lot, they walk side-by-side at an angle toward the entrance—the main one—and I see that I was wrong again. Cass is actually shorter than B., though not by much. But I guess B. does have heels on, so it’s hard to say.

Aside from being a bit on the sawed-off side, Cass is what polite people might call ‘stout.’ The rest us would probably say ‘chunky,’ or even ‘fat.’ I find the rest of us annoying, so I’ll just be pleased she looks like she can handle herself. We may need that.

I start to leave my hiding place, but as I step forward, they turn to pass between the next rows of cars and B. spots me. She changes direction, dragging Cass along. I step back under the overhang again. Getting any wetter isn’t something I’m looking forward to. I’ll gladly put it off, even if it’s just for a couple minutes.

Y’know…my judgment might not’ve been so far off if Cass dressed a little less like she raided her brother’s closet.

Her jeans are baggy with rolled boot cuffs. She wears lug soled shoes that might be boots, but it’s impossible to tell because the rolled cuffs were a necessity and they could use another turn. The heavy, brown leather duster she has on makes me think her brother might’ve been an extra on Walker, Texas Ranger. Her hat’s the only thing that doesn’t fit her like a hand-me-down, but it doesn’t exactly fit her look either. What with her coat, it seems like it should be more Arkansas than Indiana Jones.

But again, being fair, I can’t see her in skinny jeans or those girly, pointy-toed ankle boots with the weird, knotted suede overlay B.’s got on. If Cass is anything like me, the heels on those boots would lead to an untimely tragedy.

And B.’s three-quarter length raincoat would just be hilarious. Of course, it is slightly pink, like just this side of bubblegum. It’s adorable on her, but there are certain things that only she can pull off. And even more that only she should try. That coat’s one of them. I wouldn’t wear it on a bet, but I’m glad she dug the silly thing out. Between that, with its coverage and hood, and the leather coat and fisherman’s sweater she’s got on underneath, she should be toasty…if not roasting.

This little alcove really isn’t big enough for the three of us. When she takes the free corner, instead of crowding in, Cass just stands in the rain, looking completely unaffected…if not contented.

B. introduces her and I hold out my hand. “Nice to meet you,” I say. For an expected courtesy, it isn’t well received. I know I look like a rat that didn’t make it off the ship, but—

I give Cass longer than I should to make up her mind. Just as it dawns on me that I might be being pushy, she moves past the ‘friendly smile’ part of the exercise. My hand warms with her touch. In the space of a handshake, the warmth radiates out.

When she releases me, I look down. I’m not sure what I’m even looking for. The only detail strikes me as off is her nails. They’re neatly manicured and a little longer than I expected.
That means shit to a tree. And even less to me.

I’m still soggy, but I’m no longer freezing. In fact, after that handshake, there’s a bunch of things I’m ‘no longer.’ It’s the damnedest thing. The tension just peeled away. With the exception of one afternoon I spent with B., I haven’t felt better in months.

I even think we have a fair shot of succeeding today. And that one detail tips the scales. A slew of missing aches and angst trigger warning lights and throw up caution flags.

As B. slips her hand into mine, I try to blow them off. Fact is, Cass reads about as prickly as a teddy bear.

I glance at B. seconds before she turns to me. She regards Cass with warmth in her eyes and a smile on her face. I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t help resenting it.

I really am that shallow.

The bitch of the sitch is I know that Cass couldn’t have known B. that long. It took me years to get to where she has in a matter of months or maybe even minutes. She jacked what I had to earn.

As if to reward my pettiness, the tension creeps back into my body. And the chill returns too… though I barely had time to miss it. I stiffen to ward off a fresh round of shivering and chattering.

I want this over with. The sooner we do what’s gotta be done, the sooner we can part company. And the sooner I can get warm. I’ve already looped B. in on the guards and stuff. There’s nothing to discuss, so I suggest, “Let’s get moving.”

“Alright, but I should explain something before we go,” Cass says. Her round face is impossible to read. “That is if you’ll indulge me.” And her voice is just as deceptive. Because of how she looks, I expect her to sound something like Calamity Jane does on Deadwood. All harsh edges and forced deepness. Basically a caricature. Instead, her voice has a pleasant, friendly pitch and a quality that makes me think of bells…or laughter.

She’d be right at home laughing.

That doesn’t help. I want to hate her, but I’m not sure I can. I reply, “Shoot.”

“I believe we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot,” Cass says. Oh, for the love of Bob! I thought she had something to say about this place or what we need to do. Enough bonding already! I reply, “No, we’re cool.” Let’s just get this over with.

“So are we?” Cass asks and immediately answers herself, “That’s not the impression I got,” so I can’t get a word in edgewise.

I hate it when people pull that crap.

Go figure, she grins, making me think it was intentional. “We weren’t supposed to meet,” she says. “Not yet. Not like this.” Water collected in brim of her hat pours out when she looks down, shaking her head. “But life’s just full of surprises, so here we are.”

B. squeezes my hand, vying for attention. Funny, when I face her, she hangs her head all coy and shit. Fringes of blonde hair dangling below her hood are all she lets me see.

Well, it’s not like I’m gonna get her wet, so I reach out to draw her closer. She comes willingly,
placing her hands on my shoulders. Her folded arms separate us.

Mumbling to my chest, she says, “I was going to talk with you about this on the way to Chicago.” She exhales a snicker through her nose, but I feel her tense. She’s nervous. That comes through loud and clear. “We can still talk. I want to talk. That’s why the road trip. There are easier ways to get around, but none that are quite the same for talking.”

But the rest…?

I’m not sure what her deal is. I wish I could see her face. Gently probing, I find the side of her neck and use my thumb to coax her to lift her chin.

She doesn’t budge. “This is what I meant when I mentioned the mountains last night,” she says.

Okay, so…cryptic references to cryptic statements and hidden faces it is. At this rate, I might have a clue what’s up by Christmas, but I won’t hold my breath.

After a drawn-out pause, she turns frustrated, grumbling, “Oh,” like a curse. “I wish we had time. I want to explain. I want to feel better. I want us to feel better. It’d be nice to forget about everyone else and just worry about ourselves for a while.”

I guess I agree, but she still isn’t making a hell of a lot of sense. I’ll go with the feeling better part of that. Feeling anything but crappy is commodity that’s been in short supply.

As for the rest…I must be missing my decoder ring. I look up, hoping that Cass brought hers.

She has this quirky, crooked smirk on her face, like she thinks we’re cute or something. Sobering when I meet her eyes, she declares, “This sucks,” pausing to grin. “I don’t know what I was thinking. There isn’t shit I can say. It’s not like I can make you to trust me. You either will or you won’t.”

Well, Cass is making sense. Lots of it. But I’m not—

“And even if you come to, it probably won’t happen today.”

That’s nice, but she’s on a totally different page…and not really—

B. slips from my gasp, settling back into her corner. Between the edge of the parking lot and here, she went from happy-go-lucky to twitchy and weird. And the only thing that’s changed is me. That’s not a comfort.

Cass has her arms crossed when I return my attention to her. Looking down at the door somewhere between B. and me, she continues her spiel, “What I can do must seem pretty dangerous to you. I won’t argue with that. It is. You’re right to be concerned.”

I wish I could say I cared.

She lets her arms fall to her sides. Her posture relaxes. “It’s a curse,” she says, like it’s some kind of admission.

I glance at B. She’s watching Cass too. What starts as a glance ends up stare. She looks fine now. Perfectly normal.

I s’pose it’s a good thing. But of course, just because, I end up eyeing her like she did something weird when I’m—
“You’d think it’d be cool,” Cass says, briefly distracting me. “That I could do or have anything I wanted.”

I’m the one who’s off her meds. B. should be staring at me. Since they joined me—all two or three minutes, or however long it’s been—I’ve been spazzing like a one-armed man in a rowboat…

I smirk.

…headed over the falls. Yeah, that’d be me.

Cass says, “And if I wanted anything, you might have a point, but I don’t.” The way she’s grinning, I guess she thinks I find her amusing. She lets out a sniff of a snicker. “Well, that’s not exactly true.”

Figures I’d tic to another water analogy.

“What I want is to be able to shake hands with someone new without all the drama.”

Good for you. What I want is a two-track mind. Having just the one really isn’t working for me. As for the rest…I’m sure being instantly liked really sucks. I wouldn’t know.

“Remember? I told you Cass is here to help Kim,” B. says.

When I nod, she gives me a quick, lopsided little grin that dimples her cheeks. It’s hopelessly cute.

I get sucked in and end up grinning too, like the idiot I am.

“She and her friends—the coven I told you about—they run a women’s shelter,” she says. “Of course, their doors are open to all women, but because of how they do what they do, they attract a special kind. What you might call ‘the cream of the crop.’ But there’s no creamy goodness ’cause what they’re best at is being screwed up. Most of them are so wounded that it’s just easier for people to write them off.”

I glance at Cass. She’s ready to bail. That doesn’t get any better as B. continues to talk her up, “Cass and her friends are more into doing what’s right than what’s easy. Without them most these women would end up locked away god knows where. Cass’s gift is a big part of that.”

“It’s not a gift,” Cass mutters under her breath and takes off for the entrance.

I’m surprised she lasted that long.

I step out of the alcove. Rain splashes my head. My arms and shoulders stiffen against the cold. I consider putting my hood up, but I think—

“I should do the talking,” Cass says as B. and I fall in behind her.

It’s pointless. My hood hangs heavy between my shoulders. It’s so wet, it’s soaked the back of my sweater.

At least I get the picture now—all that incoherent stuff B. spewed—she must’ve made reservations for us at Casa de Cass. I guess she tweaked because she thought that her making plans behind my back might piss me off.

And she’s right. It does.
They’re leaving me behind, so I pick up the pace. Maybe Cass gets how miserable I am. That seems like progress. I like progress. I’ll take all the progress I can get.

Yeah, at this rate I’ll be swimming in fresh, frigid ‘progress’ by the time we reach the entrance.

Well, I’m awake now.

Uh…

Y’know, under any other circumstance, I’d probably stay mad, but I can’t. That just wouldn’t be fair. Considering the past few weeks, I get why B. did it. It’s not like I was up to making my own decisions. She needed the help. I can’t blame her for trying to find it.

And while I’m not exactly thrilled that she might’ve talked about my problems with some stranger, I trust her enough to believe that she wouldn’t say anything to hurt me, so…

I have this theory that running in the rain doesn’t really gain you anything. More forward momentum just means more spatter. You get just as wet regardless. I’ve never really tested it because I always felt like a dumbass walking when everyone else was running, but I think it’s true.

As I jog to keep up, the refreshing chill of ‘progress’ splatters my face, runs down my neck, trickles between my tits and shoulder blades, down my stomach and the small of my back. My sweater’s too soaked to catch much of it. And the movement of running just makes that part worse.

Concentrating on anything else is a bitch.

But yeah, I think—I’m not one-hundred percent sure—but I think that if I told her I wasn’t into making the trip that she’d respect me enough not to push.

Well, it’d depend on whether she thought I was one wave short of a shipwreck or not.

On the ‘glass half full’ side of things…thankfully, my jeans are still dry enough through the waist to spare my ass the latest ‘progress.’

Whatever…point is—the one that actually matters—she meant well. She still does. And I’m not convinced that that unfortunate character flaw should buy her an instant ticket to Hell. So what if it’s ridiculous to want to try to fix everything no matter how hopelessly broken it is? That’s just B.

I should be glad she’s that way. God knows I’m a fixer-upper.

I let it go.

And just in time. We reach the door. Cass opens it. As she ushers us inside, I smear thick, sopping clumps of hair back from my face with both hands and get to experience the thrilling chill of ice cold ‘progress’ one more time as it dribbles down my spine.

My stance on progress may’ve changed. Any progress I make usually leaves a mark.

We pass into an antechamber about the size of a generous walk-in closet, past a pair of metal detectors on either wall, through another set of doors and into a huge oblong room.

The gust of warm air I was hoping for doesn’t happen. I’m too wet and cold to say for sure, but it doesn’t seem much warmer in here than it was out there. At least it’s drier.

This place is just the opposite of where I had my run-in with Sister Mary Dubious. That was basically just a waiting room with a few churchy touches. This is great hall with all of the regal
elegance of a Catholic cathedral, but without all the set dressing to clutter up the marble floor mosaic.

Another pair of heavy, arch-shaped, wooden doors like the ones we just passed through separates a set of two two-story stained glass windows that take up most of the far wall. The doors must lead to a central courtyard because this room isn’t nearly as long as the building is wide and the light behind those windows is way too natural.

Above the doors hangs the obligatory cross complete with token martyr. I’ve never gotten that. We all know how the story goes. It’s a little hard to miss when we’re force-fed it practically from birth.

What with all the ‘tell’ going on I don’t really see the need to ‘show.’ But whatever…it’s their party. S’pose they think we’re dense enough to need the visual cue.

Check. Crucifixion would suck. Got it. But I dunno, maybe I’m being touchy.

The guard I sensed when I was snooping around outside is to our right. As I get over my role as a closet art critic long enough to recognize him with a nod, Cass enters. Acting like the model visitor, she approaches him with her hand outstretched and a friendly smile on her face.

At least one of us is. B.’s caught up in the touristy vibe too, checking out the ceiling.

Cass and the guard exchange pleasantries as he takes her hand. “My name’s Casey Tolliver,” she says. “These are my friends Dana Gentry and Annette Summerton.” After pretzeling names so badly that I wonder briefly who this ‘Dana’ chick’s s’posed to be, she gestures over her shoulder at us.

I’m sure we look oblivious…and appropriately clueless, but we’re not…or at least I’m not. I can only guess about B. I join her in taking in the ceiling as Cass slathers a thick layer of bullshit with absolute sincerity, “My sister Tina goes to school here. She’s been having some trouble, so we drove down to see if we could help out.”

Yeah, so…the ceiling’s cool…more so than the windows or that stupid cross. It’s divided into three square sections by wedge shaped structures that are a little more beefy than your average molding. The wide, beveled edges serve as a frame for three murals. The hosts of Heaven stare down at us, locked in motionless flight.

And the guard still hasn’t let go of Cass’s hand. That’s funny.

“I’ll call the Mother Superior and let her know you’re here,” he replies.

But who can blame him? If she hadn’t let go of me, I’d probably still be holding her hand. I almost remember what it was like not to feel like complete shit.

“I’ve already spoken with Sister Francis,” Cass replies. “She’s expecting us.” She must’ve dug the name up from the same place she got a sister named Tina—Google probably—but whatever…her info must be good because the guard doesn’t choke.

Not that he looks all that quick on the uptake. He’s about a head taller than Cass, paunchy and balding. One of his eyes is even a little on the lazy side, which just adds… And the way he talks makes me want to kick him in the ass to see if I can get him going.

“I should still check in and let her know you’re here,” he says.

The surprise is that he doesn’t just swallow her act hook, line and sinker. He actually seems
skeptical until Cass says, “Don’t trouble yourself. We’ll be fine.”

Why the change—I’m not sure—but whatever she did, it worked. She finally lets go of his hand. No clue.

I don’t expect him to move, but when she heads for an arched opening about halfway down the right wall, he keeps pace with her.

“At least let me help you find her,” he says.

Yeah, he’s a real credit to his uniform. But Cass doesn’t seem to mind. They chitchat quietly back and forth like a couple of old pals as we make our way down the hall.

I try to follow their conversation, hoping for clues as to where we’re going, what we’re doing, what the hell’s up…but—

She touches his hand at regular intervals as they talk. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she was flirting. She isn’t, but he might be. It’s hard to say.

I pick up enough to put together that his name’s ‘Martin Little’ almost like the actor. Unlike the actor, he really isn’t. Figures I’d get stuck behind his big ass. I bet B. can still see the doors. I can’t. All I see is Martin. I glance at her as our tour guides yuck it up. She rolls her eyes.

Eventually the brains of the operation gets over how funny that really wasn’t and moves on to better things, like the Steelers. They’re both huge fans. That must be part of why they’re all buddy-buddy. Football solidarity.

Christ. I give up. What I know is good enough. We’re headed somewhere and Cass isn’t doing a bad job of getting us there. I haven’t had to coldcock anyone yet, so I’m golden.

I have trouble placing the smell at first, but then it comes to me and I feel stupid. It’s so obvious. This hallway reeks of church. That sounds worse than it is. It’s actually kind of a nice smell. It brings back memories of Aunt Lu and long hours spent in uncomfortable clothes listening to a bunch of gobbledygook spouted by a dude a funny dress. The spectacle part of the spectacle was always kind of cool, but the rest was just…part of growing up in Southie.

The smell gets stronger the farther we go, so I guess where we’re headed is pretty obvious. Those doors I saw before I ended up stuck behind the human roadblock were the cathedral doors. That clears a couple things up. The obvious lack of people…

My guess: this part of the school is more ‘church’ less ‘school.’ The entrance on the other side was locked. That’s probably the school part. It makes sense to put the kids in an area farthest from the main entrance. It’d cut some of the bullshit factor…make it harder on them to skip out. With the courtyard in the middle, they’d have a place outside to hang out.

And judging from the other stuff I’ve seen, like the paintings displayed in this hallway that aren’t —

The guard stops.

Uh…

Cass and B. both slip past him through the open door and I follow. When I enter the vestibule, B. snags my wrist. We stay put, off to the side next to a little wall-mounted stoup.
While I’m here, may as well give in to the compulsion. I know B.’s gonna look at me like I’ve cracked, but I bow my head and dip my finger anyway. Crossing myself, I mutter under my breath, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen,” just like I do every time I get holy water, but she wouldn’t have any way of knowing that, so…

Besides, it’s not like I actually—

That’s not true. I’m not sure what I believe. It just seems the right thing to do. Respectful or whatever…

While I’m paying due diligence to dogma, Martin rejoins Cass. The happy couple’s leaving us behind. S’pose that’s part of the plan.

I glance at B. Must be. She’s in no hurry. And sure enough, she wipes the funny look off her face and busies herself by removing her raincoat.

It’s cool. I know I’m not right.

She rolls her raincoat into a tight bundle and tucks it under her arm. Guess she thinks that pink, crackly plastic might not be the best thing to be sneaky in.

At least I assume that’s what we’re doing. We would’ve just followed the two lovebirds into the cathedral if—

They have a slight head start when she touches my hand and gestures for me the follow. We pass through the narthex. At the back of the nave she veers off to the right and ducks down behind the last row of pews.

Yup, looks like that’s it. I go along with the plan, hunkering down and slinking to the other end of the row with her.

This brings back some memories. Good times. Except the last time I was in church I sat on a wooden bench that was so hard and straight-backed that squatting might actually be preferable.

But my clothes…

My clothes are classic. Absolutely perfect. Auntie Lu couldn’t have done better. My sweater’s bugging the hell out of me. Between my shoulders, buried deep within all the soggy, steamy layers of sticky, heavy, wooly fabric, I itch. And there isn’t a damned thing I can do about it.

Well, I could, but not without drawing attention to myself and I think the goal is for us to slip past the old crone who’s up near the altar.

Martin and Cass haven’t interrupted her yet either. They’re probably keeping a respectful distance, waiting for her to finish whatever nunly thing she’s got going on.

Again, I’m clueless. I glance at B. and she shrugs. Good thing we’re both on the same page.

Eventually, the nun says, “How may I be of service, child?” The line’s so stale it sounds scripted. And it might be. Who knows with nuns? But it’s her voice that really kills it. It sounds pinched, like someone’s holding a turd under her nose as she speaks.

Cass introduces herself without bothering to point us out this time because—well, we’re hiding…in a huge, well lit room. Yeah. It wouldn’t take a hell of a lot for us to be spotted, especially by a nun. They’re naturally suspicious.
B. takes my hand and tugs. As I half listen to an alternate line of crap about Cass’s imaginary sister, we cautiously move toward the front of the church, still ducked down, using the pews for cover. Cass switches from the troubled teen to another timeless classic on the retelling: the dead grandmother. That’s so Ferris Bueller of her.

Marvin either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care that Cass’s story’s changed. Either way, he’s got nothing.

I guess after sizing the place up, she got the same impression I did: this is a prep school. Troubled teens and prep schools mix about as well as stout beer and wine coolers.

Goddammit! I just had to go there. And could I ever use a drink.

The nun replies, “It saddens me to hear that.”

She sounds it…and—it’s hard to tell—but I think she sounds closer.

We stop. I follow B.’s lead, tucking myself tightly against the end of a pew.

And still not a word from Marvin.

Er…Martin.

“Tina and Granny Evelyn were very close,” Cass says.

Yeah, she sounds much closer. About even with us, actually. Good thing we stopped.

Steadily moving toward the doors, she explains, “She’ll probably want to come home to be with the family.”

B. touches my hand and starts to duck-walk up the aisle as Cass adds a tentative, stammering, “That is, if that’s okay.”

Whatever. They’ll be gone in a sec, but I follow her anyway.

The nun replies, “Yes, certainly.”

Yeah, yeah, yeah…

There’s a list of shit the pious say to comfort the bereaved. I’ll give her an ‘A’ for effort. She hits the high points as they walk up the aisle. Her tone even changes to something sort of like sympathy. It’s a nice touch, but her spiel still seems so rehearsed to me, it borders on condescending.

Good thing this is a dry run. Maybe Cass will hook her up with a few pointers. That seems right up her alley.

When a muffled thump drowns out the nun’s nasally chatter, B. stands.

I start to ask what’s up, but she leaves me behind. I find my legs and take off after her.

She goes straight for the vestry door beside the pulpit. There’s a ring of keys in hand, but she tries the knob first.

The door swings in as my voice finally decides to work, “Wha——”
Fat lot of good the poor, pathetic, broken thing does me. She heads straight for the adjacent door. The knob rattles in her hand. This one’s locked, like the other one should’ve been.

Okay, so, two things: in addition to being downright scary, Cass must also be a skilled pickpocket. Good to know. But the important thing is we’re on the right track. We have to be. I can’t think of any other reason that door would’ve been unlocked. So she did the right thing…the right, wrong thing. Funny how that happens a lot around us.

It gives me the creeps, but I tag along, locking the knob and shutting us in.

I used to wonder what a vestry would be like. Not that I was ever curious about a priest or what it might be like to be one. It’s just the appeal that any forbidden place has when you have no manners.

The keys jingle as B. tries them one-by-one.

Now I know. And I’ve gotta say, I’m a little disappointed. All the trappings of the trade are here, lit by pale yellow light so dim it barely reaches the floor. Candles and crucifixes, scrolls of parchment and old leather bound books, silk and velvet thises and thatses, and assorted brass doohickeys. It seems like tons of clutter, but the way it’s arranged has an ‘everything in its place’ sort of feel.

Truth be told, the disappointment’s my fault. It’s got nothing to do with this place…or not much. My perception’s what’s wrong. There’s just something about the bad lighting, the dark wood tones and all of the white and gold and red knickknacks that makes me feel like I stepped into a sports bar where The Holy Trinity’s the home team.

Go God.

A soft, “Huh,” of a laugh slips from my mouth. Hard to say, but I think I just put my finger on the main problem I have with organized religion.

With organized anything. It’s like we have this innate ability to take the coolest concepts and turn them cheesy.

B. glances over her shoulder at me. Could be the laugh. More likely, considering her expression, she’s discovered none of the keys fit.

Lord knows why I nod.

I just hope we don’t run into the priest. Odds are he won’t be impressed.

She takes the knob in both hands and bears down, twisting it. Something inside the lock snaps. I cringe. I’m going to Hell for sure now. Like there was ever any doubt.

The door still doesn’t open, so she puts a shoulder into it.

I can’t watch. A series of crackles and pops issue from the doorjamb.

Knowing B., if we get caught, she’ll probably skate on her standard combo of ignorance and good intentions.

But me…? I know better. And as usual, because of that, there’s no excuse.

The door finally springs open with a loud, shuddering clatter.
No one comes running, so I guess we’re good.

She feels around for a switch and turns the lights on. We’re standing in a nook at the west end of a room that’s either a large study or a small library.

I guess more than one desk makes it a library. Studies are kind of personal things. Or I think that’s how that goes.

There’s a pair of doors to our right. We’ve gotta be almost to the east end of the building. My guess, the hallway that connects that service entrance I was loitering in to the kitchens or whatever is on the other side of this room.

I stand around a moment too long with my thumb up my…and she leaves me again. I turn around and one of the two double doors stands open.

“Hurry up,” she hisses from the next room. “Turn the light off when you leave.” The expression ‘quiet as a church mouse’ is totally lost on her.

I flip off the lights and close the door behind me as I step into a wide hallway that’s lined with windows on the left side. It’s basically just dead, useless space lost from the floor plan because of the south transept of the cathedral.

Useless space with a vaulted ceiling that’s big enough to hold most people’s kitchen, living room and dining room. No wonder her voice carried so well.

The hallway ends at another pair of heavy wooden doors. She leans casually against the left one, holding it open as I make my way to her.

How she knows where we’re going is beyond me. Maybe she’s guessing. Nah. She’s too sure of herself. If she didn’t know, she’d ask what I thought. The only other choice is that Cass kibitzed. There’s no one else who could’ve. But after we came inside, she talked with everyone else except us. Unless I’m really missing something.

I stop about five feet short of the doorway and B. Before we go any farther, I’ve gotta ask, “What’s the deal with Cass? Is she a demon?” It’s a fair guess. The only other touchy, feely, ‘tell me your troubles’ sort of dude I know is green, has horns, loves show tunes and plays a mean game of Parcheesi. Only one of those things doesn’t scream ‘demon’ to me.

But B. obviously doesn’t agree. All grins and giggles, she asks, “What?” Her smile fades. She takes a breath, snaps dead serious and just answers my question, “No, she’s an empath.”

Straight answers are good…when I know what they mean. “A who?” I stammer.

“Bless you,” she replies through a smile. At least she finds me amusing.

I roll my eyes. I swear each time I open my mouth my I.Q. drops. At this rate I should be a shoo-in for ‘village idiot’ wherever we land when this shit’s over.

And standing here like a lump’s working so well for me too. Screw it. I want this over. I can figure crap out later. I’ll have her draw pictures or something to make me understand.

As I step past her through the open door onto the stairway landing, she prompts, “Empathy?” hopefully, like that might help.
Okay, I’ve heard it, but—

I mumble, “Isn’t that just a fancy word for sympathy?”

She doesn’t hear me.

You know what? Piss on this. I don’t care. This stairway’s enough distraction for now. It’s pretty as hell. And that must be the point. It’s sure in no hurry to get anywhere. It’s a huge wooden structure that wraps the room one complete turn for each floor. This whole side is one large platform, like a balcony. With the square platforms at each corner, the thing’s about half flat.

Eight ornately trimmed columns, one at each inner corner and one in the middle of each side, stretch up past where I can see. A spindled banister bridges the gaps between the columns. I go to it, lean out into the opening and look up. The stairway snakes up three more stories. And there’s another domed skylight in the ceiling, like the one in the cathedral. That explains why it’s so light in here.

I shrug. Guess she’s looking for more word-a-day action. She’s seriously looking in the wrong place.

The door shuts. I sigh and grumble, “Just fill me in.” My tone’s a lot harsher than I mean it to be. As she passes me on the landing, I mumble, “Sorry,” under my breath.

Goddammit. I really hate that word.

I turn away from the railing and follow her. We reach the first set of stairs before she says anything. “It’s alright.” She takes one step down and another, all leisurely, like we’re out for a stroll. “It’s sort of like sympathy, but with physical stuff too. Like if someone was cold and you felt cold too, not because it’s cold, but because they’re cold.”

I expect her pick up the pace, but she just saunters along, looking back over her shoulder every now and again as she explains, “And yeah, I know how that sounds. No clue how it works, but the upshot is that Cass is really sensitive to other people.”

There’s enough room for us to walk side-by-side on the stairs, so I let go of the banister and walk beside her.

Giving me sidelong glance, she says, “She can also share what she feels or make someone feel a specific way by touching them.” Her hand rests against the railing. She seems oblivious to it, so much so that it runs into the column before she pulls away. “But you got that much already,” she concludes.

We round the first corner together and I reply, “That sounds like it’d suck.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine,” she says. “Getting mad really wouldn’t be any kind of fun at all, like it ever is.” She shrugs. “But it’d be worse for Cass because she’d just end up spreading the love. She’d have to leave. And y’know those people—the ones who just won’t let go…?”

I reply through a laugh, “Yeah, I hate that.” The not-so-funny…she’s done that to me, but there’s no point in me sharing that little tidbit.

“I guess she spends a lot of time alone,” B. adds.

That much is obvious. You’d have to.
This is going the way things usually go with us. I hope for some deep insight and she just shoots the breeze. It’s sad. I bitch about it—to myself at least—but truth is I enjoy listening to her. I’m such a damned hypocrite.

“She sure wasn’t thrilled about doing this,” she says.

I ask, “So why did she?” That was an offhanded remark that I should’ve just let drop. But I didn’t, so I try to cut a little of the chitchat by filling in the predictable stuff, “I mean, she’s obviously got mad skills when it comes to getting in and out of places she isn’t s’posed to be, but it seems like a regular witch could’ve done something similar.”

As we turn the last corner, she replies, “They could’ve, but it wouldn’t have been the quite the same. What Cass does isn’t as invasive.”

That’s nice, but if I’m reading this right, she’s stalling so we can talk. I need to wrap this up. What I want to know is this: “So where are we going?”

“I don’t know exactly, but I know it’s downstairs,” she replies. “When Cass passed off the keys, she showed me something that looked like a glowing blue spot on the cathedral floor. Other than that, I don’t know anything more than you do. Right now we’re really just headed for an X on the map.”

Time’s up.

We leave the stairs and make our way to the door. Resting her hand against it, she looks over her shoulder to confirm what I’d already guessed, “We’re almost there, so we should probably try to be quiet.”

She twists the knob, pushes the door in, gets it about halfway open, thinks better of it, pulls it closed and turns back to me to add, “It was a big spot. I have no idea what that means, but ‘big’ usually isn’t a good sign with stuff like this.”

I grin. I can’t help myself. She just tickles me sometimes.

And of course, while I’m looking at the floor, trying not to crack up, she leaves me again. But that’s probably for the best. The snickering, snorting thing that’s happening with my nose is really attractive, I’m sure.

I look up when she pokes her head in the door and asks, “Are you coming?” She sounds as annoyed as humanly possible in tones that might not get her shushed in a theater.

I need sleep bad.

I pass through the doorway and the décor changes to institutional bland. The hallway leads off to the left. The midpoint should be, roughly, right under the center aisle of the cathedral. The only question now is ‘left’ or ‘right.’ She answers that quick enough. ‘Left’ it is.

Moment of truth. We do this, whatever this is, we put things right and we can motor.

Monty, I’d like to see what’s behind door number one.

As the lovely Buffy turns the doorknob and pushes, I watch over her shoulder.

Uh…
Well, this room isn’t very big. The table Kim’s passed out on takes up half the available floor space. The door just misses it as it swings in to the left.

She still has on her hospital gown. That part I expect. From there things get a bit different.

But y’know, the day something like this goes down exactly the way I expect, I’ll probably drop dead on the spot.

I quickly inventory the shit that doesn’t fit, starting with the furniture. The table’s too big and heavy-looking for such a tiny room and there aren’t any chairs. That says ‘storeroom’ to me. So the overhead projector parked ahead of us in the aisle isn’t that surprising. The part that doesn’t work for me…

On top of the projector is this beat up wooden box. It looks something you’d throw away… especially since it’s smoking.

Bet Maeve brought that with her. She’s sprawled out on the floor just past the projector. Another woman with long white hair stoops over her.

Actually, that shit’s nastier than smoke. It’s black as tar with an oily sheen just like that. It doesn’t move like smoke either. Smoke goes wherever it’s carried by the air. This stuff’s erratic, like millions of lazy flies no bigger than fine grains to sand.

The way it looks I expect to smell burnt rubber or something worse. I smell moisture. This basement’s kind of damp.

Kim’s breathing the shit in. The plume of not-quite-right smoke trails out of the box directly into her nose and mouth. But the way it swirls it’s hard to tell if it’s coming or going. She might be breathing it out.

Snow White didn’t flinch when the door opened. That made me wonder. But she’s still with us. Her hand moves from the Maeve’s cheek to her own lap.

I tense even though that isn’t exactly a provocative gesture.

Her white hair makes me think ‘old,’ but that’s not it. Her shoulders are bare. All she has on is a tank-top and sweats. Either her hair’s the result of some sort of unfortunate peroxide mishap or Granny’s seriously been rockin’ the Clinique. Her skin’s just way too good, though she could really use some sun.

Other weirdnesses: she’s dry as a bone. Either she lives here or she got here by wiggling her nose, which fits, considering, umm…

The area in front of her glows. The fluorescent lights are so bright I don’t notice. It isn’t until I see that the shadow under the cart has faded that—

She turns abruptly.

Will—

A compact ball of lightning flies under the projector and hits B. square in the chest. As she slumps back into my arms, I remember something.

Willow had white hair. I don’t remember when or—
I swing. My forearm smacks her across the cheek.

She drops over sideways.

I punch her again.

I don’t remember crossing the room.

Blood trickles from the corner of her mouth.

I feel bad, but if she’s psycho enough to attack B., I had to do something.

Did I let B. down easy? I meant to.

I don’t remember.

Why would Willow—?

Someone’s moving behind me. As they circle the table, I dive under the damn thing, turning, twisting. Reaching up, I seize the edge of the tabletop and pull.

They grab my right leg.

Clinging to the table for all I’m worth, I kick and thrash.

Whoever this is, they’re wicked strong. The table slides an inch or two, screeching against the floor.

The lights dim. Or maybe it’s just that I’m under the table?

I gain a little. My arms are bent. I let that go, bending my legs instead, then kick for all I’m worth. My foot connects.

She gasps. The table thuds. Actually, I think that was her head.

Bitch lets go. That’s all I care.

I drag myself from under the table and spring to my feet.

Dumbass I am, I stand up in the middle of a shit storm. The ‘smoke’ from that box—I guess Willow was controlling it.

Not anymore.

I duck.

It clumps together in spots, like metal filings drawn by a magnet. When the spots are stationary, they boil like storm clouds. Spots group with other spots.

There’s some sort of crude pecking order, like this shit’s alive on some level. A cluster of spots follow one lead spot. Each snake has a head. At least three separate ‘snakes’ fly around the room. One them’s downright sluggish. The others weave in and out of the slower one, swirling, twirling and dancing around it.

If I was crazy, I might think they were trying to taunt it.

This messed up, whacked out, pseudo-storm brews mostly near the ceiling. That is until I make a
break for the door. One of the ‘heads’ takes an interest in me. Go figure I get the most A.D.H.D. one of the bunch. It turns a circle around my head so fast each spot has a tail like a comet.

My thigh hits the table. I feel my way around its edge and run into the door. I push. It goes so far, not nearly far enough, and springs back.

I just need to slip past. I force the issue and the doorknob catches on my coat.

The black shit spins around my head. I can’t see. I fan my face. That doesn’t help. It’s a struggle not to flip out and swat the air. I breathe in. It’s the last thing I want.

This stuff should smell, but doesn’t. And the way it moves it should make a sound. Creepy shit doesn’t even stir the air. It feels like nothing.

Well, it may tingle a little when I breathe it, but that could just be me.

When my lungs are full, I exhale, blowing the crap away from my face. Then I free my coat and push harder.

As I squeeze past the door, my foot snags something. Trip and hop and tug. My foot doesn’t come free.

I fall, throwing my hands out to catch myself. My right hand touches down first. The something it touches is soft. I let my arm fold. What my other hand hits is hard. When the rest of me catches up, I get it. I fell on B. Her leg is under my stomach. I’m sprawled at an angle over her midsection. I pick myself up and crawl over her.

The black shit follows me out of the room. I huff and puff and sputter and spit. After too many breaths and a whole lot of waving, it finally leaves me alone.

It was her raincoat that tripped me. The stupid thing’s tangled around my foot. I stare into the room as I shake my foot free. The cart got knocked over. No clue when. Might’ve been me. The projector lays on its side half under the table. Broken glass litters the floor. The only thing I don’t see is the box.

The black shit ‘sniffs’ at B. Thick tendrils of the stuff whip around the room. It’s tripled or quadrupled in size since we arrived.

I have to get her out of here. As I drag her back, I get this sense. This bristly, uneasy sense…

I dodge a split-second too late. Her foot—the slayer—the one who’s bent on killing me—her foot grazes my face.

It feels like a lucky break when I manage to catch it, but I let go.

The bitch tackles me as I tumble away. For the second time in as many minutes, I land flat on my face. That might be a record for me. One I’d like to not repeat.

As I push off to my right, she drives her fist into my side just below my ribs. Pain gets in the way. My muscles lock. I wheeze.

I regain control and shove again.

Pissing blood never really gets old. I pay her back with an elbow to the gut as we flop onto our backs.
While she’s busy grunting, I roll back the way we came.

I try to stand again, but this bitch is flat determined we mop the floor.

She leverages me onto my back. Her hands close around my throat. The pressure makes me gag.

I do the only thing I can think to do. It’s cheap, but I force my arm between hers and grab the side of her face. My nails bite into her skin.

She wrenches her arm free and shouts, “You bitch!”

It’s news to me that I’m still clinging to her wrist.

She hauls off and knocks the shit out of me.

Pain sears my jaw. The back of my head smacks the floor. Tingling pressure pounds inside my skull. White flashes stipple my eyes.

I grab her shoulders.


My hands encircle her throat. I kneel over her, straddling her hips, shaking her.

Her head smacks the floor again and again.

Red spots spatter her face.

I taste blood.

Rage leaks out of me like blood.

Blood spatters her face. Tears mixed with blood streak her cheeks.

They aren’t her tears. One dangles from the tip of my nose.

I reach up to mop it away. My mouth hurts.

Blood smears the back of my hand.

My blood.

The details are sketchy, but my body remembers. She held my wrists. I feel her—the pressure of her grip—the way her skin clung, slipping and catching, stretching my own, tugging and twisting…

Every inch of me aches just like that. Each place we touched. Our bodies pushed and pried and pulled. I feel her mark on my skin.

The curtain of hair is gone. Her face isn’t backlit now. I peer into her wide, glassy eyes.

Hollowness fills the space where my heart was.

Buffy?

My fist’s drawn back, but I can’t get it to move.
I give up. My arm falls to my side.

I look first one way and then the other until I find Buffy. She’s still in the doorway breathing that noxious shit in.

I sit up and let the imposter wriggle free. She has to be the fake.

As I face her, the truth comes clear. It wouldn’t make sense for a body double to neglect herself. She’d do everything she could to be the spitting image of Buffy.

A bunch of tiny white scars stand out against the redness in her cheeks. I wonder what happened.

It’s cool. Our lives suck sometimes. That I get.

The deal breaker is that she hasn’t bothered to dye her hair. Just the ends are frosted blonde. The rest is brown. It doesn’t suit her.

This must be Buffy and Buffy doesn’t give a fuck anymore.

I don’t give a fuck either.

She doesn’t fight me when I get up. I go to the doorway and sit down.

My Buffy—the woman I’ve been with for—I don’t know.

I know she saved me. Some part of me belongs to her. I lift her into my lap and cradle her in my arms.

She expels fine, black vapor from her nose and draws it back in.

My head throbs. It feels a couple sizes too big. I hate what I’m thinking. I hate myself for thinking it, but I have to stop this.

Really, I’m too damned dumb to come up with anything better. I cup my hand over her nose and mouth.

She doesn’t struggle. That worries me. Even when I feel suction against my palm, she just lays there. But it stops. She doesn’t breathe any more of the shit in.

I take her place. Whatever was happening to her is happening to me now.

Better me than her.

Buffy shouts, “What are you doing?” The other Buffy. She’s standing over me. “Stop that!” Sanctimonious as ever, she grabs my wrist.

“Now you want to help?” I snap, sloughing her off with a twirl of my arm.

Where she gets off—

Shit!

Bitch doesn’t answer me either. She walks away.

Typical! The more this sinks in, the more sense it makes. The real B. would’ve just fucked off on me. She wouldn’t have cared. She never gave a shit about me.
I hear her at the other end of the hall talking with someone else.

Tears splash Buffy’s cheek. *My* tears. *My* Buffy, not that bitch. As I brush them away, a hand touches my neck.

Someone crouches down behind me. She whispers, “Faith?”

It takes me a sec to place her voice. It’s Cass.

“You’ve done enough,” she says. “It’s time to rest. We’ve got it from here.”

I could fight it, but why? My body feels heavy. I’m warm and safe. My eyes drift shut.

Buffy’s in my arms. *My* Buffy. I feel her breath on my neck.

We’re safe.
Of Sand or Stone: Scene 4

a muffled conversation in an adjacent room

I need to get over this or on with it. I’ve been standing here with my ear to the door, snooping and feeling like I’m five, for so long that the doorknob’s actually warmed in my hand.

What I need is a life, or a hobby. I could find a clue…maybe grow up…

Yeah, this is really mature.

I’ve just gotta see one more time. Maybe it’ll sink in if I do.

And that might be the dumbest thing ever.

Yet here I am.

Well, no one’s making any fun funny noises, so…

Weird, the doorknob feels chilly again when I bear down, but I guess it’s really not. The thing’s kind of on the large side, like the size of a tennis ball. The faint clinking sound it makes when I turn it brings on a cringe. I shrug off the creepy-crawlies and peek inside. Go figure. The hall light paints a slash across the cabinets and countertop of a kitchenette that’s set into a nook by the door. That’s not exactly what I pictured. It’d be helpful if this was just like, y’know, a bedroom without the added complication.

Anyone with any sense at all would probably walk away. Me? I’ve never been very good at letting stuff go. Shutting the door is another clicky, cringe-worthy exercise, with a side of pitch blackness that puts a temporary damper on my progress. I have to at least wait until my eyes get over the starry, splotchy thing they’re doing. And if I had a choice…

I really didn’t. Open doors attract attention. One random patrol could result in enough suckage to ruin my whole night.

Course, after the day I’ve had, what’s a little more ruin? The back of my head’s tender to the touch. Sudden movements are as profoundly bad an idea as being here in the first place. Judging from the achy queasiness, I probably have a mild concussion.

Again.

I have no idea how long one of Will’s magical Mickeys lasts, but I should be good, at least with the rerun. What Cass did was way subtler, but Faith was still magicked to sleep, so…

Maybe?

Yeah, I’m really pressing my luck.

No, it’s fine. I’ll be okay. It’ll be good. I can do this.

And all that self-mollification really gets me is a whole lot of not feeling better, but my eyes are as adjusted as they’re gonna get, so I tiptoe toward a squareish lump that borders the edge of the small sitting room. I think it’s a chair.
It’d be nice if I had a clue why. Whatever Will’s reasons were for going there—for getting mixed up—for attacking my double—she sure didn’t bother to share. And last I saw she was decorating a stretcher. I caught a glimpse of her during the circus that passed for the new Chicago watcher ‘containing the scene.’

Yup, definitely a chair. A pale strip on the carpet to my right highlights a door. I make my way there and stop to listen. Two people in the next room inhale sluggish, regular, sleepy breaths. I rest my hand on the doorknob and wait. I’ll give it a sec and if nothing happens…

Giles claims Edith Meriwether’s good people, but I remain completely unimpressed. She could be the second coming; it wouldn’t change the fact that she has a voice that could curdle cream.

The final straw was when she screeched at some girl named Shannon to ‘see to Buffy.’ I was about to protest that I didn’t need any ‘seeing too’ when I realized she wasn’t talking about me. Her attention to detail was brilliant.

She contained the scene alright. She was so busy BSing with Cass and barking orders that she ‘contained’ her one conscious witness into a portal. No one else seemed to mind that I slipped away. Absent, I was just one less person to contend with.

The only one who noticed me was Vi. The look of dawning comprehension on her face was followed by a twiddled wave, but there was too much going on for anything more. She’s the only reason I knew where I was.

I guess, to be fair they were only dealing with a demonic essence ‘spill’ at a Catholic boarding school. The whole thing was kind of hilarious, actually… in a really, really, really, really, really, twisted sort of way. Slayer nuns?

It could work… the day that meekness and slayeryness become even remotely compatible. Imagining how it’d go turns into something that looks like it belongs in a Tarantino film… outtakes from *The Flying Ninja-Nun*. Yeah, uh…

So normally, with two slayers in a room like this, I’d never stand a chance. They’d be on me the moment I came through the outer door. I’m still waiting. Been waiting.

And hey, look at that, this doorknob’s not nearly as ker-chunky. City lights pour in through open curtains. The contrast is almost like emerging into daylight. Except that peeking through a crack hardly qualifies as emerging. The extra light is nice though. I have an excellent view of part of the dresser.

I just wish I knew what was up with Will. All she told me was to stay put and keep quiet. And she didn’t even *tell me* that. I rated a couple of hand gestures before the fireworks went off. There had to be a reason. Something besides the creep-factor. That’s my thing. Her thing and my thing are so rarely the same thing. And my discomfort is such a tiny thing in the grand scheme of things.

A tiny thing I’m totally in touch with when I find the audacity to poke my head in the room. The bed’s directly in front of me. Faith’s out cold, lying flat on her back with ‘me’ in her arms. Neither one of them so much as twitches at my rudeness.

A few seconds tick by with me in a vacuum. I’m the only one who’s conscious enough to wig, so I let the breath that’s caught in my throat go.

This is just wrong. There are no words. My tummy flutters. I swallow in hopes of settling it. Like that’ll even—
Actually, there are plenty words—tons of choice options—just none I’ll ever repeat.

There’s the ‘saccharine’ that this is ‘sweet’ as. There’s ‘unbelievably unnerving.’ Or how ’bout ‘upsetting’? I’ve already put ‘creepy’ out there, but it deserves a revisit. ‘Cringe-worthy’? Yeah, that works too. It’s ‘keenly’ disturbing and not even ‘kosher.’ And did I mention ‘sweet’? It’s ‘sickeningly’ sweet.

But really it just sucks!

I feel strangely naked without pompoms whenever I do that.

I turn the knob and pull the door shut. It doesn’t quite meet the jamb before I open it again and lean in for a second glance. Like I need another. One more good, hard look to burn the unsettling image into my brain.

No, there’s nothing intimate about this. Not even a little. Would-be me is curled on her side using Faith’s left breast and shoulder as a pillow. From the shapes beneath the covers her right hand appears to be cupped over another pillowy, not-even-remotely-intimate part.

That part—her hand placement—that’d still be considered intimate even if they were clad in fur parkas and they aren’t. They aren’t wearing much at all.

Yeah, that was all just my overactive imagination.

Her right leg’s bent, resting over more of Faith’s assorted, not-so intimate parts. Her head at an angle. Not the best angle. Not an angle I’m used to seeing myself from, or someone who looks so much like me. It’s weird. I can almost see up her nose.

Her hair’s plastered to her head. There are dark circles under her eyes. And I don’t think that’s makeup. She has none of the other telltale signs. No black gribbles or—

Either that or she’s the only supposedly sane girl I’ve seen who’s compulsive enough to care what someone looking up her nose sees. Most of us avoid the whole ‘being viewed from unflattering angles’ thing. We don’t bother going all Catty Kathy over it.

I turn the doorknob and let the sigh I’ve been holding slip out, slow and easy. It’s an almost stealthy sigh that matches my almost stealthy door shutting and plunge into pitch darkness.

No, she wasn’t deranged. It’s perfectly normal to use a second mirror to carefully blend the makeup under your chin. No one in their right mind’s ever going to look there, but it’s just satisfying knowing that you went that extra mile to come off like a completely neurotic freak.

I still can’t believe they didn’t believe me. That was just another ripple in an endless stream of—they never listen.

The rest of my retreat’s a totally stealthy creep and grope until I get to the outer door. The doorknob clicks again, of course. I slip through, pull the damned thing shut and breathe a sigh of relief.

_Huh_. I did it. I went, I saw and no one wigged. That funny weight-lifty thing happens—all tingly and floaty and cool—and for three-point-two seconds I feel almost alright.

Who knows, maybe pod people have an inherent gift for color matching and blending in inconspicuous, completely pointless places? Could be it just happens. Or maybe there was a little Bobbi Brown DNA in the fertilizer and the spores turned into a bunch of skillful, intuitive
estheticians.

It could happen.

There’s not much sense in me standing around, so I make myself move, turning listlessly back the way I came.

Really, realistically, I’m probably the extra. Carmen Copy’s been out in the world, ‘livin’ large’ with Faith. And where’ve I been?

I’ve been marooned on Willigan’s Island, talking to the pixies who live around her tree house because—even with the occasional nibbles—they were a whole lot nicer to me than she was.

No, my life’s not complicated.

The tension in my neck and shoulders builds…and that fiery tingle in my brain. Before I know it I’m moving like I’m on a mission. Like I have a clue where I’m going. Like I’m not trapped in a human Habitrail. I pass doorway after doorway set into alcove after alcove. The monotony is mind numbing.

This place is a maze. I think it was like some sort of assisted living facility or something before we got hold of it. It’s pretty much devoid of any character except for the rails next to the toilets. Those are funny, considering.

Well, that’s not fair. It has some character. It’s just not the good kind. The floor feels vaguely spongy under my feet. And it’s not because of the cheesy maroon carpet. Makes me wonder how walking down this hallway would feel to an actual normal person—someone who weighs more than ninety pounds.

‘Dangerous’ is probably the word I’m looking for. And what with the wind, the building feels like it's swaying.

So, anyway, I’m going somewhere—somewhere equally cheery—somewhere not here—somewhere I may even reach without the ‘splat’…and I’m not wasting any time about it.

Now all I have to do is figure out where.

That or I could wander around for the rest of the night and brood. Play to my strengths. It’s not like I don’t have plenty of reasons.

I’m sure someone—one of the many peanuts in my gallery—would tell me I’m being petty ’cause the girl in the mirror got there first. And while I’ll admit that my social life hasn’t been very social or lifelike lately—in fact, it’s pretty much amounted to me talking to a tree, or the TV—

My god I sound pathetic.

But I’m not really jealous. Not of Faith. None of this has much if anything to do with her. I don’t really have a problem. Not really. I mean if she wants to go getting mixed up with one of the many mini-mes, I’ll deal. It’s a bit of a shock, but mostly because last I knew she was all over the boys.

A little too literally for me not to ‘eww.’

It’s not like I could stop her. It’s not like I even want to. I don’t. I don’t care…about that. It’s the ‘me’ who’s not ‘me’ who—
As I round a corner that I’m not even sure I should round the way I round it—that’s the trouble with wandering aimlessly—it dawns on me exactly what it was—that thing that made me want to take a second look—the thing that bugged—what I’m missing—she looked contented. It’s so simple, I feel stupid for not—

I look up. The lighted ‘exit’ sign at the end of the hallway is all I need to see. An out. Any out will do.

Her face was fuller than mine. Not a lot. Just a little. Just enough. Just perfect.

She looked healthy. She had this glow. A glow I haven’t seen in—

A glow I have to paint on.

Even completely conked and disheveled, she looked good. In a totally objective, no-so creepy and repulsively narcissistic sense, I could fall for her. And that makes me think that the pixies might’ve moved out of Will’s tree and into my tummy. It sure hurts enough.

And flip-flops and flutters.

I want to be able to look at myself in the mirror and feel something else, anything else besides a strong desire for more makeup than—

The weird pricklies from the tear and the subsequent wiping make me flinch. It feels icky. Will keeps telling me that the scars will fade—I know she’s right, nothing ever affects me for long—but that’s only part of it. She won’t speculate about the rest. I may just be minus any sensation except creepy, tingly—

And the door. I don’t quite run into the window. I’m not that hopeless. It comes up fast, but I turn in time, push through the door and bound up the steps.

I should watch where I’m going. Up, not down, though what I really want is to go down and out and away from this crap. I catch the inner railing and swing around. I wonder how long it’d take for them to miss me.

Probably a while if they missed me at all. They have a replacement. A better me. A me who can face herself in the mirror and not shrink away.

And up and catch and swing around and around…

How long has it been since I looked in the mirror and thought I was—?

I don’t remember.

Yeah, I’m jealous. I’m jealous that she has a life and I’ve been cast off like so much used, useless, broken, spent…

And for the extra, added, bonus funny: it might not suck so much if this little me wannabe had only slightly more personality than a pencil sharpener, but—

Part of me wants to get all stalkery and stupid. I want to see her in action ‘cause the thing—

A door above me opens. I stop and tuck into a corner away from the open stairwell. They shouldn’t see me if they’re smart and head the other way.

But that’s just asking too much. The footfalls grow louder. Maybe if I keep my head down and my
feet moving, I’ll be able to slip past.

A voice carries down the stairwell, “Linda said they carried…” the girl turns the corner and steps into view “…her in on a—” and like an amateur, I look up “—uh…” and freeze up…and yeah… Wet Blanket Buffy, she’s fun for all occasions. As gossip girl’s entourage piles up behind her, I see a familiar expression echoed three times. It’s not quite the same. Faint traces of recognition that grow stronger mingled with shock and something that might almost be horror.

Three times in one day…should I take a hint? I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, but really, I could live without the repeat. Faith’s reaction was enough. I blindsided her.

And them. They’re freaked. Faith’s freaked. Everyone who recognizes me flips out. Not exactly the reaction I’m looking for.

I ask, “Willow Rosenberg, where is she?” as the three girls try to slip past me, hugging the railing.

One of the quiet ones—the two of the three who didn’t get caught—looks over her shoulder, giving me a quick, quizzical glance before she replies, “Try room eight-twenty-three or eight-twenty-four. They’re both reserved for VIPs tonight.”

That’s right. I thought I heard something about the eighth floor, but I—well, I went for a walk. If this keeps up, I may go for another.

And keep going.

I smile and say, “Thanks,” as I turn to continue the climb.

Maybe with the ‘going’ I could find a good salon. I needed a trim and a touch up when I left musty ol’… and it’s amazing what a few weeks of living in a tree will do to your nails.

Going sounds even more appealing when I stop to consider this rationally, which admittedly isn’t my strong suit. But just putting the pieces together really isn’t that hard. I can do that. And where I end up is—

I glance as I pass by the next door. Seven. One more.

What I do know—the important part—to fool Faith like that—not that we were ever really what you’d call close, but—what with being enemies, she got to know me pretty well—to fool her, would-be me would have to do more than just play the part, she’d have to be in character all the time. She’d have to know the things I know, react the way I’d react. She’d have to be me for the reconciliation that’d have to happen to even—umm…

My brain feels like a pretzel. It’s a good thing I know what I mean. God help me if I ever have to explain that.

Anyway, whatever…that’s way too much to ask without an intervention of the wiccan kind. And there’s only one witch in the west I know who could pull that off, so it’s off to Oz I go.

All I need to know is: when did Willow plan to clue me in? It’s the question of the moment. One I’ve been avoiding. It makes me—

This is unbelievable! Why would she do that? There had to be a reason. A reasonable reason. One that—

Okay, so…make that: two questions…and a major case of crazy. I swear if this keeps up, cold
cocking her won’t just be for bad girls.

There’s nothing like anger to shave time off a stroll. The last few flights of stairs are a vague and distant memory and me ‘hitting’ the door isn’t so much a figurative thing. I veer left when the door strikes its stop and swings back almost clipping me.

It’s bad enough she can hear everything I think. I remember when we had boundaries. Normal human boundaries. My deepest, darkest secrets were still deep and dark. Every random thought didn’t provoke a reaction. It was—

I glance at a couple of room numbers—eight-ten, eight-oh-eight—and turn around. That’s the trouble with letting inanimate objects make your decisions. Just past the stairs, movement catches my eye. A door swings in. It’s Willow. She’s all evasive and blushy when I enter the room. A room that’s, *again*, not exactly what I expect. That many books are never a good sign. I ignore them and go straight for the stuff that matters. There was a cookie jar and she got there first. She tried to hide it, but I—

Willow replaces Faith in my mind. I see the two of them—her and the wannabe, curled up all snuggly—with the sweatiness and the—

You slept with her, didn’t you?

In a heartbeat, Will goes from shamefaced to fit to be tied. “What?” she exclaims. “No! How could you even—?”

Leave it to me to jump to the worst possible conclusion. It was a reasonable one…for the complete narcissist. She didn’t want me, so…

I hate my brain. “Sorry, it’s just…” It’s not my fault, I swear. You were the one who—

As excuses go…this one might be the lamest one ever, but—

This whole thing started with *The Way We Were* and a box of Triscuits. I love that movie. Which is, of course, why I fell asleep. Next thing I knew I was being rousted off the couch and told to get ready. I hadn’t done anything in weeks, so needless to say the knockoff came as a bit of a shock.

It’s not my fault that seduction is the foregone conclusion when an evil twin shows up. It’s either that or the embezzlement of funds I don’t have or the covert takeover of a company I don’t own. I didn’t make up the rules. “Is she evil?” I ask. She has to be evil. No one could look that good after we went through and—

“Huh?” Will looks confused. “No.”

Okay, well…don’t blame me. You were the one who told me to veg. Part of me still wonders if Megan and Brian will ever hook up. And another part wishes I could rescue the damsel of the week with a stick of chewing gum, a pipe cleaner, a lump of charcoal and a funny, foldy pair of pliers.

I should *so* get some of those. They were cool.

“Buffy!”

I sigh and have a seat.

*Comedy of Errors* my butt. Shakespeare’s got nothing on us.
Willow’s smirk fades. We stare at each other across a mound of books. Déjà vu. I glance at the nearest title: *Brain Injury Medicine: Principles and Practice*. That’s less than helpful.

I stifle my curiosity and mimic her, ‘I see the moon and the moon sees me. The moon sees the somebody I’d like to see.’ Her expression sours. ‘Goddess bless the moon and Goddess bless me. Goddess bless the somebody I’d like to see.’ She knows I’m making fun of her.

Really, I just know what she’s doing. She does it all the time. Sometimes she does it so loud it—it’s like it bleeds through. Totally weird.

Before she reacts, I break the silence, shouting, “I don’t believe you! When were you planning to tell me?”

“Tell you?” she replies, aghast. “Tell you what? You were the one who asked us to—”

It’s my turn to stammer, “I did what?”

She says, “You said ‘make it right’.”

Huh? As explanations go, this one’s a little wanting. I try again, “Make what right?” I can’t believe —this is my fault? You’re trying to put this off on me? “If this is your version of a—”

She springs to her feet, shoving the table and shouting, “Oh, for pity’s sake!” A book falls to the floor with a flapping, page-slapping thud. She turns away. Her hand goes to her head in an ‘oh, so dramatic’ gesture of disbelief. I push the table back as she combs her fingers through her hair and rants, “I can’t believe you don’t remember.”

I bend down to pick up—uh…what’s psychopathology? I’ve heard of it, but right now, all I’ve got is it’s heavy. No surprise. Any book that says ‘Oxford’ on the cover usually weighs a ton.

She faces me, glaring as I flatten the folded pages and heft it back onto the pile. Her hair slips through her fingers. “No, wait,” she fumes. “I can. This is just like you.”

I resist the urge to flip the table over. Choices, choices…

Breaking stuff really isn’t an option. I could. As flimsy as this place is, I could probably break enough stuff to give us a free ride to the ground floor, but—


She’d stop me. I wouldn’t make it out the door, not if she didn’t want me to.

Or there’s plan B: I could just sit here, admit I screwed up—because I always do—and accept whatever she’s willing to share.

“It’s my fault,” I admit because B is just the better plan. I bring this shit on myself all the time. “I was bored. You know how I get when I’m bored. So I said to myself, ‘What can I do to make things more interesting? Oh, I know! I’ll make another Buffy because one of me just isn’t enough’.”

Nice, ripe opening like that, I expect lots of deprecation. Instead, she asks, “You really don’t remember do you?”
“No,” I admit. I’m not even sure what I’m supposed to be remembering.

“Of course not,” she says. “Why would you?”

Go figure. She’s all about the snark now, dramatic pauses, and rhetorical questions.

I mumble, “You’re gonna have to simple things up for us slow kids.” But she’s way too miffed to let me get a word in edgewise. “Y’know, the ones of us who don’t know what everyone else is thinking.” And I’m too stubborn to shut up, so…

Ah, communication. She said something about ‘last year.’ I dunno. Blah, blah, blah…

Her foot taps the floor keeping time with my ‘blahs.’ “That’s right,” she affirms, “last year.”

I prop my elbow on the table and take my head in hand. Teach me, oh wise one.

And that goes over so well. If I don’t turn this around…

I counter her withering glare with my best ‘patient face’ and wait, doing math in my head to pass the time. One plus two is three. Two and three are five, five and six are eleven, eleven and twelve are twenty-three, twenty-three and twenty-four are forty-seven…

Her expression turns incredulous, which is honestly preferable to rage. Rage on her is just plain scary. I always expect to end up somewhat smaller and furrier when she gets like this. Hasn’t happened yet, but there’s always tomorrow. It’s good to have goals.

Forty-seven and forty-eight are ninety-five, ninety-five and ninety-six are, umm…one-ninety-one, one-ninety-one and one-ninety—

“One year since the mission,” she says. “We started prepping in June.” There’s a little ‘grr’ left on her face, but her tone is steeped in patience. That means that she’s—

Oh. June? Last June? That was when we were—they sent me to Cairo. I thought it was gonna be neat. Like an actual vacation. I figured some light shopping, a little sightseeing…

Boy, was I ever wrong. It was my only erroneous vacation last year, which is as close to a vacation as I got. Wonders of the World became me wondering what in the world…

My lips are still pursed from the ‘oh’ when Willow takes her seat. I smile sheepishly. I guess I said it. I didn’t mean to.

They introduced me to this little, dark-haired girl. Kind of cute. Sweet. Shy. I laughed later when they told me she’d volunteered to be a decoy. She didn’t look anything like me. I mean, she was a similar build, but the rest—

It seemed like a lot of trouble to go through…for them. For me it was—

I went to Egypt and saw a whole lot of the same four walls. Took test after stupid test and didn’t see a single pyramid, just a whole lot of pattern recognition and logic puzzles. There were even inkblots. I vowed that I’d crack the skull of the first person who asked me about my mother. And sneaking off wasn’t even—

Every time I tried, it ended the same way: I’d wake up in my bed with no clue how I got there.

From the cryptic load of crap Giles’s people told me and the churning of my brain, I didn’t need a diagram. I remembered stuff I hadn’t thought about in years. I was a rat in maze. Without cheese.
There was no reward at the end for a job well done, just a whole lot of analysis and dissection.

They were monitoring me. And not the usual, medical way, but magically. I hated it. I felt violated. It was like my brain had somehow become the intellectual property of Slayer, Inc. When really, ‘my brain’ and ‘intellectual’ shouldn’t even be used in the same sentence.

Willow smiles. It’s distracting. She has such a pretty smile. And infectious, but fleeting. The last thing I am is happy.

It took me a while, but I managed to put it all together. The gist of the stitch was that they were making a disposable me—to bring them—whoever this mystery ‘them’ was—into the fight on our side.

The idea of a ‘disposable me’ was sickening, but there wasn’t a lot I could do. If I could’ve had it my way, I would’ve just gone myself. It seemed so much simpler. But ‘go where’? Without that detail—

And Giles wasn’t having any of it. He said it was too dangerous. How dangerous could a negotiation be? I figured he just thought I’d screw it—

“Dangerous,” Willow says, totally derailing my train of thought.

“Yeah,” I mumble. I might’ve gone off and done something stupid. Like that’d be the end of the world.

Or even anything new. Me doing something stupid usually stops the world from ending.

None of it made a bit of difference. Not that I can tell. Nothing’s changed.

I got to play seat-warmer for a couple of weeks, feel useless and pound on some different girls. They let me train. Some vacation.

And when it all went sideways, they let me clean up the mess. That made no sense either. They want to protect me, but hairy extractions were still on the menu?

It was completely senseless.

“No it wasn’t,” Will replies. “It all makes perfect sense when you take into account the fact that your mystery ‘they,’ the Slogath, aren’t the sort of creatures who send polite rejection letters. They have a slightly different definition of the word ‘no’ than we do.”

“So you knew about this?” I ask, quickly tacking on, “You were there from the start?” as an afterthought.

“Yes, I knew,” she replies, “and no, not really.”

Of course you did. I want to ask how she could ‘not really’ be somewhere, but I know better.

She gives me one of those looks. Her patience is wearing thin. I have to remember that it’s not just me. She can hear the thoughts of everyone in the building. Maybe on the whole block. I don’t see how she does it. I couldn’t think straight with all that—

“It isn’t easy,” she replies. “I got used to being alone.” She gets up to shut the door.

I hear ‘lonely’ too, but she doesn’t say that. I just know her well enough to understand that all of the isolation would be hard on her.
When she returns, the glamour is gone. My heart flutters. With that funny, crushy, head-rushy thing, it’s umm…

It’s totally embarrassing, but it can’t help it. She’s gorgeous. All silvery hair, creamy skin and shocking eyes… I remember to breathe.

Resting her elbow on the table, she takes her head in hand. A casual gesture that doesn’t quite fit. You’d think I’d get used to this, but—

“The Slogath are the sort of cranky that only comes with age,” she says, “like excessive age—like they’re ancient. With the out-of-the-way-ness of their home, they don’t exactly get a lot of social calls. People usually only seek them out when they want something, so they tend to take answers a little more seriously than we do. To them ‘no’ means that they’ve judged the petitioner false. The penalty for trying to hoodwink them is—”


“You know it,” she says. “Long, horrible, agonizing…”

It’s pretty obvious now why Giles didn’t tell me the truth. If I’d had the full picture, I would’ve—

“I know,” Willow replies. “You would’ve taken it badly. Giles wasn’t willing to sacrifice you for something that might turn out okay, regardless how good it could be for our cause, so…”

“So he sacrificed somebody else,” I say. “Nice.” All the contempt I feel translates to a snicker, an eye roll and another, “Really nice.” That hardly seems adequate. I may get around to expressing my gratitude next time I see Giles.

I look down at my hands where they rest on the fake wooden table, remembering. I was still half lit from the fight. Almost shaking. The blood, the gore…the shame that the blood and the gore were even a thing. You’d think I’d be over that by now, but my shirt was sticking to me and the smell…

And hey, my hand is almost my hand again. A few spots are still pink and tender. Being flayed is a blast. It takes forever to heal, even for me.

Reports of my double’s death had been slightly exaggerated. You’ll have that with demons. They can’t seem to get it through their thick heads that even after we stop breathing there’s still hope. Of course, hearing that was no less a treat, even if it was a little premature.

I sat behind the pilot, cattycorner to the door. I was staring at the ground as we took off. It moved away, but I could still see everything that was going on in front of me. It was like looking in a mirror. It felt like that, only my reflection was in really bad shape. The girls were working on her, doing CPR.

At the same time I was watching myself—sort of—it felt like I was watching Faith too. Faith bleeding and falling. The truck driving away. One thing called to the other. I have no idea why. But to make the parallels that much harder to take, the girl ended up in a coma too. Sharp, sharp knives…

God, what was her name? I rub my eyes, like that might somehow magically shake the information loose. Needless to say, it doesn’t. And Will doesn’t either. She’d normally be all over being helpful about producing the missing fact, but I guess I’m not supposed to remember. It feels pretty awful that I can’t, so I distract myself by asking, “Does Faith know any of this?” It seems like she should. They have so much in common.
I look up when Willow replies, “I don’t know.” She gives me weak, sympathetic smile. “Probably not. Not unless you told her, but I sort of missed a few things—what with being unconscious.”

She’s right. I don’t understand. I totally missed it. I vaguely remember telling Giles to make it better. Do whatever. I can’t even remember when that happened.

But it wasn’t like I wanted to. Thinking about it sucked.

The blinds are closed. I get up to open them, mostly because sitting still is making me crazy. I go to the wrong end. Figures. The fabricy plastic slats swing, swish and clatter as I try the other side and find the stupid cord. I pull on it and there’s a great big city out there to distract me.

Or more like a little itty-bitty bit of a great big city reflected in the windows of the building across the lot. Guess that’ll have to do. I return to my chair.

Yeah, I don’t remember when that was. It’s been a few months ago, maybe?

Willow waits patiently for me to be seated before she says, “I wish I could do that.”

“What?”

“Forget,” she replies.

I reply through a laugh, “I’d share if I could.”

She laughs with me and for a moment we’re fine. It’s rare, but it happens. I enjoy the peace for everything it’s worth.

It only lasts long enough for her to collect her thoughts and say, “We did everything we could.” She swallows, giving me the distinct impression that she isn’t proud of this. “But you have to understand. It wasn’t that simple. The physical changes were all just that. Those could be done using techniques similar to plastic surgery, but not nearly so messy.”

I glance at the books and understand exactly why she’s still here. There’s a theme. Everything here that isn’t weird, nameless or magicky, is about the effects of brain damage, brain mapping, abnormal physiology…that’s what that means—psychopathology—I remember now. She must be worried that something’s gone wrong with my—

“That’s exactly why,” she replies.

I start to ask, “But wha—”

“It’s complicated,” she interrupts before I even get the ‘why’ out. “I just need you to be patient, okay?”

And I had a whole question. It was even a good one. Damned if I remember it now.

“Me?” I reply through a snicker. “Sure” I smile. “But of the two of us, which one of us is actually being impatient?”

“You’re right,” she says. “I’m sorry. It’s just…” She breathes out through her nose. It’s not really a sigh. “The mental changes were extremely complicated—” Not a snicker. “—if not convoluted. To understand, you really need to know everything I did and why I did it.” Or a snort. “And that’s gonna take time.” It’s more of a hiss. A hiss that’s rife with the very thing she’s accusing me of.

It leaves me yearning for some instant clueage. That’s what she wants. She wants this to be over…
“That isn’t what I want,” she insists.

“I don’t see why not,” I reply. “It’d be so much easier.” I have to look away, but when I look out the window I can still see her. Beige walls, crap mall store prints and closet doors aren’t—so, I look down, like my own mangled hand is any more comfort. “I know you can. This could just be over. You put enough of me into some stranger’s head to fool Faith. Why can’t you just—?”

She could do this. I could go for a walk, take some time to deal and not come back until I can look her in the eye again. It might save what’s left of our friendship. Because sitting here listening to a play-by-play really isn’t working for me.

It’s strange to look up and see tears in her eyes. Wiping them away with the sides of her thumbs, she says, “Because I don’t want to.” She gets up. “Because you’re my friend.” I turn to watch as she makes her way to the door. “I want to explain. I feel like I owe you that much.” She opens it and steps into the hall. “It’s not what you think.”

As the door swings shut, I mumble, “It might’ve mattered if you’d come clean before you got caught. Now it’s just—”

Now what?

I guess I wait. I twiddle my fingers, tapping my nails on the table.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Okay. I’m bored.

I get up and pick up a stack of books. I’m sick of looking at them. There’s a long, skinny table along the wall to my left—like a sideboard, only this is a conference room, so I’m not sure what to call it. For now, it’s a bookshelf. I move one book short of five stacks of five books to the table, wondering how she got them all here. I know they’re hers. I even recognize one of the nameless ones with the funny symbols. Probably a few at a time and ‘poof.’

She’s been busy trying to help. That’s the thing I need to obsess over.

I sit down to enjoy a significantly less cluttered table. Moving around had the desired effect. I feel a whole lot less like I need to hit something now.

Whatever happened, I know she’d do her best to protect me. I need to give her a chance. The truly messed up part is that, regardless how twisted his methods were, Giles was doing the same. This is about the road to hell and all that.

The door opens.

I just hope the trip was worth it.

“I’m sorry,” she says, returning to her seat with a box of Kleenex in hand. “You’re right. I should’ve explained earlier.”

“No, it’s fine,” I reply. “That much I get. I really don’t need to hear how easy it is to put off stuff
that has a high potential for drama.” I feel a stupid smirk coming on. I should stop it, but whatever. I’m going to be nice. “Oh, and by the way…unless you’ve got some furniture for me to move, this is as cool as I’m gonna get so you should start talking.”

She lets out a sigh that comes from somewhere around her toenails. “Alright,” she says, “but I really can’t make this quick. Like I said, it’s complicated.”

Asking, “How ’bout quickish?” gets me a shrug, so I go to the window. Maybe if I let her talk…

“Just pretending wouldn’t work,” she says. “The double could’ve been the best actress in the world, she could’ve studied you for months, it wouldn’t have mattered. The Slogath would’ve sensed the deception. We couldn’t use magic either. Not really. They would’ve known. They might even be able to match the magical signature with the witch. What I’ve read about them suggests that’s the case.”

This is going well. She’s barely started and already on my last nerve. I’ve heard newsmen get more emotional over Dow Jones Industrials and SMP Averages…whatever they are. I want to get over it, but truth is—

No. I was giving her a chance. That’s the truth. Just ’cause I don’t like how she says what she says…

Lights glint off of the glass of the neighboring building. I fixate on one that’s blinking.

I’m not gonna like it. It wouldn’t matter if she went all Lillian Gish over it. I still wouldn’t like it.

“So we had to find another way,” she says. “What we ended up using was hypnosis. Or that was part of it.”

’Kay, so…this really isn’t working. No one asked me what I thought. Not even once. They used me to make a double and they sent her off to die for some meaningless—

“That’s true,” she says, “to a point.”

“What point?” I ask. I wish she’d stop that.

“We made a double,” she replies. “That’s the only part of what you said that’s actually true.”

It’d be nice have a thought without the color commentary. It’d be even nicer if she could tell the difference between something I thought and something—

“Have you ever heard the expression ‘I’d just love to be a fly on the wall’?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I reply. “Who hasn’t? What’s your point?”

“We have that now,” she says. I turn to look over my shoulder. She’s twisted in her chair looking at me. She sees my expression and grins. My forehead’s all scrunchy. As I take another deep breath to shed some unwanted tension, she continues, “That’s what this was about. Because of the Slogath, we have access to that sort of information.”

The whole ‘deep, cleansing breath’ thing’s total bunk. My forehead just scrunches again. “Okay, so…you’re gonna have to help me out,” I break mid-question to scrunch my eyes to maybe unscrunch my forehead. Great. Now she’s giving me a funny look. I ask my question anyway, “How’s that work exactly?” Making funny faces always works like a charm when I want someone to take me seriously.
Her reply seriously doesn’t help, “The Slogath are an ancient race of sentient bugs.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.” It’s out and said before I—

“No. I’m not,” she replies as I crack up and face the window. I think I’ve officially heard it all now. “Think about it.” She sounds completely unaffected. “Their network of informants is pretty impressive—in a not-so-impressive occasionally ‘creepy crawly’ sort of way. There’s nowhere they can’t go completely unnoticed.”

I’m tempted to ask what kind of bugs ’cause try as I might the best I can come up with are Latino cockroaches with maracas.

Oh! Or Jiminy Cricket! He totally had that ‘James Bond’ vibe going on, rocking the top hat and tails.

She said something else and I totally missed it. Something about ‘the arctic’?

“I said that they aren’t much good in the arctic,” she says. “But who lives there?” Her expression suggests I should stop. Eyebrow cocked, with the smirk and…

Yeah, I’m being silly. There’s been way too much TV in my life lately. And that’s still her fault. Okay, here’s something I can ask, “By ‘sentient’ you mean ‘I think therefore I am’?”

“They’re a highly intelligent, telepathic, magical race that just happens to be gastropod mollusks.” She stops mid-discourse to give me one of those crooked, crinkly little ‘you’re being silly’ kind of smirks. “But there was this story you wanted me to tell you. You were kind of in a hurry. Can I continue now?”

Now I’m confused. Not about the second part. She’s totally right about that. “Mollusks?” I ask. “You mean like octopuses? They aren’t bugs.” This thing with my brow is past old. “And we were miles from the ocean.” I cover my mouth and yawn just for the stretching.

I look up and she’s hanging her head. She rubs her eyes with one hand, pausing to pinch the bridge of her nose. I may be pushing it. That’s sign language for ‘my brain is reaching critical mass.’

Still pinching, she says, “You’re right, technically they aren’t bugs in the ‘insect’ sort of sense, but they are pests…and invertebrates—the squishy, slimy kind, not the creepy crawly, crunchy kind.”

I’d prefer to skip that ‘critical mass’ thing, but— “What?”

“Slugs, Buffy,” she says.

Oh.

Eww.

When she finally gets around to looking at me instead of the floor, I reply to her question, “Sure. Go ahead. Knock yourself out.” I think I’m safe. We’ve hit that point. Nothing she can say could possibly top this.

And I think I’m over leaning against the window. The glass is sticking to my arm and it’s chilly. The combo’s weird and icky. As I return to my chair, she says, “The double was pregnant when she returned.” I roll my eyes and take a seat. Now she’s just messing with me.

She insists, “No, I’m serious.” Her face lights with a smile. “Well, okay, not pregnant.
Not in the conventional sense. The fairies, from my tree—they hatched while she was in the hospital.”

Okay, this is just too absurd. “Hatched? From where?” I get that out and the giggles take over. I can’t stop. That’s okay though ’cause she’s giggling too.

“No clue,” she replies with a shrug. “I think there are just certain things we’re better off not knowing, but they came from her. That’s the only thing that makes sense.” Her face is red from laughing…and trying not to. She takes a deep breath. “It was a mess,” she says. “I got this call at like four o’clock in the morning. They didn’t have a clue what to do.” She cracks up again. “Like I’d know. I agreed to help and arrived to a hospital ward full of Tinkerbells.”

This is just too funny.

“No, no, actually it wasn’t,” she says. “You can’t imagine the damage control. Fairies are highly magical creatures—like the ‘we turn people into goats’ kind of magic. You may not think so, but they liked you.”

Well, thank goodness for small favors.

“I rounded them up and sent them to my place,” she says. “I didn’t know where else to put them. It was a couple weeks before I could even go home without the biting and the zapping. I wasn’t exactly nice about how I rounded them up. It took me a while to make peace.”

“Sounds like I missed a lot,” I say, hoping she’ll keep going. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her like this.

“Yeah,” she says, turning sullen. “It’s been—”

When she stops short, I fill in, “Not-much-fun?”

“Something like that,” she replies.

It’s over. I ask one more thing in hopes of seeing her smile again, “What’s the difference between a fairy and a pixie?” I was totally getting that wrong.

She answers my question with a question, “What’s the difference between a moth and a butterfly?” which is cool because it completely clears that up.

“You were right,” she says, “The entire time you were in Cairo, they were scanning you. What you didn’t know is that I was scanning them.”

Something occurs to me. I have to ask, “But you said that they didn’t know me. The fairies, I mean. They’d recognize her, right? My double?” Their mommy’s my twin. You’d think—

“They don’t see the same way we do,” she replies.

Oh…”kay…that’s about as clear as mud. And my brow’s all crinkly again. At this rate I’ll have worry lines by the time I’m thirty.

She tries again, “More light, less shadow.”

I raise my hand, palm up. Clueless. It seems like even if they didn’t see the same thing we see, they’d still see the same thing. Umm…

She hangs her head and shakes it, rolling her eyes. “You really don’t want to talk about this do
you?"

I reply, “Yeah, I want to know,” and quickly correct, “Well, I’m not comfortable with what we’re
talking about. That much should be apparent. But it’s not that. I’m just curious.”

She says, “Alright,” but it really isn’t. “From what I’ve been able to gather, what they see is sort of
like infrared only with more depth and different colors, but the same idea.”

“So they see, like, auras?” I ask. That’s the only people-related, colorful, glowy thing I can think
of.

“Yeah, something like that,” she replies.

“Okay, that tracks, I guess,” I say and put on my very best ‘attentive’ face. Even so, it takes her a
few to move on. She must be waiting on my next annoying question. I’m done. I swear.

She looks skeptical, but she nods and says, “My job was what you might think of as quality control.
I picked what to use. Your personality was grafted in her mind one thought at a time. All of the
little things that make you, you. Physical, mental and verbal ticks…and all of the things that made
them. Insignificant things, like the fact that most of the expressions you regularly make, you’ve
rehearsed in a mirror. You’ve spent hours training your face to—”

Okay, so…I lied. This just begs to be asked. “So, you made Sybil?” I can’t help it.

“I guess,” she replies, pausing to ponder. “Yeah. I hadn’t really thought of it like that. There were
only the two personalities. Sybil had like thirteen and none of them were so fully developed. But
yeah, that’s kind of what we did.”

And it didn’t occur to you that that might end badly?

No surprise. Just thinking that makes her grumpy. I should so chill.

“It isn’t like you think,” she says. “I get why you’re taking this the way you are, but it’s not like we
set out to—” She stops cold and huffs a frustrated sigh.

I don’t see how she can expect me to see this any other way. Nothing’s changed. They still used
me.

“No we didn’t,” she snaps. “Not the way you think. It’s just hard—” Disgust gets the better of her
again. “I can’t explain this all at once.” Nice that she recovers.

I bite my tongue, ’cause if I don’t, this is gonna end badly. We’re about t-minus ten seconds from
blowing up. The tension’s palpable. That happens, I’ll stomp out of here and spend the rest of the
night sulking. And who knows how long after wondering if she’ll ever talk to me again.
Eventually, maybe, one day, we’ll make up and she’ll tell me what she wants to tell me now.
Or I could skip that and take on the epic, impossible challenge of learning some self control.

I have to at least try. Living with her is just infuriating sometimes. But living without her is even
worse. The idea of returning to a life of chronic isolation interrupted only by scheduled fisticuffs
scares me.

Simple and predictable are what she needs from me, so back to mindless math I go. One plus two is
three, two plus three is five, three plus five is eight, five plus eight is thirteen, eight plus thirteen is
twenty-one, thirteen plus twenty-one is thirty-four…
And Willow surfaces again. “You know how it is when you read a story?”

I know what it is to read a story, but I don’t see—

“It has everything to do with this,” she insists, so I let it go. “That’s all we have to offer these girls when they first come to us. And just like when you read a story, they read your story and they try to put themselves in your place. They imagine how it would be…all the things you’ve experienced.”

I, er, umm—

“Is it really any wonder that they’re awestruck when they meet you? Look at all the things you’ve done.”

Uh…

Y’know, this’d be a whole lot easier—no, no, it wouldn’t. The fact that she’s grinning at me is just—

Grrr!

“It’s true,” she replies. “All we offered her was the same thing we offer everyone else. The thing you have to understand is that it’s just one small, delusional step to go from admiration to emulation.”

Will gets up and walks over to a set of folding doors along the wall to my left. “And that’s what I did,” she says. “I pushed her.”

Here I thought that was a closet. It’s a coffee bar. And that couldn’t be more welcome.

“I’m your friend, Buffy,” she says. “I’d never use you like that. Not unless—”

Not unless I asked.

A flurry of clicks, taps and one random, shrill squeak accompany her answer, “Right,” and her quest for coffee. “I guess, I mean, even then it wasn’t easy. I knew you didn’t really know what you were asking.” But I really doubt this has much to do with coffee. She’s using being busy to cover up the fact that she’s jumpy.

She moves on to the drawers below the counter and hits pay dirt, at least with the filters. “I gave her enough structure to make the things she imagined feel real, the same way a dream can seem real. Once everything was in place, we used hypnosis to make her believe she was you.”

The coffee’s in the next drawer. Can’t say I’m thrilled to see foilish bags of that preground, prepackaged, premeasured stuff. I’m pretty sure coffee shouldn’t have that much in common with potato chips.

And there’s also that thing they say about beggars.

“But you know how hypnosis is,” she says, tearing the foil baggie open and filling the filter basket. “We could’ve made her believe she was a dog or chicken or whatever and she would’ve been convinced.” I’m not sure that coffee’s what she needs right now, but she hasn’t dropped or spilled anything, so…

She pushes a button on the front of the coffeemaker. It hisses and sputters as she returns to her seat.
There’s something about this that doesn’t fit. I ask, “You said that the witches were scanning me. If you were making all of the decisions and changes, why were they even involved?”

“Giles didn’t believe me,” she says. “He wasn’t convinced I could do what I said I could do.” Her brow crinkles. “Not that he didn’t think I couldn’t do it. He just didn’t think it was possible. I tried to tell him it was, but you know how he is.”

“I do,” I reply, “but I could’ve done without the extra attention.” A coven of witches playing around in my head is—

“I know,” she says. “That’s why we argued.”

I get up and go to the window to give her some space. As I lean close to the glass, she says, “Really, the double’s belief in her own authenticity was the important thing. That was the falsehood we needed to hide. He didn’t see it that way. He thought that mimicking your thought patterns and behaviors was more important. I tried to tell him that if I made my thing work, his thing would follow.”

Looking down and to the right, I find the street. Wet pavement glistens in the lights of a passing car. The angle’s just right so that if I focus, I can also see a ghost of the room reflected in the glass.

She twists in her chair to watch me again. “I did my thing by shoring that up,” she says, “the authenticity thing. I gave her enough information that she stopped acting the way she thought you would act and started acting like you. It was nifty. The only way I could tell that she wasn’t you was when what she remembered was colored by her own experiences. But I was there, so I could pick that out.” She gets up. “And well, I’m a telepath.”

The coffeemaker’s still burbling away, but she has her heart set on fidgeting. I turn around to lean against the glass as she goes to the counter. She takes a couple of cups from a tray and turns them over.

“All of the magical signatures faded in time, leaving behind only what we wanted. With a word and a touch, Giles could bring the ‘Buffy’ personality to the surface. When the mission was over, he should’ve been able to trigger the original personality to come forward again, so we could remove the other. Or that was the plan before…”

I get it.

Her temper flares. She snaps, “Do you?” She turns to glare at me, long and hard.

I feel like a total heel. Worse, I’m not even sure what I did, and that makes me mad ’cause really, blaming me for any of this is like blaming the dead guys for Frankenstein’s Monster.

Her expression loses its edge. Maybe she gets it. “She was broken when she came to me,” she says. “The others tried, but they only made things worse. They didn’t understand. They were trying to make her more like you. They thought that’d help.”

I guess she just needs to be mad at someone. I let it go.

She says, “She isn’t you.”

I get that.

“Do you?” she snaps. “’Cause it sure doesn’t seem that way to me.”
Why that sets her off again—?

“You keep going over the same ground, saying or *thinking* that she’s a copy, like I took every thought in your head and put them into hers. That’s not what I did.”

*Okay…*

And to make matters that much more confusing she holds up a thing of powdered creamer. Radical topic shift anyone? When I roll my eyes and shrug, giving her the universal palms up, ‘if that’s all there is,’ go ahead, she faces the counter.

She measures the antidotes for mediocre coffee as she continues, “When she finally became my responsibility, I wanted nothing more than to put her back the way she was. They basically screwed her up even more, then dumped her on my doorstep and said ‘fix it.’ Everyone said ‘fix it,’ even you.”

She glances over her shoulder to gauge my reaction. “Can you even begin to appreciate what ‘fix it’ might’ve entailed?”

I have no idea. That’s not really my department. I can guess it wasn’t easy, but from there I’d probably stand a better chance of finagling Clem a spot in the next Chippendale’s calendar than actually understanding.

She’s sick of waiting, so she goes for the standard switch and pour. One of the cups replaces the pot. “She wanted to be you,” she says, pausing to deal with the post-pour cup swap. “Between all of the well meaning people and her, she’d been pushed so far in that direction that there wasn’t any turning back. I tried.”

When she places my cup on the table, I take the hint and return to my seat.

“But she wouldn’t move forward either,” she says, finishing up with the stirring and the wiping up. “She was in an induced coma when I got her. Awake she was confused, unresponsive, uncooperative and prone to violent outbursts.”

She takes her seat and has a sip of her coffee. The lack of icky faces is probably a decent sign.

As I blow, enjoying the rich, yummy steam from my cup and the warmth in my hands—which are both likely to be the best parts of the whole experience—she says, “I did the best I could.” At least there’s that. “I started with the small stuff. She needed orthopedic surgery. Her right knee and ankle had both been broken and—due to the kindness of the NHS—left to heal the way they were.”

Imagining Willow with her nose in an anatomy textbook, fixing the ‘small stuff’ isn’t a stretch.

“Her prognosis had been less than hopeful, so they didn’t bother with any of the extraneous stuff,” she says. “They just drilled holes in her skull to relieve the pressure and limit brain damage. And they repaired her internal injuries to give her a fighting chance, but they really didn’t help her. She wasn’t expected to live.” She pauses to take another sip of her coffee. “But you know the story too well. She healed faster than anyone expected, etcetera, etcetera and so on.”

I chance a sip of my coffee. It’s basically unscorched, unscary gas station coffee.

“I was thinking ‘diner coffee’,,” she says with a shrug, “but yeah…”

Diners usually serve cream that wouldn’t pass for a serving of vegetables in a school lunch program.
She smirks and snickers and shrugs again. All of the above are cute, but not really constructive. This is spiraling. We must be getting dangerously close to the fun stuff if she’s this distracted by small talk. Or umm…in my case ‘small thought.’

“Yeah, you’re right,” she admits and falls silent.

We sip our coffee, inspect the table, our nails, read our novelty mugs—mine’s from some place called ‘Fox and Hound’—clueless unless we’re talking Disney films—and generally accomplish a whole lot of nothing. I wish she’d just move on. But guess if silence can be even remotely comfortable for a telepath—

“She’s an orphan,” she says, “Did you know that?”

I look up. “No,” I reply. How could I? I don’t even remember her name.

Willow remains firmly intent on watching her coffee, the table or her hands. One of the above. Maybe all three. It’s impossible to tell. “Working with her was hard,” she says. “Not just because of her. It was me too. She brought a lot of stuff about me to the surface that I would’ve just as soon forgotten.” She laughs, but not really. It’s a little ‘humph’ of a thing with a twitch of a smile. “About being a latchkey kid.” The corners of her mouth twitch again. “All of the stupid things I did to seek approval.”

It didn’t even cross my mind that this might’ve been hard on her. I was too worried about myself. But it didn’t occur to me that she might’ve done this to protect me either.

I feel like an ass again. Go figure. I mumble, “I’m sorry,” and reach across the table, hoping she’ll meet me halfway.

She’s too lost in the narrative. “It took me a while to realize that that was exactly the problem.” Or I hope that’s it. “It’s strange how the answer can be right in front of you and you don’t even see it.”

Still hoping here.

She reaches for my hand. Affectionate gestures are really best with a touch of irony. Her fingers are really warm from clutching her mug. It feels nice.

“You gave her a mother who loved her unconditionally,” she says. “That’s what it took. She needed that stability to be right again.” Her attention turns from our hands to my eyes. “Now she’s one of three people who remember Joyce the way you do.” She makes a funny little noise, half laugh, half question, “Hum,” and gives me half a smile. “And two of them were constructed magically.”

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