Summary

Spike's worldly possessions have just been distributed following his demise in the Hellmouth, when he pops up in Angel's offices. His new contract with the PTP stipulates that he aid Angel in his journey. Too bad nobody knows what that journey might be. Another problem: Buffy is guaranteed a happy life if Spike never sees her again, and she has some objections to that clause.

Alternate version of Angel Season 5 with rock 'n' roll and road trips, from multiple viewpoints. AU after Chosen.

Completed novel!

Notes

Joss owns all, god of all he surveys. I just love 'em up when he's too mean to them.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The evening before the battle, Spike stopped me in the kitchen, a hand on my arm. Not an imperious hand, not a brutal one– just a requesting one. I note this because I'd spent a few weeks now waiting for his revenge, waiting for that hand to reach out and grab me and make short work of me. He no longer had a chip, and he had a grievance against me.

A justified one, I suppose. I conspired to kill him. I failed.

But the hand on my arm was as humble as such a hand could be. "A word with you, Rupert?"

He was the only one who ever called me by my first name. It was either Watcher or Rupert with him, I don't know why. I suppose he meant to emphasize that, contrary to appearances, he was older than I, and could address me as an equal if he pleased. I didn't particularly like Watcher– he always said it with that extra edge– but "Rupert" was plain unnerving– too familiar. As if we were friends, or could be.

He started towards the back door, but I stopped him. "I'm not going out alone with you."

"What?" He turned back with a puzzled look. For a creature of evil intent, Spike was remarkably open-faced. I could always tell when he was lying. And now he looked honestly baffled. Then his frown cleared. "Oh, that. Right. Look, if I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead. You aren't. You're safe."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "All irrelevant now. Next time, however, do me the honor, will you, of doing it yourself? Not secretly delegating to a civilian with a grudge? I'll let you take the first blow, straight up. I deserve that much from you, after fighting beside you all this time."

I didn't know what to say. He was right, in his twisted way. "You were a danger. Still are, as far as I can tell."

"Not now. Look, I don't care where we go. Long as no one can hear."

I gave in and led the way out to the dusk-filled backgarden. Spike took a seat on the picnic table, his feet up on the bench, and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a long white envelope with my name written across the front in an unrevealing block print. He checked the seal and held it out. "If I don't come back tomorrow."

I didn't take it. "What is it?"

"You know. Final instructions."

I stared at the envelope, wondering if he'd devised, I don't know, a preferred funeral programme, perhaps an epitaph for a gravestone, not that a quickly dissipated pile of dust was likely to have a grave. Or that we were likely to be bothering with funerals. "What sort of instructions?"

"Last will and testament. That sort of thing. Disposition of my worldly goods."

"I didn't know you had any left."

"Something in storage in London. Come on, take it. Letter bomb isn't my style, you know."
I reached out and took the envelope. It was weighted on one end. With inquiring fingers, I felt out the bump. "A key."

"Yeah. Storage locker. Bookstore in Charing Cross, rents out a few boxes. I emailed him last week. He said it was all still there."

As far as I knew, Spike hadn't been in London in a decade or more. "So what's in the locker?"

"Something for Dawn. And Buffy, if she'll take it. Figure you'll be going back there soon enough, and you'll know what to do with it."

"What if I don't come back myself, and the key is lost?"

He smiled. "You'll be all right. But if you're not, the shopkeeper knows me. He'll let me at my own stuff, key or not."

I must have looked suspicious, because he added, "It's legal. Kind of complicated to sort out, but what's in there is legitimately mine. No ethical dilemmas for you."

This wasn't the sort of commission I could honorably refuse, and he knew it. "You think you won't be coming back?"

He looked out into the night. "Buffy's going to survive this time."

It was, of course, my hope too. And I couldn't help but be glad Spike was declaring his intention to die in her place if necessary. I knew why— I could hardly go on denying that he loved her, in his obsessive way. I didn't have to approve of that to be glad of his devotion, his willingness to sacrifice for her. Better he than one of the girls, at any rate, or Xander, or even I.

Still I felt awkward there, so much unspoken between us. I felt the need to speak of the future as if there would of course be a future, one that included both of us. "At some point, Spike, I would like to hear about the process you went through to get this soul. I've about abandoned all my research, but eventually I'd like to get back to it, and, well, what you did was unprecedented."

Spike just shook his head. "Unprecedently stupid. Didn't think it through. Now it's pretty clearly revealed as one of my many worst mistakes."

This took me aback. Regretting his soul? "Why would you say that?"

"The First Evil couldn't have taken me over, I think, if not for the soul. The demon soul, left to itself, would have resisted the domination."

"The... demon soul?"

His eyes gleamed with that bright irony. "You think only humans have souls, Watcher?"

Well, as a matter of fact....

"Don't think too hard on it, mate," he said kindly. "Otherwise you'll have to start accounting for anomalies like Dawn and Anya, won't you? Not to mention all those supposedly souled tyrants and murderers."

I said austerity, "A soul doesn't keep you from doing wrong. It only lets you know that something is wrong."

"Funny how so many souls seem to disagree on what's right and what's wrong. There are souls that
think what Willow and her obnoxious little bint are doing is wrong. And souls that think killing heathens is right. And souls that don't give a shit."

Despite the impending apocalypse and all the preparations that awaited, I felt the tug of this— the chance to discuss souls and such with someone who actually thought about such things – someone like Spike. Well. Frightening thought, that in this house full of humans, it was the vampire whose insights intrigued me. But it was ever thus, Spike as provocateur, delighting in puncturing illusions and playing devil's advocate. For Spike, of course souls were stupid, and/or demons had them (stronger ones, of course), and/or souls were useless and/or weakening, and if the implications therefrom pulled down the pillars of conventional cosmology, theology, demonology, well, all the better.

I didn't agree with him, but arguing with him might be entertaining.

Too bad we didn't have time, and likely never would. If Spike– the ultimate survivor– thought he was going to die, he was probably right.

I couldn't help myself. I had to challenge him. "I'm sorry you regret your ensoulment. Still, as we approach this battle, I suspect you'll find it empowering—"

"Find it frightening, is more the case. Was thinking short-term, you know? Get the soul. Get good. Impress the girl. Forgot that damnation problem."

"Damnation?" I echoed faintly.

"Yeah. You know. Evil. Times soul. Equals damned." He was smiling again, in fact, his eyes brimmed with laughter at some joke only he was hearing.

"Soul equals redemption."

"Don't think so. Not for the evildoer. Wouldn't be much of an incentive to be good, if all redemption took was a soul, right? Nah. I've got it figured. Less'n I can lose that soul quick, I'm bound for perdition. And being as how I'm already a vampire, and can't be turned again—"

"But if you lost the soul, then you would be damned."

"Don't think so. Damnation is for the souled. Without a soul, I'd just cease upon the midnight with no pain, you know? Just cease to exist once the body's gone, and all that I was would disappear, and that would be all right with me. But now—" He broke off. "Can't get that Keats poem out of my head. Passages keep popping up. He wrote the harshest lines in English verse, I think—"

*Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget*  
*What thou among the leaves hast never known, The weariness, the fever, and the fret,*  
*Here, where men sit and hear each other groan; Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,*  
*Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies; Where but to think is to be full of sorrow*  
*And leaden-eyed despairs—*"

He spoke these words casually, as if they were part of a debate he was having in his head— word-perfect, the cadence easy and conversational. That was the puzzle that was Spike, that he'd have this poem at his disposal to comfort him or challenge him on this night of all nights. I didn't care— didn't want to know why a vampire would read a poem enough to have it memorized, or why it would be
personally important to him. It was too late in our relationship to introduce such issues.

He thought he was going to die tomorrow—permanently, that is, become dust as vampires do when immortality fails. And he thought he would be damned. I wondered what hell was to him. He'd grown up when Victorian vicars were thundering about fires and eternal torment and the agonizing justice of a wrathful God. Hell would be... hell.

Would hell burn hotter now that he'd turned away from evil? Was his sacrifice all the greater knowing what awaited him?

There were no words for this. So I offered no comfort. I just rose and said, "I'll keep the envelope with me, then."

"Thanks, mate." He didn't follow me, and I looked back from the porch to see him still sitting there on the table. He was gazing at something on a chain, a piece of jewelry that glowed in the wan moonlight. To cease upon the midnight with no pain—there was something tragic in that, that last hope of his... that his best hope would be to cease to be, and that hope was lost now.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain...

It was a few hours after the collapse of Sunnydale that I remembered the envelope. I retrieved it from under the seat in the bus but didn't open it. I didn't want Buffy to see his handwriting, to tell the truth. She seemed well enough that evening, still the general, marshalling her troops into their barracks—a seedy motel a few blocks from the hospital where we'd taken the wounded. But her control was so iron-hard, I thought it might break her, a vise tightening on her heart and throttling her spirit.

I folded the envelope up and put it into the lining of my coat. There would be time, there would be time, as Eliot said, for all the works and days of hands, that lift and drop a question on your plate. There would be time to deal with the dead once we'd dealt with the living—

We all agreed that the Cleveland Hellmouth was relatively inactive and could wait. At the end of a quiet summer spent with Angel, Buffy went off on a vision quest to Tibet, leaving Dawn in a private boarding school. The young slayers went back to their families to wait for further instructions— I didn't even want to imagine how that might turn out. I returned to London to start the impossible task of rebuilding the Council of Watchers while simultaneously trying to account for and make provisions for all the potential slayers. We would never have enough Watchers for them all, so I hoped to gather them all into a school of some sort, at least until they were trained to use their powers for good.

It was several weeks, as it turned out, before I had an afternoon free enough to fulfill Spike's last wish. There was a moment of panic before I located the correct coat and withdrew the envelope. I got myself a drink— Glenlivet, I realized, Spike's preferred whisky; he always did have liquor tastes far above his economic station— and sat down in the front parlor of my Chelsea flat to open the letter.

I just looked at the neatly typed page for a moment, letting myself remember him. I didn't want to
remember him, but there you have it. There had been no funeral, no stone commemorating his passing, and perhaps this was all the memorial he would get— the occasional passing thoughts of those who were with him his last days. I realized that I had known him for ... oh, six years at least, two of them as my enemy, four as something else. We used to drink together sometimes after patrolling— that's how I knew his alcoholic preferences— but I always did my best the next morning to forget whatever drunken camaraderie we'd shared watching Manchester United or Blackadder, or discussing demon varieties, or remembering the glory days of London punk.

He was a sort of annoying constant on the periphery of my life. I relied on him to protect Dawn, to guard Buffy's back, to show up with his muscle whenever it was needed. But I never trusted him, and no matter how much he changed, I never forgot that he was a demon first and foremost.

His final action, well, I hadn't yet put it into a category yet. I knew I would have to at some point— I am cursed with a mind that must make sense of things, even when there is no sense to be made. At some point I would have to decide what his sacrifice meant about, oh, good and evil, and love and hate, and sin and redemption. And heaven and hell.

But now I just had to fulfill his last wish.

Dear Rupert: For all sorts of reasons you can guess (no identity, for one, and probably dust now, for another), I cannot do this myself. I hope you will help me. Next you're in London, will you visit the Meridian bookshop in Charing Cross and tell the shopkeeper you're there for my things? This letter and the key should be all you need.

The portrait must be worth some money. Don't worry. I didn't steal it. Or I only stole it from myself. There's a letter and a sketch inside the back wrapping should authenticate it. Your Watchers' Council's contacts must have the resources to fudge up some provenance. Could you sell it and put the money in trust for Buffy and Dawn? Don't know how that works, but you will. You can give them the money outright if you think that would be better. Don't tell them it's from me. Anonymous donor, that sort of thing. Someone whose life Buffy saved— wouldn't even be a lie. She's saved my life many times.

The book is for you, in thanks. Or as commission, whichever makes you feel more comfortable.

Yr obt servant,
Spike

I didn't open the box until I was back home again with another glass of Glenlivet. Then I cut the string with my penknife and withdrew a small painting, 12 X 18, and framed in gilt wood. I recognized the face right away— any boy schooled in England would— but didn't recognize the portrait: Admiral Nelson, a headshot, the blind eye concealed by shadow, his powdered hair light against a dark background.

I didn't know why Spike would have a reproduction of some unknown portrait of a national hero, or why he'd give it to me.

Annoyed, I set it on the desk and pulled out the gallon-sized ziplock bag containing the book. Through the cellophane, I read the words on the spine. Charles Dickens. Our Mutual Friend. Old, but in astonishing shape, the red leather smooth and unscarred.

With a careful hand, I withdrew the volume, and turned the thick pages to the publication information. First edition, 1865.
My librarian mind was already at work. It wouldn't be worth much, even in such pristine shape. A thousand pounds, perhaps. Dickens had been the most popular author in the world in his day, his every new release greeted with Beatlemaniac-like frenzy. There were hundreds of first editions of this book out there. But still—

It was lovely to hold it in my hand, to breathe in the rich smell of the leather, that sweet dusty smell of the old pages, to read the old-fashioned type, to know that the publisher had typeset this directly from Dickens's own manuscript pages.

Slowly I flipped the pages back to the frontispiece. There, in the careful cursive of a well-taught child, read, "To my beloved Mother. Christmas, 1865. Your loving son, William."

The flowing Victorian shape of the letters were marred by a slight backwards tilt, a faint fuzzing indicating a hand drawn across the ink before it fully dried. The telltale signs of a lefthanded writer.

I closed my eyes, conjuring up a moment – it was dark, some cemetery, Spike laughing as some vampire rushed at him. Buffy tossed him a stake. He twisted—an awkward move in a usually graceful man—and caught it with his left hand. I had noted then, without much interest, that Spike was lefthanded.

I touched the child's writing with a tentative finger, traced the signature. Spike's hand. William's hand.

I turned the page back to reveal the inside cover. Anne Trent Nelson was penned on the bookplate. So this was my commission. William's mother's book.

Anne Nelson. He said he'd come by the portrait legitimately. Nelson must have been a relative....

As instructed, I checked the back of the portrait and slid a careful hand in the split of the backwrapping, snaring a packet between two fingers. There was a broken wax seal. I fitted the two pieces together to reveal a Gothic L that made my heartbeat slip just for an instant. Then, slowly, I withdrew the letter inside.

It was a receipt. Small portrait as sketched attached. Received, 300 guineas, from Robt. J. Nelson. 30 June 1804. Thos. Lawrence.

I turned over the square of parchment, saw the quick lines sketching the outline of the portrait, and underneath, in the hand I now recognized as the great artist's—after Beechey.

A Lawrence portrait of Admiral Nelson, modelled not from life but from the famous Beechey portrait. Could it be real—but it must be. Spike wouldn't have kept a fake for more than a century.

I had inherited an elderly aunt's library—this is my excuse for having both the Debrett's and Burke's Peerages on my shelf. It took awhile to find what I was looking for, as Admiral Nelson, before his military exploits, had not been of the peerage. His father had been a gentleman, in that quaint old definition, a vicar from a good family, but the genealogy wasn't as extensive before as after Nelson's ascension to the peerage. Still, I located a Robert James Nelson, the vicar's first cousin. He had a son, William, born in 1806, who had a son Robert born in 1830, and there the Peerages lost interest in this not very interesting spur of the great Nelson line.

Spike had been turned in 1880, I knew that from the Watcher records. He was, he'd told me once, 26 then. Born then in 1854. Robert's son. Another William.

So, I supposed, he was right. He'd come by this portrait legitimately enough. I wondered when the
vampire would have gone back to his old house to steal the portrait, to take the book. I wondered how he had kept them all these decades, as he rampaged over Europe.

And I wondered that, having kept them all that time, he would pass them on to me. He trusted me. That was why.

And the shopkeeper part of me wondered how much the portrait was worth.

I cared nothing for the book's price, for I wouldn't sell it. Because it was Dickens. Not because it had been Spike's.

The Council of Watchers might be defunct, but its suppliers were intact. And it took only a couple weeks to work up provenance papers. A William Nelson, tragically caught in the earthquake that had consumed Sunnydale, California, a many-times removed descendant of the original purchaser, had records of storage and frame-cleaning and insurance payments dating back to the 19th Century. In his will—naming Rupert Giles, DPhil Ox. (Balliol), executor—he designated the beneficiary to be a trust for the Misses Summers, also late of Sunnydale.

It amused me to establish this William Nelson, so meticulous, so cautious, a fussy man with fussy habits and enough foresight to send the portrait and its records to his executor a year before his untimely demise. I pictured Spike with bifocals and, well, normal hair and a well-aged tweed suit and a worried expression, a Spike sans any Spike. A Spike I should not be ashamed to drink with, except that he probably would not drink with me.

I spent a month in negotiation with a private, very private, auction house, explaining the need for discretion, that the Misses Summers must not know of the sale, implying some delicate situation that I could not describe (because I could not imagine one delicate enough to suit, beyond the truth, anyway). And they purchased it outright from me, for perhaps a bit less than I might have cleared from a true auction, but a quick sale and a cheque on delivery.

I'd already set up the trust, and all that remained was to deposit the cheque and inform Buffy. Even Tibet is within email range now, with Internet cafes in the low-lying villages, and in a couple days she called me from some rich mountain climber's satellite phone. She sounded unnervingly close. "A trust? For me and Dawn?" There was relief in her voice, and skepticism.

"It's enough to pay tuition for Dawn, and for you, if you'd like to return to university. And... and a bit more."

"How much more?"

I hesitated. "Enough to buy a house. A car. But, Buffy, my dear, please don't buy a car. I value your life too greatly for that. Lease a limo with a chauffeur instead."

"You mean... thousands. Hundreds of thousands."

"Something like that."

"An anonymous beneficiary of my work."

"Yes."

She sighed, a quavery, watery sound. "At least we know Spike's share of the Great Train Robbery has gone to a good cause."

Buffy was no intellectual, but she was clever. "Why would you think it's Spike?"
"Well, I suppose it could be Angel, only I didn't save him, I killed him. And – well, I've been in worse financial straits before this, and he's never offered me money. Not that I'd accept it. So it's not Angel, is it?"

It offended me to imagine Angel getting the credit for this. "Certainly not. But I'm sure you've saved a few millionaires in your time."

"None that I know of– or know of me. And Spike– well, if he had any money, I'm sure he would have left it to me and Dawn." Another sigh. "Giles, just tell me that it's ethically all right for me to accept this. That, you know, it's not money stolen off the bodies of his victims, though really, he probably would have spent that on blood and cigarettes years ago."

Carefully I replied, "You need have no moral qualms. The... the anonymous donor came by this fund honestly. And I can vouch for his– his or her– intentions. He or she wanted only a secure future for you and Dawn."

"Thank you," she whispered, and "I have to go. Tell Dawn." And she was gone, and I thought of her huddling on some bleak mountain, handing the phone back to its owner, and deflecting questions about her tears.

But I'd hardly hung up when she was back on the line, her voice full of anguish. "Oh, Giles, I tried, I did, and I told him in the end, and he didn't believe me, and he died and his last thought was that I didn't love him."

Gently I said, "I think his last thought was that he loved you. And that he was sparing you another death. And you honor that by – by finding happiness. That's what he would want for you."

"I can't. I can't find it in me. It's lost." A moment of silence. "He had it in him. He found it easy to be happy. Maybe only for a moment– but I'd see it in him, that joy. It's so strange... he and Anya– they are the ones I think of when I think of joy. Do you know what I mean? I don't think a day went by that they didn't know a moment of joy... and they were both demons, and now they're both dead."

I thought of Spike laughing as he fought, of Anya dancing her dance of capitalist superiority– of the frightening suspicion that joy was demonic in origin.... "You have it in you also, Buffy. It's there. And he'd want you to find it." Comforting words, vague words, and yet true, or so I hoped. "Come, now, isn't that why you're on the roof of the world? To find serenity and peace and illumination through meditation?"

Buffy groaned. "I hate meditating. And Giles? Promise me when I get back, I never have to eat rice again?"

She rang off, more cheerful now, and I wondered what she had told Spike there at the end. That she loved him? And he had not believed her, she said.

Disquieted to find myself pitying him, I made my call to Dawn's room at boarding school, and told her that there would be funds for college, no matter what. I found myself awkwardly deflecting her gratitude– she assumed I was the anonymous donor– and was glad that the doorbell rang so I could politely disconnect.

A few days later I got a call from Wesley Wyndham-Pryce, informing me that the vampire Spike had returned to life, or something like that. He had been sent back for some reason that wasn't yet clear,
and unable to leave. In fact, he was currently confined in manacles there at the Angel Investigation offices. "For his own safety," Wesley informed me, just in case I thought that the AI gang might get its jollies by chaining up recently re-souled and resurrected demons. "He tried to dash out into the noon sun yesterday. We're trying to determine what is keeping him here, and why he returned." Awkwardly he added, "I thought that perhaps, well, his former... colleagues might have some insight."

My first thought, after the astonishment at least, was that I was glad I'd gotten the painting sold and the trust established before he came back and revoked the bequest. Then I felt a stirring of shame. I had no reason to believe that Spike would do that. He'd died for Buffy, after all, braved hell for her–

"Did he say--" I started. "Did he say where he'd been these months?"

Wesley chuckled. "Always researching, eh, Rupert? I am rather eager to discuss just that with him. But Angel's got him sequestered. For his own good," he said hastily. He certainly wanted to make that point. "Any insights you might have--"

I suddenly wondered if Angel had approved this phone call. No, I thought not. Wesley was doing this on his own. Angel wouldn't want Buffy to know-- "You want to know why he returned. Well, you know, I'm sure, that he was buried with Sunnydale. That amulet Angel brought, the one for the champion--"

"Ah, yes." Wesley invested that with a great deal of irony. "The champion."

For some reason, that annoyed me. I surmise it was that Sunnydale-LA rivalry cropping up again. Spike might have been an unusual sort of champion, not my choice by any means. But he was our champion. "Yes, he performed estimably. He held the army at bay until Buffy and Faith got everyone out. He rejected the opportunity to escape while he could in favor of destroying the Hellmouth. Buffy told me that she thought he had been burned up by the amulet's power. Perhaps this all has something to do with that--"

"The amulet, well, it was apparently harboring his essence. When it was returned to us, that's when he appeared."

"I'd suspect, then, that he was returned because he has--" it seemed so unlikely. But then, a vampire dying to save the world seemed unlikely too. "Because he has been redeemed and given another chance at life."

"Or unlife. He is still a vampire." Wesley added grudgingly, "He has a soul, you know."

"Yes. Last year, he went off on a quest and won it." I added honestly, "I do not know how to evaluate that."

"He-- he won the soul? It wasn't forced on him?"

Yes, Wesley, I almost said. My champion is cooler than your champion. Instead I merely observed, "I know, quite unprecedented. But then, Spike has never been your average vampire. One of a kind, certainly." Oh, dear. Very soon I was going to be saying he was prettier than Angel and could dance better too. And I didn't even like the scoundrel.

I just despised Angel that much more.

I tried to tamp down my competitive urge and speak analytically. "There must be some purpose to his return. A reward, perhaps, for his service. But why return there? Why not to-- well, there's nothing left of Sunnydale, I suppose."
"Perhaps you could—well, come collect him? He is your responsibility, rather than ours."

I grow annoyed again. "I'm quite occupied now, with the rebuilding. But I'll tell you what. Buffy will be back through California very soon. I'm sure she'll be glad to see him alive and well. And perhaps she'll be happy to take him off your hands."

It was, of course, hardly the outcome I preferred, and I suspected I would make sure it didn't occur. Nonetheless, it did score a few points in our unspoken little competition. Wesley hemmed and hawed and then said, "Well, I think perhaps Angel will want to deal with him first, save Buffy the bother. We can no doubt find some use for him. I understand he has some experience fighting?"

"A bit," I said drily. "He fought beside Buffy these last three years. Demons, vampires, hell-gods, First Evils, ubervamps.... We did get quite a lot of action in Sunnydale, you'll remember."

I like to think that Wesley was a bit chastened, no doubt remembering how Sunnydale had punctured his pomposity and taught him what real danger was. But he only thanked me and promised to keep in touch.

I hung up, wondering if I should have asked to speak to Spike. But no, I thought. He wasn't my responsibility, no matter what Wesley thought. I had discharged Spike's last request, and that was sufficient. He could expect no more of me.
Dawn

I didn't notice when Spike died. I mean, if he actually died. He was already dead, wasn't he? That's what everyone said. He used to say he was "undead" and then (this doesn't make sense) that he was living his "unlife". I think his point was, he was always the Un. You know, like Buffy's always the One.

Anyway, that last moment at the Hellmouth, I was kind of busy getting all the slayerettes out safely and worrying about Buffy and Xander and Willow and Giles, and myself, of course. Everything was collapsing. My school was collapsing. My past was collapsing, or at least the part of it that was real, the last two years or so. And we got out and on the bus and started high-tailing it out of there, and all I knew was that Buffy wasn't with us.

I couldn't cry. I couldn't yell. I was scareder than I've ever been, scareder than when Mom died. Because I had thought this might happen. I'd been dreading it for weeks. Buffy would die to save the world. She'd already done it once. I knew she'd do it again. Because she was the One.

Okay, I'm not proud of myself. But I sort of helped with a mutiny, that last week. Pushed her out of the leader position. Got her demoted from general. I know it hurt her especially that I joined in, and I couldn't let her know why. It was because I wanted her to live. It was Faith's turn to die to save the world. She was the Slayer too. And no one needed her like I needed Buffy. Faith could die and it would make her life meaningful and erase all the bad she'd done. Buffy didn't need to repent for her past or make up for it. She deserved to live. So I stood up there with the others and told Buffy to leave the house. To get out. That we didn't want her as our leader anymore.

I thought maybe she'd be so hurt and angry– Buffy does get angry, you know, real angry– that she'd walk away from us and leave us to our fate. Leave Faith to make the big sacrifice.

But then Spike came back and realized what we'd done, and took off after her. Sometimes I just want to kill him. I mean, I watched him go, and I wanted to chase him and say, "Don't you realize if you bring her back she's going to die?" But God forbid that he let her be, you know? He couldn't do that. I mean, she might be alone and feeling unloved, and Spike couldn't have that.

Anyway, that day at the Hellmouth, I was resigned to it. She wasn't going to come out alive. But somehow I still found myself at the bus's back window, gazing back at the collapsing city and begging the God who's never done anything for me to spare her. And then I saw her leaping from roof to roof, running like a gazelle– and my heart just opened with joy and love. My sister was saved. That's all I cared about.

The bus stopped finally, at the edge of the crevice that was Sunnydale. I don't remember much of that moment when we stood there and stared and realized we'd done it– beaten the First Evil, closed the Hellmouth... destroyed the school! We made some nervous jokes, but Buffy didn't say anything at all. Except when Giles asked, "What did this?" she answered "Spike."

That's when I realized he wasn't on the bus with us. But I wasn't worried. Spike was a vampire, and awfully hard to kill. You could stake him, or you could burn him, or you could put him out in the sun, or you could twist his head off (just try it– he was way strong, you know). The sun was the only danger I could see, and he knew how to deal with that. I figured he was somewhere hiding out, waiting for the sun to set. He'd catch up to us that evening.

But he didn't. And no one said anything. It was so weird. I was sort of embarrassed even to ask. For one thing, we knew Anya was dead, and Amanda and a couple of the other potentials, and the
injured were at the hospital, and we were all grieving and worrying. I knew I'd miss Anya. We didn't always get along, but she'd stayed with us when any sensible demon would have left us to our fate. And she made me a bridesmaid, which was really sweet. I mean, the wedding didn't happen, but I still appreciated that she chose me. (And I thought the dress was pretty! I don't know what was Buffy's problem.) And the potentials— I totally hated giving up my room to them, but you know, live with people for awhile and they come to matter. And even the ones I didn't like, well, they were just girls, and it wasn't fair they had to die.

We got checked into a motel near the hospital, north of LA but right off the highway. Autistic-Buffy suddenly turned into Obnoxo-Buffy, insisting that the bathtub in our room was dirty, and getting in there in her clothes with a washcloth and some shampoo and scrubbing at the porcelain. I got scared and begged her to get out and let me do it. I mean, the apocalypse really did happen— here I was demanding to be allowed to scrub the bathtub. Finally I got her out and into clean clothes and stretched out on the bed, and I went looking for someone, anyone, who was relatively sane.

Faith didn't really qualify, but she was sitting outside in the parking lot, smoking a cigarette, and the smell reminded me of— well, better times. So I plopped down on the curb beside her and said, "How come you're so together, and Buffy's falling apart?"

"Hey. Easy for me. I was just along for the ride. Buffy had to be in charge." She smiled and blew a smoke ring. "She probably feels responsible for the deaths and the injuries. We can tell her there were a lot less than we imagined, but she won't hear us. That's the way she is."

"Yeah. Doesn't do much good to say it could have been worse."

"Right. And then there's the Spike thing."

I was watching her pretty close, because, I mean, I hate smoking, but those smoke rings were tight. I wish I could do that, without the cancer, of course. Anyway, I was watching her mouth when she said that, and for just a second, her lips trembled, like she was going to cry. Then she took another drag, and I asked, "I thought they made it up. I mean, they spent last night together."

She gave me a look. "You don't know, do you?"

I figured she wasn't talking about what they did last night, you know, S-E-X. "What?"

"Spike didn't get out."

"Yeah, I know. But he'll be coming out now that the sun's down."

She shook her head, turned away, stared out into the dying light. "No. I mean, he didn't get out. He—he burned up. That amulet he was wearing. The one Angel brought from LA. It burned everything up. That's how the Hellmouth got sealed. That's what caused the earthquake. It burned all the First's army. And then it burned Spike."

I jumped up, found my back against a car. "I don't believe you."

She shrugged. "I didn't see it all. But I saw the fire. Buffy stayed with him as long as she could, but he must have made her leave so he could bring the place down." She looked up at me, her mouth twisted a bit. "You know he wouldn't have let her be the one to die. This is what he wanted."

Spike? No. Spike wanted immortality. He wanted to live forever and look good forever. He wanted to win Buffy back and see Man U beat Chelsea and force the Bronze to put the Awesome Blossom back on the menu and — and he wanted to be friends again with me.
"He didn't want to die."

"He wanted Buffy to live. And he made that happen." Faith ground the cigarette under her dusty boot and rose. "He was a good guy, you know? Stuck by her. Not many guys would have done that. So she's probably wishing she could have done something to save him, but she couldn't. He wouldn't have let her." She patted me awkwardly on the shoulder. Pat, pat. I flinched away. She stood there with her hand raised and then let it drop. "We'll just have to be gentle with her, I guess. Hell. I don't know how to deal with this sort of thing. You'd know better than I would." After a moment, she said, "Oh. Yeah. You were friends, weren't you? I forgot. I'm sorry. Like I said, he was a good guy, and-- " She kind of screwed up her face like she was searching for the right phrase. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"It's not my loss!" I said, way too loud. "We weren't friends! I didn't even like him! He hurt Buffy, and I hated him!"

"Oh." She kind of stepped back, like she was afraid I might hit her with some spit. "Well, okay. But he stuck around, and that's good, so maybe, you know, you could let it go. Forgive him. Whatever." She started fumbling for another cigarette. It reminded me of him, the way he'd get upset or anxious and the first thing he'd do is start patting his pockets looking for his smokes. I told him once he should designate one pocket the cigarette pocket, and then he'd always know where they were, and he looked at me like he'd never even conceived such a thing, and it couldn't possibly work.

Faith was a lot like him. She finally located the pack in the cleft of her cleavage. (Not that Spike had cleavage. Only that he always had some new place he'd stored his smokes.) "Christ. I told you, I'm no good at this stuff. I don't know what to say to you. But... well, he's gone now, and I think maybe everything's going to be okay. Not because he's gone. But because what he did made it okay."

"Okay." That made sense. And I felt something loosen in me. "Buffy's been sort of stuck all this time. With Sunnydale and the Hellmouth. And with him too. Now... now we can move on, right?"

"Yeah." Faith looked over at the highway, the red streaming lights of cars and trucks going somewhere else. "Yeah. We can move on. Somewhere."

We moved on to Angel's place. Me and Buffy, I mean. Xander got a line on some construction job in Santa Barbara and went off that way. Wise Witch Willow reverted to her automaton-puppy version, obediently going wherever Kennedy told her, this time to Kennedy's big family mansion back east. Kennedy always said she didn't know anything about magic, but I swear she had Willow under some spell.

Andrew just disappeared when I wasn't watching. Principal Wood got a job down in Orange County, and Faith sort of kind of followed him there. Sort of. She just planned to live in the same vicinity, she said, see what happened. I don't know. I can't see her hosting faculty teas, can you?

Giles did his Giles thing-- organizing everything and everyone, getting everyone proper ID and records, coordinating the slayerettes' return home, filing insurance claims... all while fielding phone calls from watchers who had survived the bombing and wanted a leader. Eventually he had to go back to England, but first he took me aside and said, "You have to get her away from Angel."

Well, I wasn't Angel's biggest fan, but I told Giles I couldn't do that to Buffy. Angel was being good to us. His apartment was beautiful and quiet and filled with fresh flowers every day, and when she
spaced out, he held her hand and said nice things. And she loved him. I mean, everyone knew that. When you're traumatized, you should be with someone you love, right? And she'd always loved Angel most of all. Right?

After the first couple days, Buffy was doing pretty well, really. I mean, she was subdued and quiet, but she didn't cry, and she wasn't scrubbing out bathtubs, and when Angel talked about her going back to college, she would nod and say she'd start fall semester for sure. He was very kind to her, very gentle. He treated her like a fine crystal vase of great value, you know?

It would have been really inspiring if it didn't start to totally creep me out.

Still I had to admit that Buffy was okay. Pretty much okay. She got up every morning and went to work at Angel Investigations. I'm not sure what she did there, but she had a really nice office with a big window and a brand new computer. She came back every evening with Angel. I usually made dinner for us. Angel had a great kitchen, which of course he never used, and the grocery store down the block delivered whatever I ordered. In the old days, I used to watch the Food Network sometimes—well, okay, with Spike, that summer Buffy was gone. We never cooked any of the recipes, but we used to talk about how someday maybe we would, when we had enough money for duck breast and cardamon and saffron and fresh basil. Until then, we stuck with the Cheetos.

But now I had the money for all that, or Angel did, and I had a computer with broadband for downloading the recipes, and lots of time I didn't want to think in. So I'd make dinner for Buffy and me, something elegant yet simple, pastas and salads and berries in creme fraiche.

Buffy would eat a third of what I served, and praise me to the skies, and tell me I should open a bistro. Then she'd help me clean up. And we wouldn't even argue about me always making a mess. After that, sometimes she went out on patrol with the other AI crew. Most evenings, though, Angel would read some big philosophy book in his den, and Buffy and I would go into the living room and watch videos. She'd gotten obsessed with Adam Sandler, the early version, I mean, and she'd watch those stupid comedies of his over and over. I couldn't stand it. I'd sit there with her, but I'd have my headphones on so I could listen to music instead of his grating voice. I don't know why those were the only films she liked anymore. I suppose action-thrillers were too traumatic, and romantic movies, well, best not go there.

Then about ten, we'd watch the news and go to bed. Me and Buffy. We shared the second bedroom. Angel would stop in and say good night every night, and come over to the bed and kiss Buffy on the forehead. He knew better than to try to kiss me.

It was really weird. I mean, they were supposed to be in love. He'd say that every night when he kissed her. "I love you." And she'd reply, "I love you too." Then they'd sleep in separate rooms.

I know all about the curse thing, but... but okay. I mean, I don't know everything about sex. In fact, I probably knew less than most 17-year-old girls, because of the apocalypse problems, and also I have to admit, because Spike was like total death to my social life for a couple years there— he was known to flash the gold-eyes if he thought some boy was going to get fresh with me, like any of them would after he said, "Get fresh with Dawn and you'll never get fresh again." This last year, he quit doing that— I wasn't letting him come close to me— but there wasn't much action in Sunnydale anyway. Everyone sensed the evil approaching. Kind of put a damper on the school dance planning.

Anyway, I don't know everything. But hello. I watched the impeachment hearings. I've heard of something called oral sex. And it's supposed to be pretty good without being, you know, perfect. If all Angel has to do is avoid getting perfectly happy, well, why not kind of just go limited? Or, I don't know, just don't do it too well? I mean, I can't believe that sex is always that great. Can't it be pretty good without occasioning total ecstasy and then total evil?
I wondered if he knew how Buffy had spent the last three nights before the apocalypse. Not in her own bed, if you know what I mean.

But Angel was probably being considerate. So I gave him the benefit of the doubt. It's not like we had anywhere else to go.

Then he told me not to mention Spike in her presence. "We don't want to upset her."

Well, first off, she's MY sister and I can say whatever I want to her. And second, well, okay. Spike was a sore subject for both of us. But sometimes it would slip out. And it's not like she went crazy or anything. She'd just look sad and change the subject-- probably because she knew it bothered Angel.

No one tells me what to do. Well, scratch that. Everyone tells me what to do. But I don't have to obey. I certain sure (Oh. That's a Spike-ism. I keep wanting to say Bloody hell too.) I certain sure didn't have to obey some guy who just used to be my sister's boyfriend once. So that evening at dinner, while Angel sat with his coffee (he would never drink blood at the dinner table, oh, no, not like Spike who used to dip a Frito into his blood and hold it up and say yum-yum in a disgusting voice and lick his lips and stick out his tongue and lick the Frito -- he was gross, you know? But Angel would never do anything like that) and Buffy picked at her onion rings, I said, "I wish I could make those Awesome Blossom things they had at the Bronze. You remember, Buffy?" Then, just to make sure Angel understood he couldn't order me around and get away with it, I looked straight at him and added, "Spike used to love those things, didn't he?"

Buffy glanced up. For a second her eyes glittered with laughter, and she looked like Buffy again. "Yes, he loved them. He'd get Xander to order one and then he'd keep stealing pieces." She smiled down at her onion rings and ate four of them. It was the most I'd seen her eat in a week.

But that night she woke up screaming from a nightmare. I got into her bed and held her until she was quiet. Angel must have heard, because he was right there in a minute, looming over us, all handsome and gloomy in black silk pajamas. "What's wrong?"

"She just had a bad dream," I told him, trying to shoot out go away rays.

"Tell me about it, Buffy," he said, sitting down in a chair beside the bed.

Buffy's body was trembling in my arms, but her voice was calm. She turned her head and looked at the dark form in the chair. "I was just dreaming of a fight. Spike and I were fighting some vamps, and I lost my stake. And next thing I know, one was about to strike me with it, and Spike leapt in the way, and-- and he got hit, and he turned to dust. He was all over me. And I just wanted a do-over. A rewind. And I couldn't-- but then I realized it was just a dream. And I was happy. And then I woke up and realized it was true. He's really dead. It's not just a dream. He doesn't exist anymore."

I was crying by this time. Trying to hide it, but the tears were leaking out. I just kept squeezing her, hoping to comfort us both.

Angel murmured something sympathetic, something about how traumatic it must have been, and how it was sad about the ones who had died, and how they -- always they, never he-- would not have wanted her to mourn....

And finally Buffy promised to go back to sleep, and he left us. And I crawled under the covers with her and huddled up close, and I confessed something I couldn't tell anyone else. "I feel bad because I hated him. And I didn't get a chance to stop."

She turned, and I sensed her in the darkness there, studying me. "Why did you hate him?"
"Because of what he did to you," I said. "Geez. Xander told me."

"Oh." For a minute she didn't say anything. Then-- "Xander didn't really understand everything, you know."

Well, what was there to understand? "Like what?"

"Like, oh, he stopped when I made him stop." She was perfectly still next to me. "He really stopped. And he was horrified. I don't think he really understood how I was taking it, that I was ... scared. I think he was kind of used to me, you know, being the stronger one. Because I was," she said. There was just the tiniest edge of pride in her voice. She liked being stronger than the strongest guy.

"And... okay. We didn't have the, you know, healthiest type of relationship. We were so used to fighting. Fighting demons and fighting each other. So... well, we had sort of a more... physical relationship than most people. And it wasn't very nice."

"So you're saying... you were like into S&M."

"No. Just that we didn't think much of getting bruised. We both healed so quick. And – and ... sometimes I hit him."

"What?"

"I'd get mad and hit him. He'd be so aggravating, and I'd hit him in the nose."

I dimly remembered Spike howling with outrage, "Why is it always the nose? You're always breaking my nose!" I hadn't thought anything of it. I mean, Xander used to hit Spike too, when Spike was chipped and couldn't hit back.

I never did. But I loved him, back then anyway.

"So... it wasn't so bad then? What he did to you?"

"Oh, it was pretty bad. We both felt it was over the line. But– but see, I'd gone over the line before with him, way over. And he never said anything about it. And I never apologized. Never made amends. So, well, you know what he did when he crossed the line."

"Went and got the soul?"

"Yeah. But even more, he came back. He came back and he stayed. And he knew no one wanted him there. And he knew he had no chance with me. And he knew you hated him. But he stayed to make amends. Because he knew I needed him. And... so I guess there's just a point where it's over, when you forgive and let go of the badness of it."

I was silent for a little while. "What did you do to him? When you crossed the line?"

"I don't want to-- " She sighed. "He was trying to keep me from turning myself in when I thought I killed that Katrina girl. You remember?"

"Yeah. I tried to stop you too."

"Well, he just didn't understand why I had to do it. And he kept saying I shouldn't. And he kept saying he loved me. I just saw him and thought how awful it was. That he loved me. That he could love me. That of all the creatures in the world, the one who loved me most was ... an evil soulless thing. That's what I called him. And then I started hitting him. To make him shut up. Because he kept saying he loved me. And... you know how tough he is. Was. I pretty much beat him into
unconsciousness. And then I left him there in the alley." She was crying hard now. I could hardly hear her words through the sobs. "I didn't -- I didn't even think about whether he'd wake up before sunrise. I don't know how he got home. I can't believe he could walk. But he must have dragged himself home somehow. And a couple days later, remember? It was that party. He was still all battered. His beautiful face, all bruised and swollen. After two days. I can't even imagine what it looked like that first morning-- and I never even thought to go check on him."

I cast my mind back, and recalled Spike there at the party, oddly buoyant despite his battered face. No one had commented on his bruises. I assumed he'd been in a fight-- I mean, that was his job, fighting demons. Plus he'd get drunk and start brawls all the time. You know. It was Spike. "He didn't hold it against you."

"I know. And that goes to show how wrong we'd gotten. I-- I almost destroyed him last year. I guess I did, in a way. He went and got that soul, and it drove him crazy. But--"

"But you saved him too. You did. He got better because you helped him."

"No. Because I let him help me. That's what saved him. And-- " she started to cry again. "What killed him."

I hugged her, my tears wetting her hair. "I never forgave him, you know? Never gave him a single smile all that time. Not even at the end."

"You didn't know--"

"I knew he was there for us. I just couldn't... deal. It was all so complicated. That he'd be so bad to you, after being so good to me-- and then coming back. I didn't know what to do. What to feel. And he died thinking I hated him."

"And he died thinking I didn't love him."

There wasn't anything else to say, so I just lay there with her till we both fell asleep. And I woke up with my eyes all gummy from the tears, and my heart all achey, and I just don't think that was a good morning for Angel to stop me in the kitchen and diss me for mentioning That Name.

"Surely you can see how upset it made her. She's already so tense. A nightmare like that, disrupting her sleep, just isn't good for her."

I stopped spreading the cream cheese on the bagel half and glared at him. No one was going to tell me how to treat my sister. "What's not good for her is pretending Spike never existed. They were lovers." I saw that strike home, and dug it in and twisted. "Oh, yeah. She spent those last three nights with him. And then he gave his life to save her-- and me, and you too. She's not going to forget him just because you want her to."

Angel's face got hard, but then I saw him struggle for control. His voice was almost benevolent when he finally replied. "I just want her to feel safe here, not always plagued with bad memories. She's had a hard time these last few years."

I grabbed my bagel and started to the door. But I couldn't resist a parting shot. "It's not a bad memory for her to remember that those last few years, Spike was there to support her and fight beside her every night. That's a good memory. It reminds her what real love is."

I'm surprised, after that crack, I got out with my circulatory system intact. But as soon as I could find Buffy's cell phone-- I suspected Angel had his phones monitored-- I called Giles. "Okay. Look. You're right. We have to get Buffy out of here. I'll go to my dad's for awhile, but we need to come
up with something else for her. Something that she'll go for."

There's no one like Giles. In one day he'd sent word of an expedition to Tibet, to chart the mystical paths up in the mountains, in need of a bit of muscle to beat off any evil forces. Buffy made a face when Giles told her over the phone that she should consider it a "vision quest," but promised to try to be open to new insights and meditation practices. "Fat chance," she snorted to me as she hung up. "I'm going to climb mountains and fight high-altitude demons, maybe even Bigfoot, not get all mystical and meditationy." She glanced around Angel's elegantly simple apartment. "You'll be all right at Dad's?"

"Well, I'm not staying here! Besides, it'll be fun playing with the new twins. If I ever learn to tell them apart."

I did a great job of pretending I really wanted to spend the last bit of the summer in Dallas babysitting my new half-brothers. But I had something else to look forward to. I got word two weeks later that Giles had gotten me a scholarship to this cool experimental boarding school in Santa Cruz, so I could finish high school in style. I could tell Dad and Adrienne, his new wife, were disappointed. They were hoping I'd come live with them for the school term. Right. Like I'd trade in surfing and Sumerian independent study for an unpaid position as nursemaid?

Dad was kind of sentimental as he saw me off at the airport. "I'm going to miss you, sweetie," he said, opening the trunk. "And so are the babies. You're so good with them." That was true– I hadn't once dropped either one on his cute little head. "I hope you think about coming back here to Texas for college. You could live with us and help out with the boys, just to pay for your room and board."

Yeah, that was the sort of exciting college life I had looked forward to for years. "Thanks, Dad, really, but the major I want is only available at this college in West LA."

"Well, you know, that's going to present some difficulty," he said, hefting my third bag out onto the sidewalk. "Child support ends when you're 18, you know. And I've got to start saving for the boys' college tuition. I'm sure your mother left you something—"

He'd already been told that my mother's insurance had gone to pay medical bills. So it was no use repeating it. I'd have to go for a college scholarship, that was all. I was afraid, however, that I'd face the same problem Buffy did— that the school would factor in Dad's considerable income and decrease the grant to almost nothing.

It wasn't like he was my real father or anything. I wasn't going to let myself be hurt by the neglect of someone who only thought he was responsible for me.

So I gave him a cheerful wave goodbye and went off to Cool Boarding School. There, in between tutorials out on the beach, I filled out college applications and scoured the Internet for scholarships for students majoring in Ancient Near-Eastern Language and Culture. You're probably not surprised– there aren't any.

Three weeks into the college application process, most of my classmates were already anticipating success upon success, predicting acceptances pouring in, grant offers in tow. But I was getting more and more depressed.

I'm not used to having prayers answered. I'm not even used to praying, but I thought it couldn't hurt. And then Giles called, his voice cautious and cool over the phone line. There was a trust fund for Buffy and me. Anonymous benefactor. Plenty of money. No worry about tuition. I could even go to graduate school.
I figured it was Giles's doing. He had a posh accent, as Spike would say, and so he might be rich. And it was the sort of thing he'd do. But when I said this, he denied involvement in such ringing tones I had to believe him. "It's a bequest," he said, and then I knew. But something made me pretend not to know. I guess it was Spike's intention that we be kept guessing. He probably didn't want Buffy to refuse the money on some dumb grounds, like there was no way Spike could have come by real money legally. That wasn't the sort of thing I cared about. All that mattered to me is that Spike was still taking care of me, still guarding Buffy's back.

Actually, if he stole the money, it was kind of cool.

I still remember him trying to reassure me that even if I learned that I was a soulless demon, I didn't have to be evil. Didn't have to be good either, he said. "I'm not good. And I'm okay."

And he was. Better than okay. I wished I'd been more mature and actually talked to him... but I knew he wouldn't hold it against me. He loved me. I wouldn't ever forget that again.
It was almost impossible to say those words to him. *I love you.* I waited till the last minute, when the Hellmouth was shuddering and Spike was radiating death. I had to say it. But it felt like I was forcing the words out through my throat right after a tonsillectomy. It was hard and it hurt and he knew it, and he kind of smiled and told me I didn't, thanks anyway.

And then he died.

And afterwards, when I was living with Angel and I was about to fall asleep, I asked myself... why was it so hard? So hard he couldn't believe me?

I know I'm not the most demonstrative person out there. Even less so as I get older. I can hug Dawn because she's my sister, and anyway, if Dawn wants a hug, Dawn gets a hug, that's just the rule. And I can hug Willow. She's my best friend still, always will be, no matter how much comes between us.

Xander, not so much. I used to hug him more, because he was my other best friend. But now there's always Anya between us. Not that he blames me for her death. I know he doesn't. But I think he has shut himself away, shut his heart away, honoring her by thinking only of her. Feeling only for her. I know it's wrong. I know he needs help. But I can't be the one to give it to him. Because, well, she did die on my watch. It wasn't my fault, but I can't say, *hey, Xander, get over it. Get past it. Start living again.* It's not my place to tell him that Anya wouldn't want this. Not my place to tell him that grief has an end. But if I saw him now, coming down the hall, I'd go up to him and hug him like it was high school again.

Giles— well, once in a great while. He's Giles, you know. Not the huggy type. Leave for another continent, you get a hug. Come back from the dead, you get a hug. Apocalypses averted, just a smile. But that's him, not me. Or maybe it's the combination. But anyway, I can hug him. And I've told them all I love them. It's easy on the phone, you know?

No one else. Oh. Angel, of course. I hug him. Well, not the kind of arms-around hug, the friendly thing. We have more the hold hands and kiss face type of relationship. And I can tell him I love him. That's not hard at all. Every night when I lived there with him in his penthouse, he'd come to my room and kiss me and say, "I love you," and I could say it right back, not a thought of resistance, nothing holding me back.

I'm not religious, you know, but I went to pre-school at a church when I was little. And we used to say grace before lunch. The teacher would recite God is Great and all that, and when she was done, she'd look at us expectantly and we'd all say, "Ah-men." That's how easy it is for me to say I love you to Angel. It's just like saying *Amen.*

But it took me weeks to work up to saying it to Spike. I figured out I had to do it long before the apocalypse, back in that moment before the Harbringers broke into the basement and took him. He was trying to, geez, he was trying to get me to stake him. He kept doing that after he got the soul. It wasn't fair, and he knew it, but I think he wouldn't accept it from anyone but me. He'd fight it from anyone but me. So he was trying to tell me he was still a monster, and I should dust him, and then he said something really cruel. He asked me why I kept him around, and answered it himself-- because I liked men to hurt me. Well, of course, now I see he was just trying to push me to the point I'd get mad and stake him once and for all. But that part didn't bother me so much, because I knew it wasn't true. It was something else he said. "It isn't love. We both know that."

When he said that, my heart sort of stopped. I thought he meant-- well, I thought he meant he didn't
love me anymore. It wasn't what he meant. Two seconds later I knew that, knew he still loved me just like before, only probably more than before, purer than before, because every day -- well, anyway. Still. There were those two seconds when I thought he didn't love me. And everything came apart inside me, like someone pulled a thread from my sweater and it unraveled. Because if he didn't love me anymore--

Then I saw the look on his face and I realized he just meant that I didn't love *him*, not the other way around, and relief filled me. I was still loved by the one who knew me best, so that meant I was still all right. Not meaningless. Not a monster. I could hardly concentrate on what he was saying, I was so relieved. But I managed to keep hold of my brain, and I said something good, told him it wasn't about me being a masochist, but about me believing in him, and I think maybe he listened to me, because he held out for weeks under torture, and later he told me it was because I believed in him.

It was kind of awhile before I remembered that two seconds desolation when I thought he didn't love me. I didn't want to dwell on it, you know? The last thing I needed at that point was to feel insecure and needy. But finally, one night when the First still had him, I couldn't sleep, wondering where he was and if I'd ever see him again, but still feeling that kind of shot of strength that I got everytime I remembered he loved me. And I remembered the desolation and the relief, and I thought-- *he never gets the relief. He gets the desolation of thinking he's unloved, and never the relief.* And I thought of him wherever he was, enduring who knew what pain, and he wasn't thinking, *this hurts, but at least Buffy loves me.* He was thinking, *this hurts, and Buffy doesn't love me either.*

That's what he meant by "it isn't love". That he finally accepted what I'd been telling him all along, that I didn't love him, that I couldn't love him, that I'd never love him. I couldn't stand it. It was like I sent him into battle without any weapons.

So I resolved, when-- if-- I found him, I'd tell him. I'd do it in a way he'd believe. No hearts and flowers. No melting tones. Just straight shooting. "Spike, just want you to know. I love you." One warrior to another. Shared so many foxholes, so many battles. Like Xander would say it, not that Xander would ever say it to Spike. "Love you, man."

Okay. So that sounds like that beer commercial with the two guys in the row boat.

"I love you. Just wanted you to know that." That's how I'd say it. Straight out. The truth and nothing but the truth. Keep the voice level. Because I didn't want him to think, you know, that I meant more or less than I meant.

But then I found him all broken and lost, and we walked out of that cave together, and he was trying to stand up but leaning on me a little anyway, and I said the words in my head. Loud as I could. But they never got to my mouth. I was too tired. He was too tired. He probably wouldn't even hear me, he was so out of it, and then I'd have to say it again.

So I didn't say it then. Later, when I realized Wood was trying to kill him, I ran all the way thinking I'll tell him I'll tell him if he's still here I'll tell him. And he was there, but he was mad, and I was afraid he'd really hurt Robin, and by the time I could come out with it, he was gone. The only time he ever walked away from me, I bet. Wouldn't you know it. I was finally going to say what he wanted to hear and he walked away.

Everything was chaos for awhile there, and I didn't get much of a chance, but then, well, there was that night in the abandoned house, a couple days before he died. Everyone had deserted me, but he came to find me. I tried not to show it, but of course it was symmetry, the way he found me, as I found him when he needed me. I never knew what to call it, what we had. But we were there for each other. That's the truth of it. I needed him then, and he was there. And I like to think when he needed me, when he was going crazy with his soul, when the First had him, I was there.
And think how far it went back. Back when we were enemies, when I was about to get arrested, he was there. He wasn't there for me— he just wanted to save his psycho demon girlfriend— but he was there with a plan for us to ally (just that once, we both agreed, never again) to stop Angelus and the apocalypse. And then, year after year, enemies, lovers, whatever, we were there for each other. That's what kept us both intact all that time, I guess.

So, you know, we were close enough for me to say that about love. I knew how much it would matter to him. It would matter everything to him. I knew that because when I was there in that abandoned house, totally demoralized, ready to quit and let the world die, he knelt in front of me and said he loved me just because I was me, and it made all the difference.

I should have said it then. But it might have spoiled the moment. He wanted to bolster me, right? And it might have sounded like, oh, me too, like it was all kind of trivial and high school. I love you. Well, I love you back! But I let him stay with me that night, let him hold me. The next night too.

Well, I kind of had to that second night. He'd seen me kissing Angel, and he needed some reassurance that he mattered too. I gave him the amulet, told him he was my champion, but that was the mission. That wasn't really personal. So I offered to stay with him, and I guess that might have been a good time to tell him. But I was feeling all indecisive and guilty— not that there was anything wrong with me kissing Angel. Spike knew how I felt about Angel. But Spike had come there to the tomb to help me, to guard my back, and seeing me greet Angel that way must have stung. Luckily he left before I got all stupid and tried to make Angel promise to wait for me. I don't know if he would have let go of that one. But even if Spike didn't hear that part, I knew I'd done it, and let's face it, it was sort of hard to talk about love when I'd just assured Angel that Spike wasn't my boyfriend and I didn't see a future with him and maybe saw a future with Angel. It wasn't a betrayal. I'd never promised Spike anything, and I had promised Angel, years ago, to love him forever, and --

So I couldn't say it. Spike would assume I was saying it just to distract him from the whole Angel kiss thing. And maybe I'd think that too.

Then time just ran out. There was another night, but I couldn't say anything at all that night, too worried. And then we were walking into the high school, and he went off in one direction, and I went off in another, and the battle started, and time ran out.

So there he was, standing there, starting to burn. I knew it. He knew it. He'd known it all along, ever since he saw the amulet. It would kill the one who wielded it. So he was trying to get me to leave, and I was trying to get him to leave, and he was stubborn the way he gets sometimes, and I knew he was right. And I knew it was my last chance. And I gathered it all up, all the words, and I pushed them out, and they sounded just fine. Really they did. Goldilocks words. Not too much, not too little.

And he smiled, and said, No, you don't, but thanks for saying so.

And then I had to leave, and he had to die, and that was it.

For a long time, I kept thinking about that. Not so much about why he refused it. This was Spike. He would-- well, I guess I don't know why he refused it. Maybe he thought it would weaken him to believe it. Or maybe, well, maybe he just didn't believe it. Anyway, I couldn't figure it out, and it hurt too much to try. To think he died not believing what he most wanted to believe— it hurt too much.

Denial is my middle name. Buffy Denial Summers. I didn't want to think about Spike dying unloved, or believing he was unloved, so I didn't. But that summer was supposed to be a time of self-examination, of spiritual seeking, and so I did think about me. (I can just hear Dawn now— so what else is new, Buffy?) I thought and thought about why it was so hard to say those words to Spike.
So I asked him.

I probably shouldn't say this. It's one of those things that make me sound insane, and I'm not. Really. But anyway, all that summer I was holding conversations with Spike in my head. It's not as weird as it sounds. I figured it was just me projecting what I knew of Spike, and I did know him really well. He could still surprise me (like "No, you don't"-- that was a surprise) but mostly I could imagine what he'd think and do and say.

See, we could always talk. We always did talk. It was like from the first, we had one long dialogue that never ended. No awkward silences. No searching for topics. No rehearsing so I'd have something to say to him. If we were together, we always had something to talk about.

The first time I ever saw him, in that alley behind the Bronze, he'd sent a minion to fight me, just so he could scope me out. The minion called, "Spike! Give me a hand!" and I heard someone applauding. Giving me a hand, you see. Because I was fighting so well. And I looked over and there he was, this guy, human-faced. Smiling.

_Nice work, love._
_Who are you?
_You'll find out Saturday._
_What happens Saturday?
_I kill you._

And that's when the conversation started, and it never ended. From the first, he was calling me "love", and threatening to kill me. It still makes me laugh to think of that.

He never got around to killing me. I never got around to killing him. Everytime we got started on killing each other, we'd have to talk while we did it. And sometimes I'd slay him with my words; I'd insult him so good he'd pretend-clutch his heart. And I'd end up laughing and he'd grin that grin, and murder just slipped away again.

Then we started saving each other. I won't even bother to count the times. Sometimes it seemed every time we patrolled together, one of us would save the other. He'd toss me a stake just when I needed one. I'd grab a vamp that was about to jump him. I remember when I came back from the dead, and he was so sorry that he'd let me die, as he put it. He told me every night I save you. In my dreams I save you. And I should have said then, well, sure. You save me every night, and I save you. That's what we do. We're a team.

I should have said that, but I said other things instead, and the conversation went on and on, through anger and hatred and passion and sex and madness. And despair. We always talked. And so I guess it made sense we were still talking after he was gone.

So that night, in that dark silent bedroom in Angel's penthouse, I say, _Why was it so hard for me to say that to you? I can say it to Angel no problem._

And he laughs. _Maybe it's because you mean it with Angel._

Whoa. Now that stops me. I never thought he believed in that, really believed I loved Angel. Once, in total consternation, he asked, _how can you love someone who isn't there?_ And I got mad at him and said Angel was there, he was always there, in my heart, and that I was in Angel's heart too, and Spike turned away, but then a second later-- you could never knock Spike down for long, he's like one of those bop toys-- he said, _he's in your heart. I'm in your bed. I think I'm havin' more fun._

But here he is saying-- _you mean it with Angel._
I finally hear what he isn't saying. *You think I didn't mean it with you?*

*That's what I said, pet. No, you don't. Remember?*

A pause, then his voice comes again, gentle. *But it was nice of you to say so, and I know how it hurt. But why does it hurt? And don't say because it's not true. Tell me why it hurts so much.*

*I don't know, love.*

*You do know. I know you know. You just don't want to say it because you think it will make me mad. Make you hurt, it will. And I don't want to do that.*

*Tell me. Or I'll make you hurt.*

*Ow! Off my toe, wench.*

*You're in my head, you dolt. You don't have a toe. Tell me.*

*Very soft. Baby, listen, it doesn't matter.*

*Tell me.*

Hard now. *Okay. You asked for it. Something broke in you. Your heart, I guess. Something broke when you killed Angel and it grew back crooked. And you can't love anyone you didn't love before then.*

*That's not true! There was Riley-- well, okay. Maybe I didn't love Riley, not really. But what about Dawn?*

*What about Dawn, he echoes.*

I listen to Dawn's quiet breathing in the bed on the other side of the room, and I find myself growling, like he does sometimes. Deep in the throat, vibrating. *I hate you.*

*See, that came easy. Try the other one again, feel the difference.*

I'm too mad at him to say it. Dawn. That wasn't fair.

*Told you so,* he says. *Can't say it because you don't mean it.*

He sounds sad, in a light way. Like he's trying to be brave about everyone forgetting his birthday. And because I don't even know when his birthday is, I stop being mad and I whisper it so quiet that I can hardly hear it myself.

*I do. I do. I know I do. I just can't-- I just can't say it in a way that you'll believe.*

*It's okay. I don't need it anymore.*

I get mad again. *Of course you don't need it anymore. You're dust in the rubble that was Sunnydale. You don't need anything anymore. But you needed it when I said it, didn't you? Because it was really hard to say, and if you didn't need to hear it, why did I try so hard to say it?*

*Maybe you needed to say it. So you wouldn't feel guilty afterwards. Hey! It's the best of both worlds, see? You said it, so no guilt felt. I didn't believe it, so no commitment made.*
Are you mad at me, Spike? Because if you are, just come out and say it. Don't do that hard bright thing with your voice.

You're the one who does the hard bright thing. You are the hard bright thing.

I'm not hard. Not now.

That's nice, pet. Got to go. Need a smoke.

You can smoke here now; it's okay with me.

But he's already gone.

He's back the next night, in my dreams, and this time I stake him, and he dissolves into dust, and I hear his voice, like the color commentary on Monday Night Football.

Nice work, love, but you know that would never happen. Six years, you never managed to kill me. Killed Angel, but not me. I'm too fast for you. Go back to sleep and do it again.

And obediently I drifted back into the dream, and this time he gets his hand between the stake and his chest, and a hole blossoms in his hand, but it doesn't bleed. I haven't eaten in weeks, he says, looking down at the dry hole.

I love you, I say, painfully.

There you go again. I guess you do want to make me bleed, don't you, slayer?

I don't want to hurt you.

Stop it then. Stop adding it up and saying it's love. I don't want it, see? Not that kind of love. It's just... duty to you. There's no joy in it.

I'm silent, angry. Put my bone-dry stake back in my pocket. Finally I say, It's the only kind I have. Will you just take it and we can talk about something else?

And he bites his lower lip, and tries a smile, and then he holds out his cupped hands to me. Put it in there, pet.

And I put the love into his hands, and it's like sand, and it all leaks out through the hole I made in his palm. And he dissolves too, just like when I staked him, just like when he burned, dissolves into dust that joins with the sand on the ground.

Now you stop that! I yell. You're as bad as Dracula!

And I woke up, hearing his laughter like a promise all around me.

I left him alone for awhile. Just to show him who was boss. And anyway, I worried that Angel would figure it out, that I was talking to Spike, and it would hurt him. I had to move on, that's what
everyone said, and I was doing a good job of it, especially once I got up into the Himalayas and I was surrounded by sharp crystalline air and chanting monks. Another world.

But then I got that email from Giles, and I couldn't help myself. So, Spike, I said, up on that windy mountain, huddled in a bright orange tent, the sleeping bag over my head. So all along you pretended to be poor and you were really rich.

Don't know what you're talking about.

Giles told me.

A pause. He wasn't supposed to say.

He didn't actually say. He told me it was an anonymous donor. I guessed it was you.

Hey, that's nice, love. You guessed it was me. He sounded pleased. So did it come to a plum sum?

I guess. Giles seems to think we're set for life, me and Dawn. Don't you know how much?

No. It was just a painting. If I'd ever had that kind of cash, do you think I'd still have anything left to give?

I guess not. You and savings accounts, not mixy things.

I owned some stock once. When I was a boy. My grandpapa gave me stock in a canalboat company.

What happened?

The railroads.

I wriggled deeper into the bag. I'm cold.

Couldn't help you there, love. Even when I was alive. I mean, undead. Think warm thoughts. Venice Beach. Palm Desert. Hell.

Is that where you are? I ask sleepily.

Oh, ye of little faith.

Faith's the other one. And she's not so little.

I'm all right, love. Don't worry about me.

You're still here, aren't you? Still in our dimension. That's how you can talk to me.

I'm gone for good, pet. You're just making me up. You know it.

No. I don't know anything about Victorian-era stocks. Never in a million years would I have come up with the canalboat thing.

He was silent. Then sulky. Okay. Good catch. Just don't get used to it. I'm not really here. And I don't think I'll be here long. You got to learn to live without me. Hard as that must be.

You still think you're all that, don't you? Mr. Conceito.

I thought you were going to get mystical and spiritual up here in the mountains. But you sound just like Dawn.
Whatever.

And I lay there and felt him close, and thought how maybe I could just keep him like this, kind of on retainer, just check in now and again. Click the Spike shortcut on my mental desktop, open an instant messenger window, and chat with him whenever I needed it. He was always easy to talk to, even if he made me mad.

Then, a few days later, I got to the top of the mountain and wanted to tell him about it, about the view, the effort, the sunshine on the snow. He'd been everywhere almost in the world, and I'd been nowhere, but here was a place I was pretty sure he could never go, you know, given the sunshine problem.

So I opened up that chat window and he was gone.
Angel

I didn't grieve when he died. Didn't really notice. Everything had gone to hell that month, and I was the only one who knew the extent of it, and so his death was the least of my troubles. It didn't bother me nearly as much as him saving the world, when it comes right down to it. That annoyed me. Not that the world shouldn't have been saved, but Buffy giving him all the credit for saving it-- annoying. That sounds callous.

But he didn't matter to me.

Why should he? Angelus was the one who knew him. I had the memories, but they weren't really mine. It was more like watching a film rather than remembering. I can see him in my mind even now, replay him-- but it's just cuts, shots, sequences. Not real memories.

Sometimes he looked younger than he was. I don't mean younger than a century-and-half, but younger than the 25 or 26 he was when he was turned. His eyes were dark blue and wide. His skin was fresh and dewy, the sort of skin that make a girl be called an English Rose. His mouth was sweet and vulnerable. He was as pretty as a boy could be without looking at all like a girl-- he had an angular face, cheekbones like knifeblades and a chiseled jaw. Choirboy pretty.

Often he and Darla were mistaken for brother and sister. Darla hated that-- she was two hundred years older than he, after all, and his great-grand-sire. But they were both light-boned and seemingly fragile, fair and delicate-featured. They looked like innocents caught out in an evil world. Hansel and Gretel.

He was wild and willful and always trouble. Darla never liked him, wanted to stake him every second Thursday, would have if it wouldn't have driven Drusilla around the final bend into complete incoherence. I-- I mean Angelus-- thought he was more menace than he was worth, but amusing at times. He had a wide-eyed appreciation for anything new which appealed to the jaded Angelus. He was a quick study and picked up new skills without much coaching. He had a good singing voice and could play the piano, though he was embarrassed by what this meant about him. He had a stash of books from his previous life, hidden away in the chimney of a burnt-down house in Southwark. He'd sneak away and come back with a new one in his satchel, and try to pretend he'd been out on the hunt, but I'd smell old ashes and no blood.

He looked very sweet curled up asleep with Dru, and even sweeter all beaten up, his mouth bruised like a ripe plum.

He cried sometimes when he thought no one was watching. He missed his mum. He liked being a vampire but wanted his mum with him. How can you deal with someone like that?

He never made any sense to me. He liked to fight more than he liked to kill. I taught him how to cull the weak from the herd. He used this essential knowledge to isolate the strongest instead. "Haven't you ever wanted a fight you didn't know you could win?" he used to demand. It was like one of Drusilla's questions-- insane and unanswerable. Well, I guess there was an answer. No. Sensible people wanted fights they could win.

Darla and Angelus, the two sanest vampires in England, ended up with two insane childer. It was retribution for something or other. Drusilla, I guess, was punishment for Angelus's obsession. William was punishment for ... I don't know. I don't know that I ever did anything bad enough to deserve him. Maybe he was Darla's fault.
Not fair, I know. "Bad" isn't a term that makes sense when you're talking about evil demons, after all. There's a code that is the reversal of the human moral code, and heavy on the practicality. *Thou shalt not kill* becomes *thou shalt kill with a minimum of effort*. There were principles, mostly involving preserving the food supply and keeping the authorities from getting too wise to us. Angelus was a good vampire most of the time. Sometimes there was a problem with proportion-- it made little sense to kill a whole village, far more blood than even the most gluttonous vamp could make use of, but then again, who needed witnesses? Sometimes there was defiance of the established order-- I despised the Master, mostly because Darla worshiped him, and I didn't pay him the proper respect. Sometimes there was a problem with obsession. Immortality gets dull without the occasional enthusiasm.

But mostly Angelus paid his dues and kept under control. Drusilla was a mistake, but beloved of the gods-- the wrong gods, of course-- and valuable in her own way. Her sight got us out of many scrapes, and brought currency with the other orders. More than once we sold her prophecies for our safety or for a minion or two.

William had no redeeming value, however. Oh, he was decorative enough that Darla would trot him out instead of me when she was making her annual obeisances to the Master. And he was always in human face, except when he was feeding-- never had that typical fledgling problem of face-control-- and his shy smile and pretty glances up through those long lashes attracted any number of silly chits to our lair for dinner. Otherwise-- well, no redeeming value.

Angelus used to hurt him. The usual vamp-training, only perhaps excessive. The boy was defiant. Show him a bit of kindness and he was all puppy-dog willing to please. But order him around? Cuff him to make him move faster? He'd turn into a snarling wolf. All attitude and arrogance. It was well, almost irresistible to beat him down.

I got the soul and I left. Couldn't stay. They wanted me to keep killing-- of course they did, who could blame them? I was the one who changed, not my family. I couldn't be part of that anymore. Darla saw me as a traitor, though it was hardly my fault I ended up with the soul. William-- Spike, he called himself by that time-- and Drusilla didn't understand at all. Spike killed his first slayer then, and I couldn't bear it. He was so proud, and I knew I would have been proud too, if I was still Angelus-- proud that my boy had accomplished such a feat. Instead all I felt was a sick relief. I could leave. If the boy could kill a slayer, he could take care of poor crazy Drusilla.

And he did. And I guess that was a rebuke to me, that he gave her the next century. I made her mad, and he kept her safe.

It didn't matter-- she loved me best, even when I wasn't Angelus anymore.

It's almost enough to make me pity the boy. Except I don't.

Yada yada. Sunnydale. Angelus was back for awhile. Tormented Spike. Spike returned the favor a year later. He wanted something from me, something more than the stupid ring he thought would make him all-powerful. He wanted recognition or respect or something. He wanted remembrance. He wanted me to know him. He wanted me to love him. Angelus might have loved him-- I think that's true. But I didn't even know him, and didn't want to know him. Maudlin fool that he was. A killer who cried. I had no respect for him.

So when Buffy came to LA, all weary and covered in plaster dust and surrounded by shell-shocked girls, I didn't even bother to look for Spike. I didn't care. He wasn't anything to me except a nuisance. Worse than that. He got to have her when I couldn't. And that I still couldn't understand. How could she love me and go with him? It's not that I doubt her love-- it was one of the constants of my existence-- and given the circumstances, I could hardly begrudge her seeking comfort elsewhere. As
long as we both remembered what we were to each other, no one else could ever really separate us. But Spike? What did that say about her taste, her judgment? I could hardly stand it when I caught her crying over him. Guilt and regret and grief— I didn't want her suffering because of him.

Spike tried to destroy our love. I know he did. He would have done anything to get her. That's what he called love— his desperation, his grasping, his obsession. Whatever she wanted, he'd do. He'd give her sex, even though he knew she had to be thinking about me when he touched her. He'd get a soul— a soul meant nothing to him; it was just something he thought would make him more acceptable. Devotion— as if just being there with her was the same as real love. Good works— he was like a boy playing basketball, running up the score to impress a girl. And the final stunt. Did he know it would kill him? Maybe so. But he probably thought she'd remember him always and never love again.

He couldn't believe I'd gotten there first, and already captured that flag.

I almost felt sorry for him. She came back to me, after all. When she told me, she took my hand and told me about Spike's death, and there was sadness in her eyes, but much of it I think was for me. She thought I would suffer and mourn and grieve for this supposed grandchilde I hardly knew and couldn't stand.

I pretended to care. More to make her feel better than to deceive her. It was... being polite. I'm not the sort to go to a funeral and make sure everyone knew I despised the deceased. So I made a long face and murmured something about "poor lad" and "poor Will", and she cried a bit, and I held her— and all I could think is that he wasn't mine, wasn't my boy, that I did have a boy and he was lost to me, and she couldn't weep for him because she couldn't know about him. So she was weeping for Spike, that worthless get of my get--

I suppose it was poetic justice that I ended up stuck with him.

It was that damned amulet. After months, it made its way back to the source— Wolfram and Hart, that is. And when Fred started probing the stone at the center with some electrical wire, he materialized over in the corner, as dusty as if he'd just dug his way out of the Sunnydale rubble.

Fred was delighted. I was appalled.

Spike was desperate. Lost.

I tried to be ... decent. We're supposed to help the hopeless, and I suppose there wasn't much more hopeless than a vampire who was too bad for heaven and not bad enough for hell, rejected by them both and sent back to earth. So I installed him in the guest apartment, got him cleaned up and fed, discouraged Fred from running too many tests on him— she does like new guinea pigs, Fred does— and left him with a stack of Time magazines from the waiting room, just to get him caught up on world events.

The next day I told him he had to leave. He was still a bit dazed, but agreed with an alacrity that would have insulted me if I cared one jot for him. I didn't abandon the decency thing, don't worry. I gave him one of the company cars, a thousand dollars in cash, and a bank card. There'd be another ten thousand in that bank account, I told him, if he called me from Vegas by dawn.

He gave me that quizzical headtilt— all right, I'd be blind if I didn't notice how vulnerable that made him look— and took the keys and the cash and the card and thanked me. I told him he'd better not try to track down Buffy, but he looked panicked at the idea. "Can't. Can't. Goodbye." I didn't ask why— I was just glad he realized he had no future with her.
And an hour later he was back, half-dead. He wouldn't talk to me, but Fred has her ways, and she came back to my office and reported that he'd gotten as far as the city limits and was pulled back here. Pulled. Literally. I sent a lackey out and he came back with the car, reporting it was abandoned, locked up but still running, on the side of the road, nosing the "Leaving LA" sign.

Spike was actually ill– that dematerialization and teleportation and rematerialization take it out of a vampire– and once again I was stuck with him until he was able to travel. He wanted out, he said, out of the country. Off the whole bleeding continent, as he put it. Wanted to go home to London, where there was so little sun he could maybe go out in the daylight, where he could– well, he ran out of ideas for things he could do there, a job apparently not being a priority. I arranged for a British passport and a Bank of England account and a one-way ticket.

You don't want to hear about the flight. Well, you probably already did. It was on CNN, the news item about the passenger who mysteriously disappeared two minutes after takeoff, occasioning a return to the runway and five hours delay as security personnel searched the plane, the baggage, and every passenger and crewmember.

Spike was even worse off this time. I thought he was going to die, except unfortunately vampires don't die just because they get vanished off airplanes and zoomed through eight miles of polluted airspace and dropped on their heads on a marble floor.

"You could stake me," he whispered when he regained consciousness. He sounded like he meant it. That gave me pause. One of Spike's many faults– innumerable faults– was his indomitable, oh, what's that idiotic word. Something z. Not zeal. Zest. He loved living, or what seemed like living, vampires theoretically being sort of dead. And yet he was asking for the stake. I suspected he was in greater pain than he was letting on.

I considered it. Put us all out of our misery. It wasn't like anyone was getting any work done, what with Spike catapulting through floors and ceilings like that. The secretaries were all taking extra long coffee breaks and coming to check on him, whispering to each other and giving me glances that I couldn't interpret so Fred had to do it for me: "They think you're mean to him. Yelling at him when he comes back, when anyone can see he just wants to be gone."

I'd probably have a clerical mutiny on my hands if I staked him. Besides, his return from the dead meant he was favored by the Powers, and I wasn't stupid enough to undo their doing.

So I told Fred she was in charge of him, and that she could run any test she wanted on him, fine with me. And instead of being grateful, as she would have that first day, she gave me a look that said I was a heartless monster.

She used to like me, you know. Back before Spike arrived.

I have to acquit him of taking advantage. He didn't want to be there anymore than I wanted him. He kept trying to run away. He'd get just strong enough to walk to the service stairs– Fred disabled the elevator access on that floor– and down into the garage to the car I'd given him, and after awhile he couldn't even get out of the parking spot before he'd be jumped back up to my office. Sometimes it looked like he'd torpedoed right through each floor, his head bloody and his face battered and his body trembling with the shock. Once he went down to the lobby, glanced back apologetically at the crying receptionist, flung the security guard away, and before I could grab him he walked out the door into the noonday sun. He didn't even have time to start smoldering before he was flung back through the glass doors, his blood spattering the reception desk and ruining the receptionist's white sweater.

Finally, after a week of this, we started chaining him down. Look, I'm not proud of it. The secretaries
were furious with me, though they did send a delegation to ask me, if I was insisting on the manacles, that I take a few polaroids. ("Oh, and can he be, you know, naked?" Am I the only one around here who remembers when women used to be ladies?) The chains didn't last. Spike wore most of the flesh off his wrists and ankles, and then he pulled down the fangs and started gnawing....

I couldn't take it anymore. If what he was aiming for was my begging him to stay, well, that's what he got.

But it wasn't what he wanted. He just wanted to be free. Start over where no one knew him. Get a little bed-sit in some basement and a nothing kind of job and a library card. He explained this to me in a broken voice while Fred bound up the wounds he'd made trying to bite off his hands.

Then, once she was gone back to her real work, he confessed that he'd been deceiving me. Oh, great. He got up from the bed and very carefully made his way across the room to the wardrobe hook that held his old leather duster. He used his bandaged hand to pull out a piece of paper, and with a sigh, he brought it to me, then dropped back exhausted on the bed.

It was a many-folded page of expensive bond, smelling of old leather and old cigarettes and something like lilac— I suppose the perfume of the Great Beyond. A contract, signed in blood, natch. "William Trent Nelson." So that was his real name. The contract guaranteed that Buffy would live a happy life with a natural lifespan if Spike came back to earth and never saw her again.

I sat down heavily on the bed. Spike was lying there in the middle, all abused like an early Christian martyr. For the first time, I felt a stirring of approval for him. "You agreed never to see her again?"

"Yeah. Didn't have much choice. They said they'd make sure she was happy then. If I came back." His mouth trembled, then set. "That first day back, I heard Fred tell you that Buffy's due back from Tibet any time. I can't see her. That's why I have to leave." His eyes were shining with tears. I wished he wouldn't do things like that. "You understand."

"Fine. But you don't have to leave." I folded the contract up again. "I'll meet her at the airport and head her off." It would mess up our reunion. But Spike always messed things up. It was his gift.

And what was a messed-up reunion, considering that our way now was cleared of this particular obstacle?

"Good." He closed his eyes and lay there, a tear trickling down each temple and blotting on the pillow. "Best not tell her too much. Don't let her, you know, decide she has to defy destiny. You know how she is when she thinks she's being ordered around."

"I have more influence on her than you think," I said. It sounded a bit pompous even in my own ears, but it seemed to give him comfort. I started to get up, but something occurred to me. "Why would you keep being thrown back here, if all you agreed to is to leave Buffy alone?"

He sighed. "I guess it's because they know you have a vested interest in keeping us apart. Just in case my resolve wavers."

Suspicious, I unfolded the contract and studied it again. Under the paragraph with the Buffy clause was an inch and a half of white space before the line with his signature. "You dolt. There's a secret clause in here!"

This got his eyes open. "A secret clause? What do you mean? How can a clause be secret?"

I shook my head in annoyance. "Don't you know anything about these cosmic back-from-death contracts?"
Some spirit returned to him; he retorted, "No, funny about that, Drusilla didn't make me sign one before she turned me. And I don't have a pet evil lawfirm to negotiate for me." He snatched the contract from me and stared at it. "There's nothing here."

I grabbed it back from him. "Give me your wrist."

Slowly he extended his right arm. He'd gotten quite thin with all this trauma, and his forearm was nothing but white skin over corded muscle and bone. I dropped into gameface just long enough to slice a fang through a minor vein and press up a few drops of his cinnamon-flavored blood. Then I sopped it up with my index finger and spread it over the white space on the contract.

The words appeared in white against the faded red of his blood. With dawning horror, I read it aloud.

2) Affiant is bonded to Angel to aid in his journey.

No term, no limitations.

I looked up from this to his face. His eyes had closed in pain, and those long dusky lashes were lying like shadows on his cheeks. Most of the damage from the trip through the plate glass had healed, and his skin glowed like a pearl. Fortunately I was angry enough to be immune. "You signed this contract? Indentured servitude to me? But I don't want you."

"I didn't know it was there." Suddenly he sat up, outrage replacing the anguish on his face. "They lied to me! I thought the Powers were supposed to be the good guys! Honorable and honest and--you know. Brave and forthright and--"

I couldn't help it. I started laughing. It sounded rusty. I hadn't laughed in months, not since I was last Angelus, but the look on his face, the outrage, the betrayal, the disillusion.... "First, you idiot, the Powers aren't good. They're just powerful. And second, if the good always played by the rules, they'd lose."

He found no solace in my hard-won wisdom. He sat there, his face recalcitrant. "It's not fair. I gave up Buffy. It was the hardest thing I've ever done." Oh, Christ. There went that mouth again. Trembling. He got it under some control but only by biting his lip hard enough to make it bleed. "And all I want is for her to be safe. And me to be alone. Forever. And ever."

I heard a noise in the doorway. Fred was standing there, her face a wet canvas of sympathy. Fortunately Spike was too lost in his own misery to notice her. I dismissed her with a harsh gesture and turned back to him. "I'll get the attorneys on it. There's got to be some way to break the contract."

"Yeah, like they tricked me."

"That won't work. I think we need blackmail or extortion. Or force." I was contemplating the options and looked up to find him staring at me. "What?"

"Blackmail? Extortion? Force? You're supposed to be making amends for your sins, not committing new ones."

"You're so naive." I bet no one had said that to him in a century or so. "Fire with fire, remember?"

Spike looked thoughtful. "Hey, I haven't tried burning myself up yet. Be a mate, will ya, and reach into my pocket over there? See if my Zippo survived the trip."

I crossed the room in two strides, found the Zippo, and pocketed it. "Your death won't break the contract. You'll still be bound to me. You'll just be... incorporeal." His frown deepened. He was
considering it. I had to head that off. "Think of it. Still stuck to me. But you won't be able to drink whiskey." I could tell he was waveriing. "Sex won't work either."

"Well, sod that," he said, to my great relief. He sulked for another twenty seconds or so, then brightened. "So... what's your journey? And what can I do to help?"

Oh, great. Just what I wanted. Spike's invaluable aid. I was about to say there wasn't one single thing he could do for me. But I looked back at the contract and sighed. There was no way out. That clause bound me as well as Spike. In fact, I suspected it was the Powers' pricetag for the fine job they were doing cutting Spike out of Buffy's life. For years, he'd gotten all his purpose from helping Buffy, and -- well, a purposeless Spike was a dangerous Spike. I guessed I was his new purpose.

"My journey. Helping the hopeless. You can help by--" It took me a minute to evaluate, as I would for any new staffer, his strengths and skills.

Strengths: well, the usual vampire ones. Big deal. I had those too. But I supposed, now that I had so much more management duties, another pair of super-strong hands could come in handy.

Skills: He'd always been good at fighting. He'd probably only improved in the years since we'd last connected, since he'd had Buffy to spar with, and the assorted Hellmouth denizens to practice on.

What else? I glanced over at him. He was pretty. Girls liked him. Didn't know if that constituted a skill or a problem. Still, it could be useful.

Reluctantly I remembered the boy who hid his books in the chimney. He was, I had to say, classically educated. He was too proud to admit it, but he'd been at Oxford back in the days when they didn't just read Latin and Greek, they spoke them in the dining rooms. He could perhaps be some use to Wes, if Wes could be persuaded to overlook all the non-Wessian aspects of this fellow Oxonian.

And he knew demons. That whole century I spent avoiding demons, he was seeking them out, beating them and employing them and allying with them. The sort of wisdom Wes found in his demonology texts, Spike had learned the hard way. Again, I'd have to persuade Wes of Spike's utility, but ... but it would get my demon childe out of my hair. And Wes could use a challenge. He tended to get smug as the only "truly educated" staffer-- his own term, of course. One quotation Spike topped or corrected-- well, I'd pay money to see that.

That was about it. I couldn't see any other ways Spike could help. So I summarized quickly. "And you can help with patrol, as soon as you're strong enough."

"You mean, tomorrow?"

Cocky doesn't begin to describe him. "Fred will have to decide that. And you can ... " I thought maybe I'd better talk to Wes before assigning Spike to him. "And you can --" what? "-- learn to play softball, as some of the staffers are starting a new team."

"Learn to play softball?" He scowled at me. "Oh, right, to help you on your journey towards king of the bats. Try again, bossman."

I scowled right back. "You're muscle, Spike. So get used to being used to hit things. Demons, softballs-- whatever I tell you."

Pride warred with duty on his face. Something else entirely won. "Okay. Fine. So when does the whiskey and sex start?"
The next day, the receptionist called up to my office, whispering something about a demon, a pink one, with a big box. "He won't leave, and he won't deal with anyone but you."

It wasn't as if I was getting any work done this month anyway. Oh, poor me, I'm just a pawn of the Powers That Be....

The fellow in the lobby was indeed a pink demon, one of those loose-skinned types with the floppy ears. I couldn't remember the species, but I knew it was harmless. He was jittering there, bouncing up and down on the hardwood floor like a first-grader waiting for recess to start. Beside him was a big cardboard moving box on a dolly.

I went up and introduced myself.

"I'm Clem," he said, and he shook my hand more times than was really conventional before stopping to gesture at the box. "It's for you."

I regarded it with some suspicion. "Yes?"

"Oh. I mean, I am-- I mean, I was--" his wrinkly pink face began to crumple, but then he sniffed hard and went on-- "a friend of Spike's."

"Spike had friends?"

Clem drew himself up proudly. "Spike was the best friend I ever had. He-- he--"

Oh, great, there was that crumpling face again. I said hastily, "That's great. Glad to hear it. About the box--"

"It's his worldly goods. He sent them with me. You know. When I left Sunnydale. All the things he didn't want to lose..." Another sniffle. "All his treasures... I-- I knew he'd want you to have them."

"Me?"

"His grandpa. Thought it was right."

His grandpa. "Uh, Clem--"

And then I heard that echoed above me, in amazed tones--

"Clem!"

We both looked up to see Spike on the mezzanine, staring down at the demon.

"Spike!" the demon whispered.

Spike vaulted over the railing, landing lightly on his feet-- the receptionist fanning herself at this graceful display-- and crossed the lobby in a few steps. It was like that old hair color commercial, two people running to each other across the open meadow. You know the commercial I mean? "Only her hairdresser knows for sure?" Only it was my lobby, not a meadow, and there wasn't any hairdresser or hair coloring involved, the pink fellow having no hair to speak of and Spike having given up the
bleached hair for the sandy brown curls I remembered all too well.

(Fred reported to me that one file clerk who obviously did not have enough filing to do had put up a webpage on our company intranet, complete with photos scanned from the extensive if seldom accurate William the Bloody file in the Wolfram and Hart research section. Each "look" was named—there was the Billy Idol Special, and the Bad Boyfriend, and the Most Likely to Seduce, and the Wicked Cherub, and Spikey Spikey Spikey, and the current look, The Bedhead of Redemption. She was holding a contest for best hairstyle. Fred voted for the Cherub, but said that the Bedhead was running first, though there was a late surge for the Bad Boyfriend.)

Spike and the pink demon threw their arms around each other and cried out various soppy things—"You found me!" "You're alive!" "I missed you, old buddy!" "Cheetos aren't the same without you!" "Cheetos! Oh, Clem, Cheetos, I'd forgotten about the Cheetos!"

The security guard was grabbing a handful of kleenex from the box on the desk, and the receptionist sobbed openly. I swear, there were fewer tears shed in this building when all those lawyers got sucked empty.

As the only one with dry eyes, I felt it my duty to put a stop to this. So I stepped forward and put a hand on Spike's shoulder, and he— I'm assuming he thought it was the security guard come to make it a group hug— grabbed me and drew me in, and there I was, cheek by jowl with Spike's knife-blade cheekbone, and the demon's very large and loose jowl. And both were uncomfortably damp.

Then there was the whole closeness issue. Hugging.

I fought my way free, backed off a safe dozen feet, and cleared my throat. "Uh, fellas—"

They turned in unison to face me. There could not have been a bigger contrast between the two faces. I mean, even for a demon, Clem... uh, presented an unusual appearance, sort of like a bloodhound crossed with a salmon. And next to Spike's unjustly perfect features, well, it was a sight worth recording, or at least the receptionist thought so, as she'd grabbed the digital camera we use to make up ID cards and snapped a few photos of the big reunion, no doubt to be uploaded to the Spike 4-Evuh website before quitting time.

"Clem's my best mate," Spike explained unnecessarily, gathering in the demon for another one-armed embrace. "We go way back."

"Way back, buddy," Clem sniffled. "To good old Sunnyhell. So many good times... Passions. Kitten poker. Willy's.... it's all gone now, Spike!"

"No, not gone! We still have our memories!" Another hug. Back-pounding, head-grabbing, chest-sobbing hug.

I wanted to tell them to get a room, to take it outside, to hug somewhere other than my lobby. But something stopped me. Something stirred within me. Resentment? Could it be?

When Spike had materialized and seen me for the first time, there were no hugs, no tears, no exclamations of joy. In fact, his only comment was Bloody Hell.

Of course, my first words to him were Oh, shit, so I suppose I shouldn't complain.

In fact, I thought darkly, there wasn't anyone in this world who would greet me with joyful tears and affectionate hugs. Not that I didn't have friends. Just that they'd know I'd never want anything uncomfortable and embarrassing like that.

"Spike," I said. "Could you maybe deal with that box?"
"What?" Spike loosed the demon and looked all around the lobby until his superb vampire vision finally located the huge box two feet away. "Oh, yeah. Sure."

He grabbed the cardboard front and ripped it, just like that, just as I was saying, "Somewhere else?"

But my admonition was lost in his glad cry. "My bass! My Gretsch!" And there were more hugs, one for Clem and one for the big shiny guitar Spike grabbed out of the box. "You saved it from Sunnydale!"

Thank heavens for small favors, this one being that there was no amplifier in the box, and Spike's rendition of Anarchy in the UK was necessarily somewhat muted, at least the guitar part-- Spike's singing was echoing off the distant ceiling as I made an ignominious escape into the elevator.

Later, when it all fell apart, I blamed my action on what Spike was doing to Cordelia. But... but I have to confess if it hadn't been for that damned guitar, I probably never would have been driven to the limit by my demon childe.
The vampire was bouncing off walls. Literally. Angel had set up a training room with padded walls, and Spike was jumping off the vaulting horse and somersaulting and banging and bouncing.

Angel and I were watching from the doorway. I thought it looked like fun, if you had vampire healing, that is, which I don’t. Kind of like bumper cars without the cars. But it offended Angel. I could tell. Angel didn’t like heedless destruction, even of this, what do you call him, this unwanted guest.

"Charles, will you please take him out tonight and let him kill something? Something big and demonic?"

"Sure." I’d already been patrolling with the new vampire, charging those Aphthos demons down by the docks, and he did all right. Good fighter. Took stupid risks, but I'm not one to judge. Now I watched him leap from the horse and bang his fists against the 17-foot high ceiling. I kind of recognized the energy that went into that jump. "I'm thinking more than killing, the man needs to get laid."

Oops. Forgot we didn't say things like that to Angel. Not nice to mention, you know what I mean, libidinal needs. 'Cause he didn't have any.

"I don't think so," he said coldly, and turned to go. Then he stopped and looked back at Spike.
"Then again-- if he does that, let me know, all right?"

Now I was offended. "I don't think so. There's a constitutional privilege about getting laid."

Angel humphed. "I just think it would be a healthy sign that he's getting over his obsession."

His obsession. With Buffy. The one only Angel gets to be obsessed with legally. Except when he's not obsessed with her. I mean, I worked with him most of a year before I realized he was obsessed with her. You know, when I get obsessed with a woman, it shows.

"Still none of your business."

Angel left for real this time, and I watched him go, thinking that probably he wanted something on the new guy, something he could use as evidence against him. Yo, Slayer! Your supposed loverboy has been making time with the other ladies! Doesn't love you so much after all, even if he did die in your cause. Well, Angel wouldn't say it that way, but you get the point.

All's fair in love and war, and I sort of got the impression between Angel and his grandchild here, love and war were both big issues.

So the vampire finally bounced down, splattered on the wrestling mat in the middle of the floor, lay there all splayed out like a starfish. Then he started moving his arms and legs like he was swimming. I burst out laughing, and Wesley, emerging from the locker room with one of his fancy fencing foils, came over for a looksee.

Wes shook his head. "Doesn't he have any clothes of his own?"

Spike was wearing some old sweats donated by Angel, which means impeccable designer design, but about eight sizes too big. This Spike guy was strong, but skinnier than Wes even. The sweat pants were hanging off his hips, exposing cheek like you see on the gangsta kids down in my old
part of town. Only it was white cheek. Real white. Vampire white.

"Hey, the guy arrived a week ago from the Great Beyond wearing the clothes he burned up in. I guess the powers neglected to send along his closet too." I surveyed Wes, up and down. "He's about your size, you think? Only shorter. And thinner."

"Stop that thought right there," Wes said. He was always real punctilious about his clothing. Once I was going out for some coffee, saw the rain, and grabbed his trench coat; you would have thought I'd stolen his firstborn. Wes looked back at Spike's rear end, and sighed. "I better take him shopping."

"Not you," the vampire said as he jumped to his feet. We were forty feet away, but he had that vampire hearing thing. Glad I didn't talk about his cheeks out loud. "Charlie can take me shopping."

"Why me?" I said, aggrieved.

"Like your style, mate. Never worn tweed, have you?"

Wes looked offended. "I'll have you know, I haven't worn tweed for-- "

"But you used to. I can smell it on you. Harris Tweed. From very proper sheep. Nothing wrong with that," the vampire said consolingly, yanking up his sweatpants as he walked towards us. "Just not me, you know?"

Wes had to agree that very proper sheep would have nothing to do with Spike. And he withdrew gracefully. "Gunn will be a better guide to... your sort of fashion anyway."

Both of us looked at Wes. Spike said, "Did you mean that to sound, well, you know, condescending? Because maybe Charlie here doesn't cotton to that. Know I don't."

Wes still has a terror that he might come across as racist, so he shot me a panicked look. "No, I didn't mean to sound condescending. Just that Gunn is younger than I, and a native of Los Angeles, and-- and more up on the look that's trendy today."

Spike smiled. "Precisely my point, Watcher. You run along now and stab shadows, why don't you? Me and Gunn can raid the cash box for dud money."

The cash box. Isn't that cute? I took the vampire down to the office and introduced him to the magic key known as the "company credit card". Closely related to the "expense account". He was duly impressed. He said, wistfully, that he'd never had a credit card.

I saw my chance. Didn't want his charges on my expense account, that's for sure. Plus I could play Lord Bountiful with him, get a few debts to call in maybe later. Never know when you might need a souled vampire, one with more street cred than Angel.

"I'll requisition one for you. Let me call up to accounting services."

And a half hour later, right around sundown, he was staring reverently at his very own American Express card. Spike Williams, we'd agreed on as his credit name. (I'd nixed his request for Blood E. Spike.) "So I just hand this over, and they give me stuff."

"That's it." I didn't explain about the monthly bills. Didn't want to spoil the moment.

"I know how to use them," he said, a bit boastfully. "I used to work at this magic shop, part time, you know, just helping out a friend. And I'd take the customers' cards, run them through. Sometimes
I'd forget to give them back, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. Heard about your sort. Identity theft."

"Now I can do it legally. Wow. Is this a great country or what?"

Look, I'm just supposed to get him some clothes. I'm not the one who's going to teach him the finer points of morality. Angel can do that. Or Wes. Me, I'm just wondering if maybe I can sneak a pair of Cole-Haans on to his expense account.

I made him change the sags for the jeans he arrived in. They looked all right. All that Sunnydale rubble and dust made them look, what do you call it, distressed. Fashionable. That combined with his pretty boy face and me playing the officious handler made the Saks salesguy think he was some minor film star. Okay, it could be because that's what Spike told him. "I got this part in that new Nicole Kidman film. Bit part. Real bit." Spike knew his stuff. Downplay. Keep it subtle. "Like four minutes they picked up off the cutting room floor. But I get to go to the premiere. I mean, how cool is that?"

The boyish enthusiasm won the Saks guy over. Not to mention Spike's sudden taste for the finest things, aided and abetted by, well, me. Brioni's my man, you know, ever since W&H added a few exponents to my clothing budget, and the Saks guy took one look at Spike's bitty waist and decided Brioni was his man too, bringing out armfuls of navy suits cut like one of Wes's swords and shirts the color of plums and ties that would make the Prince of Wales weep.

Spike didn't like all the fitting and measuring and standing still. In fact, I had to bribe him with the promise of the little chocolates they sell down on the first floor, not to mention a stop in at the nearest nightspot. The Saks guy was patient and skillful-- suggested Joseph Abboud for casualwear and no one but Versace for the tuxedo. Spike kind of coughed at that last, and I could tell he was wondering when he was going to wear a tuxedo. But you never know. This is LA. He was a good-looking dude, could maybe hook up with some starlet that didn't mind how he never got a tan.

He grew impatient again as the salesguy was explaining all the maintenance involved with a wardrobe like this. "You know, last time I had a wardrobe needed more than the heavy-duty washer setting, I also had a valet."

The salesguy stopped measuring Spike's arm to study him more closely. Probably didn't think this punk with the East Ender accent was the sort to know what a valet was. Hell, I only knew because Angel once had an office get-together at his place, a "fun shindig" as he called it (I know, I know, what can I say?) involving seven kinds of cheeses and two hours of Masterpiece Theatre on the dusty telly.

The Saks guy promised to ship everything to the office, and directed us over to the shoe department. Spike didn't give one blink when I added a pair in my size to the pile on the counter. All he wanted to know was where he could get a spare pair of Doc Martens. I think he actually thought we'd let him wear them with the tux.

So after we spent the equivalent of a year's salary in one evening, we adjourned to somewhere dark and martini-enabled and ordered some expensive drinks and shared out Spike's box of chocolates. We did okay. I mean, we got along. He had lots of funny Angel jokes. Gotta appreciate that. I kept thinking, keep that one to tell Fred. But then I remembered Fred and I didn't share like that.

After a couple drinks, Spike started building a tower out of the remaining chocolates. Too casually, he said, "So... what do you think Angel's journey is?"
"Huh?"

"The contract I signed. With the Powers That Be."

"So there really are Powers That Be?" I interrupted.

"Yeah, and they're just the same boring old sots you always suspected. Anyroad, they put in this secret clause that--" he broke off and looked at me aggrieved over his chocolate tower. "Is that moral? I mean, okay, I'm new at this conscience business. But even I know it's immoral to put in secret clauses. Isn't it?"

"Well, sure. But--" I thought of my shiny new truck, my Brioni, the employee lounge with the espresso machine and the wide-screen TV. "But sometimes you should kind of anticipate there'll be secret clauses. You know?"

"I don't know. I thought I was dealing with reputable, responsible entities. Instead, well, they're Wolfram & Hart in the sky."

"Yeah," I said. "Probably W&H wrote the contract. What was the secret clause?"

"I'm bound to Angel-- indefinitely!-- to help him on his journey. I asked him, and he said his journey is helping the helpless. But I think that's just the... you know, the vehicle. For the journey. He helps the helpless to get wherever he's supposed to go. So... where's he supposed to go?"

The combination of martinis and saxophones made me moody, so I actually gave this some thought. Where was Angel going? Up up up, that's all I could see. "Towards power. He's getting it together. Always had, you know, the vamp power. Moral force. All that. But now, he's got the money, and the staff, and the resources. He can do real good now. No more retail helping the helpless. He can do it wholesale now. And--" I said with a thoughtful sip of the very dry gin-- "do it in style."

Spike considered this. "What about power corrupting? Isn't that a risk?"

Could hardly deny that. "Well, sure. Hell, you and I just went through enough money to feed a family for a decade, didn't we?"

"Yeah," Spike said. "But we didn't like it. I mean, I could tell we felt way uncomfortable."

I could get to like this guy. "You got it, man. The whole time, I kept saying that I had to be careful. Not let this go to my head or anything. Not get, you know, addicted to wealth and luxury."

"Not much chance of that," Spike said. He paused to lick the coating off his $117 a pound chocolate truffle. "We got some notion of what's really valuable in this world. Considering where we came from."

We both contemplated the things of real value, or he did, while I contemplated that wherever he came from there was room for a valet. But no time to share my observation, as the waitress came back with a silver ice bucket and a bottle of Deutz champagne. "Those ladies over there," she said, gesturing with her head towards an opposite booth. "They wanted to share this with you."

I was driving, so I did without the champagne, but the feminine company? Well, talk about what's really valuable in this world.... The generous girls came over and sat down with us, and you could tell Spike was trying to get into the spirit of this. He even said he was an Aries when they asked his sign. And he lasted maybe eight or nine minutes of flirting before he started telling the girl beside him about his broken heart, his lost love, his shattered dreams, his empty future.
I almost groaned out loud. The man just had no clue. She was going to stand up and leave, just you wait-- Then I looked at my own girl, I mean, the one who had sat down next to me and pushed her drink right up against mine and her leg alongside my thigh. She wasn't paying any attention to me anymore. She was gazing soulfully over at Spike, who also had his own girl rapt.

"So, you see, I'm just not, you know. Ready."

The girl across the way sighed. "I understand. I've had my heart broken too."

"Yeah. And it takes a lot of time. You know. To heal the break."

The girl leaned forward, stroked his hand. "Yeah. And someone special. 'Cause you lost someone special."

"Yeah. Big sigh. "Don't know if I can risk that again.""

"I know. Love's such a big gamble. And you probably ask is it worth it to try again?" The girl now was sliding her hand up his wrist. Then down again. "I think it is, don't you?"

"I don't know.... seems like a few minutes of joy, and years of pain. So I've sworn off love forever."

Okay, so the girl was all eager to prove him wrong. "Oh, you mustn't give up on love! It's not fair to you! You deserve happiness!"

I'm not slow. I heaved a big sigh, and my own girl looked at me, and I said, "Sorry. Just thinking about... about what might have been. If my heart was whole, I mean. If I hadn't, uh, you know, sworn it off too."

We left with their cards and pleas that we call them anytime we needed a shoulder to cry on. And I regarded Spike with new respect. This guy had some untapped talents. Trouble is, he'd actually been sincere about that heartbroke stuff. And now he was walking with his head bent down and his shoulders slumped. And any minute, I thought, he'd start asking for my spare stake.

But he surprised me. As he climbed in my truck, he said, "So who was it busted your heart, mate? The scientist or the cheerleader?"

I bought some time by turning on the engine and messing with the CD player. But finally I said, "Neither. I mean-- no. I just--" I remembered a half-dozen girls, a few sort of sad memories, but I couldn't say any one of them busted my heart. Not sure I had a heart that could be burst anymore. But it felt heavy anyway, even if I didn't have any reason for it. "But no. Not Cordy. Not Fred. Not stupid here."

"Yeah. Guess it would be awkward, having to work with them afterwards."

I glanced over at him. He seemed to know exactly what he was talking about. "Sure. Yeah. It would be, I suppose. Reason I always avoided the workplace romance."

"You should call that girl. She'll soothe your ache."

He shrugged. "So where is the cheerleader? Cordelia, I mean?"

"You don't know?"

"Nah. No one ever mentions her, either. Thought you might be a better person to ask than, say, Angel."
"Yeah. Don't ask Angel about her. Don't ask Angel about anything. He's not in a real forthcoming type mood lately." After a moment, I added, "Cordelia's not well. Okay. She's in a coma. We've got her taken care of, and all, but it doesn't look good. I don't know if she'll ever come out of it. And if not, don't know what we'll do. Just go on taking care of her, I guess. Got the money to do it, only decent thing, right?"

Spike's face was shadowy, but his eyes glowed in the light from the dashboard. I wondered if that was some vamp thing. They could see like a cat-- maybe their eyes glowed in the night like a cat's. "Too bad. She was a good sort. Always spoke her mind. Appreciated that." He grinned. "Dab hand with a crossbow, wasn't she?"

I agreed. Sort of missed the girl, not that I'd ever confess it to her.

"So she in hospital?"

"Nah. Didn't want her exposed, you know. Enemies getting to her, that sort of thing. So we've got a clinic just for her at W&H. Nurses, a visiting doctor. Lots of equipment. She's taken care of." I added, a bit embarrassed, "I go visit her, time to time. Talk to her. No reaction, of course. But just in case. She's got to be scared, all alone in there."

"How's Angel doing with that? She's been with him for years, right?"

"For years? Don't think so, man. I mean, I think they were just getting it on for a short while last year, before-- before she got hurt. Just co-workers before that."

"Getting it-- Oh, right."

And then I realized he hadn't known, that he'd just meant that Cordy had been Angel's employee for years, that their, what do you call it, relationship was news to him.

I glanced over at him. Decided I could trust him not to say where he'd heard it from. Spike seemed to understand that essential principle: What Angel doesn't know won't hurt him. Not that the Cordy-contact was any big secret, just that it could be awkward, now that Angel had decided that all along he loved only that little blonde girl Spike jonesed on too. Got to wonder if Angel got all obsessive only because he found out Spike had his eyes-- and other body parts-- on the prize....

Not my problem. I had romantic complications of my own aplenty. Or would shortly, soon as I made use of that girl's comforting shoulder.

Anyway, the guy didn't get laid that night, by his own choice-- he coulda had that girl, I bet-- so I had to take him killing instead. I drove to a warehouse over in the industrial district, a big sprawl of a ruin surrounded by a chain-link fence with padlocked gates every hundred yards. Spike complained about the scenic inadequacy of this demon venue, compared to the picturesque grass-lined cemeteries in Sunnydale, and he only shut up about it when I threatened to call him "Smallville" from now on.

He cheered up when I jammed down the accelerator and barrelled through the gate. (Specially reinforced front bumpers.) "God, I love that sound," he crooned, as the chain-metal parted with a satisfying whine. Like I said, we got along.

Until we got into the deserted warehouse and tracked down the nest of vamps in what looked like the old shipping room. What a nest. I mean, it was a love-nest. The walls draped with red velvet. The floor lined with tufted purple satin. The couch filled with three sleek, slender, slippery ladies of the night. One wore leopard-skin tights, another had a tiger-striped tank top, the third had zebra-striped high heels. I would've stopped to admire them, maybe even consider pulling out the heartbroken story
for them, except for one thing-- they were all in vamp-face. Ladies of the night, like I said.

When I barrelled in, my stake held high, two of them shrieked like girly-girls and launched themselves at me. I caught one on the upswing, and she shattered-- just came apart in a million tiny pieces of dust. I never get used to that. The other girl bellowed with rage and got hold of my neck from behind, forgetting she was a vamp, forgetting she had fangs, just another girl launching herself onto some attacker's back and wrapping her arms around his neck and squeezing, all the while yelling obscenities in the ear. This girl had superstrength, however, and I was starting to see red and black and nothing else when the pressure suddenly let off, and dust filtered under my collar and down my back.

"Took you long enough," I grumbled, shaking my shoulders, brushing at my sleeves. "Where's the other one?"

"Got away," he said, shoving his stake back into his hoodie pocket. "Down the tunnel there."

The vampire was a bad liar-- I'd figured that out quick. Now he wouldn't look at me as he wandered around the love nest.

"You let her go. Why the hell would you do that?"

He picked up a carved ivory box from the table. "She's just a girl."

"Yeah, so were the other two."

"They tried to kill us. She didn't."

"Hey, fangboy, newsflash here. We kill vampires."

"Hey, homeboy," he echoed mockingly. "Newsflash here. I am vampire."

"So what's this then? Demon solidarity?"

"Nah." He kicked at a purple satin pillow, sent it flying across the room. "I slapped a homing device on her."

"A homing device. And where might you have gotten that?"

"You know that Fred. Sometimes she forgets to lock the lab up. And when she remembers, well, there's always the lock pick. And I found these little trackers--" He smiled, sliding a tab from his back pocket and held it up for me. I could see the faint tracing of red wires imbedded in the clear plastic. "Just slid it into the vamp's hair, onto her scalp, when I was pretending to cuff her one."

"And your motive is...?"

"She'll hightail it back to her sire." He gestured around the lovenest. "Weird setup, this. Second time in a week we've come across these pretty girls, taken early. Vamps don't usually turn girls like this, you know. The blood's so sweet, they can't stop in time to bring 'em back."

I didn't want to hear this, and I spun around on my heel and headed back to the door. But his voice followed me. "High maintenance too, pretty girls, vamp or human. Harmony, case in point."

I stopped at the door, one hand on the knob. "So? What's your point?"

"Point is... someone's building him a vampgirl harem. Or two or three. I bet you."
I couldn't help it. I turned back and gazed around at the incongruous room, all the faux luxe accouterments of a olden-day brothel, like the ones you'd see in those Westerns Angel watches. "Why?"

Spike was picking up another knickknack, a little ceramic bell, by the very edge. "Personal gratification, maybe. Gimme that pillowcase, will ya?"

As I denuded the pillow of its purple case, he added, "Or maybe, you know. Starting a whorehouse. For connoisseurs."

"Connoisseurs of what?"

"Vamps are good in bed, mate, haven't you heard?"

"Thanks, but I can live without knowing that."

"It's true. Most humans don't try it--"

"Yeah," I said, holding the pillowcase open so he could slide in his stolen loot, "wonder why. Couldn't be that bloodsucking death thing sort of ruins the experience, could it."

"But if the vamps could be controlled, kept from killing, well--"

I contemplated this as we went around the room, picking up art objects from the shelves and tables. "Can they be controlled?"

"Sure thing. Did it with me for a couple years. Little microchip." He tapped his temple. "Got a migraine if I even thought of hurting one of you humans."

He still sounded bitter about it. Couldn't blame him. Be like declawing a cat, I guess. Whoa. Better stop with that empathy thing. Some cats ought to be declawed, and William the Bloody was probably one of them.

"Not anymore?" Made me a bit nervous, standing close enough to him that he could toss that silk bag into the pillowcase. "No more microchip?"

"That's right."

I didn't step back. Just glared at him, and he laughed. "Actually, you're a mite too muscular for my taste. Hard to get to your artery through all that gristle."

"Not to mention I'd take your head off, one-handed."

"Right ho, mate."

"Long as we got that established."

"Like a bit more fat molecules in my blood," he continued easily. "The ones fixing for a coronary any time soon-- they're the best. Juicy and greasy."

"What else about the girls?" I felt grimness creeping up on my mood, thinking about those two vamps we just dusted. A couple weeks ago, maybe, they'd been human, living their lives. Okay, maybe not great lives-- they were probably whores-- but they had places to stay and friends to hang with and, who knows, stuffed animals on their beds. Maybe even had a mom somewhere who loved them, or a brother who felt like shit because he couldn't save them....
He was glancing through a leather-bound album, so his voice came muted and distracted. "Could be vamp hos. Suck a couple pints of your blood for twenty bucks. Controlled circumstances. Not much real danger."

I'd come across a lot in the years I'd spent with Angel Investigations. Demonic empires, alternate dimensions– but paying a vamp to suck your blood? "What lamo would want that?"

"Well, what lamo shoots heroin? Someone craving nirvana the easy way. Same sort of thing-- decreased blood volume makes all the inhibitions dissolve. Makes you love yourself. Good for those who don't in the main."

I shook my head. "You mean, someone gets his blood sucked and he starts to love himself? Why not, you know, give it to the bloodbank where it'll do some good?"

"And why bother with a pretty lady's mouth, when you got a hand right at the end of your wrist?"

"Not the same thing. Cock-sucking. Blood-sucking."

"Try it sometime, and you'll see-- much the same thing." He glanced back at me over his shoulder. "Not your thing maybe. But every vice has its addicts. And these addicts gather around hellmouths and centers of vamp activity. Was a vamp feeding station in Sunnydale."

"Sick."

Spike slid the album into my pillowcase. "Maybe so. Maybe not. Could be a mutual support system, you know? Preview of a future where vamps and humans all get along."

"Oh, sure, Mahatma," I said sourly. "I have a dream...."

"Shut the fuck up."

He didn't take offense. Probably figured out that something about this subject dug a hole in me. "You got a Palm Pilot?"

I found it in my jacket pocket and handed it over.

"You disappoint me, mate," Spike said with a grin, sliding the little tab of plastic into the memory slot. "Gone all corporate, and so quick."

"Yeah, well, once those Brioni suits arrive, you'll be thinking you need a few accessories too. What're you pulling up there?" I came up behind him-- he flinched, like he thought I might lay hands on him -- and peered over his shoulder at the display on the little screen.

The little blinking light was moving across the map grid, and below in white letters read the ever-changing coordinates. "Don't know LA, man," he said. "Where you think she's headed?"

"North. Towards the railroad tracks, I'd guess. Union Station's only a mile or so away."

He smiled. "I like railroad tracks."

He said it with a sweet, childlike pleasure, and I would have smiled back, except I was starting to remember something about how he'd gotten his nickname, something about railroad spikes....

My cell phone rang. I flipped it open.
"Charles." The voice of He Who Expects to Be Obeyed. "Come on back to the office. I need--"

"What? That you, Angel?" I held the phone a foot away from my face. "Can't hear you... losing the signal...."

Spike was waiting, polite as you please, by the door. "You got a GPS in that fancy truck?"

"You know it."

It's not all that common that I'm the most rational, cautious member of a team. But it looked like that was my role tonight. The vampire was the rash-bash type. All action, no strategy. As soon as he scented multiple vamps over in an abandoned railroad car, he was ready to crash in and rip off a few heads. I was, unaccountably, the one who had to hold back and talk bracingly about the benefits of scouting the territory and the longterm goal of uncovering and eliminating the entire operation, and finally I had to threaten to tell Angel so that Angel would take him off the patrol detail and he'd never, ever, ever get to leave the W&H building again.

Sulkily he helped me do the recon, and even took a few photos with the camera I keep in the glove box. Then, with a defiant glance back at me, he slid up close to the railroad car and stood there with his eyes closed and his hands open. Listening, I guess. With his hands.

Vamps are weird, you know?

He was silent as we made our way back to the truck. Once we were headed back to HQ, he muttered, "Poor girls. They're just trying to cling to whatever bit of existence they have left."

I swore under my breath. Didn't want to hear anymore. But he added, "He's targetting them. Pretty girls no one will miss. Creating his own little set of love-slaves." I felt his glowing gaze on me, and he added, almost apologetically, "Staking them won't do much good. He'll just find more live girls to replace them."

It was hard to sit next to him and argue that the only good vampire was a dead one. He was a good vampire, I suppose. And he was right. Every one of these girls we dusted, well, might mean one more girl killed.

I pulled into the W&H parking garage, found my reserved spot, and turned off the engine. We sat there in the dark for awhile. Finally I said, "I had to stake my little sister."

He was silent for a moment. Then-- "I had to stake my mother. A couple minutes after I turned her."

"Y'know," I said, shoving my door open, "you really got to watch this one-upsmanship problem of yours."

"Yeah. Sorry." He followed me into the elevator, the lumpy pillowcase in hand, and as it rose, said quietly, "We'll get 'em, Charlie. Save all the girls he wants to kill."

I had that memory flash-- my sister's face in that last moment. And gruffly I said, "Yeah. Okay. You and me. Not the others. This is our job."

Should've known I didn't need to specify that out loud.

"Right-o, mate. It'll be the Gunn and Spike show. What Angel don't know--"

"Won't hurt him," I finished, just as the elevator doors opened to reveal the great bloody poof himself. (Okay. Maybe I shouldn't call him that. It was just weird how contagious that term is.)
"Charles, I need you--"

"For pity's sake, Angel," Spike broke in. "The man's only human. And we've been fighting all night, not sitting here in a plush office listening to Mantovani. Let him get his rest."

Angel cast me a glance. I drooped, like another minute might find me sliding to the floor in an unconscious heap. "All right," he said. "It can wait until morning."

I headed down the hall towards the couch in my office, Spike veering off in the other direction. Then I heard Angel say, "So, Spike, what's in the bag there?"

I remembered quick what a bad liar Spike was. Real quick, I turned back around and said, "Told you he'd find out."

"I'd find out what?" Angel said darkly.

I made the I don't hardly like to say face, and waited till Angel's glare had darkened to a suitable level. Then I said, "The Fyarl we took out. He had a box full of junk. Spike, you know, sort of liberated it."

"Is that true, Spike?" Angel said, turning to face him.

Spike did a pretty good job of looking both defiant and guilty. In fact, for a lousy liar, he did it so well I thought maybe he had lots of experience. "So what if I did? Not like he had any use for it."

"We don't profit from demon-control," Angel said.

Spike looked around at the office, then at Angel in his $400 silk sweater. "Yeah. I forgot. Tell you what. I'll take all these items and give 'em away to, you know. One of those giveaway places."

"Charities."

"Yeah. Them. Hey, Charlie," he added. "Is that demon snot you're dripping on Angel's fancy-assed carpet?"

That was all it took to divert Angel, and Spike made his escape back to his apartment, carrying the evidence pillowcase full of vamp ho paraphernalia.
Well, I don't think I got this right-- sounds more like "artsy-writer" than Cordelia. Will try to fix later.

The coma wore off about a month ago. But it was easier just to pretend, so I wouldn't have to face the complete ruination of my life. I figured I could just lie there and play dead, or almost dead, until it became a reality, and I'd never have to look up into Angel's eyes and see the accusations.

I had some powers left, could beta out my brainwaves, so no one noticed that I was conscious much of the time. I cried a lot inside, but no tears came. I raged a lot also, but never made a sound.

My mind was out roaming the cosmos one morning when I felt someone take my hand. The fingers on my wrist were cool, and my heart leapt. Angel, I thought.

Cool fingers. Calloused fingertips. Odd. Angel always took such good care of his hands. Maybe that was falling apart too, his grooming routine abandoned with all the tragedy and trauma? Something extreme had been happening this past week, I figured from the agitation of the nursing staff and the absence of Fred and Wes and Gunn, who usually stopped by every few days just to sit and mourn over me.

It must be extreme, whatever it was, to bring Angel in here.

Still the cool hand held me, and I almost wept. It felt like forgiveness, and comfort. Then I heard a quiet snick, like a cap opening, and smelled something harsh and familiar. Gas. A poison. He was going to --

Self-preservation is a powerful thing. It was all I could to stay utterly still and let him do what I really wanted him to do. Eliminate me. End my existence, at least on this plane. End my pain.

But I did hold still, and readied myself. Said a prayer, though I didn't specify a recipient. Just waited.

And something cold touched my fingernail, and I suddenly remembered what the smell was. That it took so long was a measure of how far I'd come from my previous existence.

Nail polish.

Cool hands. Cool voice.

Not Angel's.

"Stopped by yesterday. You were asleep, I think. One of the nurses was doing your nails, but all she did was file them down. Don't want you to scratch yourself by accident, I guess."

I concentrated. I knew that voice. Knew that accent. British, like Wesley's, but not like Wesley's. An MTV type of accent.

The brush went expertly over my thumbnail, one long stroke, top to bottom. The sensation was so
familiar, so comforting, I almost sighed. What man knew how to--

I remembered a square hand, hard and capable, nails ragged--how odd it was, that a vampire would bite his nails, but then, vampires just liked to bite. Black polish, very punk. Looked better on him than I'd imagined possible, there in little suburban Sunnydale.

But Spike was dead. I'd heard Wes and Fred talk about it just after I woke up, Fred saying worriedly that Angel must be hurting but just unable to show it, Wes scoffing that anyone would mourn the demise of William the Bloody.

I was probably dreaming. I just wasn't sure why I'd dream about Spike sitting beside my bed, polishing my nails.

"Knew you'd want the right look, not just bare nails. I asked the salesgirl at Saks, described you. Said you were always up on the latest. So she said definitely Clarins. Red Fusion. Best with dramatic coloring like yours."

I felt the lightest, coolest breath on my thumbnail. Then the brush travelled to the next nail, and the voice resumed. "Wasn't sure I'd make it to Saks by myself. Couple miles, you know? And the other day, I couldn't even get out of the parking garage downstairs. But I made it. Took it slow. Didn't let myself get too excited. Just chilled. And I got there. Scary place, Rodeo Drive. Glad to get home intact." A moment's pause of the brush. "Angel's gonna choke when he sees the charges on the credit card."

I couldn't quite follow this. It sounded like Spike, of all people, had developed agoraphobia. Maybe it was because he'd been dead. I suppose that would make you want to stick close to home. But... but why would this be home to Spike, of all people? Didn't he, you know, prefer a crypt? And what was that about Angel's credit card? And how could I forget question numero uno, duh, how did Spike stop being dead?

Curiosity is a terrible thing. I found it stirring in me, growing like a sponge soaking up water.

"Intent is all, I reckon. Long as I don't intend to run away, the leash expands. Maybe I could try hypnosis. Hypnotize myself into leaving without intending." Another pause, another nail. "Only wouldn't want it to backfire and hurt Buffy. Stupid secret clauses. Who woulda thought the good guys would cheat like that, huh? You should know, I guess, given your experience."

This made no sense, though of course it reminded me that it was all about Buffy, and I was almost glad when he went on to criticize me. "So you went blonde, did you. Thought you'd have more fun. Didn't work out that way, did it, love? Not you anyway, not really. Not everyone can carry it off. There's a bit of darkness in you, ought to come out. Those eyes of yours...." A sigh.

For a moment I thought he was contemplating the beauty of my eyes, but then he meditatively stroked another nail. "I guess the Powers like the natural look, 'cause they sent me back all unbleached." Another sigh. "Doesn't seem worth it anymore to keep it up. Nothing matters anymore. Might as well forget about it all, the look, the attitude. Who gives a fuck, you know?"

That much I agreed with.

Right hand done. He set it gently down on the comforter to dry. When his hand left mine, I felt stupidly bereft. But he just leant across me and picked up the other, and resumed his existential monologue. "Sides, can't really taunt Angel about the hair gel if he's just going to point out that I'm using it too."
He was just holding my hand now, his thumb lightly stroking my palm. A hand job. Just what I needed.... not. But it was pleasant enough, his cool hand on mine, his voice ironic and regretful. "Mad tangle, it is now. Brown. Not glorious walnut like yours, back when it was all yours, but just brown. Boring." He squeezed my palm. "Wanna feel?"

Since I wouldn't answer, I could hardly protest when I found my fingers tangled in soft curls. I concentrated on not reacting. I didn't move, didn't stroke, didn't tease. I just let my hand lie there, fingers wound through his hair and resting against his temple, until he tugged my wrist back towards the bed. "See? What a mess, huh? Lettin' myself go all to hell." For some reason, this made him laugh, just a light laugh, a little beyond a chuckle. "So. You like it? Red Fusion? I got some Deep Burgundy too. Could do this hand in that. What do you think?"

He waited a moment. "Guess that's a negative. You know, babe, you got to learn to sin boldly. Experiment a little. Go for the unexpected. Who says both hands have to be the same? But you're the boss."

He stayed silent for an unprecedented minute as he finished the thumbnail. Then he said, "You hear about Sunnydale? All rubble now. Don't worry, everyone got out. I mean, all the civilians. They weren't stupid. Whole place was deserted the day before the battle. Don't know where everyone went. Your family would have gotten out, though. So don't worry about them."

He must not know that my father was in a federal prison, and my mother had avoided the same fate only by escaping to Brazil two steps ahead of the indictment. I wondered if Angel had contacted either of them. Hoped he hadn't, or otherwise I'd have to deal with the realization they hadn't bothered to call.

"School was where the last battle took place. As per usual." He started humming, and I recognized it from the oldies station. They played it every June, at the end of the school year. School's out for summer. School's out forever. "Wonder where they'll hold your reunions."

We wouldn't have any reunions. And if we ever did, I wouldn't be there. My past was rubble, just like Sunnydale. I didn't want to revisit either.

Besides, I'd still be in a coma then.

"That's done, then."

I thought he meant my life. But actually he was just setting my hand down, having finished my little finger. I could sense him admiring his work. Then I heard him capping up the polish. "I'll just leave this, shall I? And the burgundy too. When you're ready, you can see for yourself which you like better."

Then he did an odd thing-- well, everything he'd done so far was odd. But that was Spike all over.

He picked up my right hand, the dry one, and brought it to his lips, and dropped a gentle kiss right there on the palm. He set my hand back down on the cover and rose. "I'll come back tomorrow with some shears. Don't worry, babe. I know how to use them. Snip all that old color off your hair, leave a nice little cap for you. You'll look right pretty. I promise."

And I had that to worry about all night. A vampire haircut.

He arrived as promised the next day, but this time he plopped down on the bed beside me, his hip pressing against mine. With surprising ease, he slid a hand on either side of my waist and tugged me up the pillows until I was almost sitting up. I didn't respond, even though my shoulder was pressed...
uncomfortably against the bedstead.

My resolve was tested to the limit when I heard that snick-snak of scissors, and he tugged a hank of my hair out from under my head. "Just cutting off the old color, so you won't be two-toned anymore. You trust me, don't you, love? You'll feel better. Promise."

I was resigned to it. Of all the indignities committed upon my person this last few months, I was hardly going to protest a haircut, even if it was by a vampire I happened to know had a real appreciation for blood. I focused on staying still and not even flickering an eyelid. The last thing I wanted to do was startle him when he had the pointy thing pointed at my head.

As before, he kept up a steady stream of chatter. He and Angel were the only two vampires I knew well, and I had to marvel at how different they were. If Angel came in here to visit— not that he would, but just supposing— he'd sit there on the chair, never on the bed, of course, and clasp his hands and study me, and maybe he'd clear his throat and say, "Ah, Cordelia," and then fall silent, and there he'd remain, since I wouldn't be prompting him with comments and questions as I once did.

Spike required no prompting. He supplied questions and answers, observations and objections. "I know what you're thinkin'. You're thinkin' that I'm a bit at loose ends, huh? Playing hairdresser to you like this. Must not have much to do." A pause, a grudging admission. "Well, you'd be right. I mean, Angel's got me working nights. Understandable. Can't go out in the day, right? So he sends me out with one or the other of his homeboys— the black one or the white one, not the green one— and they're supposed to scout things out, and I'm supposed to keep them from getting killed. I'm hired muscle. Only, you know, he hasn't gotten around to talking salary, so I might not even be hired muscle." A moment's meditation. "I do have the credit card, however. Who needs wages, right?"

Snip, snip. A lock fell onto my shoulder. I almost winced, imagining how short and ragged my hair would look when he was done. Not that it mattered how I looked, except that my hands must look nice now, and--

"Sorry," he said. "That little piece is right by your eye. Hold still." A wet finger pressed just below my right eyebrow, and he said triumphantly, "Got the bugger. Now don't breathe too deep. Nothing as unpleasant as a hair caught in your nose or throat, remember? Anyway, no work for me indoors. Angel's a right bastard sometimes. Ill-educated lout, doesn't value real learning. I can't much sleep these days, so thought maybe I'd do some research for them. Told him I could read Latin pretty good even still, and Greek too— Christ, my papa translated Archimedes; I grew up on that rot. Knew the Greek alphabet before I knew the English one, didn't I? Could help with translations. And I know more demon languages than anyone here does, I bet you ten quid on that. But Wesley White Boy won't let me near his precious books, will he?" A chuckle. "Said he'd been taught respect for books at the Bodleian. Didn't expect me to know what it was."

If I'd been officially awake, I'd've retorted that even I knew what the Bodleian was, having heard Wes say that often enough.

"Told him I used to sleep in the Bodleian, my head pillowed by the Shakespeare folio, my feet propped up on a Gutenberg bible." Another chuckle, another snip. "I better even that side out— Wes won't believe I'm a Christ Church man. That's all right. Don't want him to believe it. Just want him to wonder if it could be true... Wesley is so easy to torment, you think? I bet you have a good time giving him a hard time. Almost too good to be true. Told him I used to drink at the Wheatsheaf and the Checquers there in the High, and he's been shooting me dark glances and muttering ever since." After a moment, he said, "Those are pubs, you know. Back when I was an undergraduate, in Victoria's day, that's where we drank. They still tip the glass there, I gather. Anyway, he's all upset about it. Accused me of seeing it on the telly."
A last snip, a satisfied noise, and he started brushing at my shoulders, my cheeks, my breasts. "Sorry, love, no insult intended. Just don't want you inhaling all this hair. You look good. Gamine. Audrey Hepburnish."

I decided there was something about this man-- he knew, instinctively, what a woman wanted to hear. I mean, a tall girl like me, well, of course I always appreciated my stature, but deep inside there was a girl who dreamed of being... gamine. Like Audrey Hepburn.

"Went to Saks again." He said this in a low, enticing voice as he brushed down along the sheet covering my legs. "Same salesgirl. Know what I did? Stole that picture off White Boy's desk. The one with you and the crossbow, you know? You ever get it on with him? Because that is one seriously hot picture, and if I had to look at it every time I sat down to work, well, trust me. Not much work would get done."

I was glad I was in a coma and didn't have to answer that outrageous series of statements. Not that Spike needed a response.

"I'd be pressin' you up against the file cabinet and -- no. More likely I'd be off in the closet, fantasizing with my fist around-- Bet Wes does a lot of that. Anyway. Took the photo to the salesgirl. Told her to tell me what sort of makeup you'd use. Amazing, the 21st century. Just like that, she scanned the photo into her computer, and started trying out options. Clicked the mouse, and there you were, all blushing and bright-eyed. Tried out about twelve combinations of face paint, and each one, you were a knockout. Couldn't choose, so I made her do it. Wouldn't you know it, I walked out with $600 worth, and she got a nice healthy commission, didn't she?"

So I lay there, thinking of Wes having a photo of me on his desk-- he'd never done that before, let me tell you-- and listening the rustling of a bag, and I sensed Spike carefully setting out the blush and the eye pencil and the mascara on the side table. "Came on to me, the salesgirl," he added casually. "Yeah, probably because I was spending so much money. But ever since I swore off women forever last week? Been surrounded by them. Explain that, why don't you?"

Now that was tempting. I could explain it easily enough-- the lure of the forbidden, the appeal of the chase. The safety and the danger of a man who has to make a vow like that.

But first I'd want to ask why? Why the vow? Wasn't he supposed to be all head-over about Buffy? Was she one of the women he'd sworn off? Was she why he swore women off? One of the reasons I was still lying here with closed eyes and decreased brainwaves was I just couldn't face waking up and having Angel tell me that he was with Buffy now that Spike was out of the picture, though who could blame him, given everything that had occurred--

I lay there, resolutely still. Spike didn't mind. He was still taking stuff out of the bag, itemizing aloud. He was trying to entice me with the expensive brands and seductive names. Laura Mercier Opera. Nars Seyshelles. T LeClerc Candide.

He'd chosen well. I almost wavered. But finally, with a sigh, he rose, kissed my hand again, and left.

I could feel the warmth of the late afternoon sun filtering through the special glass when he arrived the next day. He settled on the bed next to me and rattled something. Another bag. "Went shopping again, love. You know, that credit card was a great invention. And so was digitalis. You know, the heart attack medicine Angel's going to have to take when he gets the bill."

Angel doesn't have a heart, I thought in response. Not a beating one, anyway. But I stayed very still, though my hands were itching to reach out and take the bag from him.
"Let's see, what did I get you. That salesgirl thinks I'm hot for her, you know that? I mean, there she is in cosmetics, and I asked her to come shop with me in ladies apparel. But she understands you, I can tell. Knows your taste. Here." He took my limp hand and ran it over buttersoft leather. I almost sighed aloud at the wonder of it. "Hang on. She wrote it all down for me. Rene Lizard. No. That's LEzard. She made me keep pronouncing it till I got it right. It's a skirt. Cost more than my first car. Course, I stole my first car, but someone must have paid for it at some point." He guided my index finger upward and rubbed it on the waistband. "It's black. I thought the red was hotter, but she said you could wear the black over and over and people wouldn't realize it was the same skirt, but a red skirt, all the other girls would know you only had one skirt. Do girls really notice things like that? Think they'd have better things to think about. So that's black. Like how it feels? Okay."

He left my hand lying there on the skirt, and rustled the bag some more. "Now this is Jean Paul someone."

Gaultier.

For a second, I thought I'd said it out loud.

"It's a, wait a minute, I got it written here. A mesh tank top and cardigan. Sounds sort of queen-mumly, doesn't it? Cardigan. But it's see-through, so it's not. Not something the queen mum would wear, I mean. It's sort of silver. No, not silver. Hang on. PEWter."

This he rubbed against my cheek— a brush of cool metallic fabric. "Like that? One more thing."

He got up from the bed— it shifted slightly— and pulled up the sheet, exposing my feet. I had to fight back a gasp. He tsked- tsked over my un-pedicured state, and then drew a finger up the arch of my foot. I reacted automatically, flexing and pulling away, and he laughed in delight. "You felt that, didn't you, love? Oh, that nurse'll tell me it's just a bloody reflex, but you're in there somewhere, aren't you?" I felt something cool slip over that foot. "Wish you could see this. It's a-- damn. Where's that paper. Oh, yeah. Kate Spade halter sandal. Three-inch heels. Gotta warn ya-- not going to be chasing too many demons in these."

He pulled the sheet down over my feet, and over the sandals. Then his voice dropped to a whisper. "Oh, and I got you underthings too. Should I help you try those on too?"

It was all I could do to keep from answering. He didn't seem disappointed that I succeeded. But he took my left hand, and then the right, and folded them together on my stomach. Then he wound something silky through my fingers. "Aubade. Thong. Costs as much as, I don't know. Not as much as my first car. As much as my first horse, that's for sure." A sad sigh. "What I wouldn't give to see-- No. Forgot. Sworn off women. Got to keep reminding myself of that."

He sat down on the bed again, and I felt his fingers on mine. He was stroking the silk of the thong. "So. You probably want to know what's going on around here. Well, maybe you don't. But if I bring you up on current world events, I'm going to have to tell you about the Terminator governor. And that'll probably make you want to sink into that coma forever. So instead, let me tell you about your friends. Hmm. Well, they've made this alliance with the evil lawfirm. You know about that? Bet you do, because that's where you are right now. I know it sounds like a hospital, but it's just one little room for you, all hospitally, but right down the hall from the fileroom where they store all the closed cases. Kind of scary, huh?" He entwined his fingers in the lace of the thong, cool and comforting against mine. "Taking good care of you, yes, three shifts of nurses, lots of beeping machinery. No evil lawyers comin' in that I've been able to see, but it makes me nervous. Fred told me something about how you're connected with the bleedin' Powers, and hard to believe that the evil barristers would let that go. So, you know, sooner you can wake up and take control of yourself and get out of here, better. Right?"
He was right. I knew it. But I also knew I'd been discounted as useless so far.

"They all think it's great, this building, all the money, the staff. Fred's gone crazy with the lab facilities. Happy as can be. Feel like churl, when I keep warning her about the price she's paying for those expensive beakers. I've been evil, see. I can taste it in the air around here. Tastes like the Hellmouth, only cleaner."

I felt a tremble start inside of me. My friends-- but they weren't my friends anymore, were they? Not really. Not after Connor.

"Fred's okay. Been right kind, tell you the truth. Keeps checking on me. Course, she's forever wanting to draw blood and test it. Doesn't seem to realize that any blood she takes from me, I have to replace. Hmmm..." he added meditatively. "Wonder if you'd notice if I --"

I felt the lightest breath -- the slightest touch of tongue-- on my neck and tensed. Then I held my breath, waiting for him to try to wake me– to try and take me. But all he did was sit back, wind his fingers in the silk of the thong again, and say, a smile in his voice, "Felt your pulse race, there, babe," and then resume his monologue. "Then there's Wesley. What a prat. He alternates between despising me because Angel does-- takes this role model thing too far, doesn't he?-- and walking around with a tape recorder trying to interview me about the stupid soul and the stupid afterlife and whether I still got vamp powers. Wants to photograph me in game face. Well, I'm fine with that-- no shame where that's concerned. But Angel's all disapproving. Guess he doesn't think gameface belongs in the office?"

My heart ached a little, thinking of Angel and all the things he thought didn't belong in the office.

"So who else. There's Gunn. He's okay. Dresses sharp. Took me out shopping t'other night. Wes was going to do it-- do anything Angel says, right? But Gunn's got the taste. Put a Versace tuxedo on my expense account. Never know when might need some hired muscle at a movie premiere, right?"

I had trouble envisioning this-- Gunn and Spike in Versace. They were more the stripped-down minimalist sort. They'd get away with it because they were both so beautiful, no one cared what they wore. But Versace. Well, that might be worth waking up for, just to see the two of them--

"Then that Lorne bloke. What's his story? I told him about swearing off women, and he kind of leered at me and said had I sworn off demons too. Okay, yeah, I mean, the celibacy thing is starting to chafe, but--"

I wasn't following too well, but I could just imagine Lorne's reaction to Spike. Come to think of it, if I had to invent a Lorne-magnet, well, I wouldn't have to invent it. I'd just introduce him to Spike, ivory-sharp cheekbones, moonlight skin, crystal eyes and all.

"It's not that I'm racist. I mean, I could do Gunn, right enough, were I of that turn of mind."

This visual was almost too much for my starved libido-- a tangle of lean limbs, dark and light, Versace tuxedos discarded in their heedless abandon. Stop that, I told my mind. Stop it. Coma! Coma! Come back!

But he wasn't paying me any mind. "So not racist here. Just... green. I mean, come on. Lorne's the color of a broccoli stalk, you know? Way too healthy for the likes of me."

Another image scarred into my scarred brain. Spike's pale limbs wound around a broccoli stalk with Lorne's face-- I started to laugh. Swallowed it back, started to choke. My whole body was shaking with the effort to hold it.
Spike's hand tightened on mine. "It's okay, babe," he said in a low voice. "I won't tell. Just open your eyes for me."

And I did as he bid, and looked up to see his darkening eyes, full of sympathy and pain and compassion. And the laugh broke, and I started to cry, and he gathered me up and murmured until the tears finally stopped.

I was so tense the next morning I was sure it would register on the heart monitor and bring the nurse in with a crash cart. But everything was calm until I heard the clatter of wheels outside my door, and a confident voice I recognized, in an accent I didn't recognize. New York? Atlanta? Mars? It was sort of American, all flat vowels and nasal twang. But it was more alien.

It was Spike. Pretending.

And in a moment, I understood why. When the door opened, through the slit of my eyelids I saw the nurse, a clipboard in her hands, and behind her Spike in surgical scrubs, a green cap covering his curls, a surgical mask over the lower half of his face. He was dragging a gurney behind him.

"Well, if Dr. Burkle says she needs to do tests... but do be careful. Here. Let me help you move her onto the stretcher."

I snapped my eyes fully shut and concentrated on being comatose and floppy as they disconnected all the tubes and needles. Then two pairs of hands were inserted under me. Wrapped in the sheet, I was transferred gently to a harder mattress. I knew a moment's panic when they strapped me down, but then Spike's cool hand snuck under the sheet and squeezed my arm. It would be all right, he was telling me.

So I forced myself to relax, and in a moment we were out the door and down the corridor, the wheels singing low and Spike whistling tunelessly along, playing the dull-brained orderly with all his might. Once in the elevator, he pulled the sheet off my face, and the mask from his. "Hey, babe! Thought you might fancy an excursion."

In fact, I was trembling with fear. "You're abducting me." I still wasn't used to talking, and this came out in a croak.

"That's right." He was grinning. He looked wicked. "Taking you to my nefarious bachelor pad for nefarious purposes. Don't worry. Bring you back later, no harm done."

"What... what are you going to do?" I whispered, staring up at him, seeing the floor numbers turn red over his head.

"Just one word. It's Italian."

I shook my head. My new bangs flopped on my forehead. "Italian is the word?"

"No, prat. The word is Italian. Hush now." The elevator doors whooshed open and he stuck his head out to check. "All clear." He pulled me down the hall and stopped at the third door, fumbling in his pocket for keys. "Just a sec."
I couldn't stand it anymore. "What's the word? The Italian word?"

He opened the door, and in a swift motion, gathered me up in his arms and carried me in to an apartment. His apartment, I thought, seeing his familiar duster tossed negligently on the expensive brocade couch. Here in the middle of the Wolfram and Hart building. I'd have to ask him why. But first, "The word, Spike." I was going to dust him if it was fellatio. (That's Italian, right?)

"Jacuzzi."

I had regular physical therapy, so my muscles weren't as atrophied as they might be, but still I flopped like a ragdoll in his strong arms. I thought about struggling, but I was too weak. "Wh-what?"

"It's all ready. Nice and hot and sudsy. You know, you put just tiny little capful of bubblebath into a Jacuzzi, and, well—"

He pushed open the door. Beyond was a fancy white and black marble bathroom, candles aflame on every flat surface. Suds billowed out from the big tub and foamed all over the floor. "Careful," he said, more to himself than me, "slippery."

He set me down on the wet, soapy rim of the tub, and gestured to my nightgown. "Need help with that?"

"No!" I put my hands up protectively, and he laughed and backed away.

"Your loss, sweeting. I'm a dab hand at scrubbing backs."

I waited till the door closed behind him before I fumbled the buttons open and got out of the nightgown. I was still weak, but it was easy enough to slide my legs over the side and slip into the hot water. I lay there, feeling weightless, and listened.

Spike was back at the door. "You under the bubbles?"

"Yes," I whispered. I felt like I had laryngitis. Laryngitis of the mind.

But Spike was a vampire. He heard me. And he pushed the door open with his shoulder. He had a silver tray and an ice bucket, and ostentatiously averted his eyes as he set it on the low table beside the tub. "Champagne for you, my precious?"

"I--" I slid deeper under the bubbles. I didn't trust that vampire vision of his. "Spike, what's this all about?"

He shrugged and sat down on the wet floor. Pouring the champagne into a fluted glass, he said, "Want to remind you that life is good. It is, you know. Been to the other side myself, and this is better."

"Right." I closed my eyes, but when he pushed the glass into my hand, I closed my fingers around it. "Real good. How can you say that? You're here in this evil place with Angel, and you hate Angel, I know it--"

"Don't hate him. He hates me, for some reason."

"Well, you did torture him," I said.

"Yeah, well, he's committed all sorts of mayhem, and no one counts that."
"Because that was Angelus."

"Yeah. Forgot. Hey, it was Spikelus that tortured him! I get a pass too!"

I still had my eyes closed, but I could hear him smiling as he spoke. Spike smiled a lot. I'd never known him, not really, just those few encounters when he was still evil, but even then he was always smiling, sometimes nastily, sometimes wickedly, sometimes sweetly.

"I don't think you'd get away with claiming that," I said. I took a deep drink of the champagne. I hadn't had real food for a long time, just the liquid they shoved down a tube, and just one sip hit me like a tsunami of bubbles. I got dizzy right away. My mouth went fuzzy. I hadn't talked this much in so long. My throat felt stretched. "You're you all the time. Evil. Good. Either way. You're Spike."

"Too bad."

"No. It's good." I couldn't figure out why. But it was good. "Because you won't surprise." That wasn't right. He'd surprised me every day so far. Especially now. "Because you won't disappoint."


I started laughing. This time it didn't turn into sobs. This time it subsided into giggles. "Spike, you have the worst diet in the world."

"Forgot the Hawaiian punch. Might mix well with the champagne."

I opened my eyes and turned my head to look at him. "Why are you here?"

He didn't seem surprised by my sudden demand. "Got pitched back by the Powers. Signed a contract." He sat up, his shoulders straightening with outrage. "You know they put a secret clause in there? Said I'm bound to Angel! To help his sodding journey! I mean, why not send me to hell and get it over with?"

I thought about that. The Powers did have a sense of humor.... "Is that why you're helping me?"

"What?"

"Because you're supposed to help Angel's journey? Did he-- " I could hardly put the desire into words. "Did he ask you to do something for me?"

Everything I felt must have been in my voice, because he couldn't look at me. He got up, brushing the soapsuds off his butt, and said in a low voice, "No. He doesn't know about this. I just thought-- you know. I've been lost. Know what it's like. Thought maybe --"

"Yeah. I understand." He just wanted to help me. Felt sorry for me. That should make me feel good, but instead it was breaking my heart. Angel didn't know. Angel didn't care. I couldn't stand to think Spike might see this in my face, so I ducked under the water and stayed down till I couldn't hold my breath any longer. When I came up, Spike was gone, and a bottle of shampoo was on the rim near my head. Mimosa shampoo-- such an innocent fragrance. Wasn't meant for me. But I used it anyway, rubbing it on my face and neck as well as my hair and rinsing until I squeaked.

I had never once washed my hair without conditioning afterwards. It was a rule. And so I looked around, wondering just how well Spike understood women and their needs.

Pretty well. I scooted forward to grab the vinyl bag propped on the corner of the tub. Inside was
mimosa conditioner, body gel, and a brand new razor.

Okay. He wasn't Angel. But Angel would never have thought of the conditioner, much less the razor.

Once I was smooth from head to toe, I turned on the Jacuzzi. More suds bubbled up and cascaded over the side, but I didn't care. I let the waves pummel me until every bit of me tingled. Then, reluctantly, I turned it off and called out to Spike.

"Hey! What am I going to do about clothes? That nightgown is sopping wet!"

Spike appeared in the door, his arms full of toweling and clothing. He set them down on the top of the wicker hamper. "Here you go, love. There's an overnight bag with another set I'll give to the nurse. I'll tell her the doctor said you'd feel better with your own scruffs."

"How did you get in to my apartment? Did– did someone give you a key?"

He looked back from the doorway. "I haven't told anyone, you know that. I just – you know. Let myself in. Told you I had a credit card. Sort of a multi-function device." He added admonishingly, "You really ought to get the locks changed, cheerleader. Not safe."

"I doubt I'll ever be back there," I muttered. I waited till the door closed behind him, then levered myself so I was sitting again on the tub rim. It took me a minute to get my feet oriented on the floor. I used the sink to pull myself to a stand. And then I took my first step in months.

I was exhausted by the time I got to the chair next to the hamper. But after a moment's rest, I was able to towel off, and another minute, I pulled a comb through my tangled hair. With an inner wince, I raised my head and looked across at the mirror. I looked gaunt and worn– no surprise there– but he was right. My hair did look sort of cute, already starting to curl against my head.

I took a deep breath and reached over to sort through the clothing he'd brought. A pair of my most utilitarian panties-- white cotton-- and a basic jogbra. I thought of the silky things he'd bought me, and the other silky things in my drawer, and realized he'd decided to stop trying to embarrass me into reaction. I'm sure that was very sensitive of him, but I was sort of embarrassed anyway, that he'd seen these boring items that I kept just to spare my silks the sweat-damage from my workouts.

The other clothes were similarly basic– a cotton t-shirt and jersey pull-on pants. But they were easy to get into, and the elastic waist meant the pants didn't fall off my depleted ass. For the first time in my life, I needed to gain weight. "Spike!" I called. He arrived at the door, a quizzical look on his face. "Can I have a twinkie?"

"Sure, babe, tasty treat coming up." He did that eyebrow thing that told me I could have any tasty treat I wanted, including something shaped roughly like a twinkie but harder, and with a lot more taste and a lot less calories.

Hey, what can I say. He has really eloquent eyebrows.

Maybe I was projecting just a bit, because the guy never made a move towards me.

While he was out in the little galley kitchen, I groped my way into the living room, doorframe to table to wall to couch. I collapsed there next to his leather coat and looked around. It was a nice efficiency apartment, nicer than any I'd lived in, and Spike hadn't quite managed to trash it yet. There were boots by the door, a red t-shirt under the coffee table, a guitar and amp against the wall, and a precarious pile of books topped by an empty glass beside the couch. And a pretty wicker basket filled with five remote controls, each one labeled with a strip of masking tape. TV. DVD/VCR.
Playstation2. XBox. GameCube. I guessed Angel's credit card was getting quite a workout.

Spike came back with a couple twinkies on a silver plate, and a crystal tumbler filled with something fuschia. He set these down on the coffee table next to the remote-control basket. Then he crossed back to the bathroom and reappeared with the bottle of champagne. He slid sinuously to the floor in front of the couch, his shoulder just brushing my knee. "Knew you'd want some Hawaiian Punch, though you didn't actually say it out loud. I'll finish up the champy for you. Got you a vid too."

I was going to protest that I had to get back to my bed and my IVs and my heart-and-brain monitor. But he looked up at me with such a winsome look as he handed me the remote control. He thought we were having fun. I couldn't bring myself to disappoint him. So I pointed the remote at the big TV and pushed Play, and as the credits came up, we each took a twinkie. Spike was fooling around with his, trying to cram the whole thing into his mouth, and managed to spurt the cream out of his onto my sweat-pantsed thigh.

"Oops. Premature--" he said around a mouthful of cake, and I hit him on the top of his head before he could get the end of that phrase out. Still, after he swallowed, he said, "Not usually a problem for me."

He was incorrigible.

*Hook* was an odd choice for a video, so I knew there had to be some message there for me. Robin Williams was a high-powered executive with several phobias, a bunch of obsessive-compulsive disorders, and a secret past. Turns out he's Peter Pan, and he's been denying the magic of his nature, and this means he can't have any fun or feel comfortable with himself. Only by reclaiming his Peter Past can he achieve fullness and wholeness and all that good stuff. It was kind of fun, and Julia Roberts made an interesting Tinkerbell, but--

By the time Peter was restored to himself, Spike's head was resting on my knee, and somehow I'd gotten my fingers tangled in his curls. We both kind of drew watery sighs as the closing credits played, and I said grudgingly, "That was pretty good."

"Yeah." Spike paused a moment, and then, still staring at the screen as the credits faded, said all in a rush, "Angel's like that, isn't he? Hiding from his true nature."

I stiffened, pulling my hand away from him. "That's probably for the best since his true nature is an insane killer."

"But it's not." Spike leaned back against the couch, sliding his arm behind my calves. "No one believes me. But I knew Angelus-- the real Angelus. The one before this Angel personality split off. And yeah, he was a killer. I mean, he was a vampire. He was a predator. But he wasn't insane. And he could control himself. And--"

He stopped long enough for me to remember that Spike was a predator too... but then I thought of him and Buffy, and thought if Buffy was brave enough to sleep with him, I was brave enough to sit here and discuss Angel with him.

In fact, the discuss-Angel part was scarier than the sit-with-Spike part.

"And what?" I asked in a voice that trembled only a bit.

"And he could have fun. Enjoy life. Love. Really love. Not this apathetic excuse for it he's got now."

He knew. Someone must have told him, or he must have figured it out from my attitude. He knew that I'd fallen in love with Angel and hoped Angel could love me back. And he knew I was wrong.
"Angel loves," I told him. "In his way."

"In his way. Does it feel like love to you?"

I couldn't answer. And so, quietly, he said, "Listen. I know all about love. I mean, I don't love well. But I love hard, and it makes me do stupid things, and I break my heart. And I -- I love someone who loves like Angel does. She really tried. Felt like she, well, owed me love, because I loved her so much. And I felt her trying. Making the effort. Ordering herself to love me back. And finally she added together all the bits of things she felt for me, and she thought it maybe equalled love. And she came to me and she said, so proudly, that she loved me. And she did. In her way." He was utterly still for a moment. "Broke my heart more than all the times she told me she couldn't love me. Because I knew that was all she could feel. And it wasn't enough."

"I know what you mean," I said. And I couldn't say anything else.

"Angel thinks there's nothing good in Angelus. But there is. Passion and pleasure. And power. Maybe that's the demon that gives us that. Maybe even humans have a bit of the demon, just like vampires have a bit of the human." He leaned his head against my leg again, and this time I let him.

"He did love," I said softly. "He loved Darla. When she came back human." That tasted sour in my mouth. "But... but I think you're right. That was the demon in him. I was so scared that whole time, that he'd go all... demonic. And he did, and she paid for being the one who brought it out in him."

I felt him holding his breath. Silly, because vampires don't breathe. But he was tense against my leg. Finally he said, "You think he didn't love Buffy."

I almost laughed. It was all about Buffy, of course. Maybe Spike thought I wouldn't recognize that girl who broke his heart by loving him just a little, but a lifetime ago, I'd dated Xander, and knew the symptoms. "Well, there was no demon in the Buffy love, I guess. Not like with Darla. More just sort of wishful thinking. And he seemed to forget all about Buffy for months on end."

"She never forgot."

There was a world of bitterness in that, and I couldn't help it. I nudged him with my knee. We were two of a kind, and don't think I wasn't shocked to find myself thinking that.

"She might have, if she'd actually spent any time with him. She doesn't even know him now. He's been through all these bad experiences, and he's changed."

"So has she. But she was with him this summer. And he thinks she's coming back to him soon."

He said this gently, as if he knew it would hurt. It did. I took it out on him, of course. Messengers should expect that. "So if you love her so much, why don't you head her off?"

"I can't. I'm not allowed to see her." He added, "The contract I signed. With the Powers That Be. She gets to have a happy life if I steer clear. So. I'm steering clear."

"Oh." In the face of such a sacrifice, I felt sort of petulant and whiny. "They drive hard bargains, the Powers." Don't I know it.

"It's not so hard," he said. "If she can be happy. But Angel-- well, I don't know if he's part of that." He nuzzled into my knee with his cheek, like a cat seeking warmth. "The Powers think so, I think."

They'd last a week together, I thought cynically. They were both humorless control freaks without an ounce of empathy. Why they ever thought they needed each other, I couldn't imagine. They each
needed someone open, expressive, spontaneous... someone like Spike and me.

I suppressed a sigh. I was as cut off from my lover as Spike was from his. At least Spike's didn't hate him....

"What do you think," Spike said suddenly, "is Angel's journey?"

"His... journey?"

"You know. Like Peter Pan's journey was to, I don't know. The reclamation of his past."

"Why?" I replied suspiciously.

"Because that contract? Remember? The secret clause. I'm bound to him. To help him on his journey."

"Oh." A small pleasure blossomed in me. "If you're bound to him.... and you can't be near Buffy. So..."

"Yeah, cheerleader. The Powers screwed up. I don't think they're destined to be together much anytime soon. That make you happy?"

I tossed my head. My hair, so short now, flopped about in what I hoped was a... what did Spike call it? A gamine way. "Sure. Not that--" I cleared my throat. "Okay. Angel's journey. I think he's travelling towards...." Shanshu? No, that was supposed to be the reward, not the destination. "What if it's not a good place?"

"What do you mean?"

I gestured around me– the building, the lawfirm, the whole situation. "What if he's headed towards, I don't know, corruption?"

He considered this. "You know I don't like this W&H rig. I think your friends made a bargain with the devil, and they think they're the devil's boss, and you and I know it never works like that. But... but would the Powers put me to helping him go corrupt? I don't think so."

I had to agree. Or at least I hoped I agreed. I wasn't all that trusting of the Powers anymore.

"Maybe that's the blind alley." Spike upended the champagne bottle into his mouth, but it was empty now. He set it on the table with a sigh. "Maybe that's the diversion from his real journey. Going off in this direction towards power and money and evil so he doesn't have to stay true to the real path."

"And the real path is towards... " Connor, I thought, with a sinking heart. "Reconciliation."

"With you?"

"Oh, I don't think I matter very much."

"You do," he said. "Maybe that's why he's headed off in another direction. Too scared to face you."

I had to laugh. It came out more like a groan. "Spike, he wasn't the one who went bad. I was. Why do you think I'm still in this stupid coma? Because I can't face him."

"Has something to do with Connor, doesn't it?"

Stunned, I rose to my feet and backed away from him. "How do you know about Connor?"
Suspiciously I added, "Can you read my mind?"

"Not hardly. But the Powers imbedded some useless info in my brain, and this name Connor is a bit of it. Someone connected to Angel."

"I--" I lost my courage and sank back onto the couch. "I don't remember. The Powers erased some of my memories. I remember the name, that's all."

"Christ. The Powers took over your mind? I thought only evil entities did that."

"It was an evil Power." I thought of last year, of the helpless sense of being a puppet, but also of the knowledge I just didn't have strength enough to seize back the strings. "I don't feel like I own myself anymore."

"I hate mind control," he said. "Someone else in control, but still your mind, right? Happened to me, and Buffy tried to say it wasn't my fault, but I knew-- they needed something to work with, you know? Needed an experienced killer. Someone who could kill without needing to plan or prepare. Wouldn't have worked with, say, Xander."

I contemplated Xander as mindlessly efficient killer. "No. Xander wouldn't work."

"No fangs," Spike said seriously.

"Yeah. Need fangs. Of one sort or another." He was taking responsibility. He hadn't tried to make excuses for himself. "The coma. That's my escape. They leave me alone now."

"So now what? You ready to stop pretending you're just a body lying in a bed?"

I wanted to tell him I'd be brave, that I'd rejoin the world. But I couldn't. "I'm not ready. Not yet."

Without a word, he got up and cleared away the mess. I sensed he was unhappy with my decision. But it was my decision, damnit, not his. And still silent, he came back, loaded me on the gurney with the overnight bag, and took me back to my prison. I felt his anger, or his disappointment, and it hurt. But as he turned me back over to the nurse, he whispered in my ear, "See ya tomorrow, sweetheart."
I'd just gotten back from a Lizapalooza-- poor girl, she got all the issues of both mother and father, and what a mess that makes. I was a bit crabby because there was no smiling friend waiting at the airport, and no limo either, and I had to hire a service, hiding my green all the way home with the suspicious driver glancing every ten seconds into the rear-view.

So I wasn't very cheery stomping into W&H late that evening. But by the time I started down the corridor to my office, I was ready to pour myself a drink before I had to get on the phone to some gossip columnist and dish about Liza's latest insane ex. I was just passing the storage room-- my storage room, the one with the sound equipment saved from Caritas-- when my sharp ears picked up a suspicious sound therein.

Okay. So my ears aren't so sharp. Didn't need to be. Someone was banging away on the drums, accompanying low bass thums. I stopped at the door, looking up and down the corridor for something, anything, to explain this. But everyone was gone. Everyone but... the phantom band within.

You remember that song about rock-and-roll heaven? Well, they might have a helluva band indeed, but W&H wasn't heaven, and this band--

Then someone started singing. I couldn't hear him, really, over that damned drumming, but I could feel him, feel every snarling, sad word. It was an old Nirvana song, the one that has all the rev-ups and the raw voicing and the rancid lyrics. It wasn't a love song-- I don't think; Cobain's lyrics all seem to be about vomit and razor-blades, but sweetie, who knows, Kurt and Courtney.... "And I don't have a gun, no, I don't have a gun...."

I stood there and felt him. The singer. No one I knew. No one I'd ever heard before. Someone lost and aching and whoa, in love. In love and all flayed up about it. I knew the feeling-- well, I didn't, come to think of it, but I could feel it in my bones now.

You know, I have a little line I give my clients when their marriages end 33 days after their wedding photos appeared in People Magazine: Like the bawdy Bard says, It's better to have loved and lost, chickie, than never to have loved at all.

This lost soul's song made me think I might have been just a mite glib on that score. It made me think, heck, what after all do I know about love? I just sing about it. I don't... sing it.

So my heart was broken and my self-image shattered when I flung open the door and the music stopped with a crash.

A very handsome Clement demon was sitting in the corner, surrounded by the drum kit young Hector had extorted from me and then left behind when he ran off to Vegas. Yes, a particularly fine specimen-- his very pink cheekflaps were even pinker now, and flapping even though his hands and sticks had stilled on the snaredrum. He gazed at me in horror, then his eyes cut to the side, and I got a glimpse of the bassist, who was, I realized, also the singer who had managed to out-misery the miserable Cobain.

Pretty boys, oh, pretty boys. There are so many of them here in LA, even here in W&H. A different variety every year. Last year they all looked like Colin Farrell. This year it's Ashton Jailbait. Pretty boys with melting eyes and pouty mouths and floppy hair and incompetent gigolo bodies.
This wasn't one of them. Oh, he was pretty enough, I do vow. But Ashton would run screaming away from him, Demi honey at his heels. No, this was Pretty Boy as in Pretty Boy Floyd. Billy the Kid. All the handsome killers whose mug shots feature come-hither kissmouths and bedroom eyes. The ones who get dozens of marriage proposals between their conviction and sentencing. He was one of them. Lean to the point of thin, body of marble and white lace, face of a fallen seraph, cheekbones like dagger blades, eyes like dark blue diamonds, and a mouth, oh, a mouth of such sweetness.... no wonder he kept having to swear he don't have a gun.

Oh, and he was a vampire. I could tell right away. A killer, like I said.

The killer was looking at me, white teeth biting that sweet mouth, guilt in his eyes-- guilt.

Hmm.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "We were just, you know, exploring. And found the drum kit. And-- it's my bass. I mean, I didn't find it here--"

I was too puzzled by this penitence to answer right away. Instead I focused on his bass, a lovely item, all maple and ebony. "What a nice Gretsch. And left-handed too. You know, Paul McCartney plays one just like that."

"He-- he didn't even miss it! I mean, he's got like nine of them!"

The Clement demon cried, "Spikey, you didn't steal that bass from a Beatle! You did!"

"I left him alive, didn't I?" the bassist replied defensively. "And, you know, it was the 60s. Personal property was a crime, all that stuff-- he wouldn't have minded if he'd known--"

Spikey. Spike. The name struck home. "You're Spike! You're dead!"

"Not any more," the Clement said proudly. "He's been resurrected. 'Cause he saved the world. And-- " He paused, and the vampire looked down modestly. "He's got a soul. Won it himself, with great deeds and dangerous trials."

Whoa. I started patting my pockets, feeling for a pen. "Souled resurrected vampire. Champion. Saved the world. Oh. By the way. I'm Lorne. The Host. I'm thinking... you got an agent, kid?"

Kid. So maybe he's five times my age. Still a kid as far as experience goes, LA experience that is.

"Clem's girlfriend's a real estate agent," he said. See what I mean?

"I mean a real agent. To get you booked on the talk shows."

The vampire's mouth made a nice O. Just the right size O -- "Oh. You don't mean--" His voice dropped reverently. "Like... Jerry Springer?"

"Not Jerry." Clem broke in, speaking aloud my own thoughts, which, if I'd been able to get them out, would have come in a squeak of horror. "Not classy enough. Oprah. Maybe Dr. Phil."

The vampire was frowning-- not as fierce an expression as you might think. "Won't do Dr. Phil. I mean, don't you think he can be a little harsh? He's like Dr. Laura in a suit. Always yelling about personal responsibility and fulfilling potential and being worthwhile. I get enough shit like that from Angel."

I coughed into my hand at this mention of that other souled vampire. Then I surveyed Spike, up and
down, till the vampire dropped the defiant gaze and looked down. If he'd had anything more than borrowed blood, he'd probably have blushed.

"Clem's right. Oprah. A woman's more likely to ... well, appreciate you. Then again, Clem, what would you think of Queer Eye for the Straight Guy? You know, a new look for an old vampire newly resurrected...."

"Don't need a queer eye," Spike said resentfully. "Gunn took me and got me some threads. Good enough for me."

I gazed eloquently at the blue jeans with the tattered knees, the threadbare black t-shirt. "He took you shopping at Goodwill?"


Clem groaned. I gathered Spike's mission wasn't universally popular.

"Your... mission?" I prompted.

"Yeah. I'm here on a mission."

I looked around the storage room, baffled.

"Not here," he said with exasperation. He gestured around him "Here."

Oh. HERE. The universe. Right. "Yes. A mission. And that would be....?"

"Helping Angel on his journey."

Another groan from Clem. Spike ignored him. "You wouldn't happen to know, you know, what Angel's journey is? I'm getting kind of mixed opinions on that. And Angel's not saying. I don't think he wants help. Or maybe he doesn't want to complete the journey, and hey, I can't blame him. Probably dust at the end of that dusty road. Anyway... what do you think?"

I shook my head to clear away those old cobwebs. A mission. To help Angel. Oh, dear. Disaster lies this way, I thought. Still, Pandora here always has hope. "Angel's journey. Well, I don't precisely know. But I can tell you what he needs."

"To get laid," Clem said, sotto voce. When Spike shot him a sharp look, he added defensively, "Well, that's what you said. You said he needed to get the rod out of his bum and put it in his--"

"What Angel needs," I said in the ringing tones I once used to quell hecklers, "is to get in touch with his emotions."

Spike started laughing. I drew back, offended. Perhaps he didn't know that I, as an empath, was an expert on emotions. And that necessity forced me to become particularly sensitive to Angel's emotions, as knowing ahead of time forestalled his need to sing them for me.

"Not laughing at you, demon," he said. "Just at the thought. I mean, Angel in touch with his emotions. Let's see. What emotions are there? Oh, right, there's melancholy."

And he pulled a face, his clear brow drawing down to hood his eyes, his fist going to brush lightly
against his chin. It was a wonderful impression-- not that he looked anything like Angel; they had entirely different coloring, not to mention body types-- but the expression was so Angelic-- I mean, I could envision him staring at one of those vases of his, like he was auditioning for Hamlet.

"And there's apathy." A slight adjustment in the mouth, a droop of the shoulders.

"And we can't forget misery." The brow lifts, the eyes widen, the mouth pouts.

"And the one I call the Spike-special." This is a portrait of annoyance, brows drawn together, mouth set in a disapproving line. "That's the one I see the most."

This changeling had run through most of Angel's repertoire. Still, I was right. "Angel has other emotions deep inside. Passion. Pleasure. He just needs to accept them and experience them."

"He needs to let himself be Angelus, you mean."

At this, I fell back a step, colliding with my old karaoke machine. "Not Angelus. No way, ho-say. No way. Met him, survived him, just barely."

"Not talking about the thug, mate. I'm talking about my grandsire. The actual bloke. Not this boring mask he puts on to hide from all you."

"It's not a mask," I said firmly. "It's the soul. The soul we want him to keep."

"He can be Angelus with a soul." Spike unstrapped his guitar and dropped onto an amplifier, his legs stuck out in front of him, ugly Doc Martens blocking the path. "Soul doesn't mean he has to be half of who he was."

"Yeah, Spike's got a soul now, and he's still Spike," Clem said, punctuating this with a bit of cymbal.

"He must be different. Has to. A soul--"

"Nope," Clem said. "Same as ever."

"Wait a minute," Spike interrupted. "I've changed. I'm, like, way more conscientious now. And responsible."

"Sure, Spike," Clem said, but he wagged his earflaps at me, signalling, I suppose, that "conscientious" and "responsible" and "Spike" still didn't go together, even post-soul. "Maybe you stop and think more now. A little, anyway. And when you say something mean, you take it back a few minutes later. But... you're still you. And," he added loyally, "I'm glad. You were cool before. Still cool now."

Spike gave an I'm-really-not-conceited-just-beloved sort of shrug, but then turned back to the subject at hand. "See, I'm thinking, he keeps denying he's Angelus. But I know he is. I knew him then, and I know him now. And I know he's Angelus. But as long as he's convinced that Angel's the only way to go, that Angelus is dangerous, he's never going to touch those feelings you want him to touch. Because they've got a big gold label on 'em. Saying Angelus."

"I, uh, see what you mean," I said, but I didn't really. "But what I'd prefer is Angel getting in touch with his softer side, not his murderous side, and sweet as you seem to be, babyface, I can't see you bringing the soft stuff out in him. In fact, I kind of always had the impression that he, well, hated your guts."

Spike nodded judiciously. "Yeah, he does. But I'm stuck on him, like moss on stone. Like white on
I had to join in. "Like jelly on toast. Like sizzle on steak. Like beef on cake."

Inspiration failed after this bonnest of mots, and after a polite moment, Spike went back to his original point. "Anyway, whether I like it or not, and not doesn't do it justice, I'm stuck with this mission of mine. Ordained from above."

Clem shook his head, his jowl flaps vibrating. "I just don't get it, Spike. I mean, you're my best bud, and I'll help no matter what you do, but if you don't want to do it, why are you doing it? Since when do you follow orders? It's not like Angel wants you here."

Spike looked a bit hurt, but recovered quickly. "He did let us hug him, remember?"

"He-- he let you hug him?" I was somewhere between amazed and appalled. Amazed because, well, Angel never hugged. It could lead to sex, and you know what lies at the bottom of that slippery slope. And appalled because the vision of Angel hugging these two-- well, you remember the most embarrassing moment in TV history, when Mr. Spock fell in love and got happy? And he hung upside down from that tree-branch and laughed? You know what I mean. They replay that scene at Halloween to scare the kiddies. Angel hugging... same effect. Shiver. Shudder. Shake shake.

"He didn't like it," Clem said, "but he lasted at least a couple seconds. And he didn't hit us or anything." He tapped his drumstick lightly on the cymbal. "You didn't answer my question, Spikey. Why are you helping Angel when he doesn't want you?"

For such a nice demon, he was a tad blunt, but Spike didn't take offense. He just shrugged. "Not like I can leave, right?"

"Right. Hey, Lorne, you don't know, do you?" Clem asked. "See, Spike really can't leave. He tries to leave, he gets flung back. Literally. Broke through the garage ceiling last week."

"I can leave," Spike said defensively. "Long as I have..." and he mumbled the rest-- "Angel's permission."

"Angel's permission," Clem echoed. "And you can't go far even then. What, a couple miles?" He shook his head, his dewflaps jiggling. "I remember back in the day, when you were the Big Bad, you didn't need permission-- hmm. Didn't last, did it? 'Cause you met the Slayer, and she put that pretty leash on you, and you stopped wandering free--"

"Did not!"

"Did so."

"Wait, wait, wait," I said, foolhardly enough to wade in to this swamp. "The Slayer? The little dark toughie that came last year?"

"Not that Slayer," Spike said. "The original one. The blonde."

"Oh. Oh!" Understanding dawned. "Angel's One True Love slayer?"

Spike got up, cased up his bass, and walked out of the storage room.

Good. I was getting claustrophobia like you wouldn't believe, trapped in that little room with my
fellow demons and the detritus of my past. I trailed after Spike, pulling my overnight bag on wheels behind me. "So... chickie... how fraught the situation. You. Angel. Slayer."

"Mission. All that counts." Another mumble. "'sf for the Slayer."

"Oh. Oh!" I must make a note not to say that again. "Oh. Oh. I'm seeing, I don't know, Gwyneth... Colin Firth... Hugh Grant..."

"You're seeing hallucinations, demon." No more mumbling. Now he was snappin'. "No way either of those two ponces get to play me. And that little Paltrow girl? Not half tough enough for the Slayer. Get one of those little gymnasts, you know, pound for pound the strongest athletes in the world? That's my Slayer. Say that little Dominique girl."

It was a good suggestion. But we were putting the cart before the production deal. "Save casting for later. Script time here. You are on this mission. You didn't choose it, but you accepted it. And-- and though you love her more than life itself--"

"Got that right," he murmured, making an abrupt right into the lobby.

"But now you know that she loves Angel best, and so you're protecting him because--"

Spike stopped so suddenly I ran into the back of him. A very lean, hard back. I bounced off, found my feet, found myself looking into very blue very angry very vampire eyes.

Very slowly he said, "She doesn't love Angel best. I'm not protecting him for her." Then he paused, and shook his head. "Or maybe I am. But not the way you mean."

Then he turned and ran up the stairs, taking them four at a time-- sugar, he was a sonnet in motion, I tell you, Baryshnikov in blue jeans, leaping up like that.

Alas, I couldn't catch up. So I trudged back to the storage room, where gentle Clem was putting the drum kit back to rights.

"So what's the story, morning glory? Why's your friend taking care of his romantic rival?"

Clem glanced at the door, probably assessing how much he could get away with telling me. "Spike signed this contract. With the Powers. I don't know about all of it, but there was this secret clause."

My heart sank. "W&H wrote the contract?"

"I guess. It was too evil even for Williams and Connelly. Anyway, the secret clause said that Spike was bound indefinitely to help Angel on his journey."

I contemplated this. "So if that was the secret clause, what was the open clause?"

"Don't know. Something about the Slayer. All I know is-- he won't see her. And that's like the only thing that Angel approves of-- that Spike is steering clear of..." Clem's face crumpled up sympathetically. "Of the one woman he loves."

"Tragic," I said. "Tragic." My mind was buzzing away, casting aside this screenwriter and that director-- No. This wasn't a movie. It was a vampire's life. Or unlife.

"How can I help?" I found myself asking.

And Clem's face opened in a smile. "Didn't you used to run a nightclub?"
I once had a club in Los Angeles.... And I loved it just as much as Meryl Streep loved that stupid farm in Africa. It was called Caritas-- grace, mercy, love. And that's what I sold, and that's what I sang. It was a lovely place, filled with lovely people and demons-- lissome waiters and sympathetic bartenders and an audience full of seekers. And I sang. Oh, yea, baby, I sang, full-throated and open-hearted. And I got everyone else to sing too.

You see, it was an open bar-- demon, human, vampire, we welcomed all those who came in peace. And it was an open mike. Karaoke with a twist.

I was the twist. I'm an empath. That means I can feel others' feelings, even the ones they can't feel themselves. You know how you wake up some mornings with a sense of dread, and you try to put it away all day, hide it away, because it's so scary, and so you never find out what it is you're dreading? Well, I can feel the dread, and find the source. And it doesn't even hurt you, because I'm the one who has to feel.

But you have to sing for me.

I'm best with the blocked. If you're afraid to feel, if you're not sure what's real, I'm sure to appeal. If childhood trauma constrains you, or fear of hysteria restrains you, or only iron control maintains you, well, come to me, sing for me. I'll tell you who you are, why you are, and what you feel. And sometimes, if I'm really in tune (you don't have to be, worse luck), I can tell you what's going to come next in your life.

Just call me the Ex-lax empath, because I get in there and loosen things up and make them gush right out.

Angel used to like to sing for me. It was the only way he could feel his feelings. Secondhand, that is. I'd listen (only half an ear-- the other ear and a half would be cringing) to him sing Mandy, or Wang Fun, or New York New York (oh, please, make me stop-- the memories...) and I'd tell him, "You are feeling a bit inadequate to this new task you've set for yourself. You're such a perfectionist, babycakes-- you need to let go and trust yourself more!" Once we had a secret session, after everyone had left the club, just Angel and me on the stage, and Angel singing Send in the Clowns, and I had to tell him that no, I didn't think he was in love with anyone, much less poor Cordy....

Anyway, I once had a club in Los Angeles.

But it kept getting destroyed. I do love my Angel Investigation buds, but they are like termites. Wherever they go, real estate disaster awaits. Finally, after the last bomb, I gave up. I paid severance to my employees, stored what little equipment remained, and turned pro. That is, I became an agent for W&H's many entertainment clients. And, babe, was I ever good at it. The best. You need an audition with Spielberg, I get it. You need flattery that you still look 25, I give it. You need a statement on why you're in rehab again, I craft it. I am a Schubert-level schmoozer, the Beethoven of bull, the Rimsky-Korsakov of reassurance.

But I hadn't sung willingly since Caritas bit the dust.

Clem refused to come with me and help me explain to the pretty vampire why I had to destroy his
hopes for a firm-spirit-building and Angel-journey-facilitating band and nightclub project. I got the idea that Clem was mad at me, though it was hard to tell with a demon whose face just radiated goodwill. "No, I have to get back to my girlfriend. But Spike-- Don't worry about Spike's reaction. Really. He's got a soul now. And so he only kills demons. I mean, he only kills bad demons. Really. He won't hurt you. I promise. Those days when he killed the messenger? Long gone."

"Way to reassure me, Clem."

"Oh, good! Hey, you know, could help to come bearing gifts. The liquid kind. He always gets sort of sad and subdued if he drinks enough." A beat. This demon was incapable of telling a lie, at least for long. "That is, if he's not breaking things. But he won't do that, because he promised Angel he'd quit busting things in the guest apartment."

What could I do? We'd bonded, the vampire and me. We'd started casting his film. He'd even sung for me, though he didn't know it at the time. I owed him an explanation. So I stopped by my office, dropped off the overnight bag, and mixed up a pitcher of seabreezes.

And a few minutes later, I was sitting on a burgundy chair-- just the right setting for my coloring-- regarding Spike, who sat cross-legged on the floor in front of me, a glass in his hand. A paused Grand Theft Auto game flickered impotent and mute and bloody on the TV screen.

"I like you, Spike."

"You do?" He seemed honestly gratified by this.

"Yes. And I like your friend Clem."

"Everyone likes Clem," Spike said boastfully. "He's my best mate."

"Clem is a charmer. And you are a cutie."

This made him duck his head. I do wish he could blush. He'd look so adorable blushing, I know it. Perhaps just a smidge of rouge?

"But much as I like the both of you," I continued, "I just can't open another club. I can't. The last one--"

I couldn't finish. I didn't need to. I looked up to see Spike's eyes full of sympathy.

He pushed his glass over to me. "That's the ponciest drink I've had in years. Gimme another?"

I reached over to the table for the pitcher, and poured with the generous hand I'm known for.

"The Slayer would love this drink," he said wistfully. He let the glass rim rest on that full lower lip, the seabreeze barely touching, like a pretty girl's kiss....

Hmm. In just an hour, he'd mentioned "the Slayer" several times. Theoretically, she was the love of Angel's unlife, and I don't think he'd mentioned her four times in three years.

"Why do you call her the Slayer?"

He paused, moved the glass down, took a deep breath. "Hurts too much to say Buffy." His eyes glittered. He took another breath. "Buffy." Then, very quiet, in a ragged longing voice, "Buffy."

I've seen a lot of things in my day, but a man flagellating himself with a name-- that's a first.
It was killing him, but he said it again. "Buffy."

Oh, goodness me. Oh, dear. Oh, if everyone felt like this one-- openly, intensely-- well, we empaths would be out of business, wouldn't we?

"Buffy," he murmured.

"Please stop," I had to say. It was flaying me, the way he said her name. It was flaying him too, but he was getting more pleasure out of it.

"Sorry." After a gulp of his drink, he said gruffly, "I can't ever see her again, see. Ever. Or – or she won't have a long and happy life. And I ... I just want her to be happy."

I had it! Jude Law. Epic eyes, tragic mouth. Maybe a toupee, though.

"I understand," I said. "But... but where does Angel come in?"

"The secret clause. I think... I think if I don't fulfill that, they won't fulfill the Buffy clause." He turned his head away from me and whispered, low, under his breath, "Buffy."

"I heard you! Now stop that."

He subsided sullenly, staring into his glass. Finally he said, "See, I figured it out. If I don't help Angel on his journey, they'll have an excuse to -- to hurt her. If I quit or fail--"

"Oh. I see. Does-- does Angel go along with this?"

A shrug. "I don't know. Sure. Has no choice. He thinks his -- his whatchacallit shoe, his destiny garbage-- is at risk if he goes against the Powers. But he doesn't like it. Would prefer me long gone and far away."

Well, that I could see. Sweet as Spikey was, he had to be a reminder of all sorts of unmentionables. The past. The murders. The Slayer. The Darla.

"I get that. And I get why you have to stay. But I don't get why you think this band will help."


"Well, yes, it might make me all those things. But Angel? He doesn't want to-- Ah. I see. You think whether he wants to or not--"

"You said yourself that he needed to get in touch with his feelings. Music does that."

"He already listens to music."

"Dirges. Funeral marches. Misereres. Requiems. They help him get in touch with those emotions he's already always jacking off with-- despair. Misery. Guilt." Spike turned stern. Authority figure deluxe model. This vampire's moods shifted like mercury popping out of a broken thermometer. I was pretty mobile myself, and I couldn't keep up. He said, "Rock and roll. That's what he needs. So... we're starting this band."

"And-- you don't mean to ask him to, uh, join it?"

Spike rolled his eyes. Drunk as we were both getting, I watched with interest to make sure those pretty blue orbs finally stilled. They did. "Not join. But help out. Like, you know, with the
equipment. Stagecraft. Building sets."

"Angel?" I stared at him. "Angel is the CEO of Wolfram & Hart LA. He's not going to do manual labor!"

Spike jutted out his stubborn chin. Oh, be still my demon soul, I think there was a little cleft there--

"What? He's suddenly too good to use his muscle? He's a bleeding vampire, not an-- an executive."

"That's as it may be. But Angel-- he doesn't -- well, he's not much of a joiner. We can hardly get him to come to parties."

"Yeah, I know. So I'll have to find some way to persuade him. Working on that. Like telling him it's a firm-solidarity-building project. Improve W&H spirit now that they're not allowed to do the weekly ritual sacrifices in the lobby. And the CEO has to be seen buying into it-- you know. But first need the band. And a club to play it in."

"You expect me to open a club so that you can have somewhere to play?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, it's not like anyone else would hire us."

I closed my eyes. Groaned. Opened them to see his pleading look.

"Come on, mate. You know it'll be good. Good for Angel." The tone got sweet. Wheedling. "Good for you too."

"I don't think so."

"Yeah. It will. You're in denial. You're not one of these humans. You can't repress forever. You're a demon, and demons have passion." He regarded me fiercely. "You loved that club, and it's gone, and you're trying to pretend that you can abandon the pieces and go on. But it's not working, is it?"

I opened my mouth to protest about my great new job, to recite my billable hours total, to list all my famous clients, to brag that Liza needed me-- but then I closed my mouth. Why bother to open it, if I couldn't sing?

Quietly he said, "I know what it's like to be heartbroke, and it doesn't help to pretend you were never in love."

I went absolutely still. He -- he was hurting me. He was--

He was telling me what I felt. And I didn't even have to sing for him.

But... maybe I could. "All right." I stepped right up to that cliff, grabbed the corners of my coat to make a parachute, and leaped off. And all the way down, I practiced my scales. "But I get to sing."

He looked startled. "Uh, sure. We're thinking some punk, bit of grunge, some reggae, maybe some metal if we get the right guitarist--"

"Lady Marmalade. That's my own signature song." And I flexed my diaphragm, puffed out my chest, opened my throat, and for the first time in many moons, I rose to my feet, struck my pose, and broke into song. "Voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir. Voulez-vous coucher avec moi."

I sounded a little rusty, but still in tune. I sounded, hey, good. I could tell Spike was impressed.

He took a deep breath. "Okay."
"You'll play that song."

"Yeah."

"You'll sing it in duet with me."

He growled, a wonderful deep-throated vampire growl. "Don't push it, demon."

I smiled. "I'll start looking for a space nearby. And you start practicing my song."

"We'll do that." Spike gulped down the last of his drink, for courage, it turned out. "Just to let you know-- there's another vocalist."

I'd been reaching for the pitcher to refill him, but let my hand drop to the arm of the chair. "Another singer?"

"Yeah. Gunn."

"Gunn. Funny. I don't remember Gunn being particularly musical." I said this quite nicely. Hardly any edge at all. I don't know why the vampire flinched like I was staking him.

"No reflection on you. See, well, we didn't know you would be, you know, joining us."

Guilty vampires. Who would have thought there'd be two in the world? But Spike's guilt was so much more entertaining than Angel's. Spike hung his head and hid his eyes and shifted his little tush around like the hardwood floor had suddenly developed splinters. The very picture of abashed. It almost made me feel bad for making him feel bad.

"And Gunn's mother used to play Jimi Hendrix and Bob Marley around the house, so you know, I know a lot of the songs he knows. Not the urban contemporary stuff. The hip-hop and rap and all that. But he's willing to concentrate on older stuff. Mostly. You know, in return for getting first crack at any groupies." He gave a little shrug. "Maybe he'd share?"

"I want 60% of the lead vocals. Top billing. And an option on a karaoke night if I deem it commercially viable."

"Sure, sure, Lorne. Anything you want."

I smiled.

He growled. "Anything but a duet."

"Oh, if I keep plying you with seabreezes, chickie, I think you'll be singing tandem soon."

He pushed the glass away unfinished. I bet that didn't happen often. "So we have a deal."

"Yes. Oh. One more thing." I paused. Thought it through. Did I want-- "The club. I'm going to name it Caritas II."
I admit it. When I first saw my Blondie Bear, sort-of alive and sort-of well, I forgot everything-- the betrayal, the dumping, the staking, Drusilla, Buffy, all that bad stuff. All I could remember was how he could be so sweet. He really could. No one's ever been as sweet in bed with me.

And, well, you know, it's hard enough for a single vampire girl out in the big city to find a decent man. Harder when your sex standards got set so high so early.

So I saw him, all stunned there in Angel's office, and I thought, oh, yes, baby, bedtime story time!

But it all fell apart just like that, when about the first words out of his mouth were "where is Buffy?" And I remembered why I'd left him, why I'd left Sunnydale.

I was the only one, except Angel, who wanted Spike to whoosh back into that amulet. The secretaries thought he was the hottest thing since Orlando Bloom. And pretty soon they all found out that Spike and I used to, you know, be an item. I wasn't the one who told them-- I suspect that little bitch Lisa, who's trying to get my job, and thought it would help if everyone knew I used to get horizontal with Angel's enemy.

It didn't work. Angel never trusted me anyway, so no loss.

See, Lisa thinks I got my job out of, what do they call it, nepotism. That's when you hire a relative, right? Not that I'm a relative. Well, maybe I am. I don't know what I am in the great genealogy of Clan Vampire, being as how I was turned by some anonymous thug. Not that I care. I can't be limited by my origins, you know? This is America. Even if my sire was nothing but a minion of that mean snakey mayor, well, it doesn't mean I have to be any less than I want to be. Even if I'm not a fancy Aurelian like a couple vampires I have the (cough) good fortune to know.

But as far as Lisa's concerned, all vampires are alike, you know? So she says (behind my back-- to my face she's just as sweet as candy corn) that Angel plucked me right out of the secretarial pool because I'm a vampire. Affirmative action. Reverse discrimination.

Ha. If she only knew the truth. Angel didn't promote me. Wes did. And yeah, my being a vampire was a factor, but not like Lisa thinks. Wes didn't come right out and say it, but I got the message. I was as much a security guard as I was an executive assistant. "If Angel should happen to get... belligerent. I would appreciate your, uh, immediate action."

In other words, if Angel should happen to add "us" to his name (become Angelus again, I mean), I'm supposed to hurl my notoriously strong vampire body in his path. Stop the rampaging savage soulless monster long enough for Wes to find a spell or a gypsy or a crossbow to make him right again.

Yeah, right. I'm barely out of fledgling status. And I'm supposed to stop a 250-year-old master vampire's evil alter ego? I'd last about twenty seconds.

Wes should give Spike that job. I'm not saying Spike would win, necessarily-- Angel is way bigger, and Angelus is way meaner-- but at least Spike would have fun before he got dusted. He likes to fight. And I bet he'd love to fight Angel/us.

Then again, his typing skills are pretty bad. And his phone manner has got to be just lamentable. We'd have no clients left if Spike had to field their calls. You can just imagine how many bloody hells he'd bellow every time a client called to complain about their bill.

Anyway, I'm the only one since Cordelia, well, whatever Cordelia did, who can handle Angel. I
don't mean physically. (Heck, I'd be better than Cordy at that, lots better.) I take care of all the little details he doesn't have any patience for, and the big details too, and I do real good coffee, and real good blood too, and I got an A in English class, so I know enough grammar to rearrange the commas in his memos-- he read somewhere you put a comma wherever you'd pause, and you know how slow he talks? Well, he's got more commas per square inch than Wolfram & Hart has foreclosed souls in the vault. And he doesn't like me, not one little bit, but I never lose my cool, and I'm always cheerful, and I don't even cry in the lady's room (Lisa lurks there). I wait till I get home.

Angel doesn't like me, but he knows I'm good at my job. And he wouldn't demote me just because once upon a time, I used to be Spike's girlfriend. In fact, for awhile there, he kept making odd little suggestions -- "You know Spike. He's pretty depressed. Maybe you should take him out. Somewhere. Bowling. Uh. Dancing."

I'm not that dumb. I figured out pretty quick he wanted me to get Spike back into bed, and then Angel would have something to use in this supposed rivalry they have over the Slayer. You know, I just don't understand it. Angel's not my type... okay, I guess it's pretty clear who is my type... but he's pretty impressive in that big broody way. And he must be rich, or at least he has a way big expense account. And Spike-- well, Spike's not big, and he's not broody, and he's about as far from rich as a guy can get without sleeping at the Salvation Army. But he's ... impressive. In his own way.

Anyway, here are these two guys, relative degrees of hotness, right? And they both want that washed-out skinny little B-cup.

I'd already lost Spike to the little bitch once. She could have him. Or she couldn't, ha-ha, could she? Angel accidentally left a copy of that Powers contract in the Xerox machine, and I knew exactly what it meant. Little Buffy Anne B-cup wasn't ever going to get her pet vampire back... for her own good. I loved it.

I didn't want Spike. Really. But... well, discretion is the better part of valor, and my job too. So for a long time, I tried to avoid him. Days went by with me pretending Spike was wherever he'd been before he was here. Only he kept being where I was now. I'd hear his voice and I'd scramble into the closet by my desk. I'd see a flash of black leather, and I'd duck into an office. (Jeez, and they say evil vampires are hypersexual... they're nothing compared to evil lawyers.)

But it got old quick. I mean, he kept stomping up the stairs-- no one stomped around like Spike, it so took me back-- and I'd have to duck under my desk before he rounded the corner and shoved his way into Angel's office.

So I was crouching there late one afternoon, waiting, and I heard his footsteps go by, and then stop, and then start back. "Hey, Harmony."

Busted. I stood up, brushing off my skirt. Dignity and grace, I told myself. Think how Oprah would handle this. "Angel is on the phone," I told him. "Not that his being busy ever matters to you." Okay. So I have to work at the dignity and grace thing.

He was regarding me curiously. His head was tilted to the side in that way that makes him look so young and cute-- No. It makes him look evil and rotten. Then he stuck his lower lip out in that pout. He had it patented, you know. Along with the headtilt. I swear.

"You've been avoiding me."

I folded my arms over my chest, just like Oprah does when a guest is being really obnoxious. "I am afraid I don't give you enough thought to bother with avoiding you."

"Oh." The lip went back to a more normal posture. It was still pretty lethal. I used to nibble on that
lip. A girl doesn't forget a lip like that. "Okay. Just, you know, since we're old friends--"

"We are not old friends." Truer words have never been spoken.

"We're not?"

That jerk had the gall to look hurt.

"No." I glanced at the lights on the phone. "Angel's off the line. You can go in and antagonize him now."

But he lingered there by my desk, even as I made a big point about getting back to my computer work. Finally I had to look up. "What?"

"I'm not trying to antagonize him," he said. "I'm supposed to help him on his journey."

"Yeah. You're always such a big help to your fellow vampires." I couldn't help myself. I guess I still had some issues with him.

But from the gratified look he was giving me, he didn't have a clue that I was being ironic. Hey, he thought we were old friends, right? And I guess he'd forgotten about all those years he spent helping the vampire slayer slay his fellow vampires.

Hey. Not my problem, right? All in the past. I was a New Woman now. New Vampire Woman, I mean. And that Old Vampire Man wasn't part of my future.

Too bad he was still part of my present.

All of a sudden, he wasn't so eager to get in and irritate Angel. He hopped up on my counter, his tight little buns just managing to fit on the narrow space. He'd finally noticed it was 72 degrees in our climate-controlled headquarters and left the leather coat behind. But he hadn't noticed-- or didn't care, more likely-- that this was the headquarters of a lawfirm, the sort of lawfirm that bills out first-year associates at $400 an hour, and expects them to dress accordingly.

Gunn came by just at that moment to make the point I was way too busy ignoring Spike to make. "Dude, where are your clothes?"

Spike looked down as if he might be stark naked without realizing it. He stared at his own t-shirt covered chest for a little while-- it's one of those chests that only gets better with consideration, you know-- and then looked up inquiringly at Gunn. "Got 'em on, don't I?"

Gunn was shaking his head sadly. "I mean the suit. The tie."

He gestured to his own outfit, Brioni and Charvet, which had to cost ten billable hours at least, and Spike's eyes lit up. "Oh, right. You look great, mate. Million bucks worth. Mighty fine."

"I wasn't looking for compliments, idiot. I'm wondering where your own fancy threads are."

"Oh." Spike shrugged. "Well, I did try them on. But that tie-- I can't tie it. Can't see myself in the mirror, remember? Couldn't get it straight."

Gunn glanced over at me. More than I usually got from him. He said, "You should do what Angel does when he has to wear a tie. Have Harmony tie it for him."

Oh, yeah, my very favorite part of being Angel's assistant. NOT. Angel is even worse than Gunn-- can't bring himself to look at me, like, you know, my soullessness might be contagious. And he's so
darned tall. I have to stand on a stepstool to get access to his thick neck, and he spends the whole time looking over my shoulder at his vases or his wall-hangings, anywhere but my face. And if my hands should happen to brush his skin, he flinches. So it makes me feel, well, leprous or something. But I act like it's no big deal that I'm tying the tie of my boss who can't stand to be this close to me.

I just tie the tie and try not to remember how I learned to do it-- tying my daddy's tie before he went to work. Daddy didn't look away, though. He used to smile and tell me I was the best tie-tyer in the world, and give me a pat on the head afterwards. That's how I learned. The four-in-hand, the Windsor knot, the Oriental. My daddy taught me, and told me I'd make someone a great wife someday.

I guess he was wrong. But I made someone a great executive assistant. And that's something, isn't it?

I looked up to find Spike's gaze on me. "You think I should wear a tie, Harm?"

I lifted my chin. "I don't care what you wear. But all I can say is, you are so lucky Angel never saw that credit card bill from Saks. And you're not even wearing what you spent all that money on."

Spike smiled. "You hid the bill, didn't you? Kept Angel from seeing it."

I shut up. It was true, but I didn't want him to know it. Gunn glanced over at me, like he was going to ask maybe if I'd do the same for him. But he didn't. I should have known. He wouldn't ask any favors from me.

Now he just nodded and walked away.

Spike watched him go, then twisted to look at me. "Bit of tension there with Charlie, huh?"

"Tension? You mean how he can hardly even acknowledge my vampire existence? You call that tension?"

I guess I sounded bitter. But there were three vampires in prominent roles in this company. One Gunn admired, one he went out drinking with, and one he scorned. And I didn't know why I was the one who got the scorn.

Spike reached over my PC monitor and touched my shoulder. I felt his fingers, cool and gentle, right through the silk of my blouse. I flinched, just like Angel does when I accidentally touch him. But Angel doesn't have to make himself do it like I did.

"What?" I said.

Spike drew his hand back. "Just -- look. Charlie told me his little sister got turned a few years ago. And he had to dust her. And she was, you know, a pretty young lady like you. And so, well, I think he might have some problem with seeing you here. Because-- hey. You know. He looks at you, and you're doing good, and you're not killing anyone, and he maybe thinks he didn't have to do it after all. That maybe, if he'd done different, she could be okay too."

I looked down at the scrawled page I was supposed to be typing. Angel's words swam in front of my eyes. "Oh," I finally said. "I guess-- I guess I understand."

Spike hopped down off my counter. Change of subject. He never could focus on any one topic for long. "Is Angel back on the phone? Don't want to interrupt him when he's free, you know."

I nodded, and Spike gave me a grin and then sauntered over and flung open the door's to the boss's office. "Hey, Granddad!" I heard him call. "How's the journey going?"
It was only a minute before Angel buzzed and ordered me to come in and do some filing. I could tell what he really wanted was a witness to how annoying Spike was. And when I got in there, Spike was doing his best to score big points on the old irritation scale. He was sitting in the client chair, chewing on Angel's Dunhill pen, his big boots up on Angel's desk, and complaining about the slow espresso machine in the employee lounge and suggesting a satellite pickup for the big-screen TV.

Angel gave me a glowering look, but I figured this time it wasn't about me. I picked up the crate of folders and carried them to the mahogany filing cabinet next to the bookcase, and pretended I was all alone in the office, with nothing but the alphabet to worry about. I always get mixed up around JKL. And PQ.

But everytime I looked up from a folder, there they were, the two of them, at Angel's desk, grandsire and grandchilde, dark and light. Annoyed and Annoying.

"Okay. So. Back to the mission. What do you need me to do, mate? To get you going on that journey?"

Angel did that exasperated breath-holding thing that's a little less impressive when you realize that he doesn't need to breathe. Not that Spike's ever impressed with Angel anyway. It's what he has instead of religion, you know. Disrespecting Angel. Anyhoo, Angel held his breath and then let it out in a long sigh, like it was only his iron grip on himself that kept him from tossing Spike out the window. Finally he said, "I understand you were an utter failure on the softball team."

"Utter failure? Huh! I hit three of those, what do you call them?"

"Home runs?"

"Yeah. Right out of the pitch."

"Park. And that was just enough to let everyone know you were a ringer."

"Ringer?"

Angel rolled his eyes. "A superior but ineligible player slipped into the lineup."

"You mean, like a vampire playing with humans."

"Right. And three home runs in three at-bats kind of advertises ringer."

"I can't help it," Spike said, all modesty now. "I wield a big bat. Right, Harm?"

I ignored him and continued filing the Bs. Bostwick, Barry; Bosun demon uprising; Burundi trade rituals....

"What was I supposed to do? Strike out deliberately?"

"Once would have worked."

"I have my pride, mate."

Another heavy Angel sigh. "And then there was the bench-clearing brawl."

"That was not my fault."

I snorted. I know I wasn't supposed to acknowledge him, but I couldn't help it. "Oh, right, Spike," I said. "There was you. There was a brawl. And you weren't to blame? I'm going to call Ripley's
Believe It or Not! Because... uh, not."

Spike moved his boots to the other the corner of Angel's fancy desk, sulking. "Okay, so I started it. But I had the right! That bowler--"

"Pitcher," Angel said with his long-suffering air.

"That pitcher boned me."

You know, I'm going to have to start going to those company softball games.

"You mean he beaned you," Angel said.

"Right. He hit me with the ball. Right on the elbow." He stuck out his elbow, which was, of course, as perfectly marble-white as the rest of him. But he gazed at Angel like he expected his grandsire to kiss it and make it better.

"And you didn't move the elbow superfast right in front of the ball? Just to have an excuse to start a fight?"

"Me?" Spike said, all injured innocence.

Angel opened a folder and read from the page inside. "Three black eyes. Two broken fingers. The opposing dugout destroyed and the second base stolen."

"I can't help it if my teammates responded with the fervor one would expect from loyal comrades in battle."

Angel slapped the page down on the file, the file I'd carefully labeled with the tab Spike, aka William the Bloody Curse to Womankind. (I don't think Angel ever noticed. Then again, he never notices anything I do. I could write cusswords in otter blood on his desk, and he'd ignore it.) "You've been expelled from the league. We're lucky they're settling just for probation for W&H. But from now on, they're going to take every player's temperature before the game, to exclude all vampires."

"You know, if this was any kind of lawfirm, you'd file a discrimination suit on behalf of vampire batsmen everywhere."

"What the holy hell am I supposed to do with you, Spike?"

This made me worry, just a bit. Angel sounded really heartfelt. And considering his heart's been dead for 250 years, that was a real feat.

Not that I would be worrying about Spike. I didn't care what Angel did to him. Or with him. Or on him.

Spike bounced out of his chair and clapped his hands. "I'll show you. It'll be great. See, I'm thinking what you need is more exposure to modern culture. For, you know, your journey."

"I have enough exposure to modern culture," Angel said coldly.

"Masterpiece Theater doesn't count. Got to keep up with the times. And they got this new thing called... rock and roll."

"I don't like--"

"Said I'd show you. Harm, could you call Clem? Tell him it's rehearsal time. And Kenny."
"Kenny the security guard?" I asked.

"Kenny the lead guitarist," Spike corrected. "And Gunn. And Lorne. We've started a firm band!"

I'd been hearing rumors about this, but never figured Angel to let it get past hypothetical. And when I saw his face as Spike bounded to the door, I thought the band wasn't going to last long enough to be a one-hit wonder. Wasn't going to last another hour, to judge by Angel's expression and his extremely reluctant progress out of the office.

Still, I made the calls as Angel flung open the twin doors to his office and Spike slid through in front of him. I could see Angel at the elevator, automatically punching his thumb at the wall, but this was a heat-sensing elevator, no buttons, and so Spike stood over there laughing until the elevator doors swooshed open. Then he yelled, "Race you down!" and tore off for the staircase.

I was still pretending not to care. I moseyed down to the lobby in my own good time. So I got to hear them before I saw them, the crash of drums, the twang of guitars, and someone-- Lorne-- belting out a show tune.

"I told you, demon," Spike was yelling over the noise. "No show tunes! That's for ponces. We're a neo-punk post-grunge reggae-funk metal band!"

"Hey!" I heard Gunn's protest as I came down the corridor, and saw him standing next to Clem and his drum kit over in the corner by the big staircase. "You forgot rap!"

"Hip hop. Soul. Okay. Rhythm and blues. Fine. But we don't have the sampling equipment for rap. I told you."

"Just the one Jay-Z song. Or I quit." Gunn had that bulldog face on, and Spike was glaring right back at him. I know one's black and one's white, real white, but sometimes the two of them look like twins, the way they make mad faces. Both so stubborn. I don't get how they ever became buddies. I guess it's because they both like to drink and fight, in no particular order.

Spike gave in first, and that's when I realized this dumb band of his was, like, majorly important to him. And I glanced over at Angel's grim face, and I couldn't help feeling bad. He was going to shut Spike down, and it was going to hurt Spike's feelings. And that was like way dangerous for me. When Spike's feelings are hurt, well, what can I say. I mean, that Marquis de Sod guy? He'd put down his whip and stand there patting Spikey on the shoulder and telling him it was all right. When Spike's feelings are hurt, it's like twenty seconds and my panties are down. You know, to divert him from his pain. (At least it always used to work. Back then, I think he made that lip tremble, you know, just to do the gravity thing on the panties.)

"Okay." Spike jumped up the four steps to the staircase landing. "Let me introduce you to the band. There's Clem on skins. And Kenny the Killer on lead. And me on bass. And Lorne and Gunn doing vocals."

Angel was just standing there, his hand on a pillar like it was holding him up. "You can't play in the lobby!"

"Why not? It's after hours. Everyone's gone."

"But-- but--"

"It's going to be so cool, Angel," Spike said. "And see, it'll get you more involved with your staff. Because I did a poll-- okay, so Fred says it's not totally scientific, I mean, I just grabbed people in the hall and wouldn't let 'em go till they filled out my survey. But 63% of your workers think you don't
do enough interacting with the staff. 17% say you do just enough, so we're not inviting them to the performances."

Angel opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. "What about the rest?"

"Oh," Spike said with a wave of his hand. "They were scared to death of you and didn't want you even to know they existed. So I don't think they'll be in the audience."

"I'm not going to sing in your band."

Lorne and Gunn both blew out big sighs of relief here. I guess I'm not the only one totally sick of Mandy.

"Not singing, you prat. Don't I have enough singers already? No. Need you to be the roadie."

"The -- the what?"

"The roadie. The guy who carries all the equipment around and sets it up."

Angel's mouth was hanging open. I could practically see tonsils. Then he drew himself up, all tall and straight and CEO. "I'm not going to be your roadie!"

"Hey, c'mon, man. Need to be strong to haul all the equipment around. And you got vampire strength."

Angel never liked being reminded of that vampire thing. So I wasn't surprised when he pushed off from the pillar and turned on his heel and walked back to the elevator. But Spike seemed honestly disappointed by his exit. "Angel, come on, we need you--"

The elevator doors closed. Spike gave a big sigh.

"I have vampire strength!"

I heard this coming out of my mouth. I swear I didn't say it. It just, you know, fell out. And then, then I was suddenly just seized with hope. I don't think I've hoped so hard since Wes told me he was thinking of promoting me out of the secretarial pool. Don't ask me why, but I like so wanted to be part of the band. But-- but I couldn't ever get up on stage and sing. I know you won't believe this, but I get really bad stagefright. When Lorne made me sing karaoke, just to check if I was more evil than I was supposed to be, I about peed my panties, only it was my only pair of Chantelles, so I didn't.

But-- "I could be the roadie." I said it like I had lots of experience and could provide references from the Red Hot Chili Peppers. One thing being with Spike taught me-- you can bluff your way into most anything if you just speak up and look confident.

"But you're a gir—" Spike stopped. He narrowed his eyes in my direction, and I subtle-like curved my arm in front of my chest and flexed my bicep. "Hmm. You are pretty strong, Harm."

A compliment! From Spike! And it wasn't about my breasts, although he was sort of looking at them. (Who could blame him, huh? I mean, my bicep was like bouncing the right one up and down.) It was about my strength. This made me smile. "I was thinking maybe of being the groupie, but it seems like a roadie might get, you know, paid."

"And it's not degrading. More self-actualizing, showing that the power of a woman isn't restricted to her sexuality," Spike observed.
"Hey, yeah!" I considered this for a moment, then beamed at him. "You are so right. I'm, like fulfilling my potential for positive action and -- and--"

"And it's got to be a draw," Spike said, "a roadie who looks like you. You could wear a t-shirt with the bandname on it, and knot it under your pretty tits, like the Hooters girls."

I realized my mouth was hanging open, just like Angel's, and shut it, then opened it again to say, "Oh, wow, yeah! That would be so cool!"

Wouldn't you know it, Gunn had to object. Okay, I understood about his sister and all that, but this was business. And now that he was a bigtime attorney, he ought to read up on the Equal Employment Opportunity laws before he went around denying my equal right to be a roadie.

"Come on, Spike, she's not going to work--"

"Hey. Charlie. Think, mate. Remember the Spike and Gunn show?"

Gunn glanced over at me and away, back at Spike. "I remember the Gunn and Spike show."

"Same diff. Remember how the band is going to work? With, you know, our purpose? Our Gunn and Spike purpose?"

Spike said this with great significance, and Gunn seemed to understand what he meant. No one else did, to judge from the faces of the other bandmembers.

Gunn shrugged. "Yeah. I remember. We get the club. Appeal to the chi-chi and chi-chi wannabes, vampire, demon, and human."

Lorne looked like he was going to take issue with that wannabe part, but Spike got there first. "We get the club. Get the clientele. And there's a particular clientele, you know, that we're looking for."

"Sure. But I don't see where Harmony comes in-- oh."

Gunn looked at me. Really looked at me, for maybe the first time ever. Kind of creeped me out, if you want to know the truth, because I wondered if he was remembering what he'd done to his sister, and thinking maybe that someone should have done that to me before I got a chance to come here and be a roadie for the band. But then his face softened, and he kind of sighed. "Look, Spike, if we're going that route, the girl has a right to know."

Oh. Was he actually thinking of me? Of what was best for me? "A right to know what?"

Spike said quick, "Tell you later. So, everyone cool with this? Harmony being our roadie?"

Lorne said yes enthusiastically. He liked me. Sometimes I thought he was the only one in the building who did. But Kenny the Security Guard nodded, and Clem banged a couple times on his snare drum in an affirmative way, and Gunn shrugged. "Okay. But you fill her in, Spike. Not right to use her as bait without her permission."

Bait? Wait. But Spike was grumbling now about how maybe Gunn ought to write up a fancy-assed legal release form and have me sign it. I didn't have much chance to wonder about it all, because Clem wanted to show me how to put together and take apart his drum kit, and Lorne wanted to design my t-shirt, and it wasn't until the rehearsal was over and moonlight was sliding in through the glass doors and I was alone there with Spike that I remembered to ask what Gunn had meant about bait.
We were hauling the amps back to the storage room, one under each arm, when I said, "Okay, so spill. What did Gunn want you to tell me?"

Spike kicked the storage room door open (I made a mental note to call maintenance in the morning) and didn't answer till we were well into the room and the amps were stored away. Then he leaned against the wall and said, "See, it's like this. There's some weirdo vamp who's turning young women and forcing them into a life, or unlife, of vamp prostitution. He's marketing to humans who want to come in and get sucked, and maybe some sex on the side. He's got a few mobile brothels, and it's hard to pin him down, because his lieutenants are handling the retail business. Seems like he's the one that does all the recruiting, though. And every girl-vamp that gets dusted, well, he'll just make a new one."

It sounded like a good business plan to me. But I gathered Spike and Gunn wanted to shut him down. "So where do we come in? And where do I come in?"

"He goes after girls who are out clubbing at the trendy spots. And he also needs to find humans who are attracted to the whole vamp thing. And so we thought maybe, with Lorne's reputation, the new club would be a natural for him. Two birds with one stone. Trendy girls, and vamp-lusting humans, right there in easy reach."

"And... me as bait."

"Yeah, well." He wiggled his shoulders. He always did that when he was ashamed. "I was just thinking. You're prettier than any of the girls he's like to make."

Oh. Gee. That was sweet, wasn't it? "Thanks. And so I'm supposed to--?"

"Just do your job. And be visible. And maybe he'll come to you. And if he does, we'll get him."

"It seems like a longshot."

"Nah. You're going to stand out like a beacon. It's going to get around, word about a gorgeous girl roadie in a trendy demon-friendly club, and there'll be enough vamps around that he won't know till he gets in too close that you're one already." Awkwardly he added, "Charlie thinks it might be dangerous. For you."

That kind of warmed me, almost as much as the gorgeous and prettier did. Gunn was worried for me. Who would have thought? But much as I appreciated it, I wasn't going to revert to a poor fragile damsel. I was self-actualized, remember? So I tossed my head. "I'm not some weak human girl, easy to take and turn. I'm going to be just as strong as this vamp-pimp is, and he won't know it till it's too late."

Spike grinned and pushed off from the wall. "That's my girl. Always game for a new adventure."

That's my girl. He didn't mean it. I knew he didn't mean it. Not that way. But still--

"Race you back to the lobby!"

It wasn't fair-- he was yelling that as he headed out the door, and he got a head start of a second or two. So when I caught up to him by the staircase, I grabbed his shirt front and made him stop. He was laughing, and the pocket of his t-shirt was tight against his chest, and I saw the triangular outline of a guitar pick in there. Quick as a bunny, I reached in and grabbed it out, and started running up the steps. This time I got the jump on him.

"Hey, that's my special pick! My good luck pick!"
He probably stole it from Sid Vicious, or at least he'd claim he did. But he had to catch me first.

He did. Maybe I let him. I slowed down up on the fourth level, and he tackled me, and we went sprawling, and slid down the marble floor a few feet before skidding to a stop. I rolled over to face him, trying to squirm out of his grasp, but not maybe squirming quite as hard as I could. I did get my hand free, and held the pick up triumphantly, and before he could grab it, I popped the little plastic chip in my mouth.

I guess he thought that was an invitation. And maybe it was. I never knew my motivations when he was around. But I think I was just feeling playful, because I was so happy. I felt like I'd felt the first time Cordelia looked around the high school cafeteria and saw me and jerked her head at me, calling me to sit at her table. I was part of the band. And part of the investigation.

But maybe it was more. I don't know. All I know is that Spike's body was pressed against mine, and the marble floor was just as hard underneath me, and the laughter left his eyes and they were dark and uncertain, and he looked like he didn't know what he was supposed to do, and then he did what seemed like the most natural thing in the world. He leaned closer and kissed me. And for just a second, I let it take me back to those first months, when I thought I was the luckiest vampire on earth, because I was Spike's girlfriend—

I felt his tongue on my lips, and I almost melted, and then I remembered. And I shoved him off, and sat up and spat out the pick and threw it on the floor. And I started to get up, but he got hold of my wrist, and said plaintively, "Hey, Harm, wait. What's the matter?"

I wanted to cry. Instead I yanked my hand out of his grasp and laughed. It was a bitter laugh. "What's the matter? Oh, gee. Let me think on that. Maybe it's that you're doing it again." I fixed him with an accusatory gaze. "You can't fool me. You're still in love with the Slayer."

He was lying there on his side, propped up on his elbow. His eyes were focused warily on me. "That's over."

"Because it has to be. I've seen the contract. You can't ever see her again."

The light in his eyes blinked out. Just like that. Like a candleflame when you open the crypt door. "Yeah."

"You can't have her now. Like you couldn't have her back then. So you settle again. For me. Because I'm--" I couldn't think of the word. I could feel it, feel what he thought of me, if he was thinking of me at all.

And he said the word I was looking for. "Convenient."

"Yeah. Convenient." It tasted sharp and metallic in my mouth, that word. "See? You even realize it. I'm just a convenience. But-- but it wasn't fair back then. And it's not fair now."

His voice got defensive. "Don't recall that I forced you into my bed or anything back then."

"You didn't need to," I said bitterly. "All you needed was to -- to be nice to me."

"Sorry about that," he replied. He didn't sound sorry at all. "Being nice being such a sin and all."

I shook my head and started to rise. He wasn't going to listen to me. He didn't even care. Never had. He'd give up his whole existence for the Slayer, but for me--

"Wait." And then, coaxing, "Come on, Harmony. Just wait a mo."
I gave him a sullen look and settled back against the wall. My feet were just inches from his chest. I could kick him with my high heels if I wanted to. "What?"

"I didn't mean it as an insult. You know. Kissing you. I mean, it's over with the Slayer. I have to move on, right? That's what everyone says."

I had my sources. "And you've been answering to everyone that you're swearing off women."

"That doesn't apply to you."

"Yeah. Because I'm not a woman, right? Because I'm just-- just a female vampire?"

He got that cute frowny look, the one he always got when he was trying to figure something out. "Nah. Come on, Harmony. You're a woman, right enough." He flexed his fingers and grinned, like he might reach out and touch my womanly bosom. "It's 'cause you're an ex. Don't have to swear off an ex, right? Not so dangerous. Been there, done that. No harm, no foul." His smile grew a little sweeter. "Maybe a little Harm. But no foul."

I wasn't mollified, by his smile or by his explanation. "Lots of harm. For me."

He shook his head. Baffled. "Not meaning to harm you, sweetheart. Just, you know, some mutual sharing, by two people who know each other well enough already."

"You don't know me at all."

His eyes narrowed. "Sure I do. Lived with you for months. You like unicorns and you look pretty in blue and -- and--" He faltered then, but no one could ever call Spike slow on the uptake. He quirked his eyebrow and whispered, "And you liked me to--"

I cut it off before he reduced my whole being to my preferences in, you know, knickknacks and sweaters and bed. "Like I said. You don't know me at all." I brought my legs up to my chest and hugged them. I thought I might be starting to cry, so I pressed my face down into the little cleft between my knees. My voice came out muffled but not too teary. "You didn't give me enough thought to get to know me."

Spike was never one to be patient with self-pity, unless it was his own. "It was a long time ago, Harmony. Maybe you should get over it."

That made me mad, and I looked up at him, the tears drying fast on my cheeks. "I have gotten over it. Not that you'd notice. I have a good job and my own apartment and I'm not killing humans and-- and--" I wished I could say I had a great guy who loved me to death. But he'd know that was a lie. "And I don't need you coming around like before, trying to pretend you care. I might have needed you back then, but I don't need you now."

"You--" He got that baffled look again. Sometimes he was so dense. "You needed me back then? What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on, Spike! I was a fledgling! No sire. No family. And then you came and-- " I was remembering now, what I'd been trying to forget, how Spike had seen me one night at Willy's, when I was scared to undeath, but trying to act like I'd been a vampire for centuries, and I'd felt him watching me, and turned and saw those hard blue eyes, that soft mouth, that perfect face. No guy like that ever wanted me when I was human, and here I was, a castoff undead, and the hottest vampire in the state, the one all the girl-vamps whispered about, was crooking his finger at me.

If that was all, maybe I wouldn't have fallen so hard. If it was just him wanting sex, maybe we would
Have done it and I would have learned how to use my looks better, and caught some rich, powerful vamp, instead of one who had nothing but his hot body and cool attitude to recommend him. But Spike was so sweet to me those first weeks. He saw right through my tough pose and recognized how new I was, and he taught me what I needed to know to survive unlife. And he moved me into his crypt, and stole little things for me, and played games with me, and taught me to love sex. (I'd just done it three times before, with a guy on the golf team before I was turned, and you know, what they say about golfers is true. All they care about is their balls and their putters.) And maybe I was stupid, but I thought that all added up to him loving me, the sex and the gifts and the shared home.

"What did I do?"

I shook my head, hard. Wanting the memories to go away. I am what I am, and can't go back. "I was only 18, you know? I was really young. I got turned on my high school graduation day. I might have been a vampire, but I was still just a girl. And -- and there was you... and you made me fall --"

I broke off. There was no use saying it. When I got hold of my voice, I said, "Anyway, you started out nice, but then you got mean, and kept telling me I was stupid, and tried to stake me, and didn't even think that was a big deal. Just another vampire dusted. Only it was me, and I was all I had, and I thought I was all you had too, and that you'd care --"

The voice was getting all wavery, so I shut up. And I turned my head away and stared down at the ladies' room at the end of the hall, and thought about getting up and going in there and washing my face until Spike gave up and went home.

But I was too wrung out to move, and finally he said, "You're right. I didn't care. Didn't have it in me to care. Not then. I was-- you know. Ripped apart. Neutered. Heartbroke. Didn't know who I was anymore, but I knew I wasn't worth much." In a low tone, he said, "Shouldn't have taken it out on you. You were... good to me."

I lifted my face from my knees and looked up at him. "I was?"

"Yeah. Better than I deserved." He reached out his hand tentatively and tugged at the hem of my skirt. "I think I figured I was so low, anyone who loved me had to be even lower. Too low for me to love back."

That hit me hard, and he sensed it, and added, "But that was about me, not about you. I mean, there wasn't anything wrong with you. Sometimes-- sometimes I'd kind of wake up and see you, and not just, you know, the one stupid enough to care about me, and I'd be ... I don't know. Kind of enchanted. So pretty, you were, and that smile, and when I wanted to smash things, you'd find a way to make me laugh instead, and you were always so cheerful." He slid his hand down to encircle my ankle. "I think maybe I didn't realize you might be feeling bad. Because you were always cheerful. You'd get knocked down and spring right up again." He looked up at my face. "You're still like that, aren't you?"

I gave a little shrug. I didn't want to say anything, because I wanted him to keep talking about me. It was like aloe vera, you know, what he was saying about me. Soothing all the wounds he'd left in my heart.

"So." He squeezed my ankle. "I guess I'm sorry. I was a jerk."

I'd waited years to hear that. "Say it again."

"Harmony." He stretched out on the floor, his arms covering his eyes like he was ashamed. "I'm sorry. I was a jerk. And I'm sorry I didn't even realize it, and didn't know why you were mad at me.
now I'm back. And-- and I don't deserve anything from you."

"You got that right."

"But-- " He lifted his hands from his eyes, and looked at me with a tentative smile. "But maybe, you know, since we're going to be bandmates and all, you could maybe forgive me, even though I don't deserve it?"

"I don't know."

"Please?" That seductive hand came over, finger-by-finger, walking across the floor like one of those Mars probes. And it probed up my shoe, and onto my stocking, and up my ankle.

I got kind of mesmerized watching it. Feeling it. Imagining where it was going.

Then I wrenched my foot away. "Stop that." I needed strength. I ran through all the empowering songs I knew, and one line popped out. "I'm saving all my lovin' for someone who's lovin' me. So you can just forget touching me. I am never ever going to sleep with you again." That didn't sound quite as authoritative as I wanted, so I added, "I mean it."

His hand fell. His face fell. "Okay. But-- but we can be friends, can't we?"

I let him stew for awhile. Then I said, grudgingly, "Maybe. But only if you're nice to me."

He smiled, very nicely, at me. I went kind of weak. And so I made my voice hard. "And only if you don't try to get me into bed. No more touching. No more suggestive comments."

"Okay," he said again. Then he bit his lip. "You don't mind if --, you know, once in awhile kind of think about it."

Austerely I said, "I can't direct your thoughts."

"So you don't object to my ... fantasizing?"

"As long as you don't tell me about it."

"So it's okay, the occasional wet dream?"

I dug the pointy toe of my shoe into his ribs. "You are so disgusting, Spike."

He was also ticklish, and so I rooted around in his ribcage a bit more, just to hear him laugh helplessly and to see him rolling on the floor like a caterpillar. Finally I took pity on him and withdrew my foot, and when he stopped twitching and was just lying there smiling at me, I said, "I am my own woman. And I don't need a man. And if I want a man, and maybe I do, I'm setting my sights higher."

"Higher than me?"

"Yes. I want a successful guy. Materially successful, I mean." I didn't want to insult him. Really, I didn't. But you can't work in a place like W&H without noticing that the rich clients are a whole lot happier than the poor ones. Not that we have many poor clients. "And, no offense, Spike, but you left this world last spring with nothing but the clothes on your back, and you still just have the clothes on your back."

"Got some in my closet too," he said sullenly. "Or at least on the floor of my closet. And I have a credit card."
"And if I ever get fired, you'll lose that too, once Angel gets hold of a bill and sees how many video games you charge."

"It's research. Into fighting techniques."

"Sure, Spike. Face it. You're broke. One step from homeless. As usual."

He sat up and took my hand and squeezed it. "Not the ideal boyfriend, am I?"

"You never were." I shook my head. "At least you're cute."

"Yeah. And low-maintenance."

This made me laugh, remembering the chip, and the broken Jack Daniels bottles, and the black moods, and the rampant sex-drive (not that I ever minded that), and the all-night poetry recitations, and the search for the Gem of Amarra, and the Passions marathons, and the whole icky Drusilla obsession, and the whole nasty Slayer obsession, and --

But financially, he was pretty low-maintenance, that was true. And that kind of worried me. He never needed money, so he never had any. And vampires, well, you know, not that he ever thought about such things, but we have to fund a really long existence. So I was looking ahead for him, because he never would bother with that. If he'd just do like me, and put a bit away every week, he'd be rich before he reached another century.

"Spike," I said seriously. Like a friend. "Listen. You need a salary. And a 401K. Angel's taking advantage of you. He sends you out on the most dangerous assignments every night, sometimes without backup, and now he's planning to have you work with Wes doing research during the day. And here you're going to be running the firm band. And all you're getting in payment is the apartment."

"And the credit card," Spike said fairly. "And I made a copy of the key to Angel's blood cabinet."

So that was where all the otter blood was going. Angel probably thought I was the one taking it. No, maybe not. Angel knew Spike pretty well. "Tell Angel. A salary."

He let go of my hand. "Last thing I want to be is a W&H employee," he said, that obstinate look back on his face.

I could see his point. If Spike were an employee, he could be co-opted by the Senior Partners. Or fired by Angel. Or transferred to the laundry detail. "Then tell him you want to be an independent contractor. In business for yourself. Paid hourly."

"You mean, like minimum wage?"

I couldn't suppress a groan. "Spike, you have very specialized skills. Both in fighting and in research. You're worth more than one of those lawyers, who might be expensive but come a dime a dozen. I mean, how many souled multi-lingual vampires there are out there?"

"Uh... one other one?"

"Right. And he doesn't beat up demons anymore. So you should hold out for a high hourly. Say... $100 an hour."

His eyes widened. "What am I going to do with all that?"
"Put it into a retirement account."

He studied me until I finally broke down and smiled. "Okay. Invest part. Give part to charity. Pay for Gunn's drinks when you go out. Take girls to expensive restaurants. Buy a car."

"I'd rather just hotwire one of Angel's."

He was hopeless. "Look," I said with exasperation. "You don't even need to talk to Angel. I'll just requisition you as a contractor. He signs everything I put in front of him, and never reads it."

"Whoa." His eyes flickered, and I could see him trying to figure out some way to use that little nugget of information. But finally, he just said, "Not sure it's right to take money for doing my mission."

Boy, that soul was a real burden, wasn't it? "Your mission isn't the demon-hunting and the Fyarl translations. You should get paid for that." Geez, what he needed was a managing female to take him in hand. I could do it part-time, but it might be dangerous, 'cause even now I wanted to slide my hand under that old t-shirt of his. I decided to stay on the lookout for another candidate, one who didn't know him back when he was evil and mean. "The Angel-journey thing, you can do pro bono."

"Yeah." He slid over to the wall to sit next to me, bumping shoulders. "Ever wonder why Angel merits me working full-time on his journey? Pro bono? I mean, as much energy goes into everyone trying to make him happy and fulfilled, could power LA for weeks."

"Well, he's special." I said this like that guy on Saturday Night Live-- Spike had nicked all the SNL anniversary videos from the video store, and so I kind of knew them by heart by the time I left him. "He's got the Powers, and the Partners--"

"And the Pricks and the Pussies-- nope, sorry. None of that. Gypsy curse."

I elbowed him. "They're all into him. The Powers want him to finish this journey. But I bet the Partners want him stuck right where he is."

"The Partners are evil."

"Well, duh."

"But sometimes I think the Powers are too." He sulked for awhile, no doubt on the evilness of the Buffy-no-see clause, and then heaved a big sigh. "So what's Angel's journey? You probably know him better, the way he is now, than the rest of us. What do you think he has to do to get to where he's supposed to be?"

I gave this some thought. Thought about how Angel treated me like I was just some high-functioning robot. And thought about how he treated Spike like an enemy. And both of us going out of our way to be congenial with him. Well, me, anyway-- Spike mostly just tried to annoy him, but in a really positive way, you know, to wake him up. And I thought about how that night I forgot my purse, and came back to the office to find Angel destroying files-- the files about Darla and Drusilla, his sire and childe. And then, finally, I said, "This Shanshu thing. The prophecy."

Spike didn't look surprised that I knew about it. He was figuring out that there wasn't much about Angel I didn't have access to. "You think his journey is to becoming mortal again?"

"No, that's what I mean. The Shanshu. I think it's like, I don't know. A diversion. Maybe I'm crazy. But okay, I didn't want to die, and I didn't want to be turned, but here I am, and I'm making the best
of it, right? And you-- heck, Spike, you like being a vamp. I can't imagine you human."

"Me neither." He lowered his voice. "You probably won't believe this. But I wasn't really cool as a human."

"I kind of figured that. I mean, all those poetry books you kept around the crypt."

"Poetry can be cool," he said defensively. "Anyway, don't see much advantage to being human. Except--" He didn't say whatever it was he was going to say, probably something Buffy-related that I didn't want to hear anyway. He ought to get a clue. I mean, come on. If she didn't love him as a vampire, she wouldn't love him as a human either, when he'd only be able to get it up once a night.

"Angel doesn't want to be a vampire, does he?" I said. "He's rejecting that. And you know what Dr. Phil says. You have to accept who you are. Take responsibility for all of your parts."

Spike made a face. "Don't you think Dr. Phil's a little, I don't know, mean? Harsh? I mean, tough love is all well and good, but he really seems to enjoy cracking that whip."

"You're such a wimp," I told him. "I bet you watch those Marianne Williamson specials on PBS and do all those wussy affirm-yourself exercises."

He ducked his head and refused to answer. And that was answer itself, wasn't it? "We're not talking about me. We're talking about Angel. And yeah. I think he's rejecting a big part of himself. Angelus--my grandsire, the master vampire. That's who Angel is, but he pretends not to be."

"And he doesn't like to be reminded of it-- the past, and the blood, and all that. He wants to be human. But it's weird," I said, sighing. "He's like so not human. You always liked human food, and TV, and all that human stuff. But he's not interested in any of that. I get the feeling if he did become human, he wouldn't know what to do with himself."

"So... you don't think his journey is towards becoming human again?"

"Nope. Can't be, unless the Powers are in this for the laughs. Can you imagine Angel without the super-strength? And having to decide what to eat for dinner? He likes things simple-- otter blood for breakfast, and pig blood for dinner. Never varies. Just think of what he'd be like at TGIF, with that big menu and all those crazy drinks. He'd drive the waiter crazy, changing his mind every ten seconds."

"And then there's the whole Paper or Plastic dilemma."

We both laughed, thinking of Angel in a grocery line. Then Spike said, "So what then? He's supposed to be moving towards acceptance of his vampire self?"

"And maybe, you know, opening up to it. I mean, being a vampire doesn't mean you have to be so limited, does it? I'm not." I glanced quickly at Spike. "I learned that from you. That I could still want and care and feel. That I could be more than just a blood-sucker. Because you were always more than that."

He liked that, I could tell. I guess he wanted to hear that life with him wasn't all misery and heartbreak for me. And it wasn't. Not anymore. I could remember the good times too, now that we were... friends.

He bumped my shoulder again. "Do me a favor, love. See if you can find any info about someone named..." He paused, looking around at the empty corridor, then his voice dropped to a whisper. "Connor. First name, I think. Connected to Angel somehow. But I think most traces of him have
been eradicated. I don't know how. But-- but Connor is a key. And this is W&H. There'll be some record."

"Why?" I wasn't that naive fledgling anymore. If I was going to be rooting around in forbidden records, I wanted to make sure it was for the right reason.

"Because. Because... the Powers gave me that name. It must be important. And no one around here has ever said it. So that must be important too, if that name has been erased." He frowned. "I don't know how it connects. But it connects somehow to Angel's journey."

"If I get caught, you have to take the blame."

"Sure, sweetheart. I'll tell Angel that you're so in love with me, you're not responsible for your actions, that I have you in thrall. That you're such a weak person, you'll mindlessly do anything I tell you. How's that?"

I growled, and he was up and running down the stairs before I could grab him. For just a second, watching him jump over the railing to the lobby, all grace and laughter, I considered-- but no. We could be friends. That's all.

But Spike and me as friends, well, that was pretty amazing, considering I'd dumped him at least eight times, and he'd tried to stake me that once. Not that I was going to chase him downstairs. I had work to do.

I let myself into Wes's office-- of course I had a passkey, or Angel did anyway-- and flipped on the light and sat down at the laptop off in the corner by the Exorcism section of his personal library. When they'd put the new system in, I made myself Network Administrator, so I had access to everyone's password. Wes's was Schopenhauer. I mean, really. Who would want to type that in everytime you wanted to buy some shoes from nordstroms.com? But that's Wes all over. Never misses an opportunity to show off his learning.

So, using Wes's identity, I drilled down through his menu-system down into the depths of the network, until I hit a dead end. Hmm. Even Wes, head of the research section, couldn't get past that virtual brick wall. And I bet he didn't realize it. I bet he thought this final screen was just the end.

But I knew better. I hit the combination of keys that identified me as the System SuperUser. (Don't ask how I got this. Top secret. I'm not even supposed to know the SuperUser exists.) And then I took a deep breath, and moved the mouse around the text on the screen, until my vampire super-hearing identified the tiny tickle of a connection. I clicked there, and everything fell away-- the text, the window frame, the brick wall-- and there it was. An old-fashioned DOS screen, a rusty black with a single blinking cursor.

I typed in Connor, and hit Enter.
The vampire-- the other vampire-- was there in the corner of the library, pretending to transcribe the taped conversation he was hearing through his headphones. But in fact he was humming to himself and tapping his pen on the notebook and occasionally muttering some words in Verosh, a demon language he claimed to know.

I wasn't seeing much translating, unless constant foot-fidgeting was involved.

He was driving me mad.

But he was driving Angel mad too. And when Angel was driven mad, well, it was somewhat more dangerous than any fit of temper to which I might aspire.

"You know what you need up here."

I repressed a sigh. "What do I need?"

"A CD player. Hey. I got one, don't I? I'll bring it tomorrow. Play you some good stuff. Just right for W&H." He paused, tapped the pen on his lip. "Like, say, Megadeath. And Black Sabbath."

This time it was a shudder I repressed. Also the urge to inquire if those were actual bands. "I prefer Liszt. That's L-I-S-Z-T, Spike. Known for his piano compositions."

"I'll have you know," he said, "I went to school with Franz Liszt."

That gave me pause. Could he-- Was he old enough-- Then I regrouped, mentally banging myself upside the head, as Gunn would say. "A fine feat, considering Liszt was Austrian and studied with Salieri."

He gave me a quick grin. "Oh, and I attended Clara Schumann's last concert in London."

"Clara .... Schumann."

"Yeah. Actually saw her several times before, when I was a boy."

"Several times." I invested this with as much skepticism as I could manage. It sounded as likely as his having been Liszt's schoolmate.

"Yeah." He stopped fiddling with the play button on the tape player for a moment, and said with mock solemnity, "You young whippersnappers have no notion how hard it was to hear great music in the days before the phonograph. Or Kazaa. Fortunately, London did get the occasional travelling band."

"And you, of course, were an avid concertgoer."

"Well, my papa was. At least when it was Clara playing. He was a bit mad for her. Always told me mum it was because Mrs. Schumann looked like her-- Mum, I mean, and you know, I went to the Clara Schumann website recently, and it was true. She did look like my mum, rather. I couldn't see it when I was a boy." He sighed. "That last concert. It was soon after I was turned. She was superb. Made me snivel, I'm not ashamed to say, thinking of Papa and the past. Lucky it was I went alone."

I couldn't help myself. "Angel-- I mean, Angelus-- wasn't a music aficionado?"
"Sure he was. He just tended to show his appreciation by eating the string section." After a moment he added, "The brass section always gave him wind."

"Gave him--" I broke off. I was furious. I didn't know why, except I suspected he was playing me for a fool. "Is that another lie? Like the Liszt?"

Spike drew back, just a bit, as if he felt the force of my anger, as well he might. "The Liszt would be a lie only were you to find plausible that the Hungarian Liszt would be mates with an English boy 43 years his junior. Otherwise, it's a joke. Ha. Maybe I should just tell you when I mean it to be a joke, you think? Just so we understand each other better?" He gave me an encouraging smile, as if he were trying to tutor me in the art of human empathy. "Did Angelus ever tell you he sired Salieri?"

I turned my chair around, so that my back was to him. But he was irrepressible. "That was another joke, Wes. It was actually Darla who did for Salieri." Then, with a theatrical sigh, he added, "All right. I didn't go to school with Franz Liszt."

"I don't care."

It was bare seconds, however, before he attacked me from another angle. "I did, however, go to school with a Wyndham, I think-- who knows, maybe a relation of yours. He was two forms ahead of me, played cricket." He sighed heavily. "I recall him well, as he died of typhus during Hilary term. We all went to the memorial, and his brother recited Shelley's elegy to Keats--

For he is gone, where all things wise and fair
Descend--oh, dream not that the amorous Deep
Will yet restore him to the vital air;
Death feeds on his mute voice, and laughs at our despair."

He could recite Shelley from memory? No. I wouldn't think about it. I decided, yet again, to ignore him.

Unfortunately, he continued to ignore that I was ignoring him. "Very affecting, to my sentimental boy's mind. Death feeds on his mute voice.... Decided then and there to die young." There was a hint of laughter in his voice. "And I did."

I was resolute. I spoke not another word for the rest of an hour. But it nagged at me, that he -- out of the blue-- recited that Shelley verse... I couldn't have done that, I had to admit. And the sentence construction... how did he put it? The Liszt would be a lie only were you to find it plausible.... I would not have thought that the likes of Spike would ever have met the subjunctive, much less learned to use it properly. And how did he know he was 43 years Liszt's junior?

Surreptitiously I reached over to the bookshelf-- I scarcely had to stretch-- and pulled down a concise encyclopedia. Liszt's birthyear was 1811. Forty-three years later was... 1854. If Spike actually knew when Liszt was born, and was actually 43 years younger, and the accounts of his being turned in 1880 were actually true, then he was... oh, 26 when he died.

Unimportant. Just a tiny fact to fill in to the Watchers' sketchy biography-- but the Watchers' council was defunct, and many of their records gone.... And I wasn't a Watcher anymore, and didn't care what became of their chronicles.

Finally Spike got up, dropped a sheet of paper onto the table before me, and left without a word. Now I could stop pretending to ignore him. I started to put the encyclopedia back on the shelf, then, on impulse, opened it to the S section and located the thumbnail-sized portrait of Clara Schumann. So that's what Spike's mother looked like...
William's mother, I told myself sharply. William, the dead one.

I should have let it go. What difference did it make, anyway? I didn't like the man-- the vampire. I was letting him work with me just on sufferance, just to spare Angel the aggravation. And--

Reminded of his supposed work, I pulled the page out from under the encyclopedia.

His hand was ornate, Victorian-- back-slanted. He was left-handed, I recalled.

And there, transcribed phonetically and translated into English underneath, was the Verosh demon's monologue, along with Spike's occasionally-helpful parenthetical annotations: "I was born (or perhaps was made) the time of the darkness (literally no light), when coldness reigned in my world. The mark of Alosh (some god or devil, not clear) was upon me, and I was sent to the warrior school (maybe academy would be better? Formal, anyway) at a young age. Greatness was my destiny (hey! I thought Angel had that line trademarked! Can we sue?)--"

It wasn't, I allowed, such bad work. And the line about Angel almost -- almost-- made me smile.

Fortunately, I was made of stern stuff. So stern was I that I waited until midnight-- when it would be 8 am back home-- to call my Great-Aunt Eliza, the family genealogist.

I'd taken a bath, trying to distract myself, and now was sitting on the edge of the bed covered only in a towel. It felt ... well, illicit, to be talking to my elderly relation unclothed. Thank goodness we didn't yet have videophones in our homes. "Aunty, I had a question."

I halted there, reconsidering. She would be likely to tell my parents I'd called. But what would she tell them? That I'd suddenly become interested in the family pedigree? That would make my mother happy, and make my father frown. But everything made my father frown-- everything about me, anyway.

So I plunged on. "Aunty, do you recall a Wyndham who played cricket?"

The answer came promptly. "Your cousin Louis did, dear. You know that. He broke my window that summer, and blamed you, as I recall."


"Does it--" I forced the words through my throat. "Does it say what killed him?"

"Taken by the typhus. And he did play cricket. In fact, they laid his cricket bat in his coffin. Isn't that lovely? And his teammates from Westminster, and his classmates, held a little memorial service for him, it says here. Recitations and hymns in the chapel."

"Westminster." That was-- is-- the public school, attached to the Abbey in London. Not the most exclusive of the great schools, as it always had more poor scholarship boys than you'd find at Eton or Harrow. Poor boys like Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's poetic comrade. Perhaps William was one of them--

I was still puzzling over it in the morning, and, avoiding the lobby where Spike usually hung out flirting with the receptionists and switchboard operators, I took the backstairs up to Angel's office.
He looked up from his folders and files with a tired smile. "What is it, Wesley?"

"This-- this Spike."

Angel's face immediately fell into the familiar guilty lines. "Is he giving you trouble? I'm sorry. I had hoped--"

"No. Not trouble. But I'm a bit curious. About his origins."

Angel leaned back, his eyes narrowing. "No matter what he says, he's not my get."

I stared at him for a moment, then cleared my throat. "Uh, as far as I know, he's always said Drusilla sired him. That's not what I mean. I meant the human. William. Do you know, well, anything about his family?"

Angel didn't speak for a moment. I was being unfair. He hated recalling the old days. "He was a Londoner."

"But where in London?"

"Mayfair," Angel answered reluctantly. "On the edges of one of the squares. I forget which one."

Mayfair. "So they were wealthy?"

"I don't think so. But well enough off. I don't think William ever held a job." He spoke this with a bit of contempt, as if his own human progenitor were a respectable taxpaying business owner.

"Could he have gone to Westminster?"

"No," Angel said decisively. "Oxford. I used to torment him with that, back when he first put on his street-tough airs. Did they teach you that word at Oxford? I'd say."


"I know they're poets," he snapped. "I might not have gone to Oxford, but I have read a book or two in my time."

"I didn't mean-- " I took a deep breath. One thing I'd give that other souled vampire. He didn't take offense when none was intended. He didn't take offense even when it was intended. "I meant only that Westminster was known for its poets."

Angel subsided a bit. "Well, William loved his poetry. I'd catch him of an evening, reading his tattered books when he was supposed to be hun--" he caught himself, and finished, "working."

I turned to go, but he called after me, "Why are you asking about him?"

Now it was my turn to shrug noncommittally. "Just something he said put me of a mind."

"Let him have at some of your Greek," Angel said. "He used to boast--" and there was the barest pause, and the slightest smile, and I could almost read his mind-- before I beat it out of him "he used to boast that his father was a scholar of Greek, and translated... someone. Someone scientific, I think."

"Euclid? Archimedes?"
"That's the one. The one with the lever. So see if he's retained any of it. Sorry, Wes, but if we don't keep him occupied--"

He didn't have to remind me of that desperate first week, of the blood-spattered lobby, of the broken ceilings, of the frightful realization that the Powers were behind this, and that we had to keep Spike alive and relatively happy or face who knew what punishment. "I know. I'll give him that old Delphic prophecy to puzzle over. That should keep him busy."

It was only later, when I was searching for Spike, that I realized that during that whole conversation, Angel had referred to his pre-souled self as 'I'. Had he always done that? Had he always spoken so familiarly, so casually, of his past life? I couldn't remember. But it seemed new.

When I tracked Spike down in what had become the de facto music room-- that is, the laundry room in the basement, where his so-called band had been banished-- he was in no mood to translate. "Hey, Liszt!" he called out when he saw me. He was unpacking something from a crate labeled "Lorne" with the help of Harmony, who smiled fetchingly at me in a vain attempt to distract me from asking why she wasn't at her post outside of Angel's office.

"I'm the roadie," she explained, taking the keyboard contraption from Spike. "For the band. Got to help unpack and set up the instruments for the lunch rehearsal."

I had been a Watcher for two different Slayers, both little girls, though Faith was more solidly packed. I understood that great strength can come in small packages. But still it gave me pause to see pretty Harmony, her golden tresses glowing in the fluorescent light, one perfectly manicured little hand holding the keyboard, the other shoving an industrial washer away from the electrical outlet.

It took them only a moment to get this faux piano set up on its spindly legs and electrified. It looked more like a switchboard than a keyboard-- yes, there were black and white keys, but there was also a number pad and an ugly amount of dials and switches. Harmony pushed a button, and God Save the Queen burst out, tinny and artificial, no human input needed. It was rather like one of the old player-pianos one found in brothels, if one frequented the sort of brothels featured in Hollywood Westerns.

"Very melodious." I glanced back at the name on the crate and tried to keep the censure out of my voice. "Does Lorne know you're using his equipment?"

"He's going to sing with the band," Harmony said.

"And we've got him looking into opening a new space," Spike added.

A new space. "He can't reopen Caritas again," I said flatly. "The last bombing broke his heart."

Spike gave me a level look. "Then maybe a new place will mend it."

"Yeah, Wes, you should have seen the light in his eyes when he sang Lady Marmalade again." Harmony sighed. "I wish I could play an instrument."

"You can set them up, Harm, and that's more important," Spike said bracingly. "So, Watcher, you take a few lessons in your time? Learned to play a bit of that Liszt you like?"

"As a matter of fact," I said coolly, "I did. But I cannot play without sheet music."

"You must have something memorized? Just so I can hear the instrument, make sure I have it set up right?"

I was not proof against Harmony's entreating look. So I fingered the keys, picking out an old English
tune. It sounded a bit tinny, but I supposed I shouldn't be expecting much resonance from an instrument that appeared to be made primarily of vinyl and sheet metal.

Despite the mushy feel of the keys, I felt the music flow out through my fingers in that old way. Once, before I succumbed to the family business, I'd loved music, had dreams of, oh, perhaps accompanying some pale ethereal soprano as she sang madrigals in some intime little jewel of a concert hall, the spotlight on her-- her midnight blue gown flowing like liquid sapphire as she leaned against the side of my grand-- but a bit of the glow embracing me... the glow from her eyes....

*Alas, my love, you do me wrong,*
*To treat me so discourteously--*

Well, at least he was pale, if not ethereal or a soprano. I looked up from the keyboard to see Spike leaning against the big dryer, a pose so soulful and evil, he might have been a better-looking Frank Sinatra. His voice was clear and resonant, and Harmony was regarding him with lowered brow.

When he broke off, she said, "If you'd sung that way for me, I wouldn't have kicked you to the curb so often."

Oh, yes. I'd forgotten that Harmony and Spike used to be ... something. Whatever vampires are together-- certainly not lovers?

"I did sing for you," Spike protested.

"Oh, right. Twenty twenty twenty four hours--"

And Spike joined in-- "I wanna be sedated...." He flashed me a grin. "I sure was a romantic bloke, back in the day."

Harmony turned back to me and declared, "You should play with the band. Don't you think, Spike?"

For a moment, it looked as if Spike was going to protest, and I could hardly blame him. I was not, after all, his sort of musician. But then his blue eyes narrowed, and he regarded me quite as he might have, at one time, regarded a particularly juicy jugular vein. "That would be brilliant. We need a keyboard player."

With alacrity, I stepped away from the instrument. "No. And no. And no again."

"Now, Wes," Spike began. "Before you say no--"

"I've already said no. Several times."

"But you have forgotten. My mission."

"Your mission."

"To save Angel. To help him on his journey."

I considered this, I actually did. I'd heard about the secret contract clause, or rather, I'd heard Angel grumbling about it, though I suspect he was secretly flattered that the Powers still deemed him worthy of such interference. Not that, given his druthers, he'd ever have chosen Spike to do the interfering. Angel didn't want Spike mucking about in his journey, might not even have wanted the journey. Still, one scoffed at the Powers only at risk of peril, and I'd had enough of that.

"How is my joining your band going to further Angel on his journey?"
Spike gave me that wide-eyed look of his, the one no doubt that got Harmony into bed, or onto sarcophagus, but did nothing for me.

"He's drowning. You must have felt it."

For just an instant, I knew what he meant. For just a instant, I felt it-- the undertow tugging at Angel, dragging him down. Then another instant, and it was gone. "Drowning. I don't think so. He is doing ... quite well. Running the firm." I wanted to add several more examples of how well Angel was doing, but though I stretched and reached, I found none. Or none of note. "He is working out daily," I finished weakly.

Spike shook his head. "He sits on that bicycle contraption, the one that never takes him anywhere, and he stares at CNN and moves his legs. Then he transfers to that rowing contraption and he stares at MSNBC and moves his arms. He hardly ever leaves the building. Notice that? I'm freaking tied to this place, and I range farther afield than he does." For just a moment, he smiled proudly. "Gunn and I got all the way to the Valley hunting last night. And when I started feeling like I was going to be pulled back again, you know what I did?"

I shook my head, unwillingly enticed. Spike's involuntary travels through Los Angeles airspace never failed to fascinate, and his usually bloody arrivals in the lobby were welcomed by the punters who took book on the distance covered.

"I chanted. You know, like the poof does. Ommmmm, Ommmm... Ommmm... I'mmmm I'mmm okay, I'mmmm meant to be here.... Annnngel sennnnnnt meeeeee heeeeeee..." He stopped to explain, "Angel doesn't say all that stuff. Just the Ommmmms. I expanded. And it worked. The pull stopped, and I dropped to the ground. Only about twenty feet. I'm thinking it responds to the Angel sent me thing. Not sure if it has to be true. Will check that out next time I'm headed for the pub." He shook his head. "No. Not what I meant to tell you. Angel. Angel stays inside. All the time. Notice that?"

"I don't keep track of his activities."

"I do. 'Cause of the journey thing. Thought maybe his journey might require, you know. Greater contact with the outside world. I mean, yeah, I know you guys think you can handle this evil law firm, and you got the whole personnel under your thumb and all that. But let's face it. Even if Angel weren't being manipulated by the Senior Partners, being trapped in a building with a bunch of lawyers? Not real conducive to personal growth, would you say?"

I had to admit that it wasn't healthy for Angel to spend most of his time in this historically evil building, with his office two floors below his apartment, and his corporate motor fleet with its insulated armored autos just a few floors lower, right over the cryptorium with the bodies of massacred Spanish missionaries.

"He isn't even going out of an evening to save little blonde girls dumb enough to hang out in dark alleys. And that was like his favorite hobby, wasn't it?"

"He always did like a damsel in distress," I agreed, and Harmony snorted. For a second there, I remembered her as a human girl in high school, Cordelia's occasional best friend, as pretty and petty as a peacock. She hadn't gotten turned in some dark alley-- but at her graduation, poor girl.

Not that, I reminded myself, this vampiress was that girl, though somehow she had retained the snort, the wiggle, and the disastrous taste in boyfriends.

"His journey--" Spike repeated. "What do you think it is, Watcher? You're his best mate. You have
to have a clue."

I'd given some thought to this in those late nights alone with the bottle, not that I'd ever admit it to this vampire. "His journey is towards...." I had it there, just a second. It flashed in my mind. A word. A name. And it was gone, like the last dream you have before you wake-- it disintegrates into dust like a vampire, when the sun comes streaming in. "Memory," I whispered, forgetting my audience.

"Memory," Spike mused. "I get what you mean. He's blocking so much of the past. So many people in the past--"

"Who-- what--" I tried to grab at it, my consciousness, my thought. "What is he blocking?"

Spike gave me a long, contemplative look, and finally said, "Darla. Drusilla. His family. His blood. It's what he lost when he lost himself."

"When he lost himself? You mean, when he gained his soul."

A slow smile. "No, mate. Still had us when those gypsies cursed him with that soul. When it was unwillingly forced on him." Spike, irritatingly, never let an opportunity pass, if it meant he could remind us that he had gone out and won his soul, unlike the "poof."

"Then when?"

"When he broke himself in two, and denied half of what he was. Is. And that happened a long time after the soul."

"Darla was an evil bitch." Was? Is. She was alive, wasn't she? I should... know. Shouldn't I know? "She's still alive, isn't she?"

Spike hesitated a moment, then said, "No."

"That's so cool, Spike," Harmony put in. "How you can sense she's gone."

"Yeah. I can sense it. She was my great-grandsire."

Harmony looked down at the concrete floor. "I don't even know who my sire is. But I think someone dusted him right after he turned me."

"Just as well, sweeting," Spike said. "Sires can be a royal pain. Better off an orphan. Just ask Angel, who dusted his."

"No, he-- " Didn't. Did he? "It was--"

Spike and Harmony regarded me with concern. "What, Wes?" Harmony asked. "You know. It happened back in Sunnydale. Cordelia told me. Angel had to dust his sire to save the Slayer." Not much of a trade, her expression suggested, but she took one look at Spike and fell silent.

"Yeah. Angel dusted her. But then she came back. See, Harm, when you got a sire like Darla? Can't get rid of her."

"It was-- Drusilla. Darla was human." I was remembering now. It was like trudging through molasses. I was getting old. Slow. Stupid. "And she was dying. And Drusilla,... turned her. Again."

"Right," Spike said encouragingly. "Then what happened?"

She disappeared. Darla. Vanished from my memory. Did she just ... go? She and Dru killed those
lawyers, the ones from this building. Angel let them do it. And then... and then....

"You're certain she's dead, Spike?"

"Yeah."

"What-- what about Drusilla?"

Spike tilted his head to the side, as if he were listening for distant vibrations. "Still with us." Abruptly he pushed away from the washing machine. "Don't want to think about that. Keep my eyes on the prize. Which is Angel's journey. Facilitated by greater contact with the universe outside the evil law firm. You agree, Watcher?"

"Don't call me that," I said automatically. Darla. What happened to Darla after Angel let her kill again? Left her, this time without dusting her?

"But you'll help."

"I--" I shook my head again. My brain seemed encased in cobwebs, the sticky, unperishable sort. "I don't know how my playing with the band will help Angel."

Spike regarded me kindly. It was a terrifying sight. "Because you're his best mate. And he'll get all worried, see, that you're being pulled over to the dark side, or the light side, or the fun side, by the evil Me. Or not-so-evil Me. And so he'll come around and try to persuade you to quit. And you'll tell him no way, the band is your life, you're on your way to fame and fortune and a groupie on every arm. And he'll worry. And he'll come to the club and--"

"And what?" I'd regained my skepticism, if not my serenity. "He'll get up and do the boogaloo? Grab the mike and sing a song?"

"No!" Harmony and Spike cried in unison.

Spike added, more temperately, "He'll be out and about. He'll see everyone singing, dancing, having fun. And he'll realize something is missing in his life. Lots of somethings. Like, you know, passion and music and joy and light and pleasure and--"

"Those are missing in a lot of lives," I said coldly.

"Well, they shouldn't be," Spike said, in a tone that brooked no dissent. "And anyway, I'm not back here for all those other people. Though, you know, if they want to pay the cover charge, I'll give them it all cheap." He grinned at Harmony. "Right, babe?"

"Not if we don't have a keyboardist," Harmony said.

I have to give the vampiress this much. She had focus. She hadn't forgotten this misbegotten quest of theirs to recruit me to their misbegotten band.

"Right. A keyboardist named Wes, who wants his best mate named Angel to have a spot of fun and a glimpse of a world of music and neon lights and pretty people dressed to kill. Only they aren't killing. They're dancing. To a band with a keyboardist."

It sounded... oh, balls. It sounded like fun. But I didn't have fun. It wasn't in my lot in life. It wasn't in my disposition. It wasn't--

I used to have fun. I thought of Cordelia, back in the old days, when it was just the three of us, and
Gunn showing up every now and then to fight. We had fun, didn't we? At least Cordy and I did, and Gunn, and Angel must have, because he'd smile--

But Cordy was gone, or almost gone. And Gunn was preoccupied with something or other; he and Spike thick as thieves of a sudden. Angel, well. Angel was Angel. And I hadn't smiled for a very long time, not really, had I? I -- I couldn't remember the last time. "I get your point, Spike. But you forget. I am trained classically. Your sort of music-- I couldn't begin to play it."

"You give yourself-- and this amazing technology-- too little credit!" Spike said. "I'll show you."

He slid in behind the keyboard, punched in a few numbers, fiddled with some dials, and frowned at the keys for a few seconds, and then struck a few chords, I thought I recognized Bach... but it was unrecognizable, really, the melody wailed out in earsplitting tones. "What are you playing?"

"The, what do you call it. The Contrapunctus. Only it's through a Basque alboka. Wait! Wait'll you hear the bagpipes!" He made an adjustment and pushed a key combination, and the keyboard responded with a strangled progression of groans, something like a duck quacking into a kazoo.

Harmony burst out laughing, and so did Spike, and I couldn't help it-- it sounded like the rude noises rude boarding school boys compete to create in the shower. And I responded just as I did back in boarding school, with helpless laughter, and the three of us bent over that stupid keyboard, our heads almost bumping, and laughed until the bagpipaged duck finally gave up the ghost.

I was rusty at this. Laughter gave way to a fit of coughing, which I halted through sheer willpower, this being necessary for survival as both Harmony and Spike were banging helpfully on my back.

When I got my breath back in my lungs, and my ribs re-aligned, I pointed out reasonably, "Spike, if you can play the piano, and you know how to use this contraption, why don't you be the band's pianist?"

A look of horror flicked across his face. "I'm not a pianist," he said vehemently. "I'm a bass player."

This I took to be translated to I'm not some bleeding nancy-boy poncey piano-playing poof. I'm cool, I play bass, and gorgeous intellectual girls in spectacles want to suck my monster cock.

I could be projecting there. But the implication was that playing bass was more suited to a fellow like Spike... and that playing piano suited me right down to the ground.

And I would have responded to this with another no, no, a thousand times no, except Harmony put her finger out, pointed ominously at the keys, and the grinning Spike had his hands over his ears, and -- and I found myself scooting in there between them, and seizing hold of the instrument, as if were one of those distressed damsels and Harmony the evil threat.

"I'll just take this," I said, with as much dignity as possible. "I'd best get to know its many peculiarities before the next rehearsal."

This keyboard contraption turned out to be somewhat intriguing. Well, very intriguing. There was so much one could do with it. One used the keys to make the melody, and the number pad to select from a long list of instrumental sounds. And then there were the buttons to push to select a musical style. And one could save a performance and play it back, adding another instrument to the mix.
Some might look to the space station as the greatest example of human technological achievement, but those some had never had an electronic keyboard like mine. It was very nearly a miracle. One could make Scott Joplin slow to a reggae beat, complete with steel drums. Pomp and Circumstance could be played on the harmonica. And the Ode to Joy-- my word. If you haven't heard it played on the ukelele, well, you are missing an experience unlike any you'd find in a concert hall.

I set it up in my office, and found myself drawn to it when I ought to be researching. I became, to my shock and, but not for long, my dismay, a musical experimenter. I refused to think about what Herr Schultz, my piano teacher, would have said when I played Liszt with a background of a gospel choir, or merged a Shaker hymn with one of Spike's punk-rock melodies. I was entranced with possibility, entwined in combinations, entrapped in permutations.

As long as I was playing, my mind wasn't endlessly looping around that question I couldn't ask--what happened to Darla, and why didn't I know?

Angel-- who knew, who must know-- stopped by my office the next afternoon, his eyes hooded, his shoulders slumped. I saw now what Spike saw. Angel had no ... no enthusiasm. No novelty. No music. Yet perhaps he longed for it all, because he did come to me, came to me and stood in the doorway, looking down, while I played Chopin via the sitar.

"Uh, Wes, ummm, about this music of yours."

I looked up from my keys with pleased anticipation. "Yes, I know. It is quite fascinating, the sounds I can make. I am, almost, a symphony of my own devising. I control-- truly control! The tone. The tempo, the vibrato, the--"

"Uh, Wes. You see. Some of the, well, staff, you know, mostly the attorneys, they're complaining that, well, it's hard for them to consult with clients when you're... playing."

Philitines.

After he dragged out of my office, ashamed, and well he should have been, I subsided into my chair, gazing at my keyboard. I could take it home, but then what would I do with these long tedious office hours?

"Wes?"

It was Harmony, standing hesitantly in my doorway, biting her lip, her hands behind her back.

"Yes?" I sounded, perhaps, more fierce than I ought, but then, she should be able to see that my happiness had been ripped to tatters.

"Can I show you something?"

I nodded grimly, and she approached. Odd it was, how she did that now. She seemed to ask for permission to come closer to humans, as if she worried that we would run away. And I supposed we would, under normal circumstances, run if approached by a vampire.

She withdrew her hand from behind her back and produced a set of headphones, the expensive kind advertised in the back pages of the London Literary Review. She slid the plug into a hole on the side of my keyboard, one I hadn't noticed in all my careful study. She gestured me to sit down again on my stool, and handed me the headphones. "Try it."

I fitted the headphones on my ears, adjusting them till they felt comfortable. Harmony, standing next to me, turned on the power and depressed middle C. It whined-- I had the instrument set to panflute--
directly, and exclusively, into my ears. Amazed, I pressed A. And then B flat. And then high C. And then--

Harmony patted me on the shoulder and left without another word.

I made a mental note to put the vampiress in for an extra-large quarterly bonus.

It took two days of experiment and practice before I felt ready to attend a band rehearsal. I had Harmony come in and transport the keyboard and stand down to the ground-floor conference hall, where we held Angel's team-building rallies. Spike was already, I hoped, learning the value of having a division head in his band... no more competing with the washing machines during rehearsal.

And then, packing my sheet music into my leather portfolio, I took a deep breath and ventured down.

It was very much like entering the Common Room as a new boy. One never gets over one's adolescence, I suppose, and that terror of being unwanted, of being made a figure of ridicule, of being scorned and rejected and finally ignored....

"Hey, Wat-- I mean, Wes! You get that Hendrix sheet music I sent up?" Spike was up on the little stage, half-hidden by a giant speaker and by Kenny the Security Guard. They were facing each other like gladiators, tuning their guitars. "You know, scuse me while I kiss the sky? I'm figuring maybe filter it through that Vietnamese board zither option. You got that on the keyboard, don't you?"

Gunn was manhandling a microphone stand, but let it settle on the floor when he saw me. "Hey, Wes, man, need some support here. Harmony says Hey, Joe is about a wife-murderer and so has to be banned from the playlist, but it's the only song where I can reach all the notes, so --"

Harmony looked up from her screwdriver and Clem's drum kit. "So, duh, take a voice lesson from Lorne! I thought the point was to attract ladies, and how are you going to do that with songs that glorify violence against women?"

"When did you become some peacenik, Harm?" Gunn demanded, reaching out a hand to me, and pulling me up onto the stage. I stumbled into the microphone and knocked it down, fortunately forestalling whatever comment about pacifistic vampires Gunn was going to make next.

Lorne was practicing his scales off at the other microphone-- aaaaaAAAH!-- but he gave me a grin and changed it to WessssSSSSSSSS, and he sounded like Judy Garland had become possessed by a snake demon, and Gunn said, sotto voce, "Voice lessons from Lorne. Huh. Not likely."

The voce was insufficiently sotto. Lorne's mouth snapped shut, and he drew himself up and squared off with Gunn, and Kenny and Spike decided this was the right moment to start a duel of wailing guitars, and Clem started banging away before Harmony finished with his cymbals--

And I decided this was nothing like boarding school, nothing at all. I wasn't unwanted here. In fact I was utterly essential to the smooth running of the band, for they certainly weren't running smoothly without me.

I'd like to say that I had it all sorted by the end of the rehearsal. But I must be honest. Even I am not that effective. My only accomplishment was getting them to agree on a playlist. Nonetheless, it was an impressive achievement, requiring quite a bit of shuttle diplomacy, delicate tact, and brutal arm-twisting. Harmony allowed in the wife-abusing Hey, Joe when Spike promised to include
Leadbelly's *In the Pines*, assuring her that this song featured a vengeful woman who cut off her boyfriend's head. Lorne got in *Lady Marmalade*, of course, and Gunn promised that his rap song, something about dead presidents, had only a few objectionable words, easily mumbled, and that I wasn't to worry that the Secret Service would take exception to the subject matter. "Free speech, remember?" he added, as if he welcomed a challenge he could take to the Supreme Court.

And Spike took advantage of his position as band founder and The Powers' Earthly Representative to insert two punk songs into the mix. Since I was the one typing the playlist on my Palm Pilot, I entered *Canto Alla Vita* as the encore. Lorne made some disparaging comment about lacking the necessities for this song: a string section, a wind section, and a conductor. But I merely pointed to my keyboard and said serenely that everything we needed was right there.

Alas, what we really needed wasn't there in the keyboard-- minor things like talent, cooperation, commonality of purpose, clear leadership. Spike, you see, seemed to think that he was the de facto boss of the band, simply because it was his idea and he had recruited all of us. And perhaps he had a point. But when he took it upon himself to name the band, I objected.

"Demon." I tried, assuredly I did, to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. "An interesting choice for a band's name. But that is a singular noun."

"Right."

"But there is more than one demon in this band. Shouldn't it be Demons?"


"The Clash. So why not The Demons? Add the definite article." He could hardly fail to understand, and he could hardly pretend, given that he knew I knew he was classically educated, at Westminster and Christ Church, God spare us all.

He shot me a glare that consigned Westminster and Christ Church to perdition. "I told you. Demon is cool. Short and to the point."

There was no arguing with him... yet. But the next day I came to rehearsal with my notes.

"Spike. I did some research."

I ignored the groans that arose from Gunn and Lorne. "I remember something about your favorite bands. The Ramones. The Sex Pistols. The Rolling Stones." For good measure, I added, "Ramonessssss. Stonessssss. Sssssss."

He said nothing. Unprecedented. But if he thought he was going to ignore me away, he hadn't reckoned on my bulldog nature. "And I am coming to think that even The Demons is discriminatory. After all, not everyone in the band is a demon."

"Majority rules!" Spike said. "Raise your hand if you're a demon."

Lorne smiled benevolently and raised his green hand. Clem glanced apologetically at me and raised his. Spike's was up and proud.

Gunn, Kenny the Security Guard, and I kept our hands at our sides.

"A tie--" I started to say.
And then Harmony raised her hand.

"Harmony's not in the band," I said immediately.

Harmony gave me a stunned, hurt look. Spike crossed the room in two steps and took her hand. "Don't you think it, love," he said fiercely. "You're just as much part of the band as he is. More, because you joined earlier."

Harmony whispered her watery thanks, and it was all very affecting, and I'm sure I should have wept, were I not quite certain that if it had been human Fred as our road manager, roadies would, apologetically, be excluded from the band.


"Let me add--" Spike said helpfully. "Old-fashioned. Awkward. A mouthful."


"Wait a minute," Gunn broke in.

I smiled at him. My friend Gunn. My fellow non-demon. He would support me.

"Talk about singular nouns! Demon Hunter? I've been at this demon-hunting as long as you have, Wesley."

Well, maybe not. I scrabbled for footing. "It's a collective noun."

"The hell it is," Gunn said. "All these years fighting by your side-- saving your skinny butt over and over, and I don't even merit a single S?"

"Oh, Gunn," Clem said in his obnoxiously kind voice. "You can be an honorary demon."

"How about--" Kenny the Security Guard broke in-- it was the first time, I think, I'd ever heard his voice. "How about Demon and the Demon Hunters?"

Everyone paused to consider this.

"Yeah," Harmony said. "We demons aren't so wonky about singular and plural. We're more tolerant and flexible."

"And this way," Lorne put in, "each of us can privately vow that he-- or she, Harmonica sweetie-- are the spotlighted demon."

Spike looked at me. I looked at Spike. We shrugged simultaneously.

"Okay," Spike said. "Demon and the Demon Hunters."
Some people call me obsessive. Well, Fred does. And Angel. It's true that when I have a new enthusiasm, I tend to get, well, enthusiastic. When this tendency of mine is applied to, oh, tracking down the mating habits of Tarkal warriors, or translating Angel's latest prophecy, I am lauded for my persistence and cosseted for my self-sacrifice. But when my focus turned to the band, I sensed a certain disapproval. From Angel, of course. I fear he took my insertion into the band as a betrayal of some sort, if not of him, of our shared melancholy. (Was I always so melancholy? Surely not. And yet I sensed that the melancholy was a central part of our friendship, and when did that happen? We used to go out and hunt demons together-- sharing adventure, not apathy. When did we change?)

At least I had support from Fred-- she'd signed on as the sound engineer as soon as Spike batted his eyelashes in her direction. I would have thought she would be more resistant to his rather too-obvious blandishments, and, laughing, she agreed that she ought to be: "But really, Wes, why bother? If he doesn't get what he wants that way, he'll try blackmail next, and brute force can't be far behind. Besides," she added, with a sidelong glance, "I hear the band has a new keyboardist. Looks like you."

It was the instrument, not Spike, that enticed me. Oh, all right. There was also a certain appeal to being part of the band. It was salutary, in some strange way, to hear that loud vibrant music rising through the building that until so recently had been a place of grim and dark intent. Employees working late would stop their typing or researching and come to the railing and lean over and look down at the lobby where we often rehearsed in the evening. They'd smile, and clap, and even sing along. Sometimes, I confess, they'd call out insults or hoot like monkeys. But even that was done in fun, and, after all, the insults of lawyers and law clerks were no match for those returned by Spike and Gunn-- they had both lived in worlds where the art of dissip was a survival mechanism.

The insults were only partially deserved.

Please understand me. Demon and the Demon Hunters had a great deal of power, thanks to Spike's credit-card purchase of three extra speakers. (Props go out to Harmony for her adroit palming of the bill.) When we were "cooking", Angel's precious vases jiggled on their pedestals as if The Big One had finally split the San Andreas Fault.

DDH (Gunn's abbreviation) also had a surpassingly broad musical range, from Spike's grunge-punk to my own eclectic neo-classicism.

And DDH had an excess of, well, how shall I characterize it? Sex appeal? Among the bandmembers, there was something for every taste: Clem and Lorne for those drawn to exotica. Gunn for the traditionalists. Spike for those who liked to live dangerously. Kenny for those who preferred the strong silent (very silent) type. Modesty forbids me to point out that by the end of the first week of rehearsals, I had my own fan club, the Stubbles, consisting of the more discriminating of W&H personnel, most with advanced degrees. And I'm sure I needn't remind anyone of our beauteous technical support team, the dark Fred and the bright Harmony, who needed no spotlight to highlight their pulchritude or incite the most prurient of fantasies among those who still hid Penthouse under the mattress.

Alas, DDH lacked something... talent? Oh, surely not. Kenny was a competent guitarist, though given to overreaching (one rapidly tired of watching him strum with his tongue). Spike managed to make a melodic bass line, and (contrary to stereotype and Gunn's self-deception) he was the best dancer of the group. Lorne could channel Ethel Merman and Judy Garland, sometimes at the same time. Gunn discovered a talent for crooning that left him alternately proud and embarrassed. Clem mostly kept the beat, and his flapping pink dewlaps deserved their own music video. And I, well,
modesty again intrudes. Suffice to say, what I lacked in technical skill, I made up for in innovative initiative and (I'll admit it) the most breathtaking of musical gambles (Sousa/panflute, nuff said, as Fred would put it).

But DDH lacked, perhaps, strictly speaking, a focus. Spike was forever muttering that we had six lead guitarists. He wasn't being literal (though I like to think that my electronic-guitar-mode was every bit as tuneful as Kenny's archaic electric strumming and plucking); rather that we each wanted to be the star. (A position Spike reserved for, well, Spike.) And we each wanted to dictate the musical direction of the band. Spike thought we should concentrate on grunge and punk, for the admittedly sensible reason that neither genre required any musical skill. Lorne also had some evidence for his contrary position, that no one ever paid big bucks to see a punk band, but thousands paid hundreds to hear Wayne Newton (also sans musical ability). Gunn averred that both of them were dinosaurs-- "Rap and hip-hop rule the airwaves and the urban streets." Clem and Kenny each wanted long solos à la (Clem assures me this is the name of an actual band and not merely a fantasy of Spike's) The Grateful Dead. And I thought it was high time that one brought the classics of the Renaissance and Enlightenment into the age of electronica.

It was impressive, I suppose, that we got on as well as we did, as long as we did. And it was inspiring that we had so much fun.

Yes, fun. I'd forgotten what having fun was like, in fact, my memories of the last year or so being mostly a collage of tedium punctuated by moments of sheer terror which incipient Alzheimers had mercifully dulled. (Gunn assured me, however, that in his own recollection of the last year, I'd missed nothing much.) But once I joined the band? I suspect I have never laughed so much, not even when I was a boy at school-- what a dire time that was. And now I had nothing to regret, except that the two who had been with me the longest, who knew me when I was at my lowest and liked me even then, could not enjoy this experience with me.

Cordelia was... gone. As gone as she could be and still breathe.

It was wrong of me to think this, of course. But I thought she must have given up.

And Angel-- well, if I lived in regret, Angel lived in the sort of remorse that made it a sin to be happy.

One evening, as we rehearsed one of Spike's songs, I watched this other vampire laugh and cavort, and wondered. Spike too had a bloody past, an unlife ill-spent, innumerable sins marked to his account, not to mention a lover he could never see again. But there he was dancing and singing, his face alight.


The next afternoon, I sought Spike out. I had an assignment for him-- a bit of Greek translation I could have done myself, but I had a song to learn before rehearsal. I came across him in the library, bent over the table, cutting something with scissors. He glanced up at me and then down again, as if he thought acknowledging my presence would mean he had to stop his work. So, with something less than patience, I sat down two tables away, and, having nothing better to do, the keyboard being back in my office, watched him at his odd task.

He wasn't a big man-- in fact, minus the leather coat, he was fine-boned, almost delicate. I'd seen him
fight, and I knew that was deceptive, as deceptive as his youthful features. Still, he had a slenderness I remembered from adolescence, when muscles developed without bulk. I wondered how much of his tough attitude was to ward off—well, what happens to delicate boys with faces like that. I knew too well—

At any rate, he was not a big man, and yet his hands were square and a bit oversized. He had to work to use the scissors effectively, and even so, his movements were awkward. Usually he was so graceful— it was unexpectedly endearing to see him biting at his lip in concentration, even sticking out his tongue as he maneuvered the scissors around some paper obstacle.

The wadded up pages on the tabletop testified to his perfectionism in this task, whatever it was.

Finally he set the scissors down, and pushed the scraps away, and held up a little circle of paper. From his pocket he removed something that glinted in the necro-treated sunlight from the long windows. Gold. A pocket watch of the sort my father, a traditionalist of the obnoxious sort, wore in his waistcoat.

Spike opened it. I was close enough to see that he had removed the inner workings. A watch that was no longer a watch. Carefully he pressed the little circle of paper into the emptiness. He gazed at it for a moment, then softly snapped the lid shut and jammed the watch into his jeans pocket.

Rising, he swept the detritus of his project into his hand, depositing them in the wastebasket by the network printer.

Only then did he look over to me. "Something you need, Wes?"

I put the scroll on the empty table in front of me. "This oracular oration. And quickly. Before rehearsal."

Spike made no move to take it. "You know, Harmony says I should charge time-and-a-half for rush jobs."

"Perhaps you should remind Harmony that her job, the one that pays, involves not advising you on salary issues, but keeping W&H costs down."

Spike gazed around us, and I watched him tot up the cost of the trestle table (from a Carpathian monastery), the Xerox machine (top of the line, with folding and stapling capability), the LCD projector along the back wall. Then he turned to me with a smile. "Buy me a drink after rehearsal, mate, and we'll call it quits."

I considered this grimly for a moment. "Why me?"

He wriggled his shoulders in that embarrassed way of his, as he does whenever he's considering a lie. Then he straightened up and told the truth. (Really, his shoulders are the most reliable lie detector I've ever seen.) "Gunn doesn't work anymore. I mean, first few times, I was able to fool the Powers that it was company business, going out getting smashed with Charlie. But maybe over-abused the privilege. Had too much fun. Last night..." he sighed and rubbed at his narrow hip. "Right through his truck door. $2700 damage. He says it's too expensive, drinking with me."

"And you think a change in drinking partner will make all the difference?"

"Well, sure. Not like you're going to have any--"

Fun was the word he belatedly grabbed back off his lips. He screwed up his face, searching for some other way to finish that sentence. "Not like you're going to have any-- any worries, because the
Powers. They like you." His face brightened. "Think you're a likely bloke, full of potential. So it'll be easy to fool them that you're taking me out for a drink in order to, I don't know. Give me your erudite and wise thoughts about Angel's journey. We can even talk about that for a few. You know, in case they're listening in."

"Spike--" I started. Then I sighed. "I don't know if I want the Powers liking me. I don't even know if I believe in the Powers anymore."

"Me neither. And I've met 'em. I think they're a figment of my imagination. Me mum always said I had too much of that. Used to have the most dreadful nightmares about gryphons ripping the roof off the house and plucking me out of my seat and taking me up into the sky and dropping me-- which is pretty much what happened last week, come to think of it, when I went to that footie match."

"Perhaps I should go out to a liquor store and bring something back for you."

This kindly suggestion made him panic. "No, no. Can't. I need to get out. I really need to get out. And-- and I want some Guinness, you know? On tap. And Irish music. And Irish barmmaids with plump freckled bosoms-- please?"

"Oh, all right," I said grumpily. "After rehearsal. I understand there's an Irish pub around the corner."

"Know it well. There's a girl named Bridget that's got hair as red as my last sunset-- and the band covers the Pogues...."

Obviously he was a habitue. "You got Charles to take you to an Irish bar? More than once?"

"When you meet Bridget, mate, you'll understand."

"But you have to get the translation done."

"Certain sure, boss."

"And--" I looked away from him. "I will have some questions. About the past."

Spike was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Sure you want to hear the answers?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm all yours, Watcher. I mean Wes." He picked up the scroll and went off whistling the Pogues' song Boys from the County Hell. (I told you I get a bit obsessive. In just a week, I'd listened to all of Spike's top 137 favorite songs, and found some of them disturbingly appealing. I also noted that fully 43% of them had titles that included one or more of the words blood, devil, hell, and death, which should have bothered me, I know, but instead led me to consider a themed CD for the band.)

Once he was gone, I walked over to the wastebasket and grabbed up one of his discarded wads. Smoothing it out on the tabletop, I discovered it to be a graphic downloaded from some website (www.slayersluts.org was printed helpfully across the top-- I really must call Giles's attention to this). It was of the Slayer-- Buffy Summers, I mean-- in living color and trendy outfit, an axe across her shoulder, a belligerent look on her little face. A smooth circle had been cut almost all the way around her head, just the right size for a pocket watch.

I would rather not have seen the mistake that had made him abandon this attempt-- a wet blotch at the corner of the circle, smearing the purple of her blouse. A tearstain.

Sighing, I stuffed the sheet back into the wastebasket. A vampire who laughed as he sang, then cried
over the image of his lost love-- if ever I rejoined the Watchers Council (and Rupert Giles, in his throat-clearing way, kept hinting at that), I feared I would have to annotate a few recent volumes of the Vampire Heuristics Quarterly.
I would never admit it to Spike, but it was rather a treat to jaunt out with a fellow Brit, one who thought nothing of walking a few blocks to the pub. Angel would be calling for his car, and Lorne for his driver. But Spike set out intrepidly beside me, quite as if the smooth sidewalks and radiating streetlights and cool evening air were harmless after all.

Unfortunately, after a block, he started looking over his shoulder with every other step.

A police car cruised by, made a U-turn, and cruised back. Kept going until the corner and turned, and appeared three minutes later, having made a circuit of the block. I stared straight ahead and said out of the side of my mouth, "Spike, you know, it is suspicious enough that we are here in Los Angeles and walking after sundown. But you keep looking about as if you've got your pockets full of stolen diamonds and are being tracked by a vengeful gang of Hasids. That police officer thinks you're up to something."

"Just going to the pub," he said sullenly, hunching his shoulders, the better to steal another glance back. "Start talking about, you know, my mission. Angel's journey. All that. Distract the Powers."

I was more worried about the copper, but reminded myself that walking wasn't illegal, even in LA. "Angel's journey. Well, yes. You were relating the band to Angel's journey, and so I think we can doubtless get away with talking about the band. To wit." With Spike looking as scared as a prisoner slinking away from the entrance to his secret tunnel, it was hard to bring up this subject. But I'd been rehearsing this all during rehearsal, which went just as badly as every other rehearsal this week. "I am a trifle concerned about the, well, leadership of the band. Lorne has already contracted for that space next door, and we have less than two weeks to put together a full set. And I think that we are not close to ready. Fred still hasn't learned her way around the sound equipment. I'm sure you noticed that my zither was quite drowned out by Lorne's tamborine."

"To be fair," Spike put in, "Angel did have Fred working all day on closing that portal that opened up under the Staples Center. Lakers play at home tonight."

"Nonetheless, she has made a commitment to the band, and I think we need to remind her of that. Else we face total ignominy at our first performance."

"Yeah, well--" Spike broke off as we entered the pub, saving his breath, it turned out, for a few moments of heavy-duty flirtation with the good-as-advertised Bridget. Her long red hair gleamed like a flow of lava, and she adroitly topped Spike's double entendres as she showed us to a booth. A woman of parts, was Bridget, round, rosy, and freckled parts.

As she left, I said pointedly, "Have you the time?"

Spike regarded me in puzzlement. "'Bout 8, ain't it? Never wear a watch."

"Ah," I replied. "I thought I saw you with one in the library. A pocket watch."

Spike instantly looked stricken, and jammed his hand into his pocket and pulled out the watch. He opened it, and as sorrow crept over his face, guilt crept through my soul. It wasn't as if he could have Buffy. And of course, I didn't want him to have her. She was Angel's. Still, there had been something, oh, heartening, about Spike as Lancelot, dying for love and living to suffer the consequences. Seeing him ogle a pair of likely breasts rather diminished the tragic romance of it all.

"About the band," I prompted, just to make him put that watch away. "I am cognizant of your
superior claim to leadership. It was, after all, your idea."

"All my idea," he said coolly, "and, I gotta say, initiated with no support from upper management."

"Yes. Well. Still. It is now a going concern, but perhaps not going quite as well as it might, had we, well, more experienced leadership."

"You talkin' mutiny here, mate?"

Bridget, with great tact and perspicacity, chose this moment to deliver our overflowing drafts of Guinness. Spike drank his down in one long swallow. As he set the mug down, he raised his scarred eyebrow at me.

"Not mutiny. More a--"

"Coup d'etat?"

"A restructuring."

Bridget was back just in time, a basket of bread and a crock of clotted cream in her hands.

"Strawberry preserves?" Spike said longingly.

Bridget bent, her bosom glowing pearly above her red bodice, and gave him a kiss, right on the mouth. (I would like to take the opportunity to point out that this sort of thing never happens to me. We mere humans, I gather, don't merit such attention.) "Strawberry enough?"

Spike pulled away, laughing, embarrassed, and, I thought, a trifle guilty. "Very sweet."

Bridget grinned and produced a jar from the pocket of her apron. "Let me know when you're back on women again, darlin'." And she walked away, her bountiful hips swaying.

He caught my glance and ducked his head. "Can't help it. I tell them I've sworn off women, and they all want to be the one to make me break my vow." He popped open the jar and started slathering the bread. "You should try it. Charlie's got three dates already using this tactic."


"Yeah, well, look, Wes. I'd let you take over, really I would. Don't doubt you'd do a better job. Hell, Fred could do a better job than me. Kenny could. But you're missing the point."

"The point?"

"The point. Angel's journey."

I shook my head. "What's that got to do with the band leadership?"

Bread. Clotted cream. Strawberry preserves. More clotted cream. Spike bit off a corner, then swallowed and sighed and licked the red off his lips. "Not a good leader, am I? No, no, you don't have to say I am. I'm not. Not supposed to be. Angel, now he's a good leader, isn't he?"

"He has his moments," I said, sensing where this was headed, and let us just stipulate that it wasn't headed towards a new band name, Wes and the Demons and the Demon Hunters.

"Right. And one thing I know from painful experience-- very painful-- Angelus always steps in when he thinks things are getting bollixed up. Especially when it's me doing the bollixing. I
remember a time in St. Petersburg-- the Hermitage-- Well, anyway. I screw things up enough, he'll have to step in."

With a sinking heart, I remembered Angel's last "stepping in", when he decided that neither Dewey nor the Library of Congress had a clue about organizing books. I arrived one morning at the research library to find him dusty, exhausted, and irritable, but with that indefinable glow engendered by a job well done. He'd been at it all night, rearranging the books on the shelves by date of publication. No doubt this will be helpful to any field-researcher who comes across a flesh-eating demon labeled "as seen in some book published in 1789."

What he did to my library, he would do to my band.

"Spike. Mate." Yes, I resorted to endearment. I am shameless. "Perhaps I spoke too hastily. I did not mean to criticize your leadership, which, now that I think of it, seems almost Wellingtonian in the subtlety of its vision, the breadth of--"

"Wes. Focus. The larger picture. Angel's journey. And hurry. I'm feeling the Powers tugging, even as Bridget's getting me another draft."

It took that draft, and another, to resign me to Angel taking over the band's management. "Just to get him out and about," Spike said coaxingly. "We can ignore him most of the time. In fact, that'd be good. The more we screw up his plan, the more he'll invest in it, and the more he'll have to engage with us."

"Engage with us," I muttered into my mug. "Is that your euphemism for throttling our creativity?"

"Wes. Wes. You are his best mate. Like Clem is my best mate."

I scowled down at the clotted cream crock, empty now after Spike's predation. I took it that Clem, the Platonic ideal of best mates, would have willingly stepped aside and let Spike come in and order the band around. (In fact, I supposed, that's exactly what Clem did.)

"It is no fun," I said, or perhaps it would be more correct to say that I whined, "being Angel's best mate."

Spike gave a startled laugh. "Try being his grandchilde." Then, wheedlingly, "He needs us. He doesn't think he does. But he does. And he needs to be needed. It's a soul thing."

"I don't need to be needed." I grabbed the second-to-last piece of bread and viciously disemboweled it. "And I have a soul."

"It's those of us with a belated soul need that. Use it or lose it, you know?"

He let me have a moment to contemplate Angel sans soul, and then said, "So see, I'll ambush him right soon. Get him to take over."

"He's done nothing but complain about the band," I said skeptically. "How will you persuade him?"

Spike didn't answer. Instead he pulled out that pocket watch, snapped it open, and gazed at the Buffy .jpg for a moment. He looked up at me, his bottom lip trembling, his eyes swimming silver. And then he drew a ragged breath.

Bridget was headed past with a tray of drinks, but she skidded to a halt by our booth. "Oh, Spike, darlin'," she cried guiltily. "Did I let you run out of clotted cream?"
"And-- and preserves." His voice broke on that last syllable, and I felt something else break too, my poor battle-scarred heart.

I shoved it back together, with the determination of boar-demon. "All right. You proved your point."

Now that Bridget had rushed off to the kitchen, Spike's eyes dried up, and his lip stabilized. "Good thing Darla's not around anymore. She used to beat me whenever I did that. Would clout Angelus too, for falling for it."

Darla. With a wrench, I recalled my plan of pumping Spike for information. I nodded impatiently as he outlined his seduction scheme, agreed to terms I couldn't remember a moment later, and, as soon as he fell momentarily silent, I said, "You owe me some answers."


Once again he was hogging the clotted cream. Irritated, I said, "You're supposed to be a vampire. How do you eat all that?" *How do you excrete all that*, the third-former-within wanted to ask, but I feared Spike might answer, and then perhaps I wouldn't want any clotted cream. Instead I added, "And stay so thin?"

His teeth glinted white from within a rim of preserves. "I burn it all off. Buf-- Someone used to call it the vampire vibration."

He held his hand hovering just over mine, and for a second I could feel it, some low tactile hum, as if all the molecules in him were beating their metaphorical wings to keep from flying apart-- as I supposed they were, since he was meant to be century-old dust. "Angel doesn't feel like that."

Spike withdrew his hand, only to grab another slice of bread. "Sure he does. Just never lets anyone close enough to sense it. That the question you wanted to ask?"

I wrenched my mind back from composing yet another monograph for the VHQ. "No. I wanted to ask you about-- " I didn't want to show my hand. Not so soon. "About the past. Angel. Angelus. Did--" I gestured around the pub, the dark panelling, the low beamed ceiling, the Irish footie on the telly, the sweet dark scent of Guinness. It lacked only the pervasive pall of cigarette smoke common to real pubs. "Back then. When you knew him. Would he have liked a place like this?"

Spike leaned back against the booth, a smile playing at his mouth. "He's Irish. This would be like the womb for him."

"Guinness a good substitute for blood, you know. Thick and rich." "You should bring him here," I said.

His eyes opened. "Good idea." He fell silent, then said, "We never went to Ireland, you know. Oh, Dru and I did, between the wars. We could stay out most all day in the winter, so little sun there was. And the roses in the spring. Big as my head. And the lovely voices, and the lovely girls who all looked like Bridget there--"

I thought I'd better cut this off before he started remembering what he did to those lovely girls who looked like Bridget. "But Angel never travelled back to Ireland."

"Nah. Wouldn't hear of it. 'Course, islands aren't good for vampires. Hard to make a quick exit across the border, you know. Even Britain felt too small when the heat was on. But Angelus-- no, he wanted to leave Ireland behind."

"What-- what was he like? Did he have the Irish accent? Back then?"
"Sure. Still does."

"No, he doesn't."

Spike shrugged. "Does sometimes with me. Forgets where he's at, and who he is, I reckon."

I recalled Spike's sure-footed handling of the subjunctive, the thoughtless clarity of his voice when he recited Shelley and sang Greensleeves, and thought, *you too, Mayfair boy*. But there was a difference--

"But he's not. Not Angelus. He's Angel."

Spike regarded me with a clear-eyed expression that made me dread what was to come. "He's Angelus."

"No. Angelus-- Angelus was here last year. Yes. But he went back. I know. This isn't that one."

Spike frowned. "Didn't say it was that one. Not the half-wit thug let loose when Angel gets a happy. Angelus. My grandsire."

"Angel still has his soul."

"So? My grandsire has a soul."

"But--"

"When do you think Angel was invented? When he got the soul? No. I was there. Still Angelus. Still killing. Tried just to kill bad people then. But he was still Angelus, through and through."

"But then he left you. At the turn of the century. And became Angel."

Spike leaned forward, took hold of my wrist. His grip was light and playful. I could feel that vampire vibration, however, through my tendons. "I saw him in the twenties. And during the war. Still souled. Still Angelus."

I wrenched my hand free. "He can't be Angelus with the soul."

"Why not? I got a soul now. Am I a different bloke now?"

Stiffly I said, "I didn't know you before the soul."

"Ask Clem. Ask Harmony. Or Rupert Giles will tell you-- I went a bit mad there for a while. But emerged from it same as ever, much to his dismay, only with a soul." He waited, but I had nothing to say. Yet. "A soul is just a soul. It's not a personality. Isn't a mind. Isn't even as big as memory."

"Then what?" I whispered.

"Just a scorecard. A scorecard with a whip."

I hadn't the time, nor the inclination, to pursue that. "Angelus. You say that Angel is Angelus. You're going to say that Angel never existed."

"Not going to say that at all. Met him myself, didn't I?"

"When?"
"First time— when I came to Sunnydale. Met him in the school there. Thought he was my grandsire. Embraced him even." His smile was cool. "Not my grandsire. I knew right away, soon as I touched him. Just that ... that mask of his. That Angel mask. Angelus had gone-- I don't know."

"But he came back," I said. "You-- you lived with him. He brought forth Acathla--"

"No. That was your thug. The one without the soul. The demon Angel keeps chained up in a little prison in his mind."

I shook my head. "But you lived with him."

"Yeah. And I didn't understand. I kept thinking he was my grandsire, and couldn't understand why he'd suddenly gone so... stupid. Stupid. His plans-- you know, when you have to rely on Spike for strategy, you're in trouble. I just couldn't figure it out. Couldn't figure out why he was so stupid. Couldn't figure out why I didn't love him anymore."

This last was said softly, almost with shame. I looked into his eyes, saw the flicker of the candle reflected there. "Explain."

"The one without the soul is just a half-person. All the rationality, all the goodness, went to Angel. This other one-- he got the passion. He got the humor. The monstrousness too. But Angel, and this thug. Neither is whole. They're both missing parts." A beat. "Angelus isn't. He's got the passion and the intelligence and the soul too. And all the weight of the sin."

"I don't understand. Why? Why would he feel the sin? Angel always did--"

"Angel took the responsibility. Didn't take the blame. All those sins, the other committed, that's what he thought."

"How do you know?"

"I know because I couldn't do that. Wished I could. But I never broke. Never split. Never thought I was anything but the one that did the murders. Angel can say the other one is to blame. I don't have another one."

"Angel suffered more than you."

"Angelus did. I told you. Angel didn't even exist until, I don't know when. When he first saw Buffy, maybe. He was told helping her was his mission. And he had to do something, because he was so beaten down. Eating rats in an alley. He was Angelus until he couldn't stand it anymore, couldn't bear the weight. Couldn't stand the denial, denying all that he wanted to stay good. So... so he split. Angel took the soul. Took the reason. Imprisoned the demon and the passion and the sins. Angelus's last act, I think, was to slam the cell door shut on half of who he was."

"But-- but you say he's back. And-- well. I suppose I have to agree that you are the only one who has known all three incarnations." I paused and considered this. "Four, if you think of the pre-soul Angelus as separate."

"Darla even knew Liam," Spike said helpfully. "Told me he was a drunken ill-lettered lout."

Darla. I reminded myself to come back to Darla. "All right. So perhaps you know best, since Darla is no longer among us, and Drusilla--"

"Dru didn't understand. She -- " Bitterness twisted his lips into something like a smile. "She liked the one without a soul. The thug. Because he was most like her daddy. The one who sired her. He
changed some after that, before I came-- because of Dru, I reckon, when he saw what he'd done. Not remorse, or anything like that. But more... awareness. Not so quick to sire after that. Not so quick to lose his judgment." He took a meditative sip. "But the one who turned her was the one she remembered best. And the thug was stupid and shatter-brained, but he was vicious like she wanted. So she's not a good judge."

"All... right." I didn't want to pursue what seemed a sore subject. "I will accept that you know best in this. But that doesn't mean I accept your conclusion. Explain to me when it happened."

"Hell, I don't know. He's been Angelus... since I've been back." He frowned. "Since before that. He came to Sunnydale. Brought Buffy the amulet that did me in."

"I -- I didn't know that."

"Lot you don't know, mate." But he said this kindly. "Lot he doesn't want you to know."

"You think it was Angelus who came to Sunnydale last spring."

"Yeah. I didn't talk to him, see. Just watched him. With her."

Aha. "With Buffy."

"Yeah. He brought her the amulet. Said it was for a champion, souled, but stronger than human, all that tripe. She said thanks, and he took off."

I sensed perhaps a trifle more had happened during the encounter. "You know it was Angelus?"

"Not then. Not really." A moment's pause. "I sensed it. Didn't know how to interpret it. He was... keying on me, you know? Asking about me. Getting mad about me having a soul, Buffy said. Angel-- Angel hardly knows me. Don't know how to say that right. But -- Angelus cares about me. Negative, positive. We're bonded, like it or not. Not Angel. 'M sure he doesn't like me much, but can't believe he'd be there with Buffy and mostly talk about me."

"It does seem-- unlikely. And since you've returned...."

Spike shrugged. "He's pushing me away, certain sure. But he knows me. I know Angel's supposed to have Angelus's memories, but this is more than memory. He talks about those times-- when I can get him to talk about them-- like they're his. And he's got the power of Angelus. Ruthless. Not evil, but... ruthless."

"Yes...." It answered so many questions. Raised so many more. "But how would it happen? When did it happen?"

"How. Well, my grandsire just took back control, that's all. Pulled himself together. He had some reason for staying split, and he had some reason for pulling together. Don't know when." He glanced over at me. "You should know."

"Well, I don't!" I took a deep breath. "You're not saying he's been Angelus for years."

"Nah. I think he's been Angel all the time you've known him. Until recently. But you'd know better. Until this year, I haven't even seen him since-- well-- an innocent, abashed glance down. "Since that little interlude when he first came to LA."

"You mean, when you tortured him."
"Not me. I knew I couldn't do it. Hired someone, I did. Delegated."

"And that was Angel? The one who was tortured by your proxy?"

"Yes. Sanctimonious twit that he was. Crushed my ring, my gem of Amarra. My invulnerability."

"My pretty, my precious," I said drily. "Yes, I saw that film too. So that was Angel. Years ago."

"Right. And – later. I didn't see him, made sure not to. But he came to Sunnydale right after Joyce died. Mrs. Summers. That was Angel too. Didn't meet up with him, but he stayed an hour and left Buffy crying for him, so that had to be Angel. And when she came back. From death. She went to meet him. He said he'd only come halfway. And only gave her another hour. So that had to be Angel too."

His tone was so cynical, so bitter, that I almost didn't want to ask. "Why do you say it had to be Angel?"

"Because Angel's the one she loves. And he's the one who leaves her whenever she needs him, because it might be dangerous. The one who values his soul more than he values her."

"Don't you?" It was a relief to let Angel/Angelus go, if only for a moment.

"I don't value anything more than Buffy," he said simply. "I-- you know, last spring. I didn't know I'd be coming back. Thought I'd be going to hell, certain sure deserved it. But better me in hell than her in heaven before her time. And if the bargain had been for my soul? Sure. Let 'em have it. If it's what's needed to protect her."

"So that you would be evil again."

"If I needed to be. For her." He shook his head. "But I wouldn't be."

"Without a soul--"

"Without a soul, what? You saying a soul equals goodness? Tell that to Hitler."

The usual argument. It made me impatient. "A soul makes goodness possible."

"You think? I don't. And since I'm the only one in this room who's had a soul and lost it and got it back again, I think I just might know more about it than you, Watcher."

I was making him angry. Good. He was making me angry. "You can't be good without a soul. I don't believe it."

"I think I can be as good as the average human. I did good, before I had the soul. Ask Rupert. He'll give you all sorts of caveats, he will, resisting for the same reason you're resisting. But he's an honest man, and he'll tell you the truth. I did some good. For him and his group. Saved their little human hides, more than once."

"Because you were in love with the Slayer."

"Good reason to do good, isn't it? For love? Maybe not the best, but surely not the worst."

I had an argument for that. But he'd just argue that humans were no better. That missed the point, but he thought it was the point.

"I wouldn't be sitting here with you, were you soulless."
"Why not? You were just on stage with Clem. Not to mention Lorne. You actually think they're more evil than most humans? Say you had the choice of sitting here with Harmony, bless her pretty little missing soul, and Jeffrey Dahmer. Which would you choose? Me, pre-soul, post-Buffy, or Charles Manson?"

"William the Bloody. A century of slaughter, Spike."

"Yeah, and during that same century I was doing retail evil, humans were doing it wholesale." He shrugged. "I was a predator. A hunter. Hunted for my food, and enjoyed it. Didn't drop any atomic bombs or run any concentration camps, but killed without regret. And then I couldn't do it anymore, thanks to the good old US Army, and I stopped doing evil. Still no soul."

"You had no choice."

"Well, I did, but I was too proud to use it. Could have had minions bringing me fresh kill. But – but there's no fun in evil, is there, if you don't do it yourself?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you, Wes?"

His voice was silky now, very soft, and I felt it brush over me like a gentle, sinister touch. "I -- I don't know what you're talking about."

Suddenly he grinned. "Neither do I. Just thought maybe you'd done something that shamed you, and I'd make you confess."

"Nothing. Nothing. Except... except I didn't know. What? What was it? Had I really? Wouldn't I know?"

I found my hand at my throat.

"Never been bit, have you?" Spike asked conversationally. "What are you feeling for there?"

My fingers skittered over my neck. Searching. For a bite, for a scar.

"You haven't been bit, Wes. I'd know. Settle down. I'm just funning with you."

I felt myself collapse. Subside into my seat. Panic seeping from my body. "What is it I'm fearing?"

"You tell me."

"I can't. I don't remember."

"What don't you remember, mate?" His voice was soft again.

"Darla."

"Good one to forget, ask me." A pause. "You remember her. What have you forgotten?"

"How she died. When she died."

This was met with silence. When I looked up, he was regarding me steadily.

"Tell me."
He sighed. "I don't know how. I don't know when. But I think I can show you where."

I'd promised to buy him a drink. The check listed a half-dozen rounds of Guinness (evenly shared out between us, I admit) and two baskets of bread, of which I'd had a single slice. And Spike reminded me to leave Bridget a twenty-dollar tip, "a tenner for each beauty."

"You are remarkably like your grandsire in one respect."

"Appreciation for Irish lasses?"

"Cheapness."

He sulked about this as we left the pub. "Different. He's rich. I'm--"

"Extorting my department for a hundred dollars an hour."

Spike grinned at that. Then sobered. "And Harmony's siphoning off 75% of it. Saving for my retirement. She's putting it into tax-frees." A thought struck him. "That doesn't mean I'm paying taxes, does it?"

I was too distracted to do more than smile perfunctorily. "Let Harmony deal with it. Now that she's spending much of her work time on your projects, she might as well be your assistant."

"No way. Angel needs her. Anyone getting nagged to death here, ought to be him."

We were avoiding the subject. Joking as if there were no subject to avoid. But we were moving inexorably through the quiet streets towards... something. Past W&H. Spike looked back at the building, and I sensed he was waiting for some protest from the Powers. But nothing tugged him back towards Angel.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. I'm just following the scent."

"You can't possibly still smell her. If she's dust."

"Wes, I don't know what the hell I'm doing, but I'm feeling her, all right? She's my great-grandsire, and I lived with her for longer 'n I lived with Angelus. And blood calls to blood. Vamp thing. You don't understand it. I don't understand it. Let it be, all right?"

I was silent for awhile. We were on Wilshire, and passed the dark hulk that once was the Hyperion. I looked back over my shoulder at it, recalling a simpler time, when Angel and the rest of us were in accord-- but we still were. We were all getting along. Swimming along. Holding evil at bay.

"No Powers?"

"Nothing. It must be... right. What we're doing. Part of his journey." In the lamplight, his face was marble-smooth and still. "It must be good for him."

"That's if you trust the Powers."

"I don't." He took a deep breath, very much as if he still needed to breathe. "But I trust the truth. And
maybe you need to know the truth.”

"Whatever that is."

"Yeah."

There was a tautness about the night that reminded me, paradoxically, of home. The air was cool and misty, with something like fog slithering along the walk and twisting under the streetlights. This most modern, sunlit of cities felt sooty and ancient. I was a bit drunk and a bit frightened, and my lungs felt too big for my chest, and I wondered if Spike felt it too, felt almost that we were back home, walking the London streets at some long ago time when fear of the night would send everyone into hiding.

I was tired now and wished I could hail a cab, but Spike needed the pavement, I think, needed the feel of the concrete under his boots and the smell of night in the air. We did not speak. He took my arm once, to draw me across the street, but otherwise I just followed him, turned when he turned. Trusted him to find his way.

When he started down another familiar street, however, I stopped. "Wait. Have you ever been here before?"

Spike halted a few feet ahead of me. He gazed around him, at the tops of the buildings, the pockmarked walkway. "Don't think so. We're not there yet."

I forced myself to move on. To follow him past the blank windows of a new storefront. But when he turned the corner and took me to the opening of the alley, I stopped. "I can't."

"What?"

I reached out and touched the brick wall. "Lorne's old club. Caritas. It was back there. Where that new store is. It was blown up."

"I know. He told me. Some Grappler demons. A grenade."

"Yes." No. "Was it here that Darla died?"

"Close. Come on." He waited for me to pull level with him, and then reached out and took my arm. "Come on."

I closed my eyes and let him lead me into the alley.

He stopped. I stopped. He released my arm. "Here," he said in a whisper.

I opened my eyes. We were directly behind Caritas. In the dim light spilling in from the street, he was kneeling, his hand splayed on the rough pavement. He closed his fingers into a fist, and rose.

Then he turned his hand over and opened his fist.

There was nothing there. But he said, "Was it raining?"

"How do I know?"

"You were there, weren't you?"

No. No.
The memories flew at me, like bats, black bats, wings pounding. And they flew past and were gone, and I was standing there, gasping, tears like rain on my face, in an alley lost.

"Connor," Spike said. He took my fist and forced it open, and spread his cold palm against mine. I felt grit between us. "Tell me who Connor is."

The answer came to me. Just the answer. Nothing more. No context. No meaning. Just the words.

"Someone Angel killed."
I wanted Wes. And I couldn't find him. Not a novel experience, at least not lately. I checked his office and found it empty, the only evidence he'd been there the glasses resting on an open book under his desk lamp. I crossed the room and switched off the lamp, telling myself I was just feeling paranoid. Wes wasn't avoiding me. He was just all caught up in that goddamned band of Spike's.

The band. The bane.

It was almost 5 pm, and the four secretaries in the research department were starting to pack up their bags and briefcases-- at least until I walked by. Then they pretended to be working hard, typing away. But I kept my eyes forward, passed by their desks without making any contact, and I heard their heartbeats slow down and their voices start up when I hit the end of the corridor.

"You going to the party?" one girl was asking.

"Oh, yeah. Free booze? Charlie Gunn shimmying those hips of his? Wouldn't miss it."

This made me stop just outside the door. The stupid bints, as Spike would say, should know about vampire hearing, if they were planning a career at W&H.

"Can't believe, you know, that the boss is paying for it. Maybe he's loosening up. Can't tell by looking at him-- did you see him just now? Looks like he just staked his best friend."

"He always looks like that. Let's see if they get him to dance at the party."

"I'll bet you lunch all next week that he stays rooted the whole time."

I contemplated bringing back weekly employee sacrifices. Instead I headed down to the lobby which, as I suspected, was being set up for... a party.

Keeping tight rein on my temper, I focused not on the staff members setting up the bar (it was 4:56, still company time, by the way) or Harmony over there with Clem and his drum kit (were we paying Clem a salary? He sure seemed to be here more than most of our employees) or Lorne off in the corner in a lotus position, eyes closed, mouth open, throat vibrating. Instead I stared at the big dry-erase sign liberated from the training room.

Happy Songs! was written in multicolor across the top-- orange and blue and green and purple. The chartreuse and crimson exclamation point was all puffy, like a balloon tethered to a cherry. I recognized the technique as Clem's. Last week he'd sent me a photograph-postcard from Death Valley, him and his pretty girlfriend with their heads sticking out of cardboard cowboy/cowgirl cutouts. Dear Angel, Wish you were here! he wrote cheerily. Except for the sunshine problem!

But a big red line cut diagonally through Happy Songs!, and underneath Wes had penned in his precise way Dionysian Revelry. No exclamation point for Wes. Thank the powers for small favors. Very small favors.

That too had been crossed out too, and PARTY! was substituted in the ornate hand I recognized from long-ago scraps of poetry and yesterday's memo about the firm library's inadequate DVD collection. ("There's a great one I saw advertised on the web-- The Demon Kama Sutra Live. Good research material.")

Not that I'd had one moment's puzzlement about who it was responsible for this-- this fiesta (that was
printed in orange on the banner hanging from the mezzanine railing). The six kegs stacked by the staircase. The flood of lights from every angle that would probably double our electric bill. The pizza delivery boys arriving en masse from seven different pizza places. The opened case of Cheetos on the receptionist's desk. The receptionist giggling and dancing to some punk CD playing over the PA system. Of course.

It all spelled "Spike".

At 5 pm on the dot, he let go of the receptionist's hand and vaulted onto the makeshift stage. "Clem! Drum roll! Got to call Wes and Lorne and Charlie to their posts!"

Clem set up a deafening patter-- literally. I almost felt sorry for Harmony. I was standing thirty feet away, and my vampire hearing about shorted out. Harmony fell onto the stage and crawled over to the side, scrabbling with her hand and coming up with a set of noise-blocker headphones. She popped them firmly over her ears, and got back to work setting up the microphones.

The roadie wearing earplugs. Not a great advertisement for the band's quality, I thought.

Lorne emerged from the men's room, his hair shining with pomade and his chest thrust out. He had a pitch-pipe in one hand and kept blowing on it then mimicking the note. When he caught sight of me, he stopped mid-howl. "Angelface! Just in time! Hey, Spike! The boss is about!"

Spike looked up from his bass with a glad grin. I wasn't fooled. I'd known him too long to be fooled. But I stood there and waited for him to cross the lobby in a few long strides. He grabbed me by the arm and tugged me towards the side of the stage, declaiming something about firm-building and morale-boosting and employee-empowering and oh by the way will you handle the camcorder.

"What was that again?"

"The -- " he mumbled the rest. "The camcorder." Then, stronger, as if he could persuade just by talking really fast, "We want to make a live concert video, see. For, you know, instructional purposes. Instructing us where we're going wrong. And we need someone to operate the camera."

I took a long moment to gaze around at the lobby, which was rapidly filling with employees drawn by the continuous drum rolls and the smell of pizza. "There are others who can operate the camera."

"Well, no. See, it's a special camera." He pulled me over to the side of the stage, where a large tripod was set up, topped by a tiny black cam-corder emblazoned with the W&H logo. "I checked it out of the audio-visual department. It's the one that they use for taping the demon rituals. And it's all nano-technology and micronics, and next-year's-invention microphone. I had to promise that no one but a department head would be using it. 'Cause it cost an arm and a leg. Not literally," he added anxiously. "But if anyone else uses it, it will cost me an arm and a leg. Literally. That lady you got running A-V? She's like a Gorlap, only less charming. Anyway, you're the only department head not in the band."

"I'm not a department head. I'm CEO."

"Yeah, I told her that, and she allowed as how maybe you'd be okay." He glanced back over his shoulder and lowered his voice. "There she is. Lurking under the staircase."

I followed his gaze and saw a sweet looking little old lady sitting on a folding chair in the shadows under the stairs. Her two-inch claws flashed as she daintily dropped a cheeto into her mouth. Hmm. They weren't claws. They were fingernails. I recognized them as fake because Cor-- I recognized them as fake. But they looked like the titanium-reinforced variety that could dig into a vampire's
chest and tear out his unbeating heart.

She was looking straight at me. At my chest. "Wes is a department head."

"He's playing keyboard."

"Gunn--"

"Lead vocals. With Lorne. And Fred is doing the sound. There's no one but you." A pause. He lowered his eyes. "Please?"

Spike always made that word sound like it was killing him, like he wouldn't ever beg like this unless the alternative was evisceration. I'd've been more impressed if I hadn't heard him earlier today pleading with the receptionist for her bottle of Wite-out.

"What do I have to do?"

His smile of relief was inspiring. "Just stand here. It's all set up. Just stand and look through the viewfinder and push that button. You don't even have to hold it. Just push it again when you want to stop."

"That's all?" I gazed dubiously at the contraption, which was as ornate and as elaborate as one of Fred's portal-revolving devices. "I can't, you know, zoom in? Zoom out?"

Spike's face lit up. "Course you can. You're a 21st-century kind of guy." He took my hand and put my finger on a metal ring. "Just twist this right to zoom in. And left to zoom out." He stopped, his hand still holding mine against the camera, and mused, "Maybe it's left-in, right-out."

Spike was left-handed. Left-minded. Left behind in the directions department, anyway. Always had been. Once we ended up in Poland instead of France because of his creative interpretation of "west".

I yanked my hand free of his. "I'm sure I can figure it out."

As he sauntered away, I gave the camera a close study. All along, I felt my assistant's anxious gaze on me. I wanted to yell over at her that just because I sometimes broke a button on the goddamn phone, trying to find some way to dial out, that didn't mean that all technology baffled me. But I settled for a scowl in her direction, and she guiltily bent back towards hooking up cables to the speaker.

A quarter hour later, I admit, I was feeling pretty pleased with myself. I'd figured out the zoom. (Spike had it wrong, of course.) I'd gotten rid of the annoying date/time stamp on the corner of the picture. I'd experimented with the fade-in/fade-out effect. And as I swung the camera around on its tripod, I thought I was panning like the best of cinematographers, the gathering crowd passing through my viewfinder as a collage of pizza-sauced mouths and beer-cupped hands. I found a knob that kind of filtered the lens, so the image blurred into something almost impressionistic.

And then, in contrast, when the band walked onto the stage, I switched into sharp focus.

I cast a look at the audio-visual demon, and thought she was regarding me approvingly. (So there, Harmony.)

Then I bent back to the camera, set my eye socket into the eyepiece, and framed the band. Spike was, of course, front and center standing at the microphone, his bass hanging negligently from the strap on his shoulder, his jeans low-slung and his t-shirt ripped to show off an ivory ridge of abs. He'd always been a natural showman-- you should have seen him playing prizefighter in Shropshire,
winning the brutish crowd with his frail underdog performance against the heavyweights, snatching victory out of certain death with nothing more than his little fists and his big heart... oh, and that vampire strength and speed, which he disguised as "gutsiness". My job was to back him at the 20-1 odds, loudly proclaiming that I was throwing my money away, but the lad deserves a bit of support. Those were the days.

Annoyed, I panned the stage from Harmony crouched beside the speaker past Clem behind his drums, right over Spike and across the others. Then I pulled my head back so I could tilt the directional mike towards the stage. Spike was welcoming everyone to the party and urging them to eat more, drink more, dance more, laugh more-- and then he surprised me by gesturing in my direction and saying, "And it's all thanks to the W&H CEO and cinematographer, Angel! Let's give it up for the fearless leader over there!"

I happened to have Wes in my viewfinder right then, and he somehow knew it, and he was regarding me steadily with that look he gets, the moral authority look. You know the look I mean. The one that says, do what you know I want you to do, because it's the right thing to do. Don't even think about it. Just do it.

I remembered the vain clumsy young man who had shown up at my door years ago, hungry and lonely but refusing to admit it, dependent on Cordelia's goodwill more than mine. He was so unsure of himself then, half-conscious that he was a bit goofy, almost a caricature of the Englishman abroad. When had he changed? When had Wes become this force of certainty?

Sometime in the last couple years.

Did he remember why he'd changed? No. He couldn't. He would have to attribute the change to some other cause-- maturity, or despair, or loss.

But he was probably right. I had no choice. I had to straighten up and look around and nod as they clapped dutifully. They all avoided eye contact with me. Good. Didn't want them to think this was going to be the norm around here-- pizza and parties and the CEO up close and personal. But I went back to the camera and saw that Wes had gone back to his keyboard. Satisfied.

Spike was still speaking, gesturing with his hands, bouncing on the balls of his feet. Laughter in his eyes. "So... we each chose a song, a song that makes us happy, and we hope they make you happy too. And, well, this is our first performance, so be kind, okay? Or... else." For just a moment his game-face flickered on, and the secretarial contingent gasped, and then he was human-face again, flashing a fangless smile, and they cooed-- and the change happened so quick I didn't have time to zoom all the way in until his human face was back, and so anyone watching the tape would miss out on most of the wrinklies and just get that damned pretty boy effect.

Maybe this cinematography thing was harder than I thought.

The first happy song was actually called *Happy*. Happy something. *Happy Jack*? It seemed to consist mostly of Clem pounding the drums so hard I was afraid he'd start levitating-- his jowlflaps were flapping like Dumbo's ears. (But that made great video, I have to say.) The lead singer, surprisingly, was Kenny the Security Guard, who sang with great gusto. I heard someone behind me mutter that he was out of key, but I thought he sounded fine. Very loud, anyway. And he knew all the words, as far as I could tell. I reluctantly concluded that I should stop underestimating my staff. Who would have thought Kenny the Silent Security guard could sing and play the guitar at the same time?

I was just zooming in to catch his facial expression at the end when he whirled around and started
banging at his guitar strings with the side of his hand. It made an ungodly yowl, and I had to zoom out to show the violence of his attack. I heard Spike yell, "Harmony! Kenny alert!" and then Harmony slid into the scene, her hands outstretched, just in time to intercept the guitar, which Kenny for some reason was aiming like a hammer at the stage floor. Harmony yanked the guitar away and ran off with it, and I had to react as fast as one of those Wild Kingdom cameramen, following her off the stage, Kenny in hot pursuit, until Spike reached out and snagged him around the waist.

Everyone fell silent as Spike wrestled him to the ground, and I made a quick adjustment so that the mike would catch their conversation. "Yeah, Ken, I know, Peter Townsend used to smash his guitar. I know. But he didn't have a Stratocaster! He'd get old guitars out of pawnshops for twenty pounds, and those would be the ones he'd smash. Saw it myself, I did, back in '66. No, not compromising your creativity, not meaning to do that, but that's a classic-- yeah, okay, next time-- Harm'll sneak in and hand you a cheap old guitar, and you can smash it just like the Who did....."

"Jimi Hendrix started it," Gunn announced. "Smashing the guitars. The Who stole it from them. My mom said so. And Hendrix didn't use cheap guitars. He was authentic!"

"Okay, sure, Charlie. Just remember, that's why Hendrix never made a dime till he was dead." Spike rose and helped Kenny to his feet, and only then did Harmony return, holding the guitar out gingerly. I wondered if this camera allowed slow-motion replay.

Wes took charge, as only Wes can do, leaning into his own microphone. "Thanks to our lovely roadie Harmony for her help there. And next up is Clem singing the ever-popular Don't Worry, Be Happy." I'd never heard this ever-popular song, and by the time Clem was into the 19th repeat of the grindingly chirpy refrain, I was hoping I'd never hear it again. But I kept my focus on my work, panning the crowd to show the secretaries singing along. "This should be our company song!" one idiot suggested loudly as my camera lens passed over her happy face. Yeah, that's what the senior partners wanted employees thinking-- don't worry. Be happy. Ha. Worry. Be unhappy. Employees are more productive when they're afraid they're going to be fired. Or sacrificed.

That's what the SPs would say.

Clem seemed content to go on singing that annoying refrain until the cows came home, but finally Spike moved to the mike and announced the next song. "Lorne's signature song, that you all know and love, Lady Marmalade!"

It was an odd experience, sighting through this lens at the people I knew best. I'd seen Lorne singing like this a dozen times, strolling through his club just this way, wireless mike in hand, stopping mid-note for some light patter with someone in the audience, all self-assured and knowing, worldly, experienced.

But zooming in, I saw something else-- his fear. The tendons in his neck were taut under his green skin. That big chest of his under the ornate ruffled shirt was vibrating. Now that I saw it, I could hear the heart pumping away, the lungs panting in and out. And I could feel it, the control it took to force those notes through his tight throat, to keep the voice level and warm and bright.

Lorne was scared.

He hadn't sung that song here in LA-- since Caritas blew up. Since Darla--

He was scared he wasn't any good anymore. That they wouldn't like him. That he wouldn't fit.
I followed his path through the crowd, saw him flinch just a little when one law clerk turned away from him and laughed. Scared that he wouldn't fit. Lorne. The guy who came here to LA and made it his own town. The guy who took one part Elvis and three parts Sammy Glick and two parts Oprah and made himself into the total performer. He hadn't fit back in his homeworld, no, not Lorne, who loved music and laughter. But he made damned sure he fit here.

The great pretender-- but no. He wasn't pretending. Lorne really was what he wanted to be. What he'd made himself be. Wasn't he?

I glanced up once to see him whole, dominating the crowd, confidence radiating as his voice swelled. Then I looked back through my lens, and pulled into closeup, and there it was, the strain on his face. The strain of having to keep trying so hard to be himself. To make himself. To stay himself.

But now he was himself again. I could tell. He finished with a flourish, a light laugh, a toss of the mike to Gunn.

Lorne had done this before, many times. But Gunn? Performing was new to him, and it showed. He bobbed the microphone, cleared his throat three times, glanced back at Spike. Spike smiled reassuringly and murmured something like you can do it, Charlie.

And Charles stepped forward to the front of the stage. "Umm. Well, this is a happy song for me. 'Cause my mom used to sing it to my little sister. So I, you know, think of them both when I sing it, and I hope you all have someone to sing to too."

And then, in a voice that wavered, he sang some old song, one of those the soul groups used to sing a long time ago.

\begin{verbatim}
I've got sunshine, on a cloudy day
I've even got the month of May.
\end{verbatim}

And behind him, Lorne crooned softly My girl.

\begin{verbatim}
I guess you'll say
What can make me feel this way?
My girl, my girl, talking about my girl...
\end{verbatim}

It didn't sound like Charles at all-- it was high and sweet, and as he grew more confident and his voice steadied, he started dancing slowly, spinning around and extending his hand, and pointing at one secretary and then another. My girl, my girl.

Pretty soon the crowd was singing along, swaying from side to side like sunflowers in the breeze. Gunn strolled to the side of the stage and pointed at Harmony by the amplifier, and Fred behind the soundboard. My girl, my girl.

I narrowed in on his face, and saw there was no change in his expression. Harmony, Fred. Pretty ladies, co-workers. It suddenly struck me that he didn't remember. That he'd forgotten that Fred once was special to him.

And Fred looked up and made a face at him. She'd forgotten too.

I didn't realize, when I made the deal with W&H, that their time together would be erased.

That was good, right? They hurt each other last year, but now they could be friends again, no bad memories between them, no disappointments, no disillusionments. They didn't have to look at each other and see all that was lacking....
Gunn finished strong, and I got a good shot of his face, smiling with pride and that sweetness that I sometimes forgot about. That's what Fred loved about him, that sweet center inside the tough streetfighter. She might have forgotten, but I didn't.

Then Spike handed his bass off to Harmony and stepped forward to front of the stage, high-fiving Gunn as they passed. Gunn and the others, except Wes, receded to the back of the stage. Clem put down his sticks and rose and stretched, then took a seat beside Harmony on the side of the stage.

Wes started playing quietly, almost elegiacally. It didn't sound like a happy song to me. But at least it was calm, after all that raucous audience participation with Gunn's song. And the keyboard wasn't pretending to be an aboriginal gourd anymore-- Wes was playing just the single, simple piano melody. I zoomed out just a bit so I had him at the side of the frame, and Spike at the center.

Spike looked out at the crowd, who had silenced expectantly. But instead of singing, he started reciting. "Keats said:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

"And I say, a moment of joy is a memory forever." He stopped, and drew a breath, and added softly, "Sometimes it hurts to remember the happy moments. But the joy is there too, lingering, if you can stand the pain of memory. It isn't really past if we can call that moment to mind and be happy again."

And he glanced over at Wes and nodded, and Wes paused, then started playing again, the same melody only clearer, more insistent. And Spike closed his eyes and started to sing, and it still didn't sound happy to me, far from it. It sounded like a memory--

Night swimming deserves a quiet night.
I'm not sure all these people understand.
It's not like years ago,
The fear of getting caught,
the recklessness of water.
They cannot see me naked.
These things, they go away,
replaced by everyday.

Night swimming, remembering that night.
September's coming soon.
I'm pining for the moon.

In my viewfinder, Spike's image blurred, his face above his t-shirt pale as moonlight on black water. I turned my head and blinked, but I didn't need to see him to know he was remembering something real.... I could hear it in his voice, and it played out like a video in my mind, the vision of the two of them, their bodies naked and pale and lithe in the moonlight, their heads glittering silver and gold as they dove into the dark water, their laughter rising on the warm air.

It felt, for an instant, like my own memory. I could smell the salt and seaweed and feel the cool of the water, the air warm on my wet face, see the moonlight on her hair... the excitement hard in my throat, the almost-touch of her skin--

I gripped the camera tripod, panic rising in me. Memory. But it wasn't mine. I'd never taken Buffy in
the ocean. I'd never tasted sea-salt on her lips. I'd never seen her naked and wet in the moonlight.

I had enough memories of my own. I didn't need his.

I forced myself back to the camera, forced myself to look through the lens at him, at this display of his, his heart on his sleeve, his love on his lips. What was his point? She wasn't here to hear him. He would never see her again. And she never loved him anyway.

And yet he stood there with his eyes closed, remembering her, singing to her. Smiling a little, like it made him happy.

We were so different. I was glad of it. But still--

Memory didn't bother him. I couldn't understand it. Everytime I remembered something good, it meant it was gone. Past. Never to be experienced again.

Unlike the bad memories, which I relived over and over.

He had some point to this. He'd tell me, if I asked (and I wouldn't), that it all had to do with his mission. My journey.

I tightened the view, closing in on his face. That the Powers had chosen Spike as their emissary still confounded me. But then, he had never been anything but a living rebuke to me. His siring was my punishment for siring Drusilla. His killing the slayers was a harsh lesson to me in the eternal consequences of my evil actions. And his taking of Buffy-- that was just desserts for my making her love me when my love could only destroy her.

He finished, and everyone applauded, and he bowed in that sweeping way that told everyone that he had been schooled during Victorian times. Then he held out a hand towards Wes. "And let's hear it for my man Wes on piano. And his song will close out our set."

The camcorder lens was like a telescope, really. Or a microscope. I could see so much closer. So much clearer. Wes's face was somber and tense. I could see a nerve jumping in his jaw as he took a deep breath and said, "This is a true golden oldie. Even older than Spike there."

I zoomed out to catch Spike's reaction. But he just grinned. I could tell he thought all the ladies were making the comparison between his chronological age and his physical appearance. Forever young--that's how Drusilla seduced him, wasn't it? And that was why he didn't deserve the shanshu, not that he was likely to get it. He scorned mortality as a curse.

Wes started playing something familiar, a loud, bashing song that had everyone bouncing their shoulders up and down even before they recognized it. But they couldn't sing along. Wes was ramming out the lyrics in German.

O Freunde, nicht diese Töne,
sondern lasst uns angenehmere
anstimmen, und freundenvollere.

Ode to Joy. At first, Wes didn't look very joyful. He looked scared and tight. Then he lifted his chin in that determined way. And there on his neck, under his jaw, I saw what I hadn't seen before: an angry scrape of red, like some demon had clawed him. I had to zoom in to make sure it wasn't that scar, ominously returned-- but no, it was just a scrape. Probably a shaving mistake.

Spike was singing along enthusiastically. His words sounded a little off to me, a little too harsh. But he'd never been much good at German. Wes shot him a glance, but Spike just kept singing his own
special version of Beethoven.

Pretty soon it was over. Wes crashed the last chords, and he looked solemn and proud at the applause. My throat tightened around the oddest feeling-- relief? Wes had done well. The audience was applauding with that special pleasure that comes from actually enjoying something classy, and the band had to take several bows before they left the stage.

Yeah, it was relief I felt. It could have been so disastrous all the beer in the world wouldn't have satisfied the crowd. I mean, come on. Happy songs? At W&H? But I kept panning the crowd as they filtered out into the LA evening, and some were laughing, and some were singing, and everyone looked... happy.

So it wasn't as bad as it might have been.

The lobby was a disaster, of course.

And the band waited, smiling, until the last of the audience was gone. I kept taping, already imagining the credits rolling over this final bit ("Cinematographer: Angel. Director: Angel. Executive Producer--").

But then, when the lobby was empty, Wes turned to Spike, his face furious. "That wasn't German you were singing! It was Fyarl! And you thought I wouldn't notice!"

Spike's expression through my lens was one I recognized-- that irrepressible grin that just defied discipline. I remembered seeing that grin a hundred times over my hands gripped on his throat, Spike grinning like it was worth getting throttled and beaten, as long as he got to misbehave.

But he hardly had time to answer Wes before Gunn stomped forward. "Thanks a lot, Lorne, for ruining my song. I know you don't like the way I sing, but drowning me out isn't a solution."

Lorne raised his hands defensively. "Whoa, there, songman. Like Harmony said, you could use some voice lessons. You wouldn't listen, so I did the best I could, trying to keep you on key, at least, singing the chorus."

But he didn't have any time to elaborate, because Harmony stormed over and confronted Wes, her hands on her hips. "Where do you get off, Wes? Using that sexist terminology when you introduce me? Don't think I didn't notice that you stress the 'lovely' and sneer the 'roadie' part. I know you think it's stupid to have a girl roadie, but that just shows how sexist you are!"

"At least he remembered you!" Fred shoved the sound panel to the side and stalked to the front of the stage. She glared up at Spike. "I didn't even get a mention! After spending all week trying to learn that damned equipment, and having to listen to you all sing the same stupid songs over and over and over? You don't think I merit a simple and Fred is doing our sound?""

Spike's grin had long since faded. And he looked ever more miserable as one after another, they stalked out of the lobby into the office inner corridors, leaving him alone with me.

For just a second, I thought I heard a giggle-- it sounded like Harmony– and then an answering laugh (Gunn?). But it was probably just a door slamming. They would hardly be laughing when they were all at each other's throats, and Spike's too.

"Turn that damned thing off," Spike growled.

I was slow to comply, mostly because I thought that new grim harassed expression would be the perfect image to fade out on. No-- I had it. I cut from his almost- pout to the whiteboard proclaiming
Happy Songs! / Dionysian Revelry / Party! Dramatic irony in visual form.

Then, finally, I flipped the camcorder off. A job well done, if I must say so myself.

Spike was disconsolately picking up pizza boxes and stacking them on the receptionist's inadequate wastebasket. As I unplugged the camcorder, I watched him from the corner of my eye. He apparently recalled we had a cleaning crew, and went to the staircase and flopped down on the lower step in that boneless way of his. And then he put his head in his hands.

I am not, contrary to rumor, made of stone. I am flesh and blood-- otter blood, it's true, but human flesh. And the vision of Spike in despair, well, it pierced that flesh, hearkening too sharply to the memory of him weeks ago, battered and bloody, just begging to be let go. He had come a long way from there, I had to admit, transformed himself into an annoying cheerful advocate for fun and togetherness. He had, effortlessly from all I could see, seduced half my staff and all my department heads into this ridiculous band project. He'd gotten himself a contract to do what he ought to do just for room and board-- research and demon-hunting. He'd ensconced his pink-skinned "best mate" as a greeter in the lobby. He had Lorne opening a new club, Charles taking time off from his legal work to serve as co-muscle again, and Harmony scanning the Wall Street Journal for investment advice. He had Fred humming pop songs as she measured beaker levels. He got out every evening for booze and brawls. He even managed to keep from contacting Buffy. And he did all this claiming that it was part of my journey, which meant he'd somehow managed to snow the Powers.

But now he was sitting there bent and broken, as if all his victories were dust.

I went over and sat next to him. Well, not next to him. Above him a couple steps. And I sat here with my arms crossed waiting for him to speak. He always speaks, right? You can't shut him up.

But this time I had to wait longer than usual. At least thirty seconds. I was starting to get worried, but then he lifted up his head just for a second and said, "It's all gone to shit."

I suppressed a sigh, waiting for him to start whining again about Buffy. But I was wrong. After all, it had been at least ten minutes since the Buffy song. I shouldn't expect him to remember his heartbreak that long.

"I -- I just wanted everyone to have fun... but they're all complaining. All the time."

"The band?"

"Yeah. That happy routine? Just a performance. They're all ... they're all... unhappy."

I didn't know what to say. I could hardly dispute it, given the argument I'd just witnessed.. "Uh, sorry?"

He made something that sounded like a whimper. And then he rested the side of his head against my shin.

Like I said, we're different. I'm not one for touching. But Spike was always reaching out. He'd put his arm around Wes's shoulders, or punch Charles in the arm, or tug at Fred's hair. In the elevator, he'd reach out and take some rich lady client's hand and compliment her manicure. Or he'd stand behind a secretary and reach around her and turn on the caps lock key so her typing came out wrong. He was still a predator, invading everyone's space and claiming them with his touch.

So when he leaned against me, I tensed. The last thing I wanted was him claiming me. He already thought he had the Powers' permission to direct my "journey", as he kept calling it.
He must have sensed my discomfort, because he straightened up. "I'm not meant to be a leader," he declared.

Truer words were never spoken. "Uh, well--"

"I'm supposed to be the one on the edge, making snarky comments and leading mutinies."

"That is the way I remember you best," I allowed.

"Not supposed to be responsible. Make schedules. Devise marketing strategies."

I had to agree. "Those tasks don't, well, utilize your greatest strengths."

"They're all mad at me all the time." He bent his head again. "I-- I used to be used to that. Back in Sunnydale. But ... but at least I had Dawn. She usually liked me. And, well--"

I cut him off before he could mention Buffy. "Seems more like they're mad at each other."

"Yeah, well, I end up getting the flak. Because I'm the... leader."

I was a little above him, so I could see his shoulders sort of slump. He was giving into despair. It was harder to watch than I had imagined. Spike never despaired. Well, as long as there was some way he could use his fists--

I found myself, what does Harmony call it? Making nice. "They're all enjoying it. I can tell."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Lorne's different now. He's singing again. Not just talking on the cell phone, you know?"

"Yeah, that is an improvement."

Okay, so maybe we weren't completely different. Spike might have thrown himself into electronica--the last credit card bill, the one I waited down in the lobby all morning to intercept before Harmony could intercept it first, included charges for a new laptop, something ominously called X-box, and a whole raft of wireless routers and receivers that Spike (when interrogated) claimed was essential for him to escape W&H's evil firewall and communicate with other Grand Theft Auto champions throughout the world.

But he hated cell phones and agreed to carry one only when Fred argued that his keeping in constant contact with me was part of (you guessed it) my journey.

"And Gunn-- never thought he'd ever mention his little sister again, and here he is singing about her."

"That was pretty tight," Spike said. "He did good."

"And Wes." I had to force myself to go on. I couldn't say I liked the changes I saw in Wes. I didn't. He was so into his instrument and the band that he had no time for any of his old friends-- well, I guessed all his old friends were in the band. Except me. I'd say he was avoiding me, except, well, he wouldn't. It was just that he always flung himself into new ventures. He was like Spike that way. Unlike Spike, however, he stayed with his new ventures for more than 12 hours. "Wes seems like he's having fun."

"Yeah, he is." Spike brooded for a little while. "Didn't you think it was funny that I sang Ode to Joy in Fyarl? I mean, I thought it was funny. Like an in-joke."
"I'm not sure you and Wes, uh, have the same sort of sense of humor. I mean, I never see you chuckling over the double acrostics in the New York Times."

"He told me--" Spike drew in a breath, as if he feared this would destroy my affection for Wes forever-- "that he didn't like Benny Hill."

I shook my head. "No accounting for taste."

"So he's mad at me. And Harmony thinks I'm sexist. Me!"

"Go figure."

"Fred tells me I know nothing about the physics of sound. Huh. I know how to make things loud. And Gunn, hell, he and Lorne. At it all the time, wanting me to take sides on which is better at singing. And Kenny-- Christ. What a freaking argufier. Has to disagree with everything anyone says."

"Funny. I don't know that I've ever heard him speak aloud."

"He mutters. Balefully." The shoulders drooped again. "If it weren't for the mission, I'd lose them all, I would. Hmm." His voice brightened. "Maybe the band isn't part of the mission. I thought it was, 'cause it helped you improve employee morale and bond with your staff and all that. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe it's just taking me away from my real task. Maybe I should quit the whole band thing and focus more directly on you. Like -- like helping you work out. I saw you t'oother day in the gym, and I didn't think you were maximizing your isotonic routine, not to mention the cardio-vascular exercises."

"I don't have a cardio-vascular system." I shouldn't have had to point that out. I mean, neither did he. But he wasn't listening. "And you know, I was reading in one of those magazines Harmony's got lying around the waiting room. Shape? You know the one with all those chicks who look like Faith? All muscle and mean? Anyway, it was saying that rowing was not as effective an exercise as people think. And you row for half your workout. Like you're in a rowing coma."

"I use the time to meditate," I told him stiffly.

"Only means you're not concentrating. Okay. So let's say I stop the whole bloody band thing and focus directly on you and your journey to health and well-being. I was thinking I could be your personal trainer. You know, return the favor, like you used to train me, back in the day."

I couldn't speak. I was remembering all those years Angelus spent training the young fledgling William. And my training methods. Let's just say, I'd never read those books that argued against corporal punishment.

Finally I found my voice. "But.... but the band. You can't just abandon it."

"Well, if it's taking me away from spending time with you-- I mean, you are why they sent me back. To help you on your journey. And I can't do that if I'm not hanging with you. So personal trainer. Whaddaya think?" He looked up over his shoulder at me, a winning smile on his face. I shuddered.

"Uh, look. Listen. You-- " Inspiration struck. "You kind of got me curious. About this leadership issue. I mean, I'm a -- " the word stuck in my throat. "A leader myself. CEO."

Spike grimaced. "Hey, look. I know I should have asked you for advice. But, well, thought I could do it on my own. And now, well, advice ain't going to be enough to save that patient. I think we
need a transplant, and quick."

"A transplant. You mean, like, someone taking over as manager."

"Yeah. But no one in the band. Too much rivalry and jealousy already." Spike shook his head. "Nah. No one both willing and able. No help for it. Disband the band, start on the personal training. That's my plan."

"Spike." I said this as authoritatively as I could. "No personal training. No disbanding the band. I forbid it."

That had never worked before, and this time didn't break the pattern. "Not your call, is it, mate?"

"I -- " Honey, I heard Cordelia saying. Honey, not vinegar. She was the only one allowed to throw vinegar around. "I think that the band is succeeding. As a morale-boosting program. And -- and the staff might miss it. If you gave it up."

"Aw, they'd forget quick enough. I'll just explain about my mission, and invite them to, you know, come observe our personal training sessions in the gym!"

A Fyarl demon was clutching at my throat. Well, no, but it felt like it. I shoved the constriction away, and said, "No. Need the band. Part of my journey."

"But it takes me away from you."

"Not if-- not if I take over as band manager." I don't know where that came from. Okay, so I'd sort of been wondering about their ad hoc rehearsal schedule-- that is, they seemed to rehearse whenever Spike's hangover wore off. I'd done some research, and found that humans are most creative early in the morning, before the brain fully wakes up. So theoretically, they should be rehearsing every dawn before work--

"You? Take over? Manager?" Spike didn't look too happy about this. Terrible thing, jealousy.

"You think the band would object?"

He sulked for awhile, then said, grudgingly, "Nah. They'd probably love it. I mean, if I've heard Harmony say it once, I've heard it a thousand times. She says, Spike, how come you're not conscientious like Angel is? He never forgets to bring essential equipments to his meetings. Like, like there's something stupid about me forgetting my bass. And Wes. I mean, 'sfar as Wes is concerned, there's only one leadership style. And it's yours. And Gunn== sappy sentimentalist. He's always going, Too bad Angel's not here. And Lorne--"

I put my hand up to ward off more of the same. "Look. They're my staff. They're loyal. And that means... if it came to a vote...."

Spike stood up suddenly and stalked away. I felt a little sorry for him. Just a little. He stopped at a keg and grabbed a cup and twisted the tap. Empty.

"Bloody hell," he muttered. Then he looked back at me. "Not going to be a vote. You think I want to lose to you again? Like always? Not likely."

"So you'll-- you'll turn over the band leader position to me."

"Usurper." Vengefully, he said, "But you'll be the loser. We won't have any time for that personal training gig. So there."
I started to smile. Then I ruthlessly suppressed the impulse. "Very good. I'll see you-- Spike. Where are you going?"

Spike paused at the exterior doors, ready to shove. "No beer left. I'm going down to O'Brian's."

"You can't. You know the Powers will--"

"Don't care, do I. They can pick me up and throw me right through the side of the building, all I care. They can put me right through the corner there, bring down the whole building. Done enough for your bleedin' journey tonight. You got the band. I want a beer." He was out the door and into the dark unprotected plaza.

I didn't think he could bring down the whole building. He just wasn't that big. Then again, he did manage to bring down Sunnydale. "Spike, wait!" I pushed open the glass doors, and blinked in the artificial lighting from the halogen lamps. The night air was cooler than the inside temperature. It smelled funny. Too -- too much smell. There was the flat concrete smell and the sharp scent of all the humans who had passed through here, scents I could almost identify as one employee or another. And the diesel from the buses taking poor workers home, and the sweet tang of gasoline, and somewhere there was fresh blood, someone was bleeding--

Not Spike, I saw with relief. He was forging down the wide stone steps toward the street, the usual point for the Powers to intervene. I took a deep breath and set my shoulders and went after him.

I caught up with him at the bottom of the steps. "Look. If I go with you, the Powers will think it's about my journey. So they won't throw you back."

"Don't care." Still in full-sulk mode. The lower lip defied description.

"We'll talk about the band. You can tell me what's been decided so far."

"Right." Spike turned the corner and headed for the neon shamrock at the end of the block. "So you can just undecide them. The hell with it. All yours, mate." He cast me a glance. "I get to stay at bass. No replacing me. I'm not Brian Jones, you know. Won't put up with you taking over my band and then firing me, and me having to go drown in me own swimming pool."

"Vampires can't drown," I reminded him. "And you don't have a swimming pool. And who the hell is Brian Jones?"

Spike heaved a big sigh as we entered the pub. "If you're gonna be a rock-and-roll band manager, you better learn a little about rock-and-roll. So. Let's start at the beginning."

By the time we were seated in a booth, Spike had gotten past "Chuck Berry" and "Little Richard" and into Elvis. "Elvis I remember," I said proudly. "I even hung out with him. In Vegas. In the 50s."

"Probably the 60s," Spike retorted. "That's when he went all corporate, like you, and forgot his roots."

I let him go on about the Platters and the Crickets as I looked around the pub. They designed it so you'd forget that you were in downtown LA and a warm, dry night, and think that it was Galway. Dark wood and low ceilings and low lighting and barmaids with real breasts. And Irish accents that seemed authentic to me, though I hadn't been there in a couple centuries. And Guinness. Well, Guinness always had made up for the lousy weather. Or at least it'd get you drunk enough not to notice you were damp through all year round.

The barmaid came over, plopping down next to Spike. She gave me a look. "You got some
handsome friends, Spike. Who's this one?"

"His name's Angel. And don't even bother, love."

"He's sworn off women too?"

"Worse than that. I mean, my vow's only temporary." He snuck a hand around her back and it landed perilously close to that freckled bosom. "Till some lovely finally makes me forget my heartache. Don't know when that'll happen...."

"But we're all supposed to keep trying till it does. I get it." The barmaid pushed his hand away and stood up. She glanced over at me. "You're a priest, aren't you? I can always tell, collar or no."

Spike fell all over himself laughing at this as she walked away. "I was gonna tell her you were gay, but that's better. Hey, meet my spiritual counselor, Father Angelus!"

"Temporary heartache, huh?"

He sobered immediately. "Yeah. So? What's your point?"

"So much for loving Buffy forever."


I waited for our drinks to come, and then when the barmaid was out of earshot, I said, "You always acted like you couldn't live without her."

"Can't. That's why I died for her. So?"

"So... temporary. Not forever."

He drank down the beer in a single gulp. A final swallow, and then his gaze fixed coldly on me. "What's your point?"

I didn't actually know what my point was. Triumph, I guess. "She know that?"

"Not likely. Not like I ever talk to her." And then it started up again, the trembling lip.

I shoved my mug over to him, giving up half my drink just to give him something else to do with that damned mouth of his. "So why are you so sure you'll stop?"

He sat there staring down into my mug. Finally he said, "I have to, don't I? If I keep loving her, I won't be able to stay away. Not forever. Hard enough now. In a few months... if I don't stop... I won't be able to stop myself. I'll go after her. And I'll ruin her long and happy life gig. So. Best that I just stop. Soon as I can."

I smiled. It probably looked a little cruel. "But you won't tell her that."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if you can stop loving her, it means you never really loved her in the first place."

For an instant he reared up, his eyes glowing golden. Then he slumped down in his seat. "Yeah. Maybe. I'll try that."

"Try what?"
"Try thinking that. Say it again."

"What? That you never really loved her in the first place?"

"Yeah. Say it like you mean it. Like you believe it."

Exasperated I said, "Okay. You never really loved her."

"You got to say in the first place too."

"Why?"

"Because. I got to hear it in my brain that way. Echoing."

"You never really loved her in the first place."

He closed his eyes. He started murmuring that. Like a mantra. I never really loved her I never really loved her-- The eyes opened again. They were deep blue pools of despair.

Shit. "Listen. It doesn't matter anyway. I'm the one she loves. You know that. I know that. She knows that. And-- and neither of us is trying to stop."

"Not trying to hard to start either," he muttered.

"That's what forever means, idiot. It doesn't start and it doesn't end. And that's how we are. Together."

He made a big point of looking around the pub. "Where?"

I refrained from kicking him under the table. "I'm trying to help you. Help you give her up. Stop caring."

A pause. A sigh. My drink drained. "All right. Keep... keep trying. And you're paying, right? Get me another pint?"

The barmaid knew Spike way too well. She was right at his elbow with a replacement. "Here you go, lamb. Now you stop thinking of that little tart broke your heart. Think about the one who'll mend it."

Spike looked up at her, or at least at her breasts. "Maybe.. maybe you?"

"Soon as you get rid of that vow. Not much use to me otherwise." And with a saucy flip of her skirt, she was off.

"Why not go after her? Break the vow?"

"Can't. Not yet. Still feels like cheating."

"Spike. You just got a handful of her."

"That's not cheating. That's just... being friendly. Doesn't cross the line. But anymore... till I stop loving Buffy. See. Once I stop. Bridget. Promise. First on the agenda." His face fell. "Only I'm not getting much closer to stopping. 'Swhy I need you to, you know. Keep trying to tell me."

I had the usual loathing for discussing this and any other personal matter. But the fact remained, there was no one but Spike I could discuss it with. Not that I was discussing it. I was helping him. Helping
him give up Buffy for her own good. And his own good too. "She was never yours anyway. She's always been mine, really."

This time he kept silent. Communing with his pint.

Encouraged, I said, "I'm the only one she says that too. She told me. A whole year with that soldier, and she never said that."

Spike grinned. It was sort of a sad grin, minus the usual wickedness. But it was something. "Captain Cardboard. Not the sort to inspire much passion." Then his face darkened. "That was a long time ago. Before me. I changed things."

"No. Not really. Felt like that to you, maybe. But not to us." Us. It felt good to say that. Us. We were still Us, no matter what.

He slumped back against the booth, his hand splayed along the top like he'd fall if he didn't hold on. "She used to say that. That you were the only one. I used to laugh. Or yell. Or get drunk. But she kept saying it. Even last year, she said it." He put his head back and stared at the raftered ceiling. "I was there, you know. When you came with the bauble. Came out to make sure she was okay, meeting that lunatic with a priest's collar. And you were there. Saw you kiss her." His voice went low. "She stopped doing that. Kissing me. My fault entirely. So I couldn't grudge it. But I did. Begrudged it all. Her taking the amulet. Wanting to protect you."

I felt the stirring of ... discomfort. Not guilt. But if I'd insisted on keeping the amulet, staying and fighting with her, Spike would have been the one standing in the end at her side.

But Spike wasn't paying any attention to me. "Begrudged your time with her. Couldn't've been ten minutes. But it meant more to her than all the days and nights we spent together. Even those last three."

Something stirred in my memory. Vengeful Dawn, insisting that Buffy had slept with Spike in the end. That they were lovers. I told myself it didn't matter. "Yeah. You got it right. Anytime we spend together is meaningful. Matters more than the time apart."

He looked over to the bar, raised his hand for another round. "I got no rights here. I know it. She never made me any promises. She told you to wait for her. Told me only... only that I needed to be there with her. Like I had to be told. But all I ever was... was the present. The moment."

"Yes." I decided to say that more strongly. "Yes. I'm her past. And her future." I thought I'd better pound that home. "Every night, during the summer. She told me she loved me. Every night."

A flicker of pain across his face. "Yeah. Well."

"Every night. She'd look at me and she'd say, I love you." I was getting there. If he heard that enough, heard it enough he believed it, then maybe he'd stop, and we'd all be better off. Especially him. So I said it again. "Every night."

This time the pain wasn't a flicker. It latched on and stayed. "Yeah." He brushed at it, at the pain on his face. Shoved the heel of his hand hard across his cheek. "Yeah. She only said it the once to me."

"That she loved me?"

"No. She said that more than once. That she loved you. No. She only told me the once that she loved me."
Spasmodically my hand went out. I almost knocked over my pint, but Spike grabbed it and tilted it aright again. I sat back and made myself settle down. "She told you that she-- that she-- When? When did she tell you?"

"Oh, that last minute. Before I burned."

He rubbed at his forehead now. The pain was still there. I could see it, rippling under his smooth skin.

"She said--"

"Yeah. Crazy, huh? I almost believed her. But--"

"You didn't believe her." For some reason, this didn't reassure me the way I wanted it to.

"Nah." He shrugged. "It was just being nice. You know. I was going to die. It was like well done, thou good and faithful servant. She could hardly help saying it. I mean, Rupert probably would have said it, had he been next to me." He smiled, just a bit. "I would've said it to Rupert right back. Connection. Moment of death. Get sentimental at a time like that."

"What-- what did you say?"

"Thanked her, I reckon. Then... she left. And I burned up. Good day, all told."

_Death, glory, and sod all else_. He used to say that, like some kind of war slogan, when he was coming into his own. Of course, then death usually happened to whatever poor sod he was fighting--

"I died for her too," I found myself saying.

He was building a tower with the sugar packets, but this stopped him. "I thought she killed you, to keep you from destroying the world. You know, Acatlha, all that? Plus you didn't die. You just went to a hell dimension." He tilted his head and smiled. "I was there, remember? First time Buffy and I saved the world. Not the last."

"I'm trying to help you stop," I said, as kindly as I could manage. Next time I'd have to try it without the gritted teeth.

"Oh." His smile fell off. "Right. Sure. She-- she doesn't need me for world saveage. Does it by herself, or with others. Me. Not needed."

He looked so forlorn at this realization that I felt I had to give him some comfort. "Right. She doesn't need you to save the world. So there's not even a redemption-atonement reason for you to be with her."

"I know."

He was being so goddamned brave I wanted to eviscerate him. Instead, I said, "I hear she's going to be coming back from Tibet this weekend. Making a stop in San Francisco before going to Europe. I'm going up there to meet her."

I hadn't actually planned that. In fact, there was a hockey game on ESPN I was hoping to catch. But there was satellite television on the corporate jet--

Spike looked stricken, but all he could manage as protest was, "What about the band?"

"Oh, I'll have you musicians all squared away by then. You'll just need to rehearse a couple times,
I'm thinking, and I'll check in by phone." I considered this for a minute. "Maybe we should do the rehearsal by video-conferencing." I'd kind of gotten into the whole video thing.

But Spike looked panicked. "No. No. I can't see her. Even over video. The Powers could get sticky about that." He took a deep breath. "And I don't want her to see me. Not that she'd care, probably. But--"

I had to agree that it was best that Buffy not actually clap eyes on Spike, even in video. It wasn't that I particularly worried about-- as I said, she loved me, not him, and she'd love having me surprise her at the airport. But Spike in his rock-star persona-- well, I'd videoed a few of the secretaries when he sang that song. Buffy wouldn't be swayed as they were, I knew. I mean, I didn't think she cared much for music. But I couldn't help but be bothered by this thing about her saying she lo-- well. I knew he wasn't lying (you could always tell when Spike was lying, even when he was evil), but even he didn't put much stock in what she told him. Like he said, she was just being nice. Rewarding him. Job well done. And he did do a good job, I'd give him that. Good enough that the Powers sent him back-- to help me. Had to remember that. And this whole never-seeing-Buffy-again thing, that must be part of his helping me. And that meant the fellow just had to accept that Buffy was mine, in the sort of way he'd never understand.

"Fine. No video. But I'll get you all squared away, and pay her a visit."

Spike only stared into the depths of his glass. So I repeated myself. "Pay her a visit. Take her somewhere up on the peninsula. Somewhere romantic. Part of my journey. Part of her new happy life." The happy life that was a direct result of her never seeing Spike again. This was really a win-win proposition, for me and Buffy. And for Spike too, I told myself. He wanted Buffy to be happy. And his mission was to help me on my journey. Win-win-win.

Finally he looked up. "Got that curse thing taken care of, did you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"That curse. The one you been using all this time, to justi-- to explain why you haven't been with her." He levelled a glance at me, not even trying this time to look innocent. "Must have gotten that curse taken care of, if you intend her to be happy."

I should have known. It was all about sex with him. "That's not what our relationship is about."

"The curse?"

I gritted my teeth. "Sex."

"Oh." He flicked a finger at his sugar tower. It collapsed into a pile next to his mug. "Well, this is about her being happy. I mean, the only reason I came back is because they told me if I did, they'd make sure she had a happy life. So... you don't make her happy, you don't get to be part of her life."

He sounded like that guy. You know, that godfather guy, the one who dresses so badly and goes to the shrink every time he kills anyone. Gunn loves that show. You know the guy I mean. "You don't get to make that decision."

He raised his hands. "Hey. Contract. I just signed it. Didn't write it. Not in charge here, much as I hate to admit it. I hate all that bleeding destiny shit. Want to make my own destiny. Want to be the one to make her happy.... But, see, I died. No chance to do it. Now I got the chance, but only by staying away. And-- and watching out for her, best I can, like I always did. Only--" His face crumpled a little. "Only that's not true, is it? Only thing I can do is stay away, and then she gets to be
happy. But that means, 's long as I stay away, what happens only happens if it's going to make her happy. Right?"

I allowed as how this sounded logical. Then I wanted to take it back, "logical" having nothing to do with Spike.

"So you can go visit her all you like. But as long as I keep my part of the contract--" his voice wavered again, then steadied-- "and don't see her again, then she'll only keep you if it makes her happy."

"She has loved me since the beginning. She'll be happy to be with me." I said that with all the force of truth.

It was for his own good. He had to stop loving her, and he had to give up any lingering fantasies they'd be together somehow. But Spike had been drinking steadily, and I wasn't sure he was paying much attention. "So... why haven't you been together? All this time? If being together would make her happy?"

Because she was with you, I almost said. But that wasn't true. She was with him only because she couldn't be with me. And she couldn't be with me because-- "We were together in every way that counted."

He closed one eye and squinted at me. "Really? What way is that? The one that counted?"

I reminded myself that he needed to hear this. "Soulmates. Spirits in communion."

"Oh. Right." He raised a hand and Bridget arrived promptly with another pitcher and a sharp look at his face.

"You're still talking about her, aren't you? Got to stop that, lamb. Just makes you sad."

"Not for long, now that the reinforcements are here." As he poured another drink, he tried a grin, but it slipped away as soon as Bridget left. "Soulmates," he said. "All well and good. But she's a woman. A passionate young woman. She wants more than a soul."

I had to be cruel. Why not? Wasn't that what he was doing with me? "No," I said slowly. "She wants more than a soul from you. Because you're not enough. But soulmates is enough when it's me. It's me she asked to wait. And you she sent to die."

He opened his mouth to object. I waited, a little uneasy. Because what I said was below the belt. The usual, between us. But... not kind.

But as that old song says, sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind. The whole point of this exercise was to help him stop loving her. And I didn't see anything more likely to do that than reminding him which of us she chose to survive.

He understood. He really did. I could see it in his eyes. "Okay. That's good. That's a good one. Say it again. That part about her sending me to die."

"She sent you to die."

"Because--?"

"Because she wanted me to live."
He closed his eyes, laid his hands out flat before him, fingers outstretched. If it were anyone but Spike, I'd think he was meditating. But it was Spike, and he couldn't keep quiet long enough for that. "Say it again."

"She sent you to die--" Christ. This might be helping him, but it wasn't doing much for me. "Look. You can't see her anymore. Good reason. So live with it."

He opened his eyes. "I am living with it."

"I've lived with worse." Why I felt this was a competition, I don't know. But everything between us was a competition.

So he one-upped me. As he has always done, or tried to do. "You have to fix the curse. If you're going to be with her."

"It's not your call," I shot back. "And you act as if it's just a matter of ... fixing. You don't know what else it will affect. What the consequences will be."

"Then let her go. For real. Because it's your bloody curse, not hers, and yet it's hurt her more than it's ever hurt you."

"No. That's why I left her. So that she wouldn't be hurt."

"You don't have a clue, do you?" Angrily he drained his glass and set it down with a jolt. "Sometimes I think you weren't ever human-- Don't you know? You made her feel dirty for desiring. I know, Jesus, I know, more than anyone. The only way she could let herself feel passion was to feel it as degrading. Dirty. The things she said to me-- and we were just making love. Just like we were supposed to do-- well, maybe not exactly that way. Not the boring normal way. But it was passion and desire and it was all about life, and yet she said it was all about death. And that came from you."

"No. I left her. Let her go."

"Oh, sure. You let her go. You son of a bitch. I saw you that night, when you gave her the amulet. You let her think you still loved her. Would always love her. Just like you did back then. A pure love. No dirty touching-- That's why six years later she's still afraid to want. You made her think desiring you would lead to evil. And that desiring anyone else was a betrayal."

"Just desiring you. Because-- because that is a betrayal."

He stared at me, then -- unprecedented for him-- he rose and left without the last word.
The next day, when I took over the band, Spike started out rehearsal quiet and withdrawn. Everyone else attributed it to grievance at losing the leader position, and I had to ignore a few glares from Harmony and glances from Lorne. But pretty soon Spike was Spike again, arguing that a song called "You Shook Me All Night Long" by the band AC-DC belonged on our Love Song playlist. I had never heard said song, but the title and the bandname constituted what Gunn would call a prima facie case against it being a love song. Still, in deference to Spike's supposed dethroning, I muted my automatic and well-founded protest, and Spike's song made it into the Love Song set.

So did Lady Marmalade.

And Gunn's choice. She Lives in My Lap.

And Wes's choice. Ballin' the Jack. ("A fine old dance hall tune," he pretended.)

And Kenny's choice. Backdoor Man.

And Clem's choice. A Quick One While He's Away.

I guess it wasn't just Spike who thought love equalled sex.

But the very beginning of my tenure as band manager, I didn't choose to make a stand over something trivial. Besides, Lorne and Gunn each came up to me privately after the rehearsal to explain that Spike had promised that they could be lead singer, and they didn't understand why Kenny et al got songs, and Gunn pointed out that when Spike was leader, it made some small sense that he might sing a song or two, but now that he was just the bass guitarist.....

I promised to make it all right after the next performance. That's what I did. Always. Make it all right.

I just couldn't see it. Couldn't see taking away his songs after taking away his band. And taking away his girl.

Not that Buffy was his girl. But that's the way he saw it.

I felt more justified, however, when I was on the jet to San Francisco, and opened up my folder of paperwork, and a scrap fell out. It was unsigned on yesterday's page from a daily calendar-- someone else's, because if Spike had a Filo-fax, it was news to me-- and in Spike's ornate handwriting: Here's the address of a shaman up in the East Bay. He is good at getting rid of curses. I checked out the Better Business Bureau, and he gets high marks for accuracy and customer service.

I shoved the note into my jacket pocket, resolving not to give Spike another thought.

Except, of course, I was supposed to tell Buffy that he was back.

That was the sort of news that could wait till the end of the weekend.

I saw her as she came out of Customs, tan and confident and strapped up with a backpack that must have weighed as much as she did. She smiled as she saw me and held out her hands. "I hoped you'd take the hint when I sent you that email with my flight info!"

I took her hands and kissed her cheek, and in just a few minutes, I had her settled into my rental car, a Jag in forest green with smoked windows. She liked green, I remembered. "You look terrific," I
said, and I meant it. "I knew meditation would help you."

She leaned her head back against the leather seat and sighed. "I hate meditation. All that chanting. I couldn't wait to get back to a place that had music— mind if I turn on the radio?"

I agreed, of course, and she turned on some hip-hop station, and I almost boasted how much better Gunn sounded-- but it wasn't really time to tell her about the band. "Well, you look really relaxed."

Her hand kept the beat on her thigh. "Mountain climbing relieves stress. Hard to worry about much when you're that high up." She reached over and flipped off the radio, and looked over at me. "And the money troubles-- Giles says-- I mean it's hard to believe after so long. But I don't have to worry about that anymore. Me or Dawn."

I shrugged modestly. W&H had really gone to town with the insurance company, the one that kept wanting the title to Buffy's house. Unfortunately, the title, along with the county records office and the house itself, disappeared into the Sunnydale crater. "I know. You got a good settlement on your house."

"Oh. Right. Enough to pay off the mortgage. Yeah. Thanks." She looked out at the skyline of San Francisco. "No, I was talking about what Spike left us."

"Spike?" I echoed. "Spi-- what do you mean, what he left you?"

She sighed. "Giles didn't admit it was Spike. Just that an anonymous donor left me and Dawn a trust fund. But, well, I knew it was Spike. I don't know where he got the money. Giles would only tell me it was okay-- it was ethical. But of course he left it to us." She pulled in a breath. "I've been feeling, you know, okay since I heard that. Dawn can go to college, and grad school. She's so smart, so good at languages. She can go as far as she wants now."

This was the first I'd heard of any trust fund. And I doubted it. Spike never had any money. When he had some cash, he'd spend it on booze. Or he'd lose it in a card game. "You sure it was Spike? Where would he get enough to leave you anything?"

"I don't know. I just knew it was him. Watching my back. Just like always."

I should have told her then. But we were crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, and she was marvelling at the view of the city lights, and I told myself we had the whole weekend, and there'd be another moment. She wouldn't like to hear that he wouldn't see her. She'd let him go, that was clear, moved on, found peace up there in the mountains. But she was the defiant type. All she had to hear was "Spike is back, but he won't see you," and she wouldn't be able to think or talk about anything else all weekend. And she needed a break. She'd be seeing Dawn in a couple days, and then be off to London to check in with Giles, both of which encounters were likely to be upsetting enough.

Besides, I didn't owe Spike any favors, not after that note about the shaman.

I'd tell her at the end of the weekend, when she was over her jet lag and had her thoughts turned to the future, not the past.

We had reservations at an inn in wine country, a lovely old place up on a hill overlooking the vineyards. Buffy's room and mine shared a balcony, and we ended up with a bottle of wine out there, watching the moon rise. There was a small clear lake glistening at that base of the slope, and, a little drunk, I pointed to it. "We could, you know. Go swimming tonight." I don't know where that came from. "Night swimming."

In the light of the candles, Buffy's eyes seemed to dim. She was remembering-- clumsily I interrupted
that memory I'd already witnessed once this week. "Dumb idea. It would be cold, wouldn't it? And you're tired. Jet-lagged. Forget it."

"Yeah. I'm tired. Better I head off to bed. Don't let me sleep too late."

She gave a shaky laugh, and I thought, that's one more thing she'll never do again. Never swim naked in the night again. So many never agains. It was different when you lived as long as I did-- the world passes on, the new replaces the old, and it was okay that I'd never use my knees to urge a horse on again, because I could press my foot on the Jag's accelerator instead. But Buffy had a human lifespan-- or a Slayer's lifespan, even shorter-- and every never again was something lost forever.

Saturday dawned overcast-- not such a coincidence. I'd had Harmony research the weather across the Bay Area, and this little valley outside of Napa was usually overcast this time of year. The cloud layer was heavy enough that I didn't have any trouble getting in and out of the car, and we spent the day driving from winery to winery, and Buffy, flush now with her new trust fund, bought bottles of wine and olive oil and spices for gifts. It was an easy, relaxed day, and it reminded me of how good we were together.

The next day Buffy showed me all her photos of the Himalayas, and I told her of my long between-the-wars stay in a Tibetan monastery, right in the shadows of one of the mountains she'd climbed. I didn't tell her anything about W&H, and she never asked, and somehow the day slipped by without my mentioning Spike. I'd convinced myself that it was just kinder, for both her and Spike, to keep that quiet. Spike wouldn't be tempted to see her, if Buffy didn't know. And Buffy would be happier keeping him in the past.

Sunday evening I'd arranged to drive her down to Dawn's school for a visit. I would take the corporate jet home, then send it back so that Buffy could fly in style to London. At the inn, we packed up our luggage, and Buffy layered the bellman with her shopping bags, and then she looked around the little sitting room for anything left behind. "You forgot your jacket, Angel," she said, grabbing it off an armchair.

Something fluttered from the pocket, and before I could make a dive for it, she'd caught it. For a second, I thought I'd get away with it, that she'd just stuff it back. But that unmistakable handwriting caught her eye, and she smoothed open the page, and stared at it before lifting her gaze to mine.

"That's-- that's Spike's writing." She regarded the date on the little page with incomprehension. "But last year. On that date. He was with me in Sunnydale. How-- how did you get a note from him--"

And so I had to tell her, and it ruined everything, just as I predicted.
With the boss away, the mice will play. The band did, anyway. Except for Fred, who had some dumb experiment to finish upstairs, and Spike, who slumped around being miserable and grumpy, which was good because it reminded me why I would never sleep with him again (he was wearing a blue shirt that brought out his eyes, so I'd sort of been wavering, but one look at that frown and I remembered he was like totally in the past, even if he did look awfully pretty).

We were having some fun, drinking wine at rehearsal on Saturday. I showed Kenny the seven cheapo guitars I'd found at pawn shops, all prime smashing material, and Gunn was assuring him that it wasn't artistic selling out at all to smash them instead of the Stratocaster. Gunn was good at that, brought in the U.S. Constitution and the Federal Trade Commission, and in the end Kenny agreed (or nodded, anyway). So it was settled. Whenever he'd play something loud, I was going to sneak in and hand him a cheap guitar, and spirit the Stratocaster away somewhere safe, and he'd smash away.

Big sigh of relief all round, another wine bottle opened. Spike still glooming around playing diminished chords and thinking of the Slayer he'd never have. Since he'd spent way too much of our relationship time doing the same thing, I didn't have a whole lot of sympathy for him. But everyone else did, even Wes, who usually thinks grim and sexy is a look he has trademarked.

So everyone was being very gentle to Spike because his Beloved Slayer was probably in bed right that minute with his Not-so-Beloved Grandsire. Me, I thought we ought to feel sorry for ourselves, because isn't Buffy-Angel sex supposed to bring out the Angelus Apocalypse Now? But they were acting like the only real damage was going to be done to Spike. I could have told them-- that one takes a licking and comes out... well. Probably shouldn't mention licking and Spike in the same paragraph. That blue shirt was really sweet on him.

Anyway, he'd be fine in an hour or so, I wanted to tell them, and in fact, it didn't even take an hour for him to cheer up. It was Saturday, see, and only the attorneys were working, so we had the lobby pretty much to ourselves. So everyone stopped playing when a man wandered in from the street. Lorne brightened, because he's such an optimist! I mean, he thought that this guy had heard the band playing and came in to see, you know, if the Smashing Pumpkins had re-formed or Elvis had come back to life or something. (Lorne says yes, I mean, to the Elvis thing, but I guess the Pumpkins are gone for good.)

So he stood there by the door, a smallish man, with eager eyes. He had a suit on-- on Saturday!-- and his hands in his pockets, but he took them out when he saw us all set up on the portable stage by the staircase.

Wes and Gunn had their mouths open. You could tell they knew they were supposed to know him.

"Who's he?" Spike muttered. He didn't want anyone around, see, who didn't understand the full extent of the Spike tragedy.

I recognized the man right away. "David Nabbit," I whispered back, taking Spike's bass from him. He'd broken another string-- it was one of those days. "He used to be a client or something, when it was just Angel Investigations. Billionaire. Lives in Malibu."

"Billion--" Spike looked at him with more interest. "How do you know?"

I tossed my head. "Oh, like I'd be here even a week without looking up the photos of every one of the rich male clients."
"Doesn't look like a billionaire," Spike said, you know, like he'd seen a whole lot of those in his time. "Looks like--"

"Like Bill Gates?" I put in.

"Well, yeah."

When no one even greeted poor Mr. Nabbit, I handed Spike's guitar back and told him to fix his own damn string. And I went forward and jumped off the front of the stage and did my confident thing.

"Hi! I'm Harmony Kendall. Angel's Executive Coordinator." Well, that's what it says on my business card, and if Angel doesn't want me to choose my own title, he should occasionally, just occasionally, look at the requisition forms he signs all day. I held out my hand, with card, to the visitor. "You must be David Nabbit."

He looked gratified to be recognized-- a humble billionaire, go figure-- and took my hand. Course he noticed right away it was only room temp, and yanked his own hand away as soon as he could, leaving standing there like a fool, card still clutched. But he smiled, even if it was sort of nervously, and he said, "I just, well, just got back into town, and heard Angel had moved. We're old friends."

Wes and Gunn suddenly remembered who this was, and they jumped down off the stage and made a show of welcoming him, and he seemed really happy that they were both still human. He kept shooting me worried little glances as he talked to the guys, so I shoved my ignored business card into the back pocket of my jeans skirt, and climbed back onstage and yanked Spike's bass out of his hands. "You're doing it wrong," I told him, and instead of the usual line he gives about having strung guitars since before my mother was born, he let me alone.

For a minute, anyway. I was just tightening the string when he said real low, "So. This billionaire. It say in his profile whether he likes music? Kenny blew out the new speaker, you know."

"Yeah, I noticed," I grumbled. "I don't know whether he likes music or not. Why don't you ask him? No. Wait." I shot Mr. Nabbit a hard look. "You're a vampire. He only likes humans."

Spike shook his head. "Said he was an old friend of Angel's, and he must have noticed, one point or another, how Angel never does lunch. Only dinner."

Suddenly he was gone from my side. He did that jump thing he does that isn't just vampire, 'cause I can't do it, and I sure haven't seen Angel even attempt it. It looks better with his leather coat swooping behind him, but the blue shirt billowed up kind of nice, especially nice because it emphasized how slim and cut the rest of Spike is, and he landed right in front of Mr. Nabbit, scattering the other humans to each side.

"Hey." Spike ignored Wes and Gunn's protests and flashed a smile at David Nabbit. "I'm Spike. Angel's grandchilde."

His meaning couldn't be clearer. I mean, he and Angel looked roughly the same age, so grandchilde could only mean, well, grandchilde. Not something Angel would brag about. But it kind of made me feel a little warmer. Spike was never ashamed. Sometimes he got guilty (and what a total drag that was), but he was never ashamed of who and what he was. Hear him tell it, being a vampire was the best thing on earth, next to being a bass player, anyway, and wasn't he hot to be both.

"But I'm good now." Another smile.

This was Clem's cue to chime in with and he has a soul!, but Clem was wrestling with his snare drum and missed the whole conversation, and Wes and Gunn were too annoyed to help out. But
Spike could be charming when he tried, and he said, very winningly, "Dru's my sire. Ever meet her?"

David took a deep breath. "N-n-o. But– but I saw Darla, from a distance once. I can see the resemblance, I think."

Wes opened his mouth to give a lesson in how DNA does not transfer in vampires, that Spike no doubt looked like his human host's mother and father, and any resemblance to Darla was strictly coincidental. Spike shut him up right quick by saying modestly, "That's what the Master always said. Said we could be brother and sister, me and Darla."

David Nabbit said reverently, "Did-- did you know Darla?"

Wouldn't you know it. I get the hands-off treatment from a Darla-fan.

"Sure did. See this?" Spike pointed to the scar that bisected his eyebrow.

"Darla did that?" David breathed, staring at the eyebrow.

"None other," Spike said. It was a lie. He told me he got that scar from his first slayer. Well, maybe that's the lie. Anyway, he's a big liar, but David fell for it.

Now that he'd reeled him in with some hot-Darla-abuse story, Spike said, "So... Angel's away for the weekend--"

But that was all it took to remind him about the Slayer. Spike stopped looking cool and started looking stricken, and couldn't say anymore, and Wes shot him a disgusted glance and stepped in. "We've started a band. Demon and the Demon Hunters. Do you like music?"

"I-- I guess so," David said, looking around at us all, his glance passing uneasy over me and landing hard on Lorne.

Lorne preened a little in his silver coat and smiled and said into the mike, "Do you like show music?"

"Uh--" I could tell David wasn't sure whether he should say yes or no. But then he suddenly smiled. "I play the trumpet sometimes."

Spike took a watery sigh and regained his composure at this. "You do, huh? Wow."

Encouraged, David said, "Yeah. I've been playing since I was a kid. Doc Severinson is like my hero."

When he said that, his eyes shining, I kind of held my breath. It was such a seriously uncool thing to say, and Spike was, well, you know, so cool, and so was Gunn, and I was afraid they'd say something mean. Yeah, I know, David had been kind of rejecting to me, but I could take it. I mean, it wasn't anything I hadn't gotten before, and heck, I am a vampire, it's true, and humans don't like us, for good reason, so I should have expected it. But it might hurt David, to be made fun of.

I should have known that his being a billionaire would trump any uncoolness. Spike said speculatively to Gunn, "Didn't you just say you thought we needed some brass backup on that new song of yours?"

Gunn didn't mention that an Outkast cover probably didn't need Doc Severinson. He said only, "Yeah! Just want we need! A trumpet!"
And Spike said, "Whoa! Great idea! Hey, David, can you help us out? Play trumpet for the band?"

Wes was doing that what will Angel say face, but Spike and Gunn were ignoring him. Angel shouldn't have gone away if he really wanted to be in charge of the band, you could almost hear them say. But instead Gunn said, "You know, though, if we're going to bring on a new instrument, we're going to have to--"

"Get a new speaker," Spike said with a sigh in David's direction. "Geez. And Angel--Angel's managing the band-- he isn't going to be happy if we spend any more money on equipment."

"But I really need a trumpet fanfare," whined Gunn.

"But what are we going to do about a speaker?" Spike said, holding up his innocently empty hands. "We all put in all that money to begin the band--" another lie, not that I'm counting--

"And it's not like anyone's got any left," Gunn said, sticking his hand into his Armani jacket pocket and pulling it out, like hoping he might find a stray dime in there to add to the new speaker fund.

Seriously, these two should take their act on the road.

David cleared his throat and said, "Well, you know, if you all had to contribute capital to start the band, well, you know, the least I can do, if, you know, I'm going to join the band...."

"Please," Spike said. "Please. We really want you to join the band." He was beyond shameless.

"The least I can do is contribute too," David said, completely falling for it. "Like buying a new speaker."

"That is so great of you," Gunn said, smiling very hard.

Lorne made his stately way off the stage and over to Gunn. "There is that other thing we did. Remember, Charles? Co-signed the lease to the club."

I'd made a copy of that lease. Lorne's was the only signature on it, besides the landlord's. But Gunn was nodding.

"The lease. Sure, sure, I'll have David co-sign it too. Hey, Dave. You won't believe it. We already got a performance scheduled this week! So I'm thinking, you sign off on the paperwork, and then quicklike go get your trumpet-- you can take one of our drivers-- and we'll rehearse all afternoon, and you'll be right up to speed when it's time for our show."

"You get the paperwork, Charlie," Spike said, his hand on David's shoulder. "I'll call down for a driver. This is bloody tight, isn't it? A new bandmember! Our own brass section!"

Gunn, Lorne, and Clem all chimed in enthusiastically, and Wes muttered something that could have been "oh, yeah," but was more likely "I can play trumpet on my keyboard, you know," but he was smart enough to keep it deniable.

I was still messing with Spike's guitar, just to have something to do, but I glanced up in time to find David looking kind of dazed, the way you do when you dropped in on an old friend and ended up in a band with a bunch of people you don't know, not to mention liable for lease on a downtown club. He caught my gaze, just for a second, and I tried to smile reassuringly. But he just gulped and turned away.

And it was only after David left that Lorne said, "Hope Angel doesn't mind that we expanded the
band just a mite."

Wes muttered something, and Gunn said bracingly, "He'll be happy to welcome an old friend, especially one who might end up being a valued client also."

Well, not for the first time, Gunn was a little over-optimistic. Angel wasn't pleased to return and find out the band made a decision without him. Monday evening, as we set up for rehearsal, he took Spike up to his office to yell at him in private. But Spike was so glad to see Angel and not Angelus (that is, Angel didn't get real happy off with the Slayer) that he came back down humming some old Ramones song. "No prob!" he declared, which I bet wasn't a synonym for what Angel told him. But even Angel wasn't stubborn enough to show too much annoyance to a billionaire bandmember, so he pretended that video-ing the rehearsal was all that mattered now that he'd called Spike to account.

David must have felt the vibes, however, because he took his trumpet and kind of hid in the back of the stage. He wasn't far from where I was setting up Clem's drum kit, but we didn't speak. Clem strolled in with a cup of coffee, then meticulously checked the position of every drum before flashing me one of his sweet smiles of approval. David glanced over at me and ducked his head and went over to stand near Clem. Clem being guaranteed to start chatting with anyone in the vicinity.

I jammed the three-pronged amp plug into the outlet and concluded that David didn't like me. Not that I blamed him. Humans aren't supposed to like vampires. And I reminded myself that vampires aren't supposed to like humans, except for supper. So it didn't matter what he thought of me. Only it was getting majorly annoying, how he wouldn't even look at me, especially since he didn't have any trouble talking to Spike.

But then it was Spike, and he was always fun, right? Not your average bear. Or vampire. I bit back a nasty word as he lazily told me to plug in his bass— I knew it was my job as the roadie, only it seemed like between him and Angel, all I ever heard was command here and order there. I guess when they got back their souls, they lost the ability to say please?

I did what he ordered, and went back to cabling all the amps. Still, when I heard David's voice, I couldn't help but listen.

"No, really. I can't dance like that. Really."

"Sure you can," Spike said. "Just think of your body like, what? One of those pipe-cleaners your papa used to clean his pipe with."

"I was in foster care. Didn't have a father," David said. "But I used pipe-cleaners in arts-and-crafts at summer foster-kid camp."

"Okay, then. So you know how they're kind of bendable, but not floppy? That's like your body. It's all in the hips, see?"

This I had to see. I peeked out. I was behind the big speaker off to the side, and I figured David wouldn't catch me spying. It wasn't like he ever much looked at me anyway.

Spike was standing at the microphone, bass slung over his shoulder, hip jutted out in that way of his. David was standing stiff and scared next to him. I eased out a little, moved over to the amp, parked there, just for a minute, to see what they were going to do.
Spike started moving, nice and slow, just the hips, a bit of the shoulders. The guy could dance... the sort of dance that got you focused on that middle part of him, and wondering what those moves would feel like, you know, up close and personal. Of course I already knew. Remembered all too well.

David gave a bit of a twitch of his cute little butt, like he almost sort of had an idea of what Spike meant. His blue jeans were brand-new, however, and they didn't bend like Spike's old threadbare Levis did.

Still Spike nodded approvingly. "Think fluid, easy, slow. Listen to the beat and just go with it. Don't think about it. Hey, Clem, how about, oh, you know, a bit of *Breakdown*?"

Clem obligingly sat down on his stool and tapped out the first few beats of some old song, and Spike started rotating that pelvis of his and singing in that silky, sexy, nasty voice:

*It's all right if you love me.*
*It's all right if you don't.*
*I'm not afraid of you running away.*
*Honey, I get the feeling you won't.*

*There's no use in pretending.*
*Your eyes give you away.*
*Something inside you is feeling like I do,*
*We said all there is to say.*

*Break down, go ahead and give it to me.*
*Break down, take me through the night.*
*Breakdown, I'm standing here, can't you see?*
*Break down, it's all right...*

I couldn't look anymore at Spike. It was like, you know, the story of our relationship. All right if I loved him, all right if I didn't. Just something to take him through the night....

The story of all my relationships, all three of them. None of them ever cared if I cared, as long as I broke down and gave it to them.

I turned away when I felt the tears sting at my eyes. Don't cry, I told myself fiercely. Vampires don't cry. (Okay, Spike did-- get him in a certain mood, and he'd snuffle at life insurance commercials. But Angel never cried. And now I wanted to be like Angel. Invulnerable. Unhurt.)

"I can't, Spike." It was David's voice. It sounded like he was trying to laugh, but couldn't. "I mean, I'm just stupid at this dance stuff. See, Harmony can't even watch!"

I heard it then-- the hurt. I knew what that sounded like. Knew what it felt like. And all because he thought that I --

I whirled around. "No, David, I just got some dust in my eye, and I was rubbing it out! You were looking great! Really!"

David ducked his head, and I suddenly figured it out. It was like the scales fell from my eyes, and I could see it now. He wasn't against me. He was just kind of shy. I don't know how you could get so rich if you were shy, but I could see it now in the way he hung his head and only just peeked out the side of his eyes at me, like he was ashamed.

So I tried harder. "I thought you were doing good. Wasn't he, Spike?"
"Yeah, he was getting there. But—" Spike was looking from David to me and back. "But you know, maybe I'm not the best teacher for him. Hey. Harm. C'm'over here."

Slowly I approached the front of the stage. "What? I'm not done setting—"

"Yeah, well, maybe you can show David some moves. Harm's a great dancer," he said reassuringly to David. "Really. If she didn't have so much roadie work to do, I'd make her choreographer too."

I jumped up on the stage. "I can do both. Let me show you."

Spike's no dummy. He got out of the way, way off to the side, picking moodily at his bass, keeping the beat with Clem. I closed my eyes a second to get hold of it, started moving. Then I looked right at David and smiled. He's just shy, I reminded myself. He doesn't hate me.

I kept moving slow and smooth, and then reached out and took his hand. It was warm and dry and trembling just a tiny bit. I wouldn't even notice the tremble, but I got vampire senses.

"Close your eyes, David. Just listen. And let the beat enter you and take over. Got to let go and let it take over."

And I gripped his hand, and he closed his eyes, and I felt my chest get all tight. He closed his eyes. Here's he's got a vampire holding onto him, telling him to close his eyes, and he does. Like he trusts me not to bite him. Like he trusts me not to hurt him.

I took a deep breath I didn't need, and closed my eyes too, and sung the words real low... there's no use in pretending... your eyes give you away.... And after a couple seconds, he was singing them too. Real low, so that no one could hear. No one but me.

I guess that the Gunn and Spike show didn't have any room for Angel. They never told him about their plans to trap the vamp-pimp, using me as bait. I had to agree. Angel would probably protest, or insist on taking over. And he'd probably never let me be part of it. He didn't have much respect for my capabilities, let's just say, which was so unfair. I mean, the guy wouldn't get through a day without me. Anyway, we all agreed that what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. I think Spike was still smarting from Angel's weekend away, and Gunn, well, Gunn liked to do things independently. So there were some whispers in corners before rehearsal, and Angel glowering at us, assuming we were planning a mutiny, or, worse, departing from the playlist he had approved.

David watched us too. I could tell from his face that suspicion wasn't a habit, as it was with Angel. It seemed more like he was worried we were talking about him. You know, if I had made a billion bucks, I'd be more confident. But I think maybe Gunn and Spike just made other men nervous. They were both so sure of themselves, or seemed to be (I knew Spike way too well to think of him as a true conceito), and sometimes they got a little cruel, the two of them. Not about David-- I don't think they paid him much mind once he bought the big speaker-- but about the rich in general. It's hard to live in LA and not kind of start identifying with one class or the other. Gunn might wear the fancy suits, but in his heart, he was right there with Spike, thinking that reality didn't exist once you had your own cleaning lady and swimming pool.

We started rehearsing at Lorne's new club, right next door. During the day, he rented it out to a Pilates instructor, so I had some work to do, moving mats to the back, preparing the stage. One good thing about Angel being our manager, he let me off work early so I could get the rehearsal set up.
He'd been making some comments about rehearsing before work, but we'd all been ignoring him. I mean, come on, Lorne's showtunes at 7 am? I don't think so.) Thursday afternoon, just before opening night, I arrived at the club to find David already there, unloading boxes of microphone pieces.

He barely looked up. "Thought I'd come early. Help you set up."

"Uh, sure. Thanks," I said. I didn't really look at him either. I felt the weight of it all-- opening night, our secret plan, his being a billionaire, my being, you know, a vampire. So we worked in silence, and when the stage was set, he climbed down and backed away towards the door. "Going home to change."

I wanted to tell him it was okay to turn his back on me. I wouldn't eat a fellow bandmember. But I just yelled bye and went back over to W&H and up to the ladies' room on the third floor, the one with the shower, and I waited till all the lady lawyers left, and then I showered and put on a fresh t-shirt and the shortest shorts I had. Then, following Spike's orders, I doused myself with this weird fragrance-- human pheromones, he said, which was supposed to hide my real nature from the vamp-pimp. He had to think I was still human, or he'd know something was up.

Oh, and I had to pretend I wasn't all that strong. Just sort of girl-workout-a-lot strong. I tried to imitate the Pilates instructor, see. She was strong, but she showed it. I mean, she grunted all the time. Me, I pick up a speaker, I don't grunt. That would be uncool, and gross too. Vampires don't show strain. But as I set up that evening, I made sure to grunt everytime I moved something around. I was so embarrassed. But Gunn came by and clapped me on the back and said I was doing great, and Spike's only comment that maybe I should bend over and show my ass a little more, and the assembling crowd, at least the male portion, was watching me, so I guess I hadn't totally ruined my reputation with those grunts.

The club was okay. Not my type of place. I like the dark intimate expensive places, the kind you sip martinis with someone rich and admiring, not that I have had too much experience with clubs like that. But I've been in a couple right after payday. This club was bigger, more open, with a wide stage and little silver tables grouped in front. Lorne was trying to make it look exactly like his old club, see. And since he was the keeper of the potential-patron mailing list, not to mention the lease-holder, he got to design the place. David got to pay for the latest renovations, but we didn't ever mention that. Even Angel was participating in the myth that we'd all exhausted our own resources already, buying instruments and equipment, and the johnny-come-lately had to pay to make up for his late arrival.

Poor David. But at least he was having fun. When he wasn't being terrified.

He was terrified now. He'd arrived with Clem-- and what a contrast, not just because Clem had the mauve-skin and the jaw-flaps. Clem was cool as a pink cucumber, humming to himself as he sat down at his drumkit, waving at friends in the audience, joking with Spike. David stuck like a burr to the speaker he'd bought, his back to the crowd, his trumpet clutched in rigid fingers.

We had to look like a real band, I told myself. Even David. Or else the vamp-pimp would suspect something was up. So I went over, pretended to shove unsuccessfully at the speaker, and like I expected, David immediately put down his trumpet and applied his shoulder near mine. I got to say, for a guy raised in foster care, he had good manners. I mean, he couldn't help but help a lady out, even if the lady is a vamp.

The speaker moved an inch or so, and I did a big thanks! smile, like without him, it would have stayed put. And he kind of ducked his head and smiled down at the wooden floor, and when he picked up his trumpet, well, I think his shoulders were a little straighter and his posture a little more natural.
But I was nervous myself. Remember how I thought I couldn't ever really be on stage, that I'd pee my pants? Well, I didn't go that far. But the houselights were still up, and the crowd was gathering, talking, sitting down, pointing, laughing. Looking. I knew the whole point of the tight t-shirt and short-shorts was so that people would look at me. And they were. I could feel eyes on my ass and on my breasts whenever I came out on stage. Sometimes I'd glance back at them, wondering which one might approach me, looking to vamp me all over again. Most of the eyes slid away then, but one guy, seated nearby with a pretty black girl in a short dress, kept watching me.

They were both vamps. I could tell. Spike could too. He came over with his bass, and I pretended to fiddle with the cable, and he bent close and said, "Two o'clock."

"Ten o'clock, you mean." He was just hopeless with directions. Left, right, clockwise, counterclockwise-- how many times had I come across him breaking a jar open because he never remembered lefty-loosey, righty-tighty? "I see. I'll keep an eye on them."

"He approaches you, just say my name. I'll hear you." Then Spike kissed me, full on the lips but no tongue, and my knees went a little weak, though I knew it was 65% show on his part, letting the vamp-pimp know I was easy, or something. I dug a knuckle into his rib, just to remind him that I was seriously and forever off-limits, but I did it so no one would notice. I'd forgotten how ticklish he was, so he practically collapsed with suppressed laughter as he let go of me. I'm sure it looked to everyone else like I was so hot he could barely walk away from me.

I was smiling to myself as I turned back to the speaker, and caught David scowling at me. Oh, he looked over at Clem right away, but I caught that look. Disapproval. Of what? Geez, Louise, it's not like we were making out in some church or something. And heck, he knew we were both vamps, so it wasn't like we were committing inter-species adultery or whatever. So even if we really meant that kiss, and we didn't, I didn't know what his problem was. And it was sexist, how he was disapproving of me, and didn't even give Spike a second look. I mean, if it was wrong for me, not that it was, then it was wrong for Spike too.

He really annoyed me, David did. Here I was, trying to be nice to him, and he treated me like the Whore of Babylon or something. He was worse than Angel with his disapproving, not that Angel gave two damns about my sex life. As far as Angel was concerned, no one even had a sex life.

Well, speak of the devil, I mean, the angel, Himself came out of the office with his videocam, and he had some minion set it up for him as he came to pass on his extensive wisdom about opening night. Lorne and Spike and Kenny and Clem ignored him, as they were veterans of lots of opening nights--they'd all performed sometime in the past-- but the rest of us listened, or pretended to, as he told us not to be nervous and to break a leg and to remember to look at people as we sang, and sing on key, and be ready with Kenny's cheapo guitars, and all that. He looked twice as nervous as David. His words of encouragement were said in that depressed voice of his, like he just knew we were going to be a total failure. Wes, at least, seemed to agree, scanning the laughing crowd like they all were hiding Uzis under their tuxedos. Dread just radiated from him like that human pheronome perfume I was wearing, the scent that made Angel sniff and look over at me like I was stinking or something.

Luckily, his attention was caught by Spike. "I thought you were going to get him to dress up," Angel said to Gunn, who just shook his head.

"I am dressed up," Spike said defensively, and he was, for him. I mean, the jeans only had one ripped knee, and he had a red silk shirt over his black t-shirt. He knew he looked luscious, and if he didn't know that, there was his fanclub, the Spikettes, made up of about 60% of the secretarial pool (the others were in the Gunnettes, along with most of Litigation). They cooed and mooed and made it clear that he was dressed right for them.
Angel cast one look at the crowd gathered on the right side of the stage, practically within grabbing distance of Spike, and he went off up the aisle, muttering about how he just wanted this to be a classy band, like the Platters, and why couldn't Spike cooperate just this once....

Since Spike opened the show singing "You Shook Me All Night Long," I had the idea that classy wasn't his aim.

I kept glancing around as I moved things and plugged and unplugged and found water bottles and delivered them to the bandmembers. I was feeling the vamp-pimp, feeling him like Spike had taught me a long time ago, like he was radiating vampness. You know, the greatest danger for a vamp isn't a slayer or even the sunlight— it's other vamps. They'll kill you for your jacket or your shoes or your dinner. No sense of solidarity, at least between strangers. And so I had to learn to feel the vamps around me, to sense where they were and their intentions. This vamp-pimp was aiming for me. Watching me. Waiting.

In between songs, Spike came over for a string-- Jimi Hendrix couldn't have broken as many strings as Spike, but then, I guess, Jimi Hendrix didn't have vampire strength. He was all sexed up from that song of his and stood a little too close as I fixed his bass, and it occurred to me that I should slap him. So I did. Not hard. I mean, I was pretending to be human. But he grabbed his cheek like I'd knocked a few teeth out, and he whined, "What was that for?"

"Vamp-pimp," I said under my breath.

"Insults too?"

Sometimes Spike was really dense. "I mean, idiot, the vamp-pimp. Want him to think we're breaking up. More likely to approach me then."

"Oh. Oh! Good thinking." He took the bass from me and swaggered away, pretending to be pretending that he hadn't just got dumped in front of everyone. I could see the vamp-pimp at the front table, his hand up his ho's skirt, his gaze on me.

Lorne started singing, and suddenly David was at my side. I reached for the water bottle I'd labeled with his name, but he shook his head. He must have forgotten I had vampire hearing, because he leaned near to speak over the sound of the band. His mouth was close enough to my ear for me to feel his breath. "Just. You know. Wanted to make sure you're okay."

I stared at him, my hand frozen on the bottle. "Okay?"

"Yeah. You know." He gestured with his shoulder back at Spike.

"Oh, right. Yeah, I'm okay." I tried to sound tough but also huffy. "He is so history. Never again."

David nodded and backed away, colliding with Lorne's microphone. He grabbed it and set it back into place, and Lorne never even missed a note, and David came in with his trumpet flourish right on time.

Hey, he sounded good. They all did. As the set went on and the audience got into it, even Wes relaxed and shook a little bootie behind his keyboard. But when I glanced over at Angel, he was fiddling with his camcorder and looking really tense. I was just glad the angle blocked the audience's view of him, so they weren't picking up the non-verbal message that this was no fun. Instead they were laughing and dancing and buying more drinks.

As the set ended, the vamp-pimp paid the check and, leaving a big tip on the table, he approached the stage. Spike walked over to Clem's drum kit, casual-like, and Gunn was lingering by the front
tables, supposedly flirting with two girls. Well, he was flirting with them, but he'd turned halfway so
that he could watch me out of the corner of his eye. It made me feel good, knowing they had my
back like that.

David hadn't left the stage either. You would have thought he would want a drink, after blowing that
trumpet for an hour. But he was just hanging there by the mikes, like he didn't want the evening to
end. Only he still looked nervous, glancing around like he was expecting someone to come or
something to happen.

I didn't have time to worry about him, though. The vamp-pimp was sauntering up beside the stage,
his human face all considerate and kind. "Need some help?" he said, applying a shoulder to the
biggest speaker. I remembered to grunt as we edged it onto the dolly.

"Thanks," I said, and turned to get an amp. But he was there before me, hefting it like it was no big
deal. I could tell he wanted me to admire him, so I said, "Wow. You're really strong."

I batted the eyelashes a little too. And I remembered to keep a yard or so between us. We'd tested this
out, Spike and me, how close he could get without smelling through the human smell to my vamp
smell.

"Stronger than your boyfriend?"

He inclined his head towards Spike, and I tossed my head. "He's not my boyfriend. He is history.
Ancient history, after tonight." Now I pouted. Stuck out that lower lip. And then I departed from the
script Gunn had written up for me. Hey. I can improvise, can't I? I said, real low, "I'm going back to
human boyfriends. They don't have the vamp stamina, but they actually have jobs. And money to
spend on a girl."

The vamp's eyes glowed. "You like money, do you?"

I shrugged. "As much as any girl. It's not like roadig for a startup band like this pays much. Can't
blame me if I'd like a bit of a sugar daddy taking me out and buying me jewelry after a hard day's
work."

"No, I can't blame you a bit. In fact--" he handed me a card, and I tried not to touch his fingers while
I took it-- "why don't you give me a call? I might just know of a couple sugar daddies who would
like to help a girl like you."

"Gee, thanks," I said, smiling like a million watts. "I'll do that."

He paused there a moment, studying me, then suddenly reached out and grabbed my hand. I tried to
pull it back, but he was older than me, and stronger too. He held onto me for awhile, and I guess he
noticed both my cool and my pallor. "You've already been turned."

I almost panicked. Almost looked around for Gunn and Spike. But then I squared my shoulders, slid
my hand out of his, and said, "Well, duh. You're just noticing?"

"You smell human."

I smiled, like that was this big compliment. "It's this perfume. Supposed to attract men. Human men."
I added, "I told you I wanted a human boyfriend. Some of them want vamps, but don't want it too
obvious to their human friends."

"Too bad," he murmured. I felt his gaze on my neck. I'd covered up my bite scar with makeup, but I
bet he could see through. "It would have been a pleasure...."
That made me nervous. Was he going to ask for his card back? So I subtly thrust out my chest and smiled. "For me too, I bet!"

He raised his hand and just barely brushed the front of my t-shirt. "I can still introduce you to some sugar-daddies."

"Human only," I said sternly.

Boy, was I pushing it. But he only smiled and nodded and went back to his table, where his vamp-ho sat, her eyes focused on nothing in particular. I wondered if he kept his girls placid by keeping them drugged.

I shivered, remembering what Gunn and Spike had told me about the unlife of these poor girls. Bad enough to be turned– but worse to be turned so that you can be exploited by sick humans.

Spike waited until the vamp and his ho had strolled out of the club. Then he headed over and grabbed the card out of my hand. "I'll get right on tracking this number down--"

I grabbed it back. "Gunn and I can handle it. You can't even program your cell phone." It was true. Spike might brag about being the online Grand Theft Auto champion of Southern California, but he was worthless at practical tasks like cross-referencing telephones and addresses.

He scowled. "If you're so smart, why haven't you gotten any info on Co-- on that name I gave you?"

"That's how much you know," I said haughtily. "I got an address, so there. And if you'd ever check your email, you'd find it."

Gunn came over then, and I gave him the card and told them both about the vamp discovering my vampness. We all agreed this shouldn't be that big a problem, but I could tell Spike was disappointed that his pheromone scheme didn't work. Then Gunn headed off back to the office to track the number down. Spike peeled off to cadge drinks from his fan club, and I was left to wrestle the equipment back into the storage room.

I was pushing a dolly with Fred's expensive sound equipment into the W&H lobby when David came up behind me. "Can I help?"

It was the sort of nice thing that I bet he did all the time, billionaire or not. But it winded him, carrying an amp to the storage room. So I told him to wait, and I ran off to the employee lounge. There by the fridge I had a restorative swig of blood, and then in the very back found the emergency six-pack Spike hid, the one that had the post-it note labeled "Spike's: Violators will be eviscerated."

I was a vampire. Evisceration wouldn't hurt me a bit. Well, it would hurt, but it wouldn't kill me. And beer for the billionaire– even Spike might be okay with that. So I took a couple beers down to the lobby, where David was packing his trumpet away into its case.

It was long past sunset, and I could head on home, but I took my time with the beer. We sat together on the staircase, watching the lights come up outside, and I tried real hard not to seem threatening and vampiric.

I actually ended up feeling kind of soft and nostalgic as night fell. "My dad used to drink this brand of beer. My sister and I would steal sips when he wasn't looking." Too late, I remembered that David was an orphan, and didn't have a father. Maybe parents weren't a good topic to bring up with him.

But he just glanced down at the label on the bottle, studying it closely. "Is your father, well, dead?"
I shook my head. "No. Gunn made sure they got out of Sunnydale before the apocalypse. Gunn's good at that. He secretly got my dad a good job offer in the Bay area, in plenty of time."

"That's good. So--" he glanced quickly at me and then away. "I thought that vampires killed their families first thing."

I kind of gasped at that. And then I got hold of myself, and said calmly, "That's just a myth. Some vampires do kill their families-- I guess Angel did-- but most don't bother."

"So... well, did you see them again?"

"Sure."

"Oh. So it was okay."

"I guess." I couldn't help myself. I remembered that day after I was turned. "I went back to the house. I didn't know what to do. I rose up and I was scared and dirty from the grave. And so I went home to Mommy. And she saw me and started screaming. In Sunnydale, see, people know these things. She knew to grab a pencil. And she told me to go away. To stay away. She was--" I swallowed. "She was scared I'd hurt my sister. She'd heard the myth too. And believed it. And maybe she was right. I don't know. I was just so scared. Everything had changed, but I didn't understand that."

Very softly, he said, "So what did you do?"

I didn't tell him the truth, at least not the whole truth. Humans don't want to hear about that. "Well, pretty soon I found Spike. He kind of helped me get up to speed. I mean, he wasn't doing it out of the goodness of his heart or anything. But... but he taught me a lot. How to survive."

"So... he became your boyfriend?"

"Yeah. I guess. For awhile." I didn't want to get into it. David wouldn't ever understand what it was like, being a fledgling. Starting out all new, so young, so stupid, in a dangerous world. Being evil, but still being so scared.

He was quiet for a long time. Finally he said, "Sorry about Spike."

"Huh?" A couple beers, and I'd lost all my eloquence.

"You broke up, right?"

Oh. Yeah. "Well. Uh. See, we went out years ago. But not really anymore. Just--" I couldn't think of what to tell him. It was all show, the kiss, the slap. But I couldn't reveal that. "We're sort of friends. I don't know." I cast my mind about, searching for the right term. Finally I just repeated, "Sort of friends. That's all."

"Okay." He was staring down at his bottle. "Just wondering. You know, if you need money--"

"Huh?" I said again. I wanted to smack myself. I tried harder. "Money? Why would you say that?"

He was blushing, the color moving up his neck into his cheeks. I was kind of fascinated. Blushing was such a human thing to do. And it was kind of cute. He didn't look at me as he mumbled, "I heard you talking to that other guy. I wasn't trying to listen. I just heard. You said something about wanting a sugar daddy."
Oh, great. I had to think fast. "I was actually just trying to get rid of him. He, you know. He was trying to pick me up. And I didn't want to offend him, since he was in the band's audience, you know? So I just said that about a sugar daddy, because I knew he couldn't have much money, being a vamp, and it would discourage him." I looked directly at David, trying to sound upbeat and sincere. "I get paid real well, see. It's a good job. I just wanted to politely send the guy away."

David looked back at me, then quickly away. "Yeah. Well, just wanted to say. I got more money than I can spend, and if someone in the band needs help--"

Too heartily, I said, "Won't be me. I'm doing just fine, thanks."

It wasn't that I was insulted. I mean, it was nice of him to offer. But it was humiliating that David overheard, that he thought I was that kind of girl. That he thought I'd take money from him. And it was all a mistake. All part of my performance. After this was all over, I was going to have Spike and Gunn explain it to him, so he wouldn't think I was, you know. Just another vamp-ho.

We exchanged sort of meaningless comments then as we gathered up the beer bottles. I told him I had to lock up, and I hid out for a little while in the corridor until I was sure he'd left.

He was a nice guy. I had to watch out for that. Him being nice. It was too easy to remember that it was probably just because he didn't understand. And when he did understand, well, he'd stop being nice.

I didn't see David for a few days after that. Spike suddenly left town. I knew why-- my email had provided this Connor guy's address at a college up in the mountains. I didn't know why he wanted it, but that's where he went. But no one else knew. Angel got into a snit and cancelled rehearsals. He thought it would be some big punishment to Spike to know that his irresponsibility had screwed things up for the whole band. Sometimes I wondered if he knew Spike at all. Spike didn't even notice that he was supposed to be punished. He probably forgot about the band and the rehearsals before he hit the city limits.

I have to admit I was a little tense once Spike stole Angel's Viper and headed out of town. We'd all gotten used to him sneaking out and then, a few minutes later, slamming back through a window or a door or the floor or the ceiling as the Powers made it clear he was slacking on the Angel-journey mission. But when an hour had passed, I realized that Spike had guessed right. Whoever this Connor was, Spike was furthering Angel's journey by tracking him down. The Powers had spoken.
The football team hung out at Jerry's, where the bartender never asked for ID, even from me, and I for sure didn't look old enough to drink. Around 2 am, last call was announced, and I watched as four of the bigger ones staggered to the bar for a to-go 24-pack. This was a small college, so the offensive line looked more like the tight ends and fullbacks at a major college. But they were still big enough to get the job done. And one was cleaning his fingernails with a hunting knife as the rest pawed around in their pockets for enough crumpled dollar bills to pay for their beer.

Then they headed out into the night, and I headed out after them.

They were walking in the dark area between the stadium and the woods when I called out, "Hey, boys! Want some action?"

They turned as one to stare at me. One said, pleasantly enough, "Sorry, kid, we don't swing that way."

Just my luck I get the only sexually tolerant football players at the school. "Could've fooled me," I said, moving surely across the dozen yards that separated us. "Never seen you with anything but each other."

The two in the middle looked at each other and shrugged. The one on the end dropped the 24-pack. And they came after me.

One said, "Run, how about it? Promise we won't bother to catch you."

I ran, yeah, but right at them. They made the usual mistake. I'm a scrawny guy, to look at me, but I'm strong. I don't know why, but when I hit a guy, he usually stays down. And I hit two of these guys, and the remaining two fell back into the shadow of the stadium. I followed them, hearing their two fallen comrades scrambling behind me. And just like I wanted, I was surrounded, the football players just dark spots in the darkness, and then the linebacker brought something out of his pocket, something that glinted in the little bit of moonlight.

The knife. I bunched myself up, but before I could leap, something got there before me. It was a man, and he landed full on the big player. I could hear him laughing, like this was all great fun. At first I was annoyed that he'd come and spoiled everything, but pretty soon I started to enjoy it, fighting like a team, having an ally in the melee, especially one who fought so well. And so dirty-- I heard the tight end scream in the sort of anguish that means he got kicked in the crotch.

And so we fought, side by side-- well, he never stayed put, whoever he was, so sometimes he was beside me, a quick dark form aiming a kick or jabbing with his fist, and sometimes he was behind me, grabbing one of the players and hurling him away, and sometimes he was on the ground, whaling away.

I was busy too, my breath coming short in the cool night air, my knuckles stinging from contact with someone's jaw, my jeans getting muddy from the torn-up ground. He was still laughing, even when he yelled in pain. And he kept up a steady stream of patter, insults to them, encouragement to me-- he had a British accent, rough like some London rock star, and I couldn't understand half of what he said. But the two he was fighting understood enough, and they ganged up on him, and a third joined them, and before I could warn him, there was that knife--

Plunged hard and deep into his ribs-- and he said, only mildly surprised, "Ow," and then, with a
quick movement on his hand, chopped the knife out of the linebacker's grasp and away into the shadows. "Enough, don't ya think?" he called out to me, and then with a flurry of kicks, put the three of them down. I didn't have any choice then. I knocked my own guy down and kicked him, and then stood over him, panting, while my unwanted ally came over to join me by the stadium wall.

He was still laughing, holding his side and laughing. "Now you can't tell me that wasn't fun," he said, like he expected some response.

And so I shrugged and said, "Yeah." And I stood there like an idiot, waiting for him to decide what to do. This was all my thing, and I should decide, but I was suddenly weary and my hands hurt and he was still smiling like we were having a great time.

"Better get out of here," he said. He grabbed up the case of beer with his free hand, hefting it like it weighed nothing at all. Then he turned and started walking into the moonlight, and every third step, he said, "Ow." But he never stopped grinning.

He was crazier than me. And that was really scary.

I followed him, and now I could see him clearly. He wasn't as big as I'd thought, seeing him fight in the darkness. He wore a leather coat that made him look bigger, but now I could tell he wasn't much bigger than me-- thin even, under the coat.

"You're stronger than you look," I said, just to have something to say.

"Work out a lot," he replied, and this made him laugh again, and laughing made him clutch his ribs and groan again.

"Where are you going?" I asked, trailing along behind him.

"My car. In the parking lot."

He had a majorly sweet car, a black Viper, shining in the moonlight, and before I knew what he was doing, he tossed the keys at me. By reflex I got my hands up and caught them, and I was glad, because I would feel like a loser, dropping the keys when he was watching.

"You drive," he said. "My side hurts."

I stood undecided there by the driver's door. I mean, what did Mom and Dad tell me about strangers? But he'd helped me out, not that I wanted him to, and under the parking lot lights I could see the blood spreading on his light-blue t-shirt. "Okay. Where to? The hospital?"

"Christ, no," he said, opening his door and shoving the case of beer behind his seat. Then he fell in. "I'll be all right in a trice. Just need--"

As I got in the driver's seat, he was scrabbling in the back. As he brought out a thermos, he finished, "Just need a drink."

Uneasily I started the car-- a great vroom of ignition, a sudden blast of punk music-- and put it in gear. I flipped off the CD-player and watched him gulp down half the bottle. "You probably shouldn't, you know, get drunk with a knife wound."

He swallowed and capped up the thermos, and I saw red glinting on his mouth. V-8 juice, or Bloody Mary mix, I don't know.

"Not booze, mate. Just something restorative. Vitamin drink."
"Oh. You mean, like those power smoothies they make at the juice bars? With protein powder?"

"Yeah. And maybe a little iron," he replied with another laugh. Maybe he was already drunk, as much as he was laughing. "You decide where we're going. I don't care. Just need to get some sleep, oh, long about sunrise."

I glanced over at him, at that seeping wound, at his face pale in the streetlight. His eyes were closed, his head back against the leather seat, but his mouth was still smiling. "I'll take you back to my apartment. Fix that cut."

"Certain sure," he said, in that odd accent of his. Then he added, "So... how big a deathwish you got, anyway?"

His question was casual, his tone unconcerned, but I was defensive as I pulled out onto College Ave. (I was mad, but I still noticed what a hot car this was. Never been into cars, but this one was special. Oak steering wheel. Leather dash. Everything expensive. Maybe he stole the car, and any second I'd hear the siren behind me.) "No deathwish. They were just hassling me."

"Bollocks. I saw you. Provoked them. They didn't even really want the fight. You choose them particularly for the knife, or what?"

"Or what," I answered shortly.

"Lucky I came along," he said, though I wasn't lucky at all, hadn't been for months, and he didn't just come along, either. "What's your name?"

I was about to tell him none of his business. But he'd jumped into fight beside me, and took a knife for me. "Connor. Connor Jacobson. What about you?"

"Spike."

"That your first or your last name?"

"First. Spike Williams. I'd give you my calling card, but--" here he started laughing. "Hey. I actually have a business card somewhere. How weird is that?"

"Pretty weird," I agreed, casting another glance at him, at the disheveled dark-blonde hair, at the closed shadowed eyes, at the sharp hollowed face. He looked like he played in a band, maybe, or sold dope. "What do you do?"

"Translations."

"Huh?"

He opened his eyes and focused on me, and said, every word coming slow and distinct, "I translate documents. Say, from ancient Greek to modern English. Or from ancient Greek to Latin. Or whatever."

He was lying. He had to be. "You don't look like the type."

"You know many classical translators, do you?"

Well, none, except maybe Dr. Wayburn, the classics department head who came to the dorm and outright begged someone, anyone, to major in Latin so he could keep the department going another year. "No. But you don't look--"
"Went to Oxford, you ill-lettered lout. Spoke Greek at breakfast and Latin at dinner."

I stiffened up at the insult. But then I just looked out the windshield at the dark campus and didn't respond. I'd gone to California public schools, after all. Got good grades and good scores, and got into a good college, but how much did I really learn? Not much, and it was all fading lately, all those facts and figures, atomic weights and what happened in 1066 and who won the last World Series. Finally I said, "Sometimes I want to kill myself."

He tilted his head to the side like it hurt. "Yeah, got that idea. Taking on four bruisers like that."

After a moment, he added, "You fight like you're stupid, know that? But you're strong. Lots of power in those punches. Have to land a few to make any dent, though."

"I fight fine."

"No, you don't. But you can learn. You're tough and you're game. And you look like you can't fight. Big advantage."

"I'd guess you'd know."

He laughed again. "Yeah, well, everyone underestimates me. You too, huh?"

"Yeah." I added, "They think I'm just some skinny kid. But I'm strong."

"Saw that. Where'd that come from? That and the craziness? Your parents beat you or something?"

I had to laugh. "My parents are Quakers. Pacifists. They didn't even want me to register for the draft. I bet my dad's never been in a fight in his life."

He gave me a glance. "There are still Quakers?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Huh. I thought they'd been wiped out by the Methodists. Still wear those funny collars? Say thee and thou?"

He really was drunk. Had to be. "No. They're just like everyone else. Only they don't go to war, and they don't watch boxing on TV."

"No thee and thou, huh?" He sounded disappointed. Then he rallied. "Probably recycle."

"Yeah. My family's big on recycling." I pulled into the parking place in front of my apartment, tried to visualize how messy the place was, gave up. "Here. Number Four."

"Get the beer," he said, and got groaning out of the car. "And the thermos."

I dragged up the stairs after him, hauling the beer and his thermos. As I unlocked the door and went through, he waited there, real politely, stood there in the hallway, blood seeping between his fingers, until I said, annoyed, "Come on in. Told you I'd bandage that up." Once I got him in the apartment--it was pretty messy, since I'd stopped cooking and started eating nothing but pizza that came in boxes too big to fit in the trash can-- he didn't protest when I made him sit down. I got some gauze and some tape, and at my command he stripped off his coat and pulled up his shirt. He was thin, but there were ripples of muscle under the pale skin, and for a moment I felt something weird radiating from him, power, or energy, something weird. The cut across his ribs was still oozing in the middle, but it had already started closing up at each end. "You ought to get this stitched up," I told him.
"I'm okay. Just get it closed nice, and it won't scar."

"I don't know, man," I told him. "That's a real bad cut."

"I don't scar."

I had to admit, his pale torso was minus the scars you'd think a streetfighter like him would have. "What about that eyebrow?"

"Special case." He stretched out a hand and snagged a beer from the case on the floor. "Hurry up. Sports View is on. They got the footie results. Got to see if Man U won. You follow?"

"Well, I used to play," I said, taping down the top edge of the gauze. Even as I watched, the angry red around the bottom edge of the cut was paling to pink. This guy healed quick, yeah. That would be useful, I guess, in someone who fought as much as he seemed to. His skin was cold, though, and I wondered about shock. "Quakers let their kids play soccer, see. Not American football. But I never got into watching the international game." After a moment, I added, "Never really got into sports, get right down to it. I wasn't much good, which is why it surprised me when I had that first fight a couple months ago, and found out how strong I was."

He tried to hook the remote control with his foot, but brought all the magazines and two notebooks from school off the coffee table too. "Sit still," I said, and he did, grumbling a little about how he was going to have to look up the scores on the Web if I didn't finish up. So I jammed the last piece of adhesive tape into place and got up. "There. Don't blame me if all your guts leak out."

"No prob," he said, pulling his shirt down and grabbing the remote. "Your message light's blinking," he added as he flipped through the channels.

I resigned myself to having a guest for the night. Weird. I never had guests. Friends from high school sometimes asked to come up to visit, but I always said I had a test the next day, or a date. Except for class, I hardly saw anyone anymore, and hadn't hung out with other students since I moved out of the dorm at Christmas. But I had a guest tonight. I guess I owed him, I told myself as I crossed to the breakfast bar and hit "play" on the answering machine.

Connor, it's your father, came the first message. I cut the volume so the guy-- Spike-- wouldn't overhear. But he was concentrating hard on some replay of a soccer match. Why aren't you calling us back? We're worried about you. The dean called and said you'd been missing class. Remember you have to maintain a B average to keep the scholarship. Son, please call. We love you.

I hit delete. The next message wasn't any better. Connor, this is Tracy. She was crying. I was sick of her crying. I'm done. I mean, I keep trying to reach you. I just wanted to come up for a weekend. You're supposed to be my boyfriend. But I give up. I'm going to just forget about you, and it's your own fault.

I deleted that one too, with a hard shove of the button. And then, angry, I walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, trying to remember if I'd eaten today.

"Hey," Spike called from the couch. I glanced through the cutout to see him making himself comfortable, his boots off, his stockinged feet on the coffee table. One pale toe poked out of a hole in his sock. "You got any chips or anything? And salsa? Wanna beer?"

"Sure." I found some chips, and the salsa in the fridge wasn't too old. I couldn't remember how to be a good host, but this guest was pretty easy, considering he'd just been knifed and his shirt had a big blotch of blood on the front.
I set the bowl of chips and the salsa jar near his foot and took the beer he held out. "Uh, that shirt's pretty scuzzy," I said. "You want to borrow one of mine?"

"Yeah. You got any soccer shirts? You know. Kind of a themed outfit." He grinned, gesturing with his beer to the two teams on the screen.

I shook my head, but went off to the bedroom to look. In the dresser I found an old soccer shirt, bright red and white, my high school colors, with Jacobson across the back. Back in the living room, I tossed it over to him, and without taking his eyes from the game, Spike pulled off his bloody t-shirt and pulled on the clean one. "Man U red," he said obscurely, but with obvious pleasure. "You're okay, mate."

It was a compliment, even if I didn't know what it was for. "You know, you should get under a blanket or something. You could be in shock."

He said, "Sure," and I went and found an old fleece blanket in the closet and dropped it on him. He took his time spreading it out over his legs, muttering something at the screen, something about "Gary Neville" and "Old Trafford" and then, suddenly, he looked over at me. "So let's see. Your parents are worried, your dean is complaining, you're about to lose your scholarship, and your lady just broke up with you. And you're going out trying to get someone to beat you to death, or stab you if that doesn't work. I got that right?"

I dropped down into the threadbare old sidechair, weary like I was a hundred years old. "You shouldn't listen in to other people's messages."

"Yeah. And I shouldn't get in the middle of other people's fight, or steal some other bloke's beer. What can I say. I've always been bad." He held up his beer, like he was toasting himself. "So what's with you, huh? Got a life, so throw it away?"

"Something like that."

Unexpectedly he said, "You don't want to be dead. It's not any better."

"How would you know?"

Stupid question. Of course he grinned at me. "I been dead twice. Brought back."

"CPR?"

"Somethin' like that. Rather be here anyday. Got beer, got Man U on the telly, pretty girls in short skirts, Grand Theft Auto, Dead Kennedys... I mean, come on. Kazaa is reason enough to live."

I didn't answer, just stared out into nothing.

"You ever pull a ribbon out of a girl's hair? So her braid comes out, and there are all these waves? Reason enough, mate."

I thought of Tracy, how she used to hold her hair back with her hand when she ate french fries. She always had to dip the french fries in catsup, lots of catsup, and she was always getting it on her chin, and she'd laugh and rub at her face with her free hand. And then she'd let go of her dark hair.

"A good fight with a bad guy," he was saying persuasively. "Keats's Odes. Playing the Ramones on your bass. South Park. Hieronymus Bosch, man. Don't you like that? Like a 15th century horror flick, that triptych of his. Moonlight on the ocean. Macbeth, mate, don't you like Macbeth?"
"It's not enough."

They were showing the golf results now, and Spike swore and flipped the TV off. "Remote control," he went on. "Antibiotics. Know what life was like before antibiotics? Babies died. Half the babies born died before they were two. Epidemics took out whole families. Antibiotics. Good."

I had to smile at his intensity. "Okay. Antibiotics good."

"Like that car?"

"Your Viper?"

"Well, it's not mine really. I stole it. Good car, though, right?"

"Yeah," I admitted. He'd stolen it. Who the hell did I have in my house?

"You can have it. Stay alive, and it's yours."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. "You're giving me your car?"

"Sure. You got to give me a ride back to LA, but you can have the car."

"Spike--" This guy was insane. An insane carjacker. "You stole the car. You give it to me. Don't you think they'll come after me then?"

"Don't worry about it. Stole it from my grandsire. He won't tell the police, trust me."

"Your--" I shook my head. "Your grandfather drives a Viper?"

"Well, he doesn't get out much. So he's okay with me taking it." He frowned. "Relatively okay. Look, I'll tell him I crashed it. He'll believe me. And you can have it. All you got to do is agree to live."

"You're crazy."

He looked over at me, his face set in a stubborn expression. "No. I'm giving you a reason to live. You got plenty. Need one more is all. The car."

"Spike, I can't take your car."

I could see him weighing things. Calculating. He twisted, a wave of pain going over his face, and jammed his hand into his jeans pocket. He brought out a wad of cash. "Here. I'll pay you. Probably, I don't know. Two hundred there. All yours."

When I wouldn't take it, he dropped it on the coffee table. Then, after a moment, he reached over and grabbed a twenty. "Need petrol money. I mean, if you're not going to take the car."

He looked so earnest, so stubborn, I started laughing. I laughed and laughed, and I put my head in my hands so I wouldn't see his face all wounded and hurt. And I laughed some more. And pretty soon he was laughing too.

And when we finally quit, he said, "So I can keep my money? You gonna live even without it?"

"Give me another beer," I said, holding out my hand. And by the time we'd gotten through most of the case, I'd agreed to try life for another month. "Just one month," I said, and he shoved a piece of paper at me.
"Go ahead. Sign it."

I squinted and read the old-fashioned script I guess they taught at Oxford. It said, *I, Connor Jacobson, agree not to get myself killed in any fashion for the next 31 days.*

"A month is 30 days," I protested.

"Thirty days hath September, April, June, and November," he recited. I mean, I was impressed. He must have drunk two-thirds of the case of beer, and he could still remember that, and say it coherently. "All the rest have thirty-one, excepting February, which doesn't bloody count. Sign it, goddamnit, or I'll kill you myself."

So I signed it, and he added his name as witness underneath, and he folded it up and put it in his pocket next to his cash. And then he said, "I'm going to sleep now. Close the curtains, will ya? Not good with the sun."

I managed to get the curtains closed, and he stretched out on the couch and pulled the blanket over his head. And just like that, he fell asleep. And I guess I did too, because I woke up hours later in my bed, and he was standing in the doorway, yawning, rubbing at his ribs like they itched now. I guess he really did heal fast, because he looked okay, still pale, but not like he'd been knifed a few hours ago.

"You got any classes, kid?"

"It's Saturday."

"Oh. Right. Look. Clouding up."

I glanced through the slit between my curtains, saw gray light.

"Means I better go. You wanna come?"

"Back-- back to LA with you?"

"Yeah. You can come if you want to."

I shook my head. "I -- I got a physics exam Monday."

"Yeah. Good thought. Remember. You owe me a month. Left my card on the kitchen table. Need me, call my cellphone, not the business line, okay? Business line gets a way too inquisitive secretary. I'll drive out. We'll hang."

He headed out to the couch, and I trailed after him, not sure what to say. He was whistling, gathering up his things, and then that nagging sense of recognition that had been bugging me off and on came back. "You look like her," I said. "My benefactress."

He glanced over at me as he pulled on his coat. "Your benefactress? Like Miss Haverson?"

I didn't know what he meant. "No. Like Miss Aurelia. Or Mrs. I don't know. She died and left a trust to give scholarships to worthy Quaker students." I went to the old steel desk and rummaged through it, finally pulling out a folded brochure. "Darla Aurelia. You look like her."

He had stilled, one hand on the thermos. He put it down and reached for the brochure, and then he stared down at the picture on the front, of a young blonde woman, her face pale like his. Same mouth almost. "You could be, like, her brother."
He shook his head. "Don't see it, mate. And you wouldn't take the car from me, so I guess I don't qualify as a benefactor." He was still staring down at the photo, and I knew, no matter what he said, he was fascinated by the resemblance. "Pretty lady."

"Yeah, I guess. I don't know any more about her than it says on the brochure. Just got the scholarship because Mom and Dad were Quaker. I googled her name and didn't find anything. Like she didn't exist. I mean, everyone shows up on Google, right?"

"Maybe she used a pseudonym for the scholarship program," he said absently, turning over the brochure to read about the scholarship program. He stared for awhile at that back panel, then said, "Well, won't matter to you soon, if you don't get that B average, right? You'll lose the scholarship, and your benefactress besides."

I scowled at him, but he only laughed and tossed the brochure down on the table. "So give me a call in maybe a week or so. Whenever you feel like picking a fight. Call me, and we'll go break some heads. And I'll show you some moves. Got potential, mate."

I closed the door behind him, then looked out the window at the parking lot, to watch him saunter under the overcast sky to his car. It didn't make any sense that he'd be here-- only I felt like he was meant to be here, like he'd planned it somehow. I mean, how likely was it that someone who could fight like that just happened to happen by when I was about to lose a fight?

But try as I might, I couldn't figure out how I might know him. Maybe... for awhile, I'd had this weird fantasy. I guess most adopted kids did. I used to have this fantasy that I had another family somewhere. I mean, I loved my parents and my little sister. Don't get me wrong. And until a few months ago, I never felt, you know, adopted. Never cared about whoever it was that made me and then gave me up. But lately, I kept wondering. I had a mother somewhere. A father. Birthmother. Birthfather.

I mean, I knew who my real parents were, and their name was Jacobson, and they raised me and my younger sister in Waybright, California. But... but I wasn't like them. I always thought I was, until a few month ago, when I started to think I was different. I got angry and all that, and my parents, they never wanted to kill someone. They never wanted someone to kill them.

Lately I'd started having these dreams, violent, angry dreams, and I was in them usually. Vivid dreams. Realistic, technicolor dreams. Me in some other world, or maybe this world back in the stone age. There were no cities, only small settlements in the jungle. I carried a spear and wore animal skins, and I felt thin and feral and frightened all the time. And in these dreams, I wasn't myself, wasn't Connor Jacobson. But I was still me, only savage, only half-human.

Sometimes I had another dream, only I wasn't in it. My benefactress was. Benefactress. That's what the dean called her. She sat at this table, out in the open, in the darkness. Maybe it was a courtyard, I don't know. And she talked to someone I couldn't see, someone in the shadows. She had a hard, bright voice, and she talked like she knew the other person hated her. And sometimes I'd almost hear him answer, only his voice was just a deep rumble across the darkness. And she'd laugh, and laugh, in response, but her laughter was full of despair.

So then comes this guy, who looks like her, and laughs all the time, and when he fights, his eyes are savage, and I remember my dreams. He wasn't in them, wasn't part of my dreams. But I thought if I told him about the dreams, he'd know what I meant, and he'd tell me why I was dreaming like that.

So, like I said, I never felt adopted before, not before a few months ago. But now I felt alien. This wasn't the Jacobson boy-- he was polite and did well in school and his parents understood him. I'd
turned 18 and I'd changed and I didn't know myself. And I was pretty sure it was because I had to find the people who made me.

This Spike wasn't my father. Too young-- and I didn't feel him that way. But an older brother... maybe my birthfather sent him to watch over me. To keep me alive. There had to be some reason for Spike.
It was peaceful with Spike gone. Harmony did give me a moment's unease when she pointed out that he had to be furthering my journey somehow or the Powers wouldn't have let him leave. It made me wonder if he'd -- I don't know. I had a real dread that he'd gone to find Drusilla. He'd always hated me for what Angelus had done to Dru-- and hated that she loved me better all along anyway. I could just imagine him deciding that my journey included, oh, who knows. Apologizing to her for turning her. Some stupid thing like that.

But then the motor-pool supervisor confessed that Spike had stolen my Viper. Spike knew that Dru wasn't within driving distance-- she was still in Argentina, according to the reports from the overseas W&H branches.

He was probably going to see Dawn. I'm not sure why the Powers would let them get together to conspire against me-- as they would-- but it was the lesser of the two evil prospects, so I relaxed.

And it was just so peaceful without him. No requisitions for a gross of battle axes crossed my desk, and when I ordered the big screen TV moved out of the lobby, it stayed moved. His poker buddies went back to work, and the secretaries too, and there was no punk music erupting out of his flat, at least once maintenance went in there and turned off his CD player.

I'd almost forgotten how comfortable the building could be with the gentle buzz of employees doing their jobs, something that never happened when Spike was around.

But he wasn't. So I treated myself to long hours in the gym on the stationary bicycle, never having to worry that Spike would barge in and start giving me exercise advice.

Then, Saturday afternoon, he barged in, and my idyll ended.

"You know, you're getting no wind or road resistance, riding a nothing bike to nowhere."

He pulled off his shirt and started pounding away at the punching bag, talking a mile a minute about its superior caloric burn. Like burning calories was what a scrawny guy like him needed. He looked two quarts low-- his chest was just skin and muscle over his ribs. There was a new scar fading on his abdomen. A knife wound. I'd seen its like before, usually on him. I wanted to remind him to up his blood dose for a couple days-- he sometimes forgot to eat now that getting fed involved nothing more entertaining than opening a refrigerator door. But he never listened to me, so I spared my breath. Well, I didn't breathe, but I spared myself the trouble of telling him what he didn't want to hear.

Suddenly, he stopped punching and put his hand on the wound. His ribcage showed up like shadowy stripes under his fingers. Then he saw me watching him, and grabbed up his shirt and yanked it on.

"Where'd you get that?"

"The shirt? Dunno, picked it up somewhere-- Red and white. Man U colors."

"I meant the knife wound."

"Dunno. Picked it up somewhere."

Also Man U colors, I thought sourly, imagining a fresh wound, his blood hot and scarlet against his white skin.
I went back to my exercise as he started for the exit. Then I saw it, on the back of his shirt, the letters stretched over his shoulders. Jacobson.

It didn't mean anything. Couldn't mean anything. Still I had to ask. "You get that shirt from the Man U website? Charge it on the company credit card, like you charged the Man U coasters and the Man U shotglasses?"

"Uh, yeah." He stopped but didn't turn around, so I couldn't see his face. I did see his shoulders hunch, however, so that the "Jacob" disappeared into the wrinkles and all I could see of the name was "son". "Sell each player's shirts, see, and whoever's sells the most, uh, they get money donated in their name for pediatric AIDS research. Practically a charitable contribution, this shirt."

"Right," I said. And he dashed out the door, and before it closed, I could hear him peltering down the hall towards his flat. Let it go, I told myself. Just let it go. It was just Spike and his Man U obsession. He was too stupid to know what the name meant. And besides, Lilah had done her job well. There was no trace of Connor. Anywhere.

Now that Spike was back, we could hold rehearsal again. Carrying a thermos, I trudged down to the lobby that evening, and saw Harmony, who was supposed to be setting up Clem's drum kit, by the reception desk in some intense discussion with Gunn and Spike. "Maybe you'd like to share your thoughts with the rest of the band?" I suggested.

They turned. They wore identical furtive looks. Spike glanced at Gunn, then said, "They agree with me." And then he started to sing. "You and me, baby, we ain't nothing but mammals, so let's do it like they do it on the Discovery Channel." Then in a normal tone, he added, "Is so a love song. Mammals need love too."

This did not deserve a response. "Get back to work, Harmony," I said, and she strolled in her insolent way to Clem's half-assembled drums. Gunn followed her, complaining about the height of his microphone, and Spike just stood there by the fiddling with the receptionist's telephone headset and occasionally glancing at me.

I crossed the room and shoved the thermos at him. In a low voice only he could hear, I said, "Drink that."

Spike took it automatically, but just held it. It was an old-fashioned thermos that I'd found in the cupboard, red plaid like one of those Catholic schoolgirl uniform skirts Darla used to favor. The cup was red too, which camouflaged the contents. But Spike didn't untwist it. "I'm not hungry."

"I don't care," I said roughly. "You're getting too thin again. Not going to be much use if you can't fight, are you?"

He ducked his head. Then, obediently, he opened the thermos and, disdaining the cup, drank all the blood in a couple quick gulps. "Thanks," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and then his hand on his shirt. The color was absorbed immediately into the red fabric.

It occurred to me that he might be trying some kind of hunger strike to get out of the contract with the Powers, a passive-aggressive alternative to his jumping out the window again. Or maybe he was withering away for lack of -- of her.

"New rule," I said. "Every pint of Guinness, every pint of lager, you have to drink another pint of
blood. You got it?"

He stuck out his lip in protest. Then he said, "Okay."

Sometimes, you know, he was still my fledgling. He'd object just so I'd know he wasn't obeying my orders, then he'd obey my orders. I had to remember that. Had to remember to be Angelus with him.

It felt good. I leveled the Angelus gaze at my motley band, and they glanced quick around at each other, and got right to work. Harmony finished the drums and started in on the mikes. Kenny and Spike got their guitars tuned in record time. Lorne and Gunn started harmonizing on *Send in the Clowns*, without any sniping about my song choice. Wes and David were in tandem, producing As and Cs and Es for Fred's sound check.

It was a good rehearsal. We'd be ready for our performance next weekend. We'd be competent. That's all I asked for. Competence.

As I dismissed the band, I saw Wes catch hold of Spike by the tail of the shirt. Curious, I tuned up my hearing a notch, and heard him say, "Where'd you get the shirt?"

Spike shrugged, trying to pull free without ripping the shirt. "Man U. You know. Red and white."

Wes ignored his struggles, rubbing the fabric between his fingers. "Bad dye job," he muttered. "Wrong red."

Spike shot a glance at me and tugged free of Wes's grip. "Yeah, well, they didn't have you as a fashion consultant, I guess." He opened his mouth to yell, and quick as I could, I dialed the hearing down. "Hey, Charlie! Wanna get a beer? Wes's buying."

Over Wes's predictable protests, Spike looked over at me with one of those sweet, rueful smiles Darla used to cuff him for. "Promise. Will stop by the fridge afterwards. Wanna come?"

When I declined, he looped an arm over Wes's shoulder. "Quit your bitchin', Watcher. Just put it on the expense account. Hey, Dave! Grab the girls and come along!"

After they left, I went to Harmony's computer and checked my email, trying not to feel disappointed when, once again, there was nothing from Buffy. Then, reluctantly, I entered Manchester United in the search slot. And once I got to the website, I checked the merchandise page. Plenty of shirts for sale, similar -- but not identical-- in style and color to the one Spike had been wearing.

But there wasn't any contest for the most popular shirt. Wasn't any mention of a donation to help pediatric AIDS research.

And there wasn't any player named Jacobson listed on the Manchester United roster.

The close-circuit security camera panned the lobby, and closeted in my office, the door closed, I watched Spike come back with Wes. They crossed the lobby, leaning together, propping each other up. They stopped in front of the staircase, and then, in tacit agreement, headed for the elevator. While they waited for it to arrive, Spike's words, picked up by the microphone, sounded tinny but clear. "'Fore we start on the research, I got to stop by the break room, pick up some blood. Angel's making me drink more. Says I'm too skinny."
Wes frowned at this. "How many calories does blood have, I wonder? I should look it up."

"Bet it's less than a Guinness," Spike said. "Anyway. He's worried. About me."

The little lilt of pride in his voice twisted something in me. He cared. Always, even when we were at odds. He always wanted me to notice him. To approve of him or disapprove of him. To hug him or hit him. He just wanted to be noticed. And now he had this Powers-appointed quest. He saw it-- I know he did-- as a way to get in. Into my circle. Into my life. Into my heart.

Angelus loved him. I remembered that much. Family. Grandchild. He was proud of Spike, of how quickly Spike learned to fight, to survive. But that was Angelus, and a century ago, and I couldn't bear it again, to take him in. To take the chance.

And now. Now he'd gotten hold, somehow, of Connor's name. And he'd blame it on the Powers, say my journey required it, required him to know. Required me to tell.

I sat in my office, watching the screen, as the elevator doors closed behind them. I waited, counting the seconds down, the minutes, the steps from the elevator down the third-floor hall. Then, slowly, I found the remote and switched the display to the research library. The light was dim, but I could see Wes sitting at the refectory table, his finger outlining paragraphs in some old book. Spike was at the computer, humming one of those harsh ugly tunes he liked so well.

What could they find? Nothing. Nothing. Lilah assured me she'd erased every trace. The Partners always kept their side of a contract.

The Powers, however....

"Got it," Wes said. "The prophecy you wanted about Angel's journey."

"I hate prophecies," Spike said. He'd been saying that as long as I'd known him. Everytime Dru would come up with some prediction, he'd protest that he hated prophecies and he wasn't going to do whatever it said he was going to do. Now he was trapped in a prophecy.

Mine.

I sat there, fatalistic, waiting for Wes to read it. The father will kill the son.... would he remember, if he read those words? Would it all come back to him? Justine and Quar'toth and ... and Connor? And what I did to protect Connor, to protect Wes, and all my friends?

I had to stop it if I could.

But Wes was reading that other prophecy. Slightly different words. Another translation. "And the vampire with a soul, having achieved his destiny at the apocalypse, will live to die again."

"Live to die again. Creepy." Spike moved to look over Wes's shoulder, studying the book like he could translate it himself. And maybe he could. Maybe they taught that language at Oxford too.

"It could," Wes said quietly, "just as easily apply to you."

It was almost comical, how Spike's mouth fell open and then closed spasmodically. "No. Nope. Don't want to live again. Or die again, come to that. I-- I decline. Angel can have it."

"Not necessarily your choice."

"Sure it is." Spike's face brightened. "Anyroad, I've already achieved my destiny at an apocalypse,
and came back as myself as ever. So... must not apply to me, huh?"

"Perhaps not. Tell me again about the amulet."

Spike groaned. "It was just some stupid bauble. Supposed to be worn by someone stronger than human, with a soul. Well, that means me or Angel. Or Buffy."

"Or Faith, I suppose," Wes said. "She does still have a soul?"

"Yeah, and a real impressive set of--"

"The amulet. Angel brought it to Sunnydale."

"Right. The amulet. Angel brought it to Sunnydale. Handed it to Buffy. Walked away and left her to face the apocalypse."

Not quite, I wanted to protest. But I could hardly remember that day. I was blind with grief. Various moments pierced me, sharp as a shard of glass. But there were only bits, here and there, of Buffy. *Wait for me*, she said. Or something like that. *Go back to LA and wait for me.* And I did. *Spike is in my heart. But he's not my boyfriend. I still think about the future, and you're in it, and he's not.* I remembered that much. I remembered she kissed me. I remembered it didn't matter, because of Connor. *It mattered now.* I felt lost and broken, and she kissed me and it didn't help.

And I remembered that amulet, so hot I thought it would burn a hole in my pocket. It cooled as soon as I handed it to her.

"So what did it feel like, wearing it?"

"Like I was way overdressed." Spike was moving restlessly now, around the bookshelves, trailing his hand over the volumes. "Felt like nothing. Till the end, when it started working. Then it got warm. Kind of radiated. It sent out all this light, and heat. Not to me. Out, towards the hellmouth."

"It didn't burn you?"

"Nah. Just felt warm. I mean, I burned up eventually, and that felt hot... but the gem, it was just kind of warm. Stung a little. But that might have been the soul. I don't know. It was like they were connecting, that moment. Gem. Soul. And that's when it started shooting. When it touched my soul."

"Fascinating," Wes murmured. "It's as if it had to check to make sure there was a soul inside the bearer. But--" He glanced up with irritation at Spike. "Would you quit pacing? You're making me nervous."

"Makes me nervous to remember. Specially when you talk about that damned destiny. To think I came that close to turning human--"

"What if it weren't your destiny to wear the amulet? To die to save the world?"

"Well, good. I mean, it wasn't destiny, was it? I chose it. Told Buffy she had to give it to me. And she only gave it to me because -- " for just a second, a smile flickered over his face. "Because I was her champion. And the only reason was because I'd been fighting with her all this time. She knew it was true. So it was me and Buffy decided it was for me to bear. Buffy. Not some stupid prophecy."

"That's true. Perhaps you weren't meant to bear it. And perhaps that's why it had to probe you, searching for a soul. And--" Wes hesitated. "Perhaps that's why it killed you, rather than making you human, because it wasn't meant for you."
Spike turned away from the bookshelves. "Rather be dead than human, got that right."

"What's so bad about--" Wes shook his head. "Never mind. Listen. What if it was Angel's destiny to wear that amulet? And he didn't do it, so he wasn't there at the apocalypse? So he didn't play a role in saving the world?"

Yes, I did, I wanted to say. I brought the amulet-- but that was before. I wasn't there at the hellmouth with Buffy.

A chill came over me. My destiny-- what if Wes was right? What if I had missed my chance? Too blasted, too sorrowing, to know it when it arrived?

It was, I told myself, the least of my problems at the moment.

"Where did he get it?"

Spike sat down, sticking his ugly booted feet up on the antique table. "From here, I reckon. Where else do you get a lethal bit of jewelry but from a lethal lawfirm, huh? Question is, what did he trade for it? Your lot-- sorry, W&H-- ain't going to give that up without getting something in return."

"Connor."

Any hope I'd had that Spike had gotten that shirt by accident vanished, and I felt the hatred and dread shiver through me.

But then Spike said, "Nah. Don't think so." He wasn't looking at Wes, but at his own hands, fisted on his thighs. "I checked out that name, and it was a dry hole. Someone else entirely."

"But you said the Powers--"

"I think I misunderstood. I wasn't really into the whole afterlife process, you know. Focused on Buffy. As usual. Missed a lot of details. Like the, you know, Angel clause. Hey!" he said, yanking his feet off the table and sitting up. "Maybe that's my stupid destiny. Helping Angel on his journey."

"That would presume another apocalypse," Wes said drily. He seemed to have discarded the Connor issue, and that was good. Only I didn't know what Spike was about, disclaiming any interest in Connor. Maybe he just didn't want Wes to know. Or maybe he really wasn't able to find Connor. But there was that shirt.


"Hmm." Wes went back to his book, then, as Spike rose to leave, said, "And you're certain that this Connor isn't relevant."

"Irrelevant. Moot. Blind alley. Like I said. Off now. Got to go online and check the scores."

"Man U lost," Wes said without looking up. "Again. Missing Becks, they're saying in the forums."

"Don't need Becks," Spike said, stomping to the door. "Forums full of mollycoddled little--"

He slammed the door on the way out, leaving Wes with his book. Then Wes closed the book and
rose, and slowly made his way out. I flipped off the display and sat there, my hands clenched on the desk before me.

Spike knew the name Connor. Had said it to Wes. And yet now he was saying that the name was irrelevant.

Wes accepted it. Thank-- well, thank whoever it was. He didn't argue with Spike. And he wouldn't pursue it, not with Spike being so insistent about the irrelevance of the name Connor.

But Wes didn't know Spike well. He didn't know when Spike was lying.

I did. And Spike was lying when he said that Connor didn't matter.
Buffy

All the way to London, I got more and more annoyed with this Spike thing. You know, how he refused to see me. I wasn't going to just sit back and take it, just let him decide that without consulting me. So I started with the heavy ammunition— I put Dawn on the case. She was a bulldog, and I knew she would get information out of him one way or another, if she could just get in his face and give him that glare of hers and make her demands. He was never able to resist her when she wanted something.

But she couldn't get away from school for a few days, and I couldn't wait that long. So once I was settled in Giles's flat near Russell Square, I started thinking about Spike, and what he was like, and what mattered to him. Whiskey and sentimental movies and axes. He liked axes. And punk music and British football.

Giles had a state-of-the-art computer and broadband access, and so I spent a couple days going from one website to another, looking for Spike. Now, granted, he wasn't a big techno-guy, but that last spring, he used to-- in those times he was sane-- get on Willow's laptop and check the sports scores online or download some music. Sometimes he'd use her Amazon account to order DVDs and videogames. (Willow went ahead and paid the bills. She can be really nice, you know.) So I knew he knew how to surf the web. And he couldn't have changed that much. Okay, so he didn't want to see me, or so Angel said, and that was a big change. But he still had to like the Ramones and Manchester United.

In between meetings with the Watchers and the slayerettes, I kept trying to find Spike online. I had some free time Sunday morning-- late Saturday night in LA. Vampire hours. And I finally tracked him down at the Manchester United forum. He wasn't hard to identify. Maybe no one else would recognize him, but I did, because he was using a combination of his real name and the year he was turned. will1880. And Spike, well, he did always have his standards, and even when he was calling someone a bleeding stupid dickhead who wouldn't know a banana kick if it were shoved up his arse, he made sure to spell everything right.

I just sat there for a minute, staring at the screen as the debate unfolded in front of me. I could almost hear his voice as I read his words. Quickly I made myself an account and entered the forum. And I sent him a private message:

lookslikeposhspice: So how about we go somewhere and chat?

will1880: Your server or mine?

It made me so mad. Just that quick, he's flirting. I could be anyone. I could be some skanky ho. I could be some skanky-ho guy. But I held my tongue, or my finger, while he got us a chatroom (and when did he get so good at internet hookups, I wanted to know). It was just like my dream. A chat window with Spike. Only in my dream, I wasn't furious.

When he came back with some sexy line, I typed:

lookslikeposhspice: You big jerk. You won't even talk to me, but you go off somewhere sneaky with anyone who asks.

There was a moment of silence, and I thought he was going to sign off. But finally:

will1880: You don't look like Posh Spice.
lookslikeposhspice: *I got news for you, dummy. Neither does the skanky ho you thought you were chatting with.*

will1880: *Yeah. Well. I'm off. Can't talk to you.*

I typed fast, panicking.

lookslikeposhspice: *No, wait. I just want to ask--*

will1880: *No. Sorry, Slayer. Can't talk.*

*Sorry--* at least that was sort of an improvement, even if he followed it with Slayer, which he always called me when he was mad at me.

lookslikeposhspice: *No, wait. Giles wants to talk to you.*

He didn't say anything. But at least he didn't sign off. I yelled, "Giles!" and a minute later he appeared, panting, at the office doorway. "You didn't try to print, did you? I told you not to print anything. The firewall interprets it as a demon invasion, and freezes--"

"I didn't try to print. But I've got Spike on chat, and he keeps trying to leave, and I just want to know--" I sucked back a sob. Giles hated tears. "Why he doesn't want to see me. Why he's so mad at me."

Giles took off his glasses and then put them back on. "So why do you need me?"

I rose from the chair and moved away. "You talk to him. Ask him. Maybe he'll tell you."

"Buffy--"

He was going to say no. I said, hard and fast, "Giles, to save the world and you and all your stupid slayerettes, I sent him to his death! Do you understand? And if he's mad at me because of that, well, it's your fault, and you owe me. So sit down and type, or-- or-- or I'll take all the slayerettes to Marks and Spencer and pay for everything with my Watcher credit card!"

He sat down quick and stared at the screen. "I am not going to use that nom de plume."

"Well, I didn't want to use it either, but I had to consider my audience. Open up another account, I don't care."

Giles rapidly did as I bid, and in a moment he was typing at Spike.

watch2040: *Arsenal rules, you fuckhead. Man U sucks gutterwater.*

I guess that's something he'd wanted to say for a year or more. These guys and their dumb football rivalries. And I guess Giles was right, because Spike leaped for the bait.

will1880: *Ha! What happened to Chelsea? I thought you were a Chelsea man, but you're like a rat deserting a sinking ship and swimming over to another ship and climbing on board, huh?*

watch2004: *Better than a rat trapped on a sinking ship with the likes of Gary Neville!*

I read over Giles's shoulder as they went on and on-- both of them typing fast, in perfectly punctuated prose that marked them both as men of a time where punctuation really counted, which, like, made sense with Giles, but Spike? Finally I poked Giles in the arm and told him to get to the point. Ungraciously, he broke off another long paragraph of grammatical insults.
watch2004: Buffy wants to know why you won't talk to her. Tell me quickly, because I have some statistics from the last match which might surprise you.

will1880: I know she's reading over your shoulder.

I growled at this, and Giles cast me an annoyed glance.

watch2004: You know she won't let it rest. Give over, mate. Resistance is futile.

Maybe it was the un-Gileslike endearment that won Spike over. But as I watched, his words appeared, letter by letter, on the screen.

will1880: I won't talk to her because I don't want to talk to her. That's all. Time to move on.

Oh. Oh.

That hurt. He wasn't supposed to hurt me. We had an agreement. He wasn't supposed to hurt me.

Giles was glancing up at me now, sympathy and irritation on his careworn face. "Now what?"

"Get up," I ordered, and he got up, grumbling a little at how I should remember he wanted a bit of time at the end of the chat to unveil his Arsenal statistics and demolish Man U forever.

As Giles went back to his tea, I slid into the seat, and opened my own window again, and typed as fast as I could so I got it all out before he could sign off.

lookslikeposhspice: No. That's not good enough and you know it. You're all livey with Angel, and you hate Angel, and he said you're in a band with him and his friends, and that's like so wrong, that you're friends with Angel and you won't even talk to me. I know you're mad at me--

will1880: Not mad at you, Slayer.

This interruption silenced me, but only for a moment, because I was worried he'd get away.

lookslikeposhspice: Then why? I mean, I understand if you're mad. Angel-- well, he said something that maybe you think, and if you think that, I can understand why you'd be mad--

will1880: Not following here.

I took a deep breath and typed those awful words, that weren't true but I could see why he'd think they might be true, because, you know, of that kiss I gave to Angel that night in the crypt. And because sometimes Angel got the wrong ideas and thought they were the right ideas, and spoke them like they were the truth.

lookslikeposhspice: You know. Angel had this idea that I took that stupid amulet from him and gave it to you because I wanted to-- to protect him, and so I made you die instead of him.

It was even worse, typed out like that, appearing word by word on the screen. And it all mixed up with that dumb kiss and my coming away from Sunnydale and Spike's death and immediately setting up house with Angel. Not that we, you know. But I could see how, putting it altogether, Spike might be thinking that I chose him not to be a champion but to be a substitute sacrifice.

But I didn't. Really, I didn't.

will1880: Yeah. He said something like that. That you chose me to be the one to die.
lookslikeposhspice: And you believed him? Okay. I understand. But let me say right here that that's not what I meant--

will1880: I know. It's okay. I know you didn't want anyone to die.

Well, that took the words right out of my fingers. But then I got a little annoyed, because he made it sound like, you know, he was like anyone. You know, like I didn't want Robin Wood to die or one of the slayerettes whose name I couldn't remember. I didn't want them to die, yeah, but I really didn't want Spike to die. And I really felt terrible, only --

I shouldn't be thinking this. I should be typing it.

lookslikeposhspice: I really didn't want you to die. Especially you. We were-- you know. Friends. I --

will1880: Right. Well, don't worry. I know all that. Like I said, not mad.

lookslikeposhspice: Then it doesn't make any sense. If you're not mad, and we're still friends, why won't you speak to me? See me? I just want to be friends again--

will1880: Sure. Friends again. Got to go now--

He was going to leave, and I didn't get anything. In a panic, I typed:

lookslikeposhspice: Victorian canal stocks.

It worked once. And it worked again.

will1880: ??

lookslikeposhspice: Canal stocks. Your grandfather bought them for you, to invest, and then the railroads came and they were worthless.

will1880: Still ???

lookslikeposhspice: You told me. You came to me when I was in the Himalayas and told me about that. When you were gone. When you were dead. You talked to me then. You probably can't remember, because you were dead. And you tried to tell me you were just a figment of my imagination. But you told me that. Is it or is it not true that your grandfather bought you canal stocks?

will1880: Maybe.

lookslikeposhspice: It's true. And that proves it. You talked to me then and you were nice and still-- still liked me. And now you're back and you won't talk to me or see me, and I want to know why.

It was a long time before he answered. Finally:

will1880: Buffy, let it go, okay? I came back, and I just didn't feel the same way. There are other things that matter. And it's okay. You love Angel, right? So that's enough. Don't need me too.

Did he mean... he didn't love me anymore? I didn't believe it. I just didn't. I couldn't.

lookslikeposhspice: You still felt the same way when you were with me on the mountain.

will1880: I don't even remember. I wasn't there. Not really. And what matters is now. Everything changed when I came back. Nothing's the same. So let it go. It doesn't matter anyway, not really.
Don't need me anymore, and that's good. Got the shiny new life. Got Angel if you want him. Don't need me, so let me go.

Let him go. He was acting like—like I had some hold on him, and I could just release it. And I couldn't. He was the one who had pledged himself to me. He was the one who always came back to me. Always had my back. I didn't ask him to do that. Well, maybe I did. But he was the one who held that rope that tied us together. Not me.

Maybe he was letting it go. Maybe that's what he was trying to say.

lookslikeposhspice: If you want to tell me that, you have to do it to my face. You have to look me in the eye and tell me that you're letting go. You can't just type it.

will1880: I can, Buffy. Just type it out like that. I'm letting go. So should you.

And then, abruptly, he signed off.

Giles trailed back in, tea cup in hand, and frowned when he saw the blank screen. "I thought you were going to let me--"

Then I guess he must have seen me sitting there, all crying, because he said in his awkward way, "Buffy, dear, don't take it so hard. He's been gone most of a year--"

"I know! And I know what you're going to say, that I was okay with it when I didn't know he was back, but I wasn't. I was really hurting and felt terrible, but it didn't do any good to cry all the time, and I didn't want to be like Xander, and I knew Spike wanted me to be happy. And so I tried to be, but now—now I know he's back, and --"

I put my head down and cried some more, and Giles patted my shoulder for awhile, and finally he stopped and said sternly, "Sit up. You're going to ruin my keyboard, and it's a special ergonomic one. And you know he loves you, so stop acting like a silly girl, acquire a spine, and track down the demon like a Slayer should."
I didn't sleep that night. Every time I started to drowse, Connor's face appeared like a flash in my eyes. He was mine, and he was lost. I had to think of him as dead, dead to me. And I was dead to him. I'd never even existed for him. I had to think of it that way, or it would drive me mad.

All that Sunday I hid out in my office, avoiding Wes, avoiding Spike. Easy enough in Spike's case-- he was no doubt nursing his hangover and playing his stupid video games. But Wes, like most of our professional staff, worked on weekends, and several times my phone buzzed and the display indicated that he was the caller.

While I signed the dozens of letters Harmony left on my desk, I kept watching the security display. I don't know what I was looking for. Spike entering Wes's office, wearing that red-and-white soccer shirt, maybe. I never saw that. But I did see Spike. He came out of his flat and down the third-floor corridor in his old torn blue jeans, like this was a punk club and not a place of business. A black shirt, not the soccer shirt. He made sure the receptionist on that floor was watching, then he vaulted over the railing and dropped easily onto the mezzanine below. That's when I saw the videotape in his hand. And that's when I realized where he was headed-- back into the secured wing that housed the medical facilities.

For a moment, I sat there, staring at the closed-circuit TV, unable to move. But I swallowed down the panic and headed out and down to intercept him.

But I was too late. By the time I turned the corner, he'd already entered the room.

I went past the nurse and pushed through the door. And there he was, sitting on the bed next to Cordelia, and she was gazing at me, her eyes filled with horror. He was in game-face, bent over her, his hands at her throat.

The videotape of Connor was on the bed beside her leg.

It had been awhile since I'd been out on the streets fighting. But I always packed a stake in my coat pocket. I didn't let myself think. I grabbed the piece of wood and plunged it into his back, just as he turned, still game-faced, towards me.

His face faded back into human, his eyes dark with something-- I don't know. Guilt. Fear. And then, he just dissolved. He went to dust like a thousand others I'd staked. Just crumbled into powder. All of him just ... ended.

Cordelia was screaming. No sound. Screaming without sound. Her mouth was open and her eyes were blank and her throat went ah-ah-ah. But I couldn't hear her. Couldn't hear her through the rushing in my ears. It was like I kept hearing his body becoming dust, like a wave crawling up an endless shore. Like a fire burning a forest. All of him, every part, dissolving in a rush of hot noise. It was in my throat and in my ears-- the rush, the dust.

Cordelia was grabbing at the coverlet-- no. Grabbing at the dust. Her hands were full of dust. It sifted out of her fists, black and gray and fine. And she brought her fists up to her open screaming mouth, and I still couldn't hear her.

Something fell from her -- fell from her throat to the coverlet. Gold against the black-gray dust. I reached out for it, grabbed it, shook the dust away. Just a gold chain, with a complicated clasp. I remembered it. A birthday gift. Gunn had gone around collecting money from everyone. Back when
we were all poor.

I didn't know why it was there in the dust of Spike.

She was still staring at me, her dusty fists at her mouth. Her eyes were huge. The pupils were huge. I couldn't see her in there.

"He was going to turn you," I whispered. My voice was raw in my throat. "I saved you."

Still no sound. I dropped the chain. I felt him on my hand, dry and fine. I wiped my hand on my coat.

I took the videotape. I left the room. I stopped at the nurse's station. She had put aside her magazine and was staring at my face. I probably had dust on my face. I remembered what I wanted to say. "She-- she needs a shot."

I pushed past her and walked out into the corridor, holding the video in one hand and rubbing the other hand against my cheek. Someone was in the corner, huddled tight, but I kept going. Going. Till I reached my flat.

I collapsed on the couch and sat there, waiting.

No one came. Nothing happened.

Finally I remembered the video in my hand. I shook off the dust-- it coated it, microscopic bits of dust, all over the video, all over my hands. And I slid it into the VCR and turned on the television. Something in me dreaded. Something in me hungered. Pictures of my boy-- his smile. His laughter. His anger. His grief. If he'd been found... if he'd been seen--

The blank screen faded into life. There was an uncertain, wavering zoom to a banner.

*Happy songs! Dionysian revelry. Party!*

And then there was Spike, in his ripped jeans, holding a microphone. His eyes were alight. "And it's all thanks to the W&H CEO and cinematographer, Angel! Let's give it up for the fearless leader over there!"

I hit pause, but that just froze him-- Spike laughing.

I hit stop and eject, and pulled the video as it came out, and gripped it.

Not Connor.

The black video casing was dusty. I rubbed at it with my sleeve. And then the dust was on my sleeve, and I dropped the video and rubbed at my sleeve with my hand. And then the dust was on my hand.
I was working in the lab when the nurse called me. Cordelia was agitated, her heart rhythm bouncing. The nurse didn't want to give her a second shot, but she couldn't quiet her.

Not that Cordelia was making noise. She was absolutely silent, her eyes wide, both her fists jammed against her open mouth. She looked like she was caught in some terrible nightmare. But she couldn't wake up.

She was sitting up, her back against the backboard of the bed. I eased her down onto the pillow, and smoothed her dark hair. Her forehead was clammy and cold. I tried to pull her fists away from her mouth, but she wouldn't let me. I was afraid if I pulled too hard, I'd break her thin wrists.

I authorized another shot, and stood back while the nurse slid up Cordelia's short sleeve and gave her an injection. The light faded in her eyes. But her hands were still tight against her mouth.

There was a necklace there on the cover by her knee, and I recognized its herringbone pattern. Cordelia wore it sometimes, though it wasn't as expensive as most of her jewelry. I brought it up to my face and saw that the clasp was bent.

I slid it into my pocket. Cordelia was staring up at the ceiling. I tried once more to tug her fists down, but no luck.

Then I smoothed the coverlet, brushed some dust off, and awkwardly patted her shoulder. "I'll be back, hon. You try and rest."

The nurse followed me out. She kept glancing back at the room, and finally she whispered, "Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Spike. He went in. And then Mr. Angel went in. And Mr. Angel came out."

"Spike?" I said. "Spike-- he doesn't even know Cordelia."

And then it all came out. How Spike came by to see Cordelia every few days. How he brought things for her-- clean clothes. A comb. A CD player and her Ricky Martin CDs. All the nurses knew. No, they didn't go in with him. But it didn't seem to hurt-- Ms. Chase didn't respond negatively, and sometimes, after a visit, her beta-waves were better. And there was no doubt she looked better now than before, when her hair was growing out and her nails were ragged.

I was too confused to feel much guilt. Yeah, I hadn't been by to see her lately, except professionally. I hadn't even noticed her hair. She was in a coma, and it hurt too much to see her anyway. But Spike--

"Okay. So he visited before. You mean he came by today?"

"Yes." The nurse clutched at her chartboard, her knuckles going white. "He had a video. And he was holding some gold chain. He said he found it in her desk. And he thought she might like it. He always talked that way, like she'd know that he'd brought her a cashmere sweater or the latest issue of Hollywood Reporter. She never knew, but he always talked like he knew she liked what he brought."
I reached into the pocket of my labcoat and pulled out the chain.

"Yeah. That's the chain he had. And he went in, and he was there for a minute or so. And then Mr. Angel came and went in. And then Mr. Angel came back out and told me she needed a shot, which I already knew because her monitor readings had just gone crazy. I was already getting the injection ready. Sometimes—" the nurse drew in a breath. "Sometimes she just gets agitated, like she's having a bad dream. So I went in there with the syringe. And I expected to see Spike there. But— but he must have left when I was getting the shot ready."

I stared at her, then at the closed door. Then I pushed back into the room and went to Cordelia. I held up the chain, right over her head. "Cordy, listen. Hon, did Spike bring you this?"

Her eyes focused. Her breath went deeper. A sigh.

"Where is he, hon? Where'd he go?"

Finally her fists came away from her mouth. And they opened. And she held her hands out to me. Coating her palms, caked in her lifelines, in the webs of her thumbs.

The average vampire produces three-hundred-twenty milliliters of dust.

There wasn't that much left of Spike.
I was just preparing to go home when I got an urgent call from Fred. I met her and Gunn and Lorne in the conference room next to Angel's office. But he wasn't there.

Fred was shaking. She stood there in the middle of the room, shaking. Gunn took her hand and drew her close and held her, and it was so easy for them both I realized that they must be... together. And that struck me sharp, and it hurt, and I wasn't sure why. Because I didn't know. Because ... because I must have forgotten. Like so much else. I'd forgotten.

But Fred was pulling away, flustered, and Gunn looked surprised himself, at himself, and I wasn't certain what that meant. So I said briskly, "What is it, Fred?"

There are moments-- maybe you've experienced them. I've certainly experienced more than my share. Moments where the world just seems to stop. And this was one of them, when Fred said simply, shakily, "I think Angel staked Spike."

Everything stopped. We all stopped. My mind, which never stops, just stopped.

Lorne recovered first. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Fred said. "But it was in Cordelia's room. She -- she saw it. I'm not sure how much she understood." And then Fred's face crumpled and she started crying. "Her hands. Her hands. They were covered in dust."

Lorne went off straight away to check on Cordelia. At least that's what he said. I didn't know if he would make it all the way. As he left, I glanced out the conference room door and saw Harmony standing by her desk. Her face was blank. We'd forgotten how curious she was. How good vampire hearing was. How she had once been Spike's lover.

But before I could go after her, she was gone.

"We need to get to Angel," Gunn said. And he was right. But more than anything, I dreaded this. I believed in truth. Held tight to reality. But I wanted to forget this. I wanted rather desperately to go on as if nothing had occurred. Pretend that Spike was just off on a bender somewhere. Pretend that the dust on Cordelia's hand was of some anonymous vampire. Pretend that Angel was... still Angel. Still ours.

His flat was dark, all the drapes drawn and all the lamps extinguished. The only light came from the flickering display of the television. Angel was sitting on the couch, his hands folded in his lap, his gaze focused on the images on the screen. He didn't notice that we had come in.

I glanced over at the television. There was picture but no sound. It was that tape he had made of our band last week, the one devoted to happy songs. Gunn was singing, and there was Spike in the background, tapping his foot, his eyes bright, his surprisingly big hands moving across the strings.

I couldn't watch.

I was Angel's oldest friend. I had to be the one. I crossed the room and knelt before him and took one
of his hands. He looked down at me, surprised. "Wes."

Fred made some exclamation and went to the television and switched it off. Then she and Gunn fumbled for some light. All the while I knelt there, holding Angel's dry, cool hand. Finally, when I could see his face, I said quietly, "Tell me what happened."

I was hoping for an alibi. Evidence of self-defense. Or maybe Spike walking in and saying it was all a mistake.

What I got was Angel shaking his head. "It's that prophecy. It keeps coming true."

"The shanshu prophecy?"

"No. The one about the father killing the son."

There wasn't any such prophecy. Not that I knew, anyway. But something about the way he said that sent a chill through me. He said it as if I ought to know. As if we'd discussed this a dozen times before. As if I understood.

"But he's not my son." Angel gripped my hand with one hand. With the other hand, he rubbed at his cheek. It was red where he rubbed. "Not even my childe. He's Dru's childe."

Fred said, her voice tight, "He's gone, then? Spike's gone?"

Angel turned towards her. He was frowning, but in puzzlement. "He was going to hurt Cordelia. Turn her." After a pause, he added, "I think he thought he was helping her. That she would never come out of the coma. So he thought he was helping her."

Fred put her hand in her pocket and brought out a gold chain. I heard Gunn draw in his breath, and recalled that he'd bought that chain for Cordelia, back in the days we remembered each other's birthdays.

"Angel," Fred said, looping the chain around her hand. "Listen."

And then she couldn't go on. Angel's hand tightened on mine. "That's Cordy's chain," he said.

Fred let it drop to the floor. "Yes. Spike--Spike has been visiting her. The nurse told me. He visits her and brings her things. And today he brought her the chain."

Angel said sharply, "I saw him. He was in game-face. He was bending over her. He was at her throat."

"Oh, God," Gunn whispered.

"The clasp," Fred said. She was inexorable now. Her face was wet with tears, but her voice was clear. "The clasp was bent. I think maybe he was just trying to see it. So he could put the chain around her neck. He told me once he could see better in game-face."

Angel nodded. "That's true. We can see better that way." He didn't seem to understand what she was saying. What it meant.


Gunn was braver. "You killed him."

Angel withdrew his hand. "That's what I said. The father will kill the son." And then he shook his
head. "But he isn't really my son."

I rose and looked back at Fred. "Is there anything you can give him?"

"I don't know. Angel." She crossed the room and sat next to him. "Angel. Listen, honey. It's all ri--"

She stopped. It wasn't all right.

We'd all killed vampires. But --

This felt like murder. It wasn't. It couldn't be. But that's what it felt like. Angel let his feelings about his grandchild override his caution and his morality. And in just a second, just like that, Spike was gone.

I couldn't imagine it. Couldn't imagine Angel standing there, stake in hand, watching his grandchild dissolve like that. And Cordelia-- Oh, God.

Couldn't imagine Spike gone, his laughter all gone, that quicksilver body gone, that restless mind gone, that passion gone.

"I can't," I said, and left the room.

As I waited for the elevator, I heard the television come on, this time with sound. I heard myself playing piano, and then Spike coming in, his voice low and warm.

Night swimming deserves a quiet night.
I'm not sure all these people understand.

"What are we going to do about this?" Fred asked back in the conference room. She'd just come from Cordelia's room, reporting that she was sleeping. Sleeping, no longer unconscious. I chose not to pursue the irony therein.

Gunn sighed. "It's not like we can turn him over to the police. Killing vampires isn't illegal."

His mouth twisted, and I thought of his sister. He had watched her dissolve into dust. But she wasn't his sister. Not really. We had to remember that.

But Spike... was Spike.

And he was gone.

"Let's keep it among ourselves for the time being, until we decide what to do," I said. "I'll talk to Harmony. I think she knows."

"You don't think she'll--" Gunn started. Then he pulled his cellphone out of his pocket. "I better secure Angel's door. No reason to take chances."

None of us mentioned that the door should be secured against Angel's escape. We didn't have to
speak of it.

"What was he saying about prophecy?" Fred asked. "Wes, do you know?"

I shook my head. "The father killing the son. I haven't seen that prophecy. But... as he keeps saying, Spike isn't-- wasn't-- his son."

"Then why does he keep saying it? And son, grandson. What's the difference?" Fred rose from the table and went to the window. The sun was setting, and the lights were coming up across the city.

Just last night, we'd gone out drinking, and Spike and I stumbled back here. He wanted me to look up something about a prophecy. I thought he meant the shanshu, but--

"Connor," I said. Just to see what they'd say.

Fred looked at me blankly. Gunn, putting away his phone, said, "What?"

"Connor. Spike asked me about that name. And then, last night, he told me it didn't matter. That the name led nowhere." I remembered now that he had continued. Connor was a dry hole. A blind alley. Irrelevant. Moot. Unimportant. Meaningless.

Spike always went too far. I should have known then that he was lying.

But what did it matter now? Spike was gone.

Maybe that was Angel's journey. To murder.

Gunn and Fred left (Gunn's arm around her shoulders), and I went to find Harmony. She was sitting at her desk, as rigid as a statue. She wasn't crying. She was just staring at me. "I won't tell. Don't worry," she said. "It's not important. It's just another vampire dusted."

Then she cried.

I took her to my office, and we drank up what was left of my Lagavulin. (Spike had been into it. I wished now that I had just given him the bottle.)
There really is no one better at analyzing things than Giles. After dinner out with a few other Watchers, he sat me down in his little parlor with a cup of tea and a chocolate cookie, I mean biscuit, and talked me through everything we knew. Well, everything I knew, which wasn't much.

Turns out he knew a bit more.

Reluctantly (I know he really wishes I'd get over this vampire thing and fall for a nice human tightrope walker, or drug dealer, or something safe) he told me that a couple months earlier, Wesley Wyndham-Price had asked him to come collect the recently-returned Spike. "And of course I declined."

"You declined?" I cried. "Why did you decline?"

For a moment, he looked shamefaced. Just for a moment. Then he put his tea cup down with a clatter. "Because he has always been a distraction. Especially to you, but also to our mission. And--"

My face got hot and hard, and I started to remind him that this distraction had saved us at the hellmouth, but he interrupted me. "It turned out to be a moot point, Buffy, so please calm yourself. Wesley called a couple days later to say that Spike could not leave LA anyway. Apparently part of the deal with the Powers that brought him back to this realm included attaching himself like a burr to Angel."

"Oh." I subsided back in my chair. And then I sat up again. "Are the Powers mad at Angel? Because I can't imagine anything that would drive him round the bend faster than being with Spike."

"Indeed." Giles adjusted his glasses. "Wesley didn't explain, or perhaps he did not have all the facts. But apparently Spike's assignment is to, how did he put it, further Angel's journey." Giles's face reflected his British-distaste for such California folderol. Lately, you'd think that Giles had never left England and had never, spare the thought, lived by a sunny beach. He'd even started wearing tweeds again.

But I didn't care what he thought. "Angel's journey? To where?"

"I don't know. His destiny, I presume. Why the Powers spend so much of their time and energy on-- Never mind." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Nonetheless, if Spike's only back on that condition, he might not have much of a choice of where he lives and what he does."

"But--" I found that my hands were clutched in my lap. I had to relax before I broke my own fingers. "But what does that have to do with me? I mean, Angel said Spike was going to throw himself out a window rather than meet me. But Spike just said he wasn't mad at me." He just didn't want to see me. Not much better.

"Think it through, Buffy," Giles said patiently. "You and Angel have resumed your... relationship."

"Sort of," I muttered. I'd planned all along to go back to Angel, once I was done here in London. Until I heard about Spike. And -- well, I wasn't going to risk him throwing himself out a window if I showed up at Angel's place. And besides-- well. Besides.

"Spike might think that this has the approval of the Powers."

I shook my head, trying to clear it. "You mean, maybe Angel's supposed to be with me? That I'm
part of his journey?"

"It would account for Spike's unwillingness to meet you. If you're supposed to be a destination on Angel's journey, and Angel's journey is what been assigned as Spike's mission-- well. Best for him not to be the distraction he always seems to be."

"You're thinking that, if he doesn't accomplish that, you know, they'll probably kill him all over again."

Giles shrugged.

It was unfair, and cruel, and it sounded just like those Powers that Angel was always turning to. Just like them to manipulate not just his life, but mine too. And to use Spike to do it.

Something occurred to me. "But if he's stuck like a burr to Angel, and he won't see me, then how am I supposed to get back with Angel?"

"I don't know," Giles said. His patience was growing thin. Never took long. "Perhaps he's figuring that he can stay behind the curtain and manipulate the situation. Or perhaps we're wrong, and the Powers want Angel to stay as far from you as possible. Or maybe it's just Spike's typical bollix-up-first, plan-later strategy. It's not as if he's ever been good at following a map or completing a journey, or anything that involves more thought than stealing a six-pack of beer from the minimart."

I probably should have defended Spike-- he was my friend, right?-- only I kind of agreed with Giles. Of all the creatures in this world, Spike was the last one I'd turn to for journey-furtherance. I mean, you got a demon to kill, call Spike. You got a bad guy to terrorize, sure, call Spike. Feeling insecure and alone-- okay. Call Spike. But a long-term operation? Don't call Spike.

But the Powers called Spike. And it sounded like they meant business. If he didn't succeed, he didn't survive.

I helped Giles clean up the tea things, and then I went off to bed. I should let it go. Let Spike go. Whatever his reason for avoiding me, I should just accept that it was a good one.

But I couldn't. Not yet. Not until I knew for sure that he was all right. That he wasn't crazy again or in some kind of pain or, you know, mad at me. It wasn't like I couldn't live without him. I mean, I'd been living without him for months. Okay, sometimes I kind of missed him. Like in Tibet, while I was hand-to-handing with that Chernoof demon, I kind of wished Spike was there to help out, maybe to make some suggestive comment or toss me an axe or climb up on the demon's back and twist off his head. (Spike loved doing that.) But he was dead, and I had to live with that. Now... now he was back. And I just wanted to see him so I could know he was okay.

Also to find out why seeing me didn't matter so much to him.

He used to love me. I mean, he loved me a lot. For a long time, I couldn't accept that. I kept saying that a soulless demon couldn't love, but I think really he scared me, loving me like that. No one should love me that much, see? No one should need me that much. It was scary. It gave me too much power. And I can, you know, kind of be a problem when I have too much power. But Spike-- I don't know. He just kept on loving me. And in the end, you know, I don't think it was for any reason other than because he did. Not because he wanted to get in my pants, because that wasn't on the schedule, or because it made him happy, because it didn't. Not because he got anything out of it. Not even because he thought I might love him back. I mean, like I said, when I finally got it together enough to say I loved him, he rejected it. I think he just... loved me. You know. Like they say. Unconditionally. Just to be there for me.
And so it was confusing, him pushing me away now. I guess I got used to him loving me. It made sense to me in a way that nothing else did. He loved me and that meant something. And no one else loved me that way. I mean, I knew Angel loved me. But not like that. Angel loved me, but if you asked him why, he'd have a bunch of reasons, I mean, if you could get him to talk about it, which you probably couldn't. But if he'd talk, he'd talk about how much he admired me, and how pretty I was, and how we were soulmates and our souls connected, and -- well. I don't mean to act like I'm all that. But Angel would have plenty of reasons why he loved me, and end up talking destiny, right? It's not like we had much choice-- first love, forever love.

Spike had a choice. Boy. I know I gave him lots of reasons not to love me, and plenty of opportunities to stop once he started. And he kept deciding to keep on keeping on, when any sensible man would have decided to find someone a little more, I don't know, cuddly. Someone able to love him back in a way that he believed. But no, he wanted to love me, and so he did, and in the end, it ended up being really important to me. Even after he was gone, it was important. Sometimes when I wasn't sure I had the courage or the strength, I remembered --

Well, never mind. The important thing is, it was sort of hard to believe that a love like that could, you know, die. But if he thought loving me would screw everything up--

Hmm. That didn't used to bother him. But he had a soul now. And a mission.

So. Well. I went off to the guest room and lay there thinking about Spike and how annoying he always was, how he never did what I expected, and really only did what I wanted when we were in bed-- and that was long past. I should let him go just because he was so annoying. It would serve him right.

But it just nagged at me. Worried at me. I still kind of cared about him. Still wanted him to be safe.

The next morning, I decided to call Angel. Angel would know. I was still mad at him, for keeping Spike's renewed existence a secret, but I could get past that. I was on a search for the truth, right? And Angel knew the truth.

But I just got his voice mail when I called the business line, and his private line rang and rang. I checked the time and calculated the difference, and he ought to have been home. It's not like he went out much. I kept trying, in between runs to the Watchers Council building from some strategy workups on the Poland problem. (I don't know why I had to be there. I mean, I'm not a whole lot better than Spike when it comes to longterm planning.)

Finally, after I hit redial for the tenth time, Angel answered. He sounded tired, and I had to check the time again to make sure I was calling at a decent hour. But it sounded like he had people there. I could hear music in the background, and the buzz of a crowd.

"Angel, look, I won't keep you. I just want to know if Spike--"

He interrupted me. "Spike." He said this heavily, like the very name made him unhappy. And I guessed it did.

"I'm not going to ask you to get him, don't worry. I know he doesn't want to talk to me. He told me that."

"He-- he told you?"

"Yeah. I mean, not directly. We were online, not on the phone." I shook my head. "Don't tell the Powers, okay?"
Angel laughed. He hardly ever laughed, and this sounded more like a groan. "I won't tell. I won't tell." And then, a quick demand, "When? When did you talk to him?" Angel sounded tense, like the when really mattered, and I got scared. Maybe the Powers were listening in.

"The other day. I guess it must have been Saturday night, your time. You know. Prime Spike hours."

"Yes. Prime Spike hours."

This was getting weird. He kept repeating what I said. Maybe he was drunk. It did sound like he was having a party there. "Look, I just want to ask--"

And just then, the music in the background paused, and I heard Spike's voice. And for a moment, I couldn't speak. I hadn't heard his voice for... for months. Oh, in my head, I'd heard him. But not for real. The last time he'd really spoken to me, in the hellmouth, he was telling me I didn't love him, and that I had to go. I remembered the easy way he said that about me not loving him, and then the urgency in his voice when he told me to go. And then, as I ran, I heard him laughing. Laughing as he died.

And now I could hear him again, and everything in me wanted... wanted to talk to him. Just talk to him. Hear that dumb accent of his. Hear him say pet in that low growl. Or maybe he'd say Buffy, or Slayer, if he was really mad at me. But that would be okay too. "Is that Spike?"

"Is what--" Angel broke off, and then, after a moment, said, "Oh. No. That's just a tape. Wait."

And then the music and noise all cut off. And Spike too.

I was holding the receiver too hard. I was going to break it. "Angel," I said. "I want to know what's going on. This journey thing."

"This journey thing."

I felt the plastic receiver get hot. I forced myself to relax. "Yeah. I heard about Spike being sent back to help you on your journey. Is that right?"

He sucked in a breath. "Yeah. More or less. What else did you hear?"

"That's all. Except that maybe if Spike fails, the Powers will kill him again. Is that true?"

Angel sighed. His sighs always sounded so despairing. It used to make my heart hurt. Now it just irritated me. "Angel, tell me."

I could almost feel Angel pulling himself together. "The Powers. Kill him. I... I guess. That was sort of implied. Not stated outright. But-- these are the Powers. There are penalties for failure." At the end there, he kind of faltered. Then he added, "You know."

"I don't know," I said angrily. "I don't work for your stupid Powers, or your stupid Partners. And I don't know why you do. But you do, and now somehow you've roped Spike into it."

"Me? Trust me, Buffy, the last thing I ever wanted was Spike trying--" He sounded more himself now. "Christ. It's been one long journey to hell, as far as I'm concerned." After a moment, he said, "For both of us."

"But--" I took a deep breath. I couldn't get angry. Or I couldn't stay angry. "But you're going along, right? You're letting him help you?"
"I don't-- didn't have any choice." Now he sounded bad again. Like death was rattling in his throat. "I never planned on going against the Powers and what they want for me."

"What about--" Another breath. "What about me? Am I part of their plans? Part of your journey?"

He was absolutely silent. He didn't have to breathe, and he could be stiller than anyone I knew. Finally he said, "You mean, you and me?"

We'd never actually spoken of this, of our future. All last summer, I guess we both assumed we were going to stay together, so why bother to talk about it? "Yeah. You and me. Am I supposed to be part of your journey? Us. You know. Being together."

I heard nothing but silence. No words. No breathing. I'd forgotten what Angel sounded like when he was thinking. "Well, tell me," I said. "Because, you know, if we're meant to be together, maybe --" The words stuck in my throat. It was what I always wanted. Right? What my heart ached for year after year. Angel was my other half, my soulmate. And if it was his journey... what the Powers wanted... what Spike had to work for... "Maybe we should be together again. Maybe we need to make that happen."

Finally I heard him. Something like a sigh. If I didn't know him better-- "What?" I said.

"Buffy, I've--" More silence. I heard him swallow. Breathe. "You will not want to. When you learn--"

"What?"

"I don't think you'll forgive--"

He kept starting and stopping and breaking off. I was scared. Uncertain. "Tell me."

"I can't. What I've done-- what I just did-- You won't ever forgive--"

"Angel." It occurred to me that I'd been gone a long time. Months. Came back only to leave again. And he'd been alone all that time. And he was a handsome guy, and powerful, and rich now. And of course women would want him. Women who wouldn't trigger that stupid curse because they-- because they weren't me. He must have been with one. Maybe more than one. Maybe more than once.

I always thought I'd be jealous. I was jealous of that perfect Amazon wife of Riley's, though that was kind of a complicated situation, and they were married and all. And I was jealous of Anya when Spike was with her, even though I didn't actually have much right, since I was the one who dumped him. I was jealous of Faith too, when I found her on Spike's bed, bumming a cigarette and acting like his old chum. I guess you could say I was as possessive as any other woman, really, when I thought of a guy as mine.

And so I waited for the jealousy to come and overwhelm me. But I just felt sad and weary. I knew we'd get past this. It was just that it was going to take more emotional energy than I had right then. I was going to have to be strong and understanding and wise and all that. I was going to have to acknowledge my own responsibility and own up to my feelings and listen to his justifications and excuses and tell him how I was glad that he was being honest with me.

I was going to have to be brave and I just wasn't feeling up to it, not after that conversation with Spike. Not when I was so worried about him and what it meant when he said he was letting me go, and what the Powers had planned for him if he didn't do what they wanted.
"It's okay," I told Angel. I lay down on Giles's leather couch and put my head back on the pillow, still holding the receiver to my ear. I just felt... so tired. It seemed like such a long time since I felt safe enough to feel. "Just let's deal with it later. Okay?"

"Buffy, let me--"

"No. I can't deal with it now. I'll call you later." I hung up the phone and just lay there until I heard Giles in the kitchen and smelled the tea-cakes baking. Then I imagined what scathing comments he would have if he came in with the tea-tray and I was lying here all defeated. So I sat up and wiped my face and thought.

Not about Angel. I couldn't think about Angel. Not yet. It didn't hurt yet, but I figured it would, and so I might as well wait till then to think about him.

So I thought about how to get to Spike. He wasn't going to talk to me in person, so no matter how much I wanted to hear his voice, phone calls were out. And he wasn't going to fall for the poshspice ruse again.

But I knew him. And I knew that however mad he was, however devoted to Angel's journey, Spike couldn't resist me. Not for long. Not forever. Even if-- even if he didn't love me anymore (and I really thought he did... I'd feel it if he stopped), he still cared. He'd still listen to me.

I'd email him. That's what I'd do. Nice harmless friendly irresistible emails. Every day until he responded.

I could send him internet jokes too. Xander had sent me a good one about how many vampires it took to screw in a lightbulb.

And so, when Giles came in, bearing tea, I said, "What's Willow's phone number in Bhutan? I need her to find Spike's email for me."

And somehow Magic Willow tracked down Spike's email (though she assured me google, not magic, worked best), and I spent most of the next day writing and deleting and rewriting, and finally, finally, I hit send.

Then I looked in my Sent folder and read the email over, and it was so lame. I couldn't believe I'd sent such a lame email.

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Re: Hi

Hi, Spike. It's me again. Willow found me your email address. She says hi. Giles says something else about Arsenal, but it's really boring hearing him talk about football, so I don't remember what I was supposed to tell you. Xander sent the joke I appended at the end. Faith... well, I'm not going to tell you what Faith said to tell you. Dawn's going to come down and see you, so she can talk to you herself. So that's about everyone, I guess. Oh, Andrew wanted me to tell you "hi, bro."

So anyway, I'm here in London. It's nice. I'm staying in Giles's flat. It's just off Russell Square, right around the corner from the British Museum. I've been to the museum twice. Once I slipped into a tour without paying. But turns out it was in French. So I guess I wasn't meant to be a criminal, ha ha. I saw the old body preserved in peat. That was pretty cool. Vampires sure look better after the grave, though. At least some vampires.

Mostly what I'm doing is consulting. Giles is trying to rebuild the Council. So I come in and tell the
new Watchers, and the old ones too, how they've been going about things all wrong for a few centuries. They all listen like I'm an expert. And I guess I am, really. There was one named Lydia that said she'd met you. And she asked about you. I think she sort of had a crush on you. Or the hots for you, anyway. She was all excited to hear that you got a soul, and that you have been reborn or resurrected or whatever. Don't worry. I won't give her your email address. But if someone with a screenname like "sexywatcher" approaches you in the Man U forum—steer clear, okay?

The slayerettes are all here too. Giles wants to start a school for them, to train them how to be real slayers. I told him it wasn't fair, that I didn't get to go to a school, and neither did Faith. He said we could attend if we wanted to. Remember last year, when you'd train them? They still remember what you taught them, the ones who lived with us at the house. They all say hi too. They're not so bad, really. Awfully naive of course, but I guess I was too, way back when.

Well. That's all for now, I guess. Just wanted to tell you what was going on here. Hope all is going well with you. Tell me about your band. Is it a punk band? Do you play a lot of Ramones' songs?

Write and tell me about it and what else is going on in LA.

Buffy

And I realized I never sent Xander's joke. I started to type it, then I realized it wasn't really very funny.

But I sent it anyway.

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Re: Forgot Xander's dumb joke

How many vampires does it take to screw in a lightbulb?

Three. One to call the electrician, and two to eat him when he arrives.
So anyway, I was seventeen and applying for colleges with an easy heart now and the last few weeks before Buffy returned, I was too busy to pay the past more than a passing thought. Then I got a call from her. She was in a car, on a cellphone, and I could hear Angel droning some warning in the background. "Dawn. Listen. Spike is back. He's alive. I know. It doesn't make any sense. But I'm not going to question it."

We both started blubbering, but pretty soon Buffy'd gotten herself together. "But Angel says Spike won't see me! He refuses." Her voice got hard. The Slayer voice. "For my own good, huh! But I don't believe it. Spike always thinks he's my own good."

I agreed that it didn't sound much like Spike, and tried to convey in my tone Consider the messenger.

Buffy added, "Angel says he'll hurt himself if I come near him-- like he'll jump out of the window or something to avoid it. Dawn, you have to go see him. He's down at Angel's building for some reason Angel can't really explain. See him and tell me he's okay. Angel says he's fine, but ... but you know how men are. Too macho to confess they're not fine. But he trusts you-- And, you know, you can see if he hates me or something. I-- I don't know why he would--"

I maturely refrained from mentioning that he might have heard she ended up living with Angel all summer, and I promised I'd go down to LA as soon as I could. How could I say no?

Of course, I was doing it for Buffy. But for me too. I had another chance. I could make it right. I could apologize, and forgive, and we could be friends again.

Buffy had to go to meet with Giles in London-- just as well, 'cause it kept her away from Angel. From Spike too. I got a pass for the next Sunday, and I took the bus down the coast to LA. It was the prettiest drive in the world, not that I've seen much of the world, but it was a lot prettier than Texas, the only other part of the world I've seen. And I spent the whole time thinking of what I'd say when I saw Angel. I knew what I'd say when I saw Spik-- Hi, Spike, can we be friends again, let's watch Princess Bride, okay? And he'd say, Inconceivable! just like that guy in the movie, and we'd sit down with some Cheetos and when the movie was over, he'd be all softened up and probably sniffing-- he loves it when it all works out in the end-- and I'd make him tell me why he wouldn't see Buffy anymore. Easy as pie.

But Angel. I didn't know what I'd say to him. Maybe I'd say, what are your intentions toward my sister, huh, bub? Or I'd say, what are you doing to Spike? Or I'd say, go jump in a lake. Or I'd say--

See. I didn't know what to say to him. Maybe I wouldn't say anything at all. Maybe I'd just ignore him. Someone else could point me at Spike, or maybe he'd just know I was there. Because even if he didn't want to see Buffy again, Spike'd want to see me.

I had plenty of money-- Buffy had given me a handful of bills, mostly twenties-- and so I took a cab from the bus station. The guard at W&H remembered me from the summer, and so did the receptionist, and she sent me right up to Angel's office. "Spike's probably there, harassing him!" she said with a wink.

I was going to take the elevator. But then I saw Angel above, on the mezzanine, headed somewhere else. So I took the stairs instead, and followed him down the corridor. He was too fast to catch, and I was too cool to yell after him, so I just tried to keep heading where he was heading, because he had to eventually end up somewhere, and I'd catch him there, and tell him right upfront that I wanted to
see Spike.

I lost sight of him for a minute, but then I rounded a corner and the hall opened up into kind of a hospital lobby. It was weird. For a second I thought I was confused, but no, I'm never that confused. I'd never been this far back into the building, though, and I realized this was probably some secret medical lab where some evil W&H scientists did their evil experiments.

Angel had walked right past the nurse's desk, and she let him go without a murmur, but of course she put up all sorts of protests when I tried to follow him. "You can't go in there," she cried, but I pushed open the door anyway.

And I was just in time to see it all-- Cordelia awake, her eyes wide with horror. Spike sitting on the bed next to her, bent over. Game face. And Angel shouting, his fist raised.

Stake.

And before I could scream, Spike was gone.

Harmony was the one who found me. How weird is that? I guess, once Buffy left, she became Angel's assistant. How weird is that? I keep asking that. But what was really weird is, Harmony tried to kill me once, but when she found me in that corner of the hallway, she sat down next to me and held me like Mom used to, and she held me and we cried, and finally she picked me up and carried me like a baby. I was way bigger than her, but she carried me all the way to a bed, and she laid me down, and she covered me with something that smelled like Spike-- his old leather duster-- and she told me this was Spike's place, and Angel wouldn't know I was here, and I could rest. And some doctor came and gave me a shot, and I fell asleep with tears on my face, and Spike's coat clutched in my arms.

And when I woke up a little later, he was there in a chair, right beside the bed, in the half-light of the day's end. He looked awful-- even paler than usual, slumped silently there, and I thought, of course, he looks awful, he's a ghost. A dream. Or something.

He reached out and took my hand. He was real. Or it was the realest dream, or he was the realest ghost--

"Niblet," he said. I could hardly hear him. His voice was hoarse and low.

"Are you really here?"

"Yeah. It hurts. Everything hurts." He squeezed my hand. "Dracula didn't tell me about that."

"Dracula?" It was a dream, I decided.

"Yeah. He told me he could come back from staking. Did it with Buffy. But he never said how much it hurt."

"He's probably way better at it than you are."

"Yeah. This was the first time-- the last time, see, wasn't really my doing. This time--" his hand dropped from mine. "This time I had to do it all myself. Draw it all back together. Hurts. Tired."
"Sleep," I told him.

"Don't want anyone to see me," he whispered. "Don't you tell."

"I won't," I promised, closing my eyes.

But I opened them quick, because he was getting up out of the chair—oh, he seemed so real right
then, and he pulled the duster off me, and dragged a blanket over me instead, and he murmured
something about hiding. And before I could react, he'd slid under the bed with his coat, and I could
hear him down there, shifting around.

"Dusty," he muttered, and for some reason that got me giggling, thinking of Spike being dust, and
having a duster, and complaining about dust. And I put my hand down between the bed and the
wall, and he took it, cool, comforting, and he said, "Sleep now," and we fell asleep like that, holding
hands as the day died.

It was full dark when someone came in without a word and left a tray for me on the dresser.
Harmony. I didn't open my eyes till she was gone. When I heard the front door click shut, I slid out
of bed and padded over past the window, and brought the food back to the bed. "Spike?" I
whispered, sure that he was gone, that he'd never been there. That I'd seen him just once and that
was when Angel staked him.

"Yeah," he replied drowsily, from somewhere underneath.

"Want some tea?" I said, and handed down all the tea-making stuff, and I drank all the juice myself,
and I shared the ham sandwich with him. And then, restored a little, he slid out from under the bed,
and he fell into the chair, and he looked only a little better in the lamplight.

"What are we going to do?" I asked, swinging my blue-jeaned legs over the side of the bed so they
bumped against his.

"Leave," he said. He got up, groaning. "Wish I felt more the thing."

"Say Bloody Hell," I commanded.

He growled a little, but he actually liked it when I ordered him around, because he knew it meant I
loved him. And with a large amount of feeling, he said, "Bloody bleeding hell."

So I did what he told me. I washed up in his bathroom, and I got him some blood from the fridge,
and I found a twinkie wrapped up in cellophane in the cupboard, and I pulled on my shoes and
found my way back to that hospital room. This time the night nurse looked scared at me, but let me
in. I went to the bed where Cordelia lay under the soft lights, staring out at nothing, and I said,
"Spike is back. Again."

She made no response, just stared ahead, her eyes unfocused. But Spike had promised me it was
okay, that they were buds, that she knew he wasn't going to hurt her, and that she'd be happy to hear
this. So I took her hand and pressed the twinkie into it. "Really. He is. He told me to give this to you."
He said you'd know it came from him."

Finally her gaze turned downward, to her hand clutching the twinkie. And then she started to cry, silently, tears running down her pale cheeks.

"He said you couldn't tell anyone. We're going away for awhile tonight. He's going to take me back to school. He'll be back later this week and come see you."

She nodded, still staring down at the twinkie.

"But you can't tell anyone. Promise?"

She gave another little nod.

"But he'll be back, and he'll come see you. He promised. He just has to get out before-- well, before Angel knows he's back. Now eat the evidence, okay? So no one will suspect."

Her other hand slowly, slowly, moved across the coverlet, and began tugging at the plastic covering the twinkie. And I gave her a smile, and left her behind.

Spike made me drive the Viper past the guard (waving casually like I was authorized to drive the car) while he hunkered down in the passenger seat. "If the Powers don't think this is part of Angel's journey, they'll grab me right up. Better that I'm not at the steering wheel when they do it." It was real obscure, but I figured expecting Spike to make sense right now was expecting way too much.

He didn't look up for driving anyway. He was still pale and worn out as he rested his head on the window and gave me directions to the highway. But he looked like him. His hair was still tangled and his eyebrow was still split by the scar a slayer (not Buffy) gave him. I didn't understand how he could be him and then dust and then him. But it didn't much bother me. He was Spike, and he was mine, and I had him back again.

His cellphone rang once, and he talked to whoever was on the other side, promising to visit in a day or so. I had my doubts that Spike would be up for visiting anyone for awhile. But he was saying he was taking his "little sis" back to school, and that made me feel kind of warm inside. When he put the phone away, I punched his arm.

"Your little sis, huh?"

He burrowed down in his seat, like he had to protect himself from me. "Yeah. My mean little sis who beats up on me." He closed his eyes and sighed. "Let me sleep, bit. Talk later."

He slept most of the way back to the school, hours and hours of me trying not to get lost in the darkness, not to get stopped for speeding, not to get hit by the truckers who thought I ought to be speeding. I was scared. Scared of driving farther than I'd ever driven. Scared that Spike was really sick. Scared of what I'd seen in Cordelia's room. Scared of what would happen if Spike went back.

Finally, as the darkness grew darker, the way vampires liked, Spike woke up. "Dream, right?"

He meant everything that had happened. Angel. Dust. Dracula. "No dream."

He sighed and groaned and banged his head softly against the window. "God, I feel sick. Not fair.
I'm a vampire. I never feel sick."

"You feel sick whenever you have a hangover," I reminded him. "And that's like half the time."

"Oh, yeah." He brightened a little and sat up, but I could tell that made him dizzy, and he slumped back down in his seat. "Where are we?"

"Near my school."

"So what are we going to do when we get there?"

I liked that. You know, the assumption that I was in charge now. That I'd know what to do. "I'll smuggle you into my room. I don't have a roommate, so it'll be okay. And you can rest up and get your strength back."

"Thanks, Bit," he said.

"Oh! And I taped something for you! The Dawson Creek finale!"

"You taped it?" His voice kind of caught and kind of broke. "For me?"

"Well, I didn't tape it. I mean, it was during that crazy time. But last month I went on eBay and bought a video someone else taped." I turned off on the winding road to my school, flipping on the brights with a lot more confidence than I had when I started driving this car hours ago. "I was, you know, going to watch it sometime. But I... I kept thinking of you. And I couldn't watch it. So it's like I was saving it for you!"

He didn't say anything, just turned his head to look out into the midnight sky. He was probably, you know, sort of emotionally overwrought. Dawson's Creek always kind of hit him that way, back when we used to watch it together sitting on the floor of his crypt, or on the couch in my living room. The crypt was gone, and so was the couch, and so was the living room. And so was Dawson's Creek. But here we were, together.

I snuck him up the back stairs and into my room. This was a pretty liberal school, so I probably wouldn't be expelled for having a guy in my room. But I took one look at him as he collapsed on the floor, and thought probably my schoolmates shouldn't see him. He looked all frail and vulnerable, and they'd want to pet him and coo at him. He might like that too much.

So I got him some blood out of his cooler and popped some corn in my microwave, and slid the video into the VCR. Then I sat down next to him on the floor, and we leaned back against the side of the bed and watched as the gang returned to Dawson's Creek for one last time.

Two hours later, we were both pretty wrung out. "You-- you didn't tell me she chose Pacey," Spike said, wiping his eyes on my bedspread.

"Oh, right, Spike. In between you coming back from the dead, and, uh, you coming back from the dead, I've had like so many opportunities to tell you all the important happenings, like Joey choosing Pacey. That was like so next on my list."

He was regarding me grimly. "You knew, didn't you? You read the spoilers online. You Americans. You have no patience. Can't defer gratification."
That was so funny, hearing a vampire say that we should defer gratification. Especially Spike. "Yeah. Sue me. I knew she chose Pacey and I didn't tell you." I thought about this for awhile. Spike had always identified with Pacey because they were both outsiders. "You think, you know, that it's like a sign? That Joey chose Pacey so maybe Buffy--"

He sat up quick. "No. Doesn't have anything to do with Buffy. Just a bloody TV show. Let it go."

But I wouldn't. I was on assignment. I'd kind of forgotten, what with Spike being staked and all, but now I remembered what Buffy had told me to find out.

Spike and I were friends. So we could be honest with each other. "Look. Buffy's going to kill me if I don't tell her what's going on."

"No!" He got even more pale, if that was possible. "You can't tell her about this."

"Oh. The ... the Angel dusting you thing. You don't want her to know?"

He shook his head.

"You're such a dolt. I mean, if there's one thing that would make her choose you instead of Angel--"

"I... " He took a deep breath. "I don't want her to choose me over Angel."

Oh, right. He meant that so much that it made his mouth tremble and his voice waver. I really, like, believed him. But I played along. "Okay. I won't tell her about... this." Although it was about the best bit of anti-Angel propaganda I could imagine. I mean, it was better than anything I could make up. "But even before this, you were being all Buffy-avoidy. So tell me why."

He sat there, all stubborn, staring at the Dawson Creek credits frozen on the screen.

"Spike, you have to help me here. If I don't give Buffy something, you know she's going to get all nosey, and next thing you know, she'll be calling, and Harmony knows, okay? She was the one who helped me. She knows. And if Buffy calls the office and gets Harmony on the phone, Harmony's going to tell her all about Angel staking you. But if I call Buffy and tell her something, anything, I can steer her off."

He shot me a glance. "Okay."

"So why is it you're avoiding her? Since you're not avoiding anyone else?"

He sighed and settled back against me, his head on my shoulder like he was just too weary to hold it up anymore. "This deal I made with the Powers. I didn't know I was making it, really. Secret clauses, fine print. Typical Wolfram & Hart contract. Anyway. I have to, you know, help Angel. On his journey."

"On his journey? To where?"

"No one knows. It's a --"

And I remembered that movie with Ralph Fiennes's little brother, and how we'd watched it together and Spike had sworn he'd turned Kit Marlowe, even though Shakespeare had to be decades before Spike was even born, and that ugly guy with the bad teeth kept saying, It's a mystery.

And so I chorused "mystery!" with Spike, and we smiled at each other, and I punched him, and he groaned again, like I was the one with superstrength, not him.
"So you have to help him on a journey to no one knows where? So how do you know if you're going in the right direction?"

He shrugged. "If I'm going in the wrong direction, the Powers let me know it. They throw me around, and drop me on my head through the ceiling."

"I wish I could see that."

"Well, you can't," he said. "Because this must be part of Angel's journey, my coming here with you. Or they'd shoot me back to LA like a cruise missile."

"Hmm." I gave this some thought. "So you think maybe Angel's staking you was, you know, the Powers telling you you're on the wrong track?"

This shut him up for a minute. But then he said, "Nah. I think that was just Angel. I mean, the Powers always do it themselves. Snatched me out of an airliner once. Broke me right through Gunn's truck. Don't think they'd delegate the Spike-torture, 'cause they enjoy it too much." He sighed. "Nah. I think Angel wanted to --" He didn't finish.

I think it hurt him. That Angel would want to kill him.

I guess I couldn't blame him.

"And you pulling yourself back together? Was that the Powers?"

Good move, Dawn. His sadness vanished. "It was me. All me." And just in case I didn't get the message, he added, "I did it all by myself. Because I wanted to. Because I wasn't ready to go. Because I had unfinished business."

"Like me," I said, bumping his shoulder with mine.

"Yeah. Plus, you know, got to challenge myself. That's what Drac always does. Keeps pushing the vampire envelope. That's what I did. Went to the outer reaches of vampirism and made myself come back." He went into game face, and his brow furrowed and his eyes narrowed. I elbowed him. "What are you doing?"

"Dracula can turn into a bat. I'm trying--"


With a sigh, he went human again. "You never let me have any fun."

"Angel's journey. Your contract. What does it have to do with Buffy?"

He was silent for a long moment. Then he replied, "Maybe the Powers think she's supposed to be with Angel."

I made a face. "Ick. And stupid. They were together all summer, and let me just say-- they weren't good together. They weren't happy. He was all quiet and gloomy, and she couldn't make any decisions, and she hardly ate at all." I glanced over at him. He looked pretty glad to hear this, so I kept going. "Course that could have been because she was so sad you were gone. I mean, she was sad."

He kind of smiled at that, and then he realized he wasn't supposed to be glad she was sad. So he tried to look sad too. But one corner of his mouth kept turning up. "I talked to her."
"No! When?"

"This chatroom. The other night. She said--"

"What? That she craved your hot bod? Isn't that what you're supposed to say in chatrooms?" Not that I'd ever been in one. Of course not.

He gave me a look. "Said that when I was gone, I'd come to her head and talk to her."

I considered this for awhile. "Maybe she needs therapy?"

"Nah. She must have been right. Because I guess I told her something she'd never know unless it was really me-- that my grandfather gave me shares in a canal company."

"Boy, Spike. That must have been one fascinating conversation."

"I don't know. I don't remember. I was dead, you know? Hey."

"What?"

"Don't tell her. You know. About Angel."

"You know she's going to ask me why you won't see her. Especially since you didn't have any trouble seeing me."

"Yeah. Well. Tell her that I want her to be happy and move on and that all I'd do is hold her back."

I regarded him for a minute. I knew there was more to it than that. He loved her. Same as ever. And even just talking about not seeing her again made his voice tremble. But we had time. Spike was back, and he was safe. He knew how to survive a staking. So I'd just keep bugging him, and little by little, he'd tell me the truth. He could never hold out long, not when I bugged him.

But he looked tired and worn now, and I let him be. I pulled a blanket down off my bed and put it around him, and then I said, "I got another video for you. Guess what it is?"

And his eyes lit up, and he said, "The Princess Bride?" and I said yeah, and we smiled at each other, and we said, all together, "Inconceivable!"
Chapter Notes

I realize I could probably have made you wait for the Dawn chapter and done this one before then.... just for more suspense.

But you didn't REALLY think I'd leave poor S... dust???

The next day... it was the next day finally. Dawn broke. Hangover arrived on schedule. Spike was still gone.

I woke not to sunlight but to the noise of a company at work. I'd managed, somehow, to fall asleep at my desk. Before she left, Harmony must have moved the priceless fourteenth-century illuminated manuscript out from under my head before I drooled, because I found it back on the credenza, closed, unharmed.

I opened the book, gazing at the gilt B at the top of the page until it blurred. Then I took the torn scrap of printer paper Harmony had left to mark my place, glanced at it, and stuffed it in my pocket.

Muzzy-headed, I walked out into the lobby. Kenny the Security Guard Lead Guitarist was there near the door, fingers tapping on his gun, his mouth moving silently. Rehearsing his song. He'd been playing it with Spike the other night at our final rehearsal, the two of them facing each other with their warring guitars, Spike singing backup-- Scuse me while I kiss the sky. Spike broke a string, and that bass note had growled and then squeaked as it died. And Kenny had laughed. We all stared at him. Kenny never laughed. He cut it off right away, but Spike said something, and Kenny chortled. And after that, his mouth kept quirking up, as if he was remembering a joke.

He saw me from across the lobby and lifted a single finger from his gun. Kenny's version of a wave.

The band. What were we going to do about the band? What were we going to tell Clem?

Nothing. Nothing now.

I wandered around the corridors. Listening for him. It was stupid. I knew he was gone. But... but he was always so noisy. You'd think some echo of him would have remained in these cheerless halls--some trace of laughter, or his excited shout, or the clomp of his big ugly boots when he landed from one of his stair-rail vaults.

It was only when I got outside of Angel's flat that I heard him. Spike. His voice, quiet and happy, singing along as I played the piano.

I stood outside the door, listening. Remembering that night when he taught me that song-- he'd lost the sheet-music, of course, somewhere between his printer and the rehearsal room. So he'd picked out the chords on my keyboard, and I jotted them down, and then I worked through it as he sang. It was a lovely piece, more my sort of music than his, so I knew he was singing it only because it had some personal significance. He thought of the slayer, probably, as he sang of swimming in the ocean at night.

The song ended, and then there was silence, and it started up again. Angel must be playing it over and over--

I should go in. I couldn't. Not yet.

I went home instead, to the quiet apartment where Spike had never been and so left no trace. I showered and changed and took a couple of aspirin. By the time I got back to W&H, it was afternoon, and I went through the halls, silently gathering up the others, and I led them to my office. I pulled the drapes and turned on the lights and started the coffee pot.

Lorne dropped into a leather chair, leaning heavily against one arm. He'd started drinking later than I, maybe, or drank more, because he was still drunk. He waited until the others had settled themselves and said, "I have talked to Cordelia."

Fred started to speak, then shut up.

"She's been ... fooling us. She's been awake for weeks. She's learned to approximate coma readings, and that's why no one realized it."

"Except Spike," Fred said.

"Yes. He's been visiting her every few days. They've been talking. He even took her out once, saying Fred ordered some medical tests." Lorne lolled his head back and sighed. "Maybe the nurses knew. They're pretending they didn't. I don't know. Anyway, she told me she just couldn't face us. But Spike-- well, he was new. Didn't know about--" For a moment, Lorne looked confused, then added, "her bringing Jasmine here."

Jasmine. Right. Jasmine came back to me. I hadn't forgotten her. I just hadn't thought of her in... a long time.

But Lorne was going on. "So Spike would come and bring her clothes or books. And gossip and news from beyond. Jokes. She liked to hear about the band. So... so yesterday he brought her that videotape Ang-- we made. And he was going to pop it into the VCR in her room, and they were going to watch. He brought her gold chain too. He kept trying to perk her up. Make her rejoin the world. But she was scared."

Gunn said, "So he's helping her put on the chain, and Angel comes in, and sees, and misinterprets."

"Yeah," Lorne finished. He reached out a hand, closing on the empty air. "Wes, you got anything? You know, to keep me up?"

"Finished it last night. So what do we do?"

They all looked at me. I looked back. And I said what I hoped-- the last desolate hope of a best friend. "If Angel were himself, he wouldn't have-- He might have misinterpreted. But he wouldn't have acted like that. He would have hauled Spike away. Thrashed him maybe. But he wouldn't--"

Gunn made a sudden, angry motion of his hand. "He hated Spike. We all knew it."

"Hate's a strong word," Fred put in. "Too strong. He didn't hate Spike. He was just... conflicted about him."

"He was trying to get him to eat more," I said. It was important that I say it. It had been important to Spike. "He made this rule. Spike had to have a pint of blood for every pint of ale. Sometimes, you know, Spike forgot to eat. He'd get caught up in the band or Grand Theft Auto or whatever he
thought was Angel's journey and he'd... forget. And Angel reminded him. Just like-- " it sounded so stupid. So futile. "Just like a grandsire would."

"Big of him," Gunn muttered. "So Spike would get all nice and plump. Make a bigger target."

"Stop it, Charles!" Fred pulled her sweater around her thin shoulders, as if the air-conditioning was overworking. "Angel -- he didn't mean to. I know he didn't. He was confused or angry or something. But he wouldn't dust his own blood."

"He dusted Darla," Gunn said. "He'd dust Spike. Sometimes he'd be watching him with this look in his eyes. Spike scared him. Angel didn't want this journey, whatever it was. And now he doesn't have to take it."

Lorne said, "He was talking about the father killing the son. Some prophecy. I think... I think it might have unhinged him. And he was ready for something. And when he saw Spike with Cordelia-- it was a chance to fulfill that prophecy."

Fred whispered, "But he also kept saying Spike isn't his son."

Finally, reluctantly, I brought out Harmony's makeshift bookmark. "There's something else. This name. Connor. Spike asked me about it. I couldn't find any trace of it in our records. But Harmony found something for him. And I think that's where Spike was last week. Tracking this Connor down."

"Who is it?" Lorne frowned, as if he was trying to remember.

"I don't know." I took a deep breath. "But a couple weeks ago, Spike took me back to where Caritas was. He'd never been there. He didn't know it was Caritas, Lorne. But he took me there because he said that was where Darla died. That it was raining that night. That she died in the alley behind the club."

"She didn't--" Gunn said, and stopped, and I know he was realizing, as I had realized, that the memory of Darla's final moments was lost.

"It was raining that night." Lorne closed his eyes. "That night the club blew up."

Fred got up from her seat and came to stand by my desk. "It doesn't make any sense, Wes. The club was blown up by demons. Darla wasn't there."

"Spike said she was." I remember his palm, flat against mine, the grit from the pavement grinding into my skin. "And he asked who Connor was. And for just a second, I remembered. And I said it out loud-- or I would have forgotten again."

"Who?" Lorne's voice was only a whisper.

"I said it was someone Angel killed." I hesitated, then added, "Harmony found the name buried deep in the computer records. Hidden. Before we got here."

"Lilah," Fred said, with deep contempt.

"Yes. There's no other mention of a Connor. And Lilah did nothing without remuneration. If she buried all references to this Connor, then she must have gotten Angel to do something in return."

Gunn said, "You mean the amulet. Angel was supposed to take the amulet to Sunnydale. That was the tradeoff."
"He was meant to bear it. But he didn't."

"Spike did." Lorne sighed. "Maybe that's why he was brought back. Because he wasn't the one meant to be saving the world."

"But Spike is the one who knows about this Connor," Gunn said. "And he wasn't even around. How is it Spike knows more than we do?"

"He doesn't. He didn't." I swallowed. If it was true about the amulet, Angel had killed Spike... twice. "The Powers told him the name Connor. And he knows Angel. Angelus. In a way we don't. So -"

"So what?" Fred said. "So he had this name Connor. And Spike went to find him. And what? He wouldn't have been stupid enough to tell Angel what he was doing, would he?"

Even Lorne didn't try to defend Spike there. He said, "Well, you know Spike--"

"The idiot came back wearing a football shirt with the name Jacobson on it." I gave Fred the scrap of paper, and watched her face as she read the words there.

"Connor Jacobson."

"Yes. A deliberate provocation."

Gunn was shaking his head. "No. Spike was just trying to help. You know it's true. He-- he loved Angel. He tried not to show it. But he did. He wanted, you know, to make him proud. All that. Make him happy. Help on the stupid journey." Bitterly he added, "He gave up a lot for that. Maybe he didn't have much choice. But it's not like he wanted to let his slayer girl go. He had to do that for Angel."

Fred was still staring at the name on the paper scrap. "But you're saying that Angel killed this Connor."

"I think so."

"Then why-- As if it were burning her fingers, she dropped the paper on my desk. "You think Spike found out. And was going to confront him about it. About... about a murder."

"I don't know. I don't know."

Gunn came over and grabbed up the paper. "I'll check it out after my trial tomorrow." Charles was always quick to act, and I could tell he wanted out. Out of this building. Away from Angel. He'd never been best friends with Angel as I had. Never worshiped him as Fred once had. Never counseled him as Lorne did. They were friends, but never intimates. In just a month, Charles had gotten closer to Spike than he had in years with Angel.

Better, I supposed, that he left, burned off some of the anger.

He knew I wouldn't feel anger.

I didn't know what I felt.

But I was the one the others tacitly delegated to approach Angel. Again.

That damned song was still playing as I used the passkey to enter Angel's dark flat. I turned on the lights and turned off the television, and sat down in the chair across from him.
"Buffy called," he said suddenly.

I started to imagine a slayer arriving, breathing fire-- then stopped. No need to borrow trouble. "What did you tell her?"

"I told her she didn't want to be with me." Angel kept staring at the blank screen. His voice was curiously even, his face calm, except that he kept raising his hand and rubbing at a spot on his jaw. It was red and rough. Involuntarily, I touched my neck. I kept finding myself doing that, like Angel, rubbing at my skin as if there was something there. And there wasn't.

"Did you say why?"

"No. She wouldn't let me. She said she'd talk later."

"Don't call her back," I said. "I'll handle it."

Angel looked at me then, for the first time. And he smiled that sweet smile that he let only his friends see. "I'm glad you're here, Wes."

"Yes. Well. Angel, we have to -- " I had been rehearsing this, but no words came. Finally I said, "Tell me what happened with Spike."

And, mechanically, Angel recited what he'd said yesterday. Cordelia. Spike in game face. Angel saving her.

"That's not all of it, is it, Angel?" I said gently.

He gave me a questioning look. "It's all."

"No. Tell me about Connor."

Angel was still. No breaths. No movement. Just his gaze on me.

I tried again. "Spike knew something about Connor. You thought he might ask Cordelia."

"The video."

I glanced over at the television. "There's something on the video about Connor?"

He smiled, shook his head ruefully. "No. Wes. Look. I know what you're here for. The others sent you because -- " He got up then, went to the drapes and pulled them open. Sunshine flooded in. It didn't bother him, but the light hurt my eyes, and I closed them.

When I opened them, he was standing there, looking out at the city. The mountains were throwing odd, humpy shadows on the foothills. "I've killed. I don't know. Thousands. A century of slaughter. They took a long time to die, sometimes. I liked that."

It chilled me. It always chilled me, when he spoke of the killing years. Usually I could tell myself he was talking about Angelus, not himself. But he made no distinction now.

"They leave corpses, humans do. And they're buried. Sometimes, if I was feeling generous, they might rise again. But usually they're just corpses. And they rot, but there's a skeleton. And the skeleton lasts for centuries."

I waited. Wished I'd brought Lorne or Fred with me. Just to be with me.
"Vampires aren't like that. They go... just like that. And all they leave is a handful of dust, and the wind carries that away. They just... go. Like they were never there at all."

He raised his fist to his jaw. Rubbed hard. Dug deep.

"So he's gone. Just like that."

"Yes," I said. There was nothing else to say, was there?

"He was so proud of that other time. He was dusted, but it was to save the world. This time. It was for nothing. The Powers blinked. I staked. End of story. End of Spike."

"But why?"

Angel turned to me, but I couldn't see his dark face in the light that streamed in the window. "Because I wanted him gone."

"No," I said. And then I realized I hadn't said it out loud. "No. Angel, this isn't you."

"You don't know me. He did."

"Angelus took over." It made sense. It was the only thing that made sense.

But Angel laughed. "He'd tell you Angelus never left. He used to call me that, you know. Sometimes. Not just to annoy me. But because he'd forget. I felt like Angelus to him." He laughed again. "But he was wrong. Angelus, see, would never kill his boy. He had a thousand chances. But he loved Spike, and he'd never kill him. It takes Angel to kill a son."

He reached into his pocket and drew something out. "Here." He held it out to me. A stake. "That's what I used. Poetic justice, right?"

I didn't take it. Found some power inside me. "No. That's not the way it's going to end. That's too easy for you."

"Easy?" He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Easy. Like you said. You would just end. And there's no atonement. No redemption. No --"

"No shanshu. Wes. Wes. There won't be a shanshu now. Trust me. The Powers sent him to me. They're not going to --" he sighed. "You know I couldn't accept it anyway. It was... wrong. What I did."

"But you--" I wanted to give him an excuse. He didn't know. It was a mistake. Just an accident. But I couldn't. He knew better, and so did I. "It's too easy," I repeated. "You know it."

And then he put his hand on the window, against the light. It didn't burn. The sunlight in this building never burned. "I know. I know. I won't."

I left him then. Still no answers. I didn't have the heart for more questions. But there would be time. An eternity of time.
The first couple days, I must have checked my email twenty times an hour. On Wednesday afternoon Giles arrived with a laptop from the office and set it down in my room and said sternly, "This is on loan. Now leave mine alone."

"You just want to get back to arguing about Arsenal's new prospects," I grumbled. But I set up the laptop and checked my email account. And there it was. A message from Spike. A short one.

To: chosen1@hitmail.com  
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk  
Subject: end

Slayer, I told you. Don't want to keep on with you. So leave off trying to contact me.

Email transmits almost instantaneously. I realized he must have just sent that. As quick as I could, I opened a new email form and typed.

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk  
From: chosen1@hitmail.com  
Subject: Huh?


I started to send it, then stopped and added,

Love, Buffy

A minute later:

To: chosen1@hitmail.com  
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk  
Subject: re: Huh?
Nothing’s wrong. That’s what I’m saying. If you hear something’s wrong with me, it’s not true. So don’t call anyone or anything.

S

------------------------------------------------------------------

This time I got an initial, at least. I thought maybe he was softening.

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: re: re: Huh?
Spike, how do I know it’s you telling me you’re okay? Anyone can hijack an email account. Maybe it’s someone else. Someone who is holding you hostage or something and trying to tell me you’re okay when you’re not.
Love, Buffy

------------------------------------------------------------------

This time my own email came back with a reply appended. I thought maybe he liked seeing that Love, Buffy. Maybe. I mean, there was a time that would have made him ridiculously happy. He would have printed it out and framed it. Really. He would have.

To: chosen1@hitmail.com
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk
Subject: re: re: re: Huh?
>Spike, how do I know it’s you telling me you’re okay? Anyone can hijack an email account.
>Maybe it’s someone else. Someone who is holding you hostage or something and trying to tell me you’re okay when you’re not.
>Love, Buffy

Don’t be daft. Who could take me hostage? Vampire here, remember?
Spike

------------------------------------------------------------------

Spike. I felt kind of a sigh go through me. He’d signed his name this time.

Quickly, I copied his email and added a note at the end.

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: re: re: re: Huh?
>>Spike, how do I know it’s you telling me you’re okay? Anyone can hijack an email account.
>>Maybe it’s someone else. Someone who is holding you hostage or something and trying to tell me you’re okay when you’re not.
>>Love, Buffy

Don’t be daft. Who could take me hostage? Vampire here, remember?
>Spike

Slayer here, remember? I could take you hostage.

Tell me something no one else would know.
Love, Buffy

------------------------------------------------------------------
This time he didn't bother with a message..

To: chosen1@hitmail.com
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk
Subject: hot chocolate and mini-marshmallows

Bastard. I shot back quickly:

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: re: hot chocolate and mini-marshmallows

_Dawn would know that._
Love, Buffy

To: chosen1@hitmail.com
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk
Subject: re: re: hot chocolate and mini-marshmallows

_Yes, like Dawn could take me hostage._

_Okay. Maybe she could. But she didn't._
Spike

My heart was beating hard in my chest. I couldn't explain it. But... I just felt it. Something. I knew it was Wednesday morning in California, and Spike stayed up all night, and he was sitting there at his terminal right this minute, probably with a hangover, all grumpy and grouchy, and his hair would be kind of messed up, and his fingers would be moving fast on the keys. And he was thinking of me and he couldn't help but smile. I knew it. He was sitting there right this minute, thinking of me and smiling.

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: re: re: re: hot chocolate and mini-marshmallows

_Tell me what street the house was on._
Love, Buffy
p.s. And if you ask what house, I'll know for sure it's not you.

There wasn't any answer. I knew I'd gone too far. He didn't want to be reminded of the house we'd destroyed.

After a half an hour of sitting and staring at the screen, I got up and got a glass of milk and stood there in the kitchen and drank it. I thought about going to bed, and I thought about crying, and I put
my arms around myself and rocked a little bit. Then I stood up. I was the slayer. I couldn't go off and cry all the time.

I thought maybe I'd do some work. Some research. Something. So I went back to the laptop to write up my recommendations for stake training, and there it was.

To: chosen1@hitmail.com  
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk  
Subject: re: re: re: re: hot chocolate and mini-marshmallows

*Oaklandon Ave.*

--------------------------------

He still loved me.
A few days after Spike left, I was feeling restless. Dangerous. Like I was going to go out and stop a train with my head, you know? And I would have, except that stupid contract he made me sign. And, oh, yeah, when I thought about it, I couldn't do that to my parents and sister. Even if, the longer I went without seeing them, the less real they seemed. Less real than the dreams I had every night—the dreams that woke me, sweating and hard, remembering the kills.

Anyway, I thought about what Spike had said about how I should call him if I got scary. So I got out his card and dialed the number. Only I forgot and called that business line, and even though it was practically the middle of the night, a woman answered, professionally cheerful. "Wolfram and Hart," she said, and I remembered that he said to call the cellphone.

I asked anyway. "Is Spike there?"

And for a moment she didn't say anything. And then she took a great gulp of breath, and when she answered, her voice was all wavery, like she was trying not to cry. "No, he-- he doesn't work here anymore."

So he got fired. Well, he didn't seem like the type to hold a job long. I apologized and hung up, and I got the card back out, and this time I dialed the cell number. And after a few rings, he answered. I recognized his voice, but he sounded hungover. Big surprise.

"Hey, Spike," I said. "It's Connor. Just, you know. Wanted to see if you want to hang out."

Silence.

Stupid. I sounded stupid. Like we were in middle school and I wanted to go to the mall. But then he said, "Sure. Gimme some time. I'm driving my little sis back to school. Tomorrow, maybe? I'll get there, you know. After dark."

"Sure," I said. And I didn't have anything else to say. But he did. I was figuring out he always had more to say.

He rattled something into the phone. "Still got your contract here, mate. 'Member that. See ya tomorrow."

And I hung up and sat there a while. And then something reminded me of something, and I went over to where I'd left the scholarship brochure, and I turned it over and looked at what he'd been looking at the other day-- not her picture, but the little notice under the description of the scholarship: Copyright 2003 by Wolfram & Hart.

He arrived more or less on schedule the next night, juggling a thermos and a six-pack and a duffle bag. He practically fell into my place, and ended up lying full-length on my couch with his eyes closed. Death warmed over.

"You lose the fight this time?" I said, putting the six-pack in the back of the fridge, safely out of his reach. He didn't need another hangover on top of everything else.
"Something like that." He kind of groaned and kind of laughed. "Bad day at the office."

"Yeah. I hear you got fired. I called that number on the business card. She said you didn't work there anymore."

He sat up and regarded me intently. "I never worked there. Independent contractor. And I'm taking a few days off." Then he fell back on the couch. "Can I hide out here? Need to recuperate before I go back and face my grandsire."

Oh, yeah. The grandfather. "He found out you stole the Viper?"

"Nah. Got it with me right now. 'Sfar as I'm concerned, that car is mine. He owes me." His face got hard and grim, and for a second, I thought I saw his eyes flash. Weird. I mean, they flashed kind of gold. And he had blue eyes.

He was a real weird guy. But, you know, interesting.

Now he was lying back, hands crossed over his heart like he was in a coffin. "My grandsire-- he got mad at something else."

I got the picture. Some rich old dude. Hired a few thugs to teach grandsonny a lesson. Spike probably took out a couple of them, but it cost him. "Yeah, you can stay here for awhile." And then I thought of the brochure. "If you explain how you come to be working for the same lawfirm that set up the scholarship for my benefactress."

This got his eyes open, and he stared at me. Then he sighed. "Wish I could, mate, but I don't know myself. I didn't just happen on you last week, I admit it. Found your name in the file, came to check you out. Still doesn't make any sense. But we'll sort it out, okay? Just give me a day or so to recuperate."

I didn't have much choice, did I? With him looking like he'd been run over. So I got him a blanket and turned off the light.

Three classes the next day. Got a D on my physics exam. I came back in a lousy mood, and the empty chips bag on the floor and the television blaring MTV didn't help. "This place is a mess," I declared, and slammed out to replenish the supplies.

When I came back, the apartment was neat, all the trash bagged up, and even the coffee table straightened. And Spike was sitting on the couch, reading my philosophy textbook. He looked up as I came in. "Schopenhauer was such a prat," he said, like he knew him personally. "I don't want to make any trouble for you," he added, suddenly all abashed. "Thanks for letting me hide out here."

Hiding out, it turned out, meant going cruising for a fight. I guess he recovered quick, at least when there was the prospect of fighting. The sun had hardly set before Spike and I were outside the gym, waiting in the twilight shadows for the wrestling team to come out after their practice. "Now we're going to be civilized about this, right?" he said. "Let them start it. We're just into self-defense, remember. Not offense."

Okay, so some might construe his flipping the bird as the wrestlers passed an "offense". But Spike--just as the heavyweight stomped over-- reminded me that he was British, and that an extended middle finger did not constitute an insult in Britain. It was just too bad that these muscle-brained morons misinterpreted the exercises he did to strengthen his hand.

There were eight of them, and two of us. It was unfair, I know. But he did his best to even things by stopping every minute or so to give me some instruction or explain why he'd timed his kick just so or
"punched here instead of there. "And teamwork!" he shouted, shoving the middleweight over at me. "That's the key! Me and the sla-- I mean, this girl I used to... to spar with. Uh, martial arts champ. We used to team up. No one could beat us. We were hot."

I had about two seconds to imagine this guy fighting alongside some muscular chick, and yeah, I guess they must have been hot. Not just the way he meant. Okay, I'm not the most experienced guy on the planet-- I only did it with Tracy twice before I left for college-- but it was pretty clear this guy knew his way around women. And I bet this martial arts girl knew her way around him. Fighting would just be foreplay....

I wanted a woman like that. Or maybe I just wanted him, or wanted to be him. I don't know. I just wanted to fight every night like this, only they wouldn't last long, the school's athletic teams, and maybe it wasn't fair beating them up just for being jocks. Especially when they weren't that much competition.

He dodged the staggering heavyweight, tossed him over to me. I practically fell over under the weight, had to spin around to stay up, and the wrestler crashed over, moaning. I heard something else-- the rush of blood in my ears, yeah, but something else--

"Siren, six blocks out. Cops coming-- let's get off now," Spike said, brushing his hands off and grabbing his leather coat up from the ground. We took off at a run, making it to the Viper in record time, and Spike, laughing and cursing, got the engine started and we peeled out of there.

He drove to a roadhouse way outside of town. It was one of those redneck places with country music on the juke, and at the bar, heavyset guys with angry eyes. Spike said he wanted to drink some longnecks-- he said this with a grin, like it was an inside joke-- and listen to Patsy Cline. But I think he was hoping that one of the hillbillies would challenge us.

They didn't. They took one look at Spike's bloody knuckles and steered clear. Two of the waitresses came over, however. Spike lit up, just like that, when they started flirting with him. One started to ask me for ID, but he distracted her, and she brought me a beer, no more questions. He managed to get a basket of chili cheese fries on the house, who knows how. All I know is, it arrived and it never showed up on the bill.

I wished I looked like him. I mean, maybe not. He didn't look real tough or manly, especially now that he was sort of wasted. But somehow he still scared the guys and charmed the chicks.

"You're good with women," I said as the second waitress left, her hips swinging to the country song.

"Ha." He licked all the cheese off one fry and then started nibbling it. "Terrible with women. Give these girls a day or so with me, and they'll walk all over me, stomp on my heart, and tell me to get lost. Just like a country song."

That I couldn't believe. But then, what did I know? "You said you were driving your little sister back to school."

"Yeah. She stomps all over my heart too, but she doesn't usually tell me to get lost." He grinned and finished off his beer. "She's not really my little sister. She belongs to my sort-of ex-girlfriend."

"Sort of ex? Or sort of girlfriend?"

"Sort of girlfriend. We used to, you know-- Over a long time ago. But her little sis and me, still friends."

"The sort-of is the martial-arts chick, right? The one you used to fight with."
He sighed. "Yeah. Wanna see a picture?"

"Sure."

He pulled out an old-fashioned gold pocket watch, commenting, "I was real glad this survived the staking. I mean, the beating. See? Not even dented."

The insides weren't there-- all the watchworks had been removed. Instead, there was just a photo of a girl, blonde, thin-faced, pretty in a mean way. Axe over her shoulder. Whoa. But it wasn't really a photo. It looked like a jpeg he'd taken off some website and printed out. That made me feel sad. I thought he was tough, but this was really, like, pathetic. Downloading some anonymous girl off the internet and saying it was his girlfriend.

But I played along. "What's her name?"

He gave it another look then closed the case. "Buffy."

That was a really dumb name for a tough chick. "Looks like she should be named, I don't know. Lara Croft. Amazonia. Something tough."

He grinned. "Yeah. But there were other names she answered to. So how's it going with your lady? Tracy?"

I didn't like it that he remembered her name. Didn't want to think of her. "Over. And out."

"Too bad." He passed the fries over to me, like he knew I needed them.

We drank another beer apiece, talking about the fight, and the one before, and I thought maybe for tonight I didn't want to kill myself, or anyone else. He kept talking about how I should take some lessons, get some control over my power. I kept watching his face and thinking that he knew more than he was telling. About my benefactress. About me.


"And Europe, and the Far East. Think evil corporate entity: W&H represents them all."

"And you work for them."

"Nah. I work for my grandsire sometimes. He works for them."

"What's the name on your paycheck?"

He had to think about this one. "Don't know. Harmony-- that's the grandsire's assistant-- takes the checks and does something with them." He pulled out a battered calfskin wallet and proudly displayed a debit card. "I just hit the cash machine when I need funds."

On the other side of the wallet, under the clear plastic, I saw a credit card. "W&H," I said triumphantly, pointing to the corporate logo.

"Yeah, but I stole this one from my grandsire."

Like that made it all right. And maybe it did. "What do they have to do with Ms. Aurelia?"

He shrugged, raised his hand for the check. "Probably her attorneys. Set your scholarship up. Don't know why you yet." The waitress came, and he gave her the stolen credit card along with one of
"Aren't you going to get in trouble, paying with that?"

"Harmony vets all the bills. I'm good."

"Harmony got the hots for you or something?"

He shrugged. "We used to, you know. Go out. Years ago. Still friends."

"If she's the one who answered the phone when I called W&H by mistake, she sounded pretty upset you got fired."

"Oh, Christ. Didn't think of that. I'll call her in awhile, tell her I'm okay." He signed the receipt, no doubt leaving a big tip on the stolen card. "Let's go. I'm fading."

I came back from class the next day to find him printing something out on my computer. "What're you doing?"

"Checked my email. Hope it's okay."

His voice was all muffled and he wouldn't look at me. I saw him make a fist and rub at his face. I didn't understand him. He could fight like that, and then cry over his email?

He folded up the printout and deleted something on the screen, then got up from the chair. "All yours."

I waited till he was back on the couch playing my X-box, and then I hit Undo, and watched as the file of emails reappeared. I scrolled through. The first couple were from him. He'd kind of implied before that she'd dumped him, but it sounded like she was trying to make contact, and he was telling her to bug off. But then he started telling her not to worry if she heard he'd been hurt-- probably thinking that she was going to hear about the beating and get scared. And she started demanding more info, and they kind of got to flirting--

Anyway, he called her slayer, for some reason-- maybe she slayed his heart, or something. Or maybe it was British slang for bitch, I don't know. But each of her emails was signed "Love, Buffy."

He asked me something-- if he could close the drapes-- and quick, as I said yes, I shut down the computer. I felt like an asshole, reading his private email. But I felt better too. There really was a Buffy, and from the way she said she could take him hostage, I figured she could be a martial arts type. So he wasn't crazy. Okay, maybe he was crazy. But at least he wasn't pathetic. Even if he did cry when he read her emails. I could understand that. He was probably feeling pretty low, beaten up by thugs sent by his grandfather, having to hide out here, and getting kind of come-on emails from the girl who'd dumped him. Maybe I'd cry too, given all that.

I felt sort of like I'd been mean to him, so I sat down and picked up a controller and let him beat me at Manhunt.
We were arguing over who was the champion of the world when the doorbell rang. There was a big black guy there, bald but in a cool way, wearing a very sharp suit. He looked tough, like a corporate assassin, and I knew, somehow, he was from Wolfram & Hart. I dropped into the stance, and felt Spike rising behind me, and I reminded myself that we were a team, and we were good.

The W&H hitman looked at me, then past me, and the tough look on his face just broke. "Spike?"

He whispered that so low that I could barely hear. But Spike heard, and I sensed him relaxing, and the guy shoved me aside and in two steps was gathering Spike up in a hug.


And Charlie turned to me with a stunned look. He looked from me back to Spike, and said, "He's... you know. Turned?"

And Spike tapped on his own ear. "Can hear a heartbeat and a pulse. He's okay."

It was another one of those weird things he said. But Charlie, whoever he was, knew Spike better than me, I guess, because he nodded like he understood. Then he reached out and punched Spike's shoulder and gave a big smile, and said, "Maybe it's going to be all right after all."

So it was all decided. I was going to ride with Spike back to LA. Charlie would follow in his car. "Yeah, yeah," he said, "I won't tell anyone. We'll let this be a surprise." And he promised to call my dean and explain as how W&H was recruiting me for a special project, and that's why I wasn't in class.

"Uh," I said, "I'm just a freshman. What kind of special project could you want me for?"

Charlie shrugged. "Something about web design. You young guys are all advanced on web design, right? So the dean'll believe it. Trust me."

Young guys. That was funny. I mean, he and Spike weren't all that much older than me. "Why should I trust you? You're from an evil lawfirm."

Spike unlocked my car door and shoved me in, saying, "Charlie sings lead in me band. Trust him, or I'll break your arm."

I grumbled something about Spike and his recommendations, but they were engaged in some low-voiced negotiations over by the BMW and didn't pay me any attention. Finally Spike got in the car and slammed the door. "Off we go, whelp," he said, and headed out to the highway.

"Road trip," I said.

"Still want to off yourself?"

"No," I said. "Not at the moment."

Spike turned on the CD player. Loud. Heavy bass. Buzzcocks. He sang along for about twenty-five miles, tried to get me to sing too, and finally I did, though I have a lousy voice. "This is punk rock," he broke off singing long enough to say, "and you don't need to be any good to be good at it."
I looked back every few miles, and there Charlie was, keeping close. It was dark, but I could tell from the arrangements of the lights on the front of his BMW. I reached over and turned down the sound. "So, uh, what's Charlie do?"

"He's one of those barristers. What do you call them. Lawyers."

"Oh." I felt a certain relief there. "I thought he was a hit man."

Spike glanced over at me. In the green light of the dash, he looked eerie. Unearthly. "I thought you youngsters weren't into stereotypes."

"I--" I took a deep breath. "I was scared, you know, they might have sent someone out. To take me out. Because of Ms. Aurelia's scholarship."

"You mean, because you got that D in physics?" Spike was grinning. "Hey, they're tough, but I don't think they'd ice you because your grade point slipped a bit. Nah. Really. Charlie's okay. He's my mate. We fight all the time." After a moment, he added, "I mean, fight together. Against, you know. Evildoers."

I just shook my head. "You're really weird, you know?"

He didn't take offense. "You don't know the half of it, lad. Hold on. I'm taking this exit."

This exit was about two yards ahead. He jammed the steering wheel over, and I held on for dear life as we careened across the grassy verge onto the ramp. I saw the flash of the sign as we passed--

"Sunnydale, 6 miles."

"Lost him," Spike was crowing. But then, above and to the left, I saw red taillights coming closer. Charlie was backing up along the highway shoulder. "Shit." Spike shrugged. "Oh, well. Like I said, we fight together. He doesn't like me to have any fun without him."

The state highway to Sunnydale was two lanes and completely deserted. It was just us and our headlights on the black pavement, and Charlie behind us, flashing his brights every now and again just to show his disapproval. We drove through a stretch of orange groves, dotted occasionally with migrant worker shacks, and then, suddenly, there were big flashing signs. "Road out. Detour."

Didn't surprise me when Spike nosed the car around the detour signs and kept going down the highway. At least he slowed down a little. And when our headlights illuminated a big crater, I understood why.

He screeched to a halt a hundred feet from the railings that protected the big hole. "Oh, yeah," I said, remembering. "The Sunnydale earthquake. This was the epicenter."

Spike put on the emergency brake and just sat there, his gaze fixed on the crater. "I used to live here. Buffy too."

"You lived here together?"

He gave me a quick, rueful smile. "For a few hours at a time."

He opened the door and got out, leaving the headlights on. After a minute, I followed him up to the railing. He just stood there, looking down into the hole. I guessed it had rained a lot since the earthquake, because it had become like a lake, half-filled with moonlit water. "You okay, Spike?"

Charlie said from behind us.
"Never better," Spike said, but I could tell he was lying.

Charlie came over and put his arm around Spike's shoulder. "Pretty big hole."

Spike nodded. "Yeah." Then he said something else I didn't understand, like *Felt plenty big when it was all falling on me.* He was silent for a moment, studying the still black water. "You know, it all made sense then. This time it doesn't make any sense at all."

"This boy here," Charlie said, looking at me. "He's going to make it make sense. Somehow."

I shook my head. "Not me. I don't know anything. It doesn't make any sense to me either."

I sounded panicky and stupid, but Spike just smiled. "Don't you worry, Connor. The truth lies at the end of the journey. And whatever the truth is, I'll be there to face it with you, okay?"

And it all came back to me, the dreams, the chase, the slippery feel of blood on my hands, my hands sliding on a spear. And I could smell the blood, and the dark jungle heat--

Then the here-smell came back to me, the smell of the orange trees mixed with the stagnant water. Spike was watching me. He said, "Put your hand out, Connor. Over the crater." Even as he said it, he stuck his hand out, and I could see it tremble.


Charlie gave me a long assessing look. Then he put out his hand and held it there over the water. It stayed as still as a rock.

"What's that mean?" I said.

"Charlie's got no demon. That's what it means. Hellmouth doesn't affect him."

Before I could ask for a translation of this remark, or a better explanation for the shakes, Spike tilted his head to the side. He was listening. "Not the only demon come to feel the Hellmouth. Trouble on its way," he murmured, and started away from the crater.

We followed him back to the road and stood there, waiting. We waited a long time, in silence broken only by the buzz of insects in the orange grove. I thought Spike was probably imagining things, except Charlie-- who didn't seem the fanciful type-- was scanning the horizon like he fully expected a few tribes of Indians on horseback to arrive.

"Feel," Spike told me quietly. He reached over and took my fist and urged the fingers open. "Touch what's out there. Open your senses. Come on, Connor. Know you can do it."

And so I closed my eyes, and held out my hand again, and felt the air. Felt the dryness and the dust and the emptiness. And then his hand on my wrist, gripping lightly. And then a crackle of energy. A tension, like when I held my hand over the crater. My fingers curled back into a fist, and he let go, and I could hear stealthy footsteps to the left.

I opened my eyes and saw Charlie ready, his hands clenched, his face set. Spike looked relaxed, but by now I knew him well enough to see the intensity in his face, in the casual set of his arms.

Charlie reached into his coat pocket and brought out-- not a gun. A wooden stake. He tossed it to me. "More where that came from," he told Spike, but Spike already had one in his hand. I didn't know where he got it, or what he planned to do with it.
And then they were upon us– a sudden flurry of movement in the orange trees, and then an attack. Five, six– I lost count. I moved by instinct towards the flankers, Charlie doing the same on the other side. Spike, of course, leaped right in the middle.

The moon had moved behind a cloud, and it was too dark to identify them. I thought at first they were migrant laborers protecting their territory. But they moved too fast, fought too well. And their eyes glowed golden and feral in the night. I kept punching, kept attacking, but a chill went through me when my fist hit one man's face and I felt the ridges of bone where there should only be flat forehead. When I got my arm around his neck and pulled tight, I didn't hear him gasp. Didn't hear him choke. Didn't hear him breathe. I kept pulling tight, and he struggled soundlessly, and he was stronger than anyone I'd ever fought. Stronger even than the heavyweight wrestler. But I was strong too, like the competition was enough to challenge me, and I felt the power course through me like hard liquor.

"Use the stake!" Charlie was shouting at me, but I couldn't see him through the blood-red haze that filled my vision. And I didn't know what he meant, or what had happened to my stake. My opponent took advantage of this distraction to yank out of my grasp. He spun away, only to hook my arm with one hand and twist it behind my back. For the first time, I felt fear. It wasn't just that he was so strong. But we'd been fighting hard for several minutes and he wasn't even breathing hard. I knew my stamina was flagging, my breath thumping in my chest, but as he bent his head towards me, I couldn't hear any sign of exertion. He was pulling my arm up, and I thought in the next second it would crack--

And then suddenly he let go. And I whirled around to see Spike, his hand fisted around a stake-- and nothing in between us but the dust we must have kicked up in the struggle. There were only two of the original assailants left-- the one Charlie was fighting, and one on the ground. Mine was gone. "Where is-- ?"

Spike tossed me the stake and growled, "Right in the heart, you hear me? Don't fuck around. Just aim and shove."

And then he turned and yanked the grounded one up, and as I watched, he took him by the head and twisted. Sick-- the head came off in his hands, just as the moon came out from behind a cloud, and for just a second I saw the ridged forehead, the narrowed golden eyes, the mouth gaping open around long pointed fangs. And then he just... dissolved. Fell apart. His body fell first, reduced to a shower of dust. And finally the head, still held by Spike, dispersed.

Spike brushed off his hands. "Come on, Charlie, quit playing with him. I got to get back to LA before dawn, 'member?"

And Charlie said something snarky back, and then raised his stake and plunged it into his opponent's chest. And he just disappeared too.

"Good fight!" Spike said. He and Charlie bumped fists like they'd just won a company softball game.

I didn't know what to say, what to think. Spike said, "Oh, yeah. Connor, I forgot to tell you something." And he shook his head, and his face just transformed, became ridged and predatory like the one he'd twisted off.

I heard some noise coming out of my throat. Staring at his new face, I backed away from him, my feet stumbling on the pavement. With a sharp word, Charlie reached out and snagged me, and as he pulled me away, I saw I'd been about to back into the crater.

"Spike, you're being a jerk," he said, setting me firmly on my feet.
Spike grinned, his fangs glittering, and shook his head again, and the face I recognized reappeared. "Sorry, Charlie," he said. "Sorry, Connor."

"What are you?" I whispered.

Spike shoved the stake into his jacket pocket. "I'm just like them. A vampire. Only I'm good." He added, "Lately, anyway."

I stared at him, at that clean-lined face of his. It was like I could still see that predator underneath his skin. "A demon. That's what you said. You meant-- you meant it literally."

"Yeah. Vampire is a class of demon. Ready to go, Charlie?"

"I want to ride with him," I said.

Spike opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked hurt. Real hurt. Like I'd betrayed him.

"Fine." He pulled the keys out of his pocket and started towards the Viper.

But Charlie didn't move. "No way, kid. You can't diss Spike that way. Maybe you didn't notice, but he saved your lousy little life there." He made a sweeping gesture at the crater. "And you know what? He probably saved everyone's life. Last year, there was a hellmouth here. Open. Demons pouring out of it. And he gave his life to close it."

"I thought vampires were already dead," I said sullenly.

"Yeah, well, look at him. He looks alive to me. But he sacrificed it all to save a bunch of humans who don't even know about him and would probably try to stake him if they did."

Spike was smiling. "Hey, thanks, Charlie."

"He looks okay now," I said. I still didn't feel right. Still felt like he was dangerous. Like he'd made a fool out of me. Like this was probably a nightmare like the ones I had of the jungle.

"Hard to kill Spike for good." Charlie gave me a hard look. "Now you're either going to get in that car with Spike, or we're going to leave you here. And those aren't the only vamps nearby, you can bet on it. And if we leave, you can't count on Spike being around to save your scrawny college ass."

"Charlie--" Spike started.

"Okay," I said, stomping to the Viper. "And if he kills me on the way, you call my parents and tell them it's your fault."

Charlie thought this was really funny, for some reason, and laughed all the way to his car. Spike stood by the door for a minute, looking at me. "We wouldn't have left you here."

"Yeah. Well. Let's get going." I shoved myself into the sports car, and after a minute, Spike followed suit.

He started up the engine and headed back towards the highway. "Look. I'm sorry. I should have told you upfront. It's just-- I'm not used to being around people who don't know, and who need to know. So it's not a conversation I have a lot. Didn't want to scare you."

"What about the girlfriend?" I said. "You ever tell her?"

"The girl--" He shook his head. "Look. The girlfriend, only she wasn't ever really my girlfriend. I
mean, we just--" He took a deep breath. I thought vampires didn't have to breathe, but he had to take a deep breath to finish. "Buffy's a slayer. That means she's got special powers to slay vampires with. Like you. Only she's better. Way better. Best fighter I've ever seen, and that includes me. So yeah, she knew I was a vampire from the first. Not like I tried to hide it from her."

"And she still went to bed with you?"

He flashed a grin. "You don't know the half of it. Buffy-- look. She knew. Everyone knows. Not ashamed of what I am."

"But you didn't tell me." This came out more whiny than I meant. I meant to sound tough and angry. But I sounded like a kid kept in the dark about his parents' divorce.

"I was going to. Wanted to--" Reluctantly he finished, "Get your trust first, I guess."

"You did that much." I thought of the contract I'd signed, the pathetic call I made the other day. The beer and laughter and fights we'd shared. "I trusted you."

Spike glanced over at me. "Haven't betrayed you, Connor. I am what I am, and you just have to accept that. I won't hurt you or yours. Ask Charlie. He'll tell you. Always been honest, whatever else I've been."

"Yeah, right. He's a lawyer. For an evil lawfirm. I'm supposed to trust his word?"

"Then trust yourself. What do you feel?"

"I feel like-- " I just blurted out the rest. "I feel like we're friends. Like we're connected."

"Yeah. Well, you can take that to the bank, 'cause it's true."

I studied his face, illuminated by the pale green dashboard light. He seemed as sincere as ever. And I just gave in. Everything was crazy. Vampires. Demons. Hellmouths. Rich lawyers who moved like streetfighters. And me, in this car, headed somewhere with someone who hid the face of a monster.

Finally I asked the question. "So what am I?"

Spike gave this some consideration. "Been trying to figure that out. You're important. Know that. Someone's gone to a lot of trouble to hide you at that poncey college. You're not a vamp, but you're strong like one, and fast, and you got a demon somewhere in you. I always felt it, and the hellmouth says so."

"A demon in me." I felt like I was choking.

"A demon in me." I felt like I was choking.

But Spike grinned reassuringly. "Demons are good things to have in you, mate. Don't listen to those humans who think they're the only way to be. Demons give you power, and passion too, and those are good to have."

"I don't have any passion."

"Sure you do. You've been hiding from it, that's all. Now you know what you are, you'll let it in."

"But I don't know what I am."

Spike shook his head slowly. "You're like a slayer. Only they're all girls, always have been. They're strong as a vampire-- stronger. But not as powerful in other ways. They can be killed, and they always are eventually, usually young-- did in two of them myself."
This made me pause. "You killed slayers?"

"Well, sure. They'd've killed me, if I didn't." After a moment, he said, "Okay, so I sought them out. No one gives as a good a fight as a slayer. But still, it was kill or be killed."

"But you said your girlfriend was a slayer."

"Not really my girlfriend." He sure thought it was important to make that point. "And she is the slayer. Not was."

"You didn't kill her."

"Yeah. Tried a few times. Back when I was evil and all. But I always got distracted." His quick grin flashed. "Also, like I said, she's pretty good at fighting. She was trying to kill me too. Well, sort of. She'd get distracted too." And then, reluctantly, he added, "And eventually, you know. Fell in love with her."

"She return the favor?"

"Nah. So, anyway. Maybe you're like a new breed of slayer." He brightened. "Maybe there was some sex discrimination lawsuit that W&H defended, and you're the settlement. A male slayer."

Obviously he didn't want to talk about Buffy anymore, or explain why she hadn't fallen in love back. I guessed I couldn't much blame him. Had to hurt. But I thought about those emails she signed with love. Girls did that. Didn't mean much. I got emails from girls I hardly knew signed Love, Brittany or Love, Sarah. Their way of being polite. So maybe that was all it was with this Buffy, just a casual way to close a note. But their exchange seemed so quick, so sharp, like they knew each other so well that they could speak in shorthand and be fully understood. And, if so, every word would matter.

"Why?"

"Don't know-- maybe they figured out that it's hard to control teenaged girls--"

"No. I mean, why doesn't she love you?"

He should have told me to shut up, to leave the subject alone. But he didn't. Maybe he wanted to talk about it. But he said, slowly, "She cares. Cared. But -- but I'm not... the one. She's in love with someone else."

"Who?"

He gave a short laugh. "My grandsire."

Okay, that was weird. "Uh, isn't he like 80?"

Another laugh, this one more truly amused. "I better acquaint you with a fact of life, or unlife. Vampires don't age. Well, not till they get real old. Round about 400 or so. But till then, we look the age we looked when we were turned."

"Turned. You mean, turned into a vampire."

"Right."

"How old are you?"

He was calculating, and finally gave up. "I was born in 1854. So I'm, what?"
It seemed no more insane than anything else tonight. "150."

"Hey, cool! My sesquicentennial year." He just rolled out that word. Ses-qui-cen-ten-ni-al. I'd never get it out the first time, perfect like that.

"How old were you when you were turned?"

"Twenty-six. Prime of life. Let me tell you, mate, that's when you want to get turned, if you're going to get turned. I knew some vamps who got turned when they were 50, and it was pretty sad. Missed out on all the benefit of eternal youth, which ain't to be sneezed at."

"How old was your grandsire when he was turned?"

"Don't know exactly. Older than me a bit, I'd say. Sure looks older, anyway. Acts like a bleeding octogenarian."

I considered all this-- Spike's easy acceptance of all of this weirdness. But I guess it was what he lived with. I said it out loud. "You're so accepting of all of this."

"Well, sure. Why not? Good way to be.... being me."

He meant it. And it was so simple, the way he put it. But maybe you had to hit the sesquicentennial to feel that way.

I dragged myself away from all that. "She's in love with your grandsire. That's kind of, well, kinky."

"Yeah, well. I never believed it, see, when we were together. So it didn't feel so weird."

"But you believe it now."

He didn't answer right away. Then he said, "Just want her to be happy. And she can't be happy with me. Look. Enough. What else you want to know-- about you, I mean?"

I thought of a dozen more questions. Started with one. "Who is Darla Aurelia?"

Spike's mouth twisted. "Okay. See, Angel's my grandsire. Know what that means?"

"Same as grandfather, I guess."

"Not exactly. I was sired-- turned-- by Drusilla. She's my sire."

"Don't sires have to be male?"

He gave me a look that meant I was narrow and provincial. An ill-lettered lout. And probably sexist too. He said, "Vampire. Sire. Gender not important. So Dru sired me. And Angel sired her. So he's my grandsire."

"Okay."

"And Darla's his sire. So she's my great-grandsire. And the Aurelia part. Well, we're of the order of Aurelius."

"Sounds... classy."

"Yeah, it is, for vampires. We're all descended from Aurelius. Very important old sod. Ancient blood." He shrugged. "Never meant anything to me, but Darla put great stock in it. Lorded it over all
the other clans."
"You knew her."
"Yeah. Family."
"You didn't like her."
He grinned. "Yeah. Family."

"So... where is she now?"

He glanced over at me. "Gone. Dust to dust. Same as those vamps we staked."

Something settled in my stomach. It felt like lead. "So... why? Why is she giving me money?"

"Well, she's not, is she? She's been gone a year or more, from what I can tell."

"You don't know?"

"Nah. Look. I'm new here. That Sunnydale crater? That's where I've been for years. I mean, in Sunnydale. I was only in the crater a few months."

I didn't have time to ask about that, because he was going on. "Angel, Darla. Charlie. Wolfram & Hart. They were going their merry way without me. I was just dropped in there a couple months ago, when, you know. I came back from the dead. All that."

"You really came back from the dead?" I tried to make this sound skeptical.

"More than once. So, anyway. Charlie's going to look into that scholarship of yours. Someone set it up, and put Darla's name on it."

"Why?"

"To lead you to Angel. Only reason."

"Your grandsire."

"Yeah. The very one. You're connected to him somehow. But he wants to keep it under wraps. Enough that he--"

Spike broke off. Impatiently, I said, "What?"

"Nah. Some other time."

"Look. You come in and disrupt my life and tell me I'm-- I'm a demon or something--"

"You have a demon. It's not so bad. Like, you know, having a talent. Or a habit."

I gave him a skeptical look and went on. "You come and mess everything up, and make me wonder if I'm who I think I am."

"Well, mate, what I see is a boy who was trying to get himself killed. And why? Because he didn't know who he was. Now we're on track to find out. So--" he finished up, "you should be thanking me."

He said this is the most serene way you could imagine, and it almost won me. Then I hauled myself
up in my seat. "You say we're looking for the truth. So tell me what you weren't going to tell me. This Angel wants to keep the truth about me under wraps. So much that he did what?"

Spike sighed. Deep and heartfelt. "Look, you got to understand. First, me and him. Haven't gotten along for... well, forever. Used to trash me regular, when I was just a fledge. Okay? And, well, there's the Buffy problem. Two guys. One girl. Not real conducive to world peace. And I was given this mission to help him, only he doesn't think it's help, see. So... we don't get on."

"Plus you keep stealing his car. And his credit card. I get it. You don't get on. So what did he do to keep this secret about me?"

Spike kind of shrugged. Only it wasn't one of those insouciant shrugs. It was all about uncertainty. "You know what Charlie and me did to those vamps at the hellmouth."

"Staked them." I replayed it in my mind. "It was pretty tight, the way they just sort of dissolved. I mean, other than it being really traumatic to watch and all that."

"Yeah. Well."

It dawned on me then. "He-- he tried to do that to you?"

"Succeeded. Few days ago."

"I knew it was him," I said, feeling vindicated. "I just thought, you know. That he'd hired thugs to beat you up."

He shot me a glare. "Nah. At least he showed enough respect to do it himself."

I didn't really get how that was a respectful sort of thing to do. But I was getting the idea that vampires operated under a sort of different value system than the rest of it. "Wait. If he... if he made you turn into dust, how are you here? Solid?"

Spike glanced over at me. "Well, I don't want to brag."

"Brag."

"I fixed it. Brought myself back together."

"How?"

"I'm good at wanting."

That made no sense. "That makes no sense."

"Sure it does. Power of positive thinking. You just want it hard enough. Can work miracles. At least if you got a demon in you." He smiled at me. "I told you demons were good things to have. Humans can't do that. Course, most vamps can't even. I'm only the second ever to do it."

"Who's the first?"

"Dracula."

He said this so matter-of-factly, I felt, you know, kind of stupid when I asked, "There really is a Dracula?"

"Yeah, sure. What, you think that poncey Bram Stoker bloke actually made that up? Nah. Dracula's
been around for centuries. And he's not like most vamps. Most vamps are pretty content with their limitations. You know, we burn up in sunlight, so we just don't go out in the daylight. Well, I do, but most don't. They think it's uncool to hide under a blanket." He stopped, and I saw a frown start between his eyes. "And it is, I reckon. That's why I'm training myself to go out in low light. Pretty soon medium light. Pretty soon... high noon." The frown disappeared. "But most vamps. Content with the night. You know, you live forever, or close enough, unless you get dusted. But most end up getting dusted, just can't dodge the stake forever. Takes a vamp with ambition and drive like Dracula, or-- " he added modestly-- "me, to realize dusting isn't the end. The demonic force lives on."

"But you're still you. I mean, I just saw you last week. Same body. Same fighting skill. Same scar on your eyebrow. But you're saying your body was reduced to dust. And now you have the same body back?"

"Mind over matter, mate. Reality bends to desire."

"That's not an explanation."

"So sue me. I'm a vampire, not a physicist. But I got a friend who really is a physicist, and I bet she can explain it to you. Probably got to do with quarks and negative space. Be right embarrassing, watching you struggle along trying to understand it, you and your D in physics."

A stupid smile was tugging at my mouth. This wasn't funny. But he was sort of funny. I yanked my brain back to the matter at hand. "But what's that got to do with me? Did he find out that you'd been to see me?"

"I guess." Suddenly he wasn't being funny anymore. He sounded depressed and worn out. "Was just trying to help, you know. But... but everything I do, he thinks is a threat." He heaved a big sigh. "Charlie told me what happened. See, I was taking this video to another friend. It's of the band. But for some reason, Angel got the idea it was of you. That I'd found you and, you know, done a video of you."

I considered this. "That would probably be a pretty good idea. You know, if you wanted to prove I existed."

"Well, yeah." Spike sounded a little disgruntled. "That would have been a good idea, I guess, but I never thought of it. And he shoulda known I wouldn't have thought of it. Knows me better than that. But 'course he assumed that I was going to blow his secret, like I even know what it is. And he's always been this way with me. Not with anyone else. But with me, it's smash first, and ask questions later. Only he never lowers himself to ask questions, even later."

He was off on some internal rant, and it wasn't getting me any closer to understanding. So I said, sternly, "What's he got to do with me?"

Spike glanced over, startled. "Oh. Right. I don't know. See, I was talking to Wes-- he's the keyboardist-- and he didn't remember anything about you. Except that Angel killed you."

This dropped like a rock into a bathtub. I found myself gripping the doorhandle. "But I'm not dead." And then, weakly, "Am I?"

"Nah," Spike said consolingly. "I'd notice if you were dead. But you know, being killed is a relative thing. Or being killed by Angel, anyway. 'Cause he killed Darla years ago. And then she was back again. And just killed me. And here I am. So even if he did kill you, couldn't've been the really permanent kind of killing."
"Oh, God." I leaned my head against the glass. "Maybe it's best I don't know."

"Buck up, mate. You were suicidal a week ago. Now you're doing great. Fought some vamps-- that had to set you up. Making new friends. And pretty soon, we'll figure out this truth business."

"You make it sound like summer camp," I complained.

"Pretty cool summer camp, if it lets you dust vamps. Hey. Make a call for me."

He steered with one hand as he fumbled on the floor. Coming up with a cellphone, he handed it to me and recited a phone number. I punched it in, too disoriented to ask more about this lethal Angel and what the hell I was supposed to do with him.

When I heard the woman's voice, I handed the phone to Spike. "Babe," he said, all low and sexy. I could hear the woman's squeal, and Spike held the phone away from his ear until the noise finally faded out. "Yeah, yeah, reports of my death greatly exaggerated, etc. Sure, right, I believe you that you felt I was still here. Sure, babe. Listen. I'm on the way back, but I don't want anyone to know. You got it?" More feminine chatter on the other side. "Okay, here's what I need. Mock up some authorization from Angel and go get Cordelia. She might need a wheelchair, I don't know. I need you to take her to my flat and keep her there. Keep her comfortable. I'll be there in an hour."

He hung up and handed me the phone. I slid it into the console, and said, "That your real ex, or your sort-of ex?"

He shrugged. "My real ex. The sort-of one doesn't know. You know. That I was done for."

"Sounds like your ex still likes you."

"Yeah, well. We got to be friends. She's a vamp too. Pretty girl. Runs interference for me with Angel."

Not enough, I thought. Didn't get in the way of that stake. "Who's Cordelia?"

"Hmm. Well, she used to work with Angel. Maybe more than that. Accounts vary. She's been sick for awhile, but she's getting better." He shot a glance at me. "Don't know what she has to do with you, but something."

"You don't know much," I grumbled.


"Maybe I'm not important." I couldn't decide whether that was good or bad.

"Well, sure hope you are. Hate to think Angel dusted me for no real reason."

I brooded on that for awhile. "You said he killed me."

"That's what Wes said. I was tracking Darla. Where she died. And he didn't remember anything, but that came to him. That Angel had killed you."

A shiver went through me. Spike noticed and muttered an apology. "Messed up your life good, didn't I?"
"I don't know. I don't know. Everything's screwed up. Until spring, I was okay. But then I wake up one morning a few months ago, and I've been dreaming about killing. And that means something. Doesn't it?"

Spike shrugged. "I dream about killing all the time. 'Course, more like memories than dreams, since I've actually killed a lot."

"That like so totally makes me feel better." After a moment, I confessed, "That's what it feels like to me too. Like memories."

"So maybe you did some killing too. I mean, you still need some training– damned straight you do– but your body knows more or less what to do, when your head doesn't try to take over."

I groaned and rested my cheek against the cool window. I grew up as a Quaker, even if I hadn't been to a meeting since I left home. And Quakers were pacifists. And so was I. Or I used to be, I was almost sure. "You make it sound like killing's a good thing. And it's not."

"Not usually. But it's a skill, see? And any skill can be used for good or for evil. Say you're good with a knife. You can be a murd..."er, or you can be a butcher. Butchers are good, right?"

"Butchers are bad. I used to be a vegetarian." I used to be a lot of things. I looked back at myself, my past, and realized everything had changed last summer, before I came to college. There was like a point where I changed, and I could remember what I was like beforehand, and I could see myself so different now, but I couldn't pinpoint when or why the change happened.

"Okay." Spike always had a comeback. "Surgeons. Surgeons are good. Save your life, all that."

There was a time I thought I might be a doctor. That was before I got a C in Organic Chem because the nightmares kept waking me up the night before the exam. "That's stupid. That's not the same as killing."

"Similar. Surgeon use knives and open you up. Killing skill is like a knife. You can kill for bad reasons, or you can kill for good reasons."

"I bet most killers think their reasons are good."


"Angel is a killer too."

He seemed like he was going to protest, but must have realized it wouldn't do any good. "He's not been himself lately."

"Lately? When was he himself?"

Spike frowned. "Well, not since I got here, I reckon." After a pause, he said, "Wes and Charlie would probably say longer than that. Since he took over W&H. Been pretty ruthless since then, I guess."

Finally I asked the question that had been plaguing me. "You said he killed me. Well, he couldn't have. I mean, I'm here. And I think I'd remember dying."
He shot me a glance. "Yeah, you'd think. I remember dying. Each time." With a bit of wonder, he added, "Three times. Wonder if that's a record. Hey! We should look it up in Guinness."

"You're avoiding my question."

"Yeah. Okay. So maybe he only killed you in some figurative way. Metaphorically. Like... say that you were a client of W&H, and – and he, you know, deleted you from the computer records."

I was skeptical. "I haven't ever been a client of W&H."

"Yeah, well, I can't see him able to delete you anyway. He can't even program his cell phone."

"So when was he supposed to have done this?"

"Dunno. Wes and Charlie don't remember much. Angel... did something to their memories."

The more I heard about this Angel, the more I wanted to kill him. And not metaphorically. "That's rotten."

"Yeah, well..." Spike shrugged helplessly. "He must have thought it was for the best. But it's not," he added with renewed urgency. "Truth is best. Even when it hurts. Right?"

"Right," I said, but I didn't mean it. I didn't really want to know the truth. Didn't want to learn the worst. And it had to be the worst, or Angel wouldn't have had to wipe out everyone's memory.

"See, it's all connected to you. No one remembers you. You don't remember anything. So you're the key. You open the door that leads to the truth."

"I don't want to," I said. But we'd hit town, and the freeway was jammed, and Spike was too busy driving along the shoulder to reassure me one more time.

Wolfram & Hart. Big building. Lots of windows gleaming in the moonlight. Spike kind of shivered as he drove down into the parking garage. Gave himself a shake. Muttered something that was probably meant to buck him up. And took a big deep breath.

Charlie was waiting for us at the garage elevator. He gave me a hard look, just in case I wasn't being nice enough to poor Spike. And Spike wasn't helping much-- he was standing there trembling. But his voice was even enough. "Charlie, I'm taking the kid to my place. Cordy's there. Can you find Angel, get him to the back parking lot?"

"Yeah." Charlie added awkwardly, "Look, you got every right. I know. But Angel--"

Spike put a hand on his arm. "Trust me. I'll do what's right."

Charlie looked dubious. "But what's right might not be--"

Spike gave him a shove towards the elevator. "You're going to have to learn to trust me, Charlie. Have I been wrong yet? Except about Lorne singing that Metallica song. That was a mistake."

"Just afraid. You know." Charlie mumbled the last bit. "That he'll hurt you again."

Spike didn't react like he should have to this show of concern. In fact, he got mad. "What? You don't
think I can take him? I can take him. He got me by surprise last time, that's all."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm more worried about him than you." Charlie wasn't stupid. He knew what would work with Spike.

"Don't need to worry. Too much. I'll show him. But I'll keep him intact. Good enough?"

"Yeah," Charlie said, and we entered the elevator.

I knew what Spike was going to do. He was going to get his grandsire into the back parking lot and fight him. I'd fought next to Spike three times now, and I recognized his fighting stance, all cool and taut and ready. And his fighting spirit.

"I want to see it," I said. "The fight."

Charlie glanced over at me. "You and everyone else, kid. Epic, it'll be. Spike vs. Angel. We could sell tickets, fund our retirement."

"Nah," Spike said. "I thrash him in private. He's still got to run this place afterwards-- can't do that if I humiliate him in public."

Well, one thing Spike had going for him was confidence. "You seem like you think you're going to win."

Spike just smiled. It was sort of a scary smile.

The elevator opened on the fourth floor. Spike bumped knuckles again with Charlie, who sighed and punched PH for penthouse. I followed Spike out into a softly lit corridor lined with closed doors. It was, like the rest of the building, modern and classy. The walls were one of those subdued colors like you see on the new BMW models– kind of purple mixed with light brown. I don't know. Carpet was just the light brown. I didn't like any of it. I mean, I was a Quaker, and a scholarship student, and I was naturally suspicious about displays of wealth. This just felt like the kind of place rich people went when they wanted help avoiding taxes or laying off employees just before Christmas.

I had to remind myself that this law firm set up my scholarship. And I didn't know why. But they had some reason, and that meant I was connected to them. And that meant I was--

Spike stopped and knocked softly on one of the doors. It was opened promptly by a knockout. I mean, she was one of those blondes you see on Baywatch-- all long curls and generous curves and a wide mouth open in a squeal. She grabbed Spike and hugged him, and he hugged back, and I figured this had to be Harmony.

She was real pretty for a vampire. I was starting to rethink my image of vampires. I mean, the ones at the migrant camp were ugly suckers, no doubt about it. And Spike looked nasty when he was wearing his vamp face. But usually he was a good-looking dude. And Harmony was, well, like I said, she was a knockout. I stared at her in Spike's arms and felt this sort of explosion of fantasy. She was a vampire, but so what? We'd have to work around the blood thing, but--

Spike let her go, and she turned her attention to me. I straightened up and tried to look, you know, manly. Like a killer, only a really nice guy too. She mouthed *Connor* at Spike, and he nodded, and she flashed a smile at me.
"Stay here," he told me, yanking me just inside the door. "Harm, bring him in when I call you."

And so we waited in the narrow foyer. I could smell her, and she smelled good. Like perfume. Expensive perfume. When I started to speak, she laid a cool finger on my lips. I kind of fell in love. Only I didn't. I mean, I'm not dumb enough to fall in love with a vampire, not so quick. But when she took my arm and drew me a bit further into the flat, well, maybe I wasn't in love. But I was in want real bad. And it felt good. I hadn't wanted in long time.

I was taller than she was. A definite plus. I'm not necessarily taller than every girl out there. But I could see right over her shoulder into the living room. There was a woman sitting in a wheelchair, staring blankly at the news show on the TV. She was kind of shrunken and emaciated, kind of hunched over. But she had pretty dark hair, and I thought maybe her eyes would be pretty if they had any life to them.

I was right. Spike said, "Cordy," real quiet, and she looked over at him standing by the couch, and her eyes lit up. And she bit her lip and held out her thin hands, and he came to her and fell to his knees in front of her. I heard Harmony kind of sigh behind me, and I thought maybe that was a move I should borrow, like I'd borrowed some of his fight moves. Want to impress a girl, fall on your knees.

It worked with this Cordy. She kind of grabbed him by the shoulders and he put his head in her lap, just like a child would with his mother. And she whispered his name, and patted his hair, and Harmony started sniffling, and I guess I was sort of affected too. Cordelia had looked so sick, so out of it, when we came in, and now it was like the spirit was flooding back into her.

And then Spike rose and turned to us and called, "Harmony."

And Harmony grabbed my arm in a grip a whole lot stronger than any girl ought to have, and she pulled me out of the foyer into the living room.

And Cordy-- this stranger-- looked at me and her eyes filled with tears. And she reached out one hand to me. She said, "Oh, God. Connor. Connor."

And Harmony gave me a shove, and I walked over there, and I took her hand. It was like touching a skeleton-- she was that thin. And she started crying. Said my name over and over. And then she whispered, "I thought I could never ever make up for it. I thought he'd killed you, and it was my fault."

I looked into her eyes, and I almost remembered them-- almost remembered her. Almost remembered--

The door closed behind me. I turned. There was Harmony, standing guard. But Spike was gone.
I wasn't supposed to have any photos of Connor, see. But I kept one, the one I took when he was just a baby. He was wearing a little blue outfit Cordelia had bought at Nordstroms, and he had a little Dodgers cap on, and he was propped up on pillows in the Hyperion lobby. He had this big grin on his face, and not much hair under the cap, and a softball next to his chubby leg. It was a great photo, even Cordelia thought so, and she was really critical about baby photos. So when it all came down, I kept it and hid it in the old wooden cigar box where I kept all my old photos.

Lilah, or whoever, made it vanish. Every month or so, I'd sit down and painstakingly go through each photo in the box, and there was Darla and there was Dru and there was the Eiffel Tower in the moonlight (Will hanging one-handed off a strut about halfway up, stupid fledge that he was), and there was the monk who had taught me how to meditate. A couple of Buffy and her friends. Lots of others, just people and places over the years. Fred and Cordy hamming it up with axes. Gunn and Wes looking up, startled, from their weapons cleaning. Lorne on stage. But the one of Connor was gone. Every time I looked, it was gone.

I sat in my apartment one evening and looked through the photos again, searching for Connor's picture. I was surprised I'd kept so many Darlas. She always looked the same. Her dress changed, picture to picture—she'd never be recorded wearing the same dress twice—but she always had that knowing expression. When I was fresh-turned, I thought she knew everything. That's the look she had in the photos. Don't bother to argue. I know everything.

Drusilla never looked like that. She always looked like she'd just blinked and couldn't yet see right. Why did I keep photos of her? Just to make myself feel bad, I guess. Just to remind myself of what I once was. I didn't keep any pictures of victims here—except for her. And Will, or Spike, or whatever. I had three pictures of him.

Three close-ups. Not as many as Darla, or as Dru. He wasn't like Darla— in every photo, he had a different expression. One was all sappy and adoring—he must have been looking off-camera at Dru. One was a snarl, but he was putting it on. He always liked to pretend he was tough. One was just a smile. I looked at that one for a while, trying to remember when that was taken. It was a candid— or as candid as any shot was, back at the turn of the century. It was indoors. He was in formal dress, white tie, and he was leaning on one elbow against a gilt staircase. His eyebrow was intact, so it was before China. The symphony in Paris? He always liked taking Dru to musicales, the two of them dressed to the nines and looking like magic. But when? Where?

Didn't matter. I slid it into the stack, and kept looking for Connor's picture.

He was a handsome boy. William, that is. He could spruce up nice, not that anyone would believe it now, when "formal" to him meant a collared shirt and lots of whines about how it itched at his neck. I stopped sorting through the stack and went back and found the white-tie one. I should show it to Wes. Wes still didn't quite believe that William had gone to Oxford. But if he saw this picture, saw how easy Will looked in formal dress, Wes would have to admit that it was no street urchin Dru had turned that rainy night, but a handsome young aristocrat. Aurelians bred true, everyone knew that.

I set the photo aside for Wes and went back to looking for Connor. It was just some magic cloaking, see. That's what I'd finally figured out. He was there. Only Lilah or whoever had cloaked him. They'd superimposed some picture of someone else on top. And if I could just find the photo that didn't fit, that I didn't remember from before, well, then I could take it to Wes—no, couldn't take it to Wes, Wes didn't know about Connor.... oh, he thought he knew something, but he didn't. So I couldn't take it to him. I'd take it to someone outside. And someone would erase the spell and reveal
the true photo, and I'd have Connor back, that laughing boy with the Dodger cap.

It wasn't any of the photos of my old family. I remembered those photos from before. I'd had them a long time. I hesitated for awhile over a photo of Cordelia sitting at her desk. It didn't look like any desk I remembered she had. So I sorted that one out. I didn't have any other single pictures of Cordy, just her with someone else in the crew. But it would make sense they'd cover Connor up with Cordy–

The door opened, and Gunn came in. He was excited about something, I could smell it. "You been out fighting?"

He just looked at me, quizzical.

"Your jacket. Dus–"

I realized what I was saying and stopped saying it. But Gunn frowned down at his expensive suit and brushed at his lapel. Brush. Brush.

Brush.

Then he swiped his hands, one against the other, and the air around him turned a little gray with the powder, and I could smell it. Feel it. Vamp dust. "I– " I remembered the photo of Will, and seized it. "Hey. Do me a favor. Give this to Wes."

He came over to my desk and took the photo. He stared at it for a moment, then tried to hand it back. "Give it to him yourself."

I didn't take the picture. "No. Wes has been avoiding me." So had Gunn, come to think of it. "Just give him that photo. And tell him I said, see."

"See."

I'd forgotten, just then, what I wanted Wes to see. "Good picture," I said lamely.

"Yeah." Gunn looked at it once more, his face hard. And then he smiled. It wasn't like he wanted to smile. He just smiled, looking at Will. "Dressed to kill."

Encouraged, I laughed. "Good-looking boy, don't you think? William."

"Spike," he said, and it was like a rebuke. He shoved the photo into his pocket. He looked back at me. "You do remember what you did to him."

"I dusted him," I said. I didn't mean it to sound proud. I didn't mean it to sound any way.

"And you want me to admire this old photo of him. Tell you that he was a pretty boy."

"I can't tell if you're in denial, or just a sociopath."

"Probably a sociopath," I said honestly. "But... but he is still my boy. I killed him, but that doesn't mean he's not mine."

Gunn didn't understand. No one did. Not even me. I almost felt it there, the answer, elusive, just out of reach. But all I could think was– I killed him, and he was mine. I killed him, because he was mine. I killed him, so he was mine.

It must not have made any sense, because Gunn was regarding me with hostility.
"It doesn't make any sense, I know."

"Are you at least sorry?"

I thought about this. It wasn't much of a word. Sorry. "I was wrong." It piled on me, the wrongness. My latest wrongness.

It wasn't sufficient. Gunn just shrugged and turned towards the door. "I need you to come look at something."

I glanced around. I was sort of sticking close to my apartment and my office lately. Going back and forth up and down the elevator. It was .... quieter that way. People didn't look at me that way. "Where?"

"The parking lot. Someone moved your GTO out of the garage. Bunged up the fender. And they spraypainted a name on the side."

The GTO was a great car. Midnight blue with a white stripe. "A gang name?"

"Nah. Just a name name," Gunn said, pushing the door open and letting me pass through it. "Connor."

The parking lot was across an alley. I stood out on the building loading dock, chilled by the night air, squinting over at the floodlit array of cars. I couldn't see the GTO or any vandalized car. "I don't see it--"

"Go on over-- it's in the row against the fence." He patted his breast pocket. "I'd come with you, but I got to take this picture to Wes."

"Oh, right." Gunn was a good man. He knew why Wes had to see that photo. He knew Wes had to understand about Will, that Will wasn't any ordinary vampire. He was an Aurelian, and he could look the part if he wanted. I wasn't going to let Wes do that anymore, scoff at Will.

Spike.

"What was the name you said?" I knew. Of course I knew. I just wanted to hear him say it again. "The name spray-painted on my car?"

"Connor." He pushed the loading dock door open and disappeared back inside, and after a moment, I took a deep breath and jumped down into the alley.

Connor. Spray-painted on my car. Who would do it? I didn't care. There was this hunger in me, just to see it. Just to see his name again. It would make him real, to see his name. I knew I should stop and think, think about who would know his name, who would paint it on my car. Wes? No, not Wes. Lilah, though I hadn't seen her in months--

Spike knew. At least he knew Connor's last name-- he put it on that soccer shirt. And he knew how to hotwire and steal a car. But-- but Spike was gone. So it wasn't Spike that painted Connor's name on the car.

I just wanted to see his name. So I crossed the alley and wended my way through the cars, back
towards the fence. It was a little chilly and the lot smelled like metal and tar, and I had to pull myself together, I really did, take charge again, of myself and my people, and I would. As soon as I saw the car.

I smelled him– Spike, that is– but it was only guilt. Had to be guilt. You know, Spike could always make me feel guilty, even back in the days when I didn't have a soul to induce guilt. Okay, maybe it wasn't guilt. Discomfort. Sympathy. Something like that. Stirrings of regret. There was sometimes this look on his face, just such surprise, dismay, like he expected a bouquet and got a fist instead. He was always surprised when I hurt him. I don't know why he would be surprised.

He never figured out that it made him that much easier to hurt, because he wasn't ever expecting it. Not from me, anyway.

See, if he'd been expecting me to hurt him, he would have gotten his hand up or turned his shoulder or something– gotten something in the way of the stake. I was good– I really was– but he should have been better. He'd fought slayers and demons for the century I'd been in hiding. He should have been better. Should have done better. Should have expected it. Shouldn't have looked at me with that look on his face. Shouldn't have frozen with dismay.

He should have stopped me. But he never, even after so long, expected me to hurt him.

He was stupid, that boy. My other boy wasn't so stupid. My other boy asked for it.

I was searching for his name, searching for the GTO, and couldn't find it. But it felt like Spike was everywhere. I wanted Connor, and I got Spike. My senses were so jagged, I was imagining him, feeling him. Sensing him. I'd spent days now smelling his dust, feeling it on me, rubbing it off me. But now I felt him– the charge of him, the sharpness.

I was going mad. It had been happening for awhile, but I couldn't deny it anymore. I was going mad. I couldn't think. Couldn't tell dreams from reality. Couldn't let the past go. It was all around me, my past– the feel of Spike, the taste of Darla, the memory of Connor–

I couldn't see his name anywhere. Every car was wrong. I walked from one to the next, looking for his name. "Connor," I whispered.

"Wrong victim."

The voice came from behind me– from where I kept feeling Spike. Only he was gone, and so was his voice. I was just losing my mind, that was all. I kept moving down the line of cars, touching the cool chrome of each bumper, but none of them were right.

"Angelus."

Angelus. Only Spike and Darla ever called me that anymore. And they were both–

It was Spike's voice. Not Darla's. Of course. Darla was long gone, but Spike was still with me. Haunting me. I turned slowly. "You are not Spike," I said. I really was going mad. It was part of the punishment, I knew, but instinctively I fought it, felt my way back to reality – the chrome slick and cool under my hand, the smell of pavement, the grit of Spike's dust still on my face. "You're only a figment."

"You wish," he said, stepping out from behind a pickup truck. "A figment wouldn't kick your ass like I'm going to."

It was overwhelming, the feel of him, the sight of him. The sound of him, growling like that. His
hands in fists, his face hard and fierce, still human but as fierce as game-face. His anger and hurt just as fierce.

I wished I felt Connor that way, wished he would come to me this way, with all his anger and hurt, and be there before me hating me. Wished that were the way my madness was going, to dreaming Connor. Not towards Spike. Not towards that mistake – keeping him. Killing him. All a mistake.

If it were Connor –

But it wasn't.

He was stripping off his coat, laying it in the bed of the truck. I found myself smiling to see that. It was so much like him, like Spike, to take care with it, with his old leather coat. And he looked over at me, saw the smile, and his expression grew harder. "Think it's funny, do you? Dusting your own grandchilde, like I'm nothing to you."

"Spike," I said.

But he wasn't listening. He probably couldn't hear me. He wasn't actually here with me. I clung to that reality, to the reality of my actions, not my feelings. I couldn't rely on my feelings anymore, because I felt him here, even though I knew very well what I had done. He didn't exist anymore, except in my mind. He existed only for me.

Connor existed, but not for me. It made my heart hurt to think of all this.

He pointed a finger at me. "Take your jacket off. No stakes this time, you hear me?"

Automatically I took my jacket off and dropped it on the hood of a BMW. I reached into my pants pocket and pulled out the stake, and tossed it on top of the jacket. "Angelus obedient," he said. "Never thought I'd see the day. Get the stakes out of your socks too."

And I pulled one stake out of each sock, and tried to remember if I'd stashed any others. Finally I shook my head. There was only one floodlight in the opposite corner of the lot, and the cars were just dark lumps in the dark night, but his eyes were glowing golden. Like a cat's. Like a vamp's. But he was still in the human face, that pretty, pretty face. Like Darla's face, only harder.

Why didn't Connor look like Darla? But he didn't. He didn't look like anyone but Connor.

"Angelus. Pay attention." Spike was getting exasperated.

I tried to focus. But everytime I concentrated, I saw Spike. Felt him. And he was gone. "Okay," I said. Humoring him. Or humoring me. Whoever it was that made him be.

"Now I want you to focus," he said. "Focus on me. We're going to fight. And I'm going to beat you. Only you have to really fight, all right? Don't want you getting all stupid and letting me win. Want to beat you fair and square."

"Fair and square," I agreed. He was only a few feet away.

"You start. That way it'll be fair."

So I launched a kick across the divide, and he dodged, and I just got my boot toe into his ribs, not enough to hurt him. He spun around and caught me with a fist, right below the ear, and my head buzzed, and I thought he really felt real. Solid. "You're back."
"You got it, mate." He was backing up, against a Mercedes, and I followed him, walking lightly on the balls of my feet.

"The Powers--" I started. That was the only thing that made sense.

Not to him. "Sod the Powers. Did it myself."

I punched him, but he slid sideways, so my fist only grazed his cheek. He hopped up then, onto the Mercedes, and the hood bent under his weight, creaked like a rusty gate. He made a dent in the world. "You're real."

He sighed, a big sigh – but before it was over, he'd jumped off the hood and on to me, and he shoved me to the hard ground, and he had his hands at my throat. "Real. Real. I told you." With each word, he shoved my head against the pavement.

I hurt, and struck back, jamming my arm under his chest, shoving him away, flinging him away. He landed on the roof of the pickup truck, and slowly, laughing, he got to his feet, bounced down off the roof, to the hood, and landed lightly right in front of me. He waited politely until I get up, and then we were at each other, bouncing off the cars, rolling on the ground. My head swam from his proximity, the feel of him, the real of him, and he got me down, his hands at my throat, his voice in my ear, "Don't quit. Don't give in. I want to beat you."

So I fought back, hard, directing my punches now, forcing him up and off me, and it would have felt good and strong, except he was laughing as I backed him against the fence. Laughing, his eyes blue again and alight. Laughing like life was all a big, big joke. Like death was a big, big joke. Like I was a big, big joke. Laughing in that way that always enraged me. Laughing in a way that made Angelus vow to dust him over and over again.

But he wasn't laughing when I finally dusted him.

Now I had him against the fence, and I could feel the laughter vibrating through his body, and it vibrated through me. For just a second I hesitated, feeling that laughter, and he grabbed my arms and shoved me back, and I slammed against the bumper of a pickup. He had one hand on my throat and the other at my chest, and in the glow of the street light I saw his face go hard and vampiric, and he bent over me, like he was going to kiss me – and he slashed across my throat with a fang.

Then he let me go, and I felt behind me for the warm metal and shoved myself up. He stood before me, his fists clenched, my blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. "First blood is mine," he said, though it wasn't really true – we were both bloodied from the first moment of the fight. But he won. I bent my head as a concession. As my only concession.

Very low, he said, "You know what I had to give up for you. You know. And you know more than anyone what that means." His voice kind of hitched, and he swallowed, and his face went back to human. He swiped at his mouth with his fist, and said, "So you're going to complete your fucking journey whether you like it or not. And then --"

And then... he didn't finish. So I finished for him in my head. And then I'll never have to see you again. And then I'll quit and you can dust me because that way I won't go after Buffy. And then they'll take me off to heaven and let me stay this time. And then they'll take me off to hell and I can bedevil Satan who can't be any worse than Angel. And then....

A lot of different and thens. Futures.

He was back. He had futures again.
I watched him walk back across the alley, vault up the loading dock, stop there at the light-sliced door to speak to someone – just Gunn, I hoped – and then disappear inside.

They kept pardoning me, the Powers. They kept giving me second chances. Second and third and fourth chances. And so did he. Stupid fledge. Always kept forgetting and letting me off.

Not this time. I didn't think this time.

Finally I pushed away from the truck, found my coat – found his too, he'd forgotten it there in the truck bed. Found a handkerchief in my pocket and wiped the blood off my throat. The slash was shallow and already half-closed.

I walked slower than he did. I probably hurt more. He'd always gotten a rush from a fight, and wanted to keep going and going until suddenly he dropped from pain and exhaustion. He still had all that adrenaline in him – I could smell it as I followed his trail to the building.

I found him in the lobby, surrounded by the ones who knew – I mean Gunn and Wes and Fred and Harmony and Lorne. The ones who knew what I'd done. And Spike saw me and they all turned to look at me, Gunn with suspicion and Wes and Lorne with sympathy and Fred with confusion. Harmony just glared, and then I guessed she remembered I could fire her, and she turned the glare away.

Spike rubbed at the bruise on his cheekbone and declared, "We got it sorted, me and Angel. Back to normal. No hard feelings. Okay?"

And everyone chorused okay, even Harmony, and Spike said, "So did you all rehearse? We got a show this week!"

It was all ... back to normal.

I draped Spike's coat over the stair-rail. "Sorry." I said it really quietly. But he was a vampire. He should be able to hear it, even all the way across the lobby like that.

But he was getting arm-punched by Gunn, and Wes was saying something fervent and restrained, and Fred was hanging on his sleeve, and Harmony was attached to his chest. He was smiling, laughing, dazzled. He couldn't hear me because he wasn't listening.

I said it again anyway. "Sorry I hurt you. Glad you're back."
Buffy

He wouldn't take my calls. I mean, how mean is that? This was the guy who – well, once upon a
time, he would have been happy if I called him.

I was getting the idea that "once upon a time" was a long time ago.

But he still loved me. I was sure of that. If he didn't, I'd know it. I'd feel the emptiness where his love
used to be. And anyway, Dawn had called, acting all enigmatic, but she had confirmed that he was
still so into me. (Her term, not mine.)

So he loved me but wouldn't take my calls. What the hell did that mean?

It started the day after our email exchange. I thought I'd escalate our interactions. (Sorry. Just been to
a seminar on war strategy.) I knew he refused to see me, for some dumb reason, but he never said
anything about talking to me.

Maybe if he heard my voice, well– Well, really. I got him to get a soul for me. I figured I could get
him to bend his dumb "no-see" rule for me.

So I called W&H and said authoritatively, "Let me talk to Spike, please." Like I not only knew
exactly who Spike was, but I had every right to talk to him. The receptionist kind of gasped. And
then she said, all uncertain, "Let me let you talk to Harmony."

"Harmony? I don't want to talk to--" I heard the click of the hold button and all was silent.

Harmony. Spike's ex. Maybe not so ex. Maybe that's why he couldn't see me, because he was back
with Harmony and didn't want her to see me because she'd get jealous and she'd kill me (ha! like that
was possible) or – or I'd get jealous and I'd kill her.

I wouldn't get jealous. It wasn't like he was my boyfriend or anything. We were, okay, sort of like
friends. Sort of like best friends. Last year, anyway, before he died. I thought we'd achieved
something, you know, there in the end? Trust. Friendship. Okay, maybe he was still in love with me,
but it was this amazing love that wasn't about sex or that stuff. I think it was sort of like what they
call unconditional. I think. That was what that "I love what you are, what you do, how you try" was
all about, right? Not like I deserved it, but he made me sort of feel like I deserved it.

But it wasn't the sort of love that went with jealousy. He didn't have any claim on me, and I didn't
have any claim on him. (But... Harmony???) I didn't go around after he died acting like his almost-
widow, did I? I went to Angel. I moved in with Angel. Granted, we didn't do the ultimate– we didn't
even sleep together. But we were together, right? And I came back from Tibet all ready to move to
the next stage with him. Went away for a romantic weekend in wine country and all that. Right? And
I'd probably be with Angel right now, except–

Except that Spike came back.

Okay, there was all this stuff about Angel's journey and Spike being attached to it. Otherwise I'd be
with Angel. Right? That was the big revelation I'd had in Tibet, that we were supposed to be
together. Mostly I was thinking, "That way neither of us would destroy anyone else," because I was
feeling kind of guilty about Spike going out and getting a soul and being miserable and then dying,
all due to me. Let's face it, he was a pretty happy vampire before he met me, and after he met me, if
he had twenty hours of happiness total over five years, I'd be surprised. In Tibet, I realized I kind of
ruined his unlife. Even if it was good for the world, him falling for me, well, I couldn't say it was
beneficial for him personally, other than him ending up good and all that. (Which isn't to be sneezed at, but still—) I figured anyone else Angel got involved with, if he ever got involved with anyone, would have a similar tale of misery and sorrow.

Angel and me, not great lover-material, okay? But maybe together we'd be... I don't know. Compatible. Harmless.

But here I was in London, and I was calling LA and wanting to talk to Spike instead of Angel. I could talk to Angel any time, probably. Spike I had to sort of... sneak up on.

The receptionist came back on. "Uh, Harmony's away from her desk. But I'll take a message."

"I don't want to talk to Harmony," I said. "I told you. I want to talk to Spike."

The receptionist repeated with her professional perkiness, "Okay. I'll take a message."

So what the hell. I left a message. *Spike (not Harmony)!. Call Buffy. Immediately.*

I called a few hours later and got another receptionist. Same message. In fact, I called five times in the next two days. He never called back.

That wasn't even polite.

But I didn't have any time to plot my revenge. As soon as I opened my email account, I got this:

**To: chosen1@hitmail.com**
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk
Subject: Calls
_Slayer, I'm telling you this one time. I'm not going to talk to you. So stop bothering the receptionists._

I typed up a really angry reply, about how much he owed me (the soul, for one thing, and I bet I saved his mealy unlife twenty times at least, plus I did give him some epic sex, just in case he'd forgotten). I typed it all up and signed it The Slayer instead of Love, Buffy.

And then I saved it to a file, and I wrote up another email instead.

**To: spike666@manunited.co.uk**
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: Re: Calls
Hi, Spike! I guess you're back from wherever you were when I called. So how are you doing? How's the band? Tell me all the news. Maybe you can send me a tape or CD of the band? I'd love to hear it.

Dawn said you came up and visited with her at her school. What did you think? Does she seem okay? Happy? Did she tell you anything about her trigonometry class? I'm worried she needs tutoring, but you know Dawn. She won't admit to any problems. I bet all her friends thought you were really hot. You probably improved her social standing.

She said you watched the Dawson Creek finale. What did you think of it? I thought it was sort of lame, the way they made it take place years later, and we're supposed to believe Joey and Pacey had no contact at all, but they're still in love. But it was still pretty romantic, didn't you think? I felt bad for Dawson, because he thought they were soulmates and all, but at least he had a great new career.

So, speaking of great new careers (not), I'm sort of hanging around here, being a Senior Slayer. That mostly means I take the girls out on patrol and try to teach them how not to get killed.
Sometimes I think that they'd really benefit from your perspective. Okay, I'll admit it, I learned a lot from you. And you learned a lot from me. About fighting, I mean. Anyway, anytime you want a slayer teaching job, let me know. I got connections here. :)

I don't know what I'm going to do next. Go back to school, maybe. Get a degree in... slaying. Just kidding. There has to be something I can get a degree in. I look at Willow, and she's got this triple major in Ancient History, Computer Science, and Paranormal Studies, and it's so amazing. She has so many enthusiasms, you know? And I don't have any. Not good at much of anything but slaying. And that's kind of a flooded market lately!

Anyway, Giles is telling me I have to go to some meeting, so I better sign off. Just wanted to touch base and say hi and all that. I hope you're well. Well, of course you're well. You're always well.

Say hi to everyone for me and tell me all the gossip and news. Andrew says hi, and Giles says something else about football that probably you ought to hear in person, and Willow says may the Goddess be with you. (She really did say that. I gave her a chance to retract it, but she said that's what she wanted to say.)

Miss you!
Love, Buffy

So it was one of the stupidest emails ever, and I got a little too revelatory in there maybe. But I said Miss you! and Love and you're really hot. Okay, I said Dawn's schoolmates probably thought he was really hot, but I thought he'd know that I meant I thought he was really hot. (I'd found this website some girl at W&H did, spikeylove.com, and there were a bunch of photos of him, and some sketches too, so I guess it was on my mind, how good he looked. Did he look that good when I was with him? Oh, and on the website it promised there'd be a video of Spike singing with the band, so I checked back every day. No video yet.)

And I didn't let myself get mad. It was all perky and cheerful and open. He couldn't help but answer. But just in case, I went to amazon.com and ordered him a little present. The website gave me this crazy idea, and I just went with it. I had it shipped overnight, and sure enough, in the morning there was an email from him. He didn't respond to my perky email and its many questions. But he responded to the gift.

To: chosen1@hitmail.com
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk
Subject: camera

What's this about, Slayer?

I gritted my teeth and fired off a reply. A very nice, unfrontational reply.

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: Re: Camera
What do you mean, what's this about? It's a gift. For you. For your birthday.

Love, Buffy

About three minutes passed. I still had a couple fingernails left.

To: chosen1@hitmail.com
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk
Subject: Re: re: camera

I'm a vampire. I don't have a birthday. Besides, you don't even know when it is.
I smiled. It was probably sort of a hard, grim smile. A Slayer smile.

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: Re: re: Camera
I do so know when your birthday is. It says it on your website. March 21. Right under that incredibly luscious picture of you with the silver chain around your neck.
Love, Buffy

He was such easy prey for a slayer like me.

To: chosen1@hitmail.com
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk
Subject: Re: re: re: Camera
That's six months away.
So you like that photo, do you?

S

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: Re: re: re: re: Camera
This is a belated gift. For your last birthday. We were way too busy to deal with that then, right? Anyway, it's a digital camera, and you can take pictures and email them to me. You know, like of the band. And your apartment. And anything else you see that you think would interest me.

Yes, I like that photo. When was it taken? Recently? It's kind of hard to tell with a vampire, whether it was last year or last week. But I know it wasn't last year. You were awfully thin last year. And this picture looks like you've been seriously working out. I have too. Not just training, but weight training. You should see my biceps. And my triceps. So take me some pictures. Otherwise I'll think you didn't like your present. And I know you did. It's nice getting presents.
Love, Buffy

I was feeling maybe too bold, making demands, bragging about my biceps. Expecting too much. But a day later, I got this:

To: chosen1@hitmail.com
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk
Subject: Re: re: re: re: Camera
Thanks, pet.

I was sitting in Giles's little breakfast nook with my borrowed laptop on the table in front of me when I saw this. Giles was making something really gross and English—baked beans on toast— and happened to glance back over his shoulder at me. He made a heavy sigh. "You haven't started emailing Spike again, have you?"

"Why do you say that?" I asked, guiltily rubbing the tears off my face.

"What did he say?"
And then I said to Giles what I shouldn't say to anyone except maybe Dawn, who would understand. But Dawn was 6000 miles away. Giles was right here. And he did ask. "He called me pet."

"Ah." It contained a lot more meaning than just Ah. He didn't really need to elaborate, but he did. "I am wondering what you're planning to do about Angel. I had understood that you planned to return to California to be with him."

His voice was really even. So even that I understood how deep his disapproval was. Sure, he probably wasn't all that happy about Spike calling me pet, or me weeping like a big girl's blouse (that's something Spike used to say-- don't ask me what it means, other than weeping a whole bunch). But that unhappiness was totally overwhelmed by his unhappiness at the prospect of me going back to Angel.

Just as well that it didn't seem likely. I practically threw myself at Angel a couple days ago, offering to come further his journey, just in case, you know, the Powers were going to punish Spike somehow if journey furtherance slowed down because of me being here. And Angel turned me down.

I wasn't actually having a great month. Neither of these two exes who were supposed to love me seemed to want to be around me.

"I'm not thinking of being with anyone," I said firmly. "Independent woman here. Don't need a man anymore than a fish needs a bicycle."

"But a fish doesn't need--" Giles's voice trailed off as he got what I meant. He went back to warming up his baked beans.

So I went back to my email. Maybe Spike didn't want to see me, but he'd accepted my gift, right? It was the first gift I ever gave him (the amulet didn't count), and that meant something.

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: Re: re: re: re: Camera

You're welcome! Now you have to send me some photos. You can just attach them to the email. See, this is a digital camera, and the photos are files, just like any other file. So you can email them. You just install the software, hook the camera up to the PC, and save the photos into a folder. It's easy. So send me something!
Love, Buffy

I'd kind of forgotten how sensitive Spike was about technology. I mean, he might have stuck with a 30-year-old car and a 20-year-old TV, but he never wanted anyone to think he wasn't up on the latest gear. And he was, with video games. And I have to admit last year he programmed the DVD player he stole from an abandoned house. The clock was always off about twelve minutes, but that was sort of charming, and we all adjusted.

Anyway, an hour or so later, I got this reply. Kind of touchy.

To: chosen1@hitmail.com
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk
Subject: Re: re: re: re: Camera
Attachment: demonbody.jpg

I figured out how to do the camera even without your directions. Or reading the manual either. And I took a picture of the kill we had tonight. Charlie dusted a vamp too, but you know those damned vamps. Don't leave much evidence for a photoshoot. So we had to go out and find a Lattice demon...
who was snacking on pet dogs. Charlie thought it was sort of penny-ante, but I told him I needed a photo. So here you go. Not much light, sorry. Dark outside.

S

We were back to initials, or he was anyway. Here I was signing every email Love, Buffy, and he wasn't even signing his name.

But he did call me pet. Once.

And I liked the photo of Charles Gunn standing with his foot on the chest of an ugly purple thing.

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: Re: re: re: re: Camera

Thanks for the jpg! Next time have Gunn take the photo so I can see you all triumphant and conquering, okay?

I wrote a bunch of other stuff, just light stuff, just friend stuff. I had to keep it light, I knew, or I'd scare him off. And it worked. He replied real quick, telling me about the band and the performance they had coming up, and how there was a vamp pimp they were trying to get ("but don't say anything to Angel, okay, because he doesn't like us going out on our own fighting crime and evil--wants us to do it the corporate way"... like I'd say anything to Angel, right?). It was so much like old times, like when we'd patrol and trade demon stories--we were friends again.

It felt good.

And then my incoming-email bell binged, and I thought maybe it was something else from Spike, and it made me feel even more good that he'd spend so much time emailing me when he was working on getting that vamp-pimp.

But it was from Giles--he had left an hour ago to go to the Council headquarters. I didn't know why he'd email me instead of call me, but there it was. The subject line kind of chilled me.

To: chosen1@hitmail.com
From: rgiles@council.co.uk
Subject: Spike

Buffy, I meant to say this at breakfast, but lost my courage. I wish you would think about what you want, what purpose you are pursuing with this Spike correspondence. He must have some reason for steering clear of you, and that reason can only be to protect you from some danger. You know I am not an advocate of his, but I cannot deny that his first priority is your well-being. Before you proceed with your communication, do consider what the consequences could be.

You must know that I, like Spike, have only your best interests at heart.

Giles, I thought grimly. Always concerned with consequences. That was why he was a watcher and not a slayer. Slayers had to act on instinct, on intuition. And both my instinct and my intuition were telling me to reach out to my old friend. I reached out to Giles, didn't I? And Willow too? And they'd both done wrong. Spike... Spike did right. I could hardly withhold the hand of friendship from him, could I?

So I replied to Giles, very restrained and mature, thanking him for his concern and assuring him that I would certainly consider what he'd said. He copied back my email and added the single phrase, "Just so," which I think is British for "yeah, right, pull the other leg."

But I actually did consider it. What was my purpose? Well, I wanted to be Spike's friend. Again.
We'd been through a lot together, the two of us, starting when we were enemies and then reluctant allies. We finally achieved, in that last year, something like friendship. I certainly trusted him, and I thought he trusted me.

I know Giles probably thought I was after Spike. Physically, I mean. Or romantically. But I decided he was wrong. That was only one phase of our long relationship, and not by any means the best phase. We didn't need to return to that to have a real connection. After all, we spent those last three nights together, holding each other, and we didn't need sex then. Yeah, I know when I told him I loved him, he said I didn't, but I thought he might now understand that love comes in different forms, and I felt one of those forms for him.

I'd kind of gone off sex anyway. I'd lived for two months with Angel without it really being an issue, without even thinking much about ... about wanting. I have to admit, I wanted him to get rid of that curse, but mostly as a sign of devotion. I guess I wanted to think that I was more important to Angel than –

Well, than his mission, I guess. Maybe even his soul. Than anything. But it wasn't sex really I wanted. Just some big dramatic show of love.

It was kind of moot now. And anyway, that part of me that used to want sex had kind of shut down. I couldn't say why. But I could almost get why Angel didn't bother to get rid of the curse. Sex was more trouble than it was worth.

(I thought it would be, you know, compatible if Spike felt the same way, I mean, if the sex-wanting part of him had also shut down. Not that he wasn't free to seek other entertainment. He was. But his taste in women, well, it wasn't so good. Drusilla, and Harmony, just to name two. And Anya and Faith. I know he never did it with Faith, but if I'd been out of the picture entirely, well, she would be in the picture right away. In fact, she'd emailed me right after she heard Spike was back, kind of probing to see if I still considered him my property. Well, of course I didn't consider him my property, but I probably sort of implied that she'd really be better off leaving him alone. Not that I was trying to interfere with his right to roam or anything. But he really did kind of have dangerous taste in women. Killers, all of them, even the ones who weren't slayers. So it would really work, for him and for us, if he went off sex too and came to appreciate those other forms of love, right?)

(Yeah, probably I belong on that list of unfortunate Spike choices.)

All I knew was, I could have a perfectly good relationship with Spike without ever taking him back to bed.

But I wasn't sure I wanted a perfectly good relationship with Spike without ever seeing him again.

The next email sounded like he was questioning it too.

**To: chosen1@hitmail.com**
**From: spike666@manunited.co.uk**
**Subject: Re: re: re: re: Camera**

*Look, Buffy, this isn't going to work. I can't see you, and so why should we bother with this? You got your life, and I got my unlife. Let's let the past stay the past.*

*S*

This made my heart hurt. Really. My chest just ached. The past. We weren't the past. We still had a relationship. Okay, it was all in email, but that was by his choice, not mine. I'd be happy to talk to him on the phone. Even better if it was one of those camera phones so I could see him as we talked. Heck, I'd be fine with getting together every now and then, face to face, maybe going out patrolling.
He was the one who wouldn't link any way but email.

Yet another email I had to save to a secret file and replace with something neutral.

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: Re: re: re: re: Camera

Did Giles contact you? Because that sure sounds like what he's been saying to me. We're friends. I'm not going to stop being friends.

Love, Buffy

To: chosen1@hitmail.com
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk
Subject: Re: re: re: re: Camera

I don't want to be friends.

Giles came home and found me all huddled up on the couch. He stood in the doorway, shaking his head, shaking off the raindrops. "Buffy." He set his umbrella on the mat and took off his trenchcoat. He brought out a handkerchief and removed his glasses and wiped the mist of the lenses. His movements were all deliberate and careful. Finally, he came and took a seat in the armchair across from me.

"Tell me," he said, "did you cry this much when you were shagging him?"

And that made me sit up. Shagging was a Spike term, and just like when Giles said Bloody hell, which he said a lot more than shagging, I had that weird disorientation and had to remind myself that they were both English, and that's why they talked so alike sometimes.

And Giles never talked about shagging, at least to me. So I kind of glared at him, like he'd broken a rule. And then I answered him. "No. I never cried then." Well, maybe the once with Tara. But I didn't want to talk about that time, because it always reminded me of his face after I'd hurt him-- "I wasn't in a crying mood then." He cried. I remembered that. But I never did.

Giles studied me carefully. "You didn't seem to give way after he died either."

I remembered that bleak time. That's what it was. Bleak. "I wasn't feeling much of anything then. But I guess I cried once, with Dawn." Grudgingly I said, "I don't let go until it's safe to let go. You know that."

"So why are you letting go now? What did he say to you?"

I hugged my legs to my chest and put my wet face against my knees. "He said he didn't want to be friends."

"He didn't want to be just friends? Well, surely you knew that."

"No. He didn't want to be friends at all. He said that the past was done."

Gently he said, "Perhaps the way he needs it to be."

I stayed stubbornly silent, and finally he said, "You did without him a long time. You can do it
"But--" But I couldn't tell him about the Spike shortcut on my mental desktop, about the talks we had after he was gone, about how he was in me when he wasn't in the world. The truth was, if I lost him now, I wouldn't even have that.

I wiped my face off and stood up. "I'll just convince him that I can be a good friend, that it's worth having me that way if not any other." I started back towards my laptop, then stopped and looked back at Giles. "I'm a good friend, aren't I?"

He smiled. "Very."

"I just have to remind him of that."

And so I embarked on my crusade of friendship. I bombarded him with friendship. I sent him funny jokes and downloads of songs he'd like (I had to consult with Giles about this, the history of London punk not being something they taught at Sunnydale High), and pictures of demons from our past, ones that I thought might bring back good slaying memories. And I found this great poetry site with everything Keats ever wrote, and I actually read some of the poems, and I picked out some appropriate lines and put them on my signature line, kind of casual and subversive, like I signed all my emails with scraps of poetry. Like:

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: Remember this one?
Attachment: galaxdemon.jpg

Remember this demon, Spike? It was the one we found in Fieldcrest Graveyard, living in that mausoleum. He had a barbecue out back, and used to grill his victims. And we killed him and you took the barbecue for Clem and I thought that was about as gross as could be. But Clem didn't mind.

Anyway, here's a good picture from that demons4ever.com.

Love, Buffy

Bright Star! would I were steadfast as thou art—
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night,
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like Nature's patient sleepless Eremite.
John Keats

I spent all night doing this. No response till morning, when I got this:

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: Stop

Slayer, this has got to stop. Your demon jpegs ignited the W&H firewall and got me all in trouble with the IT department, and I got to stay on their good side so they'll keep lending me laptops and PCs when I break the ones I got. So stop sending me all those attachments.

S

I'd fought with him enough to know when I had him in a headlock. He knew it too.

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: Re: Stop
I'll stop when you say we can still be friends. I promise not to be obnoxious about seeing you. We'll just do email. Maybe chat sometime. I won't even ask for a phone call.

Just email buddies.
Okay?
Love, Buffy

Have ye tippled drink more fine
Than mine host's Canary wine?
John Keats

To: chosen1@hitmail.com
From: spike666@manunited.co.uk
Subject: Re: re: Stop
Okay. I give up. Just stop screwing up the firewall. I'm about to win the online Final Fantasy regional tournament, and if the IT guys shut me down, they'll call me a forfeit, which is practically like being called a coward.
Besides, I got this nice little fencing operation going– I get their three-month old castoff laptops and sell them in the back alley. You're jeopardizing that too. You always did make it hard for me to be bad.
Spike

I tried to be a gracious winner.

To: spike666@manunited.co.uk
From: chosen1@hitmail.com
Subject: Friends again
Well, far as I'm concerned, you can fence all of the Evil Corp's goods you want, as long as you don't get caught. Now how about a mp3 of the band, with you singing, okay? Just to pay me back. I mean, you might as well shut down the Council's firewall as revenge, huh?
Love, Buffy
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.
John Keats

So he sent me an mp3, and it was really inappropriate, because it was this song about sex, and we were supposed to have transcended that totally. But maybe it was the only vocal he had recorded. I put headphones on– last thing I wanted was Giles or a visiting slayerette to hear this– and I tried to listen to the voice and not the words. Too bad the voice was so... physical. Sexual. There was this kind of growl that he used to make when–

Well, anyway, I listened to it, and the second time I got to thinking about that gig he said the band had last night (well, it would be yesterday morning London time, unless it was tomorrow morning London time– sometimes I got confused). And I thought of him singing this song. I hit replay, and I closed my eyes, and I sort of made a mental music video of him fighting to this music:

Knockin' me out with those American thighs
Taking more than her share
Had me fighting for air
'She told me to come but I was already there
'Cause the walls start shaking
The earth was quaking
My mind was aching
And we were makin it and you -
Shook me all night long
Whoa. The fighting video kind of morphed into a... well, another kind of video. And I opened my eyes and shook my head hard and banished the pictures to where they belonged. Only he was still singing in the headphones, all growly and purry, and I could just imagine him on stage, and what his hips would be doing, and his eyes, and--

Then I got this emailed picture from him. My virus filter tried to reject it a couple times, but it kept coming back until finally, after an hour on the phone to my own IT department (that is, Willow), I found a way to grab it before the virus-check grabbed it. No virus anyway. And no message. Just the picture. It was a pile of dust. I'm not kidding. There was this shiny parquet floor, like a dance floor, and the leg of a table and chair in the background, and a pile of dust about the size of a sandwich. Vamp dust– I've seen enough to recognize it.

I quick sent a reply demanding to know whose dust that was. No quick reply back. Finally I went to bed, but I got up every hour or so to check my messages. Nothing. I sent another three or four or ten emails, and finally got one back: Wolframandhart.com doesn't like this address. Okay, it was just one of those nutso Window trouble messages, and probably what it meant was that Spike tried to download his mail and it overloaded the server or ran into the firewall or something. But--

I picked up the phone and called the secretary who handles the Council travel arrangements, and when I got my breath back, I ordered a ticket on the next flight to LAX.
I stashed the kid in Cordelia's apartment. The ghost that used to reside there had given—am I really going to say this? Yeah, I guess I am. Given up the ghost finally, waiting for Cordelia to come back.

I told the kid anyway, told him the place was haunted. But he's one of those modern skeptical kids, you know? Everything has to be proved. He accepted the fact of vampires – Spike was proof enough of that. But far as he was concerned, that didn't prove anything else. Ghosts, demons, werewolves, he didn't believe in any of them. He didn't disbelieve— or at least he didn't call me a liar to my face. But he was reserving judgment.

These damned kids. No respect for their elders.

So... what Angel don't know won't hurt him. Remember? Spike and me agreed on that. So everyone was sworn to silence. We had to figure out who Connor was and why he was and how he was, before we let Angel know about him. It was for the kid's own safety— if Wes was right, then Angel had already done him in once. Best not give him another chance, until we had no choice.

Yeah. I know. Weird to be talking about Angel that way. Like he was a stone killer. But ever since he did what he did to Spike, well, I'd been warier of him than I'd been since I first met him. It's not that he was evil. But he was so full of conflict. He could do something like that and in his head make it work— "I killed him, but that doesn't mean he's not mine." That just kept coming back to me, the way he'd said that.

I didn't tell Spike. But I knew Spike would understand what Angel meant. I just wasn't sure I was ready to hear his explanation.

We still didn't have much clue about Connor, only that he lived a normal life until last summer, when he started having weird dreams of killing and chasing and being chased on some primitive world. Cordelia was no help. She retreated almost immediately into her semi-comatose state, and ended up back in her bed with a bunch of cables attached, measuring her respiration and heartbeat. No one believed her anymore – even the nurses doubted the machines that kept saying she was unconscious. But short of hauling her out of bed and torturing her, we couldn't think of a way to make her talk. She must have some reason for retreating, that's all we could figure out. At least she'd confirmed that Connor was important, and that Angel had killed him. Somehow.

Spike and I stood just inside her room the evening after his return, arguing. I was all for going over there and ripping off the heart monitor and demanding that she talk. I mean, I didn't believe her anymore, didn't believe in this coma shit. And facing the truth, whatever it was, would help her regain her old self.

But Spike just stood there looking all sad and martyred. He did that really well since he'd come back. He looked so sacrificial and almost saintly, like being dusted by Angel was some rite of passage to a higher state. "We should just love her," he said, gazing down at Cordelia. "She needs love. Forgiveness. But mostly love. Love will bring her back."

"That's it!" I turned and went out the door. "I'm having Harmony cancel the Lifetime Network on your TV! Too many goddamn Highway to Heaven reruns!"

Spike went to the bed and whispered something, probably Don't listen to him, dearest St. Cordelia, we all love you unconditionally, and finally met me out in the hall. "So, Charlie," he said, still with that saintly look on his face and his hand in his jacket pocket, "you wanna smoke this Sumatran
before or after the rehearsal tonight?"

Hadn't changed a bit. At least in the important respects.

We waited until after the rehearsal, and we took Harmony off to Spike's flat for a planning session. Harmony had one drag, and coughed so much you'd swear she had virgin-pink sensitive lungs, and then she giggled more than usual, which is a lot. So I cut her off the boo, earning one of those pouts. But then Spike got her a mug of blood and some fruit rollups, and she settled back down for our strategizing.

I produced my little notebook. "Okay, the phone number we got off that business card. Belongs to a Wednesday Enterprises. And that's owned by a stack of different corporations, one owning the next."

"And at the top of the stack is--" Spike was a lousy audience for suspense. He never had any patience.

Just to punish him, I drew it out. "There's Friday that owns Wednesday. And Look-see that owns that." Finally I gave over. "And at the top of the stack is a corporation named Loki Development."

Harmony and Spike exchanged looks, assuring each other that they were both clueless.

"And the treasurer of that corporation is ..." Drum roll please. (Where is Clem when you need him, huh?) "Daniel Eades."

"Oh, yeah!" Spike said. "I remember him. Goalkeeper for the Irish National Team."

"No." I gave him a levelling look. "Son of one of the named partners of ..." Harmony, at least, was holding her breath. Not that she had a breath. But her bosoms were pushed out like her chest was filled with air. I tore my gaze from the sight. "Lewis Danham and Eades."

"Whoa!" Harmony said.

"So who the hell is Lewis Danham N. Eades?" Spike demanded.

"AND Eades," Harmony replied scornfully. "They're just like our biggest competitors in the representation of evil entities industry. Geez. Don't you ever read the LA Business Report?"

Spike gave her a look that said No wasn't a strong enough word. "So you're saying?"

"I'm saying that this isn't some little fly-by-night pimp organization. LDE charges $500 an hour even for associate time."

"Gee, Charlie," Harmony said, "you ought to apply for a job there. What do they pay the exec assistants, you know?"

"No, I don't know," I said sharply. "And you're not leaving here, not while Angel's still half-crazy."

"So ..." Spike said consideringly. "So let's say we shut down this pimp organization. Okay, that's saying a lot, yeah. But say we do. And Lewis Dummy and Evil loses a client, and its billing. That's good, right? Make Angel happy? Give us a raise and a corner office?"

"I already got a corner office," I said. "And I got a raise last month."

Harmony chimed in, "I got a raise too, not to mention my year-end bonus."
"I didn't get any raise. Or a bonus either." Spike did his sulk thing. Not a pretty sight, though Harmony thought it was, and did that cooing thing women do with him. I got to learn how he makes 'em do that. He always swore he didn't have the thrall, but he has the pout.

"Spike," I said. "You're not even employed by W&H, remember? You said you'd sooner work for Michael Eisner and Mickey Mouse." This didn't preclude his having a credit card and an expense account along with his demon-management contract. (That's what they called sending Spike out every night to smash in demon faces and then get smashed himself at that Irish pub of his.) "Anyway, let's focus." That was hard to do, after a couple tokes. Spike had the best source in town, a guy in the Client Records department down in the third sub-basement. He had a whole vault dedicated to his garden, with grow lights and special misting fans. Or so I hear. I'm officially incognizant and without liability.

"Focus," Harmony echoed, and giggled.

"If we're going to shut down the organization, we have to go beyond the vamp-pimp himself, right?"
Spike said, "So Harmony calls him and insists that she meet with his boss."

"And he'll go along with that why?"

"Because Harm doesn't trust vamps, especially those of the lesser orders."
Harmony kind of hung her head. "But, Spike– I mean, I could be one of the lesser orders."

"You're an Aurelian!" Spike said. "The best order of them all. Except maybe the Julians are higher. Maybe. Only because they're more prolific, and get better press."

"I'm no Aurelian. I'm no anything."

"How's he supposed to know that, huh? He knows you work for Angelus, the Master of Aurelius. And if a Master has an executive assistant, it's usually a relative. They don't need to know that Angelus has alienated every relative he ever had."

"Oh! And you're the Childe of Aurelius, and you're my ex. He knows that too."

"And everyone knows we Aurelians stick to our own kind. You know, me and Dru, and Angelus and Darla, and the old Master and Phillippe–"

"Phillippe?" I couldn't help myself. It was like reading Star Magazine in the checkout line. "The old Master's love interest was named Phillippe?"

"Well, yeah. He was the same cohort as Darla. He'd been a dancing master at the French court when the Master turned him. But Angelus dusted him." Spike glanced around like the walls might be bugged. And who knows. They might be. "No one's supposed to know that. I was guarding the door when he did it. Did it for Darla."

Fascinating as this ancient vamp history was, I had to keep us on task. "So Harmony says she's Aurelian. Who sired her?"

"Heck, make it Dru. She'd like Harmony."

"Gee, thanks, Spike," Harmony said, though me myself? I don't think I'd want Drusilla, Queen of the Bonkers, to like me.
"Well, she always goes for the pretty face, does Dru." Spike shrugged modestly, and started to name some other pretty faces Dru had gone for, and Harmony preened like she'd just been selected for America's Top Model, to get to be known as Dru's get.

They were laughing and joking about it. About being turned. About dying and rising again as a goddamned vampire. I couldn't stand it. I got up—almost knocking over a two-liter bottle of Cherry coke—and said, "Where's your cell, Harmony? You got to call him tonight. Make sure he brings his boss to the performance."

Harmony located her cellphone and punched in the number I read to her from the vamp-pimp's card. I pulled out my little notebook and started scrawling a script for her. But she did pretty well on her own, putting on her petulant Valley-girl voice and demanding to talk to the big boss, because she was an Aurelian and she didn't deal with minions.

It took a while, but the vamp-pimp agreed to bring along his supervisor, if Harmony would agree to go out with them afterwards. And to bring another chick along.

She hung up and made a face. "Like who am I going to bring, huh?"

"With any luck, we'll have dusted them all before the end of the performance," Spike said.

"Yeah, right," Harmony said. "I hope so. Otherwise we're going to have to get Fred in on this, and ...

"Nah," I broke in. "We're not going to endanger Fred. Worse comes to worst, we'll stick a wig and a dress on old Spike here. After all, he's the one with the pretty face, right?"

Spike growled at this, but I noticed he didn't refuse. And Harmony was eying him like she was a dressmaker and he was a dressmaker's dummy. She had his size all figured out, and she probably knew what kind of panty-hose he needed too.

Harmony wanted more info about the Lewis Danham and Eades associate, and so I pulled out my Blackberry and wirelessed up to the big server and downloaded his bio and photo from the legal registry. We were trying to figure out what his department (mergers and acquisitions) had to do with vamp prostitution, when the text on my Blackberry faded and the connection winked out. "Damn," I said. "The server lost it."

Spike looked panicky, muttered something about checking his email, and headed back into his bedroom. "Probably got some Grand Theft Auto tournament going," I observed, "and he's worried he lost the connection too."

Harmony grabbed the Blackberry from me and tried to reconnect, but no luck. Spike came out a few minutes later, cussing under his breath about the bloody stupid firewall and John Keats and women who wouldn't give up and go away, and started yanking on his boots.

Harmony made a face at me and mouthed "Slayer".

"Spike," I said, in my I'm the law here voice, "we're having a strategy meeting now."

"Yeah, well, see how much strategizing you get done when the whole W&H server crashes and you lose all your pleadings and demon client billings and your expense check goes to the Katmandu office."

Harmony and I exchanged glances, and then we both headed for the exits, Spike right behind us, his boots still untied.
Well, no surprise, the server crash turned out to be Spike's fault. To keep him in laptops, Harmony had to promise the IT crew that she'd bill their nightly pizza as an otter blood delivery.

Wes got nowhere with his Connor research. Nowhere much, anyway. "Lilah's involved," he told me as we walked through the dusk to Lorne's club. "I can sense it. I can see her bloodred fingerprints all over this."

"Maybe I can get the Replanning division working on conjuring Lilah up," I said.

"No." Wes said this harshly, and then, in case I hadn't gotten the message, said it again. "No. We don't need Lilah. But she's involved. I know it."

"Angel too." I glanced behind me, just checking. But this was LA. No one walked, especially not Angel. "He knows, I know he knows. When I told him the name Connor was spraypainted on his car, well, he couldn't get there fast enough. The name means something to him. Something big."

"But Angel– Lilah. I can't believe–"

"Come on, Wes," I said. "What do you think we're doing here?" I gestured back at our building, all glass and steel, reflecting the streetlights as they came on one by one. Stupid how proud I was of that place. "He cut some deal with Lilah. Maybe the Senior Partners needed the kid taken out, and Angel killed him in exchange for the firm."

"But he's here. Connor. We met him."

"Yeah, and Spike's here too, a week after Angel killed him." We stopped in front of the club, both of us waiting for the other to say it. Finally I said it. "The boy says last summer, everything started going wrong for him. He started feeling like he was someone else. That's the same time we thought we'd won the big war and the big prize."

"So what are you saying?"

"Maybe that kid– maybe somehow Connor got inserted into that boy. I don't know. His spirit maybe. And maybe he's the price we paid."

Wes brooded on this for awhile, his hand on the door handle. "But we didn't pay it."

"Well, Angel did."

"Angel wouldn't. He wouldn't kill a boy to gain an advantage. None of us would."

It annoyed me, how Wes couldn't just look straight at the truth. How he had to pretend that we were some great moral force, and so we weren't even capable of doing wrong. Of course we were. We could be deluded and blind, just like anyone else. Difference was, we faced it when we had to. "We can't even remember."

"Precisely. If that happened," Wes said stubbornly, "we'd remember."

I imitated his poncey tone. "Precisely not. The fact we can't remember– that we don't know how the hell we ended up running W&H– that's evidence that something happened." Brooding was contagious. I felt it coming on me too, that gloom and dread.
I pushed Wes aside and pulled open the door to Caritas. It was bright in there— the house lights were up, and the tables were set up nice and shiny, and Spike was standing on the stage with Kenny. They were tuning their guitars, but Spike stopped when he saw us. He unstrapped his bass and set it aside and bounded off the stage. Took him about three steps to reach us, and pretty soon he had an arm around each of us and his mouth was doing that mile-a-minute thing he does, and the speed added to the accent made it impossible for me to understand. But Wes was English, and I guess could understand that language, and he said, "Yes, yes, we'll make certain of that, you may be sure."

I pulled away from them, suspicious, because let's face it, Wes had dropped all his old antagonism to Spike. I mean, all Spike had to do was be dusted and come back, and Wes was putty in his hands. I wasn't sure what Wes had just promised, but I thought it might have to do with giving Spike another song. "You said Lorne and I were going to split most of the lead singing."

"Yeah, yeah," Spike said. "But what are you lawyers always saying about verbal contracts? Worth the paper they're printed on?" He smiled at me, and said in his wheedling tone, "Just one more song. And it's important." He gave that last word particular emphasis, so I was supposed to understand that his singing this song was absolutely essential to our vanquishing the vamp pimp.

"What's the song?" I growled. "We haven't rehearsed anything new."

He looked away and mumbled something that sounded weirdly like "hot stuff". But it couldn't be that. Spike and disco? I yanked him away from Wes and said, "What?"

Spike glanced over at the stage, where Lorne was adjusting the vocalist's microphone. To his height. I resolved to get over there and fix it to my own height before we got started. "What's Lorne got to do with it?"

"Like we discussed?" I repeated.

"Yeah. Had to tell Lorne because he's got wards on this place, remember? To keep violence to a minimum?"

I vaguely remembered something like that, but that was some pretty good Sumatran we'd shared the other night. "Okay. So he's going to cut the wards?"

Spike nodded. "But there's more. Lorne said he knew that vampgirl that came in with the pimp last week. Said she used to come to the old Caritas, when she was still human."

"Yeah, so?" I was looking over his shoulder, watching Lorne arrange the whole stage to his specifications. Now he was picking up the clipboard with the songlist, and he made a sharp slash of his pen, and I knew, just knew, he was cutting my Jay-Z cover.

"So she used to get up and sing karaoke. Lorne said she sang like Donna Summers. Big bluesy voice."

I turned my attention back to him. "And that helps us how?"

"She's a vampire. Strong. If we get her away from the pimp before we go after him and his boss, then that's less we have to fight through to get the boss. So I'm thinking we sing something she likes, and get her up on stage, and then do our thing."

This sounded perfectly plausible, and I would have accepted it no problem, except that Spike wouldn't look me in the eye. "What aren't you telling me?"
He looked down, all furtive. "Well, we got to do Hot Stuff. You know. The song. And you have to sing backup."

"Me? Backup? But it's not my – why not Lorne?"

"Lorne's the one got to go down and get her to join us on stage." He smiled. "Come on, Charlie. It's all for the cause. You know the song?"

So maybe my mother used to play that song sometimes. So maybe I spent a couple hours– okay, a couple years-- thinking Donna Summers was pretty hot stuff herself. "I can probably remember the chorus," I said grudgingly.

Already there was a crowd forming at the door– mostly our fan club members, but some outsiders too. Wes was being all serious, noodling Chopin or something like that on his keyboard and pretending like it was just to warm up, not to impress the intellectual chicks. Angel was over at the side, fiddling with the videocam like, you know, he was making a documentary about the band or something and had to get the cinematography just right. David Nabbit was off behind a speaker, popping downers– okay, probably they were just aspirin, but he was definitely taking some pills.

Spike disappeared for ten minutes, and next thing I knew, Angel was putting away his cell phone and tearing out of there. I chuckled, wondering which of Angel's cars Spike had just vandalized or stolen. But it bought us some time without Angel figuring out we were free-lancing.

And then, as the crowd filed in, pushing and laughing, I saw another reason why Spike had diverted Angel right out the door. The kid was there in the wings, trying to hide behind Fred and her sound equipment. I shot Spike a glance, and he shrugged a "what can you do" shrug. Okay, probably the kid was way bored off in that apartment, nothing but videogames and cable TV to keep him occupied. And Spike had bragged to him about the band. And the kid was good muscle, scrawny as he was, and maybe we'd need him. But Spike was taking a hell of a chance. Angel might decide the car wasn't that important (okay, this was Angel– cars were always important) and come back to his camera, and see the kid.

But he was doing a pretty good job of staying out of sight. Next time I looked over towards Fred, Connor was nowhere to be seen. Finally I located his face, just through the little glass window on the swinging door to the kitchen. Good to know– in case we needed him.

When the vamp-pimp strutted in with his long-legged girl, I gave the signal for us to go on. It was only as I was crossing the stage to the second microphone– Lorne had confiscated the wireless and was walking around the crowd with it, doing his standup, being charming and hostlike and obnoxious– that I noticed the human guy who sat down at the vamp-pimp's front row table. He was a husky guy in an expensive suit– Versace?– and expensive shades that hid most of his face. He looked a bit familiar, but I couldn't place him. This was LA, however, and half the people on the street looked vaguely familiar. I mean, most of them had been extras or walkons on some show, right? I glanced over at Spike, and nodded towards the table, just to let him know that we had one more potential set of meaty fists out there.

The set went about as good as could be expected. Wes tried something fancy with Lady Marmalade, adding a fake saxophone to the mix, and I could tell our brass section– that is, David– was sort of annoyed by this usurpation. Spike tried this kind of Sinatra pose during his rendition of the Ramones' rendition of My Way, leaning against a speaker, and he almost knocked it over. Kenny forgot he was supposed to cue Harmony three bars before the guitar-smashing, and she barely made it out there with the cheap acoustic guitar before he did in his stratocaster. And with all those dangerous shard of maple flying around, Spike had to leap into the crowd, or anyway, he pretended like he had to. I think he was just missing the whole 80s mosh pit experience. At least this time he didn't take the
opportunity to bite a few mosher throats.

I kept a watch on that front table. The vamp-pimp was taking good care of the human, pouring him a glass of wine, ordering him some hors d'oeuvres, leaning in to catch every word. Laughing at his jokes. Obviously the human was the boss, or the moneyman. Something important. Yeah, well, that made sense—vamps weren't generally very ambitious, you get right down to it. Had to be a human planning it all out.

We were about half through the set when Harmony did her thing—coming out to the table just to say hi, shake hands, simper at the human. Audition, I guess, for the role. She was pretty good at it, playing the ho-wannabe, and the human was smiling and trying to get her to sit with them. Spike and I kept a close eye on him, just in case he should make some move on her. But when she made a gesture like she had to go back to work now, he let go of her hand like he didn't really want to, and she tapped her finger on her wrist like she was promising to be back when the set was done.

Yeah. She was good at it. Still made me nervous, her so close to those two guys who wanted to make her a slave— and so close to that girl who'd lost it all already.

But at least the vamp-girl was having fun, as much fun as she was likely ever to have again. She was tapping her silver-shod foot, and her hand kept kind of conducting as we sang. She even smiled once or twice, listening to us. And once I thought I saw her red mouth moving, like she was singing along with Clem.

Then Kenny started playing those first jangly chords, and Spike strode bassless to the front of the stage, seizing the microphone and singing out—"Sitting here eatin' my heart out, baby, waiting for some lover to call." And the crowd went wild. Who woulda thought it? I mean, disco? Spike? Big hit? But just like that, they were all on their feet, all the girls anyway, swaying real pretty and singing along. And Lorne was down there with his wireless mike, thrusting it at one girl and then the next, so they could sing the chorus— "I need some hot stuff, baby, this evening, gotta have some hot stuff baby tonight."

We went into extra choruses so Lorne had time to get over the vamp-girl. And—just like a real girl—she looked all surprised, and pointed at herself— me?—and smiled kind of bashful and pretty, and then she opened her mouth and belted it out—"Gotta have some hot stuff, gotta have some love tonight."

Whoa. It was like Aretha, man. I mean, she had a voice, a deep sexy voice. And she kind of gasped after she sang the line, like she was surprised, like she didn't realize she could still sing, now that she'd been vamped. And Lorne was playing it just right. He looked amazed, held up his hand like he was pope or something, gestured to the stage.

She glanced over at her pimp, and he shrugged. Good advertising, probably, his girl up there on stage showing off her long brown legs and her pretty ass in gold lycra. And so, laughing kind of shyly, she took Lorne's hand and followed him up on stage, right up to the center mike. And Lorne cut off all our singing with an imperious hand, and in the silence, he turned to her and said, "Seems to me you used to come up here and sing some song, let me see, something about raining men?"

Her face brightened. "Yeah," she said. Her speaking voice was real soft. Hint of Alabama there. Hard to believe she could belt it out like that. "It's Raining Men." And then, suddenly forgetting her shyness, she turned to Kenny and Wes. "You know that?"

Wes looked all guilty, and Kenny looked sheepish, like, you know, they should've known every note of some disco song as old as they were. But then there came the booming, clear notes of the song opening, and I turned to see David walking to the front of the stage, with his trumpet raised and his
cheeks puffed up with air. And the girl vamp gave him a nod, and burst into the first line—"Humidity is rising...barometer is getting low..."

And pretty soon Spike was grabbing me, and we were bumping with her up near the microphone, and the girls at the tables in front were raising their hands and shouting, "It's raining men, hallelujah, it's raining men, every specimen," and I started to think maybe a chick singer wasn't a bad idea, because seriously, these girls were getting into singing along and the guys, you could tell, were getting into the girls getting into it.

And this time it was me taking the microphone down there, shoving it at the girls in the front row, letting them sing along, and I was right at the table next to the pimp's when I glanced back to see Spike whispering in the singer's ear. And she glanced startled at him, and then, without missing a beat, started sashaying over to the side of the stage like she was going to dance with Kenny.

Damn. I knew right away what Spike was doing. Warning her. Now we didn't have much time. She was still singing, and Harmony had figured out what was up, and she'd come out onto the floor and taken the human pimp's hands and was trying to get him to dance. And I took a deep breath, grabbed back the mike from a girl, and yelled, "Now!"

I smashed the mike into the vamp-pimp's head, and a second later, Harmony shoved the human against the table. Spike leaped off the stage, the music still going behind him, and landed beside me, and I could see him mouth the word "three", meaning, I thought, that the girl had told him there were three vamp guards somewhere in the crowd. And there they were, right up in front of us all of a sudden, mean-looking guys, their wrinklies rough and brown over their slick suits.

One got hold of me, and the vamp-pimp started whaling at me, but Spike was right there, grabbing him by the necktie and swinging him around like a chain, knocking down the next table and a pitcher of beer onto two innocent patrons.

I was busy with the second vamp, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw the human scramble up and head for the kitchen, shoving past all the girls who were still singing loud and hard, even though Wes had stopped playing and Kenny was standing there staring and only Clem were still banging the rhythm. "Stop him!" I yelled, but the guy was pushing through the swinging metal doors, and the vamp had me around the neck, and I was too busy kicking at him, and trying to breathe, to say anything more.

In the narrow area between the front tables and the stage, Spike was working on both the vamp-pimp and one of the guards. He was used to more open space, and so was I, and usually we didn't have to worry about a dozen girls who thought this was all part of the show and were singing about raining men so loud we couldn't even yell to each other. I heard Harmony gasping behind me, and tried to turn and toss her a stake, but my vamp had hold of my arm and was trying his best to break it, and Wes landed next to me and was banging the mike stand on the vamp's head, only occasionally hitting me instead.

I wanted to help Harmony— even over the singing I could hear her sharp pants of pain, and I knew she must be right behind me— but I couldn't get my arm free enough to turn, and Wes had fallen to his knees, and Spike was getting pinned between his two vamps. Not that I was worried about Spike. He'd manage. But Harmony – she wasn't a fighter, for all that she was a vamp. And we'd got her into this, promised to protect her, and she was moaning now with pain—

"Harmony!" It was David, calling out, and I twisted free enough to see him jumping off the stage. He had something in his hand, and he held it out towards her.

I yanked my arm free and whirled to help her— just in time to see her plunge a shard of Kenny's
broken guitar into the chest of the vamp.

She crowed like she'd just won a gold medal, and I thought I wasn't going to get bested by some girl, even if she was a vamp, and I took tight hold of my stake and jammed it up, right into the ribcage of the vamp in front of me. And as the dust from two vamps settled over us, I yelled to Spike and flipped him my stake. And I pulled Wes up, and we went over there to help. But by that time, Spike had one vamp's head between his hands, and he wrenched, and this time the dust sort of splattered, and the girls all went ewww and jumped back. And the crowd went down like ninepins, the remaining vamp grabbing one girl to keep from falling. She was drunk, I guess, because she kept laughing, but he got his arm around her neck and bared his fangs at Spike.

Spike did a 360, pretty cool, right around the guy, slamming the stake into the guy's back. And the girl kept laughing, only now she was kind of choking too, as she got a good mouthful of vamp dust.

"The human!" I yelled, and pointed to the kitchen door. We both sprinted over there-- okay, Spike sprinted, I limped. I shoved open the door a few seconds later and saw Spike standing over the human, and Connor there, his fists bloody and his face smug. "Stopped him just like you said," he said, grinning.

He was stronger than he looked. The human pimp was stretched out on the gleaming tile floor, breathing raggedly, and moaning through a broken mouth.

Then I heard a thunderous voice just outside in the main room. "What the hell is this?"

It was Angel. "Get out of here!" I gave Connor a shove towards the back exit. "We'll call you later."

"Good work, mate," Spike said, giving him another shove. "Now go!"

An hour later, the patrons had all cleared out, and Lorne was in the corner on the cellphone to his insurance agent, just crying a little. We sat there amidst the wreckage-- well, Harmony and me sat at the one intact table, and Wes sat on the stage, and Spike stood over by the kitchen, fiddling with the camcorder. And Angel stalked. Back and forth. Back and forth. In front of us. Back and forth.

"And that human you beat to a pulp, Spike--" (we were letting Spike take the credit for the human, just so we wouldn't have to mention the C-word) "-- was Winston Snopes. One of our real estate clients."

"I thought he was with Lewis Danham," I said. "Our rivals."

Angel grudgingly allowed that Lewis Danham might be Snopes's corporate agent on a couple deals. "But he billed $240K for us last year!"

"We weren't even us last year." I drank down the last of my beer. Thirsty work, free-lancing. "W&H was our enemy, remember?"

"Well, now it's our employer." Angel stopped. Knew that didn't sound right. Sounded sort of patriarchal and senior-partnery. "I mean, it's our firm now."

"Yes," Wes said consideringly. It was the first time he'd spoken, although he kept shooting me and Spike nasty hurt looks. He thought we should have cut him in on this deal. I wanted to tell him, hey, bro, you want to be asked to demon-fight, you ought to do some demon-fighting, not just demon-
researching. But I think he got the message.

Now he was kicking the stage with his heels and turning that sharp look at Angel. "Yes. How is that, that our former enemy is our firm now? How did that come about?"

"That's not the point," Angel said in a quick way that told us it exactly the point. "The point is, Spike hospitalized an important client--"

"Who was vamping girls and turning them into prostitutes," Harmony said. She had some courage. I mean, she was the only one of us who could be fired. Wes and me and Lorne, we'd been with Angel from the beginning, and we had immunity. And Spike-- well, Spike was assigned by the Powers. Angel couldn't get rid of him if he tried, as we'd just found out. But Harmony was only Angel's assistant. Employment at will. He didn't even have to give her notice.

So I joined in, to give her some cover. "Yeah. We're supposed to be culling out the evillest clients anyway. That's all Spike was doing."

"Not like he's going to hire us again after that," Harmony said brightly. "Did you really break his jaw in three places?"

Spike shrugged modestly. Only fitting, considering he didn't break the guy's jaw in even one place.

Angel thought it best to change the subject. Now it was all about our free-lancing, keeping him in the dark, when he was the boss and responsible for everything we did. "And you keyed my Viper!" he said, glaring at Spike.

But Spike was bending over the camcorder, aiming it at the parquet floor. "Hey. Cool. I can make still photos on this thing too." He focused on a little pile of vamp dust-- I think it was my guy-- under one of the tables. And he stared at it for a minute while Angel fumed about the expensive paint-repair job and the downright sacrilege of--

"Just think," Spike said sadly, still focused on the pile of dust. "That's what I looked like, a week ago."

Spike sighed his new martyr sigh, and Angel stopped with his mouth open and then hung his head, and the rest of us exchanged grins. And in a minute or so, Angel was making his brooding way out, and we headed out too, leaving Lorne to his comforting insurance agent.

As we walked back to the W&H building, I noticed Spike had put on his leather coat. And sticking out of one pocket was something that gleamed silver and shiny-- the camcorder. Another addition to the growing Spike collection of expensive firm electronics.

Not my problem. Angel could deal with the demon-lady in Audiovisual.

Wes left us at the door of Spike's flat. "I'm going to go work out," he said, all grim. "On the punching bag."

"You do that," I said, giving him a thumbs-up. And maybe next time we'll include you, was my implication. Not a promise. Just an affirmation.

Spike flipped on the lights and, humming Hot Stuff, ushered us into his little living room. From an inside pocket of his coat-- that coat had a lot of pockets-- he pulled out a bottle of champagne and handed it over to me.

Very good champagne. A Pol-Roger... good stuff.
"Where'd you get this?"

He looked guilty, and mumbled something that Harmony and I took to mean that not only did we smash poor Lorne's club, we also raided his wine cellar. Oh, well. Insurance would pay for it all.

"Open it. I'll just be a mo--" and he crossed into the tiny office, pulling out his new camcorder as he went. Probably wanted to download whatever was captured of our great fight– but without Angel there to operate the camera, I figured not much was captured.

Harmony found some plastic glasses from the 7-11, and I got the cork off, and by the time Spike emerged, we were sitting on the floor, ready to toast.

"To us," I said. "The Gunn and Spike show."

Harmony kicked my foot. "The Harmony, Gunn, and Spike show, you mean."

"HGS." Spike was already done with his glass and pouring himself another.

"That's practically Hugs," Harmony said. "All we need is a member whose name starts with a U, and we could be the Hugs."

Spike and I nixed that right away. But then Spike said, "Uma Thurman begins with U."

"You're right," I said. "Hugs it is, then."

"Not that we need Uma," Spike said, tipping his glass towards Harmony. "Not with our Harm here."

The bubbles, and the adrenaline, had gone to my head, and I was feeling benevolent and woozy, so I said, "Yeah, Harmony. You were awesome. When you stuck that piece of guitar into the guy's chest, man, did you look fierce."

She just beamed, until Spike added, "Yeah. Game face and everything. Terrifying."

"Oh, no!" She touched her face, like it might still be all wrinkly. "You mean, I went into game face? Right in front of– in front of everyone?"

"Well, yeah. You looked like a warrior." Spike poured some more champagne into her glass. "You looked great."

"Well, sure. You'd say so." Harmony kind of wailed. "You're a vamp too! You probably thought it was cool!"

Spike regarded her with an annoyed look that slowly turned kind of thoughtful. "Everyone thought it was cool. Because it was cool. Wasn't she cool, Charlie?"

"Sure was," I said promptly, though I wasn't completely sure what I was agreeing too. Didn't matter. Didn't help. Harmony put her glass down on the coffee table and dropped her head into her hands. She even moaned.

Women. They were all alike, get down to it. Never wanted to be seen without their makeup. Even the vamps. Speaking of which-- "Hey. I saw you warn that vamp-girl to get out."

Spike just scowled.

I went on, "So you let her go undusted. Let her sneak out, huh?"
"Yeah." He put on that stubborn look again. Like I was second-guessing him. Dissing him. "So what?"

I leaned back against the couch and finished my glass of champagne. "So we need to track her down. See about her singing with the band. I could see a duet, me and her. Like Jay-Z and Beyonce."

And Spike looked surprised, and Harmony stopped moaning, and they both looked over at me.

They were both vampires. Both of ’em. And like it or not, we were a team. I wasn’t sure what that meant.
Harmony

After all the excitement, doing my Angel-assistant job was sort of an anti-climax. But at least I still had the job. Sure, Angel glared at me when I walked in the next morning, and he muttered something about goddamn free-lancers and undermining the firm mission. I just kept my eyes down and my smile up, and announced I had to copy that something or other, and I spent the whole morning in the Xerox room.

Gunn and Spike would protect me. I was sure of that.

Almost.

I waited till Angel left for a meeting, and then I went through the firm's client list. I should have recognized Winston Snopes, even if he was wearing dark glasses. Not that I would have done anything differently— the man deserved to go down— but if I'd known he was a client, I would have been better prepared to answer Angel's objections.

So I flipped through the thumbnail photos of our clients and committed them to memory. I sipped my thermos of blood, reading through Snopes's records— we really did bill a lot on that account, or used to anyway— and then, kind of sort of involuntarily, I put "David Nabbit" into the search field and brought up his client page.

It was kind of a nice photo of him, copyrighted to Forbes. (Hey, come on. It's an evil lawfirm. We can infringe on copyright all we want.) He was trying to smile, but in a shy way, and his dark hair was flopping over one eyebrow. And his hand was gripping a pen— just a regular Bic. He wasn't really an affected guy, you know? I mean, yeah, maybe he was a billionaire, but he didn't have to let everyone know it with everything he possessed. Bic was okay with him.

He held the pen like he held that guitar shard last night. Like a weapon. I sighed, thinking of how he kind of saved my unlife there— how quick he thought, how quick he acted. But he let me be the hero, notice that? He let me be the one who staked the vamp. How many guys would do that?

But then, he was so successful. He didn't need to prove himself. He could let me be the big warrior chick.

In game-face.

I sank my head down on the keyboard and groaned. And moaned. It was easy for Spike to say I looked good that way. He was used to it. Of course, look who he fell in love with— a human, with a face that stayed human all the time. (Though I have to say, Buffy looked sort of mean and thin and angry, last time I saw her. Might as well have a game-face.)

But I'd seen the look on David's face as he left last night. I didn't understand it at the time. I thought he was just worried about Angel coming down on the band. But now I figured it out— he was looking at me like he was scared of me. Like I made him nervous. Like he'd come face-to-face with my real face.

You know, I didn't choose this. I didn't choose to die at my high school graduation. I didn't choose to become a vampire. It just happened. And I suppose if I'd been real strong and moral and all that, I would have done the right thing and walked into the sunlight and burned my worthless evil self up.

But I didn't. I didn't do the right thing. Instead I tried to ... I don't know. Just go on. Survive the best I could. I wasn't a very good vampire, so here I was, trying pretty much to live like a good human, or
at least an okay human, working all day, sleeping at night, going to clubs instead of vamp rallies, learning Powerpoint and Excel and all that evil human stuff.

I had to survive, didn't I? I mean, don't I have the right to make the best of what I got?

But get right down to it, that was it. I was a vampire. And I couldn't be anything else. And no one was going to let me forget it.

Well, Gunn – Charlie was treating me like a real person now. A teammate. Even if he had some real issues with vampires, notice who he ended up hanging out with– me and Spike. I guess his human friends didn't provide enough of a charge. Charlie was Type-A, you know. A real risk-taker. And we vamps, well, he had issues with us, but no doubt about it. We went for risk too.

So maybe I sort of kind of won Charlie over. Or maybe Spike won him over for me. I don't know. But being a teammate wasn't like ... you know. Being accepted. Being lo–

Okay. I closed the browser window and got back to work.

Angel had to punish me, his own way, that is. So he kept me late that evening, learning a new billing program, one that didn't (like the old billing program) automatically embezzle 10% and ship it off to a Cayman bank account. (I'd have to find that account number when I had a bit of time.) But ha, ha, the joke was on him. Whenever he was about to walk out of the office to go to the band rehearsal, I'd ask him some dumb question that would send him back to the software manual or the W&H policy and procedure handbook. So I ended up leaving before he did, since he'd taken a highlighter and was highlighting every policy he thought sounded like Lindsey McDonald wrote.

Too bad when I got downstairs to the conference room, rehearsal was over, and there was just Clem there, eating Cheetos and watching the Best of SNL video on the TV he'd dragged down from the employee lounge. I said, "Hi, Clem!" real bright, and made some small talk, and then said, "So... everyone there this evening? Like Kenny? And David? How is David, anyway?"

When I said David's name, Clem got all squirmy and wouldn't look at me as he mumbled something about everyone being fine. He got up from his chair, scattering orange Cheeto dust on the carpet, and said, "Gotta go. Bye."

Geez. Even nice clueless Clem realized he better not mention me and David in the same sentence.

No, I didn't cry myself to sleep. Vampires don't cry. (Okay, Spike does, but you think I want to be like him? All mushy and sappy and moping about lost love and all that? Nah.) And I didn't have anything to cry about anyway. Hey. Unlife was good. Had a good job, and some money in the bank, and a couple real friends, or at least teammates, and we'd just vanquished the Snopes-vamp Prostitution Ring, and – and it was a good unlife. I mean, it could be worse. I could be... well, I could be Cordelia. She even had a life, and look at her. She preferred a coma.

And I was better off than Buffy. The next morning, the tech guy from IT came to me with some garbled email they'd got from her that morning, figuring it was for Angel, because, you know, it was from HIS GIRLFRIEND. At least, as far as any of us knew, that's what she was, right? It was only a few months ago she lived in Angel's apartment and had a little office right off his. Only a few months ago they'd sit together holding hands and staring out the window and never saying a word. Only a few months ago that I'd made those reservations for that romantic inn in Napa Valley for her and
Angel. I mean, if she wasn't his girlfriend anymore, it was news to all of us. Only this email, which
the server had rejected (but of course secretly accepted—those IT guys were pretty smart), was
addressed to Spike, and though the body was all garbled up, the last line was spelled out nice and
clear: Love, Buffy.

I got through the day okay. Spike came by around three, looking like he just got up, which he
probably did, and made a big point of telling me I wasn't needed at rehearsal and I should take the
time for myself, go have a massage or something, before the show that night. I got my revenge. I
didn't tell him about the Buffy-mail. I mean, she was the boss's girlfriend, right? And I owed it to my
boss to—well, all I know is, really, if I'd been told to come to the rehearsal, I'd probably have
remembered to bring that email with me. But Spike told me to stay away.

Just in case I hadn't gotten the message, Gunn stopped by my desk right at quitting time. Only he's a
lawyer, see, so he can get away with lying like Spike can't. Gunn told me that they'd cancelled
rehearsal, and I should go on home and not bother to report to Caritas till 9. Go home. Like right
now. Like it was an order.

Remember what I said about having teammates? I took it back. They weren't my friends. They
weren't even my comrades-in-stakes anymore. Probably never had been.

But I was a glutton for punishment. And I had vampire hearing. So I waited till all the other
secretaries were gone, and Angel had taken his private elevator up to his private apartment, and I
went down to the first floor. And I just followed the sound of music past the usual rehearsal room to
the employee lounge.

I heard some familiar tune, something that nagged at me, just a bit annoying, just a bit out of reach. I
shoved the nagging away and pushed open the door to the lounge—and the song suddenly ended,
and Spike and Wes and Kenny the Killer Lead Guitarist were standing there stockstill, staring at me,
like I'd broken in on them doing something illegal. And David was turning away, hiding his face
again.

The hell with them, I told myself. I got as much right to be here as they do. I'm the roadie. I have to
set up all this equipment up for the show. I got to take it down a few hours later. I'm part of the band
too—

But I took one glance at their faces, and thought bitterly that it was all a lie. Just like always. Never
fit in. And I couldn't blame it on being a vampire, 'cause Spike was a vampire, and he was the big
bass player sex symbol. He fit in. And I couldn't blame it on being female, 'cause Fred was female
and they all liked Fred. And I couldn't blame it on—well, I couldn't blame it on anything but being
Harmony. And didn't matter what happened to me, I never could stop being Harmony.

So I was feeling pretty savage as I crossed to the bass amp and examined the cable. "Anything you
need?"

"Uh, no," Spike said. "We'll be done with rehearsal in a couple minutes. Maybe you can, you know,
check with Fred over at the club and see about the sound check. And, you know, get yourself some
dinner and report back by nine for the show."

"Yeah. Okay."

I was halfway down the hall before they started up again.
Lorne was getting good at restoring order to destroyed nightclubs. He'd gotten most of the tables replaced, and fixed the stage, and that big mirror over the bar was still cracked, but he'd put a nice yellow ribbon along the crack, like it was a birthday gift or something. Pretty good work for just a couple days post-riot.

This show was going, well, as well as could be expected. Kind of boring after all the excitement of the other night. Mixed audience, a few demons, a few vampires, more humans, everyone behaving like an example to the UN on Diversity Cooperation. That might have been because Lorne stationed a couple Fyarls at each door, I don't know. The band was pretty funky. Fred got all flummoxed again, like I could have predicted, and the sound was muddy. But no one seemed to mind. Gunn's one token affirmative-action rap song had a few people dancing, and Spike recruited some girls to be a chorus while he sang "Hit the Road, Jack," which was like exactly what I felt like telling him and every other male in the vicinity.

And David, well, he looked so excited and happy up there playing his trumpet in the spotlight. He even did a bit of shimmying like I taught him. I kind of forgave him for being a jerk and ignoring me, you know? Because I guess there's not much you can do to make someone care. They got the right not to like you. And you got the right to like them anyway. It's not degrading, is it? More like free choice. Right?

So I was sitting by the side of the stage, on one of those hard metal folding chairs, waiting for Kenny to come over for a string or Spike to need his other guitar, when the band finished what was listed on my sheet as the last song in the set.

And then Spike leaned into the mike and said, "Got a new song here. And it's David's first time singing lead, so, you know, put your hands together and let him know you support him."

I felt my chest tighten. Okay, so maybe it wasn't so easy, not being liked. I already figured David had been avoiding me, like he didn't like me anymore, like maybe he never had. But this meant I wasn't part of the band. He'd been working on a song, and I didn't even know about it, wasn't good enough to be there when they rehearsed it.

But– but still. I saw him standing up there, without his trumpet, holding the mike in a hand that trembled so hard the cable looked like a rattlesnake slithering along the stage. And his voice trembled too, as he said, "Uh, this goes out to a special lady who knows who she is."

I looked around me, annoyed. More than annoyed. Watching for some girl with shining eyes, with her hands clasped to her heart and her gaze focused on David. A special lady. And I wondered how special she'd look with her throat ripped out–

One, two, three, Clem tapped on the rim of his snare drum, and the band struck up that familiar tune, the one I knew but couldn't name, and David opened his mouth, and he started singing:

Hello, baby hello
Open up your heart and let your feelings flow
You're not unlucky knowing me
Keeping the speed real slow
In any case I set my own pace
By stealing the show, say hello, hello

I knew this song... my mother used to sing it to me. When I was little. When I was human. When I was... loved.
His voice started out a little quavery, but got surer, and by the end of the verse he was looking around the whole room, and then, moving like a panther, like a jaguar, he crossed the stage, mike in hand, and walked down the steps towards my post next to the speaker. And there was something in his eyes--

*Harmony and me*

*We're pretty good company Looking for an island In our boat upon the sea*

Then he was right there before me, and gracefully he sank on to one knee, and he held out his hand to me, and I took it, and I couldn't believe it was real, except that his hand was warm and his smile was full of joy, and his eyes, oh, his eyes were looking right at me, seeing me.

*Harmony, gee I really love you And I want to love you forever And dream of never, never, never leaving Harmony Never leaving Harmony... Never leaving Harmony.*

And then he set the mike down carefully on the floor, and the band faded out, and he took something out of his pocket, something that flashed in the spotlight. "Harmony, I mean it. I really love you and I want to love you forever. Will you let me?"

And he slid that flashy something onto my finger, and I stared at the diamond, and I couldn't say anything, and his hand tightened on mine, and I felt the trembling, and I realized he was scared, real scared, and it was because I hadn't answered him. I thought I had. I mean, the word *yes* was like screaming in my brain. But when I finally got it into my mouth, it came out a whisper, and that was okay, because only David heard me, and he was the only one who counted.

It was morning before I realized this could never work. Something about the sunlight slicing through the drapes on his Palladian windows reminded me what I was, and what he was, and I woke him up crying all over his chest, and all I could get out was that it couldn't work, it couldn't work, and he held me close and said, "No, no, it's okay. I know it's about my money. And it's okay. I don't mind that you only love me because of the money. I--"

I yanked away from him and sat up, rubbing my palm over my wet cheek while I stared at him. "Your-- your money? What's that got to do with anything?"

"I told you. I understand, and I don't care. A girl like you-- so beautiful, so special, well, I know you couldn't see anything in me, except, you know, that I'm really good at making money."

I had to cut this off. "David!" I yelled.

He stopped and looked at me.

"David. I don't love you because of your money!" I got a little vehement there. I had to learn that you couldn't just tap a human guy to make your point clearer. The pain distracts him from the real issue.

"You-- you don't?" he asked, rubbing his upper arm.

"No, Geez." I shook my head. (My hair must be a total mess. But... but this was David. And David
wouldn't mind.) "I love you for you."

"Me?"

"Yeah. You. The kindest man in the world. The one with the – " I bit my lip, thinking about all the things I thought about when I thought about him. "With the little dimple in his chin. And that sweet lower lip." I ran my finger up from one to the other. "And the arms that hold me. And the heart that accepts me. And the eyes that look at me like... like I matter."

"You do matter! You matter more than anything!"

And we fell back on the bed, kissing, and it was a while before I remembered it couldn't work. I pulled away, retreating to the very edge of the bed. "But it can't work! I'm – I'm a vampire. I– I can't go out in the sun. I can't give you babies. I can't grow old with you!"

"Don't care about the sun," David said promptly. "We can adopt babies if we want them. I told you, I was in foster care myself. And it's okay if you don't grow old, as long as you don't grow away from me. I'll just tell everyone I'm a dirty old man and you're my hotsy-totsy young wife!"

"Oh, David...." I made myself stern. "David, it's not that simple. I... You saw what I really was. The other night. You saw my real face."

His eyes glinted. "Yeah. Was that hot."

He was crazy. He had to be. "It's not hot! It's a game-face!"

"We all have a kink," he said. "Mine is your game-face. Maybe you can put it on sometimes? Like when we're, you know–"

"David! Listen!" I cried. "I don't have a soul. I'm evil."

David regarded me soberly for a moment. Then, gently, he said, "You're not evil. You're someone who has worked awfully hard to stay good. And I know it's difficult for you, and I've seen you try so hard, and you know what? It makes me trust you more, to know how hard you've tried. I trust you'll be as good as I deserve. Probably better."

And as he was sinking under my embrace, he said, "Besides, I can afford to keep you full of otter blood every day of the week."

David was in the shower, and I was lying there in the truly luxurious Egyptian cotton sheets, wishing I could open the drapes and look out at the sunlight on the ocean. But that was okay. I could see the moonlight on the ocean, any night I wanted. With David. How cool was that?

My cellphone rang. I scrabbled around on the floor, searching for my purse, suddenly remembering I had a job and a boss who got crabby when I wasn't there to give him his morning coffee-and-blood.

I found the phone and flipped it open. "Hello?" I said, trying not to sound like I was totally sex-wonked and naked besides.

"How ya doin', babe?" It was Spike. Of course.

"None of your beeswax."

"You're naked, aren't you?"

"NONE of your beeswax!" I said again, this time more sharply.
Okay, okay. So you are. I can just imagine... geez. Why bother to imagine? I just have to remember —

"Spike. Did you have something you wanted to ask me? If not, I'm hanging up."

"Oh, yeah. Just noticed you didn't come into work today. I made some excuse to Angel. Told him you were taking a spa day at company expense."

"Gee, thanks, Spike. Get me fired, why don't you?"

"Hey, you're going to be rich. You can buy Angel's contract, you want to."

"Hmmmm..." Then I shook my head. "I won't be rich. It's not my money."

"David's listening in, is he?"

"No! No, I mean it."

"Sure, babe. Whatever you say." He paused for a moment, and then his voice got sort of soft. "You—you feeling happy, Harm?"

"Yeah, I think so." I think so. Duh. When I thought of the contrast between how I felt yesterday afternoon, and how I felt now, well, it was like night and day.

"Good. 'Cause, you know, I planned the whole thing."

I scoffed. "Oh, right, Spike the master planner. If you'd planned it, David would probably be in bed with Lorne now, 'cause your plans never work out right."

Spike didn't like this. But it was true, and he knew it. "Huh. Well, I did help him learn that poncey song. And we all pitched in to buy the ring."

"You did not!"

"Nah, but we helped him pick it out. The jeweler was scared to death when we all marched in and demanded to see his diamonds."

"The whole band?"

"Well, not the whole band. We thought it'd be best to leave you out of it. Seeing as how David wanted to surprise you. But everyone else went."

I tried to envision this, all of them in a jewelry store, Spike fingering the gold chains, Wes turning up his nose at the display of religious medals. "Angel too?"

"Well, uh... we didn't think he'd approve."

My heart sank. I had to get used to that response, if I was going to be with a human. "Because I'm a vampire."

"No, not that, you dink. Because you're his assistant, and he can't do without you, and if he knew you were going to hook up with some billionaire, he might try to stop it, 'cause you might quit."

"I'm not going to quit. I like my job."

"Yeah! You can donate your salary to the band!"
"Dream on, Spike. And get to work." I yawned, luxuriously. "Me, I'm going to take a nap. I didn't get much sleep last night."

Spike laughed and hung up.

It was only then I remembered the email from Buffy. I should tell him about it. I should give it to him. But there wasn't anything readable there. And it would probably only hurt him. It's not like he could see her or anything. He'd be better off not knowing –

I was still holding the cell phone when David came back from the shower, a towel around his bitty waist and his hair all damp. "Someone call?"

"Spike. He said he's glad his plan worked out so well."

"It was my plan," David said. "Spike just helped." After a moment, he said, "Are you still, you know, into him? I mean, I understand if –"

"No!" I said immediately. "That is so over. It was over even before I met you. I mean, it was over before I even came to LA. But– but we're still sort of friends, you know."

"Well, sure." David looked relieved as he got back into bed with me. "And bandmates. But... but you're, uh, mine, right?"

"Yeah. And you're... mine?"

And that's all we needed to know.
I took the loaner laptop to the airport with me. It was like my only lifeline to Spike.

Lifeline. Not a good word now.

I kept telling myself not to worry. Spike was all right. Wouldn't I know it if he wasn't? Wouldn't I?

Well, no. I mean, I didn't know it when he came back to life. I should have known– he stopped showing up in my head– but I didn't know. I felt sad, like I'd lost him, just at the moment when I should have felt an inexplicable joy–

Not joy. That would be too strong. We were friends. So I'd feel some friendly feeling if I'd thought he was back. Happiness. Pleasure. Not joy precisely. That was too strong for friends.

Okay. There was that moment I saw his handwriting on that Filofax page. That moment I realized he had to have written it, and written it recently– what did I feel?

Confusion, mostly. Puzzlement. Anger at Angel for not telling me. Anger at Spike for not seeing me. Anger at myself because there had to be some reason Angel wouldn't tell me and Spike wouldn't see me.

I should have felt something else. Something more.

I sat in the waiting room of the International Departures concourse with the laptop on my lap and remembered what Spike had said. It was in my head, so maybe it was just my subconscious– maybe I made him up like he told me later. But it felt like him and it sounded like him. Something broke in you. Your heart, I guess. Something broke when you killed Angel and it grew back crooked.

I should feel more. I knew I should feel more. But it was crooked, my heart, just like he said. And so I could feel anger and anxiety and worry. But I couldn't feel that other stuff anymore.

It didn't matter, I told myself. Not now. Now what mattered was–

As I fired up the laptop, I started scouting around the terminal. There. Over there. The first-class lounge. I wasn't flying first-class, but I had once, coming back from Tibet, and I knew something about how the other class flew. I slung my bag over my shoulder and hefted up the laptop– it was buzzing and bright– and I hobbled over to a seat really close to the lounge. See, I'd learned that they had free wireless there, and since wireless passes right through walls like a ghost, I could pick up their network. Clever, huh? It made me feel sort of bad and Spike-ish, stealing their signal like that.

First thing I did was check my email. Nothing from Spike. That didn't mean anything, I told myself. After all, I'd just gotten an email from him the other day. Yeah, it was a .jpg of vampire dust, which was kind of worrisome. But even coupled with that, it didn't mean anything that he hadn't emailed me. This was Spike. He could have slept this whole time. I mean, sometimes he stayed up for 72 hours in a row and then crashed for two days. Sometimes he drank too much and had a hangover and just sat around feeling sorry for himself. Sometimes he got excited about something and focused on that and didn't think of anything else for days.

Maybe he was out chasing some demon. Like in Mexico. If he were down in Mexico, chasing a demon, maybe he didn't have Internet access.

Maybe he was mad at me.
That was all a whole lot more likely than that somehow he had been dusted and someone mean sent me a picture on his own email account.

I mean, that was really unlikely. Right?

But there wasn't any email from him. So I sent him my own email. I tried to be upbeat and not show how worried I was, just haven't heard from you in awhile... whatcha doin'.... I miss our chats and stuff... I liked your mp3 file... nice to hear your voice.... liked the song, well, sort of, and I suppose all the chicks dug it, huh? All your groupies? So do you have groupies? Anyone you, you know, like? Not that I'm jealous! Just as a friend I think you ought to remember that sometimes these girls who hang out with bands are not really nice girls... don't want you to get hurt! Okay, so that's pretty funny, I know, coming from me. But I'm your friend and I don't want you hurt... so what was that pile of dust, anyway? Some vamp you dusted, I hope! Gave me a start.... you know, for just a second there, I thought maybe it was your dust! How dumb is that, huh? Like anyone could dust you! I mean, I used to try, and I'm the slayer, and I never could dust you. So I don't think anyone else could. But it still made me stop and wonder. And you're going to think this is really dumb. I did call W&H, but couldn't get anyone, so I went online yesterday, just thinking maybe I'd find something, like on the LA Times site. Dumb, huh? Like they'd have an obituary for some vampire. See how dumb I am? Wasn't anything there anyway. I even ran a search for "vampire dust" and got lots of hits, but nothing about you.... so I figured it wasn't you, anyway! I knew it wasn't you all along. But just for a minute there, it startled me. Don't do that again, okay? Send a jpg without a note or a caption or something? Don't do that... I know it's dumb, but it worried me just for a minute. Okay? ..... 

I did the Love, Buffy thing and hit Send. The laptop kind of groaned as the message disappeared, and the screen got dark for a minute, and then when it came back up, my email program crashed. It was like the first-class-lounge network knew I was poaching.

But they were calling my flight, and I didn't have time to recover the email and re-send it. I didn't even have time to log off Windows– I had to shut the laptop off, and it squawked a protest.

The next day, or the day before– I can't get the time change figured out– I was in L.A. I took my laptop bag and my carry-on– that was all I brought– through Customs, and caught a cab to the W&H building. I used to work here, but it felt alien to me. I walked into the bright hard lobby with all its sharp edges and reflective surfaces and wondered why I hadn't before noticed how wrong it was. Angel heading this place. Spike living here. It was just... wrong.

I marched right up to the receptionist and declared, "I'm here to see Spike."

I didn't recognize her– she was just the usual bright-haired W&H receptionist– but she recognized me, and immediately started putting me off. "Oh! Yes. Well. Let me call upstairs."

"I just want to know--" I said, but she put up a finger to stop me as she spoke rapidly into the phone.

"I just want to know--" I said, but she put up a finger to stop me as she spoke rapidly into the phone. And even after she cut that call off, she pretended to be dealing with other lines. "Please hold!"

"Wolfram and Hart, can I help you?" "I'm afraid Ms. Morgan doesn't work here anymore. Can I transfer your call to Mr. Gunn?" I couldn't get a word in edgewise.

But maybe-- well, maybe she called up to Spike's place and any minute he'd be coming down the stairs and before he realized it was me, he'd be practically in the lobby, and I could--
My imagination ran out then. Maybe I could— Okay. Maybe it wasn't my imagination running out, but running wild. Because I could just imagine him walking down that wide staircase, and he'd see me, and he'd smile that smile of his, the joy one, and — No. Maybe he'd be really mad at me because I promised not to try to see him. Maybe he'd see me and turn right around and —

But my imagination was way wrong. Coming down that staircase was a refugee from Sunnydale, yeah, but not the one I wanted.

"Buffy!" Harmony called from the landing. And then, even louder, "Slayer!"

Oh, great. Just who I wanted to see. Spike's ex. Maybe current. Not that it was any of my business. And she was Angel's assistant. I wasn't sure what that meant. But I knew I couldn't trust her. I never had, not back in high school when she was being nasty to Willow, not when she was trying so incompetently to kill me—

But I wasn't going to get to Spike by alienating her. "Hi, Harmony!" I said brightly. I thought I should add something about her outfit, which really was sort of great— a Chanel-style powder-blue suit and these kicky three-strap sandals with major stilettos. "Nice out—" But she was making this bewildered face, which, like, was nothing new. I mean, she went all the way through high school alternating between "bewildered" and "bitchy".

"What?" she shouted. "I couldn't hear you."

You'd think if she couldn't hear me, she'd walk down the rest of the steps. Instead she cupped her hand to her ear like she'd gone deaf. "Sorry!" she shouted. "Working with the band has blown my ears out! What did you say?"

Loudly, I said, "Hi, Harmony."

"Buffy!" she yelled back. "Great to see you, Slayer!"

That I doubted. But I smiled really hard. "Just wanted to visit with—"

"Angel!" she yelled. "You want to see Angel, of course! Boy, has Angel missed you! Wow, Angel has really really missed you!" And she added, really loud, "Buffy! Angel has missed you, Buffy!"

This was getting really annoying. But I thought maybe I should play along. Angel would be easier to deal with than Harmony— or at least he wouldn't make me yell. I would just make him take me to Spike. "Yeah! Can't wait to see him!"

Harmony yelled, "Come on, then!" and started back up the stairs.

I caught up with her and went ahead— no way I'm going to let the world's least competent vampire beat me up the stairs. But as I passed her, I saw something flashing on her finger.

A diamond.

A big diamond.

It was probably one of those cubic zirconiums, I told myself. She probably bought it herself off the Home Shopping Network. For a hundred dollars. "Nice ring," I said.

She smiled. No, beamed. Her face got all soft, and so did her voice. "Oh, th—" And then she yelled, "What was that you said, Buffy?"
My throat was already raw from shouting so much, and anyway, I didn't care about her stupid ring.

Unless—

Nah. Spike wouldn't. He wouldn't. Would he?

Nah. Anyway, he wouldn't even have a hundred dollars to spend on a ring. Spike and money, not mixy things.

Except that– well, he did somehow manage to accumulate enough to fund my future and Dawn's too.

But, I thought more cheerfully, he gave us every penny, probably, and he wouldn't have any left over to buy a ring for an ex. Or even a current.

I just sort of waved my hand at her and sprinted the last few steps to the second floor. "I remember where Angel's office is," I said, taking off down the hall.

But she was right behind me. "Yes! Buffy! Wonderful to see you again, Buffy!"

No one had used my name this much since that clueless insurance agent tried to sell me an accident policy. "Yep," I said, "I'll just find Angel's office again--"

Harmony tried to get ahead of me, but I headed right for the secretarial pool, and she was impeded by the obstacle course of desks. As we passed through, the keyboard clicking stopped and the buzz started. Phones picked up. Urgent gossip shared.

Probably this wasn't the best way to go if I wanted to sneak up unaware– but at least Harmony fell behind when two secretaries stood up simultaneously to block her path, and she had to lose precious seconds saying (loudly, of course) that yes, indeed, I was BUFFY, the SLAYER. And I was headed for ANGEL'S OFFICE.

I burst out of the secretarial pool and into the open area in front of the executive offices. Someone tried to stop me– was it Wesley? But I barreled on through, pushed open Angel's double doors, and found him standing before his desk, looking handsome and dark and annoyed.

Not at me. Never at me. He didn't get annoyed at me. His face softened. "Buffy," he said. "Welcome back."

I turned my face so his kiss landed on my cheek. "Hi, Angel," I said. Harmony was right behind me, so I kept it easy and casual, like we'd just seen each other last night. "How ya doing."

"It's so good to see you." This sounded more ... earnest than I expected. And I looked up (way up– was he always that much taller than me?) and there was something in his eyes. Something scared and sad and desperate.

No. I didn't want that. I didn't want to be drawn in.

Thank God there was Harmony, and yeah, I realize this was the only time anyone ever said anything like that before. But she was just so there, though not so loud as before, which was good because my ears were hurting, but she was there, and she must have grabbed some papers from somewhere, because she was putting them on Angel's desk and demanding signatures, and kind of robotically, he went and sat in his chair and picked up a pen and started signing.

And Harmony said, "That's all, boss! Now you can take Buffy out somewhere, somewhere nice, somewhere fun, somewhere Not Here."
Angel looked out his big window. It was still a long way from sunset. And then he looked back at her. "Thanks. You can go, Harmony."

I didn't wait. I was still in sort of an agony. I mean, no one had specifically mentioned Spike. You know, specifically mentioned that he was still intact. So I forced a little laugh. "Hey! Just got this crazy photo from Spike. At least I think it was from Spike. It was a little pile of vamp dust. For a second, well, I thought it was, you know, Spike."

Angel looked panicky. And I couldn't speak. Couldn't be. I forced the words out. "Spike's not dust, is he?"

"Not this week," Harmony said, and I turned just as the door slammed behind her.

"What--" Then I shook my head. I just wanted to hear it from Angel. He'd know. "Angel, come on. He's okay, isn't he?"

Angel took a deep breath and let it out. He was looking at me – I don't know. He was looking at me some way. Some sort of sad way. I closed my eyes. I couldn't stand looking at him and thinking about why his eyes were so sad. Oh, my Spike... my-- Then he said, real careful, "He's okay. Just fine. His usual. But--" He looked around the office, like he was sort of surprised not to find Spike lurking in a corner. "He's not here now. How about we--"

I was so relieved. I sort of slumped into a chair. It felt like weeks since I'd relaxed. "He's okay?"

"Yeah." Angel didn't seem too happy about it. "But, like I said, he's gone. And-- and you know he won't--"

"I know. He won't see me. So you say."

"Not just me--"


"Be sure what?"

"That he's still here. Still real." I didn't look up. Didn't want to see Angel's face. "Show me where he stays."

Angel hesitated, then stood up. "Sure. He lives in the guest apartment. He's not there now."

"Yeah." I said this with plenty of irony. "I know. You wouldn't let me go there if he was there."

It didn't seem fair. But I knew it wasn't all Angel's doing. It was Spike too, who wanted to make sure I didn't see him. But his place... that would be something. Not much. Something. And maybe he'd come back, all unawares, and I'd catch him there in his doorway, and--

Angel took me up on the elevator, around some corridors, to a wing I didn't remember seeing last summer. Stands to reason he'd put Spike off in some hidden corner –

"It's probably a total mess," Angel said, already apologizing, even before he got out the keycard.
"Spike's not always messy," I said. I don't know why I felt like I had to defend him. I just did. "You should have seen how nice he fixed up his crypt."

"Gee, sorry I missed that."

I looked up at him. Wow. Sarcasm. I hadn't heard sarcasm from Angel for – forever. It was kind of funny, and despite my worries, I grinned. And he smiled back. It was sort of a strained smile, but it was a smile, and I said impulsively, "Everything okay?"

He shrugged. "Is everything ever okay in our world?"

"But–" But yes, I wanted to say. Or no. Not everything was okay, but that didn't mean that we couldn't smile.... "What about the band? How's that going?"

Well, this topic did animate him. It was sort of surprising. As he slid the keycard into the lock, Angel talked about the sound equipment and the stage and the really cool camcorder he used and the rehearsal room and the trouble they had with the lighting the other night. He didn't, I noticed, talk about the people. The band itself. But that was okay, because it sounded like the microphones and the speakers made him kind of happy, how they cabled together, and how much they cost, and how loud they were.

I felt my heart sort of hurt. It was so nice to see his face light up like that. But it just reminded me how sad it usually was. I hadn't seen him in weeks, but I remembered that sad face all too well.

Neither of us said anything about, you know. Us. Had we broken up sometime without me noticing? If so, well, okay. Good. It was easier that way.

But that was sad too. That we could just end without an ending. That we could just fade out.

And really. I could be with him, if that was necessary. I needed to tell him that again– that if his journey included me as his, well, girlfriend I guess, that was okay. I could do that. I just wanted this journey to be a success, because otherwise– well, who knew what would happen? If the Powers got the idea that Spike had failed–

Not going to happen, I told myself firmly. As soon as I got Spike corralled and we could sit down and talk like the old friends we were, I'd let him know I was here to help him. I didn't understand this mission of his, but we'd been a team for a long time, and I had his back. Just wanted him to know that. I could help him on this mission. He just had to let me.

First, of course, he had to agree to see me first. I was really tired of emailing him. I wanted... well, to see his face when he spoke. He had such an expressive face. When he was mad, he got this kind of lowered brow and set jaw. It was really cute. And when he was happy, it showed– in his bright eyes and his smile and–

Anyway, our talk would go a lot better if I could watch his face. And hear his voice. And touch his... hand. Just to sort of affirm him when he said something good. Or maybe I'd play-slap his hand if he said something outrageous. Just his hand. I wasn't going to touch anything else. Well, maybe I'd kiss him hello. I could do that. Friends kissed hello. Hugged. I could do that.

Mostly I wanted to see him. But everyone kept telling me I couldn't.

Let me give you a piece of advice. Never tell a Slayer "you can't". At least not this Slayer.
Angel pushed the door to Spike's flat open, and I stood there just a second in the doorway, thinking—what if... what if helping with Spike's mission meant I had to go with Angel? What would Spike think about that? What would—

Huh. Spike had already made it crystal clear that he didn't care. He didn't even want to be friends. So why I was here entering his apartment, longing for some sign of him, I couldn't say.

"See," I said as I walked into the little living room. I dropped my bag onto the couch and looked around. "It's not so messy."

I was right. Of course there were piles of things. Piles of books by one end of the couch and piles of DVDs on the other. Piles of videogames on the coffee table. But that was just vintage Spike. He was a piler, and that didn't bother me much. It bothered Angel, I could tell, but that was because Angel was a filer. He liked everything hidden away in drawers and cabinets, while Spike liked things in easy reach.

Angel stood there by the couch as I walked through the arch into the kitchen. It was just a little galley area, but that was okay, because it wasn't like Spike did a lot of gourmet cooking. There were a couple glasses on the drainboard, but they were clean and rinsed. No bloodspots. No whisky stains. I touched the rim of one glass, and imagined him drinking from it. This morning maybe. He'd been here... just a few hours ago.

I went to the refrigerator and yanked it open, and I kind of got nostalgic, because there was a big jar of blood, and a six-pack of Pilsner beer, and a single stalk of celery – sometimes he liked to stir his blood with celery like it was a bloody mary. I closed it, sort of sighing, and opened the freezer compartment, and there were four pints of Ben and Jerry's Phish Food ice cream and a bag of ice and six gallon bags of frozen blood. And three bags of popcorn kernels– Dawn had told him once they stayed fresher frozen, and here he was, still obeying her. And a fifth of vodka, and a couple beer mugs.

I closed the freezer. Just stood there holding the door handle and breathing in. I couldn't smell smoke– well, not cigarette smoke. I thought maybe I smelled a little smoke like I used to smell whenever I passed the Phi Delt frat house at UCSunnydale, something illegal. I sighed again. Spike was so– But at least ... "It smells like he quit smoking."

"Spike smoked?" Angel said, and I wondered how much he knew about Spike if he didn't know that. "Well, he hasn't since he came back." He sniffed, and I figured he got a whiff of the illegal stuff, because his face got all grim.

Quickly I said, "See, the problem is, like I said, someone sent me a photo of vampire dust. And– sure, this is dumb. But I thought it might be, you know, Spike."

I pushed past him and went out into the living room. In my bag I found the .jpg I'd printed out, the one that sent me here. "See?"

As I held the paper out to him, Angel's face, if anything, got even grimmer. He said something under his breath, and his hand was trembling as he took the page. But then his expression cleared as he gazed down at the little pile of dust. "That's at Lorne's club. It's not– not Spike's dust."

"Yeah," I said cheerily. It was a relief to hear him affirm that. "I figured that. But... whose dust is it? And why would he send it to me?"
Angel stared down at the photo as if he could tell the family lineage from the consistency of the dust, or the shape of the pile. "There was – a fight. I guess. At Lorne's club. Earlier in the week. Vamp pimp. Dusted by Gunn and Spike– and Harmony!" He said his secretary's name like she'd especially made him mad.

"Harmony was in on it?" Okay, that surprised me. I mean, Harmony was a vamp, and fought okay... for a human. I couldn't see her taking on another vamp. Might break a nail, you know? Or smear her Nars lipstick.

"Yeah." Angel didn't seem happy about it. "They trashed Lorne's club. And sent one of our human clients to the hospital." He added grudgingly, "Sure, he was in charge of the vamp operation. But they didn't clear it with me first."

"Last week, Spike sent me the picture of a demon he and Gunn killed." I couldn't help it. It made me smile. The memory– and the certainty now that Spike was okay– it made me smile. "So I guess this was just the same sort of thing. Keeping me apprized."

"You've been emailing."

"Yeah. We have." I glanced up at Angel. There was something painful in his expression, and then it was gone, and he just looked distracted. "Just like friends, you know?"

I didn't know why I had to say that. But it was true. Just friends. But not really just. It was ... more than just. Kind of, you know, a higher form of friendship. But I couldn't explain it. And I didn't want to explain it. I mean, if I tried to say that to Spike, it might spook him. He'd write another email about how he didn't want to be friends, and I'd have to blackmail him again, and it was just easier to be friends without talking about it.

"He won't see you, you know. If that's why you're here."

I shrugged. I didn't want to say that was why I was here, or that wasn't why I was here. "Maybe not."

"No maybe, Buffy." Angel's voice was hard. His voice was hardly ever that hard with me, and I kind of flinched. He saw, and went on more quietly, "Trust me. He can't see you. And you're just going to make it harder on him–"

I broke in before he could tell me how much I was going to hurt Spike by being here. "Where is he?"

Angel sighed. "He went to cover. I mean, he's hiding out until I give the all-clear. And that won't happen until after I put you on the plane back to London."

I bent my head so he couldn't see my scowl. Then, as sweetly as I could, I asked, "Then is it okay if I stay here for a few hours? Just to rest? I'm really jet-lagged, about to drop."

Angel muttered something about his own flat, and I said, real quick, "Oh, no, really. I'm too tired to move. I'll just sit here on the couch–" and I plopped down hard, like I couldn't stand for one more second– "and veg out. Maybe you can call me around dinner time? We can, you know, get some Chinese or something."

I wasn't sure how I was going to handle, you know, the night thing. Where I was going to, you know, spend the night. But for now, Angel seemed pacified. "Okay. Call me if you need me for anything. I'll just be in my office." Then he added, "But call first, okay? Just in case–"

Just in case Spike was in the building. Yeah. I got it. Boy, did I get it. I got it over and over. Spike
couldn't see me. Wouldn't see me. I pasted on a smile and got up and kind of ushered him to the door. "Okay! I'll call. I promise!"

He gave me one last sad look, and then went back to whatever work I'd torn him away from. And me? I went back to snooping.

Next to the couch was that stack of books. Two were old red leather-bound poetry volumes, one by Keats, and I flipped through it, finding the dog-eared pages he read the most, and making mental notes to use those verses in future emails.

In the middle of the stack was that Anne Rice book that always got Spike mad. He was still on his one-vampire crusade to prove her totally bogus. Every second paragraph in the first few chapters was highlighted with yellow, and in the margin he'd stuck post-its – he had really nice handwriting, even when he was ranting– with some notes that could one day be added to some essay he wrote for, who knows, Vampire Living or something. They're clans or orders or families-- but they're not covens! What do you think we are, poncey witches? And No vampire lives to be over 300? Huh? How bloody stupid is that? I can name a dozen just off the top of my head– (ask Angel for other names). And No vampire shall kill another vampire. Oh, right. The vamp community is a model of cooperation and peace now? Where'd she get this shit? (He hated the movie even more. He insisted no vampire would be stupid enough to turn either Tom Cruise or Brad Pitt, much less both of them.) (It sounded so much like him. How bloody stupid is that? It sounded just like him. I could almost hear his voice.) (I wanted to hear his voice.)

There was also the latest of Stephen King's Dark Tower series, and a bookmark was stuck between pages 218 and 219. I picked the bookmark and found it was actually a parking ticket, so I looked at it more closely. It was from a week ago, for a Viper– yeah, like Spike would have a Viper; he must have stolen it from Angel– and it was issued in a town north of Sunnydale, or north of where Sunnydale used to be. There was a college in that town, I remembered. One of the girls in my bio class got a scholarship there. I had to smile, thinking of Spike sitting at one of those desks chewing on his pen and listening to the professor lecture about romantic poetry. Only Spike would probably be arguing with the prof, not listening to him. If he didn't have any respect for Anne Rice, you think he'd listen to some professor who probably had a bloody stupid interpretation of "Ode to a Nightingale"?

I replaced the bookmark. Only I put it between pages 216 and 217. Just, you know. To have an effect.

I stacked the books back up, trying to remember the order he'd had them in. Keats top? Yeah. Keats would be on the top. Then I got up from the couch. I was sort of tired– I mean, I hadn't been actually lying to Angel– but not really ready to sleep. And that PC at the desk in the corner was calling to me. I crossed the room and pushed the power button.

Maybe he saved all my emails.

Maybe he saved emails from some college girl from that college town. Maybe that's who he was visiting when he got that parking ticket.

As soon as the desktop came up (uh, Heidi Klum, you're going to catch cold, sitting there on the screen in a bikini that way), I grabbed the mouse and opened his email program.

Only there was a login. A password. I tried every word I could think of– you know, slayer and pet and Buffy and Dawn and vampire and vamp and blood– but nothing worked. Annoyed, I switched to the browser. That came right up– it was wirelessly linked to the W&H server, and I still had my old ID and password.
I found the Spike 4-evuh website— he had it bookmarked, the big conceito— and there he was. A big picture of him as the wallpaper. His face. All hollows. He looked thin. Thinner, anyway. And sad. He was gazing off into the distance. His hair was darker, and a little curly, and I could almost feel those curls under my fingers.

A big red banner across the top proclaimed "Spike vid!"

I stared at the link for a minute. Spike. Moving. Singing. I would see him. Hear his voice. I noticed that my hand was trembling as I moved the mouse and clicked on the link. Stupid hand.

It kept trembling for the minute or so of the video buffering. Then suddenly, without warning, I heard a piano, and his face appeared in closeup. It was a quiet song, and his face for once looked peaceful. Then the picture kind of wobbled out of focus and pulled away to show him on a stage. He was standing there, in just the usual t-shirt and jeans, and leaned into the mike and closed his eyes. Nightswimming deserves a quiet night.

I knew what he was singing about. I knew it. I closed my eyes too, and remembered a hot night and a broken air conditioner and a motorcycle ride through the darkness to the beach. And taking off my clothes and running breathless and naked into the water— while he took his time, walking slow across the beach, giving me plenty of time to admire him, the showoff, and then he came to me, cool and hard, and there we were waistdeep in the cold water, and he pulled me against him, and his face was like ivory in the moonlight—

It's not like years ago,
The fear of getting caught,
The recklessness of water.
They cannot see me naked.
These things, they go away,
Replaced by everyday.

His voice was so quiet. He was hardly ever that quiet— but he'd been quiet that night in the ocean, kissing me, the rush of the waves drowning out the little murmurs he made against my mouth—

The video ended. I shut the computer down.

There was a bedroom off to the left. I went in without turning on the lamp, and I could see in the dimness that the bed was made, all nice and neat. But there on the floor against the wall, away from the windows, was a blanket and pillow.

Still a vampire. He didn't like soft beds, soft mattresses. I swear, he'd sleep in a coffin if he didn't think it was too Anne-Ricey.

I was tired. Really. Jet lag. I needed a nap.

I started towards the bed. But it looked too neat. I didn't want to muss the red and blue coverlet.

So I knelt down next to his makeshift bedroll and punched his pillow and crawled into the blanket. This is where he slept. I put my nose into the blanket and closed my eyes and breathed in. No more smoky smell. But something of Spike, that sweet smell of the fabric softener my mother always used— I pulled the blanket around me and thought that maybe just a few hours ago, he was lying here, wrapped in this same blanket, his head just here on the same pillow.

I felt comforted. He was still here. Still with me. Maybe he'd come back, slip into this room, and find me here—
I let myself drift off to sleep, wrapped in his blanket.

And I dreamed of that night and the ocean and his body slippery against mine—

I woke up suddenly. My whole body was... tense. Tense.

I scrambled out of the blanket. Settled it back down on the floor nice and neat. Went to the living room and grabbed my bag and brought it back into the bedroom and changed my clothes.

I couldn't believe I dreamed like that. I hadn't dreamt like that in ... in months.

Once I was safely in clean clothes, I went back out into the living room and located the phone. I called Angel's office, but not his private line. "Wolfram and Hart! Angel's office!" Harmony said perkily.

"We need to talk," I said coolly. "Come to Spike's apartment. As soon as possible."

And before she could protest, I'd hung up.

She showed up a few minutes later, still in her pretty suit and pretty shoes and wearing that big rock on her finger. She plopped down on the couch like she was really well-acquainted with it, put her arm along the leather back, and said, "So? Whatcha need?"

I had like twenty questions, but the one that came out was, "Did Spike give you that ring?"

She looked down at the ring, and then back up at me. "Spike? Diamonds? Where would he get the money for diamonds?" Holding out her hand, just in case I wanted to admire the bauble one more time, she said, "That's three carats in the center, and four one-carat diamonds around it."

"Real diamonds?" I said skeptically.

"Uh, yeah. You want me to scratch the window or something to prove it?"

I grudgingly allowed that wouldn't be necessary. Back to the important point. "But Spike didn't give it to you."

She laughed. A sort of trilling laugh. Made my back teeth hurt. "No. Not Spike. I mean, come on. Spike has his good points—" and she gave me a look that said she knew just as well as I did what those good points were— "but he's got no drive. No ambition."

Hey. Wait a minute. "He does so have ambition," I said hotly. "He didn't slay two slayers by not having ambition!"

She kind of gave a big sigh. "Yeah, well, he gave up that ambition a long time ago. When he met you." You know, like I ruined him or something.

"Well, he wanted to get those Fular demons. They're the most wily ones, the most elusive, and he's always had an ambition to find a lair of them, and—"

"Gee. I don't remember his once mentioning that ambition this last year." She examined her nails, and then buffed them against her fancy suit. "Like I said, nice guy, great bod— but no drive or ambition. Unlike—" and she let this word kind of hang there, then she finished, "my fiancé."
"Your... fiancé." A vampire? With a fiancé? Vampires got married?

"Yeah! David!" She showed off the diamond again, and then suddenly bounded to her feet. "Wanna see a picture?"

"Sure." I assumed she would pull a photo out of her pocket. But instead she ran across the room to Spike's desk and powered on the PC.

She fiddled with the mouse and then called me over. I watched over her shoulder as a browser page loaded. She was wearing some Bond fragrance— I wondered if her fiancé had bought it for her, or more likely, she'd spent a week's salary on a bottle in order to entice him. I guessed it worked, because now she pointed at the photo taking shape at forbes.com. It was the face of a man, a youngish man, sort of a nebbish, but with a nice tentative smile. Underneath a headline read, "Nabbit Enterprises moves into new markets in Asia and Europe."

"That's him," she said. "He has this big software company. It —" and then she went off on some incomprehensible description of servers and communication and software that I tuned out because I was thinking if she did marry him, her name would be Harmony Nabbit, and that made me feel a whole lot better about not having a fiancé of my own.

"He looks really nice," I said, and I meant it. I mean, she could marry Jude Law and it'd be okay with me, so long as she left Spike alone.

"He is a sweetie," she said with a sigh, and she stared at the photo and I realized with a jolt that she was, how do you say it? In love.

Giles's Watcher Chronicles was so wrong about whether vampires could feel. Here was another vampire who fell in love. I mean, I totally disliked Harmony, but how anyone could look at that besotted stare of hers and not recognize feeling and emotion and devotion and all that....

"Harmony, I'm happy for you." It came out easier than I thought.

"Thanks, Slayer," she said with another sigh. "He makes me so happy." And then she clicked the browser closed, and swivelled around in the chair and looked up at me. "So. No. Not with Spike. Are you?"

That question was really pointed. I parried it. "We're friends. And so I was just wondering. You know. How he's doing."

She shrugged. "You know. Still the same. Likes to drink a lot and have brawls and annoy Angel."

That wasn't very informative. "That's his computer, huh?"

"Uh, yeah."

"He's just, you know, not very informative. I just kind of wonder if he's okay, really. And maybe, well, if I could see for myself—"

"He can't see you," she said immediately. This was obviously the party line.

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard. But surely there's some way that I can at least, oh, get a glimpse of what he's doing... who he's doing... I mean, who he's communicating with—" I stared hard at the computer. "Like he sent me this email picture that misconnected with my virus check. Maybe there are some emails he meant to send me that I never got because—"
Harmony swivelled back around and stared at Heidi Klum sprawling in her bikini across the screen. "I actually have a superuser account. Don't tell anyone."

"And this account lets you--"

"Have access to everyone's password."

"That means--"

"That I can get you into his email--" Then she stopped and actually slapped herself in the face. "No! I can't!"

"Why not?"

She got up from the chair and pushed past me, finally sitting down on the couch, way out of reach of that keyboard. "Because. Because I'm trying not to be evil. And here I am, trying to tempt you to do something bad."

"That's okay!" I said. "It's not so bad. I mean, it's only email--"

"No!" She put her hand up, the one with the diamond, and turned her face away, like I was the devil or something. "No. I can't. I don't have a soul, so I have to try extra-hard not to be evil. And I've already used someone's password--"

"Spike's?" I thought maybe if I was careful, I could get it from her and use it after she left.

"Not Spike's. Someone else's. And it was for a good cause. But--" She scrunched her face up. "But I'm trying to feel guilty even if it was a good cause."

I dropped down onto the desk chair. I felt miserable. Harmony had her diamond and her David, and here she was, trying to be good and being kind of better at it than me, and-- "It's just that I want to see Spike. Just see him. Just talk to him. I don't want to cause problems and--" God. What was I doing? Confiding in Harmony? But my mouth kept moving and moving. "I just want to see him. I just want to know why he doesn't want to see me. I thought we were, you know, friends. But--" To my total and utter humiliation, tears started rolling down my face.

Next thing I knew, Harmony was beside me. Patting my shoulder. "He still loves you, you know."

I looked up at her through the haze of tears. "Really?" My voice broke on that word.

"Oh, yeah." She shook her head. "I'd love to fix him up with one of the lady lawyers around here. But he just glooms around missing you."

"Oh." Oh, good. I mean, not good. I didn't want him being gloomy. But at least he was missing me. "Then why does he run out of the building when I arrive? Why's he hiding out if he misses me so much?"

"You really don't know?"

I kind of sniffled and shook my head. "He won't say. And neither will Angel."

"Men." She pushed me out of the desk chair and sat down herself. "Let me show you something. It's a contract Spike signed with the Powers when they sent him back. Full of secret hidden clauses and--"

In about ten seconds she'd logged onto Angel's account with his password (HOCKEY, but I'm sure
"Isn't it evil to break into Angel's account?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I'm his assistant. It's part of my job, keeping track of his passwords. He's always forgetting them."

And she went down a list of folders until she found one and clicked on it, and there it was. A scan of a legal contract. "That's what Spike brought back with him when he was resurrected."

She pointed at the clause with my name on it. And I whispered, "Oh. Oh." And, "That stupid guy—what was he thinking—" and "He does still love me, doesn't he?"

Harmony waited patiently until my sentences ran down into silence. Then she said, "So now you know. He's not just being a pain. He really can't see you."

I backed away from the monitor until my legs hit the couch. Then I dropped into it and sat there thinking hard. Finally I said, "Okay. I need you to help me. Will you?"

She swivelled around and looked me straight in the eye. "Promise not to hurt him anymore."

I shouldn't promise that. I always hurt him, whether I meant to or not. I was just ... hurtful. I knew it now. But... but you know, if Harmony Kendall could try not to be evil, I guessed I could try not to be hurtful. "I promise."

"Okay, Slayer. What do you need me to do?"

So I got the six-pack of beer out of the refrigerator, and we sat on opposite sides of the couch and drank it all up and planned our strategy for trapping Spike.
The vamp-pimp fight in the nightclub was fun, but over too quick. After that, I had to go back to the apartment and wait. And wait. And wait. Spike came by the next day and with a pirated copy of Final Fantasy 13.5, you know, the secret one that no one's even supposed to know about. And okay, that passed the time. But I got bored, and started thinking about going back to school, anything, even that. Spike kept telling me I had to find out the truth, but I couldn't see that I was doing much of that, sitting in Cordelia's apartment and playing videogames.

On Friday, Harmony stopped by with a folder full of material she'd found about Darla Aurelia/Aurelius. I started thinking about putting the moves on her, Harmony, I mean, but I hardly had time to flash the smile I'd been practicing before she told me all about her billionaire fiancé and showed off her fancy ring.

Geez. I mean, I was like almost ready to–

Never mind. I was just getting bored, see?

So Spike was telling me more than I really wanted to know about Darla– like what she used to do to keep Angel in line (he used to be called Angelus, back when he and Spike and Darla and some other chick tore up Europe– Spike used to be evil, you know, like real recently, to hear him tell it, and he was real bad, again to hear him tell it, but it was sort of hard to believe, though I could believe that Angelus was really evil)– and I suddenly realized that Darla was the one with the despairing laugh in my dreams. And Angelus– Angel– was the one with the deep uncaring voice, the one who made her despair.

Okay, so like two years ago, Darla died. Or whatever. Dusted. Decayed. I don't know. But she'd been gone a couple years, that much I figured from Harmony's file. Charlie Gunn messaged me some other stuff about my scholarship that made it really clear, like I hadn't figured it out yet, that Darla wasn't a elderly pious Quaker widow trying to help us young pious Quakers get educated. It was Wolfram & Hart, evil lawfirm Inc, which set up the scholarship and sent me, and only me, the brochure and application.

Spike arrived that evening with a ziploc bag full of photos and a preview copy of Metal Gear Solid. (Wow, all's I can say is, get MGS as soon as it's on sale, or email me and maybe I can get another copy, if, you know, you send a nude photo of you, and you're pretty and female, I mean– okay. I've been hanging around Spike and Charlie too much. They get away with that sort of stuff all the time. Me, I'll probably get sued for sexual harassment.)

He handed me the baggie, which was sort of dusted with orange dust. "Not vamp," he assured me, brushing his hands off. "I sent all my old stuff out before the apocalypse with my buddy Clem, and he's got a Cheeto problem. Anyway."

I didn't know if I'd get used to him and Wes and Gunn talking about apocalypses like that, like, you know, last year's Super Bowl or something else major but perennial. I thought there was supposed to be one apocalypse, the permanent kind. But he had a six-pack of Grolsh– he sure drank a lot, and so did I lately– and he sat down beside me on the couch, and as he opened a beer with one hand, he used the other to sort through the photos. "That's Dru," he said, gazing with a sort of fond smile at the dark image of the lady.
"Dru." A swig of my own beer brought back the memory. "Drusilla. Your sire."

"Yeah." He slid the photo over on the coffee table. "Angelus's childe. Darla's grandchilde." He frowned for a moment. "Darla's sire too. Weird that. Darla came back human, Wes said– he remembers that much– and Dru had to turn her again. Oh, crikey, that makes Darla my–"

When he broke off, too appalled I guess to finish, I stared at the photo of Darla's, uh, grandchilde and sire. These vampires. They should go on Jerry Springer, you know? Next up! She's her own great grand-childe! Dru was sort of pretty, but the camera flash had gotten her eyes so that they looked blank and starry. She didn't seem Spike's type. I mean, I didn't know exactly what his type was, but she had on this elaborate red-velvet dress, and red plumes in her hair, and you know, I couldn't see Spike dressed up fit to escort her around the killing fields and ballrooms of Europe.

Before I could ask if he owned a tux, he shoved another photo at me. "That's Darla and Angelus. In better days. Or worse days, depending on your perspective."

My hand trembled a little as I took the picture. My vision was so unfocused that all I could see at first was the outlines of two people, one standing, one sitting. "Tell me– were they, like, together?"

"Centuries," Spike said promptly. "Till Angelus got his soul, and Darla kicked him out. Only she mourned and lamented for years after that. God, was I glad when she went off on her own and left me and Dru to ourselves."

"She... loved him."

"Darla? Sure. Hey! Here's a pic of Buffy's little sister. Dawn. She's the one I drove back to school. Only she drove. Pretty good driver, considering–"

He went jabbering on about this Dawn girl, and I stared at the photo of my benefactress and my... killer until my vision finally cleared. Angelus was a big man, husky, dressed in an old-fashioned black suit. With his black hair, well, he looked like an undertaker, only his grin made him look like he enjoyed the work way too much. Darla was standing beside him, her hand on his shoulder, her face kind of serene, but her eyes glittering. "You sure look like her," I finally said.

Spike broke off some reminiscence about popcorn and said, "I do not!" But then he added, like he was ashamed but had to be honest, "The Master always said so. Angelus too. He used to–" And then he stopped and stood up and said, "I better get going– Charlie got a Langel trapped down in the tar pits last night, and we're hiring a cherry-picker tonight to get him out. Wanna come?"

"Sure," I said. "Anything to get out of this apartment." Anything to get away from that photo–

But it must have had sentimental value for Spike. He stuffed it back into the bag with the other photos, and shoved that into his jacket pocket, and we headed out into the night.

Okay, so this was better than studying for a physics exam. It was really dark– the moon hidden by clouds, the only light cast by some distant streetlamps and the cherry picker's headlight. The three of us were all jammed into the cab, and the windows were open, and the air inside was warm and the air outside was cool. And all the air crackled in my lungs– I guess it was excitement, and the late night, that made me kind of breathless

The cherry picker had a CD player– how cool is that?– and Spike kept something really loud going,
the Clash, I think, as we took turns maneuvering it up to the pit. It was so big, the cherry picker I mean, that it made me feel like I was shifting a tyrannosaurus around. The pit was big too, maybe a football field across, and the demon was the size of a rhino, at least with that tar covering.

We got him hooked and got him elevated-- it was pretty clear he was dead, encapsulated as he was. The cherry picker's floodlight picked him out real pretty, the tar glistening all black and shiny. It was the first demon I'd ever seen, and I had to take a photo of it with Spike's cell phone, and he said make sure to save it because he wanted to send it to "the Slayer", which told me that he was back in contact with the sort-of-ex-not-really-girlfriend.

And so we'd just maneuvered it to the side of the pit, and Gunn and Spike were arguing about whether to sell it as an aphrodisiac to the Koreans or as sculpture to a trendy art gallery downtown. Then Tar Baby's relatives showed up looking for vengeance, the three of them roaring and wailing and pushing at the cherry picker, trying to upend it into the pit. We had to jump out and take them on-- untarred, they're not as big, and their skin, or hide, is sort of a sick yellow-- and two of them landed in the tar pit, and the third took off running.

I didn't know how I could do it, go back to school, be normal, after this.

The two new Langels were deep in the tar, and no matter how we fished, we couldn't find them. So Charlie called for a van to take our only catch to the shipping container, and called the construction company to retrieve their cherry picker (paying no attention to Spike who begged to keep it as a pet).

And then, full of adrenaline, we went off to an after-hours club near the W&H building, and picked up some chicks and danced. Okay, Gunn picked up some chicks, or at least one. And Spike danced with about twelve different girls. And he made me dance with a couple girls too, even though I'm not a great dancer. The music was loud enough that it didn't much matter anyway. Not like there was any conversation between me and my partners, just some bumping and wiggling.

So Gunn went off with his girl, and it wasn't till he was gone that we realized he had the car keys. And the car. So Spike said I better come home with him, and we ended up skulking through the corridors of the W&H building, even though it was 3 a.m. He seemed to think something really bad would happen if I ran into that Angel guy, the one who kind of killed me. Yeah, I said. I might just return the favor, only I wouldn't do it "kind of".

But we didn't see him, or anyone but a security guard-- the one who played guitar in Spike's band, who was pretty cool and promised not to tell Angel about me. All the energy had drained out of me, and I couldn't even make my usual protest about wanting to meet this Angel face to face and tell him what-for. I got as far as Spike's living room and collapsed on the couch. I fell asleep just as he was sitting down at his desk, checking email "one more time"-- that is, checking to see if the ex-not-really-girlfriend had emailed to say goodnight. I reminded myself to ask him in the morning why, if she was never his girlfriend, why she was always emailing him.

I dreamt about Darla, my cold, pretty benefactress, and the dark looming man who hated her, and hated me too, felt like-- and when I woke up, I located Spike sleeping on the bedroom floor, and I shook him awake and said, "That's it. No more waiting. Today I'm going to find out what this shit is all about."

Spike kind of panicked then. He jumped up and dashed over to the door and stood in front of it, like he intended to bar my exit. We finally agreed that I'd have some breakfast while he gathered the team-- but I told him, that was it, we were going to settle this today so I could get back to my real life. (Or start a new life-- I mean, I really couldn't see going back to school now.)

Breakfast at Spike's turned out to be a choice between ice cream and thawed blood ("it's otter," Spike said, like he had to be hospitable but worried that I might deprive him of his treat). But Gunn and the
other English guy– Wesley– and the pretty dark-haired scientist lady brought enough coffee to share, so we all sat around with our cups and I made my case for action.

My case pretty much consisted of "now or never". Wesley’s case consisted of "wait". "We need to know more," he said authoritatively. "We don't even know yet who you are— or why we don't know." Fred agreed with Wesley, and Gunn wasn't any help, as he was lying in a hungover haze on the floor. Spike decided to summarize all the evidence, which wasn’t his forte, to say the least, and he was messing it up and getting the sequence of events wrong, and Wes was annoyed, and Fred was consulting her Blackberry calendar, and ....

And while they were arguing, I slipped out the door.

I didn't know, but I knew who knew. Cordelia.

I wasn't completely sure where she was, but I'd learned something from Spike (besides how to pick up girls, that is). I followed my nose. She was in a hospital ward, I knew that much, and I just kept sniffing the air, and tracked the faint hospital smell down to the second floor. I stuck to the back stairs and back halls so I wouldn't run into Angel, and I didn't see anyone but a couple sneaky smokers who turned their faces away when I approached.

The disinfectant smell got stronger as I moved deeper into the interior of the building. I was glad I had that trail, because I would have gotten lost otherwise. The back corridors made a labyrinth, kept twisting in and in, and the walls became cement-block and the floors concrete the deeper I went. I passed closed doors and "no exit" signs every few steps. Scary in a weird scary corporate way.

But then I emerged into a wider hallway, and at the end were double doors, and I pushed through them and saw an older lady in a nurse’s uniform, sitting behind a narrow counter. She was reading the classifieds, but looked up when I came in.

"Spike sent me to see how Cordelia was doing," I said, smiling a nice college-boy smile. "He couldn't come himself because, you know—"

She finished for me. "Hungover. I know. Well, there's been no change. But you're welcome to go in and sit with her. Talk to her. I know she can hear. She just isn't letting anyone in to her space."

I did the poor-Cordelia sympathy face, and promised to say hi to Spike, and stepped quietly into the hospital room. Cordelia was lying flat, her dark hair spread out on the white pillow, her eyes unfocused but aimed at the ceiling.

"Cordelia," I said, quiet. No response. I said it more loudly. "Cordelia. I know you can hear me." Nothing. I crossed to the bed and stood over her. Maybe I loomed. I don't know. I'm not a real tall guy, but she looked pretty small and weak there in the bed, and so I guess you could say I was looming. I didn't mean to scare her, but I wanted her to pay attention.

"Listen. You were the one who said it. That you thought Angel killed me. That's what Wes said too, but that's all he remembered."

She didn't move, but I sensed her drawing in, tightening up, protecting herself. From me. Or from him. I thought maybe I should stop with the looming, so I dropped into the chair by her bed and took her hand. It was cold, like a vampire’s, and thin, the fingers like twigs. "I need to know. Because I'm going to meet with Angel soon, and I need to know what he knows. Or—" this probably wasn't fair, but I wasn't feeling fair then. "Or he'll probably kill me again."

She sighed and opened her eyes, and her hand twitched in mine. I squeezed it tight and said, "No
one else knows what happened before. I mean, okay, Spike wasn't here, but the others were, and it's like something happened and they didn't know. Only Wes– he thinks he sort of remembers. Something. He looks at me and – and I can feel it. He's feeling bad. Guilty. And he doesn't even know why, and neither do I, because I never met him before Spike brought me here."

"You did." Her eyes were focused on my shoulder. And her voice was so low I had to bend closer to hear. "But you don't remember. And Wes doesn't remember. Because Angel doesn't want you to remember. And maybe he's right."

She withdrew her hand from mine and raised it to touch my hair. She touched me like she knew me. Like I mattered to her. It made my heart hurt in my chest. She was looking at me with such... caring.

And I knew then that I should go back. That I should leave this place and forget about it and pretend that my scholarship was a scholarship and my benefactress was just an old Quaker lady and I was just a teenager who screwed up one semester but got back on track in time. I could take it all back and be me again--

"Why? Why doesn't he want us to remember?"

Her hand cupped my cheek. It felt right-- like she'd done that before. She whispered, "Because of me. Because of what I did. Because you will hate me. And he doesn't want that."

I stared at her, at her ghostly eyes and her chapped mouth, and I said, "I won't hate you. I might hate him--"

"No. He only did it for me...."

Her voice trailed off again, and I said, "Okay. Maybe it was to protect you. But – but Wes said Angel killed me. And when you first saw me, you said that too. So--" it sounded stupid, with me sitting there, feeling the warmth of her hand on my face, feeling my heart racing and my breath pounding in and out of my lungs. "So did he? When did he kill me? Am I -- dead?"

"No. Yes." Her hand dropped and she turned her face away. "Yes. He killed you last year. But not really. It can't be really. Because you're here. And you're alive."

"I know that! But– but I thought I knew who I was. And you're telling me I'm not that person. That I'm someone who was here last year, when I thought I was a senior in high school. So who am I? Who is Darla? Why does she matter?"

Cordelia wouldn't look at me. But she answered me. "Darla was your mother."

No. No. No. My mother was a social worker who helped hospice patients. She wasn't a murderous icy-eyed vampire –

There was a sound behind me, and I turned and saw Wes push in through the doorway, and behind him Spike. Wes was looking at Cordelia. "When?" he said hoarsely.

She stared down at her hands on the coverlet. "It was... almost three years ago."

"That I was born?" It made no sense. But I could see it made sense to Wes. And Spike's face was thoughtful. "But--" I had to say it. "But I'm nineteen."

"You were-- " Cordy whispered this. "In another dimension. You grew up there. And then came back."
Wes whispered, "Three years. So since we've known Angel. Since we've been together."

Spike said, "You think you'd remember, huh?"

Wes sat down heavily on the second chair. "He lied to us."

"Well, duh," Spike said. He really wasn't any help. But I was too – too something– to protest. "So," Spike added, like this was something he was reading in Soap Opera Digest, "what's Angel got to do with it?"

There was silence. I grabbed one of Cordelia's hands and kind of squeezed. Okay, it wasn't nice. None of this was nice. "What's Angel got to do with it?"

Finally she spoke, the words coming out in the lowest of tones. "He's your father."

Stupid. Stupid. All I could think of right then was Darth Vader saying, "Luke, I'm your father." This made exactly the same amount of sense.

"Vampires can't have children," Spike said immediately, and he should know, right? I kind of cast him a grateful glance for saying that so forcefully.

Wes of course had to disagree. Wes always had his own source of information– "There are stories... of vampire children. Called damphyr."

"Yeah, yeah, Wes. I saw the movie too. All bullshit– Angel and Darla--" But then he stopped. Exchanged a glance with Wes. "I suppose if the Powers can bring me back...."

"No," I said, but no one was listening to me.

Cordelia slid her hand out of mine. "It's true. It's crazy, I know. But true. You were born in--"


"Where Darla died," Spike said.

"He– he killed her?" I shoved my chair back. It was really way too much.

"No!" Cordelia cried. "No. She killed herself. To let you live."

I kind of sagged back. "Three years ago." I was in high school three years ago. Playing soccer. I felt on my elbow, found the scar I'd gotten from sliding on the field after a kick. I was in high school three years ago.

"She– she loved you," Cordelia said, like it should make me feel better. "As much as she could. Being a vampire--"

Spike kind of laughed at this. "Cordelia, pet, Angel's the only vampire who can't love. The rest of us manage very well."

She gave him a hurt look. Oh. Christ. I didn't want to know–

Wes interrupted all this. "You remember, Cordy. Why don't I?"

"Because," Spike answered for her, "Angel did something to your memory. Magicked it away. Left Cordy's brain alone."
"Because he thought it wouldn't matter...." Wes shot a sharp glance at her. "But you've been awake for days. And you didn't tell me."

Cordy was trying to explain, and Wes cut her off. "The father will kill the son. He kept saying that--after he dusted Spike. Then he kept saying that Spike wasn't his son."

"Lucky at that," Spike said. "Sorry," he added, looking at me. "I mean, I did have a father, you know, once upon a time. And he wouldn't even cane me, much less kill me."

My father too--I thought of him, Tim Jacobson, the Quaker. He never raised a hand to me or my sister--only he wasn't my father. He wasn't my father. That was what Cordelia was saying. "Did it just... all get made up? My family? My past?"

No one answered. I stood up, the chair crashing to the floor. I headed for the door.

Spike was right behind me when I got into the hallway. "Where you going?"

"To him. To Angel. To hear the truth."

I thought he would protest. But he just smiled. "Got your back, kid. Go for it."

The anger fueled me until I reached the first staircase. Then I realized I didn't know where Angel was. I stood there until Spike caught up with me. He took one look at my face, and said, "So feel him. Like you felt those vamps coming. Tune me out, and feel for him."

Yeah, right, Spike had to make this a learning experience. But I closed my eyes and felt. I let the nerves on my arms reach out. I don't know how to describe it. It was like I had a new sense now. It took me a minute, but finally I opened my eyes. "Follow me."

Spike smiled, like I'd passed the test, and followed.

As I strode towards the double doors, Harmony looked up from her desk. But other than a little squeak, she didn't protest. She just gave Spike a little hand gesture, sort of like "be careful", and then ducked down. 'Cause the doors were wood, I guess. Not that I busted through. I just flung them open and walked in.

It was dark in there. Dark wood. Dark drapes. And behind the dark desk, a dark man. It got even darker when Spike closed the doors behind us.

They could see in the dark. I couldn't. All I could see was a man rising from behind the desk. A big man. He couldn't be my--

Spike gave me a jab in the back. I stepped forward. But I still couldn't see anything but that big desk and that looming form. And no one spoke. The air was heavy and quiet and hot.

Spike crossed over to the window. The heavy drapes slid over the brass rod, and sunlight poured through the vampire-safe glass. And I could finally see him. It was the man in that photo. When he said my name, I knew it was the man who spoke to Darla in my dreams.

"Connor," he said again. His face was--

God. There were tears on his face.
I had questions. I knew I had questions. Only he had the answers. But I saw his tears glinting in the sunlight and I couldn't speak.

"You couldn't shut Spike up, though. "So. The kid wants to know what it all means. Specially the part about you killing him."

"I didn't--" And then the man fell silent.

Finally I found my voice. It wasn't as strong as I'd like. But I said, "Tell me. All my memories. They're bogus, aren't they?"

He lowered his head, stared at the folders on his desk. "Yes. They implanted them. To give you-- to give you happy memories. A happy life."

I backed up until I was against the closed door. "My parents. Do they know?"

"No. They-- their memories were altered too."


"How do you--" Angel took a deep breath. "How did you figure it out?"

Spike shrugged. "Someone left a trail of breadcrumbs." He tilted his head and asked what I wanted to ask. "Was it you? Left the trail?"

Angel shook his head. "Not me. Not me. I didn't want him to know-- never wanted him to know."

And then, with sudden venom, he said, "You ruined it. You made him know." He came out from behind the desk and moved towards Spike. "And now he's here, and he knows, and it's all gone. All his happiness--"

I couldn't listen to this. "I was going to kill myself!"

Angel stopped. He turned slowly to face me. He looked agonized. Not as bad as I felt, I bet. "But they promised me. You'd have a new life."

"Yeah, well, I kept having these old dreams, see." I felt the anger grow, with him so close. "Killing dreams. And I'd wake up and want to go kill. Someone. Or myself." It was like I couldn't help it. I pressed my hands flat back against the door. "And it's your fault." I launched myself at him.

Spike was there between us, catching me just like that in one arm, and setting me down on the floor. "Settle down, Cassius," he murmured. "Can't let you kill him." He glanced back at Angel and smiled. "You wouldn't last two rounds anyway. Nasty bugger, your old man."

I struggled against him, but he was too strong. And anyway, I wanted to know. Not just to kill. To know. I pushed my chest against Spike's arm and said,"How? How? How are you my-- " I couldn't say that word. My father was Tim Jacobson. He was. He was.

"I-- I don't know. It was ordained. Somehow."

"And-- her."

"Darla," Spike said. He pushed me back a couple feet and let me go. "Darla was her name."

"Darla," I whispered. "What about her?"
"She's gone," Angel said. His face was blank.

"Did you-- did you love her?"

"I--" he stopped and started again. His voice came strained. "I've only loved two people. You and-- and someone else. Not Darla. She was ... evil. It was never love between us."

"Sod that," Spike said suddenly. He was fierce now, his hands balled into fists. He was talking to me, but glaring at Angel. "Don't listen to him, Connor. She loved him. I know. I was there when they were together. Wasn't a good love maybe. But it was love, and he can't say it wasn't."

Angel started to say, "I never--"

But then Spike cocked his head, and listened, and whispered, "Slayer."

A second later, Angel whispered, "Buffy."

I couldn't hear anything. But I guess they could, because they both turned towards the double doors. They didn't look anything alike, but at that moment, they were like twins. And I remembered what Spike had said. This slayer didn't love him, because she was in love with--

Christ. I want to go home, I thought really clearly. Want my mom and dad. Only they weren't my mom and dad, and they didn't even know it.

So I couldn't go home. Spike was standing there in front of me, his face bleak. "I can't see her," he said real low. "I have to go."

"Then go," Angel said. He crossed behind his desk and pushed at the paneling. A small door opened. "Sounds like she's headed this way. Go."

"I--" Spike wasn't moving. "I can't." He looked at me, his expression pleading. "I can't go. You have to make me."

Oh, Christ, that's all I needed now. "How?"

"Knock me out. Shove me out."

I stared at him. But he was serious. He couldn't stay, and he couldn't go. "I can't knock you out."

"I can," Angel said, and took a step forward.

"No!" I moved in between, glaring at him. "You've hurt him enough." And then, quick, before he could raise his hands in defense, I clipped Spike a good one on the chin, and caught him as he fell. Then I dragged him through the panel door, and down the hidden stairway that led to the garage. Behind me I could hear a trilling voice-- Harmony? -- saying the name "Buffy" a half-dozen times.

We'd gotten out just in time.

But as I draped Spike into the driver's seat of the Viper, I couldn't figure it out. He loved her. Jeez. That was obvious. And yet he'd rather be knocked out than see her. Rather leave her to Angel than wait for her.

I didn't understand this love. Spike said he loved Buffy. He said Darla loved Angel. Angel said he loved me.

Maybe it was just vampires. Didn't love the way they were supposed to.
It hurt. I didn't want to know it. Didn't want to know what it meant about me.

I found the keys hanging on a pegboard in the little garage office, and brought them to Spike. He was just coming round as I slipped the keyring on his finger. "Wha--"

"I'm going back. Gonna have this out with him. I'll meet you back at Cordelia's later." I closed the car door, but he rolled down the window.

"Nah, wait, I'll go with you– when she's gone."

"I can't wait. You get out of here, or she'll see you."

That was it. All I needed to say. He nodded and put the key in the ignition, and, rubbing his chin, backed out and drove off.

I went back up the backstairs. But Angel's office was empty. I went to the drapes Spike had opened, and pulled them shut, and sat down in a leather chair. He would return. I could wait.

Chapter End Notes

Buffy

Finally, Buffy. And she gets to see Spike. This is definitely the slowest Spuffy fic ever.

:) Plus I suspect I let Buffy get Ditzy. Oh, well, she's light-headed because Spike is near.

Okay, I kept thinking that if I waited long enough, Spike would sneak back to his apartment, and I'd be there. But the afternoon melted away without his appearance, and so did the six-pack of Zima we found in the fridge's vegetable crisper. "You sure he doesn't have a girlfriend?" I asked Harmony, tossing the last empty bottle towards the wastebasket. "Because Zima is so not his drink of choice."

"Oh, he keeps that for bribes," Harmony said, leaning her head back against the leather couch. She probably didn't mean to be so cryptic. It was more like she forgot what she was answering before she got done answering. You know, you'd think that it would take more to get a vampire drunk. (It took a lot to get Spike drunk, I know that, at least compared to me.) But Harmony was ditzy to begin with, so I suppose it didn't take much more to make her really dumb.

As soon as I thought that, I felt guilty. I mean, here she was, helping me out. Keeping me company. Promising to get Spike somewhere, and me there simultaneously. At least she didn't forget that, no matter how drunk she got. She kept checking her watch (I think it was a Bulgari... had to be a gift from the billionaire boyfriend), and right at 6 pm, she yanked out her cell-phone.

(Shell had him on speed-dial. Spike, I mean. But okay. Probably lots of women had him on speed-dial. That didn't mean anything. But as soon as I got hold of him, I'd check his speed-dial directory for numbers. Not that he shouldn't speed-dial other women. Not that he was, you know, mine or anything. I just wanted to know, that's all.)

(I should get Spike's number from Harmony. He probably had voice mail too.)

"Hey, Spike! Got a job for you." She made a face at me as she listened. "Okay, yeah, so I'm a little drunk. Prudence brought some champagne. 'Cause it's the first day of-- I forget. You know those witches. They have all these ritual days they have to celebrate." She rolled her eyes and shook her head, and then said, "Yeah. I yelled Buffy's name about fifty times so that you'd hear and clear out. She probably thought I was nuts. But she and Angel went out somewhere, I don't know where. Probably somewhere really expensive and exclusive. They took the Rolls, anyway. And they're probably holding hands right now."

I glared at her, but she only smiled and waggled her fingers at me. Get to the point, I mouthed. I was trying not to breathe too loud, because I didn't want him to hear me through the phone. And holding my breath was making me kind of light-headed.

"Anyway, this job just came in." Harmony reached over to the pile of magazines on the coffee table and ripped the front cover of the National Enquirer. I guess it was supposed to sound like she was tearing a message off one of those pink message pads. I had to wonder what Spike would say when
he saw Angelina Jolie ripped in half that way.

"Okay, here's the deal. It's a cemetery." More listening. "Quitcher bitching. This is a paying job. There's some mogul's mom buried there, and he's gotten afraid to visit her grave, cuz he's heard there's a vamp nest near by." She did the you think I'm an idiot outrage look, and added, "Well, no, I didn't inform him that he should visit during the day and he'd be safe. I didn't do that because you keep saying you need to make some money. So here's a quick two-thousand, and all you have to do is take out a few really dense cemetery dwellers. You keep saying how you miss the Sunnydale cemeteries--"

I kind of sighed (real quietly). I missed the Sunnydale cemeteries too. Or at least patrolling them with Sp– well, you know, we used to have some fun. Just remembering, it got the juices flowing. Fighting with Spike, fighting next to Spike–

Harmony switched off the phone and smiled a little woozily at me. "Okay. He grumbled about it. He doesn't want to work. All he wanted to do was moan and groan about how totally unfair life is and how much he wants to be with you but can't."

Awww... I yanked my mind back. "But he was going to be at that cemetery."

"Yeah. In an hour. Said he's in some old art movie theater, watching Casablanca, and he wants to see the end again."

I closed my eyes. Oh, great. Casablanca. Wasn't that all about renouncing the beloved for her own good? As soon as I had him, I was going to rent The Big Easy and make him watch that. I sighed and opened my eyes and found Harmony watching me. So I sat up straight and tried to look like a Slayer, and said, "Okay, tell me where the cemetery is. And I'll... well, I'll meet him there. You'll call him in an hour and make sure he hasn't forgotten?"

Harmony gave me directions and promised to call Spike and remind him of the job. Then, grabbing the National Enquirer, she waved and kind of staggered out. I was about to suggest a cab to take her home, then I remembered she probably had a limo with a liveried driver waiting at the door. Not that I begrudged it. Harmony could have ten billionaire boyfriends, as long as she got Spike to the right place.

Once she was gone, I did a little snooping. I mean, I searched for his weapons trunk. Needed an axe or two, right? Not like they'd let me bring one in my carry-on luggage. So I searched the closet and found his duster hanging up there. I had to kind of hold it for awhile. Kind of gather it against me. Okay. So I put it on. It was like being with him. Smelling that old leather. Feeling him all smooth against me–

I slid the coat off my shoulders and hung it up again. Maybe, next time he wore it, he'd know I tried it on.... Well, with luck, next time he wore it, I'd be right there with him.

Finally located the weapons trunk in the linen closet. I got a handful of stakes, chose a short-handled axe, and took a dagger for Spike. He liked to thrust. You know what I mean. In fights. So I stuffed all that in my bag, and looked at my watch, and decided it was time to go. Even if it wasn't really time to go yet. I kind of couldn't wait.

But I had to change first. I knew Spike didn't want to see me, but just in case, I put on this really cute plaid skirt and a tight black sweater and my new red jacket. You know that last year? I kind of let the wardrobe go. So when Spike remembered me fighting, he probably remembered me in workout pants and one of those ugly sweatshirts. Once he saw me do a roundhouse kick in this little skirt... well, me in baggy sweats would be erased from his mind.
The sun was already set when I got there, and dusk was gathering in the stone-walled corners and under the spreading live oaks. I stood for a moment under the gateway arch and got my bearings. I sensed vampire. Good. I sensed Spike. Very good. (Actually, it made my knees sort of buckle. I had to grab the iron gate to stay up. He was... so close.) Only if I could sense him, he could sense me. And sure enough, I felt him moving away, towards the back of the graveyard. I couldn't see him, but I felt him, getting more and more distant. I even thought I saw his shadow, darker than the darkness, disappearing into the distant trees.

I broke into a run. I don't know what I thought I was going to do. Grab him. Tackle him. Something him.

But then, right next to a big old pyramid monument, I stopped. Chasing him was a really dumb idea. That would just make him run. No, like Cosmo always says, make him come to you.

So I slung the bag back on my shoulder and walked slow, trying to look innocent and stupid under the soft light of the halogen security lamps. It always works. I don't know what they're teaching vamps these days. I mean, really, there are like dozens of slayers now, right? But vamps still see a nubile young woman in graveyard, and instead of hightailing it out of there to bite another day, or night, they decide to attack.

It was almost insulting, how quickly the first vamp appeared. He sauntered out from behind a big cherub-topped mausoleum. "Hey, Little Red Riding Hood," he said. You know, like he was so original. (You know the first thing Spike ever said to me? He said, Nice work, love. And then he said he was going to kill me, but not right away. On Saturday. It was sort of thrilling, like he wanted the extra time to prepare for the fight. Spike knew a slayer when he saw one.)

"Hey," I said. "Wow! What long teeth you have!" I said this really loud. I knew Spike was listening. And I wanted to make sure he knew that I was here with a for-real vampire. "Oh!" I felt in my jacket pocket and yanked out a stake. "What have we here? A pointy wooden thing!" (That was to let Spike know I was going to really soon start to fight. He always liked to watch me fight, until he got all excited and had to join in.)

The vamp kind of frowned. He looked pretty new. I let the bag fall to the ground and raised the stake, and he started backing away. "Hey, Toadie!" he yelled. "Hey, Wheatie!" (You know, along with slayer recognition, vamp-naming has really deteriorated.)

I vaulted over a gravestone, stake held out, and catapulted into the first vamp. He exploded into dust, and I yelled, "Hey! Still got the right stuff!" Not that I'd been insecure or anything, but it had been kind of a while since I dusted a vamp. And it felt good. I thought probably it looked good too, me in my kicky boots and short skirt. Only I was worried Spike wasn't watching. He probably still was thinking that dumb thing about how to protect me, he had to not see me, no matter how short my skirt was.

Well, that wasn't going to last if I had anything to say about it. I heard a noise behind me—Toadie and Wheatie were making their appearance too late to save their buddy. I whirled around just in time to see Toadie, or maybe Wheatie, grab my bag. Oops. My bad. No! My good! This would give Spike a chance to remind me of Lesson the First: A slayer should always keep her weapons handy. (Or something like that. He was leaning really close when he said it, and I was wondering how such a bad man could have such a pretty mouth... I mean, I had trouble paying attention to his lessons, but I remember the first was about weapons.)

But I didn't hear a word from Spike. I thought I heard him move though. There was this snapping sound, like he was holding too tight to a tree branch, and I got nervous. Him and sharp pieces of wood do not go together. So I got serious. I let Toadie (or Wheatie) yank my axe out of the bag, and
I backed up till I was against the wall of a mausoleum.

"Spike! I need you!"

Toadie (or Wheatie) started swinging that axe around. And Wheatie (or Toadie) circled around the mausoleum and came at me from behind.

Hey. These were not the densest vamps in the lair. I was going to have a word with Harmony when I got back. "Spike!" I yelled. "This time I really mean it! He's got my axe!"

Suddenly Spike was by my side, fighting one-handed because he was using the other hand to shield his eyes. He was holding a piece of tree branch, and he raised it just in time to impale Wheatie in the shoulder, which was pretty impressive aiming, given that he couldn't see. Wouldn't see, that is.

"Oh, you – you are such a... an annoying vampire!" I cried, kicking Toadie in the forearm and dislodging the axe "You drive me crazy!"

"Gee, thanks," said Toadie.

"Not you, idiot." I jammed the stake into his chest, and he dissolved, the smug look still on his face.

"YOU, idiot!" I said, turning just as Spike yanked the branch out of Wheatie and stuck it back in, this time right over the pocket protector. "You're the one who drives me crazy!"

"Buffy, don't–" He stood there, his hands over his eyes, as the vamp dust settled all around him. He wasn't going to look at me. He wasn't.

I hadn't actually meant to touch him. That would mean too much. I never meant to mean too much. But he wouldn't look at me, and all of a sudden I needed him to see me. If he could just see me, if I could look into his eyes, I'd know. I knew I'd know.

But his eyes stayed hard-shut.

"Spike, look at me." I said this against his soft mouth. He felt so right, so familiar, so new– all cool and taut and wanting. "Don't listen to those stupid Powers."

"I– I have to. They hold your future–"

"No, they don't."

"They'll make sure you'll have a happy life– if I just don't see you again."

"You don't have the right to decide that for me! " I stopped, took a breath, lay my head against his chest. "You're so dumb sometimes." I couldn't ever lie to him. He always knew the truth about me, even when I was lying to myself. "How do you think I can have a happy life, if you're not in it?"

"Oh." He whispered, "Buffy...."
"Spike. Open your eyes. Look at me." And then I said, "Really. Open your eyes and I'll tell you something nice."

And he sighed, and he opened his eyes, and they were filled with love and anguish, and I kissed him as tenderly as I could, all my longing there, all my sorrow, all my gladness. And he closed his eyes again, but then he usually did when I kissed him. I was going to say something nice, say that he was beautiful, that I missed him. And instead I heard myself saying, "I love you."

And it just burst inside me, all the happiness, all the joy, and I thought, oh. That's love. That's what it's supposed to be like. Because it had hurt before, love— when I loved Angel. But now— oh. That's what it supposed to feel like. It felt... good. Lovely. Wow.

And I smiled at him, and he smiled back, and I knew this time he believed me. This time I believed me too. "I love you," I whispered, and kissed him again.

After a moment, we pulled slightly away. "Anything... happen?" he asked. (He really did have a pretty mouth. And his eyes.)

I shook my head. "Well, you know, lust and all that. But— no cataclysm. No misery. In fact," I added, "I kind of feel... happy. How about you?"

"Yeah. Scared. Happy."

"I love you." That was... easy. Hard. Real.

He closed his eyes again and kissed me.

"You believe me this time?"

"Maybe. Might have to say it a few hundred more times, just in case."

"You didn't believe it last time."

"I thought it was your way of saying goodbye."

"This is my way of saying hello. Hello, I love you." I started crying, my cheek wet against his. It felt really right, him holding me. I'd forgotten how right it felt. "I've been so... so missing you. I kept thinking of all the time I wasted. I kept thinking of how you'd say you loved me, and I'd yell at you and tell you to stop. And you never stopped, and I never realized until you were gone how amazing that was. How valuable that was. How I relied on it. And then it was too late."

"Maybe not. We're here." But while Spike clasped me reassuringly to him, he was looking around the cemetery. Watching for... what?

For that. Over the cherub-topped mausoleum, a dark cloud appeared. It was like the cloud that always followed Pigpen in the Peanuts cartoon. Only much bigger, and much darker.

And its voice was like thunder. "You have abrogated the contract, vampire."

Spike sighed. "Yeah. I know. Never been good at following instructions." He tightened his grip on me, kissed my mouth, and then let me go. "And since I'm the one who broke your bloody rules, I'm the one you need to punish. So take me. Scourge me. Whatever you're going to do."

I realized what he meant. "No! Listen." I felt stupid, addressing the cloud, but I spoke firmly anyway. "I don't care. It's okay with me. I don't have to be happy. I don't mind."
The cloud churned around.

"Really. I'm okay with it. As long as I've got Spike, I don't have to be happy."

"Buffy." Spike gripped my hand.

"It's not that simple, Slayer," the cloud said.

"Sure it is. The clause said—what did it say, Spike?" I finished under my breath.

"It said you'd have a long and happy life if I never saw you again. But—"

"That I'd have a long and happy life if he never saw me again. So, okay. He sees me. I don't get such a long and happy life." Or maybe I'd have a long and happy life anyway, just to spite them.

"But—" Spike seemed as if he wanted to argue this point. I squeezed his hand almost to the bone-breaking point, and he shut up.

"So—uh, thanks for coming to check on me. You can go now."

"Slayer." It sounded like Giles on a hungover morning. Crabby yet authoritative. "You are missing the point."

"Nope, I don't think so. We'll just be going now." I yanked Spike by the hand, but he was rooted in place. Really. I couldn't budge him without pulling his arm out of the socket. "Spike, stop being such a—"

"I'm not doing it. Jesus. You think I want to stay here? I can't move."

"We said. You are missing the point, Slayer."

I tugged futilely at Spike's hand, and he said, "Ow," so I just held it.

"What's the point then?"

"He broke the agreement. And he knows what the penalty for that is. Don't you, vampire?"

"Being stuck here listening to you blather on? Yeah, that's punishment enough."

"Death. The endless kind."

That last word echoed off the tombstones. I started getting scared. Really scared. And that always makes me mad.

"Wait a minute. I think you have a problem here. Because the clause concerned me. I was a party to it. Only you didn't consult me, and I didn't sign it. So I'm not bound by it. And if I want him to be with me, then I, as an involved party, can—can—can abrogate the contract because it was made without my consent." Well, it sounded good, considering I know squat about the law.

"We are the ones in control of the future. Your wishes don't matter."

I felt Spike stir next to me. "Uh-oh," he said under his breath. "Bad move, Powers."

Yeah. Bad move, Powers. "My wishes don't matter?" It started loud, and ended up a screech. "My wishes don't matter? Do you know who you're talking to? I am the Slayer! Of course my wishes matter! It's my life, and my future! Where do you get off saying you can control my future? You
can't. I'm in charge, and I want this man. So there. You can't do anything about it." Then I gave into a moment of weakness, and asked, "Can you?"

And the universe responded with a big Duhhhh.... "You are our tool."

Spike's chin jutted out. "No, she isn't. Angel's your tool. But Buffy's not. She's – she's an independent contractor. Accent on independent."

"She fulfills our wishes. Maintains balance in the world."

"Not because you say so. The Slayer is her own woman."

"Yeah!" I said. Inspiration struck. "You want me to do good, right? Keep on slaying? Maintain balance in the world? All that? Well-" I drew myself up straight, and yelled this at the cloud over the mausoleum. "I'll quit. I'll stop. I won't do it. I won't have any reason to do it if you take my man away."

There was a resounding silence from the cloud. But Spike pressed up against my side and twined his fingers in mine. "Am I really your man?"

"Yeah. Now shut up and let me threaten them some more," I whispered. To the cloud, I shouted, "I'll quit! I mean it!"

There was a rumbling, and the cloud got darker. Finally it intoned, "Like we care? There are more than one hundred slayers now, thanks to your axe-magic. They can do the work. We don't need you."

"Union," Spike whispered.

"What?"

"Tell them you're going to organize a slayer union. Trust me. It'll scare the pants off them. Noticed that with all W&H clients. Management hates unionizing."

"I'll organize a union! All the slayers! They worship me! I'm their idol! They'll go on strike if I tell them to!"

I didn't actually know if this was true, but then, neither did the Powers. Slayers tended to be unpredictable, and this latest crop was especially so, since they hadn't been trained and prepared for their role. I mean, ask Giles. He'll tell you. Everyone thought I was a rebel– well, I got nothing on that girl from Sri Lanka, let me tell you. Anyway, the new Slayers were the defiant sort. They might join me against the Powers just to show no one bossed them around either.

"I'm going home right now and send a broadcast email!"

That did it. The cloud moiled and roiled, and said, "Two days. That's all you have. Two days to prepare a defense of the vampire."

It wasn't a pardon. But we were in no position to turn it down. "We'll be ready."

Spike chimed in, "And Wolfram and Hart are our attorneys."

"But-" The cloud darkened. "But they wrote the original contract. That's a – a conflict of interest."

"Ha!" cried the cloud. "Perhaps you don't realize that we are not only the plaintiffs, but the judge, jury, and executioner?"

I shivered at that last word. But Spike was defiant. I like that in a vampire. "Sure, you got the game rigged. But look what I got. I got the Slayer. I got truth and justice. I got love." He shot a glance at me, full of... love. I almost burst into tears, but I didn't. "I got the evillest attorneys in the universe. I got...

"Angel," I whispered.

"Angel," he repeated, sounding not quite so convinced. But then he forced some enthusiasm into his voice. "Yeah. I got your champion, the one you love so much you sent me to save him. And he's my grandsire, and he's on my side, not yours!"

It sounded good. It sounded right. I just wished it sounded true.

The Powers cackled. "On your side, is he? The one who staked you two weeks ago?"

"What?" I said.

"Never mind. Tell you later," Spike muttered.

"The one who wants this woman of yours? The one who wants you gone from his world? No, he'll wash his hands of you, demon childe, and leave you to your just fate."

"No, he won't!" I said firmly. "Angel helps the helpless."

"Not that I'm, you know, helpless," Spike put in. "But he'll help me anyway."

"Dream on, poor little vampire. You will be ours very soon. See you here. Two days."

And then Spike could move again, and he took me in his arms, and he murmured brokenly that he loved me and he missed me and–

And I pulled him behind the mausoleum, and kissed him fierce enough to let him know I was never ever ever going to let him go again.
When I saw Buffy in Spike's kitchen, I knew I had lost her.

Cordelia always said I was deaf to nuance, but I'm not blind. I watched Buffy pick up a glass from his drainboard and hold it against her– I think, if I wasn't there, she would have kissed it. Just because he drank from it.

I didn't know when it happened. She didn't love him before, I was pretty sure. Not that night in the crypt when she kissed me and asked me to wait. Not after he burned up– no, she came to live with me, and only cried for him that once. Not when she returned from Tibet and learned he was back. She was mad, not... not loving. But there she was in his kitchen, looking at his drainboard and loving him.

And not loving me.

The sense of loss... oh, I don't know. It was like that first time years ago, when I'd had to walk away from her. Only worse, because this time–

I got out of there without making a fool of myself. Promised to call her about dinner. All that. Walked back to my office. I stood outside the door, feeling Connor in there, the mingle of need and dread rising in me. He was there and angry and hating, like the time before, when I'd had to ki–

Had to send him away to another life. And he was back again, out of that better life.

Spike brought him here to destroy me.

He wouldn't admit that. Maybe he didn't even mean that. Maybe he thought it would help me on my journey. But it felt like destruction to me, like destruction of all my hopes, all my desires, would happen when I opened that door.

It was too much. Too hard. All of it today– Buffy and Connor and Spike, and I knew that even more would come tomorrow when my friends learned about Connor and what I had to do to them to keep him safe. Their anger would be justified. But it would be too much. I couldn't face it.

I thought about going over to the elevator and going down to the first floor and walking out into the sunlight, like Spike used to try to do when he first came here. The Powers kept throwing him back. Somehow I knew they wouldn't do that for me. They would have no use for me, if I would do that.

I hadn't finished. Hadn't gotten to the end. So I'd be going to hell.

I thought I'd wake up in hell. Spike said that once, in his careless way, when he talked about dying in the Hellmouth. He thought he'd die and go to hell for all his sins. And he still did it– because, I don't know, he was impulsive and careless, and because he'd never been in hell. And because he had to, I guess. For her.

But I had some notion of what hell felt like, because I'd been in a dimension like that for years. Buffy sent me there. I deserved it. I survived it. The real hell would be worse than that. I deserved it. I– whoever I was– wouldn't survive it.

Hell.

Hell had to be worse than this, or– or it wouldn't be hell. And if it was worse than this– I guessed I didn't want it.

And I owed Connor better.

I steeled myself and entered the office. He was sitting there in the dark, his knees drawn up, his head down. I couldn't tell if he'd been crying or sleeping, or both. "Connor," I said softly, and he looked up. "Connor," I said again. Just to say it. Just because for the first time in almost a year, I could say it. It was worth it. Just to say it. Just to see him. My son.

He hated me, but I could love him anyway. Have him anyway. I didn't even need him to know me– but he did now. He knew I was his father. And he had to know I loved him. He had to see it in my eyes. Even here in the dark, when he looked at me that way, he had to see it in my eyes.

We stared at each other, and then he rose and with jerky motions went to the corner and turned on a little table lamp.

"Why?" he said. In the yellow pool of light, his face was anguished. I remembered that expression. He looked just like that in those terrible days before I– before I gave him up. He stared at me with those great dark eyes. "Why did I happen?"

It was a good question. I'd spent time wondering just that, when Darla returned, her belly big with him. Why did nature distort to produce this child of two vampires? To save me. To destroy me. To save the world. To destroy the world.

"To save her," I said. I didn't even know what I meant. But then the words came to me. "To save Darla. There was ... something about her. I don't know. Not... not goodness. But something."

"What?" he whispered.

I wanted to tell him to ask Spike. Spike... Spike didn't like her, but he knew her. They were family. And he would know what was special about her. Why someone would care to save her somehow. He would know because he knew her and he – he didn't need her to be good. He didn't need anyone to be good. Goodness had nothing to do with it. He just... I don't know. Cared. No taste at all, our little Spike.

That sounded like her– she was always finding some new fault in Spike. I could almost hear her saying that, and I smiled just a bit, listening to her voice.

Darla. I thought of her as a vampire, my sire, then a human again, needing me. And then a vampire again. Needing me again. "Something," I told Connor. "She was .... strong. She kept... coming back. She wanted to ... to be ."

"Like Spike," he said.

"Yeah. I guess. Only Spike–" I didn't know what I meant. I didn't want him thinking of Spike. "She came back with you. She wanted me to know. And then she died. For you. So you could be born."
And she wanted me to know because she wanted me to take you." And then it came to me, all the memories, her pain, the way she grabbed my hand, jamming it onto her stomach so I could feel him move. "She shared your soul. Just for a little while."

"Did I know that?" he whispered. "Before?"

"I think you felt her with you. Somehow." All I could do was repeat it. "You came because your birth saved her. Saved her soul, or the bit of your soul that was hers. Do you see? She chose you. Over being. Over surviving. It meant– I don't know. She was saved."

"Okay," he said, and this time I could see that he was crying. His head was down and his voice was even, but I knew he was crying.

She died to birth him. I killed him to keep him alive.

"I just wanted you to be happy," I said. "And I knew you couldn't be happy with me. With me in your life at all." And then it came to me, the meaning of it. "You can't be here."

He kind of laughed. "That's what Spike keeps saying to his slayer. He just wants her to be happy. So she should stay away. Only she won't."

"What does that mean?"

He looked up finally, his eyes shiny with tears, his mouth twisted in a smile. "I guess it means there are more important things than being happy. I don't know. I just know... here I am."

"Yeah."

We stared at each other, and then he got up and went to the door– the back door, the one hidden in the panelling. "I should check on Spike. I hit him pretty hard."

"He heals fast."

Connor slid open the panel and peered down into the dark staircase. "Yeah. You should have seen how quick he got over getting dusted."

Oh. Too much to expect. Forgiveness. Too much to deserve.

He took a step into the darkness, then glanced back at me. "How long did it take me? To get over your killing me?"

"Not long," I said. It didn't sound like me. The voice was croaky and indistinct. "New family. Fit right in." I stopped and sucked in some air. "Took me... longer."

"How long?"

"Never," I said.

"Good." And he disappeared down the stairs.
I stayed there in the office for the rest of the day. Door closed, drapes drawn. The phone rang and rang, but I just let it ring until a receptionist picked it up. Not Harmony. She was gone somewhere. Without permission. Probably I should fire her.

She came by after everyone else had gone home, stuck her head in and said, "Headed out, Boss."

"You've been drinking." I might be deaf to nuance, but I'm not blind.

Harmony leaned against the door frame and giggled. "You don't know the half of it. Busy afternoon."


She didn't quiver. She looked right at me and said, "No prob. I'm sure I can get a job at whatever lawfirm David takes all his business to."


"I think I deserve a raise. You know, since I'm in such demand."

I closed my eyes. "Okay. Tell Personnel I said it was okay with me."

Harmony hesitated, and said, "And a company car."

I didn't open my eyes. "You're pushing it, Harmony."

"Can't blame a girl for trying. See ya tomorrow, Boss." And she was gone, flipping off lights as she went through the outer office, and soon all that was left of her was some light trace of perfume. And beer. And... and Buffy.

She'd been around Buffy. But they hated each other. Hmm. Maybe they'd gotten into a fight. Slayer. Vampire. But Harmony would be bruised, wouldn't she? Or wouldn't be at all? Buffy could take on four of her without breaking a sweat.

This prospect occupied my brain for a minute or so. Then I remembered I was supposed to have dinner with Buffy. I just... couldn't. Not yet. I rose from my chair and went over to the wall, and I sat down there on the hardwood floor and crossed my legs and tried to meditate the way I'd been taught so long ago. But even after a half hour, peace didn't come, and I finally got up and went to the desk and located Buffy's cell number.

No answer.

I had to dial Spike's apartment number, and that annoyed me, thinking that she was there. Not with him, but waiting for him. But annoyance felt better than the alternative—betrayal, or anguish, or whatever it was just lurking there at the edges.

No answer there either.
So. I sank back into my leather chair and rested my forehead on the file folders on my desk. No dinner with Buffy. Just as well. I wouldn't have to smile–

I could win her back. Maybe. She loved me. Whatever she felt for him, she felt for me first. But....

But it didn't matter. It didn't matter now. I couldn't even come up with enough caring to care. Anyway, she'd find out soon enough, about Connor, about my lies, about, oh, about staking Spike, I'd forgotten that one, but she wouldn't forgive that. And who could blame her. If Spike hadn't done whatever he'd done to come back –

I'd lost her a long time ago. Maybe I never had her.

It didn't matter. Connor mattered. I didn't even know where he'd gone. That's hard, when you're a father, not knowing where your son is. Not knowing if he's safe. Not knowing if he's happy.

Well, that much I knew. He said that much. He was not happy.

He wanted to know more than he wanted to be happy. I didn't understand that. Why didn't he let it rest, enjoy his new family, do well at school, grow up normal? That was what I wanted.

All he wanted was to know. And that was what I wanted to spare him.

He didn't know it all yet. But he'd learn the rest sooner or later—once the others got back their memories. And I'd be alone.

All I deserved.

And all I wanted, really, now.

Maybe I fell asleep, or maybe I just lost consciousness. But I didn't think again until I heard a clatter in the outside office. Then I rose, pushed aside my desk, and strode over to my door. Maybe it would be a Grelnik I could kill. We'd been having trouble with them slipping in through the basement and rising up through the vents.

But it was Buffy. And Spike. Over by the elevator, in the half-light from the up and down buttons. Laughing and picking up the trashcan they'd knocked over. Together, each with a hand on the trashcan, and the leftover hands linked.

They turned when they heard me, and on their faces were identical guilty expressions.

So much for the no-see-'em clause, huh? Spike's resolve lasted, let's see, five hours after Buffy arrived in LA.

"Hi, Angel," Buffy said. "I found Spike."

For some reason, this made them laugh again and let go of the trashcan and link those hands and let go of the other so they could face me. They were both looking at me, but then Buffy looked out of the corner of her eye at Spike, and the laughter faded into a smile. A gentle kind of smile.

"So I see." I stuck my hands in my pockets. "No torment, torture, and death resulted, I guess." No, it
wasn't disappointment in my voice. Just casual inquiry, that's all.

"Oh, some of that," Spike said, in his I cannot tell a lie voice.

"We saw one of the Powers," Buffy added. "Or maybe all of them. Just a big cloud. Could be all of them fit in there, I guess."

"It was a pretty big cloud," Spike agreed. "Don't know how big Powers are, but yeah, could have been all of them. One voice, but lots of reverb."

In all of this detail, there was something essential. "You saw the Powers?"

"Yeah. Blathered on and on." Spike grinned. "Buffy threatened to organize a union."

"And Spike said W&H were our lawyers!" Buffy said. She gave Spike a look that suggested this was the smartest thing ever. And for Spike, well, it was pretty smart. I mean, for Spike.

"You need a lawyer, huh."

And Buffy's smile slipped off, and Spike gripped her hand hard, and he said, "Yeah, gotta see if we can break that contract."

"Looks like you already did," I observed.

"My fault," Spike said, and "My bad," Buffy said, and they both stopped and looked at each other and started smiling again.

"Really, it's my fault," Buffy said. "I just wanted to see him again. And I wanted him to see me."

They did that hold-hands-and-smile thing again, like they weren't sinking in quicksand and trying to drag my firm after them. "Spike!" I said sharply. "W&H wrote that contract!"

Spike yanked his gaze off Buffy for a second and looked at me. "I know. Conflict of interest, all that. But maybe Charlie can figure out a way to get me out of it. And then you can get shut of me," he finished.

"Speaking of getting shut of you—" she said, putting her hand on his chest. "Let's leave Angel in peace. Get the elevator." And she gave him a little shove, like she meant business.

"Wait," I said. "Tell me what the Powers said."

"No big deal," Spike said. He pretended he was looking up at the elevator display to see if it was moving. But I knew his ways. He didn't want to look at me because I'd know he was lying.

"Buffy. Tell me what they said."

"They said—" And her face kind of crumpled for a second, and that worried me. Buffy's tough. It had to be bad if she was scared. But then her shoulders straightened and her little chin stuck out. "They said we have two days to come up with a defense to save Spike. From... you know. But we have two days."

"Plenty of time," Spike said. He took Buffy's hand and brought it to his lips.
I was in charge. I reminded myself of that. I was in charge, and Spike was mine whether I wanted it or not, and I had to protect him. "I'll call Gunn and everyone, get them together– we'll have a meeting tonight."

At this, Spike looked a little panicky, and Buffy got a stubborn look. "Not tonight."

"No need to roust them out this late," Spike added. "Tomorrow's plenty of time."

I was about to point out that tomorrow was not plenty of time when he had only two days, but before I could speak, the elevator arrived and Buffy pulled Spike in. I got treated to one of those romantic sights you see in old movies, the two of them kissing as the elevator doors closed.

I slumped back against my doorframe. I thought I'd accepted this, that she loved Spike. I thought I could deal with it, that I was too worn out anyway to bother with something as trivial as jealousy. And I didn't deserve her, and maybe he did, and all that.

But it hurt. It hurt that she'd risk so much to be with him, that he'd risk so much to be with her. It was all so heedless, this passion. And now they were off to Spike's bed. All those weeks, she'd been with me, and passion had never mattered, but now – hey, big deal, so Spike was facing extinction. There was a bed nearby, and that was most important, right?

It hurt. It hurt because I couldn't have her and I'd never had her, not like this, and I'd never love anyone again. Or be loved again. Not like that. Not with that ... that knowing.

No one was ever going to know me and still love me.

It hit me hard. It was because of the Connor thing– I wasn't usually this weak. I didn't usually regret so much. But now I'd lost everything, it felt like– my dreams for my son, my hopes for Buffy, my destiny.

I couldn't blame Spike. I shouldn't.

It's just that before he came–

At least they showed up on time the next morning, all discreet, not even touching as they walked past my open office door into the conference room. Buffy's eyes were heavy-lidded and sultry, like she hadn't gotten much sleep and didn't much mind. And Spike was walking like he owned the world. You'd never think, to see him this morning, that he was on borrowed time, that being with Buffy had probably doomed him.

They looked happy. They kept stealing glances at each other as they went down the corridor.

I followed them– I didn't want to face Wes and Fred and Lorne and Gunn's accusations this morning. Buffy, and Spike's imminent peril, would be plenty of distraction.

Connor wasn't there. Well, I didn't expect him. I'd just hoped–

It would be so complicated. I'd have to explain, and I didn't have any explanations to offer. But I still wished he was there, angry at me, waiting for me.
Instead, it was only the division heads grouped around the table, coffee cups before them, and I could feel Spike's pride as he introduced Buffy to Gunn and to Fred. "The slayer, huh," Gunn said, and grinned at Spike. "No wonder."

Fred was all smiles, all welcome, and Harmony – there to take notes – gave Buffy a little wave, and Buffy said, "Hi, Harmony," right back, like they were old friends instead of old enemies.

Wes was looking at me in that Wes way, so I avoided him and addressed the group at large. "Well, the Powers have given Spike a deadline. There's be a trial or hearing or something in two days. We've got to come up with a strategy."

That got them focused. Even Wes stopped glaring at me and pulled out his notepad. "Two days. From ...." He cast an assessing look at the two of them, sitting not so close but pretty obviously holding hands under the table. "From last night, I take it. That puts the trial on..." he calculated. "The Feast of the Long Daggers."

Buffy's face paled, but she spoke up, "A feast! Hope they have a good buffet." She paused and looked down at the table. "This is all my fault. I knew about the contract. But I– " Biting her lip, she finished, "I just had to see him."

Spike put his hand on her cheek, easing her face up so they were gazing at each other. "I wouldn't've lasted long anyway. Knowing you were out there. Knowing you were close. Those damned emails. The Keats. I couldn't've held out much longer."

"But–" Buffy drew in her breath and let it out in a sigh. "But I've ruined everything. They're after you now. The Powers."

"Sod the Powers. I just want you to be happy."

"But how can I be happy if– if– you're gone–" And she broke off, and her big eyes glittered with tears, and Fred sniffled, and Wes swallowed hard, and Lorne moaned.

"Don't you worry," Spike said roughly. "Charlie's going to loophole us out of it. Right, Charlie?"

Gunn sat up straight like he'd just been called to order. "Oh. Right. Gotta do the loophole thing." He rifled in his briefcase and pulled out a folder, then passed out copies of the contract. "So let's go through this."

And so we all got out our pens– Spike didn't have one, of course, but Buffy promised to take notes for him– and studied the contract.

First there was the clause that Buffy would live a happy life with a natural lifespan if Spike came back to earth and never saw her again.

"It doesn't say that she won't live a happy life, etc.,” Gunn said. "Just that if Spike doesn't see her, she's guaranteed one."

"Guaranteed....." Spike put his head down on the table and groaned. "Pet, you could have had a guaranteed happy life."

Buffy patted his tangle of hair. "I'd rather have you. And you'll just have to work extra hard at
making me happy to make up for no guarantee. Like—" she paused significantly, and he raised his head to see if she was going to say what he thought she was going to say. Luckily she just smiled one of those cat-cream smiles, and Gunn cleared his throat.

"Well, that's good. But it still means you violated the contract, and therein lies the problem."

"Therein," Harmony repeated, writing that down. Then she held up her pen like she was waiting for more fancy legal words from Gunn.

Instead he said, "You screwed up, and they're making use of the performance clause to argue that the coming back to life action can be revoked." There was dead silence as Spike sank his head back on the table, then Gunn added awkwardly, "See, the two things are coupled—your coming back to life and the Buffy thing."

"But there is more to the contract," Fred cried. "There's the hidden clause about Angel. Don't both affect Spike's fate?"

Spike sat up and gave me a hopeful look. "Yeah. Maybe Gunn can argue I'm free of any obligation because you've completed your journey." He frowned. "So maybe you can hurry up and get there? Wherever there is."

"Yeah, Angel," Buffy chimed in. "For your own sake too. Complete your journey, and—" Then she swallowed and looked away. Not at me. Not at Spike. In a small voice, she said, "If, you know, your journey ends with, uh, me, I mean, that you need to be with me to complete the journey, well, okay." She looked like Joan of Arc contemplating the fire. Bravely. I'd been insulted in my time, but never like this.

I was lucky that Spike was there to distract everyone from this humiliation. He rose and shoved his chair back. It clattered over and onto the floor. He glared at Buffy. "You can say that after last night?"

He invested that phrase with so much meaning that we all understood that never in the history of this dimension had any two people ever achieved such a level of physical and spiritual intimacy as they did last night.

Gunn looked intrigued. You could tell he wanted details. Fred looked envious. Wes looked down and pretended he was scribbling some notes on his notepad, but his face was flushed. Lorne—Well, Lorne looked radiant, like he was already casting the film and counting up the box office.

Buffy got up and went over and put her arms around Spike and her cheek against his. "There's always tonight. And tomorrow."

"And this afternoon," Harmony put in.

"And there's a couple hours before lunch," Gunn added helpfully. He was really getting into this.

"I don't think that'll be necessary," I said through gritted teeth. I meant the Buffy-sacrifice, not the noonier Gunn was scheduling for Spike and Buffy. "I don't think you're part of my journey anymore." And as I said that, I felt the rightness of it. It hurt, but it hurt like a stone rolling off my chest and leaving a big bruise behind.
Buffy regarded me with barely concealed relief. "Well, okay." She brightened. "I promise not to be all offended or anything."

She and Spike resumed their seats, maybe pulling them a little closer together. More sub-table handholding. "So if Angel finishes his journey," Buffy said, "Spike is free, right?"

Gunn looked down at his copy of the contract. At his pen. At the table.

"Spike is free, right?" Buffy repeated, more insistently this time.

"Uh," Gunn said, shooting me an apologetic look. "Actually, could be that Angel finishing his journey is the worst thing that could happen. If Angel's done and doesn't need him anymore, then they can just whisk Spike away. But as long as Angel's still laboring towards journey's end, we can argue that Spike hasn't fulfilled his mission and has to stick around here."

The words sunk in, and the prospect bothered me more than Buffy's defection. "Wait a minute," I said. "You mean that I'll be stuck with him? Forever?"

"In the best-case scenario." Gunn didn't have to mention what the worst-case scenario was. And he didn't bother to stipulate that the worse-case scenario was actually worse than the best-case scenario, although I for one thought it was an arguable point.

"There's always the Shanshu," Wes said. It was his first contribution to the conversation, and it was clear he was mad at me, because here he was, trying to give Spike my destiny along with my girl. He opened an old book and spoke the words that had only ever applied to me. "The vampire with a soul, once he fulfills his destiny of saving the world, will Shanshu. Become human. That could mean Spike."

Spike was groaning before Wes even got to the end of the prophecy. "Don't want to be human," he said. "Like myself just the way I am."

Buffy was regarding him with troubled eyes. "But it's better than being... you know. Dead. Permanently."

"Yeah, right," he said with some disgust. "You'd have a lot of use for me if I were a scrawny human."

"Hey!" Gunn said. "Human here, and proud of it."

"Yeah, well, if it's the best you can do..." Spike said. He brightened. "But anyway, I haven't saved the world for months."

Buffy cast a glance at Wes's book, like she didn't care what Spike said, Shanshu sounded pretty good to her. But then she sighed. "He's right, Wes. It's been months since the apocalypse, and if he was going to whatever-shu, he would have done it already." She looked down and smiled secretly. "And I can tell you, he's, uh, beyond human. Still."

Spike shrugged modestly, and Gunn looked put-out. Then he rallied. "Well, it's a good call, Wes, but I think Spike is right. If they were going to shanshu him, they would've done that when they brought him back."

Everyone was doing a good job of not looking at me. They knew I didn't deserve the Shanshu. Spike
did, probably, and he didn't even want it.

I was sort of tired of irony at this point.

"So what are we left with?" I said, rapping my pen on the table. "We got to prepare some defense. Sounds like there's going to be a trial of some kind."

Spike raised his hand. "I claim trial by combat!"

Gunn shook his head. "They aren't going to settle things with a fight."

"Only," Spike said grimly, "because they know I'd win."

"You know, Spike," I broke in, my tone maybe a bit edgy. "That's exactly the attitude that's going to get you flayed and tortured before they send you off to hell."

Buffy gasped, and Fred cried, "Angel! That's a rotten thing to say!"

But Spike seemed to be considering it. "Okay, well, if there's any combat, I have dibs. But otherwise, I'll let my attorney speak for me."

"Wise of you," Gunn muttered. "Now let's get back to the contract."

We followed along as he went through word-by-word, and I wanted to point out that he was really saying it was hopeless, because the Powers can do anything they please. But I didn't say that. And neither did Gunn, and he kept his tone pretty positive, and concluded with, "Okay! So let's break for lunch, or whatever you plan for the next hour or so--" He grinned at Spike, who ducked his head. "And let's meet back here at 1. I've got to check Dexis for precedents here."

Wes rose and gathered up his books. Then he looked straight at me. "There's another prophecy someone mentioned. It might have some relevance to the situation at hand."

I knew which prophecy he meant. I wanted to tell him it was a false prophecy– Sahjahn invented it. But it couldn't be false, because it came true... the father killed the son. But Spike isn't my son, I wanted to call after him. He's not the one I killed– but I did, didn't I. Just not my son....

Wes knew. Somehow he knew. Something he knew. He didn't look at me as he left.

I rose heavily and went to the door. And then, in the outer office, I looked back through the glass wall to see Spike kneeling there in front of Buffy. Her hand went to cup his face, and her eyes were sad but glowing too.

Maybe. Maybe.

I wanted her to be happy. I just didn't think –

It didn't matter now. Now I had to focus on the problem at hand.

They were the last ones to return to the conference room, Buffy first, then Spike, carrying a mug, a half-minute later. Buffy wouldn't look at him even as he took the seat beside her. Trouble in
paradise?

But then her hand stole over to touch the back of his fingers, and he set the mug on the conference table. He took her hand, and I thought maybe he was about to bring it to his lips, something sappy and unbearable.

Then a commotion at the door made everyone look away from Spike (except for Buffy, who still stared at their joined hands as if there were notes to a final exam written there).

I felt him before I turned in my chair and saw him. Connor. Standing in the doorway, hunched over in his old t-shirt and army jacket. He didn't look like he was very happy– but he was here. Harmony called out, "Hi, Connor!" and he muttered a greeting and stayed by the door, behind me.

I couldn't see him now, but I could feel him there as Fred reported on her attempts to invent a Powers-locator device. "I was just thinkin' that if we could keep track of them, we might get somethin' on them, somethin' we could use as a bargaining chip."

"Hey," Spike said, "maybe one of them frequents strip joints. Or engages in ritual slaughters of baby seals."

"That's what I'm thinkin'," Fred said. But it was pretty clear that she wasn't optimistic. Hesitantly she added, "And then there's the other option. I got a portal-generator. Worse comes to worst, Spike, we can send you to another dimension. Just for awhile. Till we get this straightened out."

Spike looked alarmed. "Another dimension? I can't ask Buffy--"

Buffy broke in, "I'm not letting you go without me!"

"But your friends. Dawn." He looked at her and then over at Fred. "And anyway, what dimension is out of the Powers' reach?"

Fred looked down at her notes. "Well, we know Angel's been to one the Powers couldn't get him out of, not for a long time--"

"The--" Buffy started and stopped and started again. "The hell dimension I sent him to?"

I found my voice. My resolve. "No. Spike's not going there. We have to find another way. Wes, you got anything?"

Wes shook his head. "Just that prophecy." He stared straight at me. "The one about the father killing the son. And it appears to be fraudulent– except that it happened."

I felt Connor stir behind me. "I don't see," I said, "what that has to do with this situation."

"And anyway," Lorne put in, his voice easy, "Spike's not Angel's son. Except in metaphoric terms, and thematically, it does resonate, Abraham and Isaacically, which we might be able to use--"

Christ. He was already writing the screenplay. Metaphors. Thematic resonances. I cut him off. "Right. He's not my son. So--"

"So killing him didn't fulfill the prophecy," Connor said.
I could feel his gaze on the back of my head. I didn't turn. I just said, "Right."

Buffy, always laserlike in her focus, ignored all the tension and zoomed in on the one thing that mattered to her. "What's this about killing Spike anyway? The Powers said that too. Something about you dusting him, which like couldn't be true." No one said anything, and she added a bit desperately, "Unless it's just-- what did Lorne call it? Just metaphorical dusting. Right?"

Spike was shaking his head at me and mouthing I didn't tell her. And before I could speak, he said, "Just playing around. No harm done. Right, Angel?"

"Wrong. Harm done," Connor broke in. I didn't even have to turn my head to see his anger-- it was all around me, red and black. "I saw you afterwards, remember? You were trashed."

"Tell me." Buffy reached up and took hold of Spike's face, and glared right into his eyes. "You better tell me."

I saw his teeth gouging at his lower lip, and Buffy's fingers digging into his jaw, and knew there'd be blood drawn quick if we had to wait for him to decide what to say. So I said, "It's true. I dusted him."

Buffy let go of his face and turned to me. "But why?" she whispered. "Not-- not because of me."

"No." It hurt to be honest, but I couldn't lie, not when she was looking at me like that, like she blamed herself. I was the one to blame. "I don't think so. Maybe a bit. But--"

And now Spike interrupted. "He thought I was going to hurt Cordelia. Which I wasn't, but I could see why he thought maybe I was. Anyway. I brought myself back together. It was tight. Just pulled myself back together. Like I said, no harm done."

Buffy looked back at him, touched his face, squeezed his bicep. When she was done making sure he was solid, she said, "Like Dracula. He came back together when I dusted him. Only he wasn't trashed afterwards. He was just fine right away."

"Well, so? Drac is, what, 370 or so?" Spike said hotly. "I bet he couldn't do it when he was just 124. I'm only the second vamp to do it-- me and Drac."

Buffy observed, "Well, he can turn into a bat. Can you do that?"

"That's just what Dawn said," Spike replied. "And I've been trying, but--"

"Dawn?" Buffy's voice rose. "Dawn knew about this?"

"Well, yeah," Spike said. "She was there. But I made her promise not to tell you."

"And she went along? Oh, I am so going to ground her--" And Buffy pulled out her little purple cell phone and got up and went out into the hall, and it didn't take vampire hearing to listen in on her tirade against her sister.

"Now see what you've done," Spike growled, like this was all my fault. And I guessed maybe it was.

Gunn cleared his throat. Sometime while Buffy was still manhandling Spike, he'd gotten up and gone with Connor to the corner by the outside windows. Now he said, "The kid and I have come up with something. Maybe it'll work. Maybe not. But it's a good little technicality. Who knows. One of
the Powers might appreciate its elegance."

"What?" I said as Buffy slipped into the room. She closed her phone with a decisive snap and sat back down beside Spike.

"Connor here pointed out that Spike dusted. Disappeared."

"His essence mingled with the detritus of the cosmos," Lorne said reverently.

"Did not," Spike muttered.

"Whatever," Gunn continued. "For at least a moment, he didn't exist."

Spike looked mutinous, like he was going to argue that he did so exist, but Gunn shot him a glare. "Shut up, Spike. Just go with me here."

Spike settled back in his chair, his mouth still set, but Buffy set to patting his hair, and whispering in his ear, and at least he stayed quiet.

Gunn went on, "So there. The Spike who signed that contract ended. And then a new Spike appeared in his place."

"Huh?" Fred said, and you could tell she was going to pull out her physics book and start lecturing on matter being conserved and E=mc squared and all that.

But Gunn went on relentlessly. "So this Spike, the one sitting here with us, with the Slayer, well, it's not the one who signed that contract. So he can't be held to it."

"Wow," Buffy breathed. "Is that true?"

Gunn shrugged. "It doesn't have to be true. "It just has to be persuasive. And if you can keep him from swearing he's still the same--"

"But he is," Buffy said, just as Spike said, "But I am."

"Well, yeah, okay, seems the same to me too," Gunn allowed. "Same scar on his eyebrow, same taste in liquor. But we just don't admit that. Look, it's like a company dissolving in a bankruptcy, and then coming back from receivership with the same name, only without any of the obligations the original company made. You remember, Angel. We just did that with Big-Mart. Took it into bankruptcy, broke its contracts and ruined three of its suppliers. And it's right back in business a day later."

I nodded slowly. "So you're saying that – that my dusting him put an end to that contract."

"We can argue that. But at the same time we'll argue that he still has to complete the mission he contracted to do. Helping on your journey."

"But those are like mutually exclusive," Fred said.

"It's called arguing in the alternative, and I think physicists have been known to do it once in awhile," Gunn said. "Like the whole quantum mechanics thing."
"And," Spike put in, "you gotta say that they cheated too, putting a sodding secret clause in there. And they're not supposed to cheat. They're the good guys."

"Good guys don't hire W&H to write contracts for them," Wes said. "But there are at least three arguments. And the shanshu prophecy. We can insist that Spike qualifies for that and that should have superseded this contract in the first place." He overrode Spike's objections and said grimly, "It's better than the alternative, Spike."

"Whatever works." Connor moved back to his place by the door. "Whatever saves Spike."

Buffy hadn't paid him much mind so far, but this got her attention. She smiled up at him. "Hey. Connor, right? We haven't been introduced. I'm Buffy."

"Hi," Connor replied. And then he smiled, an unexpected smile that warmed me, though it wasn't aimed at me. "You're the slayer. Spike's told me a lot about you."

"All good, I hope," Buffy said, and Connor nodded. She glanced over at Spike, like she expected him to explain who this kid was. But he was unprecedentedly quiet. Just when I might have wanted him to take over and tell all, he decided to be discreet.

Wes swivelled to look at me. "Angel. Perhaps you should introduce Connor to us all."

Of course, they'd all met him probably, but Wes had to get his digs in. I guess I deserved it. "Connor is my son," I said, rising to stand beside my chair, where I could see him, and everyone else besides.

"Your–" Buffy started, and then shut up, and I could tell she was thinking of all the things I hadn't told her (she didn't even know half of them) from the very first— I didn't tell her I was a vampire, and I didn't tell her that Spike was my grandchilde or Darla was my sire and the Master my grandsire, and I didn't tell her about the curse, though to be fair I didn't realize how the happiness clause would be applied. She was running through all this in her head, and then, tightly, she said, "Wes, do I need to know this?"

Wes considered this, and shook his head. "It's not really relevant to the Spike issue."

But Connor was standing there, still by the door, and he looked miserable and angry and I wanted to tell him he was always relevant, no matter what the issue. So I watched him as I spoke. "Connor is my son. And Darla's. Don't ask me how because I don't know. Darla died to get him born. And he was a baby two years ago."

I realized that I hadn't explained that to him. I'd forgotten. Or we never got around to it. So as fast as I could, I said, "He was stolen. Wes--" and Wes looked down, and I saw he was writing a word over and over on his notepad. Connor Connor Connor Connor. And I added, as gently as I could, "Wes was trying to save him. From me. Because he was afraid I'd hurt him. And that's when Connor was stolen. Taken to another dimension. And that's where he grew up."

"And I came back." He was whispering now. "And I tried to kill you, and you killed me. Only I didn't really die. I just went... somewhere else."

"Another dimension?" Buffy asked.

"No, just another county," Connor said. "Santa Barbara."
I gripped the back of the chair, feeling the leather stretch and part under my fingers. "He – he was placed with a family. And memories implanted. So everyone thought he was there all along."

"Like Dawn," Buffy whispered.

"Lilah set this up," Wes said. It wasn't a question. He knew somehow. Well, yeah. Her smutty fingerprints were all over the deal.

I looked at Wes and Fred, and spoke to them and Lorne and Gunn too. "Yes. It was Lilah's doing. And in return, we were supposed to take over W&H."

"And she didn't want us to know that? Because we might refuse?" Gunn asked. "So she wiped our memories?"

"No." It hurt, this truth business. No refuges allowed. "That was my request. I didn't want you to know what I'd done."

Everyone was silent. There was one more thing. I couldn't remember. Oh. Right. "Buffy, that amulet."

"The one that I gave to Spike?"

"Yeah. That was part of the deal. Only I think I was supposed to wear it, not Spike."

Spike muttered something about his doing a way better job with it, but I ignored him and went on. "I was so... blasted. Losing Connor. But I should have stayed with you in Sunnydale. Worn it. It was supposed to be me that died that day."

Wes said, "But you wouldn't have died. They would just have controlled you. Trapped your soul in the amulet, with W&H in charge. That's why they gave us the firm to run, because they planned on running you."

"Wow." Connor finally spoke, and his voice was neutral now, and that was better, wasn't it, than hate-filled? "But they got Spike instead."

"And they couldn't detach my soul. It's permanent, not like Angel's," Spike said. He liked that so much he said it again. "Permanent. Not detachable like Angel's."

I couldn't help myself. "So what? They threw you back, right? No use to–"

"To them." Now he was smiling at me. "No use to them, 'cause I can't be made evil."

"Or because," I muttered, "you're the world's worst administrator and they didn't want you anywhere near W&H."

"Hey!" Spike protested, but amazingly, it was Buffy that came to my aid.

"Spike, honey, he's right. You're the best fighter in the world, well, except for me. But you can't manage anything." Buffy laid her cheek against his arm and gazed up at him fondly. "Harmony told me you can't even file your own expense reports."

Spike shot Harmony a betrayed look, and she busied herself with her notes, and I broke in. "So
"maybe the Powers grabbed you and decided to make use of you." I added, under my breath, "And to punish me."

"And this whole Buffy clause, giving her a long and happy life," Gunn said. "That was the incentive for him to sign. Like Connor's new life was an incentive for Angel."

Spike groaned, I guessed because he thought he'd wrecked the guarantee, and I looked at Connor and remembered what he said about nightmares and suicidal thoughts. "I guess it's not so easy," I said. "You can't just make deals about lives."

"You can if you have a good enough attorney," Gunn said. "You and Spike didn't back then. But now you do." And he smiled. It was sort of a lethal smile. "Harmony, call your boyfriend and tell him you're working late. Wes, I'll need you and the prophecy originals. We'll work on the brief tonight and tomorrow. And tomorrow night, we'll have our hearing with the Powers."

We could tell when we filed into the mystical courtroom on the 13th floor that the Powers had already made up their minds. They were sitting there behind the altar, four beings of indeterminate age and gender and identically forbidding expressions, and they didn't react when Gunn and Wes went through the obligatory opening ritual. The Powers' gaze was everywhere, nowhere, omniscient, but mostly, I thought, concentrated on Spike, the vampire who had the recklessness to defy them.

He couldn't help it. He sat there beside me with that mouth of his set rebelliously, and his jaw all tight, and his fists so clenched that Buffy beside him took hold and inserted a finger and pushed and prodded until his hand finally opened. That was just the way he was— a natural fighter. A natural rebel. I'd always known that. I'd tried to beat it out of him a century ago, and all he did was laugh (when he wasn't crying— I did know how to make him cry). The Powers could kill him, but they couldn't subjugate him, except by threatening Buffy. And they couldn't do that anymore, not with her threat of a slayer-strike.

So all they could do was take him. Judge, jury, and executioner, they sat there, implacable, ready to do that as soon as Gunn shut up.

But Gunn spun it out. He talked and talked until they finally started listening. He talked about the natural rights of man, and he talked about the flaws in the contract, and he talked about quantum mechanics (and Fred kept her mouth shut even though he probably got it wrong) and the chaos theory and the detritus of the cosmos, and he talked about the new, improved, unobligated Spike. He talked about my unfinished journey and Spike's continued obligation to the secret clause and went on real fast past that contradiction. He talked about the amulet and Spike's sacrifice and the shanshu (Wes silently walking forward and handing them the vellum prophecies).

And finally, his voice hoarse and low, he talked about love.

When he was finally done, the Powers were silent for a long time. And then they said, their voices mingling into one, "Vampire. Have you anything to say for yourself?"

Spike rose and said, "Don't hurt Buffy." He started to sit down, then bounced up again. "And I'm a fighter. A warrior. So you should do this trial by combat. I'll meet any demon you send. And I'll beat him."

"Sit down, Spike," I hissed, and he did, finally, like he'd already won the battle and was waiting for
the laurel crown.

But my contribution only drew their attention to me. "You. Angel. Rise."

Slowly I stood up, gripping the edge of the table with both hands.

"What have you to say? After all, he was brought back to help you on your journey."

I couldn't speak. I had to speak. I thought back on the past months, the agony and the anguish of it all. All because of him. I saw Spike looking down at Buffy's hand in his, and I felt Connor's gaze on me. And finally I said, "Yes. He ... " I wanted to say something about the band, about how he'd come back from the staking and could still play bass. About the guilt and the pain and the videos I'd made of the performances. But I heard myself saying, "He brought me back with my son. And he made me tell the truth to my friends."

They didn't move. I hadn't moved them. I added, "I'm not there yet. I'm almost there. But--" and then the words came to me, and I just let them come out. "I still need him."

There was silence again as I sat down.

And then, "Stand up, vampire."

I rose, and only when Spike rose too did I realize they meant him, not me. But I stayed standing there beside him. And Buffy rose too on his other side, and I couldn't look at her and see the anguish. So I just stared straight forward. Not at him. Not at her. Not even at the Powers.

"Vampire."

"Yeah." Spike pulled his hand out from Buffy's. Wherever he was going, he was going alone.

He was ready.

I wasn't.

"We will take this under advisement."

And then, as one, they vanished.

We just stood there. Buffy cast herself into Spike's arms, and he had to take hold of her to keep them both from falling, and he murmured something into her hair, and I said, "Charles! What does this mean?"

Gunn opened and closed his mouth, and finally said, "It means I'm way better than I thought." And then he added really quick, "But it doesn't mean Spike's free. It just means they're going to give it some thought before they zap him into oblivion. But they'll still zap him."

Harmony gasped, and Buffy moaned, and Spike said, "So do I get my trial by combat or not?"

"Not," Gunn said shortly. "Just show back up here tomorrow morning, okay? And--" he looked at Buffy. "You get another night. Make use of it."
I guess making the most of the night started with a good slay. The next I saw of Buffy and Spike, they were in the lobby, headed outside with a bag full of daggers. Dressed and prepped for action. Buffy gave me a cheerful wave, and I marvelled at their jauntiness.

"You'd never know," Connor said behind me, "that he's going to be gone tomorrow."

I turned slowly. He was standing on the last step, his hands jammed into his pockets.

"Maybe," I said, "the Powers will spare him."

He gave me that contemptuous, cynical look kids must practice in the mirror. "Yeah, well, you probably believe in Santa Claus too."

"That's enough," I snapped. Just like I was his real father dealing with his real obnoxiousness. But I saw him withdraw, hunch deeper into that stupid jacket, and I said more quietly, "There's still a chance. Gunn's filing another brief tonight."

"Yeah. That'll do it." He walked towards the doors to the street. "I was watching. I saw it. They don't care about briefs and evidence or truth or what's right. The Powers don't care about anything but power."

I stood there in the lobby, watching him walk away, the glow of the streetlamps outlining his slender form. And his words echoed in my mind. The Powers don't care about anything but power.

That couldn't be true. They weren't the Senior Partners, after all. They had to care about–

Something.

I headed up the stairs, and through the corridor to the medical clinic. The nurse regarded me suspiciously– I guess she'd heard about the Spike dusting– but she let me go in as long as I promised to leave the door open.

So when I spoke to Cordelia, it was in a low voice. "I need your help."

Cordy didn't respond. She just lay there under the pristine sheet, her eyes closed, her breathing deep and regular.

Annoyed, I grabbed her hand, and in a harsh whisper, I said, "Spike is probably going to vanish in the morning. A victim of your colleagues at the Powers That Be. I need you to get me to them."

Slowly, her eyes opened, and she gazed up at me. "Angel." Her voice was thin. Everything about her was thin. But her hand moved in mine. "I don't want Spike to–"

"No one does," I interrupted. "So help me. Take me to them."

She withdrew her hand and put it over her eyes. "What are you going to do?"

"Talk to them. Make my case." Gunn had made Spike's case. Only I could make my own.
"You know what will happen if you do."

"I know what will happen if I don't."

She sighed and let her hand drop, and I saw that her big eyes were shiny with tears. "I don't have much left, you know. I was never really one of them."

"Just guide me to them. That's all."

"That's enough." She looked so weary that for a moment I wondered if it would kill her, taking me there. But then she smiled. "I heard the nurse say that Buffy came for Spike."

Several times, to judge by her – never mind. "Yeah. She's here. They're together now. Killing demons. Their idea of a glamorous night out."

"She loves him?"

I stepped back, impatient with this line of questioning. "I guess. Come on. Will you help me or not?"

"Help me up."

I got her to her feet— it took a couple minutes. She was wearing flannel pajamas, and that stopped me for a minute. If Cordelia had any power at all, she would be wearing silk. But once she was standing, she took a deep breath, and she steadied herself by holding on to my arm. "Close your eyes," she said, and I remembered another girl saying that long ago.

But this was Cordelia, and when I opened my eyes, she was still with me.

She was about all I could see in the blinding white light, Cordelia thin and gaunt in her blue flannel pajamas, her forehead lined like it used to be when she would be suffering from a vision. "There," she whispered, and gave me a little shove in the direction of the light. "I'll wait for you."

I walked and walked, into the whiteness, away from the whiteness, over the whiteness. Finally there were two white marble pillars that stretched up and up, disappearing finally into the white sky. I walked between them, and just beyond was a pair of black upholstered armchairs.

I took a seat in one of them and waited.

Eventually the other chair became occupied. Hard to explain— just a gradual fading in of a persona. It had no weight, no smell, but then neither did I. We didn't actually exist in this place. The place didn't actually exist. Just a moment stopped in time, and an illusion of space. An illusion of two people sitting together and talking.

"Yes?" the Powers said.

"I won a life. Remember." It sounded like one of those Free Spins on that game show with Vanna in an evening gown. I'm not bankrupt after all, because I won this free spin. This free life. "For Darla. And she couldn't use it."

"So?"
"I want to use it now."

A moment, then, "You have already used it. For your son's life. Do you want to give that up?"

No. No. "There must be a way."

The floor opened like the moon roof on my Viper, just pulled back and under our feet it was like glass, the dark sky spreading out below us, the stars winking, the city lights aglow. I stared down, and the image zoomed in. A dark place. A cemetery, one where the wealthy rested—monuments as tall as I in the dewy grass.

They were there, Buffy and Spike, fighting four vamps, two a piece. Buffy dusted hers quick, but Spike was taking his time. I couldn't hear his voice—I couldn't hear anything—but I could see his mouth going ninety miles an hour, taunting the vamps as he tossed the stake from hand to hand. Buffy was laughing.

As we watched, he forced one back against a cherub monument, back and back till the vamp was bent over almost backwards. And then Spike struck him, and just as quick whirled around and got the other on the backswing. Then he blew on the stake, like it was a smoking gun barrel.

The Powers let the moon roof slide back to hide the scene. "He has been your grandchilde for how long?"

I made a quick calculation. "Almost 125 years."

"And you've only staked him once? Remarkable restraint."


"He is... rather pretty," the Power said, and I wondered why he/she/it sounded like Darla just then, with that cool assessing tone.

"He's a good fighter too. You just saw it. And—and—" I scrounged up what I knew of Spike's assets. "You should have seen him play softball before he was banned for life. He plays bass too."

"And she loves him."

"Yeah." That was reason enough. Buffy loved him. "Let him go." It sounded too commanding. I had a problem with that. I said, as humbly as I could, "Let him go. For her. She hasn't had much chance to be happy."

"You think he can make her happy?"

I inhaled some of that empty air. "I think he will spend the rest of his unlife trying."

The Powers didn't speak again, not for a long time. And then, very gently, "There must be an exchange. You know that."

"Yes." I was ready. Really. I spared a thought for Cordelia, waiting for me to return. But she would know, probably before I knew. "I'm ready."
The Powers laughed. At least, I thought it was a laugh. "Too easy. You know that. What is harder?"

And then I knew.

It was still mine, that's what they were saying. Still mine to earn. Still mine to lose. Still mine to... trade.

"All right," I said. I said it quick, so that I wouldn't take it back.

All I ever wanted, and it was gone just like that.

We rose, and they/it walked back with me. Halfway back, anyway. Not close enough to see Cordelia.

"Don't give it to him. He doesn't want it." And then I said, "Would you mind instead just sending a demon for him to fight? He'd be disappointed if he doesn't get a trial by combat."

"And if he loses?"

"Oh, he won't lose." I suppressed a sigh. "He doesn't lose. He even beat me."

The Power nodded. "We will make arrangements."

I thought for a moment about how Buffy would take this. "Could you send two? Buffy will want to help."

The Powers seemed to laugh again. I was amusing, I guess. "Any more requests?"

"Don't tell them about this. Let Gunn think his brief won the day."

"It will be a good brief. Eloquent. Persuasive."

"Yeah. Let's go with that."

"The brief wins a trial by combat. The vampire and his slayer will win— if they win."

It was a good deal, and we would have shaken on it, if either of us had hands. Instead, I just nodded. "Done."

"Done."

And then I was back with Cordelia in her hospital room, and she was sagging in my arms, and I laid her back on the bed and pulled the sheet over her.
Buffy

We had fun out there slaying again. Hard to imagine that we could forget reality and just have fun, but it was true. I guess the two of us were good at living in the moment. Guess we had to be. So we killed some vamps, and headed back to W&H, and took the stairs instead of the elevator—racing to see who would get to the top first (him— I’m stronger, but he’s faster).

Then we went into his apartment and sat down on the couch and watched some DVDs.

Just kidding.

We took a long shower, longer than it had to be. Came to bed wet and sleek. Forgot to pull the coverlet back, and got it all damp.

"I love you," I said. I couldn't help it. I knew I should wait, wait until it mattered, so it would mean more. But I had to keep saying it. I went years without saying it, and now I had hours. And so I said it and he whispered it back to me.

It was dark in the bedroom, and I couldn't see him. But that didn't matter. I'd seen him last night, and this morning, naked and loving and mine. Now I could close my eyes and remember him with my hands, that smooth ivory body of his, all hard and marble except for the places where it was velvet—his eyelids and his mouth and under his jaw. The curve of his neck. The inside of his elbow. The soft soft skin over his hard cock.

That made him moan. I kissed him. My eyes were still closed, but I knew his mouth, all gentle and demanding and waiting for me.

We lay side by side, taking it slow, his hand skimming my skin, so light that I almost thought I was imagining it. His tongue on my lips. On my tongue. On my throat. On my breasts. I wasn't imagining that, no—he was gentle and rough, teasing my nipple until it came into his mouth, and I arched towards him. More. More.

We had all night.

That was all we had.

He kissed me there, and there, and there. And there. "There," I whispered. "There." And he kissed there, and kissed, his lips kissing me, his tongue kissing me, and I tangled my fingers in his curls and held him there with my hands, with my thighs. There.

Oh. There.

Just as I came in his mouth, he pulled away, slid into me, and laid his face against my neck, stroking in and out, all sweet and long. Again and again, inside me, cool and hot and mine. I couldn't breathe just then, but I had to breathe to tell him I loved him, to beg him to come to me.

He heard that I loved him, but he wouldn't come, not yet. I was annoyed— I wanted him to be happy too, and he was holding back. I said into his hair, "You must have had a lot of girls when you were away from me, to be able to hold out so long again tonight."
He turned, rose a bit, looked down at me. Even in the darkness, I could see the gold in his eyes. "No girls. No one else." He paused, then mumbled, so I could hardly hear, "Maybe a couple kisses. But--" and he said this quick, to change the subject back, "Just... vampire stamina. Can hold out for hours."

"Me too," I answered the question he wouldn't ask. "I mean, no one else. Not even," I added sort of sternly, "any kisses." He didn't say anything, and I knew he was thinking of the weeks I'd lived here with Angel. "No one here," I said. "No one in London either. And no one in Tibet."

"Bigfoot is lying, huh?"

So much for vampire stamina. When I laughed, he came with a startled gasp, and he rose up above me, every muscle straining, and he closed his eyes and whispered my name.

I told myself that it wasn't the last time we'd make love, not even the last time tonight. We had forever. It was only right.

Finally we fell asleep, still joined, and too soon it was morning, and it was all over. Someone was banging on the door.

Gunn, maybe. Or Spike's escort, maybe. Or a lackey of the Powers.

Spike pulled the pillow over his head.

I got up, pulled open a drawer, yanked on one of his clean black t-shirts. I found my denim skirt and slid it on, and went to answer the door.

It was Dawn. She was standing there, her fist raised, her face tight too. "Let me in," she said, pushing past me. "Where's Spike?"

"Still asleep," I said, though I knew he wouldn't sleep through her noise. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you think? I'm here to be with you guys."

And she plopped down on the couch. "Can we send a minion out for a latte? I've been on that stupid bus all night." She fixed me with a glare. "So tell me what you didn't tell me on the phone."

I heard the shower start up, and I talked fast, wanting to get it done. And wanting to get our tears done. And so we were sitting at the kitchen table, dry-eyed and nursing our coffee mugs when Spike came out, shirtless, his hair damp from the shower.

"'Lo, Bit," he said, like it was any other day.

Dawn swallowed hard, but replied, "Hey, Spike. Want some coffee?"

But before he could respond, there was another knock on the door. When he took a deep breath and went to answer it, Dawn grabbed my hand, and we sat there, waiting, watching.

It was Gunn. He was in his Armani suit, and he took one look at Spike and said, "Go get dressed. They're giving us an oral argument on the brief this afternoon." And then he turned and left.

Spike stood for a moment, and then he came over and dropped to his knees in front of me and put his
head in my lap. Dawn crouched down beside him, murmuring something, and I held them both, and held back my tears. There would be time enough for that later.

After a minute or two, I pushed Dawn away and dropped a kiss on Spike's head. "You have to get dressed, honey. What are you going to wear?"

He rose slowly, held a hand out to me. "I'll dress for battle. Anyway it goes, I'm not going out without a fight."

It was the same old fake courtroom, with the Powers in their fake bodies with their fake faces. And their very real power. They listened without comment as Gunn summarized the brief that kept him up working all night. And Spike sat there, his face hard, holding our hands, me and Dawn on either side of him.

I would fight for him if I could.

Angel was behind us, standing with his back against the door. I glanced back at him, resenting him, seeing so neutral there, his face expressionless, his arms crossed over his chest, looking like he'd given it a try and now it wasn't his problem anymore.

But it wasn't, I guessed.

Dawn stared back at him, her expression implacable. She hated Angel, especially after he, you know, killed Spike. I reached across Spike to grab her wrist. Behave, I mouthed. We might need Angel. Somehow.

Gunn finally sat down next to me, and I wanted to thank him, but I couldn't find the words. All I could do was grip Spike's hand and glare at the Powers.

When I realized maybe that wasn't the best tactic, I had to stare down at the table. I couldn't look up at the ones who wanted to take my man away, just when I held him closest.

There was the sound of a crashing gavel, and I still couldn't look up. Spike bent toward me, his mouth at my ear. "I love you. Always. Be happy," he whispered. "For me." And we waited like that, my hot forehead against his cool cheek, waited for the end.

"A trial by combat. Tonight." Another crash of the gavel, and they were gone.

"What--" Gunn was pushing up from the table. Spike was up on his feet too, and right across me, they shoulder-punched each other. "You are the man!" Spike was saying, and Gunn called back, "That I am! Greatest ever!"

I just sat there, heavy with hope. I couldn't breathe, I was hoping so much. But then Dawn cried, "Buffy! What happened?"

"I think--" I had to take another breath. "I think it means Spike gets to fight tonight. And if he wins--"

"He'll win," Angel said from behind me. "One thing he knows how to do is fight."
"Hey, thanks," Spike said, about as pleased by this assessment as he was with the prospect of getting to fight. "Good to know you have faith in me."

"At least your fighting ability," Angel said. He actually sounded amused.

I didn't care. All I cared about was Spike and the fight and –

I jumped up and grabbed Spike by the arm. "Come on. We got to train. I gotta make sure you're in top shape."

"Sure, pet," Spike said, "nothing I'd like more."

Gunn trailed us out, pleading, "Don't hurt him, Slayer. You don't know what the Powers have planned. Could be a gryphon or a dragon or a mind-boggler. Whatever it is, he's got to be able to fight it."

"Yeah," Dawn scoffed. "Like Buffy's going to disable him." She stopped and thought, and then said sternly, "I'll be referee. Just to make sure."

Okay, that sort of cramped our style. I mean, with Dawn there, we could hardly proceed from fighting to... Anyway, up in the training room, I took Spike through his paces, correcting a sloppy stance, drilling him in hand-chops, grabbing at his sword and parrying his axe with a shield.

But everytime we started to really get loose, to fall into that dangerous rhythm, Dawn would stand up from the wrestling mat and yell at us. "That's enough! You're going to bruise him! He needs both his hands, you know!"

Well, okay, she was right. And anyway, I had other plans for Spike. "Dawn, you know what," I said. "Maybe you could go to the drugstore down the street and get me some aspirin."

"I got some right here in my purse," Dawn said.

"I mean ibuprofen. That's what I need." I kept my gaze on Spike. He was smiling that smile, the one that promised all sorts of things. "And – and – bandaids. I need bandaids. And maybe one of those wrist splints. And –"

"Okay, okay," Dawn said. "But if you tire him out too much–"

"Hey!" Spike said. "Vampire here, remember?"

Dawn hmphed and headed out without a backwards glance. I knew her. She'd give us maybe a half hour. "Let's hurry," I said, locking the training room door behind me. Spike was frowning at the display window, so I dragged a mat over to the corner to the left. You'd have to have X-ray vision or a periscope to see us over there. "We don't have much time," I said, and that sounded like I didn't have a lot of faith in him, so I added, "before Dawn gets back."

So we made it really quick, which made him grumble, because he was a man who liked to take his time. So I had to take charge, force him onto his back, take control of his body and his desires. Easy enough. Not like he resisted. Not like he minded. And at the last moment, I did it– I reached out and grabbed the dagger discarded by the mat, grabbed it and sliced the inside of my arm.

He opened his eyes, scenting blood, and I shoved my wrist against his mouth, and instinctively he
swallowed hard, his lips fastening on my flesh. And we both came, just like that, and I thought, oh. This is what Dracula was trying to tell me. Too bad for Dracula that he wasn't Spike....

He wrenched away, rolled away, ended up crouched naked and hard, his face hard too, his eyes glowing golden, his hands clenched into fists. His lips stained red with my blood.

And then he pressed back against the wall, his predatory features fading into the face I knew so well, his tongue going automatically to swipe at his lips. "Buffy, why--"

"I want you to have me with you," I said fiercely. I went over to him, my arm outstretched, but he turned his back, his whole body shaking with tension.

I pulled him down on the mat, got on top of him, put my mouth against his. Whispered, "Slayer blood. Make you strong."

"Got enough. Strong enough," he said, and I saw the effort it was taking him to smile. "Slayer blood. More than a mouthful is too much."

"I hope it's enough, anyway." I laid my head on his chest. It drove me crazy, how stubborn he was. But maybe he was right. Maybe I'd given him enough. It didn't matter, because I knew he wasn't going to take anymore. "You feel strong enough to take on a gryphon? Or a dragon?"

"A gryphon and a dragon," he said softly. "Got your power inside me now, and your love-- Can't lose."

The Powers sent some message to Charles Gunn, and so three hours past sundown we all gathered in the parking garage to carpool over to the arena. Gunn read out the address, and Spike said, "Hey. That's the park in front of your flat, innit, Wes?"

"Yes, it is," Wesley said in his precise way. "Why would they choose that venue, do you think?"

Gunn shrugged. "It's a big park, but without junkies who might get in the way. Can't think of any other reason."

Then Angel spoke. Levelly. Looking at Wesley. "That was where they stole Connor from you. When he was a baby."

Wesley's hand went to his throat. I don't think he even knew he was doing it. "So it's to— punish me, is it?"

Angel was looking at Connor now. The boy— his son, I had to keep reminding myself of that— looked down at the concrete floor, scuffing his sneakers a little. "I think just to get things out in the open."

I'm sure it was all really important to them, but to me, well, all I could think of was Spike fighting the demon sent by the Powers. I didn't trust the Powers. They'd once saved Angel's life— sending that snow and the long night— but see, he wanted to die. So they saved him, but it was against his own wishes. Spike wanted to survive, so they'd probably thwart him too. And that meant—

I wasn't going to think that. I was going to watch him, standing so straight and proud by Angel's old
car, his hands jammed into his pockets, that cocky smile on his face. He looked like he could take on an army of demons. I just hoped he didn't have to.

Angel said, "Get in the car, Spike. I'll drive."

And Spike looked surprised, and pleased, like this was some big gift, getting to ride in the crummy old convertible. I guess it was nicer than the DeSoto, or cleaner at least, and he vaulted into the back seat and held out his arms for me. And so what could I do, but a nice cartwheel right into the seat beside him. Just to make him laugh.

"I'm going with you," Dawn declared, and yanked open the front door. She glared at Angel like she was begging him to tell her no. But Angel just found the keys deep in his leather jacket and got in on his side.

The others were all piling into Gunn's SUV. But at the last minute, Connor said, "I guess I'll go with you guys."

Dawn was about to get in the front, but after a moment contemplating being jammed in the center seat against Angel, she said, "Fine. But I get the window."

And so we headed out into the cool night, Spike and me all tight and close in the back seat, Angel driving, Connor squeezed next to him and pretending to be somewhere else, and Dawn talking to us and glaring at Angel.

Dawn wasn't real good at that forgiveness business. Angel could save a thousand lives, and Dawn would still think only of the time he staked Spike.

I didn't really blame her. I kind of felt like I had to let it go— I mean, I sent Angel to a hell dimension, and he let that go— but I was glad that Dawn maintained her grudge.

Dawn, being the total expert on fighting along with everything else, gave Spike advice all the way. Connor chipped in too, but mostly to say what Spike did well, like we didn't already know. I mean, Spike was an epically good demon-fighter. I couldn't even count the varieties we'd dispatched, and I got the idea that in the last few months, he'd added a few more to his score. But the Powers–

No. Wasn't going to think about that. I just stared at the back of Angel's head and pressed my body against Spike's and told myself that he had my love and he had my blood in his veins and he had all these people rooting for him.

Too soon we were there. The park was a square surrounded by big old residential blocks. It was late enough that most of the lights were off in the apartments and the streets were deserted. The park was flat and open except for a few trees, and this concerned me. Spike and I were more used to cemeteries, where we could vault off the headstones and jump out from behind the mausoleums. This park, in the glow of the streetlamps, just looked so... exposed.

Spike just jumped out of the car and extended his hand to help me out, like I needed help, right? But it was nice and gentlemanly of him, and it gave me a chance to squeeze his hand to tell him I was with him.

I just wished I could fight with him. Not that he needed help! But just in case— too bad Gunn had looked at the printout of the writ and said that the fight was Spike's alone. He sounded regretful, Gunn did, and that kind of warmed my heart, you know, that he wanted to fight beside Spike too.
But Spike had to do it alone. Well, him and the bag of weapons we put together.

So he gave me a kiss and yanked on Dawn's hair and strode forward like a champion prizefighter entering a ring favored 10-1.

"Bring 'im on," he said loudly, and we all held our breaths.

He was in the big open space in the middle of the park, standing in the new mown grass, and we were all gathered on the edge near the trees. It was well-lit, with the darkness beyond, so we saw right away when the demon appeared.

Someone gasped. Not me. I was too busy feeling all relieved. Fyarls were big, but slow and dumb, and Spike had fought them many times before, and knew how to pierce the armored skin and dodge the mucus bombs. He even knew the Fyarl language, so he kept up a steady stream of insults that confused and angered the big lug.


"Don't jinx it," she told me.

I shut my mouth and just watched as Spike swung his axe around and around, and then, with a laugh, beheaded the Fyarl.

Okay. Now we could go. Fast. Before the Powers–

Too late. The body of the Fyarl disappeared and was replaced with a live Dolnix. This was getting a bit more dicey. Dolnix aren't dumb like Fyarl's, see. They're as smart as humans, or at least that's what their website says.

Spike was still smiling. But he wasn't laughing anymore. He waited for the Dolnix to come to him, to swipe at him with the bladed arm, and he dodged out of the way. Light on his feet, dancing like Ali, staying just out of reach.

"How do I kill this, Buffy?" he called, and I frantically searched my mental database of demon death techniques.

"Uh, stab it in the eye," I yelled, hoping that I was right. Luckily most demons succumbed to a good eye-stab, at least the ones humanoid enough to keep their brains in the head region. But Spike's axe wasn't pointy enough for the task, and his weapons bag was behind a tree, on the other side of the Dolnix.

"Here!" I pulled out my favorite dagger, unsheathed it, and threw it overhand to him.

Halfway there, it clanged, and fell to the ground.

I pulled away from Dawn and ran after the dagger, and reached up to the invisible barrier, like glass but even clearer. I ran my hand down it and felt the power of it. Even I couldn't break through. Suddenly I remembered something—the night I revoked Spike's invitation to my house. He slammed facefirst into a barrier just like this. And his expression—

I'd kept him from me. And now the Powers were keeping me from him. And he needed me, because
a second Dolnix appeared beside the first, and they looked at each other, and I think that was a smile that passed between them. The second one threw a wooden stake to the first.

Spike looked so... mortal. So alone.

They advanced, flanking him, one on each side. Then they attacked, both of them swinging their bladed arms and brushing him. He kicked out at one, knocking it down, but he had only a second and he spent it diving for the weapons bag. The second Dolnix kicked it out of the way, and Spike went sprawling. I don't know that I've ever seen him move so clumsily, and even before I saw the blood pouring out of the slash on his shirt, I knew he was hurt.

I pounded on the barrier until my fists bled, and someone– Angel– pulled me back and held me fast.

Spike started to rise, but he stopped midway, and launched himself at the second Dolnix, right at the blade on his knee. The Dolnix thought this was amusing– at least that looked like amusement on his craggy face– and just stood there, sticking out his leg. But Spike twisted at the last minute, shooting past the demon towards the weapons bag. He landed hard, but rolled and came up with a knife in his hand. The Dolnix wasn't as fast. He turned on one foot, his other leg still extended, and so he was off-balance when Spike tackled him, forcing him down into the ground. And forcing the knife into the nearest eye.

The demon howled, and so did his colleague. But Spike was up on his feet now, knife out, game-face down– that predatory, fierce face of his, that always thrilled something deep inside me. His killer face. The surviving demon bellowed, all rationality gone, and swiped his arm around, the blade flashing in the light of the streetlamp. Spike ducked, and came up knife first, slipping right between the arms and up in the Dolnix's face.

Jammed it home.

The demon fell hard, and melted away.

Spike was breathing hard. He didn't need to breathe, but he was winded. No triumph now. He sensed what was coming. And it came. A whole squadron. Three demons– I recognized the first one as a Chugger, but the other two were big and ugly and unfamiliar. "Spike!" I cried, and I saw him take a deep breath and get set, and his chest was bleeding and his arm too. I didn't know how much longer he could hold on. "Spike," I whispered, as the Chugger came towards him.

"Go."

I'd forgotten that Angel was holding me back, his arms around my waist. But now he gave me a little shove towards the invisible barrier. I stopped to pick up my dagger, and saw over my shoulder that now he held Connor back. And just that moment, I was flooded with gratitude, because he had to hold Connor back, because Connor was straining to get loose, to get loose and come fight with Spike.

But then Angel bent, a tall man, over his much smaller son, and said something in his ear. And Connor stopped struggling.

I didn't have any time to wonder why. I ran at the barrier full speed, and it bent for me and broke, like a spiderweb, and then I was through, my dagger in hand. I skidded to a stop right beside Spike. "I'm here," I said, and he gave me a quick smile.
"The Jensen clan," he said, and I remembered– we'd slain them all, four vampires from one family killed in a drunk-driving accident. They all rose at once, and swarmed us, and we'd beaten them by going for the ones on either side.

So to his whispered "now!" we launched ourselves out to the sides, hitting the demons around the legs and forcing them back. Mine went slamming into a tree, and Spike's landed with a sickening crack on the sidewalk. The one in the middle hesitated, not sure of which of us to go after, and by the time he decided, we'd beheaded his friends.

Spike rose, holding his hand against the cut in his side. "Ladies first," he said, gesturing at the surviving demon.

"It'll be more fun if we do it, you know. Simultaneously."

"Anytime you're ready, slayer."

I almost felt sorry for the demon. You'd be amazed how well those ugly demon faces can convey terror. This one looked like he'd awakened into a nightmare– a nightmare of a vampire and his slayer, both stalking towards him, one on each side.

He turned and ran. But he wasn't fast enough. We were on him just like that, and I worked my dagger between the armored plates on his chest and plunged it home.

Spike rose first, offered me a hand. I got up, scanning the park for another set of demons. But instead, all I saw was that cloud that had first threatened Spike two nights ago. It hovered above the body of the fallen Chugger, all ominous and forbidding.

I grabbed Spike's arm, ignored his gasp of pain, and yelled, "He won. You don't get him! I won't let you take him!"

The cloud roiled around a bit, and then: "We have no desire to take him. He won the trial. We release him."

And then the cloud zipped into itself and disappeared, and I stood there breathless, and Spike gathered me close, and I started to cry.

It didn't last. The crying, I mean. I cried just enough to wet his shirt, which was already sort of damp with his blood, and then I pulled away and said, "We're free."

"Yeah." He stood there with his hands at my waist, his eyes dark with longing. But he didn't get a chance to tell me anymore, because they were all around us, Gunn and Wesley and Connor and everyone. And Spike swept me up in his arms, and we laughed.

Angel's apartment started filling up. Spike's bandmates came with their instruments– Clem lugging a single snare drum– and Harmony came in carrying an amplifier that was as big as she was. Pizzas started arriving, and someone was rummaging through Angel's perfect cabinets for champagne
glasses. And a boy with a freckled Irish face pushed open the door, rolling a keg in front of him. As he set it up, he called over, "Hey, Spike. Bridget sends her love."

Spike was within arm's length, and I yanked him close and yelled over the music, "Who is Bridget?"

He looked down and away and I realized she was one of the kissers, or kissees, and I pulled him against me and said, "She's history. You hear."

"Sure, pet," he said, kissing me quick. I could see he was relieved to get off so easy. And then he grinned and said, "I like it when you get jealous."

I kind of liked it too, because it reminded me that he was mine. I'd spent so long denying that, denying his love, that it was practically liberating to feel possessive and bitchy and jealous, just like a real girlfriend.

The band was setting up in the corner of Angel's living room—okay, it was seriously weird to see Harmony there as the roadie, bantering with Wesley as she set up his keyboard— and Spike grabbed my hand and drew me over to the microphone. He picked up a guitar and motioned to the others to get to their instruments.

He said something I didn't catch to the band— the song title, I guess— and then he said into the mike, "This is for my lady. My slayer."

I kind of got a shiver when he said that. It was a little scary— loving him back, having him whole, committing, all that— and it was really scary being up by the microphone, with everyone looking at me. I could see Dawn out there by that Irish boy who brought the beer and Bridget's love, and she was laughing at me. I could tell she thought she'd be way cooler than me if she got the chance to be up there with the band (and just you wait, by the end of the night, I bet she'd doing her Britney imitation).

Spike said, "So this is an old Pogues' song—"

The lead guitarist, who had said not one word so far, muttered, "Acid Anteaters."

Spike shot him a look that should have scared him to death. Then he growled into the mike, "The great Pogues' song that the Anteaters bloody massacred." He was so cute when he was mad. And he got mad about such cute things. Okay. So he was cute all the time. Sue me.

Clem was, as usual, conciliating, and he set up a beat, and the guitarist had to join in, and so did some little guy with a trumpet who I finally recognized as Harmony's billionaire— and Spike. He'd set down his bass and had hold of my hand and wouldn't let go, and when he started singing, I got all tense, because it was so sweet, what he sang, but also because I knew the chorus was coming and he expected me to sing along. And I had to because it was something I really wanted to say to him.

He was looking deep into my eyes, holding my hand, and singing.

I just want to be there
When we're caught in the rain
I just want to see you laugh not cry
I just want to feel you
When the night puts on its cloak
I'm lost for words don't tell me
All I can say
I love you 'till the end

I took a deep breath and looked at him and no one else, and I sang it too. I love you 'till the end. I love you 'till the end.

And I knew it was true. And so did he.
Angel

It was cool on the balcony, and I could smell the ocean, and the sounds of the party receded as I imagined sound of the tide coming in, wave crashing into wave into sand. Everything was gone—everything I wanted. I didn't want anything anymore. I couldn't imagine wanting anything ever again. All along, all I'd wanted was to get rid of Spike, and I didn't even want that anymore. I just wanted... oh, to be alone, forever and ever. And I would be, I thought. Whether I wanted it or not.

"Hey, Angel!"

Spike was standing in the doorway, loud music escaping around him. He came out, sliding the door shut behind him, and it was quiet again, as quiet as it could ever be in a major city with Spike around.

"You okay?"

"Just fine." Maybe I was being a little curt. But Spike was used to it, or maybe he was just so happy that he wasn't going to let a trivial thing like me bother him.

At least he'd changed out of the blood-soaked clothes, though the black t-shirt and jeans looked the same, minus the blood. He stood there by the door, his hand on his ribs where the demon had slashed him, and said, "Great party– thanks for holding it."

"I didn't realize I had a choice. Kegs and people just started appearing. And then the band set up, and--"

Spike smiled. "Yeah. Best parties are the unplanned ones. Band's playing great."

I cocked my head and listened, and now I could hear the music even through the soundproofed glass. "David Nabbit's really doing his best to follow Kenny, isn't he?"

"Yeah, David's a game 'un. Hard to keep enough to keep up with Super-K, but I bet it's even harder on a trumpet."

"It was cool," I said, "when Kenny played the guitar with his teeth."

"Cool?" Spike scoffed. "It was just showboating."

"You're just saying that because you can't do it. Some measly human with blunt teeth can do it, but you the fanged one can't."

"Can so. Just don't want to."

He came to the railing and stood next to me, leaning out. I could feel him vibrating like Kenny's guitar string. Fulfilled love hadn't calmed him down one bit. "Look," I said, trying to sound warm. Or generous. Or friendly. And failing. "Buffy--"

When I didn't get the next word out, he said, softly, "I meant to thank you--"

"That's not what I want to talk about."
He shut up. Unprecedented. Looked away, out towards the ocean. Waited.

"I wanted to tell you, I think you two ought to get away together."

"Yeah, okay," he said, still looking away, and I knew what he was thinking, that I couldn't stand to see him happy with her. And it wasn't true.

"You both have been through a lot, and you never got a chance just to be together. So I thought, you know, well, my journey might include you two going to some inn up on the Oregon coast, somewhere quiet, where you can be alone—my treat, of course."

He turned to me, his head tilted quizzically to the side. "Really? You think the Powers will go for that?"

"Sure. I think they're ready to wash their hands of you."

"I guess I wasn't what they expected in a minion."

"I could have told them it would backfire on them. So what do you say? Month or so, just the two of you." The words stuck in my throat, but I forced them out. "Somewhere romantic."

He considered this, then said, "See, I'm thinking romantic is fine, but... but I think we need to fight things. Or we'll fight each other. So what do you think of financing, oh, a demon-destructo tour? We drive around to hotspots and kill demons. Be fun. Do good. Together. We like that."

I had to admit it sounded more likely than my vision of them sitting quietly on a porch reading deep books and sipping herb tea. "Sure. Guess you'll need a car." I took a deep breath. "You can have the Viper."

Spike's eyes gleamed golden for a moment. Just a moment. Then he shook his head. "Nah. Need space for the weapons. And best to be inconspicuous."

"Right. You and Buffy. Inconspicuous. So take your pick from the motor pool."

"That panel van. The black one."

The ugliest vehicle in the garage. "You sure?"

"Yeah. I'll have them fit it with some weapon racks, a good sound system, a mini-fridge, maybe a mattress—"

I'd heard enough. "Okay. All yours."

"Thanks, mate."

He turned to go, and I sighed, and said, "Come here."

His face suspicious, he took a step towards me. Then he planted his feet like he figured I was going to try to toss him over the side. I briefly contemplated it, then pushed away from the rail and walked over to him.
It was awkward, hugging him. It was awkward hugging anyone, for me, but him most of all. Too much history, antagonism, conflict, pain, all wrapped up in that compact, tense body of his. And I think he was scared, because he never did relax, never did that laughing arms-around thing he did with Gunn and Clem and Fred and everyone else. But he stood there and took it like a man, even eventually working one hand free from my embrace to pat me on the back.

I gave into the moment. Or rather, I forced the moment as far as I could make it go. Then I let him go. "Have fun," I said, turning back to the night.

He waited a moment, and then said, all in a rush as he opened the door, "Yeah, love ya, see ya."

I'd failed again, I knew it. That was the best I could do, and it wasn't much of anything. Couldn't even say it back to him.

Something hit me hard in the chest, and I thought it was him– staking me, or ripping through the flesh and ribcage to grab my dead heart– and I fell to the floor. The stars winked out, and all the lights, and I remembered it was just like this with Connor, just like this, rage and the ocean closing in, darkness and cold seeping into my eyes and bones. "Will," I whispered, and I couldn't hear my own voice above the roaring in my ears. I sensed that he was nowhere close, that I was alone here in the absolute night. Will, I thought, wanting nothing more than just to say what I couldn't say, but it was too late.

Then he was beside me, kneeling. I could feel his hands hauling me up, and then I was sitting up, sprawled half over his legs. He held me up, and over the roaring, I heard his voice, desperate, scared. "It's all right, mate, 'll be all right. Hang on, I'll–"

"No," I whispered. "Stay."

So I rested against him, and the ocean receded, and warmth crept into me, and he said, tense, casual, "I can hear something, Angel."

"What?" I said, because I couldn't hear anything but the ocean and Spike.

"Blood."

"You staked me."

"Staked– Jesus. I wasn't even out here. Just heard you call me– found you like this." I could feel him sob, or maybe it was a laugh. "Shoulda known you'd blame me, you wanker. Got your precious shanshu, and you think I dusted you."

"Shanshu–" I could feel it now, the blood rushing everywhere, all through my body, flooding the pathways, the cells. Veins and arteries. And I started to shiver as the cold from the marble floor hit my warm flesh.

Spike tightened his arms around me and said, "You all right?"

I took a deep breath. I must have been breathing for a minute or more, but this felt like my first breath in– in 250 years. It filled my lungs and hurt my chest and I started to panic, thinking that I'd have to remember to do this forever– or for the rest of my life. My life. I let the breath out in a rush. When was I supposed to take another? I couldn't remember. I tried talking instead. "I don't deserve this."
"Not your call, mate."

"I killed you. Just a couple weeks ago. Hatred. I did it and–"

"'S all right, Angel. Helped me this week. Evens out."

"But I'm not good enough to be human yet."

"Bollocks," Spike shifted, shoving me up more, waking me up more. "You're not being elevated to the celestial choir, man, you're just becoming human, and the standards just aren't that bleeding high. You been better than most humans for a century. Hey!" He jiggled me a little, and I realized that he was now stronger than I was—much stronger. "Maybe it was that little lapse into murder sealed it for you. Now you're bad enough to be human!"

"This should be yours," I said. "You're the one who saved the world. Instead of me—"

"All I want is Buffy. You can have the sodding heartbeat."

"You mean it?"

"Yeah. Never wanted to be human, even when I was. I've just got all I wanted—then and now."

I could hear his smile, but I couldn't see it. "I can't see," I said, starting to panic again.

"Try opening your eyes."

I tried, and found them squeezed shut, and shoved them open, and the darkness was still all there, all around me. But Spike was murmuring something about it being all right, and gradually the stars winked back on, and the moon, and the eternal glow of the city lights crept up the edges of my sight. "Okay," I said.

"Better now?"

"My back. You're jamming your knee into it."

"Sorry."

He moved his knee fractionally, and hit a kidney, and I said, "You know, this hurts a lot more than I remember. Living."

"Bet dying will hurt more."

"Thanks for cheering me up."

"My pleasure. You planning on sitting on me forever?"

"I don't have forever."

"None of us do. Not even me. So how about getting started on it? This new life of yours?"

"What should I do?"
Spike gave this at least three seconds consideration. "Get laid. Eat some fish and chips. Get drunk."

"Sounds like your unlife, not my new life."

"What can I say. I know how to live." Awkwardly he added, "Just live. Be happy. Your way. Hey! You can go out on the beach and watch the girls surfing in their bikinis!"

"I saw that on ESPN last week."

"But it wasn't real. You can see it for real." A pause. "Course for real doesn't have slo-mo tit zoom."

I started to laugh. It felt weird. Because I was human, or because I just never laughed? I had to stop laughing to take a breath. That was new, and authentically weird. "I'm scared," I told him.

"Yeah, I'll bet. Didn't expect this, did you?"

"It's what I wanted. Always."

"Prophecy said you'd be wiped clean. You feel cleaner?"

"Squeaky clean." And it was true. I felt weary and frightened and alien. But the nagging guilt I'd lived with for a century was gone.

"Worth it then. Come on. Get up. My leg's falling asleep."

"It can't fall asleep. It doesn't have blood flow. Unlike, say, mine."

"I spose I'm going to have to listen to that sort of comment from now on?"

"That you are." I gripped the railing and leveraged myself to a standing position. Everything felt different. "I'm going to go to bed. And set my alarm clock so I'll wake up in time to see the sunrise."

Spike got to his feet and looked back into the brightly lit room. Lorne and Harmony were dancing, and Gunn was yelling something into the microphone. Employees I'd seldom seen actually working had shown up for the party, and there wasn't a square foot of space to be had. "You know, it might work better for the rest of us," he said, "if you just stayed up all night, partied hearty, watched the sunrise, and fell into bed then. That's what real humans do."

Except for the sunrise part, it was what Spike usually did, but I didn't bother to make note of this. "Okay."

He lingered by the door. "What you wanted, huh? The Shanshu?"

And I breathed deep of the dirty air, and got dizzy, and gripped the railing. My grip was weaker. I thought I might just pitch over, I was so dizzy, but I felt Spike's hand—strong as ever—grip my shoulder and hold me there. "I guess," I said. And then, softly, "Don't tell anyone yet."

"Sure. In your own time."

And then I felt the improbability of it all, the loss and the gain, the mystery, and I whispered, "But I just gave it up. Signed it away."
His hand gripped tighter, tight enough to hurt, and then relaxed. "For me, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"Well." He let go of my shoulder and a moment later I heard the French doors open. Then he said over the sudden rush of music and noise, "That's all right then."

The door closed behind him, and the music ceased, and all I could hear was the sound of traffic far below. I held tight to the railing and looked down at the lights of the city. I felt... forgiven.

Spike was the least of my victims. But there he was, forgiving me. That's what he meant.

Finally I made my way back in to the room. I stood there, my back against the glass door, watching them. The humans. My fellow humans. Well, them and Spike and Clem and Lorne.

They were all having fun. Loud, drunken fun.

I felt... empty. Full. Alone.

Then Buffy was standing at the microphone, all golden and cream, the light behind her radiating like the halo of her smile. She was happy. She reached out and took Spike firmly in hand, and said into the mike, "Let's go to the beach!"

And everyone yelled, and rushed to the door. Even Wes, though he tried to make it seem like he just happened to be heading out at the same time, like he wasn't actually going to go skinny-dipping with them. Like he wasn't going to stay really close to skinny-dipping Fred.

Connor caught my eye and shrugged, and I nodded, and he smiled and headed for the door.

Asked my permission. Like I was his dad.

Pretty soon the apartment was empty, except for Dawn curled up asleep on the couch-- she was going to be mad when she woke up and learned what she'd missed-- and Cordelia standing in the doorway to the kitchen. She had her hand on the door frame and looked as shaky as I felt.

She said, "I don't suppose they're all stopping to get their swim suits first."

I shook my head. "Doubt it." I added awkwardly, "Don't you want to go skinny-dipping too?"

"Oh, right. I'm going to the beach to display my miserable flat ass and deflated breasts under that bright moon. With Harmony and Buffy there looking all fit and luscious. I don't think so."

"Yeah. I know what you mean."

It wasn't till she laughed that I realized how ungallant I'd been. And how good her laugh sounded. "Sorry," I muttered.

We both stood by our respective doors, hanging on for dear life. Finally she said, "So you got it, did you."

We both knew what she meant. I raised my hand to my heart, felt it beat one and one and one and one like Clem keeping time for Gunn's rap songs. "I guess."
"Wow."

"You were there. Remember? When Wes found the prophecy." Suddenly that felt important— that she'd been there then. That she was here now.

"I remember," she said so softly I almost didn't hear her with my faulty human hearing. "Now what?"

"Now...." And I turned and pushed open the door. "Now I'd like to sit outside. And wait for the sunrise."

When I was out on the balcony, I looked back. She was still in the kitchen doorway, her head down, her expression unreadable.

"With you," I said quietly, and she couldn't have heard, but she must have heard, because she raised her head and smiled, and walked out to join me.

The End

End Notes


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