Resolutions
by Niamh

Summary

Third Major book in the Originsverse. The Scoobies have faced Angelus and the rest of the Aurelians, with unlikely support from within their ranks and the only survivor was Drusilla.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Book Three.

Chapter One. Real life, depicted in song

What’s worth nothing else but love
Take a walk down any street now
Every one of us in our own little world
Looking for a heart with whom to beat now
What’s worth nothing else but love
I’m prepared to take the heat now
What’s worth more than anything else at all
To keep you firmly on your feet now
So fake cool image should be over
‘Cause I long for a feeling of home

Real life, depicted in song
A loving memory
After long, home is a place where I yearn to belong
Where the land meets the sea
She’ll be smiling so sweetly now
I hope that she’ll be here much longer than I will
My heart loves her with every beat now
So fake cool image should be over
‘Cause I long for a feeling of home
Real life, depicted in song
A loving memory
After long, home is a place where I yearn to belong
Fake cool image should be over
‘Cause I long for a feeling of home
Real life, depicted in song
A loving memory
After long, home is a place where I yearn to belong
Fake cool image should be over
Home is a place where I yearn to belong
Fake cool image should be over
Home is a place where I yearn to belong
Fake cool image should be over
I’m going home
Where I belong
Fake cool image should be over
Rolling home
Fake cool image should be over

Home, Hucknall, S. Lewinson, P. Lewinson
“She’s flatlining!”

“We’re not getting a heart beat!”

“Get the paddles!”

“Charged and ready.”

“Count... three... two... charging!”

There was a flurry of controlled chaos, nurses and orderlies racing to their appointed tasks, each intent upon saving the life hanging in the balance. Within seconds, shock paddles were produced and charged. The prone figure on the gurney jumped as the electric current surged through her unresponsive form, reanimating her unbeating heart. The entire room paused, waiting for the monitors to signal success, no one daring to breathe.

Steady, rhythmic beeps finally filled the operating room and the sighs of relief were clearly audible.

Out in the hallway, watching the proceedings through heavily plated glass, one Englishman turned to a second. “You do realize this may not work.”

“Said as much more than once. Didn’t mean anyone but you was listenin’.” The seemingly younger man moved away from the window, his attention on the woman approaching from the opposite end of the hallway.

“How long was she dead?” Buffy’s voice chirped cheerily from her as she made her way slowly toward the two men standing at the window.

“Approximately one minute, thirty seconds, give or take a second or two.” Wesley emerged from the operating room in time to answer her query.

“Yeah, but was it long enough?”

Giles glanced back at the operating room, concern etched on his features. “Unknown.” His stare was distant and distracted, until some small noise from Buffy reclaimed his attention. He looked down at her fondly. “I would presume so, since you were dead for about the same amount of time.”

“The first time.” She grimaced and in the classic pose of a heavily pregnant woman, placed one hand on her extended belly, the other at the small of her back.

“You all right?” Spike was at her side instantly. “Here, lean back.” He stood behind her, easing her closer, his arms stealing around her. A deep sigh shook her small frame and Buffy brushed back her hair.

“I’m tired. Can we go home soon?”

Spike’s pointed look at Giles over her head forestalled any comment and he said, “We can go,
kitten. The Watchers can do what they do best.”

Before either of the other two could protest, Spike was leading Buffy slowly down the corridor.

“I’m waddling. This is so not cool, Spike. I’m way too young to be waddling.”

His chuckle followed behind them, causing the two males staying behind to laugh.

“Mr Wyndam-Pryce?” The question came as Rupert’s cell phone rang. Wesley motioned the nurse to silence, waiting for Giles to answer.

“Rupert Giles.”

He was quiet after that, though the expression on his face remained impassive. As he disconnected the call, Wesley motioned the nurse to relay her message. “We’re moving Ms. Lehane to post-op. She should be awake in a couple of hours.”

“Thank you.”

Once she was gone, Wesley raised an eyebrow, waiting impatiently for Giles to deliver his news.

“That was Anya.”

“Anya?”

“She wants to know when we’ll be home.”

“Oh.” Wesley shook his head. “I suppose it is too soon for the Council to be aware of the change.”

He started down the hallway, the older man just behind him. “Provided this harebrained scheme actually worked, the Council should have some indication a new Slayer has been called.”

“They’ll only know for certain if the girl is already in their control.”

“True. Odds are against them. Last I knew, there were only six potentials identified and under Council control.”

“Only six?” Wesley broke his stride to stare at his counterpart. “I thought the seers were more accurate than that.”

“Evidently the Council has had some difficulty persuading parents to relinquish their daughters. I believe an accusation was leveled by more than one girl’s family.”

“Accusation?” Wesley was genuinely confused. “Of what?”

“Pedophilia.” The distaste was clear in Rupert’s tone of voice.

“Oh, dear.”

“Indeed.”
Silence filled the hallway as they continued out of the hospital and into the waning daylight.

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“Did you see the size of that thing?”

Dawn was walking backwards, facing Connor while they headed home. “That was a cool move, flipping over its head and . . . whhooooossshhh.” She swept her arm out, imitating his earlier move. “Way cool, dude.”

He ducked his head, uncomfortable with her praise. “Wasn’t that cool. I’ve seen Spike do it.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know, Con, you don’t have to be like that.”

“Like what?”

“Mr. Embarrassed. Be proud of all the cool things you can do.” She slapped his arm, then turned to walk by his side. “It’s totally cool how you do all that stuff.”

He was quiet for a while, long enough for Dawn to pick up on his unease. “Spill.”

Connor hesitated, then shrugged. “I have to hide it, Dawnie.” He looked away, concealing his expression. “The other guys all . . . I don’t – ”

“Fit in?”

When he didn’t respond, she ducked her own head, letting her hair fall in front of her face. “I told you all about my memories. So you know it’s not any better for me. You could show off every day and people around here wouldn’t notice. Sunnydale is like that.”

“So I’ve learned.” His shoulders hunched a bit more and Dawn caught the movement out of the corner of her eye.

“What’s really bothering you?”

A shrug was her only answer.

Maybe Spike can get it out of him, or Wesley. Dawn had a feeling she knew what it might be, even without Connor saying anything. A few weeks earlier, Wesley and Spike had taken Connor out, supposedly on patrol, but really, they were telling Connor all about Angel. Though he’d claimed to have gotten the full story while he was in the Otherworld, there were still gaps. The Fae had only given him the recent stuff, leading up to his birth and just after.

Connor had gotten home that night and gone right to bed. Since then, he’d barely said a word to any of them. Dawn figured that was also why Connor had also been avoiding everyone at school.

She wasn’t far off the mark. Connor had known his parents – Darla and Angel – were vampires and had been of the not-good variety for a very long time, although he hadn’t really understood.

Whatever the Fae had told him and allowed him to see, it hadn’t been what Wesley and Spike had
told him. *That* had shaken him to the core.

His father had tried to kill his family. Each one of them. First Dawn, and he’d very nearly succeeded. Angel killed her boyfriend, Casey. Then he’d gone after everyone else.

Connor didn’t know how – or what – to think. He couldn’t understand how they didn’t hate him. How they allowed him to stay. Yet every night, Buffy hugged him, kissed his cheek and told him she was glad he was part of the family.

She’d never once shied away or ignored him. Connor couldn’t actually understand why.

Dawn was the same way.

Once they’d discovered Connor could read, they’d made arrangements to enroll him in school. Dawn treated him like a brother, introducing him that way to everyone she knew, not like someone resented or unwanted.

Connor didn’t understand.

He felt so guilty, knowing his father had been the one to hurt her, he sometimes didn’t know how to act or what to say. It had gotten harder to look at any of them, and he avoided everyone’s eyes whenever he could. He was so afraid he’d be shunned, tossed out, told he wasn’t worthy.

It was hardest to look at Buffy, knowing one of the reasons why Angel – he refused to refer to him as his father – wanted to kill her so badly was because he’d once loved her. There were times when he wondered if that was the same reason he’d wanted Spike dead. *Or was it more twisted than that?*

Connor sometimes wondered if there was more that Spike and Wesley didn’t tell him.

He was very afraid what they had told him was only a very small part of Angel’s history.

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Despite the heat outside, the air in the basement storage area was cool, redolent with myriad scents of herbs and candles. Working downstairs always gave Anya time to get her thoughts and inventory in order.

She catalogued the shipment of dragon’s bane, re-packaging it from the bulk size into smaller, retail packages. Usually she let Spike do this, however, lately, he’d been busy with the increased activity around the Hellmouth and Buffy.

So here she was.

Taking stock of her life.

It had been only a year ago that Xander had been down here with her, asking her to marry him. And just six months ago – she’d given him back his ring.

A week or so into the New Year, when everyone was still recuperating from the battle with
Angelus and the rest of the Aurelians, Xander had finally shown up. She hadn’t seen him since just after Christmas, when he refused to help them, choosing instead not to get involved and stay back, guarding Cordelia. He’d shown up, though, barely minutes into the battle around the house and been beaten by Angelus for his troubles. Afterward, though, he hadn’t stuck around at all, preferring to keep blaming Spike for all their problems instead of laying the blame where it belonged, squarely on Willow’s shoulders.

Even now, months after she’d broken off their engagement, that betrayal still stung. He’d chosen to watch over his ex-girlfriend – who needed no watching over, and turn his back on her and everyone else. Added with that was his continued defense of the redhead witch, and Anya felt like once again, she came dead last on his list of priorities.

What had really gotten her ire up had been his cavalier dismissal of their injuries. Giles had been limping around, Drusilla’s bite taking longer to heal than any of them had liked. He was in the office, while Anya had been behind the counter assisting a customer when Xander had wandered in, acting like no time had passed.

“Hey, Ahn.”

She glanced up, her eyes bulging out at the vision standing before her, looking like it hadn’t been nearly two weeks since she last laid eyes on him. “Hello, Xander.”

He must have picked up on her less than enthusiastic greeting, because he ducked his head. “How’s everything?”

Giles picked that moment to come out of the office, in search of a fresh cup of tea, and his limp had been very pronounced. “Hey, G-man, what’s with the limp?”

They both stared at him, disbelief clear in both sets of eyes. Xander’s gaze swung between the two, mild curiosity on his features. Anya stood up straight, a spark of anger lighting her eyes and she huffed out a breath. “He’s got stitches in his leg, and he really shouldn’t be up and walking around.”

For a moment, Giles wasn’t sure which of them she was more exasperated with, until she walked around the counter, her arm sliding around his waist. “Really, Giles, you should have asked me to get you some tea.”

Without missing a beat, Anya muttered to no one in particular, “Vampire bites aren’t something to be ignored.”

“You let a vampire get a chunk of you?”

The incredulous tone of Xander’s voice brought their attention back to him, and Giles remarked with a touch of anger, “I wasn’t exactly keen on the idea. But better my leg than my neck.”

“Who got a piece of you?”

“Drusilla.” Giles let Anya help him to a chair, and he marveled at how dense Xander was. “You were there, Xander, weren’t you?”

“Yeah.” The boy shoved his hands into his pockets, looking down at the floor tiles. “I don’t remember that though.”
Anya piped in at that, “You were too busy being unconscious . . . which was a nice change for Rupert, since that’s usually his job.”

The smile she bestowed upon Giles went a long way to soothing his suddenly wounded ego and he smiled up at her. She winked, then schooled her features to look at Xander again. “How come you’re here?”

“I miss you, Ahn.”

Her raised eyebrow and tapping foot were the only indications that she wasn’t exactly buying the contrite little-boy act Xander was trying for and Giles wished he hadn’t come out of the office when he had. The couple – if they even were that anymore – was headed for an explosion. He could feel Anya’s temper rising and the rapid staccato of her heel on the tiles indicated she was about to unleash the rough side of her tongue.

“It took you two weeks to realize you missed me? I haven’t seen you since the morning after we beat the Aurelians.” She folded her arms over her chest, squaring her feet. “What exactly do you miss, Xander?”

He looked around, hoping to find the answer written boldly somewhere mid-air. When nothing appeared to bail him out, Xander just repeated his earlier statement. “I missed you.”

“You missed me? Or the many orgasms we shared?”

Giles dropped his head down, hoping his own guilt wasn’t written clearly for Xander to see, and once again wishing he was very far removed from this conversation.

“Ahn!” Xander took a step toward her, but Anya moved out of his reach, taking two steps backward. “Can we talk?”

“We are talking, Xander.”

“Alone?”

She huffed out a breath, clearly thinking over his request. Anya looked down, seeing the dark red creeping along the neckline of Giles’ shirt, and she realized abruptly that it wasn’t embarrassment but anger that was brewing. Getting a boost of strength from the sitting man, Anya squared her shoulders and gave Xander his answer. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Because I really don’t have anything else to say to you, Xander. You left me alone for two weeks. Is that what I can expect if we get married? Whenever something you don’t like happens, will you leave me?”

The vein on Giles’ neck was pounding, and Anya could see his jaw tensing with the repressed desire to unleash some of his anger onto the poor unsuspecting boy who didn’t realize she was about to dump him. She stepped closer to Giles, letting the hem of her skirt brush over his arm. The small contact was enough.

“Anya, I wasn’t leaving you. I just needed time to think. And Cordy needed me.” The instant her
name was out of his mouth, Xander realized what he’d done.

“You always put everyone else ahead of me, Xander. Do you really love me at all? Or am I just a replacement for the real girl you can’t have?” Frustrated and angry tears sprung to her eyes and before Xander could try and explain himself, Anya was twisting the ring off her finger. “I don’t think I want this anymore. Take it back.”

“Anya, please, you don’t mean it. I love you.” Xander was pleading with her now, his hands raised up to refuse the ring. “C’mon, Ahn, let’s talk about this. You love me, you don’t wanna do this.”

“I’m not sure I love you, Xander. You don’t show me that you love me. You don’t look at me the way Spike looks at Buffy.”

Xander exploded into angry shouts at the mention of Spike loving Buffy, his face mottled and red, his vitriolic words spitting out incoherently. Anya cringed back while Giles struggled to get to his feet, to get between Xander and Anya. He was about to step forward, when a stern voice from the basement steps broke into his ranting.

“Girl told you it was over, whelp. You need to go, before you do somethin’ even more foolish.” Spike leaned against the door frame, arms crossed over his chest and his eyes sparking.

More sputtering words spewed from Xander, and Anya kept backing away, moving closer and closer to Spike. Giles finally stood, gently pushing Xander back. “Xander, it’s time to go. Please leave the shop.”

“I’m not leaving without Anya.”

“She’s not goin’ anywhere with you.” Spike straightened up, his eyes glittering. Anya slipped behind him and he nodded toward the door. “Slayer’s about to come in.”

The bell over the door rang and Buffy stepped inside. The cheery greeting died before she could utter it as she looked around at the angry faces. “What’s going on?”

Spike inclined his head, concentrating on her and Buffy’s eyes widened, then her eyes settled on Xander. Silence greeted her question, but then again, she didn’t really need an answer. Anya’s next words gave her more than a bit of insight into the situation anyway.

“I always come last with you anyway, so maybe you should just go.” Anya looked away from Xander and Buffy could see the tears pooling in her eyes.

“That’s not true, Ahn, you know I love you.” Xander tried again, pleading with her to talk to him. “We can talk about this alone.”

“No. I’ll never come first with you, so long as Buffy and Willow are around. I’m not your first choice, Xander, and I deserve to be.” She moved away, putting the counter between herself and Xander. “Take your ring and just go.”

That had been it.

Xander hadn’t tried, just dropped his head and gone. Anya figured it was because he couldn’t lie, not with Buffy and Giles – and Spike – standing there listening to them. She hadn’t seen much of
him at all in the intervening months and though she thought at first she’d miss him, that hadn’t been the case at all.

A slight smirk played about her lips, as Anya remembered just why she hadn’t been all mopey about breaking up with Xander.

The bell over the door tinkled and she hurried up the steps, to find the reason back with their dinner.

“Hello, dear.”

She blushed, then peeked around him to make sure they were alone. “Hello, Rupert.”
Book Three.

Chapter Two. My piece of heaven

To bring up a child in the way he should go, travel that way yourself once in a while.
    Josh Billings

The guys who fear becoming fathers don’t understand that fathering is not something perfect men do, but something that perfects the man. The end product of child raising is not the child but the parent.
    Frank Pittman, Man Enough

If you would keep your secret from an enemy, tell it not to a friend.
    Benjamin Franklin, Poor Richard's Almanac

The first rule in keeping secrets is nothing on paper.
    Thomas Powers

I know a place where I keep the best of things I’m not gonna wait for my piece of heaven. Where there's a road it leads to the promised land I just turn the key the key to the ...kingdom...
    Icehouse, The Kingdom, Davies & Kretschmer

Twilight was creeping over the streets of Sunnydale, making it much easier for Spike to forego sewer trips, which was a plus, because Buffy hadn’t been able to traverse the sewers in months. Since his sojourn through the Otherworld to find Connor, he’d been inexplicably able to withstand the sun’s rays for longer periods of time, a gift they attributed to time spent there. Lawson had been similarly affected, albeit not to the same extent.

They were quiet, each wrapped up in thoughts they weren’t quite prepared to share, though it was proving harder and harder to keep any secrets between them. Their latest battle was an on-going one, nothing more than squabbles over what to name the children. Buffy had been adamant that at least one was destined to be Kirsten – despite knowing that could have changed – and was determined to have that name. Spike was holding out hope for her sake, though a large part of him had the sinking feeling that the Kirsten that had defied time for their sakes wasn’t going to be the same child she carried in her belly. It saddened him, because in the short span of time he’d come to know her, she’d wormed her way into his heart and Spike very much wanted to watch her grow up,
to learn everything he could about her.

His hand snagged Buffy’s, lifting it to his lips as she turned to answer his unspoken question. “Does it really matter if she’s not exactly the same?”

Lifting unsurprised blue eyes, Spike met Buffy’s intent gaze. “Suppose not. ‘S still our little one, right?”

“Yup. Still ours.” Her smile lit up her whole face and she tugged him closer for a kiss. “First name or middle?”

A sly grin overtook his features and he leaned closer, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. He whispered softly into her ear and her smile got wider. A quick glance at his eyes confirmed to her he wasn’t teasing and she nodded her head.

“That’s settled then.”

Their foreheads rested against each other and he stroked the side of her neck, rubbing soft circles in her skin. “What time do we have to be at the witches’?”

“When we get there. We’re the only ones going.” Buffy’s head found its way to the crook of Spike’s neck and she settled further into his arms. “I’m tired.”

“I bet you are, sweets. Haven’t got too much longer. Sprogs are ready to get loose.” He laughed at her scrunched up features, knowing how he’d just expressed himself had amused her.

Her fist thumped his chest. “Our babies are not sprogs.”


“Not funny, Spike.”

There had been moments, though admittedly fleeting ones, when Buffy’s hormones and fears had gotten the best of her and she’d tearfully wondered if the babies would be healthy. And then there had been the hysterical moments when she’d wondered about the state of their souls, whether they had them, or whether that mattered because she already loved them. Spike and Wesley had both pointed out – one more forcefully than the other – that Connor had been born with a soul and his parents had, at the time of his birth, one soul between them. Not that had been much of a consolation, especially given the months immediately following Connor’s birth, but Spike’s constant assurances and her trust in him had eased some of the worries. Now she was just eager to have them arrive.

She ached in spots she’d never ached before. Her body wasn’t her own. Weird rumblings emerged from her belly at all hours. The muscles and skin of her belly were stretched far beyond what she thought was possible, and she constantly had to pee. Being pregnant? Not fun in the least.

What was fun, though, was the look in Spike’s eyes. She’d never seen anyone look at her with such unabashed adoration before. Such complete and total, overwhelming love.

He had that look right now.
Buffy smiled into his eyes, tears pooling in her own. “I love you, you know?”

His chuckle filled the darkening night air, echoing all around them. “Yeah, I know.” He nuzzled against her hair, his voice suddenly gruff with emotion. “Love you just as much.”

“You two are really gross, you know that?” Dawn’s voice was echoed by Connor’s involuntary laugh. “Can’t you, like, wait until you get home?”

Spike lifted his head, glaring at her. “Must you? We’re havin’ a moment here.”

An inelegant snort wafted from her. “Puhlease. Looks like you’ve already had a few of those.”

He tried glaring at her again, but the smile twitching at his lips just made her raise an eyebrow and cross her arms over her chest. “Oh, like you haven’t? You guys have more ‘moments’ than any other couple in history.” Air quotes surrounded the word and Spike couldn’t hold back any more.

Laughter filled the night and he broke away from Buffy. “What’s the matter, platelet? Can’t stand to see us snoggin’?”

“You know, that question would have some sort of meaning if you guys didn’t snog at every opportunity.” Dawn hadn’t changed her stance, though Connor had shifted a bit, his eyes avoiding them.

“So I guess we do bother you.” Buffy’s voice was soft, and even Connor could sense the impending hormonal outburst.

Dawn quickly tried back-tracking. “No, that’s not what I meant and you know it. I’m just teasing.” Her hands raised in an effort to stem the upcoming rant. “Really, I’m only teasing.”

As quickly as it threatened, hurricane Buffy eased down into tropical storm. Spike pulled her close to his side, the low rumble of his voice going a long way to soothing the flare of her temper. Once she was calm again, he nudged her forward, letting the two teens follow behind them. “You two gonna be okay for a bit by yourselves?”

Before answering the two teens shared a look. “Yeah, why?”

“Got someplace to go. We’ll be back later, and then we’ll be goin’ on patrol.” Speaking over his shoulder, Spike directed his comments to Connor, who had been the one to ask the question.

“We’ll be fine. There’s leftover pizza and other stuff. We’re good.” Dawn shared a glance with the other teen, shrugging her shoulders to indicate she had no idea what was going on.

“Right then, we’ll see you later.” Spike led Buffy off to their right, heading off closer toward the college campus, leaving them with a final admonishment. “Don’t burn down the bloody house.”

The two teens shared a final look and headed home.
“Sir?”

With the sound of the tentative question, Quentin Travers, current Chairman of the Council of Watchers, looked up from the copious amount of paperwork covering his desk. It was nearing midnight and he was already tired.

“Yes, Mr. Nicholson?”

“The latest report from Sunnydale is in.”

When Nicholson hesitated in the doorway, Travers looked up again. “I assume from your stance there is more.”

“Yes, sir. Apparently the Seers have picked up a new Slayer.” Nicholson looked faintly worried, though it wouldn’t necessarily be evident to anyone other than his superior.

“Do we have a tape to accompany the written report from Sunnydale?” Travers finally laid down the pen he was using to write. When Nicholson gave him an emphatic affirmative nod, he continued, “Have it set up in the screening room. I’ll be there shortly.”

As Nicholson turned to leave, Travers called out softly, “And Nicholson, have a report on the new Slayer by the time the video is finished.”

Having long since given up on trusting in Rupert Giles, Travers had enlisted the use of informants located both in Sunnydale and in Los Angeles, where the souled vampire had been living. One of his informants had been especially inventive, placing video surveillance cameras in and around certain locations, including the shop owned by Giles and the Summers residence. Though the cameras inside the Summers’ residence had been disabled for months, he’d hoped footage from the ridiculously named Magic Box and other spots would prove helpful. However, it had been some time since a video report had been filed. Only written reports had arrived in the last four months.

Coupled with the announcement from the Seers, Quentin had a feeling this report would give him the ammunition needed to cease the payments Giles had blackmailed out of him the previous October. Paying a slayer for her services irked him no end, but at the time, the Council had no other recourse but to accede to the former Watcher’s demands. Faith Lehane’s incarceration left the world dangerously vulnerable. The reanimation – or resurrection – of Buffy Summers had left Travers and the Council with little choice but to capitulate.

Travers had done so grudgingly, with the tacit hope that he could somehow extricate the Council from the agreement at the earliest opportunity. With luck and a bit of creative thinking, this news could very well be the start of that process.

His fatigue, he realized, had flown out the door behind Nicholson. Quentin Travers fought the self-satisfied smirk and schooled his features to impassivity.

Time to alleviate one financial burden from the Council.

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Sweat was poring from his body, making the dark fatigues stick to his skin. In spite of the hour –
twenty hundred hours and some change – the air was heavy and damp, and the only breeze had
died when the sun had sunk beneath the horizon some forty-five minutes earlier. Once upon a
time, he’d thought the heat of southern California was stifling, draining him of all strength and will
to move. Southern California had nothing on the jungles of Belize and the Amazon basin.

In the year plus since he’d left Sunnydale and the United States behind, Riley Finn had learned a
new definition of sweaty. He’d also learned what it was like to really go without sleep, follow
orders and dedicate himself to a cause.

Back then, he’d thought he found the cause, something and someone worth fighting for. He
realized now that what he thought was love wasn’t. Didn’t mean it had been easy walking away,
and some days he was even willing to admit to himself that he’d been a fool and he’d thrown away
– with both hands – the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Riley dumped the contents of his canteen over his head, hoping for some relief from the heat. It
didn’t appear his thoughts were going to change course, though, when his eyes found the only
picture he still had of that time in Sunnydale. Why he still carried it he wasn’t exactly sure, but it
was still there, in his gear. Information had been spotty, a few notes and letters making it to their
base camp in Belize every couple of months.

The last information he’d gotten from Sunnydale had been a letter from Xander. The date and
postmark were from sometime last August and the content hadn’t helped his guilt at all. Buffy had
died fighting a hell-god, trying to protect Dawn. At the time, he’d sat there with the letter in his
hand, numb and unable to shed any tears. The urge to go find a local vampire had been something
he’d had to fight with every fiber of his being. Riley knew he should have stayed in Sunnydale.
Knew at the time he’d been making a mistake though he hadn’t been able to see any way to stay.

“Finn?”

He looked up to find Major Ellis standing at his tent flap, a single piece of paper in his hand.

“Sir?”

“Initiative HQ intercepted an interesting conversation from a former cover operation in California.”

Riley glanced down at the paper, half expecting it to burst into flames or something equally
dangerous. “What was the conversation, sir?”

“This is a direct quote, but I’ll skip the chatter from the cover operation. ‘I’m looking for Riley
Finn. He used to work there about two years ago. Do you have a contact number for him now?
Could you please just tell him Buffy Summers is looking for him and it’s about the chip. He’ll
We’ll get someone else to take care of it.’ That’s all there was, the connection was terminated after
that.”

No, it couldn’t be her. Xander’s letter said she was dead. Riley stared at Major Ellis, not really
seeing him. “Could I see the transcript, sir?”

Without a word Ellis handed it over, his eyes watching Riley for any reaction other than the tensing
of his jaw. Ellis had a sinking feeling Finn was about to ask for a platoon to accompany him to
Sunnydale, with a medical officer in tow.
As he was reading the transcript for the third time, Riley could practically hear Buffy’s voice delivering the lines as she rambled on, trying to get information to him. On the third pass, Riley realized exactly what she was asking. *She wants intel on the chip for that fucking vampire?!

“Permission to secure transport to Sunnydale, sir, with a small contingent of personnel and a medical officer?”

Ellis thought about it for a moment, though his mind was already made up. “For what purpose, Finn?”

“To secure and recapture an escaped hostile sub-terran.” He paused, then looked at the missive in his hand. “And eliminate same.”

“How many men will you need?” Ellis held his hand out for the paper.

“No more than six, sir, with the medical officer as an addition.” Riley turned his back on Ellis, grabbing his duffel bag out from under his bunk. Quickly packing, he didn’t even wait for the Major’s approval. “We should be in and out in under seven days. I know exactly where to find the sub-tee, and how to capture him.”

“You have ten days, Finn. No more. If the mission isn’t accomplished by that time you are to abort and return to base. Immediately.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Have your requisition papers in my tent before you leave.” Ellis turned to go, then hesitated. “Finn? Keep your emotions out of it.”

“Will do.”

*Ten days.* Ellis had given him ten days to figure out what the hell was going on in Sunnydale; why Xander had lied to him about Buffy and, best of all get rid of Spike.

Calling out for Graham, Riley made a list of who would be best for the trip. This was going to be a cakewalk.

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The house, one of the oldest in Sunnydale, was huge. Buffy loved it on first sight. To Spike, it looked remarkably like the drawings from his childhood storybooks of what a witch’s house should look like. It was green with a darker green trim, a round tower with gabled roofs and large rooms, all wood floors. Three stories of Victorian architecture in the middle of Sunnydale. In fact, the first time they’d gone, he’d remarked, “Watch out for ovens and trolls, love.”

At her blank look, he’d shaken his head and simply said, “Hansel and Gretel, you daft woman.”

“They almost got me burned as a witch! Those two were demons, not little kids. My mom and Willow’s went crazy.” When his eyebrow rose in question, she kept going, “They really were demons. Got the whole town riled up and . . . and, people were going crazy. Everyone ignores
vampires and other big bads, but these two? Sheesh. They’re the reason why we have a pet rat.”

“We have a pet rat?”

“Well, really, she belongs to Willow but, since Willow’s gone and Tara’s living in the house, I guess Amy belongs to her.” Buffy had pondered this for a moment before continuing. “I guess we should get Tara to see if she can turn Amy back into a girl.”

“We have a rat that should be a girl?” He’d shaken his head again, then helped her get up the stairs. “Why does this not surprise me? And when did all this happen?”

“Oh, while you were gone and Drusilla was dumping you for a chaos demon.” She laughed at him. “I guess that was a good time for everyone.”

“Laugh it up, princess. Have you seen one of those?” He shuddered, then muttered under his breath about daft women and bratty bints.

Her giggles had been worth the smack and they’d been laughing when they knocked on the door.

The woman who answered had been short, round, and stunningly beautiful. “Hello, there. You’re Buffy and Spike. Welcome to Aberfa.” She stepped away from the door, ushering them inside. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

Lavender, beeswax, smoky pine, and some other scents Spike couldn’t readily pick out and identify greeted them as they stepped into the door. “Relax, this house is so heavily warded, anything with evil intent will just . . . bounce off. You’re safe.”

She shook their hands, and led them from the hallway, into the rounded sitting room. “I’m Kait. Grace’ll be right with you.”

And that had been their introduction to the women of Aberfa.

Buffy had finally confessed her fear of hospital stays to both Spike and Tara, who promised to do everything they could to allow her to have the babies at home. Dr. Thomas was still monitoring her progress, but he’d agreed that because of who she was and her excellent health, she could attempt the home birth.

So for the last two weeks, they’d been spending a couple of hours at Aberfa, learning everything they would need to know for the home birth. Tonight’s class was about breathing techniques, which Spike wasn’t looking forward to at all. He wasn’t sure how much assistance he was going to be able to provide, since his breathing was anything but regular, though Grace kept insisting he was going to be fine.

Her reassurances that the breathing was more about concentration than the actual act of breathing had helped a bit, though he wasn’t entirely convinced. He was doing it for Buffy, and he was willing to try as long as she was.

The whole idea of babies and being there while she delivered them had him worried. Spike was half convinced he wasn’t going to be able to control himself if complications arose, nor was he certain that he’d be able to keep himself from going into game-face at the first sign of her blood.

Before he realized it, he and Buffy were on the floor in the sitting room, a soft blue comforter
beneath them, with large feather pillows piled haphazardly on the floor. Grace, who was everything Kait wasn’t, stood at the edge of the comforter, her soft, sweet voice telling them firmly to get comfortable.

“Okay, you two, when I say comfortable, I mean shoes off, I mean duster and everything else that’s gonna get in the way – off.” Grace looked down from her considerable height and long nose at the two of them. “Spike, take off the damn boots.”

Spike glanced up and her and catching the no-nonsense look in her dark blue eyes, started undoing his laces.

“Buffy, honey, c’mere so I can help you.” Grace held out her chocolate-colored hand, balancing Buffy as she stepped over Spike’s hunched form. “I thought I told you two to wear comfy clothes? Don’t either of you listen?”

When Buffy started to protest, Grace held up a hand and yelled, “Kait! Get me the sweats!”

She faced Buffy, wagging a finger at her. “Next time I tell you something, you listen. A sundress would’ve been better.” Grace shook her head and pointed Buffy toward the bathroom. “Go. And take off the damn bra, too.”

Spike was muttering softly, complaining about pushy witches and dominant women, when Grace whirled on him. “Look, buster, you wanna help your woman or not?”

“You know I wanna help. ‘S why I’m here, isn’t it?”

“Right. Just so you remember this – she isn’t gonna be giving birth in jeans and a tee-shirt. She’s gonna be bare-assed naked, sweating and shaking and scared outta her mind. So you need to remember she’s got to be comfortable and trust that you can handle this. Get your damned self together and pay attention.”

“Where did you say you were from?”

The question took Grace completely by surprise and she grinned at him. “I’m from New York. Where did you think?”

“Should’ve known. Pushiest bints in the world, an’ you lead the pack.” Spike tossed his boots aside, then dropped the duster and his tee-shirt over them. When he caught her shaking her head at his actions, he said, “You want me all comfortable-like, right?”

Grace was eyeing him, genuinely appreciating the view when Buffy walked back into the room. “You are a fine looking man, Spike, too bad I’m not interested.”

“Good thing, coz he’s so taken.” Buffy glared at Grace, green sparks lighting her eyes.

Grace laughed, throwing back her head and setting the loose curls bouncing. “And this is why I’m not interested. You’d kick my ass from here to Sunday.”

Spike got to his feet, crossing the distance to where Buffy stood waiting. “No offense, Gracie, but I’ve only got eyes for one girl.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” She pointed to the comforter. “Spike, help Buffy sit down in the middle of
the comforter, then you get right behind her.” As they followed her instructions, Spike brushed a hand across her belly, then reached for her arm.

“Okay, slide between his legs and rest your back up against his chest. It’s okay to lean into him, he’s strong, he can support all of you.” Grace leaned down, correcting Spike’s positioning, then said, “Good. Now, Spike, take your nice hands and rub them up and down Buffy’s beautiful belly. Buffy, sweetie, deep, steady breathing.”

Grace was circling around them, her bare feet making no noise on the hardwood floor just outside the edges of the comforter. “Talk to her, let her know you’re right there with her.”

“Relax, kitten, ‘ve got you.” His hand was rubbing circular patterns on the soft cotton of her tee-shirt, which happened to be one of his, but he could still feel the tension in her back and sides. “C’mon, baby, jus’ breathe.”

“Keep talking, Spike. Buffy, you need to focus on his voice and forget that I’m in the room.” Grace watched them for a moment, hoping Buffy would relax further.

“It’s all right, kitten, ‘m right here behind you. ‘M the one holding you safe. Lean into me, baby.” Buffy looked up at him over her shoulder and she caught the edge of his smile. “See? Jus’ you an’ me.” His voice dropped to a deep, husky whisper for her ears only. “I love you, Buffy.”

Every single time he said those words, she melted, and this time was no different. Buffy felt all the muscles in her body ease and her weight sank onto Spike’s chest. “That’s, it, sweetheart, lean on me.”

The circled patterns on her belly widened, then lengthened, sweeping from just beneath her breasts, up and over the swell of her belly. Every third loop or so, his hand would pause atop her bellybutton, his thumb brushing over it lightly. Spike kept up the litany of comforting, supportive words, his considerable attention focused on the woman in his arms and the three strong heartbeats echoing in his ear.

His breathing naturally echoed hers, and as they were settling into a good, strong pattern, Grace softly started speaking. “Okay now, focus on his touch, his strong body supporting you. Deepen those breaths.”

This time, neither of them outwardly reacted to Grace’s voice, though their breathing did deepen. Spike’s hand was doing wonderful things to her muscles and he loosely griped her hip with his other hand, fingers flexing and digging into her in time with their breathing. Buffy’s legs drew up and Spike’s automatically mimicked her position.

Grace was offering soft encouragement from the sidelines, letting them weave themselves into an almost trance-like state. If they could learn how to achieve this on their own, without her assistance, it would help them, and not just during the childbirthing process. Their connection was so clear to her, their essences and auras combining perfectly together, each half balancing the other. She’d rarely seen this kind of meshing in humans and finding it with these two was a joy and a blessing. The air around them crackled with life – with energy – and if they could learn to draw on that, nothing would stand in their way.

When Tara had come to them with the idea of herself acting as their midwife, Grace had been a bit reluctant, without even knowing their whole story. All Tara had told her was that two dear friends of hers wanted a home birth. Knowing the instant he’d crossed the threshold that Spike was a
vampire had Grace worried and concerned. It wasn’t unusual for a vampire to have a pregnant
slave or blood donor – what was unusual was their relationship. They had something real, vibrant
and potent, and well beyond her reckoning.

She knew, now, that she was witnessing history changing.

Her meditations had revealed the totally unexpected, the totally unplanned and the wholly
miraculous.

Those babies waiting to be born were theirs.

The children of a vampire and a slayer.

With a shake, Grace came back to herself, watching the two supernatural blondes breathing
steadily in tandem, while Spike kept up a constant stream of soothing chatter. Trying not to disrupt
too much, Grace spoke. “Okay now, I want you to shift positions and face each other.”

Buffy flowed out of Spike’s embrace, gracefully moving to sit opposite him. “Whatever way is
most comfortable. If you wanna sit cross-legged do it. If it’s easier with your legs draped over his,
that’s good too.”

Half a second later, Grace realized her own mistake. The connection between Buffy and Spike
flared, causing every hair on her body to stand on end. The air snapped and hummed, intensifying
with the touch of his hands on hers. Her own body tightened in response and Grace figured she
had an outside chance of getting out of the room before they exploded into each other. She’d never
actually seen a man respond so visibly before – nor his partner so in tune that she seemed to absorb
his arousal and magnify it in return.

Spike reached for Buffy’s hands, pulling her closer into his embrace. The world had receded to
just the two of them, and he wasn’t even aware of his surroundings. Sounds rumbled from his
chest, but he didn’t know if they were real words or just mere growls of arousal. It didn’t matter,
though, because Buffy was responding, her soft pliant body arching into his, her legs curling over
his hips, trying to pull them closer together.

Neither of them heard the pocket door close and lock behind Grace’s retreating form.

“You’re beautiful.” Spike skimmed his hands beneath his black shirt, lifting it from Buffy’s body.
“So fuckin’ beautiful.”

“Spike?” Buffy raised herself up, watching as his lips trailed over the tops of her breasts, his
fingers flexing into her ass. “Need you, Spike, need you now.”

“Gotta get you outta this. Lift up.” One handed, he held her up and together they pushed, pulled,
and stripped off the borrowed sweatpants, leaving Buffy clad in only her panties. Spike laid her
down on the soft blue cotton, his eyes drinking in her gravid state. “You fuckin’ glow. So bright.”

His calloused hand swept over her soft skin, fingers sliding beneath the panties. “Take ‘em off.”

“You do it.” He barely waited for her approval for they were down around her hips before she
finished speaking.

Spike stripped out of his jeans, just stepping out them then dropping down to lean over Buffy.
Carefully keeping his weight off her, he laid soft, nipping kisses all over her belly. “Sit up, sweetheart.”

Sliding into the position suggested earlier by Grace, Buffy draped her legs over Spike’s, her core lining up with his solid erection. “Spike. . .”

“I know, kitten.” He kissed her deeply, tongues battling, then pulled back and stared into her eyes. “You ready for me?”

“Ah huh. Very.” She nipped at him, her teeth pulling on his lips. “Need you now. No teasing.”

“No teasin’.” Lifting her up with his palms firmly under her rounded ass, Spike eased her down onto his cock. “Better now?”

“Mmmhmmm.” Buffy rocked back and forth, bumping her clit hard against his body, aching for more friction. A low-pitched whine started in her throat, increasing in volume as he dropped away from her, his back flush against the floor. His left hand snaked between them, finding her clit with unerring precision. He flicked at it, stopping only when she hesitated in her movements.

Husky and deep, his voice reached into her, notching her need higher. “C’mon, baby, squeeze me.” Flicking her clit, he arched up into her, emphasizing his words. “Tha’s it, jus’ like that.”

Bearing down, Buffy flexed her vaginal muscles, squeezing hard. “Spike. . . gotta. . .”

“I know, baby. Do it.” He bucked up, lifting them both, his thumb pressing hard on her clit. Her whole body tensed, poised on the edge of ecstasy, her inner walls fluttering around his thick cock. The whine she’d been fighting erupted into a hissed breathless scream as Spike pitched his hips upward, his own body strung taut.

Spike caught her slumping body, easing her down onto the comforter. “Not done with you yet, kitten.”

A husky laugh shook her entire body and she whined again when he slipped from her pussy. “Figured that.”

“Here.” He grabbed two of the big body pillows, stuffing them under her prone form. “Up you go.”

His cool fingers traced the strong muscles of her back as she curled over the pillows. “Oooh. . . do it again.”

Poised behind her, Spike smoothed his hands up around her body, his lips following the path of his fingers. “How’s that? Better? Want more?”

He swept her hair back, letting it hang over one shoulder, then pulled her closer to him and nuzzled into her nape. Supporting her weight on his spread thighs, Spike held her close with one hand, while the other dipped into her steaming pussy. “So wet an’ warm.”

Buffy wriggled, his voice against the back of her neck sending icy hot shivers down her back and straight to her core. Her hand closed around his wrist, holding his fingers in her depths. Her breathing was shallow, panting, and she could barely gasp out, “You said no teasing.”
“Not teasin’. ‘M enjoyin’.”

She whined out his name and his answering chuckle surged through her nerves. Buffy’s body twitched, arching into his hand. Spike eased her forward, letting her body fall gently onto the bunched pillows. “No more playin’.”

He thrust into her depths, holding her steady with one hand. Spike built up speed slowly, keeping a steady pace, her condition always in the back of his mind. Buffy, though, had other ideas.

“Spike.” She pushed back against him, forcing him in deeper. “You promised.”

He held still, letting her inner muscles ripple up and down his turgid length. Buffy concentrated, squeezing harder and a low growl was forced from him. “Tha’s it. ‘M gonna. . .”

Suiting actions to words, Spike dug his fingers into her sides, setting a brutal pace. Buffy flexed around him, riding out the storm she’d initiated, gasping for air as a gut-wrenching climax started sweeping through her. Her head dropped down, and her entire body shook, triggering his orgasm. He curled over her back, completely spent. Buffy’s legs gave out and she rolled sideways, shaking with the after-shocks.

Spike kissed her shoulders, his arms holding her tight. Their breathing settled into something resembling normal respiration and he barely managed to pant out, “Think that bint’ll be happy with our breathing now, kitten?”

Her only answer was a slap and a husky giggle.

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The video was actually a computer DVD disk, and Nicholson had procured a projection screen, enabling Travers to see without having to sit in front of a computer screen. He and three other senior staff members were in the makeshift screening room, waiting for Nicholson to get the disk working. His patience was waning when noise flooded the room and the screen lightened to show a daylight shot of the area just in front of the Summers’ residence. Usual background noises were filtered out and they could make out the faint sound of voices from inside the partially opened front door.

A hand appeared, opening the door further and Dawn Summers emerged, with another teen, a male, right on her heels. They proceeded down the walk, innocuous and inane chatter occupying their attention. The door started closing, then abruptly opened again. Buffy peeked her head out, calling the two back. Her form was obscured by shadows, although something about her appearance seemed a bit off to Travers’ trained eye.

It wasn’t until she stepped out onto the porch that the reason for her altered state became evident.

Buffy Summers was pregnant.

Beside him, the other senior staffers snapped to attention, all eyes riveted to the screen. “Nicholson?”

“Yes, sir?”
“Why wasn’t this information disseminated in the written reports from Sunnydale?”

His gulp was audible, even over the recorded conversation. “Unknown, sir.”

“Unknown?” Travers turned his head to stare at the obviously flustered underling. “It had better become known before dawn.”

“Travers?”

“What?”

Miriam Eldridge, the only female senior staffer present, was the only one brave enough to interrupt him. “When was the last report from Rupert Giles received?”

Shuffling through papers in his hands, Travers searched for the information. “February.”

“It is now nearly June. Is it possible he was unaware of her condition?”

“He made no mention of it. So the possibility does exist.”

Emboldened by Miriam’s questioning, Nigel Smythe-Hynde interjected, “And we are certain the vampire Angel was eliminated in late December?”

“Independent corroboration of that information was received from more than one source, so yes, we can be certain he was eliminated.” Travers rose from his chair, ignoring the video playing on the big screen. “Your point, Nigel?”

“My point, Quentin, is that we had better ascertain the paternal origins of this pregnancy before it is too late.”

Travers looked like he’d swallowed something very bitter. “Are you implying that Miss Summers had relations with Angel after her return?”

Before anyone had a chance to answer him, the last senior staffer spoke. “I sincerely doubt Miss Summers had an opportunity for a tryst with Angelus.” Jonathan Burton held up an elegant hand, forestalling any interruptions from the others. “However, I do believe our answer was just revealed.”

He directed their attention back to the video.

There, standing in the shadows on the porch, his arms wrapped around Buffy, was the unmistakable figure of William the Bloody.

The papers Travers had been holding fluttered to the floor.
Never in the expected manner

Book Three.

Chapter Three. Never in the expected manner

Surprise, the stuff that news is made of.
  William E Giles, National Observer, 19 Oct 64

Life is a series of surprises,  
and would not be worth taking or keeping,  
if it were not.
God delights to isolate us every day,  
and hide from us the past and the future.
  Ralph Waldo Emerson, Experience, Essays, Second Series (1844)

It is an endless procession of surprises.  
The expected rarely occurs and  
ever in the expected manner.
  Vernon A Walters, On UN social circuit, 4 Oct 85

A story to me means a plot where there is some surprise  
Because that is how life is—full of surprises.
  Isaac Bashevis Singer, NY Times 26 Nov 78

Well, that's the thing about life,  
is the surprises,  
the little things that sneak up on you and grab hold of you.
  George, Father of the Bride (1991)

The last six months hadn’t been easy, the punishment imposed by the Gods forcing her to learn how to function without the ability to perform magic at her fingertips. Daily, Willow cursed and railed against her fate, more often than not heaping the blame for her isolation on shoulders not her own. She alternated between blaming Giles and Buffy, but mostly her ire focused completely on the vampire she continued to believe had usurped her position in Buffy’s life.

For the first few weeks, Willow had fruitlessly researched every spell, every incantation, every meditation she could locate in an effort to recapture what she’d lost. And every single time she’d tried one, everything had fizzled. Candles wouldn’t light, incense didn’t burn, protection circles refused to close, nothing worked. Nothing. The only flicker of response had come in the course of meditating, though even now, nearly six months later, she shied away from even thinking about another attempt.

She’d been deep inside a trance, reality suspended around her when she’d felt the clear hand of
Other ripping through the veils of time and space. That hand hadn’t been of the helping kind. Instead, it had manifested in shards of pounding, bone-numbing pain, strong enough to wrench through the trance and leave her panting for air. A second attempt two days following the first, left her a quivering mass of pain, blood dripping from her nose and a constant buzzing in her ears that had taken nearly two weeks to go away.

It was her third attempt that had truly scared her.

Just before the end of January, the night of the full moon, Willow had attempted the deep trance. As a precaution, instead of using Wiccan symbols of protection, she’d relied on the symbols of her childhood, the ones that still, despite her foray into the arcane, gave her a sense of peace. A series of mezuzahs ranged about her bedroom, on each side of her door and windows, and she clutched another in her left hand, while in her right she held her grandmother’s Star of David pendant. Willow had also decided to use the Hebrew prayers she’d learned as a child, the few she remembered.

Everything had been going well, much better than she’d expected, given her two previous attempts. Willow had a guarded moment of optimism, hope flaring inside her and she allowed herself to sink further into the trance. The success buoyed her spirits and Willow grinned, believing she’d discovered a way to circumvent her punishment.

Until the hand of Other reached out again.

One moment she was basking in the glow of peaceful meditation and the next. . . . The next, she was gasping for air through a throat that was slowly closing, ghostly, inanimate fingers tightening in a vice grip around her skin. Her arms were stuck at her sides, her entire body held immobile, control over herself gone. Whip thin tendrils of icy pain snapped through her body, flaying her muscles. Pulsing heat traveled through her blood, creating tiny rivers of pain meandering through her system. Laughter sounded in her ears, harsh and biting, pitched low and threaded with dark retribution. The laughter devolved slowly into words and Willow fought renewed tears.

"Warned you were, Red Willow."

A second voice, this one higher and sounding more smug than angry, spoke over the repeated phrase. “No more chances. Try again and you forfeit all.”

The voices melded together as the pain increased and Willow was unable to stop the tremors shaking her entire body. Her eyes rolled back, drool pooled under her head and her last thought wasn’t anything more coherent than “Ow.”

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The sun was barely breaking the horizon when the Army transport jet circled for landing over the runway of Sunnydale Airport. Riley refused to look at any of the other personnel with him, especially avoiding Graham’s eyes. He knew without having to be told what the other man’s opinion of this mission was. However, he also knew it wouldn’t change Graham’s willingness to accompany him. Whether Graham thought he was there to cover Riley’s ass or for some other reason, Riley almost didn’t care.

From the air, Sunnydale looked like every other small suburban city, houses all lined up on neat
little streets, lawns manicured and orderly. None of the turmoil beneath the earth showed aside from the inordinate number of cemeteries. He was able to pick out the school, and from there it was easy for him to get his bearings.

“We need to secure housing first.”

Graham’s voice sounded in everyone’s earpieces and Riley pointed at Rodriguez, one of the men he’d been working with closely over the last few months. Responding to the next, unspoken question, Riley issued orders. “Graham and I will do recon, the rest of you off load the supplies into the vehicles waiting. Do not, I repeat, do not engage any of the locals unless absolutely imperative.”

When Simms, otherwise known as Sloth, started to speak, Riley motioned him to silence, then continued. “This town is full of hostile sub-terrestrials. Some of them are able to pass as humans without scanners. Be on alert at all times, until we get the equipment up and functioning. Daylight is not a hindrance to those who can pass as humans. Eyes and ears, men.”

That warning was sufficient for all of them and even Sloth kept his mouth shut. Gebhardt, the medical doctor, shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and Riley said, “I’ll answer all questions at the debriefing, until then, follow normal protocol for setting up a satellite camp.”

“With a few more amenities.” Graham’s mutter caused low laughter among the others, and Sloth quipped, “Air conditioning and cable? Sure beats the hell out of the jungle.”

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In the months since Anya had dumped him, Xander had drowned his sorrows, alternating between drinking too much and not drinking at all. Most of his free time was spent with Cordelia, just sitting in her hospital room. Half the time no words were exchanged between them, since Cordy very rarely spoke to anyone and he was reluctant to fill the silence with idle chatter. He’d tried a couple of times, but she’d never even reacted, so he’d long since given up.

Physically, she’d healed. All the bruises and cuts were gone, only faint scars showing on her still pale skin. Xander wondered, though, if Cordy would ever recover.

Whatever torture Angel had inflicted on her had damaged her. She was not anywhere near recovered from the emotional pain. She might never be.

Fred and Gunn had stopped visiting every day, finally returning to Los Angeles and only showing up once a week or so, whenever Gunn could get away for the drive. Xander looked forward to those days, knowing someone would at least be willing to talk to him. He’d stopped going to the Magic Box – seeing Anya happy and laughing, sharing jokes with Giles and Spike – and hadn’t spoken to any of the others.

Oddly enough, he hadn’t sought out Willow either. His once unswerving loyalty to the redhead had been shaken to the core by her actions around Christmas. Xander had never expected Willow to act that way, to be willing to kill Dawn to fix everything. He hadn’t believed it, until Dawn had told him exactly what Willow’s intentions had been that night and how she’d nearly killed Connor.
That had been the last time he’d set foot in the Magic Box.

Tara and Buffy had both been in the shop, and once Dawn had started yelling at Xander, they’d intervened. Both blondes had been willing to forgive him his part in what happened, telling him they didn’t blame him at all, and he’d found some measure of peace in that. Dawn and Anya hadn’t though, and it was their emotions Xander found himself focusing on. He didn’t blame either of them. He’d let them both down – failing miserably as a man – just rolling over and believing Willow instead of anyone else.

Xander had walked away from them after that.

Only now, his last refuge was being taken away from him. After almost six months in both the hospital and the rehabilitation center, Cordelia was finally being released and she’d been emphatic in her refusal to stay in Sunnydale. She wouldn’t accept his offer of hospitality and instead insisted he take her to Los Angeles. They were going to move her stuff out of her apartment and into a place owned by a friend of hers – someone she called Lorne.

He was taking the next couple of days off, to help Cordelia and maybe see if he could figure out his own future.

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Feeling like she’d been on a three-day bender instead of knocked out cold by anesthesia, Faith groaned into the stillness of her hospital room and tried to roll over onto her side. The pull of stitches and the dull ache around her abdomen had her rethinking that and she groaned a second time, adding a vicious grumble to the mix. Realizing quickly she wasn’t going to find a comfortable position flat on her back, she fumbled about for the bed controls and flicked them irritably.

“It’s not the bed’s fault, you know.” The dark voice held a thread of amusement, which just aggravated her further.

“You could show a little sympathy.” Faith moved her head, facing the deeper shadows in the still dark room. “I’m still recovering.”

“Yeah. Sure. Has that vaunted Slayer healing kicked in yet?” The amusement became an outright chuckle and in response Faith pulled the pillow out from beneath her head and tossed it at the voice.

“Don’t be a prick.”

Jenner stepped out of the shadows, her pillow clutched in one hand. “Oh, baby, you know you love it.” When she didn’t react he moved closer to the bed, offering the pillow. “So how are you feeling?”

She huffed out a breath. “I’m okay. Sore mostly.”

Faith tried looking out the window only to realize the blinds were down completely, blocking any view of the outside. “How late is it? Can we blow this taco stand?”
“It’s early enough. If you really are ready to leave we could go.”

“Oh, I’m so ready.”

Without waiting another moment, Jenner leaned down, scooping her up in his strong arms. Two quick steps had him at the doorway to her room and within moments, they’d escaped from the hospital.

For the tenth morning in a row, Tara woke up feeling out of sorts and under the weather.

And alone.

Lately, Oz had been spending more and more time in the house at Revello, reluctant to leave the women alone while Spike took Connor out on patrol. Buffy was unable to fight, the bulk of the late stages of her pregnancy making it impossible for her to even make the attempt. And every single night he’d fallen asleep, usually in her bed.

The hormonal changes, coupled with Buffy’s strength were making it difficult for anyone but Spike to try and keep her calm. She alternated between a hair-trigger temper and tears, which had everyone in the house – actually every one of them – walking on eggshells.

Tara groaned softly in her pillow, only to be hit with a wave of nausea that had her bolting from the bed. She raced up the stairs to the bathroom, hoping she didn’t encounter any obstacles along the way and didn’t even notice Spike standing in the kitchen, watching her race through the rooms. Her scent flooded the kitchen, and his nostrils flared as he inhaled deeply. The glass in his hands slipped, dropping down on to the counter, its contents sluggishly moving over the counter top.

"No fuckin’ way!"

He moved toward the bathroom, the unmistakable sounds of retching clear to his sensitive ears. "Glinda?"

Wesley was just waking up, his brain already engaged in listing his tasks for the day when his cell phone started ringing. Deciding against letting it go to voicemail, he reached for it, overcompensating for his still lethargic limbs and instead of finding it, he got tangled up in his sheets, and nearly fell off the bed.

By the third ring, he gave up reaching for it and just disentangled his legs. It took him longer than usual, more than likely because of his rush to get to the phone. Once he had it in hand, Wesley angrily punched in the code for voicemail, holding it to his ear.
Leslie McKeown’s voice sounded softly agitated and he had to listen twice to the Scot’s urgent tones before he completely understood the entire message. After the second listen, Wesley completely understood the stress.

“A new girl’s been called. Council already has the bird. They’re briefing her now, with intentions to send her and a wetworks team to your area. There’s video of the Slayer and the cat’s well out of the bag. I’ll ring you before Saturday with more.”

Shutting off the phone, Wesley dropped back onto his bed. He thought over the reasons why they’d reached the decision they had, and how it was really the only safe course of action. The California penal system had placed Faith on their most wanted list after her escape from jail, and had begun clumsy surveillance on the Summers residence, interviewing neighbors and flashing Faith’s picture around. Thankfully, at the time, she and Jenner had been in England, however, it didn’t negate the danger to her, nor to those still living in California.

If the California authorities felt Faith was a big enough flight risk – since Mexico wasn’t that far away – it was only a phone call to the Federal authorities and Faith would then be placed on international wanted lists. A situation they could not allow. It would call unnecessary attention to everyone in Sunnydale, leaving both Buffy and Spike, and not to mention Dawn and Connor in a very, very precarious position. There stood a very real threat of custody issues being raised, which neither teen could afford. Without a valid explanation for Connor’s existence and coupled with the already difficult social worker that had been overseeing Dawn’s case, the Summers household wouldn’t withstand the scrutiny.

The whole thing had been Faith’s idea – and she’d had the logical arguments to sway all of them. Not that there had been much objection. Oddly enough, the one most vocal had been Spike. Faith had countered every argument he laid out, only getting stumped when he threw out, “Dyin’ makes it possible for you to get knocked up.”

Faith’s response had been equally sharp and just as equally to the point. “Not if all the parts aren’t working. Or something is done to stop it.”

Her tone of voice as much as her statement had gotten everyone’s attention. While Jenner looked on impassively, Faith had calmly laid out all her reasons why they should do this. First and foremost had been the California authorities and only further down on her list had been actual slaying duties. They had to fool the State of California into believing something had happened to her and a fight – given her past – wouldn’t be hard for any of them to believe.

The autopsy had to list some cause of death and severe abdominal bleeding from a knife wound would more than accomplish it.

It had been Buffy’s softly worded question and Faith’s equally soft answer that sealed the deal for most of them. “What about a family? Don’t you want one of those?”

“Never had much of one to begin with. That’s your deal, B.” Faith had stared off, not looking at any of them, until a sniffle from Buffy caught her attention. “Someone like me would only screw up a kid. I’m better off playing cool aunt than mom.”

“What about a home?”

She finally turned to look at the older Slayer then. Something akin to real regret and longing filled her voice. “The only real home I have is yours, B. Last thing you need is me hanging around
“Spike?”

“Oxford.”

The blond stared at his taller counterpart, waiting for him to speak. When the strained silence became too much for his patience, Spike snarked at him, “Now that we’ve established our names, care to tell me why we’re outside talking when we could be inside in the cold air?”

“I heard from my contact. A new girl’s been called.”

Spike shrugged his shoulders, dismissing the news. “So? ‘S what we expected, yeah? Not worried about that.”

“Well, perhaps you should be worrying.” Inhaling deeply, Wesley dropped the real bombshell. “Apparently they’ve found out about Buffy.”

“Fuckin’ hell.” The cigarette that had been on its way to his mouth dropped to the ground and Spike stomped on it forcefully. “Bloody, buggerin’, interferin’, fuckin’ wankers.”

“You must be referring to the Council.” Rupert headed up the walkway, his eyes following Spike’s pacing form. He addressed his question to Wesley. “You’ve heard then?”

“McKeown called me. No identity on the new Slayer, though he did say the Council was planning on sending her here with a wetworks team.”

“What?!” Spike whirled on Wesley, his face contorting with rage, eyes flickering golden. “How soon are they expected to arrive?”

Wesley sounded less happy than Spike looked. “If they’re already on the move, my guess is they’ll be arriving sometime in the next twenty-four hours.”

“Bloody hell.”

“I doubt the Council had a team on alert.” Rupert’s calmer voice broke through Spike’s visible agitation. “We have a bit of time. Granted, not much, but we still have time.”

“There’s no way we’re prepared for this, Giles.” Wesley watched while Spike resumed pacing. “We thought we had time before they discovered Buffy’s pregnancy.”

“I think a more effective use of our time would be to get Buffy out of town.” Wesley finally dared to broach the subject he’d had on his mind for days.

“I’m so not leaving here.” Buffy stepped out the front door and onto the porch. Her arms were folded over her breasts, resting on her distended belly. “I may be pregnant and not so good in a fight right now, but they are not gonna drive me outta my house. This is my town and I’m trying to steal your life.”
staying.”

Spike had stopped pacing the second her voice sounded in the soft night air. “Might be safer, kitten.”

It was almost as if the distance and two people separating them disappeared. Buffy’s voice softened and caught on a hitched breath. “Is that what you want?”

“God no.” He moved closer. “Don’t want you out of my sight. Need to see you, be near you. Hiding you away means me going one way an’ you the other.”

She stood on the top step, looking into his intent gaze. “I don’t wanna go. I want our babies born right here, with you and Tara and . . . I don’t wanna be alone.”

He pulled her into his arms, eyes searching out Wesley over her bowed head. “No leaving town.”

“All right then.” Giles nodded his agreement. “We should discuss options for the birthing, in case of emergency.”

“The witches’ll keep her safe if needs be.” Buffy nodded her head against his chest, agreeing with Spike. “Kait an’ that hellion won’t let anything happen to her.”

“I still think we should talk to Dr. Thomas about the chip.”

“Oh!” Buffy looked up, her eyes shifting between the three Englishmen. “I called the old Initiative cover number. You know the emergency one?”

“You did what?”

“When?”

A low growl from the vampire holding her punctuated the other Brits’ questions and Buffy chose to ignore the flare of jealousy she felt from Spike. “The other day?”

She could feel his body stiffen, the lines of his muscles going rigid and inflexible. Buffy wormed her fingers under his tee-shirt, stroking the strong flesh of his side. Concentrating on him alone, she focused inward, using the breathing techniques Grace had been teaching them. Finding the center of calmness Grace always harped on was getting easier and Buffy leaned further into Spike’s embrace. All the love and trust she had in him surged through the bond and Buffy knew the moment it slammed into him, because he faltered, his whole body going slack for an instant.

He dropped a kiss on her head, his arms tightening around her.

It was Wesley who broke the spell surrounding them. “So we potentially have both the Initiative and the Council to contend with.”

“Yup.” Buffy chirped out, almost too cheerfully, then in a complete change of subject, she said. “Anyone else want ice cream?”
Initial reconnaissance had been mostly a bust, which Riley had anticipated. Which was why they were all out again the minute the sun started sinking into the Pacific. His men were all in civilian garb, traveling in pairs, while the medic remaining behind in quarters. They’d secured a rental house not far from campus with more than enough room for them and equipment. Tomorrow he was planning on going down into the old base, but tonight, they were just roaming the streets, scoping out the natives.

They were all in radio contact, though he’d given them strict orders to keep low profiles and not to engage any hostiles unless they happened upon an out of control situation. He and Graham were patrolling Main Street, and they were approaching the bridal shop he remembered. A wry grin and a shake of his head, followed by a chuckle had Graham looking at him strangely, but Riley just waved him off without any explanation.

The Espresso Pump was just ahead and down the block a little further was the Magic Box. Riley’s feet slowed. He really didn’t want to walk past the shop and have Buffy or some of her friends recognize him. For once, the mission wasn’t the primary motivation and Riley motioned Graham to turn down a side street. Downtown Sunnydale was busy, lots of people milling around and for once, Riley was grateful the townsfolk were oblivious to the danger being out after dark posed. People streamed out into the night from the just ending movie and the two soldiers allowed themselves to be carried along by momentum.

He stepped out into the middle of the street, waiting for Graham to join him when a flash of something familiar caught his eye. Unconsciously he moved closer, aware of his heart thumping madly in his chest and the increased respiration. He lost sight of the dark gold hair for a moment, then peered around again, quickly scanning the crowds for her. It couldn’t be... The Buffy he knew would be in a cemetery – then he checked his watch and realized it was still fairly early, only a little past nine. It might be her.

Ignoring Graham, Riley crossed the street, watching while the crowd thinned a bit. Yup, it’s her.

She was sitting at one of the outdoor tables, her back to the street and a dark-haired, scruffy-faced man opposite her. Her head was bobbing, hands gesturing animatedly. From what he could tell, she looked good, though he could be wrong too – it might not be her. His heart was telling him it was, and without much conscious thought, he kept walking closer.

Dawn stepped out of the shop, followed by another male, but Riley didn’t see her, nor did he hear the gasp of surprise and accompanying growl, because he was standing next to Buffy, listening to her rant to the guy sitting across from her.

Before his brain caught up with his mouth and eyes, Riley spoke.

“Buffy?”
Wesley had been talking, questioning her decision to contact the Initiative without letting any of them know beforehand, when Buffy leaned forward, her eyes intent on his. Resting her elbows on the table, Buffy launched into her reasons why. The last one was the most telling.

“Spike would have wigged.”

He shot her a look which clearly stated he thought she’d lost her mind.

“Okay, so he wigged anyway.” Buffy made a face, then continued, “I goofed, didn’t I?”

“I believe you might have miscalculated.” She winced and knowing how volatile her emotions were, Wesley reached out to grasp her wringing hands. “He’ll calm down.”

Her lower lip wobbled, her eyes growing wide and misty, and Wesley realized he had to bolster her spirits. “Buffy, he’s not going to stay angry with you. We already knew this was our only recourse.”

With an obvious effort, Buffy composed herself, fighting back the tears that had threatened. “So it’s all good.” Her smile took over her features and she leaned further forward. “He knows I love him. And he knows it has to come out.”

Wesley acknowledged the truth of her statement. “He does.”
Buffy was about to speak when someone – a very large male – loomed behind her, calling her name. Wesley looked up and had to crane his neck to get a better look at the man. The male was tall, well-built, and his buzz cut hair and the livid scar marring one cheek clued Wesley in to at least his occupation.

Buffy’s eyes bulged – something Wesley never thought he’d see – and sheer panic flooded her expression.

“Buffy?”

She stared at Wesley for a minute longer, visibly paling.

“Buffy? Are you all right?” Wesley felt the need to ask her, though he could very clearly see and sense she wasn’t anywhere in the vicinity of all right.

She squeaked out something, then cleared her throat. “Ah.” Another look around had her panic growing.

“Buffy?” The soldier spoke again, his tone clearly indicating he knew it was her. And knew her very well.

Finally, with her teeth firmly clamped on her lower lip, Buffy dared to look up. “Hey, Riley.”

Something thunked down on the table between them, rocking it from side to side. Wesley had jumped, nearly scrambling to his feet when the soldier’s identity was revealed.

“What the hell are you doing here, Riley?” Dawn pushed Buffy’s ice cream toward her, but didn’t take the seat next to the blond.

“I got a message from your sister.”

Dawn snorted, a very unladylike sound. “Sheyah. Sure you did.”

An uncomfortable silence descended and Dawn glanced from Buffy to Wesley, noting both their expressions.

“Actually, I did try and get a message to him.”

Shifting her stance, Dawn plopped her own ice cream down. Crossing her arms over her chest, Dawn stared down at Buffy. It was clear she was awaiting a better explanation and she wasn’t going to allow them to let it slide. Her raised eyebrow and stance had Buffy feeling guilty for her actions, and worried that Dawn’s parentage would be clear for anyone to see.

Inhaling deeply, Buffy pushed back away from the rickety table, revealing her condition to their unwanted companion.

“Buffy? What the hell happened? The last time I heard from anyone, Xander wrote to tell me you were dead!” Riley spluttered, his voice rising to a near shout.

“Keep your bloody voice down, soldier boy.” Spike leaned over, pulling out the chair Buffy was still struggling to get out of. A second sigh of relief escaped from Buffy and she laid a hand in
Spike’s while shooting him a grateful look. Her smile went a long way to easing some of his tension and anger.

“Don’t tell me what to do, Spike.” Riley squared off, widening his stance, trying very hard to stare down the shorter man. Spike just glared at Riley, daring the younger man to make a scene.

Buffy let Spike help her up, resting her hand on his tense forearm. Clutching at him, Buffy addressed her next statement to Riley. “Why don’t you meet us in the Magic Box?”

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Quentin Travers listened with half an ear as his assistant Nicholson ticked off the availability of the Council’s wetworks operatives. The bulk of his attention was on the hard copy reports of the transcripts of the DVDs from Sunnydale.

“Nicholson, how soon will a team be assembled?” Travers flipped through the pages, his eyes flicking rapidly over the words.

“No sooner than thirty-six hours, sir.” He shifted, hoping Travers wouldn’t unleash his temper.

“That is acceptable. Where is our newest Slayer?”

Nicholson rocked back on his heels, very aware he’d just dodged a dressing down of Biblical proportions. “I believe she’s being debriefed on the Sunnydale situation as we speak.”

Travers waved Nicholson off. “Very good. Advise me when she’s finished.”

“Yes, sir.” He backed out of the doorway, closing it softly behind him.

Quickly checking the corridor, Nicholson moved swiftly away from the executive offices, toward the research wing. Once there, he quickly entered the Journal archive room. There was rarely anyone in the archives, especially at this hour of night and Nicholson was certain he and his accomplice would be relatively safe.

“Leslie?” His voice was soft, barely discernable in the musty air of the oldest journals in Council possession.

“Over here, Robert.” McKeown leaned back from the stack he was in front of, into Nicholson’s line of sight.

“I’ve delayed as long as I possibly can. More than likely the team will be ready before Thursday.” Nicholson turned around, facing away from his counterpart, eyes constantly scanning the room.

“That’s fine. Contact has been made. They’re already aware of the situation.” Leslie re-shelved the journal he’d been reading, then glanced over his shoulder. “Who’s been picked for the girl?”

“Spencer Whitworth.”

“Bloody... Why on earth did they pick her?” McKeown turned to face him, distaste clearly visible in the dim light.
“It is believed the new girl will respond better to a woman.”

“What the hell for?”

Nicholson chuckled ironically. “The new Slayer has exhibited a distinct problem with and decided lack of respect for male Watchers.”

“Robert, what the hell does that mean?”

“Well, Leslie, evidently the new Slayer is a lesbian.”

McKeown stared at him, mirth swirling in his eyes. He dare not laugh out loud, but he was suddenly struck with the irreverent thought that Travers just might have gone from the frying pan into the fire with the new Slayer.

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An urgent phone call had Giles and Anya opening up the Magic Box, and a follow-up call to Connor had him cutting short his solo patrol to meet them all there. Wesley’s third phone call was to Jenner, alerting him to keep a very low profile and avoid the house for the next couple of day, but also warning him to keep in contact.

The contingency plan they’d formulated in case the Initiative returned to Sunnydale rolled into action, and while Dawn and Wesley followed Buffy and Spike, they hastily dialed numbers, making phone calls to friendly demons like Clem.

Buffy was leaning heavily on Spike’s arm, and from her position Dawn could sense the tension her parents were trying very hard to control.

“Wes? Why is he here?” Dawn’s tone of voice indicated she wasn’t going to let him get away without answering.

“The chip.” Those two words were enough to enlighten the teen.

“So she called them?” There was a pause while Dawn processed the situation. “She called him? Why the hell . . . He’s an asshole!”

“Dawn. . .” Wesley glanced over at her, preparing to admonish her language but was stopped by the expression on her face.

“He is, so don’t yell at me. I don’t believe she’d do this.”

“None of the surgeons we contacted would make the attempt. We had no other choice.” Wesley stuck his hands in his pockets and kept walking, expecting Dawn to keep up with him.

“Whatever. He doesn’t really look happy, not that I care.” Dawn waved him off, not wanting to hear any of Wesley’s explanations. “Did you call Connor?”
“He’s on his way. He’ll meet us at the shop.” Part of Wesley was very unhappy with the way Dawn and Connor had become close, while the saner part of him was very grateful. His feelings for Dawn hadn’t eased, had in fact, only grown stronger. She was maturing, becoming more comfortable with herself and it showed, making him ache every time they were alone. Thankfully, before the situation had a chance to get more awkward, they were interrupted.

“Hey. What’s up?” A barely out of breath Connor raced up behind them, pushing himself between the two.

“Bad guy alert.” Dawn stepped into him, playfully blocking his steps. The two played for a moment, then Dawn grew serious. “Do you think they’ll be able to take care of it?”

Wesley gave her question the gravity it deserved. “The better question is; will they?”

“Who the hell is Riley?” Jenner closed the cell phone, his eyes focused on Faith.

“Oh, shit.” She struggled to get to her feet, dropping the weights on the floor beside the bench she was lying on.

“Should you really be doing all that?” The big Welsh vampire loomed over her, pushing her back down onto the narrow bench.

Faith stared up at him, wrapping her legs around his waist and pulling him forward, closer to her. “I’m a Slayer. I can do anything.”

“So you keep telling me.” He smirked, then nuzzled between her breasts. She tugged at his shoulders, trying to drag his lips toward hers, while Jenner resisted. His low laugh reverberated through her and Faith pinched his side. In retaliation, Jenner laid a series of bites across her breasts.

“Who is Riley?”

“You’re sucking on my tits and asking me about some guy?” Faith tightened her legs around his waist. “There something you wanna tell me, dude?”

Jenner bit down hard, closing his teeth around one nipple. “You really don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Hmmm. You sure about that? I’ve seen you eyeing Spike.”

In response, Jenner pulled their groins together, grinding Faith against his turgid erection. “Spike isn’t girl enough for me.”

Faith snickered, quipping, “He’d look mighty pretty in a dress though.”

To which Jenner just laughed harder. He bucked his hips, arching her up into his thrust. “So who the hell is Riley?”
“Geez. What’s with the single-mindedness?”

“The junior Watcher sounded serious.”

Faith wrapped her arms around Jenner’s shoulders. “Riley’s . . . he’s Buffy’s ex honey and with the government boys that put the chip in Spike’s head.”

“So not someone we want to accidentally run across?” He ran his hands down her side, then slid one up under sports bra.

“Nope. So I guess we have to lay low?”

“That’s the warning.”

Faith slipped one hand between them, raking her nails down the middle of Jenner’s chest. “Guess we have to find something to keep us occupied.”

Jenner groaned when her hand skimmed over his erection, then flittered away. “Looks that way.”

Her husky laugh echoed in the empty gym. “Man, I’d hate to be in B’s shoes right now.”

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Buffy could easily feel the tension radiating through Spike’s body, could sense the anger and confusion threading through his emotions, while every single one of them magnified and multiplied within her. She was teetering on the edge of a colossal meltdown and she almost couldn’t even explain why. Yes, she’d been the one to make the phone call; yes, she’d asked for Riley by name, but she hadn’t actually expected him to be the one to come and investigate.

They were halfway to the Magic Box when a wave of anxiety threatened to overwhelm her. Buffy clutched at Spike’s supporting arm, digging her nails into his skin. “Are you mad at me? Please don’t be. I . . .” She turned watery hazel eyes up at him, her teeth biting at her lower lip.

One look at her stricken eyes and Spike knew he had to hold it together for her. Buffy was a mess, her face splotchy, hectic with fever spots, an indication that her blood pressure had risen, and the tears pooling in her eyes wrecked havoc with his resolution to stay angry with her. Spike knew this was a possibility, knew all those long months ago, when they’d first discussed the idea of removing the chip that it would all come down to this moment. A confrontation he’d wanted to avoid all along. It was inevitable. It was karmic.

Riley and his merry band of misguided do-gooders were the ones responsible for his inability to protect his family. Riley Finn was the reason why he had the girl. If not for Riley and his disappearing act, and his betrayal, Spike wouldn’t have been the one Buffy had been forced to rely upon. Spike heaved out a deep sigh, then glanced down at the woman holding the strings on his heart. There was really only one way to respond to her. “I’m not angry, kitten.”

“You’re sure?” Buffy’s eyes scanned his, looking for some sign of deeply banked anger, some ticking of his jaw. Finding none, she stepped into his embrace, the tears she’d been fighting
finding a home on his soft cotton tee shirt. “He’s not gonna come between us, right?”

“No, sweetheart, he’s not gonna.” His arms locked around her, one hand smoothing down the tense lines of her back.

A flare of insecurity rose in her and Buffy held on tighter. Words tumbled from her, words Spike never expected he’d hear. “He was supposed to be my shot at normal. Supposed to be the steady, understanding guy. The normal guy who got the slaying thing. The guy everyone told me I should want.” Buffy slipped to the side, leaning against the stillness of Spike’s chest. “Wanna know a secret?”

When he didn’t answer except to thread his fingers in her hair, she squeezed him again. “I didn’t know if I wanted normal. If normal was ever gonna be enough.”

A low laugh sounded in her ear and she tilted her face up to look at Spike’s. “Not when the real deal was just under my fingers – too close to ignore and too far to . . . God, I so didn’t want to notice you. Didn’t want to remember what it was like to be close.”

Spike’s thumb brushed away the tears slipping from the corners of her eyes, his touch gentle and soft. “I was so mad at Willow for giving me something so good and then just stealing it away from you. You always made me feel safe, even when you didn’t want to.”

“Always wanted to, kitten, ‘specially at that time.” Spike finally spoke, his voice just as low and soft as hers had been. “Wanted to throttle the witch, though, for forcin’ me to face m’own feelings. Didn’t want to want you so much either, jus’ couldn’t help myself.”

His fingers were cool against her over-heated flesh, his touch lowering her panic to more manageable levels. “You know I wouldn’t have trusted him with Dawnie.”

“Why’s that?” Spike couldn’t help the question from surfacing. He’d always wondered if she’d turned to him because there was no one else around, because Riley had gone. Now, it seemed he was going to get his answer.

“He couldn’t deal. He was having trouble just dealing with the slaying. No way would he have been okay with the whole hellgod and someone must die thing.” She got quiet then, her thoughts racing through her head too fast for her to put them into words. Every moment where Riley talked down to her about the slaying, and about how he thought she should act, and then, the end of their relationship, when he’d sought something from the vampire whores he wasn’t getting from her replayed in her mind, and Buffy could feel her anger growing. “Riley wasn’t a really a nice guy, was he?”

Spike stared off into the night, unwilling to meet her eyes. He had decidedly negative thoughts about Finn, none of which were flattering, and that was before he connected him with the Initiative. On his own, Riley was a bigoted, throwback Neanderthal, who believed anything that wasn’t like him was beneath him. He didn’t answer Buffy’s question, just tightened his hold on her, rocking her back and forth slowly.

“I love you, kitten.” It was the only thing he could think to say. Now was not the time to lay all of Riley’s crimes out on the table, not when they needed the man’s assistance.

“Spike? You wouldn’t do that, would you.” Though it sounded like a question, they both knew Buffy wasn’t asking him, she was stating a truth.
Again he didn’t answer her. There was no need to. They both knew the truth of things. Spike wouldn’t ever leave her, wouldn’t dream of cheating on her. His hand cupped the back of her head, his thumb brushing gently over the curve of her cheek. “Isn’t anythin’ that would drive me to that.”

Buffy rested her head on his chest, her face tilted up toward his. The tears had finally stopped and the steady thumping of her heart was echoed by the rapid pitter-patter of the twins. Spike narrowed his focus, closing his eyes to just listen to the three of them. A slow smile bloomed on his features and his free hand smoothed down her side, resting on her belly. Buffy linked her hand with his. Her sigh released all the tension from her body and Buffy sagged into his chest, leaning into Spike. Her softly uttered, “I love you,” had him rumbling the same back at her.

Connor, Wesley, and Dawn passed them, Dawn stealing a glance at the still pair as she walked by, concern etched on her features. Spike smiled at her, urging her forward with a shrug of his shoulders. Wesley herded the two teens on, catching Spike’s movement and nodding his acknowledgment.

For long minutes, Spike continued to hold Buffy, his hands brushing across her soft skin. “C’mon, kitten, we need to get moving.”

“Can’t we just go home?” She pouted a little, shifting her weight from foot to foot. “Please?”

Spike’s exhalation blew through her hair, making loose strands waft around. “No, we really can’t. This is something we really need to do.”

“We can’t just change our minds?” She stepped away from him, her feet reluctantly heading toward the Magic Box and where her ex-boyfriend would be meeting them shortly. Spike tugged her forward, his hand firmly wrapped around hers.

“Buffy. . . no point in stallin’, is there?”

“No, not really.” She paused, then whined a bit. “But can’t we do it tomorrow?”

“Sweetheart. . .”

The exasperation in his voice was easy to hear, and Buffy didn’t for one second fool herself into thinking she could avoid this situation, even employing her pout. With a slump in her shoulders and an air of dejection around her, Buffy dragged her feet as much as she could, though it wasn’t very long before they were in front of the Magic Box. One last time she tried, tugging on Spike’s hand to stop his entry into the shop.

“Tomorrow would be better for this.”

His raised eyebrow and stern expression were more than enough, but when he added her name in a tone that brooked no argument, she gave in. “Buffy.”

“Fine. Be that way.”
Title is from a Thompson Twins song -- Lies
A leavening of truth

Book Three.

Chapter Five. A leavening of truth

There is more truth in honest lies,
Believe me, than in half the truths.
   Samuel Butler, Notebooks, p. 52

Good lies need a leavening of truth to make them palatable.
   William McIlvanney, The Papers of Tony Veitch

In wartime, truth is so precious
that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.
   Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain

Desire is in men a hunger,
in women only an appetite.
   Mignon McLaughlin, The Neurotic's Notebook

take me now baby here as I am
pull me close, try and understand
desire is hunger is the fire I breathe
love is a banquet on which we feed
come on now try and understand
the way I feel when I'm in your hands
take my hand come undercover
they can't hurt you now,
can't hurt you now, can't hurt you now
because the night belongs to lovers
because the night belongs to lust
because the night belongs to lovers
because the night belongs to us
have I doubt when I'm alone
love is a ring, the telephone
love is an angel disguised as lust
here in our bed until the morning comes
come on now try and understand
the way I feel under your command
take my hand as the sun descends
they can’t touch you now,
can’t touch you now, can’t touch you now
because the night belongs to lovers ...
with love we sleep
Spike held the back door for Buffy, watching her closely as she visibly composed herself. He’d been ambivalent about her phone call to the Initiative, already resigned to the idea they were going to have to rely on their assistance to remove the chip. What he hadn’t been fully prepared for was her timing and Finn’s reappearance, though the latter shouldn’t have surprised him at all.

Finn had to have known when he left that something was bound to happen between them. What Spike was relying on now were Finn’s residual feelings for his ex-girlfriend and him being considerate about her condition.

Only the soft lighting bathed the shop and Giles had yet to open the front door, waiting until all of them were assembled. Buffy handed Anya her order, smiling crookedly as the former demon checked it for accuracy.

“Are you certain this is wisest course of action?” Giles broke the silence as everyone took up various positions around the shop.

Connor deftly climbed the stairs to the restricted section, taking them more than two at a time, while Dawn leaned against the counter. Spike looked on while Buffy got comfortable and answered him. “It’s a little late to be rethinkin’ things, i’nt?”

“A bit.” Anya’s bag rustling partially muffled the next comment from Giles. “We aren’t prepared for the Initiative to reinsert itself into Sunnydale. And now, with the Council on the move…” Giles let his voice trail off, unwilling to put his fears into words.

“We’ve already been over all this, jus’ now the bloody wankers are here.”

“The Council’s coming too?”

Spike’s comment was drowned out by Dawn’s almost shrill question.

“The Council’s involvement was the downside of Faith’s ploy to fool the California authorities.”

“Geez, Wes, didya have to get all wordy?” Dawn’s sarcastic mutter diffused some of the tension in the room. Spike smirked and winked at her while the other Englishman tried to splutter out a response.

“Forget it. Faith did what she had to and I just did the same thing.” Buffy waved off objections
and interruptions. “We don’t know if Riley’s brought a whole bunch of commandos with him.”

“The Council is sending a wetworks team.” Wesley sat heavily down across from Buffy.

“So what?” Buffy reached for Spike’s hand. “We faced Angelus and all his bad guys. The Council can’t be anywhere near as bad.”

“The Council operatives are all human, Buffy.”

“And they’re coming here to take my babies. Not letting that happen.” Spike’s low rumble punctuated Buffy’s forceful words, while Connor’s higher pitched growl had everyone looking upward.

“Connor?”

“They can’t do that.” His features hardened, his eyes going unexpectedly feral. “We aren’t going to let them do that, right, Dad?”

“No, we aren’t.” No one commented on Connor’s pointed decision to address Spike that way before he was again speaking. “We’ve got company.”

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Less than twenty seconds after leaving the Slayer and her entourage, Graham had two of the other reconnaissance groups converging on the Magic Box, preparing to take up surveillance positions on the shop. Sloth, who was the group’s sniper, was getting into position across the street, with orders to just observe and ascertain which position had the best advantage. The last pair were being given their orders when Riley confronted Graham.

“Is this necessary?”

“I believe it is, sir.” Graham lifted his steely blue eyes to meet Riley’s, not flinching away from the other man’s obvious short temper.

Riley’s jaw flexed, the muscle tensing and his neck bulged. “And why is that?”

“This is her home turf, sir, and the hostile is with her. Just what do you expect to happen here?”

The taller man was the first to look away. A sigh broke from his mouth and Riley shook his head, turning away from Graham toward the Magic Box. “I wish I knew.”

“The girl has obviously moved on.”

“Yeah, thanks, Graham, I got that update.” The ticking in his jaw was back, this time more prominently. “The question is to whom.”

“My bet’s on the English guy.”

“Funny. They’re both English.”
Graham hid the smile he knew wouldn’t do anything to help Riley’s temper. “Vampires can’t procreate.”

“Graham, this is the Hellmouth. Demons aren’t supposed to exist at all. And yet we’ve catalogued how many species in this place?”

“Point taken.”

“Anyway, we’ll know shortly.”

More than half asleep, Tara fought the rising nausea threatening her rest. The second Buffy had mentioned ice cream, she’d wanted to vomit up the contents of her stomach. For almost two weeks now, she’d been deliberately ignoring the very obvious signs. There was no denying it any longer. She was pregnant.

Tara marveled at the thought, aware that she’d almost resigned herself to not ever having children – at least without some sort of intervention. How ironic was it that the first time she experimented... not that Oz could be considered an experiment, not the way she felt about him, but the first time she had straight sex, she got caught.

A tiny little laugh erupted from her lips and she rolled onto her back, staring up at the ceiling of her bedroom. Really, I should have expected that... this is the hellmouth, after all.

What made it even more ironic that it had been Oz – her ex-girlfriend’s ex-boyfriend. Tara realized with a start that she loved him, not with an all consuming passion, but more with a sense of comfort and familiarity. Why it had taken her until now to realize it, she wasn’t quite sure. But she did. Oz was her part of her family, along with Buffy, Spike, Dawn, and even Wesley. And Giles.

That feeling was partially why she had allowed the sex to happen – and it wasn’t all planned out, it just sort of...

They’d been in her bed, waking up later than they normally did on a weekend; Tara had been up most of the night writing a paper that was due the following Monday, and Oz had gotten in late from a gig. She’d woken up with his hand covering her breast and his erection pressing into her from behind, and Tara hadn’t known what to think. At first she’d nearly panicked, then she’d calmed her breathing and her emotions. It was just Oz, and his reaction and their position were normal when two adult people as close as they were slept in the same bed. Nothing more than that. It was impersonal, or so she tried to tell herself.

Fooling herself had lasted only long enough for Oz’ hand to tighten around her breast and his hips moved closer. Panic was about to set in when he stopped moving, a soft snore rumbling in his chest. Tara’s heart fluttered in her chest. Okay, I need to get out of this... before it becomes really awkward.

It was already too late. Oz was waking up and his hand around her breast tightened, then his softly muttered “Shit” had a reluctant smile forming on her lips.
He slowly extricated himself from around her. Oz rolled onto his back, throwing his arm over his face, shielding his eyes. “You’re awake.”

“Yeah I am.” Tara kept her back to him, afraid to face him.

“I’m really sorry. I . . .” Oz blew out a breath, keeping his eyes averted from hers. “I didn’t mean to. . .”

His voice trailed off and though Tara could hear the regret, there was some other underlying emotion threading through his words. She usually kept her mouth shut about other people’s emotions, though some demon was riding her shoulders that particular morning. “Are you really sorry?”

She’d caught his attention with the quietly worded question. Oz rolled to his side, attempting to get a glimpse of her expression. “Tara?”

“You wake up earlier than I do every time you end up crashing here. Why?”

There was probing curiosity in her gaze and Oz couldn’t lie to her. “Are you really sure you want to know why?”

Tara raised her eyebrow and Oz looked away. “I can’t stay here in the morning. I have to get up.”

“Because?” She was pushing and she knew it, but Tara suddenly didn’t care. She wanted the truth from him, because their relationship, whatever it was, wouldn’t survive if they weren’t truthful with each other.

“Because I need to take care of things.” The admission hung in the air, almost as if his words had been written there. “Because I want more than just snuggling with you.”

A small, knowing little smile played about her lips. “You do know I’m a lesbian and I’m not attracted to most men.”

“Most?”

“Well, there is Spike, but then he’s like a class all his own.” Tara couldn’t help the little dig, knowing Oz knew exactly what she was hinting at.

“He is kinda sexy. In a predatory way.”

Her hand fluttered over her heart and her giggle was unexpected. “Yeah, but he’s totally into Buffy, so that’s not an issue.”

Tara paused, ducking her head to avoid looking at him. “I’m not in love with you.”

“I know that.” Oz shifted, staring once more up at the ceiling. “I can’t help how I feel. I love you.”

There, he’d said it. Oz closed his eyes, waiting for Tara to toss him out and tell him that they couldn’t be friends any longer.

Gathering her courage, Tara spoke. “Oz, I don’t think I could fall in love with you. But I do have
feelings for you. Like you’re a part of me, a part of my family.”

“I can live with that.” And strangely enough, he could. He wasn’t really in love with her either, but he did love her. To him and to wolf, Tara was family, was pack. It was enough for him that the emotional ties existed between them. Oz didn’t fool himself either, into thinking that he wasn’t sexually attracted to her, the proof was there, still hard and heavy between them. Tara thoroughly surprised him with her next words, nearly shocking him into growling.

“I’ve never been with a man before.”

If she thought that was going to curb his arousal, she was sadly mistaken. Oz ground out his response. “Not helping.”

“I’m not sure I wanna help.” His head snapped around so that he could look into her eyes. She wasn’t joking, that much he could tell. What he didn’t know and couldn’t tell at all was what she was thinking.

“Tara?”

“Do you ever wonder what it might be like? Doing something for the first time?” She picked at a piece of imaginary lint on the comforter, avoiding his eyes. “I’ve been touched. . . and had oral sex. . . but . . .”

Her voice trailed off, unwilling to mention who she’d had lots of oral sex with, but Oz knew. Willow was always the third invisible person in their relationship, and it sometimes weighed on him and he guessed it was bothering her as well. But the thought . . . the image of Willow and Tara having sex . . . Oz growled low in his chest, his erection pulsing at the mental pictures. That image really didn’t help at all.

After that, Tara’s memories sort of blurred. She wasn’t entirely sure how it happened, and who moved first, but the next thing she could recall, she and Oz had been in a liplock, his tongue thrusting into her mouth, his hands loosening her nightgown and pulling on her panties.

His touch was different, more assured, less . . . delicate than all her other lovers. Hard, insistent and . . . grasping in ways her female lovers hadn’t been. Calloused fingers and short, blunt nails pushed heavily into her skin, tugging harder than she was used to. She could feel all the harder edges, flat planes where rounded curves usually were and her brain shut down, just allowing her senses to feel. Oz kept making noises, not growling, more like soft almost-puppyish noises that caused shivers to race along her spine.

Her body was reacting, but a part of her remained aloof, marking the differences between this and all her other encounters. She’d never been one for one night stands; nearly all her sexual moments had come as part of long term relationships. With a start, Tara realized that this relationship with Oz was one of her longest . . . and really, she did care about him . . .

Oz was trailing kisses down her side, little nipping bites pulling at her skin. His nose nuzzled just beneath her breast and when his mouth latched onto her nipple, Tara felt . . . The difference was indescribable. She couldn’t wrap her brain how very different it was from having Oz suckling at her breast than Willow . . . it was harder, needier.

Everything about this was that way. He wanted her with an intensity that she’d never encountered before. Not even Willow had wanted her like this. It was as if he wanted to consume her, crawl
inside her skin and . . . Oz thrust his fingers inside her wet pussy and Tara couldn’t breathe.

Though he was small in stature, Oz was still a man, still built like a man, with thicker, blunt fingers, broad shoulders and narrow hips, strong arms. And a hard, heavy penis that was throbbing against her inner thigh. Tara’s emotions seesawed between fear and curiosity, wondering at this new sensation, this new. . . presence in her bed that hadn’t ever been before. With a hesitant hand, she reached down and ran her palm over the length, almost jerking her hand away at the last second.

Oz growled then, his mouth lifting away from her breast. “Do it again.”

Tara flushed hotly. Her hand reached over, curling around his erection and he covered her hand with his own, pumping them both up and down. “Like that.”

It felt odd, and she didn’t quite understand how it worked, but he was panting heavily, his chest heaving with effort. Oz’s fingers thrust inside her, and she arched her hips, as they brushed over a spot she didn’t know existed. “Oh. . . . . Oz?”

He rose up on his knees, spreading her legs open. “Don’t tense up.”

Oz didn’t give her time to have any more second thoughts. No sooner had he finished speaking than he was holding his penis at her opening, slowly pushing his way inside her. Her body tensed at the intrusion, until his thumb found her clit and her legs fell open, her hips curving upwards. It was slow, agonizing and more than once she found herself fighting tears, but each time, Oz would do something, and she’d relax once more.

And then she couldn’t relax. His body was inside hers, his erection stretching her, filling her and Tara instinctively curled her legs, trying to force away the intrusion. Oz leaned down, his face bare inches from hers and his eyes were so bright, so intently focused on hers that Tara could almost see the emotions swimming with the dark orbs. His hand brushed her hair back, off her face and he smiled a little, his lips curling with happiness. “You look kind of different from this position.”

She couldn’t help the nervous giggle from escaping. “So do you.”

The laughter eased her fears, and Tara unclenched her legs. “I’m gonna start moving now.”

“Okay.”

His hips moved, and Tara’s eyes nearly bugged out of her head. This is soo . . . this is so . . . . .

“Oh. . . .”

There was no more time for thought, no more time to mark the differences, because once he started moving, Oz didn’t stop, the friction of his body within hers giving her no relief. She needed him to keep going, for him to help her find her peak.

Hours or minutes later, Tara was never sure afterward just how long they’d moved together, her senses fired, stars exploding behind her closed eyes and she felt him shudder, his entire body seizing up, clenching, then he was pouring himself into her depths, his seed filling her womb.

So, now, here she was, six weeks later, that seed having found fertile ground.
Disconnecting the cell phone, Lawson watched from the shadows as the Brachens and Glai-Glia spread out, watching the Initiative soldiers take up places outside the Magic Box. The two demon clans had pretty much taken over the police and fire departments, even inter-marrying, and their rivalries only extended to the annual bowling, softball, and basketball tournaments. Rogan, the brother of Lawson’s girlfriend, nodded once, then sprang easily and silently half-way up the side of the building. He clung there for moment, then started the climb up the solid brick.

In the days following the battle with Angel and his forces, the Brachens had requested a meeting with the Slayer and her people. Since both species passed for human and were mostly non-violent, a truce was negotiated and they were able to keep their jobs and homes. The fact they also agreed to peace-keeping duties weighed heavily in their favor, and on the nights when none of the Slayer’s group was able to patrol, the Brachens took over the job.

The plan they’d formed in case of another emergency rolled into high gear the instant Spike, Wesley, and Dawn had started making phone calls. Upon learning who it was they were gearing up against, Lawson and Rogan had to turn away volunteers. Instead they’d split off-duty Brachens into groups and had set up round the clock surveillance on the house the soldiers had rented.

Lawson felt like he was in an old western, where the good guys were surrounded by bad guys... and the bad guys were in turn surrounded by renegade Indians. He wondered, for a brief second, as he watched Rogan hang by his fingers on the building ledge then swing his legs lightly up and over the side, if anyone but Spike and the Watchers would get the imagery.

Getting the all clear from Rogan, who could see everything from his vantage point, Lawson flipped open his cell phone and said one word when it was answered. “Ready.”

He braced himself, wondering how long the night was going to be. He was just glad he wasn’t inside with the soldier boy.

The door rattled, just seconds after Connor had alerted them all to Riley’s arrival. Buffy looked over at Spike, who held up his finger in a ‘wait’ motion, then he flipped open his cell phone. He spoke only once, listening intently to the voice on the other end. Nodding his head at the older Englishman, Spike smiled and severed the connection.

Before Giles moved to open the door, Spike filled everyone else in. "They’re only eight. Two are headed in here, two on the street, one in the Espresso Pump and another up on the roof. Three are back at their digs."

"I thought you said eight?" Dawn looked up from the counter, sliding her hair back over her shoulder.

“Last one in their digs is the medical officer." He made a face at her, laughing when she stuck her
tongue out at him. "Lawson an’ the others are in position."

"Then let’s get this show over with so I can go home and sleep." Buffy waved her hand in the direction of the door, shooing Giles off.

Everyone was quiet as Giles opened the door. "Riley."

“Hello, sir.” It looked like Riley was going to shake his hand and to forestall that action, Giles stepped back, motioning the two into the shop.

Their footsteps echoed across the fake marble floor and no one spoke. Dawn moved away from the counter, standing almost behind Spike, watching the two soldiers warily.

It was hard not to notice how cold their reception was. No one smiled, even Dawn was giving them the cold shoulder. “Hi.”

Riley knew, now, how very much an outsider he was. And just how unwelcome.

“Hi. Why don’t you have a seat?” There was no hint in Buffy’s demeanor that she’d ever been intimate with him, none at all. There was barely an acknowledgment that she even knew his name.

He reluctantly sat, taking the seat opposite where Buffy was sitting, Graham a silent sentinel at his back.

“I guess you’re wondering why I called.”

“That’s one of the things.” It was almost funny, how very cordial they were being with each other, if the awkwardness hadn’t been so evident. “How about we do this without an audience?”

Buffy shook her head negatively. “Got no secrets, so we’re good.”

“Even with him here?” Though he tried for merely curious, Riley’s feelings for Spike were clearly heard.

“Spike stays.” Something in either her tone or her expression gave her emotions away and Riley flinched.

“Why did you call?”

“We want the chip removed.”

“We?”

Even Graham reacted to the anger in Riley’s tone and he stepped forward, intent on restraining him if that became necessary.

Wesley mirrored Graham’s movements, stopping just beside Spike. “Yes. Although it was ultimately Buffy’s decision.”

“And you agree with this?” Not knowing Wesley’s identity, Riley addressed his question to Giles.

“Completely.”
Spike fought the smile Rupert’s unconditional support engendered. *No reason to tip our hands this soon.* . .

“You just expect us to take out the chip that controls this vampire?”

So much contempt flooded his tone that nearly all of them flinched. This time, Buffy didn’t bother to hide her emotions. She snapped back, her own anger rising. “Yeah, I do. You put it there, you take it out.”
Book Three

Chapter Six  Never Explain

Never hate your enemies.
It affects your judgment.

Never explain
   – your friends do not need it
and your enemies will not believe you anyhow.
   Elbert Hubbard

Family faces are magic mirrors.
Looking at people who belong to us,
we see the past, present, and future.
   Gail Lumet Buckley

And I wonder
day to day
I don’t like you
anyway
I don't need your shit today
you’re pathetic in your own way
I feel for you
Better fuckin' go away
I will behave
Better fuckin' go away
I'm doin' the best I ever did
I'm doin' the best that I can
I'm doin' the best I ever did
now, go away
   Godsmack, Godsmack II, Whatever

Spike knew. . .

He knew.  Damn vampire.  Spike knew the secret she’d been hiding, even from herself.  What he didn’t know was how or who.  Tara figured she had another day or two at most before he spilled it all.  And she certainly didn’t want Oz to find out that way, which meant she had to track him down tonight and tell him.
It was Tuesday and that meant rehearsal night. They had no plans to meet, though that rarely was something they did. He had a right to know, to find out from her. She already knew what her position about it was. Tara might not be ready, might not have her future all settled, but this was quite possibly her only chance to have a child of her own blood, and she wasn’t going to let that slip from her hands.

The fact this baby also had werewolf DNA didn’t faze her in the least. She was already half in love with it.

Groaning at the thought of having to move, Tara slowly got to her feet, fighting the nausea. New respect bloomed in her for Buffy, who had not only suffered this, but then patrolled and did all the things a Slayer was supposed to do. Tara wondered if there had been times when Buffy had thought about puking on the vampires instead of staking them.

She was more than halfway up the basement stairs when the back door opened and Oz’ voice called out, sounding unusually cheerful. “Hello? Anybody around?”

“Hi.” Tara couldn’t look at him, instead ducking her head and searching the cabinets for something carbonated and sweet. Spying a Dr. Pepper hidden behind Spike’s stash of beer, she breathed a sigh of relief. *Something of home. . . . yeah, just what I need.*

Oz sniffed the air, his sense altering him to something not being right with her. “What’s shaking?”

“My nerves. . . .” Tara smiled despite those nerves and figured there was no way to just chitchat about this. “Are you . . . are you staying tonight?”

“Thought I would. Unless you’ve got other plans.” He was looking at her steadily, an odd expression on his usually impassive features.

“No. No, plans. But I . . . I need to talk to you about some . . . something.” *Damn. Damned stutter.* Tara swallowed down half the bottle, feeling the liquid settle the roiling in her belly.

He waited quietly, not pushing her at all, just taking a seat at the center island.

Tara closed her eyes, searching for the right way to broach this subject. Finding no inspiration behind her closed eyes, she plunged right in. “Re . . . remember that morning? When we . . . ? Ah. I’m . . . I’m pregnant.”

Oz blinked. Slowly. He stared at her, his expression blank save for the lights twinkling in his eyes. He stayed like that for long minutes. Tara could almost sense the thoughts swirling behind that unflappable facade, feel the weight of his ruminations.

His words, when they came, didn’t shock her. “Guess they lie about it not happening the first time.”

“Guess so.”

They lapsed into silence. Tara was afraid of saying anything more, while Oz obviously composed himself. To occupy her hands while she was waiting for him to speak, she started opening cabinets, pulling out a box of brownie mix. *When in doubt, chocolate always makes things better.*
“Tara?”

She looked up, fork in hand while she stirred the batter. “Yeah?”

“My parents are leaving Sunnydale.”

Not fazed at all by his seeming non-sequitur, Tara continued stirring. “When are they leaving?”

“In September.”

“Oh. Where are they going?” She greased the pan, debating internally about putting walnuts or pecans in the brownies before changing her mind and deciding on leaving them plain.

“To Arizona. They offered me the house.” He swiped some of the raw batter, licking his fingers noisily.

A slow, crooked smile crossed her lips and she finally looked over at him. “And?”

“There’s a lot of room. For people. Even little ones.”

She decided then, to play along with him. His sense of humor was infectious, even though it never showed on his face. “How much room?”

“Enough for a couple of people. People who might be a family.” They were staring at each other and Oz swiped his finger in the batter again.

“Families are good things.” Tara slapped his hand, then dumped the batter into the baking pan.

“They are. Even when the family isn’t conventional.” He smiled, finally, the expression on his face matching the one in his eyes. “I think I might take the house. I just need a roomie.”

There was real laughter in her eyes, though it was tinged with a bit of apprehension. “Do you?”

“I do. And I would rather live with someone who was a part of my family.” He took the now empty bowl, running his finger along the side. His eyes softened, and she could nearly see the moment when he was done playing word games with her. “Someone who is my family.”

She sighed, turning to place the brownie pan in the oven. “I don’t have a lot of money.”

Oz was shaking his head. “Maybe it’s time I got something resembling more steady income. Could teach guitar and piano.” He shrugged. “Are you okay with this?”

“Better than I was before.” Tara looked at him from behind lowered lashes. “I was worried, about . . . about a lot of things.”

He nodded. “I get that.” Oz got up from the counter, and without giving her a chance to move away from him, he grabbed her hands with both of his. “You aren’t alone. And aside from a couple of nights a month, I can do the dad thing while you’re still in school. I’m empowered enough to be the stay-at-home guy.”

“Yeah, you and Spike can do the dad thing.”
Oz grinned, a real, wide smile covering his face. "Werewolf and vampire babies? Is the Hellmouth gonna explode?"

Tara was shaking her head, laughing at him. "Only if the werewolf and vampires are having babies together."

"Daycare on the Hellmouth." Oz snickered. "Could be interesting."

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"I don’t think that’s a smart thing to do. The chip controls his behavior. Without it he’d go back to killing.” Riley spoke to Buffy, but his eyes were focused on Giles, obviously believing him the more reasonable of the two.

“See, that’s where you’d be really wrong.” Buffy shifted, obviously trying to get comfortable. When that didn’t work she hauled her very pregnant body off the chair and started pacing around. “We want it removed.”

Her movement and the size of her belly caught his eye and Riley couldn’t look away. “What happened? I got a letter from Xander last August. He wrote that you died.” He watched her pace slowly from the table to the bookshelves and back, his voice filled with confusion. “How did you get from being dead to this?”

Dawn couldn’t help the giggle that welled up in her throat at the stupid question. It didn’t help that Buffy looked up at Riley with an expression that was clearly one of Spike’s – the ‘are you completely daft?’ look that always accompanied really stupid questions. Seeing the smile curling on Wesley’s lips, Dawn dropped into a chair, muttering, “Sex education sucks in the military.”

Anya started to add her own comment, changing her mind at the last second when she caught the look on Rupert’s face. Spike and Buffy shared a look, then after a moment of pointed and silent communication, she huffed out a loud breath, turning her back to Riley’s gaze. “The how and why are the usual ways, Riley.”

Buffy waddled toward the training room door, stopped for a moment and then turned around. “You know what? We’re so not doing this. I want the chip out. Like yesterday."

“I think I deserve an explanation, Buffy.”

Everyone stared at him, with varying degrees of shock and outrage. Buffy shared a look with Spike, rolling her eyes. “No, not so much. You left me, remember? After getting caught cheating.” She stepped forward, her cheeks flaring with spots of color. “So I’m thinking you don’t deserve anything.”

Riley stiffened at the mention of his past transgression and slowly got to his feet. He was at a distinct disadvantage sitting down and he didn’t like it. “I won’t give the order for anything unless I have some more information.”

For the first time since the Initiative agents entered the building, Spike opened his mouth. “You have all the information she’s willin’ to give you. Slayer trusts me, an’ that’s all you need to
“Well I don’t trust you and I give the orders to my men, not Buffy.” Riley’s stance tightened. “So no orders get issued until I have some information.”

Buffy blew out a breath, shifting her hair away from her eyes. Her hands landed on her hips and she very nearly snarled her next words at Riley. “Fine. You want information. Here’s all you’re getting. I died closing the dimensional walls Dawn’s blood opened up. Willow brought me back without telling anyone what she was doing.” She walked closer, her finger pointing at his chest. “I fell in love after she brought me back. I got pregnant. There’s your information.” She poked him once, falling silent.

A muscle was ticking in Riley’s cheek, but Buffy completely ignored it. Her outburst had drained her a bit, and though Spike could feel it through the bond, neither of them allowed it to show. Gritting her teeth, she backed away from Riley, throwing her hands up. “There it is. It should be more than enough for you to issue that order.”

“What’s your reason for having the chip removed?” He was pushing it and Riley knew that. Part of him was beginning to suspect the impossible, though his brain was insisting his suspicions couldn’t possibly be true. However, it was that perverse part of him – the part that constantly pushed – that was driving him now. He wanted Buffy to admit who it was she was in love with, who the father of her child was.

Unexpectedly, it was Giles who spoke. “Our reasons are numerous. And for your purposes, that should be sufficient.”

“So you’re just going to unleash a vicious killer because . . .” Riley’s voice trailed off and he looked between Giles and Buffy to fill in the blank.

It was clear to all of them what Riley was fishing for and why, though they all followed the earlier decision to keep him in the dark for as long as possible. Until the chip was removed, Spike was in a precarious position. There was no telling what Riley’s reaction would be if he discovered the truth. “Because he’s the strongest ally I have and I need him to help protect me and my babies.” Buffy wasn’t going to budge, wasn’t going to give him any more information than that.

It took him a moment, but the information she dropped finally registered. “Babies?”

“I’m having twins.” All the emotion she’d expended finally caught up with her. “I’m tired. I need to sleep.”

“Let’s go, then.” Spike headed for the door, Buffy and Wesley following. “Bit?”

“Why is he going?” Riley reached out a hand to snag Buffy’s arm and she pulled away too quickly, losing her balance. She stumbled, nearly knocking Wesley over, who overcompensated and nearly upended them both. Spike was back at her side, his arm curling around her waist, holding her upright, long before she could hit the floor.

“All right?” His thumb rubbed over her side, the movement hidden by her loose shirt. She clutched his forearm tightly, her fingers digging into his skin the only outward sign of her agitation.
“Wanna go home.” She rested against his chest for a brief second, not long enough for Riley to notice. Straightening away from him, she huffed out a breath. “My feet hurt.”

Spike whispered softly into her ear as he let her go. “Give you a foot massage after we get home.”

Riley caught the smile she sent Spike’s way and his suspicions suddenly didn’t seem so farfetched. There still remained a kernel of doubt though, because the other Englishman, the one he didn’t know and no one had introduced, moved quickly to her side. He started to speak, but Buffy held up a hand, forestalling his comments.

“Look, Riley. I’m really tired and my feet hurt. I’ve got a yoga class at nine tomorrow morning, so I need to get some rest. You’ve got twenty-four hours to make a decision.”

She headed for the door, followed by both of the younger Brits and Dawn. “Bye.”

They were gone, none of them sparing a backward glance and Riley realized he’d been summarily dismissed.

“I need to close up the shop for the night.”

Brought back to earth by Giles’ comment, Riley stared at him for a second, then without further comment, he and Graham left the building.

Connor flipped down off the upper level, waited five minutes then headed for the back door. “You coming back to the house?”

Giles and Anya shared a quick look and the twinkle in her eyes made his decision for him. “No, I believe I’ll call.” Quickly glancing at Connor, who was shaking his head, Giles continued, “Be careful out there.”

“You too, Pop.”

When Giles grumbled about being anyone’s grandfather, Anya took pity on him and pulled him into a deep kiss after quipping, “Most virile grandfather I’ve ever met.”

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It was obvious they were being followed. They had in fact, planned on it. Which explained why Wesley was sleeping at Revello Drive, why Connor had lagged behind, and why they’d had Tara and Giles reinforce the wards. They couldn’t do much about video surveillance, though they could mask heat signatures and shield warp some of the audio. It wasn’t much, but given their power issues, it was the best they could do. Tara’s abilities combined with Wesley’s and Giles’ were almost a match for what Willow had once been able to tap into, though they were hampered by their collective refusal to work dark magic. Even with the addition of Anya, they still fell short.

Spike walked two paces behind Buffy, letting Wesley take position beside her. They wanted to keep Finn and his goons guessing for as long as possible, dropping enough unspoken clues about Wesley to keep them from suspecting the truth. It irked him that he couldn’t flaunt his relationship, to rub Finn’s nose in the reality that was life at Revello Drive. He couldn’t though, and what irritated him even more was that it had been his own suggestion to keep them guessing.
His aggravation kept growing, though, fueling his possessive anger simmering just below the surface.

The four commandos trailing them stayed just at the edge of his awareness, pricking the hairs on the back of his neck. His nerves were jittering, electrical impulses twitching and jumping along his back and shoulders. Finn’s obnoxious odor was in his nostrils again, bringing back all sorts of unwanted memories of cold sterile walls and un-anaesthetized surgical procedures, stuff that had fed his nightmares far longer than he’d ever willingly admit. An involuntary low growl caught in his throat and Buffy’s shoulders twitched, her head angling to look at him over her shoulder.

“You okay?” At his look, she flinched. “Stupid question, right?”

He growled something again, then flashed her a small, tight smile. “Jus’ keep walkin’.”

“How many?” The question was more for Wesley’s benefit, since she already had an answer.

“Four.” Spike swung away from Dawn, who stumbled at his answer. “Finn an’ the other git are part of the group.”

“What are we gonna do about it?” She hissed, barely loud enough for the two in front of them to hear her. “Are we just gonna let them follow us?”

“Kind of hard to prevent them, seein’ as how we’re even numbers. ‘Sides, don’t really wanna make enemies with them just yet.” Spike kept walking, belatedly realizing Dawn had stopped to look at him incredulously.

“Are you crazy? What the hell?”

“Bit, they know where the house is anyway, ‘s not like the location’s changed.” He looked at her like she was the crazy one, shaking his head when she started spluttering her objections. “We want the soldier boys to think we’re . . . more vulnerable than we are, yeah? Don’t want them . . .” When it looked like she still wasn’t buying his explanation, Spike grabbed her arm, then whispered low into her ear. “Same reason we’re not tellin’ ‘em who, got it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I get it. But I still think it’s a stupid plan.” She pulled her arm away roughly, then wrapped it more comfortably around Spike’s forearm. “Who was the genius that came up with that idea anyway?” When he refused to meet her gaze, she rolled her eyes and huffed out a sigh. “Don’t tell me. You and Buffy decided this on the way to the Magic Box, and expect the rest of us to just come up with the details.”

He lowly growled her name, then broke into a reluctant smile when her mutters of “I can’t believe you guys save the world,” reached his ears.

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Connor couldn’t believe how stupid and unobservant the Commandos were. Not a one of them realized he was behind them, tracking their every move. Not even the ones Lawson and the others were tracking had a clue. Granted, he had abilities and skills none of them had, since they were nothing more than souped-up, steroid-ridden humans, but it was almost laughable how none of
them even thought to just. . . look behind them.

He shook his head, passing one of the Brachens, his lips curling in a slight smile. Dylan nodded, then shifted his attention back to the parking ticket he was writing. Connor thought it incredibly funny that the soldiers hadn’t even noticed him standing over them in the restricted book section of the Magic Box. He’d been ready to swoop down and intervene if things got too hot and it looked like Spike and Wesley were going to have to get physical. Instead it had been an almost total bust, with Buffy verbally putting the soldier in his place.

Dawn had filled him in on the history between Buffy and Riley without going into a whole lot of detail just before the hurried meeting. Connor couldn’t picture them together, wondering how someone like Buffy could even waste her time on a guy like Riley.

Once he was certain everyone else was home and safely inside, Connor waited a few more minutes, then headed off after two of the commandos. Neither one of them was the great git, but he didn’t exactly care.

With an all over body stretch, Connor let them get a block away, then lightly ran after them. At the very least, he’d get to work on his tracking skills.

His grin was very reminiscent of another’s, deceptively gentle, yet extremely feral. Had Buffy or Spike seen it, they would have both known who that smile had been inherited from.
A succession of moments

Book Three

Chapter Seven A succession of moments

There are moments when you feel free,
moments when you have energy,
moments when you have hope,
but you can’t rely on any of these things to see you through.
Circumstances do that.

Anita Brookner, Novelists in Interview, ed. John Haffenden (1985)

Life is a succession of moments,
To live each one is to succeed.

Corita Kent, Newsweek 17 Dec 84

Think naught a trifle, though it small appear;
Small sands the mountain, moments make the year,
And trifles life.

Edward Young, Love of Fame. Satire vi.

I realize that I always defined myself
in terms of what I wasn’t.
I wasn’t a good soldier like my father.
I wasn’t the job.
I wasn’t a good prospect for marriage or kids.
Always what I wasn’t, never what I was.
And when you do that, you miss the moments
And the moments are all we’ve got.
When I thought I was going to die,
even after everything that’s happened,
I realized I didn’t want to let go.
I was willing to do it all over again,
and this time I could appreciate the moments.
I can’t go back, but I can appreciate what I have right now.
And I can define myself by what I am instead of what I’m not.

Dr. Stephen Franklin, Babylon 5

“Did that satisfy your curiosity? Did you get any intel from that meeting?” Graham kept his expression blank, keeping his disappointment to himself. As far as he was concerned, that entire meeting was a bust and he had no intentions of repeating it.

Riley shot the shorter man a look, trying to get some indication of what he was thinking. When
nothing changed on his face, Riley was forced to answer. “Yeah, I did.”

“You did?” Graham turned slightly, getting a glimpse of the expression on Riley’s face. “How did you get anything but hostility from that?”

“I know she’s hiding something, probably who the father is. And she doesn’t want me to know, so it’s obviously someone I don’t like.” Riley kept walking, his eyes on the four people half a block ahead of them. “If I were a betting man, I’d put my money on Spike.”

“He’s still a vampire.”

“I’m well aware of that.” He lapsed into silence for a moment. “I don’t know how it happened. And part of me doesn’t even care.”

Graham matched his stride to Riley’s easily keeping up with his pace. “But?”

“I’m not helping him. And if that means ignoring her request and taking out the vampire, then we do it.” A muscle tensed along his jaw and it wasn’t hard to see the hold he had on his temper was slipping. “He’s not human. He’s a demon. And what do we do with demons?”

“We put them down.”

“Right.” Riley stopped as they filed into the house, watching as the vampire was the last in the door. “We put them down.”

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Oz was alone in the kitchen, cleaning up after Tara’s impromptu baking session, the brownies out on the counter and most of the dishes put away. He could hear everyone clearly as they neared the front door and he started the dishwasher as Dawn and Wesley made their way noisily down the hallway.

“Hey.” Dawn looked around, not seeing anyone but him. “Where’s Tara?”

“She’s got an early final, so she’s downstairs trying to fall asleep.” He wasn’t lying, though he wasn’t telling the entire truth. They’d decided, right after agreeing to take his parents’ house together that they would tell Buffy and Spike first before they broke the other news. Although Tara did tell him Spike suspected.

“Aw, so you made brownies? That’s sweet.” Despite the ice cream run, Dawn snagged one.

Before he had a chance to tell her differently, Buffy and Spike were inside the house, Buffy heading directly up the stairs. “Not too late, Dawnie.”

Spike moved into the kitchen, getting a bottle of water from the refrigerator. He nodded at Wesley and stared at the werewolf. “Thought you weren’t gonna be here ’til later?”

“Got an early start on rehearsal. Figured I’d stop by.” He didn’t avoid the vampire’s gaze, knowing he’d sense the change in his body temperature if he didn’t at least tell a partial truth.
The two supernatural men stared at each other for a moment, neither one saying a word. Dawn stole the water bottle in Spike’s hand, then with a “Night, guys,” tossed over her shoulder, she headed up the stairs.

“Gonna need to invest in a water company or somethin’, way those two drink.” Spike grumbled good-naturedly, reaching for the refrigerator again. “Don’t see what’s wrong with the stuff from the tap.”

Wesley quipped, “It’s not chic, Spike. You should know that.” A very noisy snort was his only answer. “Are you going to meet Connor?”

“Yeah. Soon as Buffy’s settled in. Her feet are sore.” Spike looked at Oz. “You stayin’?”

“Planned on it. Tara’s not feeling too hot. Figured I’d give her a ride to campus tomorrow.” Oz picked at some of the brownie crumbs, his eyes focused on Spike. When Spike raised his eyebrow, Oz smiled slightly.

“Good. You two can keep watch over the birds while I go patrol for the nasties.” Just like Dawn had minutes earlier, Spike headed upstairs without much fanfare.

Wesley stared after him, wondering why it felt like Spike and Oz had just shared some silent communication that he wasn’t privy to.

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Willow fiddled with the components of an audio recording device, wondering – not for the first time – what she was doing. She’d thought when she ran into Warren that what he was doing wasn’t really wrong, but now she wasn’t so sure.

She had thought they’d been working on a new robot, one much more advanced than the Buffybot, and not much else. In the last two weeks, Willow was learning otherwise. Warren had video and audio surveillance in various locations around Sunnydale, including the Magic Box, Buffy’s house, Xander’s apartment, Spike’s crypt, and – something that really had her rattled – the Hellmouth.

It had taken her a week to believe he’d actually had the nerve to install cameras in their homes. Willow hadn’t been able to locate all the feeds, or why Warren was recording. Whatever it was, and for whoever, it couldn’t be for a good reason. There was a maniacal glint in his eyes that set her nerves on edge and sometimes, the way he looked at her gave her the wiggins.

There were no cameras inside Revello Drive, thanks to Spike’s constant vigilance, and that must also be the explanation for the lack of any surveillance at Giles’ residence. Willow was inordinately grateful for that fact, the last thing she wanted to do was see was Giles in the bathroom or Buffy and Spike having sex. Once was more than enough.

For the last few nights, Willow hadn’t been able to sleep, tossing and turning, her conscience weighing on her heavily. Her conscience – sounding eerily like the voice of Ceridwen – kept her brain active long after her body was exhausted, preventing her from sleeping at all. Part of her knew she should let the Scoobies know, though without something concrete, Willow knew she’d be rejected. And rightfully so.
Everything she’d done over the past few months had torn and shattered any trust the others might have once had. Willow hadn’t just burned her bridges, she’d obliterated them into dust, destroying any hope of reconciliation. She had no one to blame but herself.

The look into Ceridwen’s cauldron had stung; an unvarnished look at her own actions, none of which stood up beyond the moment. It had taken long months, and more than one reproving slap from the Goddess, but Willow had finally begun to see how very wrong she’d been. Jealousy, lack of self-esteem, hurt, grief, every negative emotion she'd ever harbored had fueled her past actions.

Buffy wasn’t to blame for her actions, nor was Xander, Spike or anyone else. Willow knew she was alone in bearing responsibility for her actions. Staring down at the computer chips laid out on the table, Willow knew she was at a crossroads.

_I can keep doing what I’m doing – pretending like none of the past is my fault, and that no matter what I do, nothing will change. Or I could get some of this stuff together and try to make amends. Do something different. Maybe get back... no, I can’t think about doing this to get back what I lost. I have to decide that this is the right thing to do, because to do nothing is the wrong thing to do. Is this the right thing to do?_

Warren was out getting supplies and Willow knew she only had a short window of opportunity before he returned. Grabbing schematics and various computer disks and printouts, Willow stuffed what she could into her backpack.

She put the finishing touches on the small robot, jumping every time she heard a noise.  _Ohhkay, Will, need to just chill... Not give everything away the second he walks back in the door._ It took her a while, and more than one intense bout of nerves, but she finally managed to calm herself – just in time for Warren return from his errands.

Schooling her features, Willow prepared herself for the one thing she was never good at.

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“Ugh. Spike?” When he turned to look at her, Buffy stuck out her feet. “I can’t get my shoes off.”

He snickered, mostly at the completely disgruntled look on her face, then stooped to remove the shoes from her feet. “Better, kitten?”

“This is the kind of fun that isn’t. My feet hurt.” Slightly swollen and pudgy toes wiggled in his direction and Spike couldn’t help himself. He dropped soft kisses on the tops, then took the aching parts into his cool hands.

“How much longer?” Now that he took the time to look, not only her feet were slightly swollen, but her ankles and calves were looking a bit thicker than normal. “Did they say anything about swollen feet?”

Buffy was silent while he worked on the sore muscles, only soft little grunts and deep inhalations an indication she was still awake. When he hit a particularly sore spot on her right instep, Buffy panted heavily. “She wants to see if I can go another couple of weeks. We’re at thirty-one weeks.”
She said that like it was supposed to be important, and though Spike had read all the books at the same time she did, his mind wasn’t on their conversation. “Supposed to be how many?”

“Forty. But because we’ve got twins... Spike, you aren’t listening to me.” Buffy pulled her feet away from his hands, her mouth drawn in thin lines.

He grabbed for a foot, his strong fingers capturing her ankle easily. “Am. Jus’ not focused, is all.” His thumb ran the length of her instep, pushing heavily. “He knows, or suspects he does.”

She dropped back, her head bouncing softly on the bed. He couldn’t see her face behind the mound of her belly, but the exasperation was clear in her voice. “I so don’t wanna think about him. Or what he thinks he knows.”

Spike moved to sit on the edge of the bed, looking down at her prone form. “We’ve got t’deal with this, pet. Whether we want to or not. They’re the only ones left who can get this thing out.”

A tiny bit of a whine crept into her voice. “I know. I made a mistake, didn’t I?”

“How do you figure that?” He was leaning over her now, his right hand curved over the rise of her belly. Spike could feel the babies moving, feel them adjusting and rolling about, trying to get comfortable.

“ Asking for him.” She shifted, struggling to get into a better position. “I should have asked for someone else, right?”

Spike eased one arm beneath her, helping her to a semi-sitting position. “An’ jus’ who else were you supposed t’ask for? The Walsh bitch is dead. Do you even know anyone else in that group?”

The pout that drove him to distraction appeared on her face and Spike didn’t bother resisting it. He dove in for a quick kiss and a nibble, his mouth zeroing in on hers. He pulled away, noting that her eyes were glazed and her breathing heavier than normal. His smirk bloomed and she swatted half-heartedly at his chest when he laughed at her breathless question. “What were we talking about?”

He dropped a kiss on her belly, murmuring, “Talkin’ about me goin’ on patrol, an’ you gettin’ some kip.”

Buffy finished the roll onto her side, propping herself up on her elbow. “Nope. I think we were talking about something else.”

“Don’t worry about it, okay? ‘S not like we weren’t prepared for this. You called ‘im, an’ he came running.” Spike moved away from the bed and temptation, heading for the doorway. “M not angry, kitten. Jus’ need to go work off some frustration. ‘ll be back soon.”

“Take Connor with you.”

He was halfway out the door and he acknowledged her comment with a wave of his hand.

“I love you.”

That stopped him in his tracks. It wasn’t often that she said it and he knew whenever she did it was important. Though she’d gotten better, her saying those words were still a moment to savor. So he turned right back around, covering the distance between them in three strides. She was in his arms,
his mouth covering hers before Buffy realized he’d even heard her. Her belly was squashed between them, his fingers digging into her hips, holding her tight against him.

“Say it again.”

“I love you, Spike.” She toyed with the collar of his shirt, her eyes staring up into his. “No one else.”

One more quick kiss and he was gone.

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Patrol was, like Connor had said earlier, mostly a complete waste of his time. A handful of fledgling vampires and not much else troubled his walk through the rows of the peaceful dead. He’d sent Connor home, not anticipating much action. It was a school night, both he and Dawn had final exams coming up, and Spike knew for a fact that Connor hadn’t cracked a book in days.

Spike was more than aware of the two soldiers trailing him, but he ignored them. Neither was Finn, which suited him fine. He supposed that Finn thought he was being smart, sending two of his men that Spike didn’t know on sight to trail after him. Which just proved all over again how stupid Finn really was. He constantly underestimated Spike’s abilities, preferring to keep stereotyping him as “just” a vampire. He had no more in common with the glut of fledglings than Riley Finn or any of his other Initiative buddies had with regular Army soldiers.

Master vampires – especially Aurelian master vampires – were a definite breed apart. For centuries they’d managed to survive, outliving most of their brethren, including those from other lines. Spike could remember a time just after Darla left them to go haring off after the Master, when it had just been he and Drusilla and they’d stumbled into the territory of Corvus vampires. It had been touch and go for a bit, until one of the elders realized who they were. The two of them had lived like royalty, until he’d grown bored and killed most of them.

That Finn kept assuming Spike was nothing more than a fledgling kept a relative rein on his temper. Finn hadn’t always been present during the more restrained debriefing sessions that Walsh and her cohorts conducted, and it was also glaringly obvious he’d never read any of the records of those sessions. Just because the Scoobies had treated him like a failure didn’t make him one. Spike hadn’t survived – keeping himself and Drusilla hale and hearty – over a hundred years on his good looks alone.

His luck had just run out once he was back in Sunnydale.

There had been nothing to recommend the town the first time he’d visited just before the Master’s harebrained idea got him jammed up like a genie in a bottle, and he hadn’t liked it the second visit. Except for fighting Buffy. That had been a real joy. Thoughts of sparring with her still had him tingling all over, moreso now. Spike stopped pacing through Shady Rest, his coat swirling around his ankles. No reason to be out, still. Could go home an’ spend some quality time with Buffy. . . Since tha’s soon to be a precious commodity.

It still boggled his mind, the idea of them being able to produce children. He’d thought when Dawn had first blurted out the truth she’d found in the journals that she would be all he’d leave behind when he was finally dust. His real legacy. Instead, fate had smiled on him, deciding he
deserved something better. The irony of it was not lost on him.

Retracing his steps back toward Revello Drive, Spike mused over the changes. It was a habit he’d picked up – since he’d been chipped – pondering the alterations fate and destiny had spun into his life. He’d always, as a human, spent too much time in his own head, romantic dreams and whimsy ruling his days, especially as a boy. The chip, rendering his more violent tendencies null and void, had forced him back into that mode. At first he’d balked, trying desperately to hold onto that image of himself and then he’d just . . . accepted it. Accepted the limitations the hardware forced into his brain had placed on him.

Spike was half a block away from the house when he sensed the familiar and unwelcome presence hovering around the property. He paused for a moment, watching intently while the slight figure paced toward the front door, then retreated back to the sidewalk. It happened twice, which was more than enough for him to decide to take matters into his own hands.

"What do you want, Red?"

She hadn’t sensed him and the resulting yelp of surprise nearly had him shaking his head. Willow panted hard for a moment, trying to calm her heartbeat and breathing. Once she had a modicum of control, she blurted out, amidst nervous laughter, "Oh, hey, Spike. You scared me."

He didn’t respond, merely inclining his head in her direction. When she also lapsed into silence, Spike stepped between her and the house, effectively blocking her progress. "What do you want?"

"I . . um. . . wanted to talk to Buffy. Is she home?" There was a hopeful lilt in her voice, one all out of proportion to her earlier hesitance.

A quick glance over his shoulder proved his earlier suspicion. The only light in their room was dimmed, alerting him to the likely fact she was already asleep. At least he was hoping so. "She’s home, pro’ly already in bed, though." Spike stared down into Willow’s face, his expression set. "Can’t say that I’d be willing to get her up to see you."

"Oh." Willow looked away, unable to meet his intense gaze. "I guess I kinda deserved that." Her eyes darted to his, then away again. "I wouldn’t be here unless it was important."

Spike wasn’t moved. "Doesn’t much impress me, what you think is important."

It finally dawned on Willow that he wasn’t going to budge and she reached out to grasp his arm. When he reared back, avoiding her touch, she halted the motion, instead wringing her hands together and mumbling an apology. "Sorry. I’m sorry. I just. . . I really need to talk to her. Could you ask her if she would let me. . . talk?"

"Dunno, Red. ‘M not even sure she wants to be in the same room with you. Not sure any of us do." Spike folded his arms across his chest, his attention fixed on Willow. “What’s so bloody important anyway?"

Thinking if she managed to win Spike to her side, she had a better shot of getting to see Buffy, Willow poured on the charm and tried. “I know you’re probably all still really mad at me, but I found out something that might help you.”

“Help us? Why would we want your kind of help?”
Nothing stands between us here

Book Three

Chapter Eight. Nothing stands between us here

For winter's rains and ruins are over,
And all the seasons of snows and sins;
The days dividing lover and lover,
The light that loses, the night that wins;
And time remembered is grief forgotten,
And frosts are slain and flowers begotten,
And in green underwood and cover
Blossom by blossom the spring begins.

Algernon Charles Swinburne, Atalanta in Calydon, chorus, st. 4

Listen as the wind blows
from across the great divide,
Voices trapped in yearning,
memories trapped in time,
The night is my companion
and solitude my guide,
Would I spend forever here
and not be satisfied,
And I would be the one
to hold you down,
kiss you so hard,
I'll take your breath away
and after I'd wipe away the tears,
Just close your eyes dear
Through this world I've stumbled
so many times betrayed,
Trying to find an honest word,
to find the truth enslaved,
Oh you speak to me in riddles and
you speak to me in rhymes
My body aches to breathe your breath,
your words keep me alive,
And I would be the one
to hold you down,
kiss you so hard,
I'll take your breath away
and after I'd wipe away the tears,
Just close your eyes dear
Into this night I wander,
it's morning that I dread,
Another day of knowing of
the path I fear to tread,
Oh into the sea of waking dreams
I follow without pride,
Nothing stands between us here
and I won’t be denied,
And I would be the one
to hold you down,
Kiss you so hard,
I’ll take your breath away
And after I’d wipe away the tears,
Just close your eyes dear...

Sarah McLachlan, Possession, Fumbling Toward Ecstasy, 1993

Staring down at the date didn’t make it any easier.

Nor did avoiding the earlier pages, the ones she hardly ever allowed herself to turn to – the ones with barely more than a few smeared and illegible words. Knowing they were there at the beginning of the journal didn’t help at all.

Time hadn’t quite begun to heal the wounds. Anguish and grief still flooded her veins, tears still flowed from her eyes and just the sound of his name was enough to put a fist around her heart.

She’d started out this journal so hopefully. Given to her by Giles for Christmas, the first two pages were filled with the spirit surrounding that holiday, which, despite being without Joyce’s presence, had been a good one. Knowing and acknowledging the truth of her origins, and knowing too, that a second miracle was going to take place had almost mitigated the fear of Angelus.

Page three was the one with a single word.

Just his name.

The ink was smeared and the letters were barely visible, water marks of her tears, mixed with faint traces of blood, obscuring the almost faded black letters. Here and there were fingerprints, ridges and lines showing where she’d gripped the book with an almost feral grief. A small tear along the bottom held the imprint of her teeth, though Dawn had no memory of gnawing on the sleek leather-bound journal.

The weeks following Casey’s death had been more than difficult. She hadn’t wanted to live, blaming herself for putting him in harm’s way. If she hadn’t been dating him, he would have been safe, protected from her secret life, ignorant and blissful, but alive.

Knowing the truth hadn’t made it any easier. Yes, her head knew Willow’s spell had placed them all in serious danger and Connor’s birth had ripped away Angel’s soul – neither of which she had any control over – though her heart didn’t believe she was innocent of Casey’s death.

From the moment she’d learned – not the whole truth, but the partial truth – that monks had
created her and her entire past was nothing but fabricated memories rudely inserted into the minds of everyone around her, Dawn had suspected there might be something wrong about her. Then Joyce had gotten sick... And Glory, who’d all but confirmed what Dawn had been thinking. That somehow the monk’s actions had demanded some sort of payment or something. Because she existed, someone or something had to die.

And her continued existence demanded sacrifice.

First Joyce, the mother the monks had created for her.

Then Buffy, the mother the monks had created her from.

And last, Casey.

Felt like every couple of months someone important in her life died, someone she needed.

The pages after – the tearstained and ripped page containing only Casey’s name – those were filled with angry, hurting words, some of them heavily crossed out, only to be replaced with even harsher ones. Dawn had spared herself not once, giving herself no pity, no sympathy. She was the cause of all the misery. Because of her, Tara had been hurt, Buffy had died, and then, also because of her Willow had gone off the deep end and damn near destroyed them all. And even though her therapist tried to help – a wonderful witch recommended by Tara – nothing she said could shake Dawn’s belief that her existence was the root of all their deep problems.

Dawn was desperately afraid now, though. Afraid something would happen in the next couple of days and someone else she loved and needed would die. The constant refrain of please, not now, not this time, kept running through her brain, her thoughts touching upon it at every opportunity.

Half the time she didn’t know how to feel and the other half, her emotions were so raw and exposed, Dawn could barely catch a breath. The memories the monks had injected into everyone had screwed with everything, especially her own emotions. Perhaps it would’ve been smarter in the long run for them to have given them correct memories, instead of making everyone believe Joyce Summers had two daughters. She didn’t know, because despite having read all the journals twice, they contained nothing about why they had chosen that particular circumstance. Maybe they’d thought she would be safer as a teenager, instead of a smaller child, but she had no way of knowing it, since they hadn’t bothered to chronicle that particular instance. Or if they had, that journal no longer existed.

Believing, even for a short while, that Joyce Summers had been her mother had twisted her insides. While Dawn acknowledged that Buffy was her mother, sometimes it was very difficult to think of her that way. Every memory she had – except for the very recent ones – said differently. That Joyce and Hank Summers were her parents. Except Hank had never even really set eyes on her and he could care less, one way or the other. It was easier to believe and accept that Spike was her true father. He loved her unconditionally, never once letting her doubt the place she occupied in his heart.

It was the other, trying to wrap her head – and her heart – around the truth of Buffy being her mother that kept her reeling. At least it kept her mind off the other... the ever present and real fear that something bad was going to happen.

That someone else might die.
Spike had watched, standing resolutely in front of the house, as Willow tearfully walked away. He felt no guilt for making the redhead cry, for telling her in no uncertain terms that there was no way he was letting her see Buffy tonight, or any other time, unless and until Buffy said otherwise.

He also had no qualms about sending her off without protection. Willow had made her choices, done all that damage with her conscience and soul intact and of her own free will. It wasn’t his duty to protect her. She knew the dangers of roaming the streets of Sunnydale at night. It was on her own head if she got caught by one of the nasty demons calling the place home.

Checking to make sure the tin soldiers who’d been following him were taking up surveillance positions on the house, Spike shook his head and went inside. Bloody idiots, listenin’ to Finn. . .

Once inside the door, Spike dropped his duster on the big comfy chair in the living room and sat down, taking the remote away from Connor. “Should be in bed.”

“Yeah. I guess.” Connor didn’t shift his focus, reaching instead for the chips. “Can’t sleep.”

“Doubt you even tried.” Spike kept his thumb on the channel changer, flicking through the hundreds of cable television channels faster than a human could follow. Neither of them had a problem though, and it was only after Spike slowed down when Connor showed an interest in what was on. “Spike, leave that.”

A low chuckle and then, “I’m not leavin’ that on. Don’t think Buffy’d like it much.”

“Well, she’s not watching it is she? It’s just you and me and I’m not gonna tell anyone.” Connor reached across, trying to wrestle the remote from Spike’s firm grip. “C’mon, lemme watch.”

“Pup, you should just go out an’ get a woman.” Spike’s chuckles gained intensity as Connor heard something interesting emerge from the screen and whipped his head around to watch. “This is shite anyway.”

“Who cares? Doesn’t have to be Shakespeare, ya know.” Connor leaned forward, his eyes glued to the television. “No one cares if they can act. And I’ve seen you watching it.”

“So? ‘S not like ‘m not old enough.” Spike watched for a moment, snickering and snorting at the position and the fake moans. “Bloody awful.”

“A few more moans and accompanying grunts had Spike rolling his eyes. “Pup, go t’ your own room an’ watch this drivel. ‘M going up to bed.”

Connor looked up as Spike got up from the couch. “Why do I have to go?”

“Coz I don’t think either of the girls would appreciate you hangin’ about in the sitting room with your prick in hand.” Spike motioned to the lights, then locked the door. “Go’n now.”

He waited at the foot of the stairs while Connor reluctantly got to his feet. “I’m going, see?”
“Con, don’t gimme any shite. You know the girls, ‘specially Buffy, would have your head.”

“Yeah, I know.” He looked up at Spike standing on the stairs, a roguish smile playing about his lips. “Gonna go upstairs and wake her up?”

Another deep chuckle barked from Spike and his answering grin was more a leer. “As if you had any doubts.”

“Just keep it down so the neighbors don’t complain again.” Connor scampered out of the way before Spike could thump him.

Shaking his head with laughter, Spike dropped down the two steps to flick off the lights, then took the stairs two at a time.

He was still laughing when he hit the door to their bedroom. Buffy was curled on her side, the body pillow Grace had recommended tucked under her with her head on his pillow. As he watched her, she shifted, her eyes slowly opening.

“Hey.”

Spike moved toward the bed, his eyes sweeping over her. “Did you sleep?”

“Some. It’s hard when you aren’t here. I can’t get comfy enough.”

A raised eyebrow greeted her statement and he once more swept his eyes over her. “Look right comfy from here.”

“It’s all an act. See? This comfy pillow isn’t cool enough for me and it doesn’t hold me back.” She rolled over slowly and struggled to sit up. “That’s the best part.”

His hands were there before she could finish moving, lifting her easily so she could sit up. “Is that so?”

“Yup.” Buffy reached out to grab his hand before he could move away. “You’re staying now?”

Giving her fingers a squeeze, Spike sat down on the bed, his back to her. His voice was muffled a bit as he leaned over to unlace his boots, but Buffy heard him clearly. “Am. It’s gone one, kitten. An’ there’s nothin’ on the telly.”

He didn’t need to turn around to see the pout forming on her lips. “So you’re only here because there’s nothing good on the television?”

“No, kitten. ‘M here because there’s no where on earth ‘d rather be.” Spike glanced over his shoulder, catching sight of Buffy leaning toward him, her fingers reaching out to play with the hem of his tee-shirt. They were warm, brushing over the hollow of his back, tracing the line of his spine up, then down, dipping below his belt. Electricity seemed to flow between them, his eyes finding hers in the soft glow of a small, single lamp.

“Nowhere else?” His boots thumped to the floor, punctuating her question.

Angling his body to face her, Spike let a slow grin cross his features. “If you think there’s
someplace else ‘d rather be, you’ve got ‘nother think comin’, pet.”

The hand she wasn’t leaning on trailed across his lower abdomen, teasing around and around his belly button. He brushed a few lazy, slow kisses up her arm, nipping briefly at her shoulder. “Need to shower, kitten.”

“No, you don’t. You’re fine.” She leaned closer, playfully sniffing along his collarbone and across his torso. “You smell okay. Better than okay.”

“Yeah? Not too cold for you?”

It wasn’t usually something they talked about, or that she’d ever even mentioned, so understanding dawned slowly. Spike usually showered at night, just before getting into bed and now she finally understood why. Buffy tilted her head, looking up at him from lowered lashes. “God, no. Is that why you don’t come to bed until after you’ve showered?”

Spike slid down, until she was nearly lying on his chest, his fingers sliding easily over her soft skin. “Thought you’d appreciate it, me being a bit more than room temp.”

Buffy snuggled close, letting her whole body relax into his. “Whenever Riley and I used to . . .” She felt Spike tense briefly, so she quickly rushed through the next part of what she was saying, “I always ended up moving away from him, pushing the covers off. I wasn’t really comfortable sleeping with him.”

He was quiet for longer than she would have expected and when he spoke, it was almost as if he hadn’t heard her. “So me bein’ a bit cool doesn’t bother you, then.”

“Spike?” She started to sit up, but his strong hands held her down, gently yet firmly.

“Heard you. Di’nt think you needed me to . . .” He paused for a moment, obviously gathering his thoughts. “Knew the soldier boy wasn’t entirely right for you. Knew no regular joe would be. Too much strength in you. Seen a fair amount of slayers in my life, knew the moment I saw you that you were special, different. You need someone a bit more than jus’ normal.”

She waited, having learned in the almost year they’d been together when he was being serious and when he wasn’t. Spike was very serious now. “In all my time huntin’ Chosen Ones, ‘ve learned a bit about them. Uncommon birds, the whole lot, but every once in a while, one comes along tha’s just a bit more than the others. Bit stronger, bolder, better. Closer to the core, the essence of what a Slayer really is. Those are the ones gave me the most trouble, an’ a couple even had— There was this one Slayer in Barcelona, ‘round the time of the Spanish Civil War, was, well, she was like you. Strong, smart, an’ bloody difficult to fight. Went a few rounds, only to find out she was makin’ time with another vamp— one of the Corvos line.”

He lapsed into silence, letting his fingers run through the strands of her hair. “And? What happened?”

“Couldn’t kill her, so me an’ Dru headed up toward France. Were in Paris when it fell to the Nazis.”

“No, I mean what happened to her?” Buffy drummed her fingers on his taut stomach, almost digging in when he didn’t answer her right away.
“Ow.” He captured her fingers in his free hand, holding them away from him. “Heard she got killed in the fightin’, not sure what happened to her vamp.”

“That’s sad.” Buffy tried wiping her eyes before Spike realized she had teared up, but he brushed away her hand and did it for her. “So I guess we aren’t so special then, huh?”

“Wouldn’t go that far, kitten. ‘S not every day a vampire with a reputation for fightin’ Slayers meets up with a Slayer strong enough to beat a Hellgod.” One of the babies kicked, a tiny foot tapping insistently through Buffy’s skin to thump into his. “Look at us, kitten. Neither one of us should be here. By rights, I should’ve been dead more than once an’ you. . . Well, you’re a bloody miracle, you are.”

The tapping continued, and Spike nudged back. When the tapping increased, he did it again, chuckling the whole time. He knew Buffy was crying, but didn’t really know what to say to soothe her. Lately, almost anything seemed to set her off, and it was getting harder and harder to cajole her out of the mood swings. When it was just tears, he’d learned to hold her, keeping his thoughts to himself – one busted lip and a pair of bruised ribs had cured him of speaking his mind quickly.

Her sniffles were tapering off, though he was suddenly too busy to remark on it, because the tapping had become something of a game. Spike eased out from beneath her, his head resting lightly against her belly, his fingers beating a tattoo on her skin. An unconscious, low humming started in his throat and it took Buffy more than a few minutes to figure out what he was humming. Once she had narrowed it down, she couldn’t stop the giggles.

“Spike?”

“Hhmmm?” He didn’t look up from where he was, instead he just lifted her sleep shirt, laying his cheek against her belly.

“What are you doing?” Buffy ran her fingers through his hair.

“Talkin’ to the nippers.”

“Is that what you call it? Sounds more like you’re trying to sing to them.”

He kissed her belly, sighing when the tapping finally ended. “Party’s over, I guess.”

His fingers traced imaginary lines up and over her belly, able to feel where each baby nestled inside her. Grace and Kait, along with Doctor Thomas, assured them there was enough room inside Buffy for both babies, however every time Spike looked at her, he couldn’t imagine how. She was still so tiny, except for the bulge that housed their twins. Her breasts had gotten just a little bigger, and her hips had filled out some, but for the most part Buffy was still small. Despite the big belly, or maybe because of it – Spike wasn’t entirely sure which – he had this insatiable urge to touch her. He couldn’t keep his hands, or fingers or any part of himself from constantly touching her. And every part of her was fair game, at any given time.

Leaving a trail of kisses across her belly and then down toward her hip, Spike got up from the bed, stripping out of his clothes. Tossing them haphazardly all over, he padded naked about the room, looking for the small tealights they habitually left burning at night. He could feel her eyes on him while he found what he was looking for, enjoying the reaction she was giving him. The increased heartrate and the shallowness of her inhalations skittered through his skin, pitching his arousal higher. His hands itched with the need to touch her, to run his fingers over the softness of her skin,
tracing the lines of her veins, feel her heart pounding from his touch.

The longer he held out, the more he needed to be near her, his body reacting, his arousal pointing in her direction. Finally, the harsh electric light was out, only the dim illumination provided by the candles bathing her in soft tones. Spike stood at the end of their bed, watching her watch him. His hand curved around his erection, idly stroking from base to tip. Buffy rested on her side, the body pillow supporting her, her eyes focused on the movement of his hand.

She shifted, one leg curling over the pillow, and Spike caught himself salivating at the glimpse of thigh and ass she teased him with. A low growl of her name sounded from his lips and she did it again, giving him a clear view of her rear. He was in bed beside her in an instant, one hand sliding between her thighs, his hips nestled behind her. Without any warning two fingers thrust into her pussy, pumping her steadily. “Gonna do this slow, kitten, take you hard.”

A gasping “Oohhh” was all the answer he got until she could breathe again. His name was a low whine while her body tried to get closer.

“Don’t move, kitten, lemme do all the work.” Sliding his fingers out of her pussy, he angled her backward a bit, letting his hand take the weight of her thigh. His cock was slipping over her folds, bumping into her clit from behind, and he could feel the clenching and contracting of her muscles, mini orgasms rippling through her. The fleeting realization that her state of perpetual readiness now was behind the reason why he couldn’t keep his hands off her raced through his mind and then he couldn’t think anymore.

She was tight and slick and . . . Spike ground into her grasping pussy from behind, nothing separating them. Buffy’s muscles clenched around him, fist tight and softer, silkier, and her faint grunting mewls drove him harder into her, his hips barely moving against her. Buffy grabbed his hip, her fingers digging into him awkwardly. Spike nuzzled the back of her neck, breathing heavily through his nose, knowing the effect that had on Buffy’s nerves.

Her entire body started tremoring, muscles rippling and writhing as he steadily pumped into her. She was close, he could tell. Spike slowed down, savoring the sound of her whimpered protest, the scent of frustrated arousal playing havoc with his own senses. He bit down on her shoulder, holding her still as he thrust harder and deeper, his body almost pinning her to the bed.

Buffy’s nails dragged deeply across his hip, drawing blood in their wake and Spike growled fiercely into her neck. His teeth tightened around her skin, biting down harder, warning her without words not to move. Teasing her with shallower thrusts, Spike growled again, then whispered harshly into her ear. “What do you want, baby?”

She barely breathed out an answer, her voice high and breathy. Spike slid in deeper, then teased at her entrance. “Who, kitten?”

When she answered this time with a whine, Spike stilled his hips completely. “Say it, baby, tell me.” She couldn’t catch a breath to answer him, couldn’t breathe. Her fingers clutched at him, scratching over his skin. His voice got deeper, raspier as he demanded a response from her. “Who do you belong to?”

“You, Oh, God. You. Yours, yours, Spike.” The answer bubbled up from her, her body convulsing on the last word as he thrust hard, holding her down. Buffy shrieked out his name again, her inner muscles clamping around him as she rode out her orgasm. Spike dug his fingers into her inner thigh, barely holding off his own orgasm. He lost the battle though, when Buffy
whispered, “I’m so yours.”

He collapsed against her, his head resting just behind hers. She was trembling, little quakes shaking through her body and he could smell the salt of her sweat and tears. Spike eased the hold he had on her thigh, letting it rest over his. He realized his hands were shaking when he tried to gather her close, holding her in the aftermath. Buffy burrowed into his arms, her hand reaching for his, drawing it over her side.

Spike tried to speak, opening his mouth more than once to say something, anything, but no words formed in his head. He released the breath he was holding, shifting himself until Buffy was laying beside him. Once more he tried to speak, but she looked up at him, her eyes capturing his and all he could do was stare back. She didn’t need words, knew without him saying anything how he felt, knew, too, that he could read her feelings clearly. Buffy snuggled into his arms, her head resting on his chest. Spike held her close, letting her drift off to sleep.

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The fully loaded private plane waited on the tarmac, just like it had for the last two hours. Both the pilot and co-pilot were conferring with the ground crew chief, who was gesturing animatedly toward the right engine. Three large Range Rovers and a couple of smaller, sleeker vehicles were parked on the edge of the runway, their passengers by turns riveted or bored by the drama taking place outside.

Quentin Travers was too far away to hear the conversation, though just by body language alone, it was clear he wasn’t going to like the outcome. “Nicholson? Go find out how long this delay is going to last.”

“Yes, sir.” Without a backward glance, Nicholson exited the vehicle and headed over to the trio standing just beneath the plane’s wing. “Gentlemen? Mr. Travers would like to know how long this delay will be.”

The pilot, a Scot by birth, raised his eyebrow and smirked, while remarking to the other two. “Travers wants to know, eh?”

Nicholson hid his grin. “He does.”

“Well then, laddie, you just go toddle off and tell his lordship that you’ll no’ be takin’ off for at least another two or three hours.” The crew chief, another Scot, spoke, adding, “Though if you need for more time, we can arrange that.”

Ducking his head and shifting his body so that those in the vehicles couldn’t get a glimpse of his features, Nicholson spoke softly and quickly. “Haven’t gotten the signal from my contact yet, so we’ll need at least that much time. Four hours or more would be better. In fact,” he glanced upward, gesturing toward the engine, “As much time as you can give me would be best.”

“Right then.” Sharing a look, the three communicated without words. The crew chief finally conceded, “I can give you five hours, but any more than that and the old man will be suspicious. Lucky for you this plane has been a bit twitchy since we bought it.”

“Five hours is fine. Thanks, gents.” Nicholson sprinted back to the lead Rover, schooling his
features to grim lines. *C’mon, Leslie, get a move on it. Need to know if Giles has been warned of our arrival.* . .
The sin of broken faith

Book Three

Chapter Nine  The sin of broken faith

The heart may think it knows better:  
the senses know that absence blots people out.  
We really have no absent friends.  
The friend becomes a traitor by breaking,  
however unwillingly or sadly, out of our own zone:  
a hard judgment is passed on him, for all the pleas of the heart.  
   Elizabeth Bowen, The Death of the Heart

They talk of a man betraying his country, his friends, his sweetheart.  
There must be a moral bond first.  
All a man can betray is his conscience.  
   Joseph Conrad, Under Western Eyes

I hate the idea of causes,  
and if I had to choose between betraying my country  
and betraying my friend,  
I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.  

When you were weary, roaming the wide world, over,  
I gave my fickle heart to a new lover.  
Now they tell me that you are lying dead:  
O mountains fall on me and hide my head!  
When you lay burning in the throes of fever,  
He vowed me love by the willow-margined river:  
Death smote you there — here was your trust betrayed,  
O darkness, cover me, I am afraid!  
Yea, in the hour of your supremest trial, I laughed with him!  
The shadows on the dial  
Stayed not, aghast at my dread ignorance:  
Nor man nor angel looked at me askance.  
Under the mountains there is peace abiding,  
Darkness shall be pavilion for my hiding,  
Tears shall blot out the sin of broken faith,  
The lips that falsely kissed, shall kiss but Death.  
   Alice Furlong, The Betrayal
It was early and the quad was quiet, though there were pockets of students conversing in various locations; some at the tables surrounding the coffee bar and others on the lawns, hiding from the morning sunshine. Willow kept her eyes trained on the parking lot, hoping to catch a glimpse of Tara before she had to head off to finals.

Despite Spike’s very firm dismissal, Willow wasn’t going to give up. He’d brushed her off, telling her in no uncertain terms he wasn’t going to let her into the house until Buffy had okayed it. However, Willow’s newly reawakened conscience wouldn’t let her throw up her hands and say she’d tried. So if Buffy wouldn’t listen, maybe, just maybe, Tara would. She had to try. What Warren was doing – selling information to the Council – was bad enough. What he was planning would amount to another apocalypse. Buffy and the others needed to know about both those things. Sooner rather than later.

So if Buffy and Tara wouldn’t listen, then she’d try Giles and Wesley – anyone. Eventually someone had to listen.

Willow was lost in thought, running all sorts of scenarios through her head, over and over, trying to come up with the best way to approach Tara when her mind finally registered what her eyes were seeing. Tara was sitting at one of the tables nearest the coffee bar, her companions blocked by other students, her head bent over a book. Sunlight picked out all the soft blond highlights, the faint breeze enough to send wisps of loose hair up into the air. She moved enough for Willow to catch a glimpse of her smooth cheek. Willow’s heart contracted, grief and guilt choking her until she could scarcely breathe.

She’s so beautiful.

Unexpected tears welled up and her breathing hitched on a stifled sob. Trying hard to compose herself and her thoughts, Willow braced herself for the coming confrontation. I can do this. Tara will listen to me, I know she will. I know it. She loves me still, even if it’s . . . she’ll listen. I know it.

On her feet before she realized it, Willow hesitantly approached the table, the whole time talking to herself. I’m going to forget I know what her kisses are like. Forget that I know every swell and curve of her breasts, the taste of her skin . . . her smell. What it feels like to sleep next to her, with her . . . oh, Goddess. I can’t do this.

I can. I have to. I really, really have to.

Long before she reached the table, the crowd around Tara’s table parted and for the first time she could see who was with Tara. Oh. I can do this. If anyone of the gang is gonna listen to me, it’ll be Tara and Oz. I can do this. This is good.

Or so she thought until she moved closer. Their arms were hanging down between them, both of them intent upon the texts in front of them and their fingers were linked loosely. As she watched, Oz squeezed Tara’s fingers. She responded by looking up at him and smiling. That smile froze the breath in Willow’s chest. That was her special smile, Tara’s I-know-something-really-special smile that had always warmed her.

Seeing it now, directed at someone else, seared her to the core. That’s my smile. Only for me! Only it wasn’t. Not anymore. As unbelievable as it seemed, that smile now belonged to Oz.

Willow stifled the hysterical sob building in her throat and fled the quad.
The house was quiet. Dawn and Connor had already gone to school, the door closing behind Oz and Tara. Spike was upstairs, still sleeping and there was at least an hour before Grace was scheduled to arrive.

For once, Buffy was entirely alone.

*Well*, she thought, staring down at the enormous bulge of her belly, *not entirely*. The two babies were always with her, but at the moment, they weren’t clamoring for her attention.

Which left her ample time for thought, something she hadn’t necessarily indulged in frequently, or much at all in the past. Before dying, before learning, and ultimately understanding the value of quiet and solitude. Reflection of what was. Taking stock of her life.

She’d been done, thought her battles were all fought, her tenure as the Chosen One finished. Part of her still yearned for the peace she’d touched upon. The serenity. But the ache had long since dulled to something manageable, disappearing in the face of love surrounding her now.

Buffy knew if it hadn’t been for Spike and his willingness to stand between the shattered girl who’d had to dig her way from her own grave and the rest of the world, she wouldn’t be anywhere near recovered, much less looking forward to the future. A future Spike, of all people, had given her.

There were moments when she could hardly believe all the changes, some of which she wasn’t sure she was prepared to face. Her biggest worry wasn’t the Initiative or the Council. Situations and circumstances would determine the outcome of those confrontations. Riley would either help or he wouldn’t, and Buffy was pretty sure he wasn’t going to help. The Council’s motives were a bit more hidden, though she had a feeling if the commandos jumped the wrong way, the Council would move to protect their own. Or that’s what she hoped would happen. Hard to tell sometimes with the Council.

In typical Buffy fashion, she dismissed both groups.

What worried her – really worried her – was her family. Something was up with Tara, though Spike said it wasn’t anything bad and they’d hear about it when Tara was ready to share. And though Dawn tried so hard to prove to them she was better, Buffy knew differently. Her blue eyes were always shadowed with sadness and she wasn’t doing any of the things Buffy thought she should. It was hard to draw her out of the shell she’d retreated into, though every now and again, there were glimpses of the irrepressible girl Dawn had once been. Buffy could only hope time and love would work in their favor.

Connor, for all the awkwardness and weirdness that surrounded him, seemed to be adjusting well. He was learning how to cope with the incredible strength and agility his parentage had given him. Spike had started training him, and between his attention and Wesley’s, they’d managed to not only get him ready for school, but caught up enough on pop culture that he wouldn’t be an automatic outcast. For once, one of Spike’s weird quirks had reaped a benefit.
Buffy padded barefoot into the kitchen, her attention momentarily diverted from her thoughts by thirst. The teenagers were one thing. Most of the time she could pretend they weren’t really her responsibility, though she knew it wasn’t the truth. They didn’t really need her – not the way the infants would. I don’t know if I can do this.

It was more than a little late to decide that.

Worries that a normal mother faced – fear of giving birth and the pain involved – didn’t even give her pause. Her calling, her Chosen status, added so many complications. While Jenner’s assertion that he’d met Bryn of Rhuddlan and her vampire had set off a round of research, nothing Giles or Wesley uncovered indicated their longevity was more than a fluke, or, at worst, a case of mistaken identity.

Buffy needed something to hold onto, something tangible. Some proof that her expiration date wouldn’t come due in another five years. Neither Spike nor Jenner knew what effect a mating or claiming would have on a Slayer. Kirsten’s daring trip through time had given her some hope. A thin thread, but possibly that thread would be enough to hold onto. It would have to be enough.

*Wonder what Mom would say about all this? I know she liked Spike, but would she be all on the bandwagon? Or would she be like Xander and Willow – not with the happy?*_

Buffy thought about her own babies and a fierce wave of an emotion she couldn’t even describe rose up, almost choking her in its intensity. She realized, after the plastic cup in her hand exploded, that she’d felt this way before. When Glory had Dawn. When Angel had Dawn. A deep, internal growl rumbled through her and Buffy had a feeling this ferocious emotion was a mix of maternal and Slayer and she promised herself – and her babies – that nothing was ever going to hurt them.

And whatever tried would have to go through her first.

*Huh.*

*I guess I am all mom-ready. Who knew?*

Suddenly doubt-free, Buffy picked up the splintered plastic, sweeping it easily into the trash.

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"Rupert Giles?"

The voice was unfamiliar, but given the accent, Giles was more than willing to wager his last measure of Drambuie the caller was Leslie McKeown.

"Speaking."

"I’ve not much time, in fact our stalling tactics have about run out and circumstances, on your part, are critical."

Glancing up from the book he was reading, Giles motioned Anya to silence. "And?"
"Despite our best efforts, we’ve run out of excuses. The teams are on the runways now, preparing to depart."

Rupert watched Anya flounce away, her indecently short nightgown revealing far too much skin for him to ignore. A slight grin played about his mouth as he recognized the depths she was willing to go to in order to distract him. Belatedly, he realized his caller was waiting for his response and, feeling more annoyed than worried, he gruffly spoke. "We anticipated this. I’m surprised you managed to hold them off as long as you did. Your efforts are greatly appreciated."

The silence lasted for a moment, then, in an unexpected burst of enthusiasm, McKeown burst out, "It’s an honor to help you, sir. Any time, anything you need, sir."

Well, this was unforeseen. Allies in the main camp. "You’ve gone above and beyond, you and your associates. Watch yourself."

"Will do." There was another short pause and just before the connection was severed, the Scot whispered, "Mind your back."

Giles stared at the phone for a moment, contemplating what hadn’t been said. He’d gotten more information than expected and yet it still wasn’t enough. No knowledge of numbers, nor of who led the group, though Giles had his suspicions. Travers wouldn’t dare trust something of this importance to an underling.

No, Quentin Travers would see to this himself. The question was, how would he act?

Or what he would decide when confronted with the reality of life on the Hellmouth.

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"We gotta stick around." Faith was lying crosswise on the bed, feet in the air, idly watching the television. "B’s gotta be stressing with her old honey back in town."

"Got any ideas what we should be doing?" Jenner leaned against the wall, his attention riveted on Faith’s nearly bare ass. It took him a moment to think about why they would want them to stay, though not reveal their presence. "They want us to lie low and stay under the radar."

She shrugged, throwing a quick glance over her shoulder. "I think they want you to stay outta sight. Riley already knows about me."

“And I’m supposed to care that some covert military operation is hunting demons?” Jenner moved away from the wall, his steps taking him around the room. “I’ve been watching my back for longer than these soldiers have been alive. Combined.” His dismissive shrug was more eloquent than any words he might utter. “They can try all they like.”

“Do I need to remind you these are the same guys that managed to capture Spike?”

“How many of them did it take? Has he told you?”

Faith thought about it for a minute, shaking her head when she couldn’t remember. “Don’t think
“They tasered him. Hit him with at least four or five shots.” He picked up a glass ashtray, idly tossing it into the air. “When he finally woke up, he killed eight of them before they were able to hit him again. I’d wager it wasn’t as simple as those soldiers made it out to be.”

She rolled over, her eyes following the movement of the ashtray. “He never said.”

“He wouldn’t. I doubt even Buffy knows exactly what went on while he was a guest of the military.” He palmed the ashtray, then laid it back down. “Not something an old vampire wants to admit. Humans getting the better of him and then experimenting? Spike doesn’t want anyone to know what really went on.”

“So how come you know?” Faith played with the hem of the long shirt she was wearing, her eyes back on the television.

“I pried it out of him one night, right after he killed Angelus. We were drinking and he was talkative.”

“Damn. You got him to spill on the commando boys?” Faith rolled onto her side, eyeing Jenner as he leaned over the foot of the bed. “Color me impressed.”

His deep chuckle resonated in the room, and he shook his head. “Have you ever seen Spike on a bender?”

“Can’t say that I have. Why?”

Jenner moved around to the side, his cool hand brushing over her bare leg. “Baby, he’s a funny drunk. Giggles, laughter, and you bloody can’t get him to shut up.” His hand met hers at the hem of her long tee-shirt. “Tosser is a complete git when he’s had a snoot full.”

“Snoot? What the hell is a snoot?” Faith idly watched Jenner’s hand slide beneath the tee-shirt, squirming a little at the feel of his calloused fingers tweaking her clit.

“It’s a nose. Thing used to smell with.” He inhaled deeply, his eyes never leaving hers. “Like I’m doing right now. Got a snoot full of your scent, baby, and it’s driving me crazy.”

“Is it?” Faith tried for demure, but knew she was going to miss the mark. Instead she raised her leg, exposing her bare pussy to his gaze. “Do I smell good?”

One thick finger slid inside her. “Good enough to eat.”

Her laugh was husky and dark, filled with desire. “Oh, baby, don’t let me stop you.”

Jenner rolled her onto her back, hands on her inner thighs, holding her open to his intense gaze. “You couldn’t even if you wanted to.”

“Who said I wanted to? You’re right where I want you.” Faith curled one leg over Jenner’s shoulder, directing him toward her pussy. “C’mon. . . what the hell are you waiting for? I thought you said I was good enough to eat.”

“I’m savoring my treat.” He laughed when she kicked his ear. “All right, baby. No need to get
nasty.”

He held her down as his tongue searched out her core, his hands cool and strong against her skin. Faith had a moment to think and wonder why he was going so damn slowly and then. . . . she couldn’t think at all.

Could only feel.

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The ringing of his cell phone distracted Wesley enough that he missed the step and nearly fell on his face. As it was, his tea splattered all over the pavement, splashing onto his shoes and on the hem of his jeans.

"Drat!"

Glancing around quickly to ensure that no one witnessed his graceless behavior or his completely unmanly exclamation, Wesley pulled the phone from his pocket and flipped it open. The call had gone to voicemail, and leaving it for a moment, he opened the Magic Box and turned off the alarm.

Settling himself in for the day, Wesley wiped the moisture from his shoes, grateful for the fact he took the tea without milk or sugar. Once he was organized, he punched in the numbers for his voicemail and listened as his secondary contact in the Council relayed crucial information.

As they’d suspected, Quentin Travers was heading up the expedition to Sunnydale, accompanied by the new Slayer, Kennedy Morganthau, her Watcher, one of the girls he’d gone to the Academy with, and several other senior staffers. What concerned him mostly was the wetworks team.

They’d sent only four operatives, which set off internal alarms. Wesley had been certain they’d send more in light of their knowledge of circumstances in Sunnydale.

The fact they’d only assembled the smallest team possible had him warily reaching for the phone. Giles and Spike needed to know this, and he needed to confirm with either McKeown or Nicholson the actual numbers. If the Council had assembled a second team and dispatched them via a different route, it was imperative that they know about it.

Punching in the numbers for McKeown, Wesley formed different scenarios in his head. Giles and Anya weren’t due to arrive for another half hour, and Spike wouldn’t even be awake at this point. He could alert Lawson, who would start the process of alerting the Brachens and other friendly demons, though he wanted to be certain of the Council’s actions before he sounded the red alert. Although it was highly unlikely they hadn’t relaxed their watch, what with a cadre of Initiative soldiers in town. Yet with those same circumstances, Wesley also didn’t want this second influx of unwanted organizations to cause a panic among the peaceful demons.

"Got your message. Need a bit more information, if you’ve got a moment." Wesley didn’t identify himself, nor did McKeown. It would protect both of them a bit longer, should the signals be intercepted. "Have they sent more than one?"

There was a pause while some papers were shuffled on the other end and Wesley held his breath, hoping the news was good. "To your knowledge?"
A muffled answer in the affirmative was all he got before the connection was severed. Wesley moved the phone away from his ear, staring at it for long moments.

Deciding quickly that he’d better at least leave a message for Spike, Wesley nearly jumped out of his skin when a breathless Willow raced into the shop.

"Hello, Grace." Buffy held open the front door, letting the brash witch into the house. "Spike’s not up yet."

"It’s after ten, how come you’re letting him sleep?" Not standing on ceremony, Grace trooped into the living room, her boots thumping heavily. "Are you alone?"

"Yup, everyone else is gone." Buffy watched while Grace deposited her big carpetbag on the floor, the contents rattling and thudding heavily.

"Oh, that is not good, girl, and you know that. You’re getting toward the end and you need to have someone nearby at all times." Grace wagged a long, elegant finger in Buffy’s face. "Get that lazy man of yours outta bed."

Before Buffy had a chance to react, Grace was heading for the stairs, her long skirt trailing behind her. "Spike! Spike! Get yo’ sorry ass outta bed!"

She hopped up two steps, yelling at the top of her lungs, and nearly fell backwards when Spike appeared at the top in full game face, growling at her.

"Shut your gob, you evil, wretched bint. ‘M awake."

Grace stared up at him, her heart thumping wildly in her chest. Trying to give herself a moment, she shot a glance at Buffy, who was trying not to giggle, and struggling at the same time to get Spike calm. "Spike?"

When he swung his head to look at her, Buffy motioned to her forehead. "Bumpies."

"Oh. Right." Spike shook off his game face, thumping down the stairs. "Sorry, Gracie."

He didn’t even bother to look sheepish, though Grace considered herself lucky that he hadn’t jumped first and asked questions later. "No problem, Spike. Just lay off the growlies."

After a bit more grouring, from both Grace and Spike, the trio settled down, the two superbeings listening intently to the list of instructions Grace had compiled for them. They were just about to start on the necessary supplies when the house phone rang. Spike got up, leaving the two women alone. He was back in seconds.

"Buffy." He stood in the doorway, his eyes focused on her face. "Council jet took off. Travers himself is comin’ with the new bird." He paused for a moment, letting that news sink in. "Four of the brute squad is comin’."
For the sake of knowing

Book Three

Chapter Ten   For the sake of knowing

What we learn for the sake of knowing, we hold;
what we learn for the sake of accomplishing some ulterior end,
we forget as soon as that end has been gained.
   Anna C. Brackett, The Technique of Rest

O, what men dare do!
What men may do!
What men daily do,
not knowing what they do!
   Much Ado About Nothing, act iv, sc i

Jealousy feeds upon suspicion,
and it turns into fury or it ends as soon
as we pass from suspicion to certainty.
   Francois de La Rochefoucauld

It's not an accident.
Not an accident.
Never underestimate your opponent.
They'll tell you that if you're a fighter.
Never underestimate.
   Al Lewis

Graham Miller watched his friend and fellow Initiative officer pace through the living room of the house they’d secured as an operations base. Surveillance reports were sketchy, with each of the teams reporting in at different times. They were waiting on Sloth to report in from his location atop the building opposite the Magic Box. So far, none of the reports were good. Team one – consisting of Rivera and Lowenstein, had tracked the vampire the night before, noting his patrol route and the fact he’d had a teenaged boy with him. The boy had been sent home at approximately twenty-three hundred hours to an unknown destination. At oh-one hundred hours, the vampire had returned to Revello Drive and had gone inside, after confronting a red-headed female.

Correctly identifying the female from pictures, Riley had wondered why Willow hadn’t gone inside with Spike, though he said nothing to his men. There were already enough questions from them. His knowledge of the area and target had drawn pointed looks and quiet conversations already. Any more revelations and he was sure they were going to question the entire mission. And he couldn’t have that.

They were here to take down Spike. Nothing more.
If his conscience nagged at him about leaving Buffy alone without any back-up or support, he refused to give in to that guilt. Spike was a vampire, a demon, and no matter what he did, he was always going to be a vampire. Nothing he did to help Buffy mitigated that. Vampires needed to be staked.

He still couldn’t believe she’d asked to have the behavioral control chip removed. There was no way she wanted Spike free to prey on the population of Sunnydale. She was only going to have to stake him when he starting draining victims again. He could spare her that . . . he wouldn’t call it heartache, because to call it that meant there was something between Buffy and Spike. And Riley couldn’t . . . he refused to believe there were any real feelings on her part.

There wasn’t anything between them. Buffy was in a relationship with the English guy, the one he didn’t know. Didn’t want to know. Tall, dark, and accented. It was easier to fool himself into believing that Buffy had fallen for someone like that, instead of her having a relationship with Spike. Even knowing she’d once been in love with a vampire.

That little revelation had fueled his jealousy unlike anything else. He hadn’t been able to fool himself after that. Especially with Spike feeling the way he did. Spike had never really come out and said the words – that he wanted more from Buffy than just friendship – though Riley hadn’t needed to hear them to know they existed. Before he’d fled Sunnydale with his pride in his back pocket, Riley had known. Had seen Spike watching Buffy, took note of his eyes following her when he thought no one was looking, saw the flare of arousal and need in the vampire’s eyes.

No.

Buffy was not involved with Spike. He couldn’t accept it, even in theory.

Riley whirled to face Graham as Sloth’s voice sounded over the radio. "Target sighted. Young, dark, tall English has entered shop. Subject is currently alone."

Graham raised an eyebrow, his expression otherwise impassive. "Maintain surveillance."

"Roger, that."

Communication ceased and the two officers faced each other across the room. "You’re going to have to make a decision."

"Understood." Riley paced the floor one more time, then said without looking at his counterpart, "I’m going out."

"You should take one of the men."

"No, I want to see some of the others, see what Xander and Willow have to say. It’s better if I go alone."

He was gone before Graham could talk him out of it.
“They’re only sending four?” Buffy stared at Spike, her eyes sparkling with suppressed mischief. “Really?”

“Tha’s what Oxford has to say.” He folded his arms over his chest, waiting for the explosion which was certainly about to erupt.

“Only four.” Her expression darkened for a moment and Buffy glanced over at Grace, who was watching their by-play with wide eyes. “I think I’m insulted.”

Spike’s chuckle did nothing to ease the pout plumping Buffy’s lips. “Would imagine they think you’re an easy mark.”

“I’m not easy. I’m so . . . you’re smirking. Stop it.” She glared at him, which was softened somewhat by the pout she was still sporting. Her hands fisted at her sides. “Really, Spike. It’s not funny.”

His chuckle had escalated to out-right laughter as she looked more and more like a five year old. “Jus’ . . . pet, have you got any idea how bloody adorable you are?” He moved further into the living room, stopping just in front of the couch. “Anyone else’d be shakin’ an’ scared, but not you.”

When she started to speak, he shushed her with an outstretched finger. “Not sayin’ you aren’t a bit put out, but, kitten, you’re brassed b’cause they’re only sending four men after you.” He shook his head, amusement playing about his lips. “Is a bit cock-eyed if you ask me.”

The pout only got more pronounced and it took Spike crouching down in front of her, his hands wrapped around her fists, before Buffy would relent. “They’re underestimatin’ you. An’ me. Not to mention the rest. Gives us an advantage, sunshine.”

It took a long minute of his thumbs brushing over her tightly clenched hands and her eyes staring into his, before she was finally placated. Her look turned assessing, and she scrunched her face, the wheels obviously turning furiously inside her head. Spike could always tell when something was going on, because she got that same look every time she was concentrating.

“So we have time, right?”

“Think so, kitten.” He stood up, knowing she wanted to get to her feet. “Give ‘em a day to get settled, an’ then they’ll come looking. Remember, they haven’t a clue that we know they’re comin’.”

A smile bloomed on her face, one Spike had seen in the past, usually just prior to her handing him a colossal beat-down. General Buffy with a plan was back. “Okay, then.”

Before Spike could ask her, Grace interjected. “Are you ready to start? Or should we postpone this and wait until the crisis is over?”

Buffy shifted her gaze between Spike and Grace, her expression for once unreadable. She pursed her lips, squared her shoulders and said in her best I’m-so-in-charge voice, “Nope, we’re not waiting. These babies aren’t waiting for anyone else. This is way more important than Riley. Or the Council.”

Spike’s eyebrows rose in amusement. He waited a bit, anticipating some further comment from Buffy, and she didn’t disappoint him. Putting on an almost too cheery smile, she chirped at Grace,
“So, let’s get started.”

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“Willow?”

Wesley stared at the redhead, confusion and worry writ large across his features. He hadn’t seen her in months, not since just following the battle against Angel. Her presence now boded no good news.

Willow looked no less uncomfortable than he felt. Grief, confusion and fear had driven her to the Magic Box – one of the few places she still felt safe – hoping for some answers. She hadn’t known Wesley would be the only one present, Willow had hoped Giles would be in the shop.

“I didn’t. . . I’m sorry. I just didn’t know where else to go and Spike wouldn’t let me talk to Buffy and then I figured Tara would listen but Tara’s with Oz, and. . .” Her voice faded as tears clogged her throat.

Wesley got the distinct impression she’d still be talking if she hadn’t mentioned her former paramours. However, his curiosity was piqued. “Perhaps you should slow down.”

She lifted teary eyes to his. “I’m sorry. I just didn’t know where else to go or who to talk to. I thought maybe Giles would be here and he’d listen to me when no one else . . .” Her words trailed off again and Willow looked away, artlessly wiping her nose and tear streaked face on the sleeve of her sweater.

Before he could stop her, Willow moved toward the door, shoulders slumped, still sniffling through her nose.

“Wait.” Wesley took two steps forward, his hand reaching for her. “I’ll listen.”

At her look, Wesley clarified. “I can’t promise anything. You must know your prior actions have created enough doubt as to your intentions.”

“I get that.” She hesitated, admitting quietly, “It’s all my fault.”

He contemplated her for a long moment, watching her bowed head and dejected air. Wesley didn’t fool himself for one moment into believing that Willow’s current actions and demeanor were truly motivated by an attack of conscience. For one thing, he wasn’t sure she possessed the necessary moral center, and for another, her actions reeked of self-service. Still, he thought her information could prove useful.

“Come sit down, Willow.” Wesley ushered her back to the research table. “Perhaps it would be best if you just stuck to the facts for now.”

She didn’t waste any time, somehow understanding that playing on Wesley’s sympathy wouldn’t get her anywhere. “Warren – he’s the guy who built the Buffybot – he’s been spying on everyone. He put cameras here and at Buffy’s house.”
“Go on.”

“He’s been sending the information to the Council. There are cameras set up all over town, not just . . . some are at different spots, like Willy’s bar and,” When he nodded for her to continue, Willow dropped the real news.

“There’s a camera watching the Hellmouth.” Willow reached into her backpack and withdrew a sheaf of papers. “I think he’s planning something.”

Wesley took the proffered papers, his eyes scanning through them quickly. Most were charts, tracking changes around the Hellmouth, though there were other charts were just as disturbing. “He’s tracking everyone’s movements?”

Though it was phrased as a question, both of them were aware it really wasn’t. Putting aside the papers on each of them, Wesley read through the Hellmouth charts again. “These readings aren’t all from video surveillance.”

“No. He’s got seismographs, infrared cameras, audio recorders, and, well,” Willow pointed to one particular readout. “I don’t know what this tracks, but my guess is it’s something demonic.”

The former Watcher looked up, fixing Willow with flinty blue eyes. “Why are you bringing this to us?” Unspoken, but very clear in his tone of voice was censure and a demand to know why it had taken her so long.

“He didn’t trust me. I only found out about all the cameras earlier this week. I wanted to get some proof, so it wouldn’t . . .” She sucked in a deep breath, her shadowed eyes pleading with him. “I wanted to help. I need to help.”

“Why do you need to help, Willow?” He leaned forward, his elbows resting on the table, his eyes unwavering.

“I know you don’t trust me. No one does.” She mimicked his pose, her gaze not flinching from his. “I can’t make up for everything I did. I know that. This isn’t about making everything better. I just thought you should all know. Someone should know what he’s doing. I don’t want the Hellmouth opened.”

“Past actions speak differently than what you’re saying now, Willow.” Wesley got to his feet, gathering up the paperwork. “Thank you for bringing this. I’ll make sure everyone’s aware of this Warren fellow’s actions.”

It was very clearly a dismissal, leaving Willow no other option but to go. She couldn’t broach the subject most on her mind, didn’t dare ask for such information from Wesley. She turned just as she opened the door, to look at Wesley one more time. “Could you tell . . .” The sudden chill in his eyes stilled her wayward tongue. “Never mind. Thanks for listening.”

Wesley stared at the closed door, his mind whirling with all that Willow had just told him. It wasn’t much in the way of real information, but added to other events, he knew this was enough to alert everyone. *More fuel to the fire.*
Suburbia wasn’t supposed to be bustling with activity, not with the start of summer, and especially not during the week. It should be slow, isolated pockets of activity and teenagers just hanging about, no real destination in mind. And that would have been the case, if it was anywhere but Sunnydale. Riley walked through the crowded downtown streets, sidestepping all kinds of people, his mind idly noting the conversations floating around him.

He refused to dwell on what was going on with Buffy until he had more information, until he knew for certain the situation she was in, and who she was involved with. Intuition told him that she and Spike were together, but before he accused her, he needed proof. Looking up and realizing his location, Riley shook his head and turned around, moving away from Revello Drive. The last thing he wanted at this moment was to come face to face with either of them. He wanted time to gather the information and process it.

Ten minutes later, Riley found himself outside Sunnydale General, watching as some guy loaded up a car. The man stood and Riley realized it was Xander a half-second before the other man recognized him.

“Xander!”

“Riley? Hey, how are you? What are you doing in Sunnydale?” Xander straightened up from the opened trunk, reaching out to shake Riley’s hand.

“Just got in yesterday. I, ah, got your letter.”

“Letter?” Xander looked confused for a moment, then as the memory of writing to Riley months earlier resurfaced, he shook his head. “Man, that was almost a year ago. Lot’s changed since then.”

Deciding quickly to play dumb, Riley asked what he thought might be the next logical question. “How is everyone? Are Joyce and Dawn okay?”

Xander shook his head, a sad look entering his eyes. “Riley, Joyce died.”

He hadn’t known that. The letter Xander had sent only mentioned Buffy, not anyone else. “What happened?”

“Brain aneurysm. She died a little while after you left.” Xander looked away, his expression hidden.

“I didn’t know. Wow.” That news had caught him unaware and he was genuinely stricken. “She was a good person.”

“She was.” An awkward silence filled the air between them and Xander closed the trunk, eager to get the rest of Cordelia’s things. “Have you been by the house yet?”

“No, I haven’t.” Riley convinced himself he wasn’t lying, because he hadn’t been at the house, not really. Not openly.

“Oh.” Xander paused for a moment, wondering how much he could say. Or should say. “Are you going to stop by?”
“I was on my way there. I was just, sort of getting my courage together.”

Xander stared at him for a moment, then blurted out, “Buffy’s not dead. Willow worked a spell and brought her back.”

“What? Willow did what?” Riley didn’t know how well or for how long he could keep faking his ignorance, but if playing stupid could get Xander to give him some more information, he’d try as long as possible. “How did she do that?”

“I don’t know all of it, but she used Dawn and Tara to open up a portal or something and pulled Buffy out of heaven.” When Riley didn’t speak, Xander kept going. “Spike was already living in the house and, well, a whole lot of other things went down, then Angel lost his soul and came after all of us.”

“How did that happen?” Riley abruptly realized that deciding to look for Xander had been one of his best ideas, and the information was worth it. “What happened then?”

“Angel attacked Dawn and killed her boyfriend right after Christmas. He’d already kidnapped Cordy.” Xander walked away, heading toward the hospital. “She’s only getting out of the hospital now.”

“Oh, man, I’m sorry.” Riley didn’t really know who Xander was talking about, but by the sound of his voice, she meant something to him.

“Thanks.”

Riley stared at Xander for a moment, noting the slump of his shoulders and the grim lines etched on his face. For once, he was moved to sympathy. “Who is Cordy? Should I remember her?”

A wry, sad smile twisted Xander’s lips and he ducked his head. “She was my first girlfriend.” Xander gestured to the hospital door and said, “I’ve got to get inside, she’s probably ready to leave. I’m taking her to Los Angeles.”

“Oh, okay. Are you coming back?” Riley thought frantically for a moment, trying to come up with something else that might keep Xander talking, even for just another few minutes.

“I dunno, man. I keep thinking that maybe it’s time to get out of this place. Start over somewhere else.” He shrugged, looking away. “Buffy doesn’t need my help. She’s got Spike.”

Here was the opening Riley was hoping for. “Spike?”

“Yeah. The bleached wonder does most of the patrolling, and he’s been helping for a while. He dusted Angel.”

“Angel’s dead?”

“Yup. Spike did it. Ripped his head clean off.” It was clear that information pleased Xander, and for the first time since he’d run across him, Riley could see the smile reach his eyes. “Oh, yeah. I’m just really sorry I was the unconscious guy that time.”

“So why is Spike patrolling?” Riley gave up any pretense at all, asking outright one of the things he wanted to know.
“Riley, you should just go by the house. Talk to Buffy. It’s not my...” Xander shook his head, then motioned toward the hospital. “I gotta go. Take care of yourself.”

He was gone in the next moment, disappearing inside the hospital. Riley thought about following him, then dismissed that idea. Though he didn’t want to, he was beginning to think that in order to get the whole story, he was going to have to ask Buffy for the truth.

Riley just wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to know the truth.

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“Let me guess. Council?”

Anya stood in the doorway, guilelessly eyeing the telephone still in Rupert’s hand.

He jumped a bit at her voice, then placed the receiver back. “Yes, dear.” He took off his glasses, rubbing his fingers over the bridge of his nose. “Actually, that wasn’t an official phone call. Just one of Wesley’s contacts, informing me that Travers is coming, along with the rest of the team he’s assembled.”

Anya moved gracefully into the room, her hands resting on his shoulders as she stopped behind him. She began kneading his tense muscles and Giles leaned back, resting his head against her silk-clad breasts. “So when are they arriving?”

“More than likely they’ll arrive sometime this afternoon. The plane had just taken off.” He murmured his approval when her fingers found and massaged a particularly tight spot.

“So we have some time.” Her voice sounded right beside his ear, and he smiled when her teeth nipped at his neck. “Wesley’s at the shop.”

“He is.” Anya slid one hand down his chest inside his tee-shirt. Her talented fingers found a flat nipple and his grin widened. Giles turned his head, his teeth closing around her earlobe. “We have time.”

“Time is good. Whatever shall we do to fill it?”

He couldn’t help himself. The coquette routine got him every time and Anya knew it. Giles erupted into deep chuckles as his hand drifted up her arm. He pulled her around, toppling her gracefully into his lap. Her legs trapped his arm momentarily against the chair, and one of her breasts escaped the confines of her almost indecent nightgown, drawing his considerable attention.

“I shall endeavor to keep your time filled, madam.” His finger traced the line of her hip, snaking beneath the silk. Giles wormed his hand free and Anya squirmed on his lap, her legs falling open. Her hands as busy as his. “What’re you going to fill my... time... with?”

He laughed again, throwing his head back. “Oh dear, have you picked up yet another
euphemism?”

She purred into his skin, hiding her own amusement. “You know I love it when you use big words.”

“Hhhmmmm.” Rupert stared down at her, splayed across his lap, affection and amusement making his eyes twinkle dangerously. “Shall I also use Latin? Or perhaps Sumerian?”

Catching the gleam and more than a little turned on by it, Anya wriggled again. He was hard and pulsing beneath her ass and she wanted him. Now. “Rupert . . . you’re teasing me again.”

“I know, dear.” His tone of voice indicated that he was especially enjoying her reaction.

He began speaking in Latin, telling her how creamy her skin was, how soft and sinful she looked while Anya curled her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. “Rupert, please . . . take me now.”

He lifted her up, pushed the chair away from the table and braced his feet on the floor. Their mouths met in a heated kiss as Anya’s hands worked on loosening his jeans, her fingers scrabbling on the button and zipper. He lifted her again, propping her on the edge of the table. Her legs spread and Rupert slipped two fingers easily inside her heated core. Somehow she managed to get his pants undone and he let them fall, stepping out of them and kicking them aside.

“Come here, my dear.” Rupert sat back down in the chair, pulling her toward him. He twirled her around, one hand sliding up the front of her silky thigh, honing in on her clit. Anya tried to turn, but his hands held her facing away from him as he lowered her easily onto his lap. “Steady, girl. Just let me guide you.”

He slowly lowered her onto his shaft, lifting her legs over the arms of the chair. “That’s it, sweetheart.”

Anya shuddered knowing this position would prolong her orgasm. She gasped and mewedled softly when his hands cupped her breasts, fingers pinching her nipples. His hips surged once then his mouth found the back of her neck nibbling on the corded muscles. “I’m completely at your mercy, my dear. You control everything.”

It was frustrating, maddening and deliciously arousing. Her position allowed for no clitoral contact, and Anya writhed, seeking something more. “Rupert . . .”

“Is there something you need?” His kisses began trailing across her shoulders, his fingers focused on her nipples. “Hhmmm?”

“Rupert, if you don’t touch my clitoris, next time you won’t be allowed to.” When he hesitated, she glanced over her shoulder at him, frustration swirling in her eyes. “And there won’t be any oral gratification for a week.”

He buried his head in the middle of her shoulders, his entire body shuddering as he tried to repress the laughter threatening his composure. “We can’t have that now, can we?”

“You’re laughing at me. This is not funny, Rupert, I’m very frustrated. I need more stimulation.” Anya ground down. One of her hands grabbed his, trying to force the contact she craved.
The laugh he was trying to suppress escaped him and he collapsed against her, his fingers finding her clit. “Good god, woman, I do love you.”

Her movements stilled and her breath caught in her throat. “You do?”

“Of course I do.” It was true, Rupert realized; had been true for quite some time, long before her relationship with Xander had ended. She enthralled him, kept him guessing, constantly surprising him with her spontaneity and her enthusiasm for life. He hadn’t felt this alive... in a very, very long time. Not even Jenny had made him feel this way.

With his declaration, Anya squeezed internally, her entire body shaking with emotion. “Oh, Rupert, I love you too.”

She collapsed against him, her entire body limp. Rupert held her close, then lifted her away. “Come back to bed with me, dear.”

Anya smiled at him, her eyes filled with love and devotion. “I’ll go anywhere with you.”

“I’m counting on that.”

Rupert swept her up into his arms, moving up the stairs easily.
Grace had gone, leaving them all alone until Tara was schedule to arrive. Buffy was curled up on the couch, idly watching the television, while Spike was puttering around in the kitchen. There wasn’t anything holding her interest and Buffy kept flipping through the channels, more in an effort to stay awake than anything else.

“You hungry?” Spike stood at the far end of the living room, watching her thoughtfully.

“Nope. Just trying to stay awake. And comfy.” She paused, shifting her weight off her hip and onto her back. “This isn’t comfy at all.”

Her pout had him moving forward before he realized it. “Lean up, kitten.”

Buffy tried, but the bulk of her pregnancy didn’t allow for it, and she whined again, grumbling and
muttering under her breath. “So not fun at all.”

“I know, sweetness.” Spike lifted her easily, slipping behind her, his hands moving automatically to her waist, kneading the sore and over-extended muscles there. “Lean on me.”

“How come you always know what to say and what to do?” She melted against him, letting his strong hands work their magic. “I was all ready to be bitchy and you just . . . How do you do that?”

He chuckled, dropping kisses along her hair line and down the side of her neck. “Dunno, pet. Could be I jus’ know you, an’ know what you need.” He rested his chin on her shoulder, wrapping his arms around her. “Or could be that I’d do anything to keep you happy.”

She sniffled, fighting the sudden tears his tenderness had evoked. “How come you’re the best boyfriend I ever had?”

“Fate, pet. ‘S all it is.” Spike hugged her, holding her as close as possible. She could feel his smile against her shoulder. “Has nothin’ to do with the fact I love you.”

Buffy leaned further back, slumping heavily against his chest. “I’m all sleepy now.”

Spike kissed her shoulder. “Rest, then, kitten, I’ll hold you.”

True to his word, Spike held onto her as she slept, knowing that Buffy wouldn’t be able to sleep long. In the last couple of days, her sleep had deteriorated to long catnaps, none of them lasting longer than two hours. She always woke complaining of being too hot, or too uncomfortable, and the only time she was able to sleep more than two hours was whenever he held her.

Grabbing the remote from her lax hand, Spike settled in for a long, boring morning. He was asleep before the first program was over.

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Cordelia was sitting in the wheelchair, dressed and ready to go when Xander made it back inside her room. The sunlight from the open shades seemed to settle on her shoulders, and for once there was an expression flickering in her eyes.

“I can’t wait to get out of here.”

Xander stopped in the doorway, drawn up short by her words. “Cordy?”

“I hate this place, this town.” She clutched at the wheels, pushing herself forward. “You are taking me to LA? Right?”

“That’s the plan.” He finally stepped into the room, giving her a wide berth. “Lemme push you.”

“I’m not weak anymore. I don’t need this thing.” Cordelia stopped moving, resting her hands on the wheelchair arms, anger and defiance flaring in her voice. “I can walk out of here on my own.”

“I know that. But the hospital has rules, dear, and you can’t walk until you’re out of the building.”
One of the nurses emerged from the bathroom, handing her the last of her belongings. “Just humor us this one last time.”

“Fine. Let’s go.”

Despite the haughty tone and the snippy words, Xander smiled widely. Cordelia was finally getting back to herself, ordering everyone around and breaking free of the angry depression that had colored her moods since she’d been rescued. It was good to see her this way, almost her old self again.

“Ready when you are.”

Xander walked beside the wheelchair, pushing elevator buttons and holding open doors so the two women could pass through easily, mind on his earlier conversation. Something about seeing Riley after all this time struck him as odd. It shouldn’t have taken almost a year for him to get that letter, even if he was overseas, deep in a jungle. Mail service couldn’t possibly be that bad, especially military mail. And anyway, even if the mail was held up, the last letter should have triggered some sort of response, because that had been the one about Buffy.

Their split hadn’t been that bad, at least from his point of view, not bad enough for him to ignore the news of her death. The Riley he thought he knew would have tried to call, tried to get some sort of information, even just to offer his condolences to Dawn. Xander couldn’t believe Riley could have gotten over Buffy that quickly, not when he’d been devastated by the thought of her not loving him. He’d seen the guy, known how hurt he was by that – and though Xander couldn’t blame Riley for being just a little angry – he also knew Buffy’s death would have hurt. It had to have. Her jump to save the world had hurt them all, even Spike.

Stricken by a bit of conscience, Xander stopped short just before the hospital exit. “Hey, Cordy, I gotta make a phone call. Hang on a minute.”

Not waiting for a response, Xander stepped outside and dialed the Magic Box. He really didn’t want to talk to Spike, and figuring he might get Giles on the phone, he called there.

“Good morning, Magic Box.”

“Wesley?”

“Speaking. Is this Xander?” There was no mistaking the surprise in Wesley’s voice.

“Yeah, it’s me. Listen, I just ran into Riley, Buffy’s ex-boyfriend.” He held the phone to his ear, listening as Wesley sputtered unintelligibly. “He said he just got back in town last night. I got a weird feeling about it.”

“How so?” Wesley couldn’t tell if he was more surprised by the information or that Xander was the one relaying it. He’d never expected to hear from the boy again, not after his break-up with Anya, and the fact he wasn’t really on speaking terms with either Buffy or Dawn.

“Dunno. Just tell Buffy that he’s in town.” Xander paced a few feet, debating with himself how much more he should say. “Look, I’m not the bleached one’s biggest fan, but even I can see how much Buffy wants him. So, I’m just giving you a head’s up.”

“Thank you, Xander, I’ll call and let them know.”
Xander hung up, believing he’d done the right thing, for Buffy and for himself. Walking back through the doorway, he crouched down in front of Cordelia, looking into her eyes. “You ready to leave this place?”

“I’m so ready, Xander. Let’s go.”

She stood up on somewhat steady legs, pride stiffening her posture and her head held regally. “I can’t wait to get out of here.”

Connor sat in the cafeteria, watching Dawn and Janice work their way through the crowd, heading straight toward him. The two girls were engaged in animated chatter, heads bent together, focused on their conversation. Since his conversation with Spike the other night, Connor had thought long and hard about his advice to find himself a girlfriend. None of the girls in any of his classes caught his eye, and none of the girls in his limited social circle did either – except for Janice. The fact she was his pseudo-sister’s best friend made it a bit easier. When he’d first come back from the Otherworld, he’d had a slight crush on Dawn, which had eased in time to be nothing more than sibling affection. Her grief for Casey and the depression she’d been in hadn’t given him any room for hope that his crush would be reciprocated so he’d quickly lost interest.

Females mystified him, although he understood Buffy better than many of the others. It was easy to relate to her, though he still couldn’t comprehend how she didn’t blame him for Angelus – lately Connor had decided it was easier to refer to him that way than as his father – since it was his birth that triggered the soul’s release. What continued to confuse him was the open affection and trust they all showed in him. By rights they shouldn’t even want him around. He’d made a promise to himself that he’d do everything he could to protect his family – because that’s what they were – and never hesitate.

Janice sat down in the chair opposite his, dropping her books on the floor. “I swear to God they’re trying to make us robots.” When no one responded, she continued to rant, “Do you have any idea how much studying I have to do? This is totally not fair.”

“It’s not just you, you know.” Lucas, who was sitting next to Connor, leaned back in his chair, tipping up the front legs. “We’re all stuck with the same amount of finals.”

Dawn sighed. “Hey, at least no summer school.”

“That is sooo sweet.” Janice smiled brightly, her eyes sweeping over Connor, then quickly away. “I really don’t wanna be stuck in summer school again, but I dunno if I’m gonna be able to skip it.”

Connor couldn’t help asking, “Why?”

Janice ducked her head, admitting with some embarrassment, “I’m failing English.”

A chorus of commiserating groans and grumbles greeted her statement, while Connor just stared at her. Not for the first time, he caught himself watching her. She was kind of pretty, with long, very dark red hair and warm brown eyes and Connor admitted to himself that she was just as pretty as Dawn, and their personalities weren’t all that dissimilar either. Janice didn’t have the air of grief
that always surrounded Dawn, so instead she was just a bit more adventurous, a bit bolder and able to persuade her best friend into doing or trying just about anything. At least, that seemed to be the case. She was also the only person who kept Dawn from sinking into depression.

“I can help.” The words were out of his mouth before he realized it, and both girls stared at him, confusion clearly on their faces.

“You can?”

“Yeah, I just said so, didn’t I?” He shrugged, downplaying the offer as much as possible. “How bad is it?”

“Bad. I need to get an eighty-five on the final in order to just avoid summer school.”

Dawn cringed. “Ouch.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.” Janice groused, looking very dejected.

“When’s the test?”

“Monday.”

Thinking about it, Connor realized he would have to scramble a bit, but he figured with some help from either Wesley or Spike, he could manage it. “That gives us five days.”

Hope flared in her dark eyes. “You really think you can help?”

“Wouldn’t hurt to try, would it? He smiled at her, something he rarely did and he heard Dawn’s choked amusement, but didn’t react.

“Cool. When do you wanna start?”

“Today, after school.” He thought for a couple of minutes, then mumbled, “We should be able to get in a few hours at our house.”

“Sweet.” Janice dragged out the syllables, exaggerating her enthusiasm. “I can’t wait.”

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As the morning progressed, Wesley’s thoughts focused more and more on what Willow had said earlier, his brain putting together all of the information they currently had. He found it very odd, that the day Willow tried to make contact with everyone, that Xander had done the same thing. More than like one had nothing to do with the other, although Wesley was not one to discount coincidence. Which more than set off additional warning signals. Given what was going on, no one could afford to be without the full story. On a spur of the moment decision, he reached for the phone, intent on alerting Spike when Giles and Anya arrived, forestalling his actions.

“Good morning.”
When Wesley merely grunted something unintelligible in their direction, Giles and Anya exchanged concerned looks. “Wesley?”

“Mmmhhmm?” He answered with a distracted air, his attention back on one of the more disturbing printouts.

“Did something happen this morning?” Giles fixed him with an inquisitive look. “Wesley?”

Coming back to himself, Wesley looked up. “Take a look at this, Rupert.”

“What?” Giles took the paper, glancing at it quickly. When something on it caught his eye, he slowed down and read it more carefully. “Where did you get this?”

“Willow was here.” Wesley got up to pour himself another cup of tea, motioning to the papers scattered on the table. “She brought these. She was rather agitated and kept rambling on about how she tried to speak to a few of the others, sounding quite garbled and upset.”

“Where did she get these from?”

“Apparently Willow started working, in what capacity she did not say, with someone named Warren. I believe that name should mean something to you?” There was more than just mild curiosity in Wesley’s tone.

“Oh dear.” Giles sat down, leafing through some of the other papers. “Warren Meers is the boy who built the Buffybot for Spike.”

“Ah.” Wesley thought for a moment, sipping his tea. “That explains the expertise and some of the readouts.”

Anya listened to them for a moment, leaning over Giles to see the papers they were both commenting on. She pointed at one of them. “What is this for?”

“I believe that one is a seismograph reading for tectonic activity in and around the Hellmouth.”

“So what else is he doing?” Anya got right to the point, ignoring the papers.

“According to Willow, he planted the video surveillance and has been selling his information to the Council.”

The other two took the time to digest that information, sharing a look that spoke volumes. Giles removed his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose, trying to stave off the headache that was beginning to blossom behind his eyes. Anya took one more look at the paperwork then walked purposefully toward the register.

It was very clear Anya wasn’t happy with the information Wesley imparted. She let the counter slap down heavily, the noise reminiscent of a gunshot. Silence reigned, punctuated only by the brief rustle of papers and metallic ringing of the cash register.

“Out with it.” Giles turned to face Anya, finally acknowledging her barely suppressed anger.

“He’s been spying on us.” Anya slammed the register closed. “For months.” She paused, her expression hardening. “He’s very lucky I’m not a vengeance demon anymore.”
Giles didn’t hesitate. “I know, dear.”

“You know you’re going to have a very angry vampire on your hands shortly.” He could hear the tap of her foot, finding it oddly comforting in the face of her fury.

“I know.” His voice held all the gravity he suddenly felt.

There was no telling what Spike would do once he learned the truth – even with the chip still embedded in his brain. It wasn’t a matter of when Spike would kill but in what ways and how – or rather – whom. Giles had sufficient trust that Spike wouldn’t rampage through Sunnydale, unlike another vampire. Buffy trusted him and Spike had more than earned their trust. However, when faced with someone who threatened his family, Giles couldn’t imagine he’d hold back, nor did he expect him to.

In fact, it was the primary reason behind removing the chip.

Removing the chip would enable Spike to protect his family. Right now, it was imperative they somehow convince Finn and his cadre of Initiative soldiers that it was in their best interests to remove the chip. Though how they were going to accomplish that, Giles was completely at a loss. The Council appeared the bigger threat, given their propensity for exerting control over their Slayers. They weren’t likely to relinquish it now, even if Buffy refused to comply with their orders.

Spike had to be able to protect Buffy and their children from every threat, including human ones. Now that the Council was aware of Buffy’s condition, it was only a matter of time before it was all over the underground, since there were demons who monitored Council communications. It had only been because of the presence of Faith and Spike, with some occasional assistance from other sources that they’d managed to keep the news of Buffy’s pregnancy from the demonic and magical communities.

“Have you called Spike yet?”

Once again Anya brought him back to practicalities. Giles looked to Wesley, who had the grace to look a bit sheepish. “I was about to call them when you came into the shop.”

“I’ll do it.” Giles got up, reaching for the phone.

He was dreaming, lulled into a restful state by the thumping heartbeats next to him. His dream was echoing the steady beat, and Spike knew he was dreaming. For some odd reason, his mother and Drusilla were having tea, and they were sitting beneath Roman ruins in a rainstorm. They were discussing people they’d known in common, which tipped him off about the state of his consciousness, and though it had him wondering why and trying, at the same time, to snap out of the dream and wake up, he found he couldn’t.

The two women were in front of him, profiles clear in the hazy gray light, and neither one made mention of the rain. A noise to his left drew his attention and Spike caught sight of Joyce, who was carrying a serving tray. It was the rain pinging off the silver that startled him and Spike tried
again to wake himself up, to no avail.

Joyce walked past him, rainwater pooling in the tray and on the dishes, yet not soaking the cookies. She was softly humming an old lullaby, one that both his mother and Drusilla started singing as they recognized the tune. Their voices blended nicely, the harmonies pleasing to his ears. A small hand appeared on his shoulder, and Buffy’s whispered voice sounded against his neck. “They sound so nice. I wish I could keep them calm like that.”

He drew her hand forward, bushing a tender kiss into her palm. “You calm them in other ways, kitten. ‘S you they need most.”

“They need all of us.” She leaned into his back, her face resting against his shoulder. A deep sigh wafted from her. “Can we keep them safe?”

“We will.” Spike turned, drawing her over the low wall he was sitting on. She settled into his lap, her small form tucked close to him. “They sleeping?”

“They are now.” Buffy pointed over her shoulder. “See?”

Two ornate cradles, covered in copious amounts of white netting – one with pink bows and the other with fluttering blue ribbons – swayed gently in the breeze. By some twist of his dream, the cradles were shielded from the rain. “Right snug they are.”

“Like two itty bitty bugs.” Buffy giggled softly, her fingers tracing over his lips.

Thunder rolled in the distance, the rain pelting down harder. Giles appeared behind the cradles, a book and tea cup in his hands. “We’ve still got work to do. It isn’t all sunny skies and pork pies.”

“Pork pies? Who wants those?” But Buffy was licking her lips and a low rumbling emerged from her belly. She giggled again, the laughter making her eyes sparkle. “Oops, I guess that’s me. Will you fix me some pork and cherry pies?”

Spike felt his eyebrow raise and he knew disgust was written on his features. “You sure you want some of those?”

“Yup. I’m hungry.” She stirred in his arms, pushing away from his embrace. “Really. Please?” Buffy repeated herself a few times, until Spike realized she was really speaking and he wasn’t dreaming anymore.

“Spike, the phone’s ringing. And I’m hungry.” She poked his side, sleepy irritation clear in her tone. “C’mon, Spike, wake up.”

“Right, ‘m up, sweetheart. Stay put.” He climbed over her, reaching for the cordless phone that was on the coffee table. Spike grabbed it, turning it on and growling, “This better be worth disturbin’ my nap.”

“I believe it is, Spike.”

“Wonderful. What’s the situation now, Watcher?” Spike eased Buffy back down onto the couch as he perched on the table.

“Two odd occurrences this morning. Willow stopped by and passed on some information that
might be of some interest.”

Spike dropped his head down, scratching his hairline. “And the other?”

“Riley ran into Xander.”

That was a surprise. “Thought Harris was leavin’ with the cheerleader?”

“He is. Cordelia’s being released today, so I can only assume Riley ran into Xander while he was preparing to leave.” Giles paused, waiting for Spike’s next comment.

“Right. So the soldier-boy was probably out, doin’ some scoutin’. ‘S great. Jus’ bloody fuckin’ wonderful.” He huffed out a breath, his eyes searching Buffy’s face for any sign of stress. Finding none, he hazarded a wry smile, which was answered when she reached for his free hand. “Any idea where the git is now?”

“None. I have placed calls to Lawson and some of the others, asking for them to keep an eye out and have whoever’s available start daylight surveillance on the Initiative and the Council.”

“Good. At least we’ll have somethin’ soon.” Spike asked Buffy a silent question, getting his response with an emphatic shake of her head. “Slayer says she wants everyone here before sundown. We need to make plans.”

Buffy rolled her eyes at him and held out her hand for the phone. “Hey, Giles.”

“Hello, Buffy. Did you hear what I just relayed to Spike?”

“Most of it.” She blew a kiss at Spike. “You do know we can’t leave the planning to Spike, so you have to make sure you get here before dinner.”

She giggled, as he groused in the background, watching him get to his feet. “Laugh it up, Slayer.”

“Oh, hey, Giles? Bring some Thai food, please?” She disconnected the phone, calling out softly, “Spike? You do know I was only teasing, right?”

He turned to look at her over his shoulder. “I know, kitten.”

“You’re not mad, are you?” She struggled to find a more comfortable position, wincing when her body didn’t contort the way she wanted it to. “Gimme a hand?”

He was at her side instantly, helping her balance and shift. “No, not mad. Jus’ plottin’ my revenge.” Spike dropped a kiss on her forehead then sauntered off into the kitchen. “You still hungry?”

“Yeah! Do we have any cherries?”
Touchstones of our characters

Book Three

Chapter Twelve Touchstones of our characters

Dreams are the touchstones of our characters.
   Henry David Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers

Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow.
The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.
   Abraham Lincoln, Lincoln’s Own Stories

A man’s character is his fate.
   Heraclitus, On The Universe, fragment 121

Character, like a photograph, develops in darkness.
   Yousuf Karsh, Parade 3 Dec 78

Weakness of character is the only defect which cannot be amended.
   Francois de La Rochefoucauld

To measure the man, measure his heart.
   Malcolm Stevenson Forbes

“We’ll be landing in a few hours, Mr. Travers. Everything is set for our arrival. Why don’t you try and get some rest?” Nicholson tried to be solicitous without sounding sycophantic. Every day it got harder and harder for him to feign obedience to Travers and some of the more pompous members of the Council. He’d been recruited out of Cambridge because of his studies – he’d majored in Ancient History and Archeology, hoping for a fellowship in either Egypt or India – and his grades had brought him to the attention of the Council. Nicholson had been top of his class, obtaining his doctorate in both disciplines easily.

There were a growing number of dissidents, mostly the younger Council members, and the core group were those like him who’d studied under Rupert Giles and Edward Robson. Both men had worked every job in the Council, from librarian to Watcher of an active Slayer, and both had been proponents of more enlightened practices. Nicholson had been present when Giles made his report on the last days of Buffy Summers, and had seen firsthand how distraught he’d been. Rumors swirling about headquarters hinted that their relationship had been more than just Watcher and Slayer, though having seen Giles, Nicholson seriously doubted anything of a romantic nature had ever occurred. His suppositions had proven correct based on the older reports on Summers, her propensity for vampire involvement, and the video surveillance since her miraculous return from death. It was obvious to him, that the relationship had been move of a familial nature, rather than romantic.
Travers dismissed him with a wave of his hand, his eyes trained on the pages of a worn book. Without another word, Nicholson returned to his seat on the private jet, worry creasing his brow. He didn’t dare attempt any further contact, not with anyone. The close confines of the airplane didn’t provide much privacy and he hated being out of contact. There was too much to organize, too many people to coordinate and he tried hard not to chafe at the enforced inactivity. Mentally he ticked off the list in his head for at least the tenth time.

*Have to notify Wyndham-Pryce and Giles. Need to set up safe area for contact with the Slayer.*  
*Have to call Leslie. Insist on meeting the vampire.* The last bit was because he’d always believed Lydia was exaggerating and basing most of her thesis on rumors – not cold facts – especially in light of Rupert Giles’ testimony on his behalf. The Watcher he knew and trained under would not have argued so vehemently for the vampire’s continued existence unless there was more to him than the drivel some star-struck trainee had cobbled together from rumor and innuendo. Then again, it was entirely possible he had information Lydia had not been privy to all.

As a child, he’d been enormously interested in his family history, to the point of spending visits with his grandmother listening to her speak of her grandmother when no one else would. She’d passed on when he was just entering Cambridge and it had somehow fallen to him to go through her belongings. Tucked away in an old trunk up in the attic of her summer home, he’d found journals written by his great-great-grandfather. He hadn’t known until then that his family had a rather notorious past; though from that moment on, he’d devoted much of his free time to researching the family. His three times grandfather, William Gull, had been Royal Physician and it had been his efforts that had saved the Prince of Wales during his bout of typhoid fever in 1871. In his later years, he’d also been accused of being Jack the Ripper, though Nicholson very sincerely doubted that particular theory.

However, he’d found a notation in one of Gull’s journals that hadn’t meant anything to him until after he’d been recruited by the Council. In 1880, just as the Ripper murders were occurring, the Marchioness of Camden lost her second son, who held the title of Viscount Bayham, since both his older brothers were dead, though the eldest had managed to produce an heir. He hadn’t died – at least his body had never been found – and his name had been William. Digging further, Nicholson had discovered he’d attended Cambridge and graduated, with highest honors, in 1873. The Dowager Marchioness had succumbed to her grief, and the consumption she was suffering from, dying weeks after her son’s disappearance. William had been her last surviving offspring and, despite her daughter-in-law’s care, burying so much of her family had finally sapped the old lady’s strength.

Nicholson didn’t dare breathe a word of his theory – not until he had a chance to prove it to himself. If Spike was who he thought he was, Lydia’s entire thesis would be debunked. And that would be worth almost as much as getting the Council into the twenty-first century.

Spencer Whitworth sat beside him, leaning in closely. She hissed at him with vehement softness, “Is there any possible way you could get this brat reassigned to someone else?”

“Did you just ask for cherries?” Spike stopped, his brain unwilling to process Buffy’s last request. *She couldn’t have.* . .
“Ahuh. I did.” Her smile was bright, almost too chipper, then started humming.

It took him a minute, but the tune was easily recognizable, and not one that Buffy should even know. “Sweetness, where’d you hear that?”

Buffy tilted her head to the side, thinking heavily. “Just now, in the dream I was having.”

“You were dreaming?” He eyed her, wondering if they’d shared his dream somehow. “An’ what was it you were dreamin’ about?”

“It was raining, I think. Some old woman and Drusilla were having tea and you were sitting on a wall. It was pretty, all green despite the rain coming down, and then they started singing and my mom was there and it was all . . . Wait. That was a Slayer dream.” Buffy sat up abruptly, letting a soft cry escape when the babies in her belly protested the swift, awkward movement. “Owww.”

Spike was back at her side, helping her to her feet. The look on his face was a strange one, and Buffy stared at him for a minute, her eyes searching his for his reaction. “Spike? You’re wigging me. What’s wrong?”

“Think we had the same dream, kitten.” He looked away for a moment, shielding his expression a bit. “That old lady? Did she have her hair up in a bun, all silvery-white and wearing old fashioned dress, all lacy an’ what-not?”

Buffy thought hard for a moment, then nodded, knowing he’d continue.

“That was m’mum.”

She didn’t know how to react to that information. Buffy clutched at his forearms, then relaxed her hold. Her intent obvious, she moved to stand in front of him, so he couldn’t avoid looking at her. “She looked like a very nice lady.”

“She was.” Spike couldn’t look at her, knowing the truth of what he’d done would be written all over his face, the guilt he shouldn’t feel exposed for her assessing gaze. In all his long years, that one act had haunted him, chased him and destroyed his peace. He hadn’t been changed all that much when Drusilla sired him. Why, then, had his mother changed? Why had she said and done those things?

Spike turned away from Buffy, uncharacteristically silent. She knew something was upsetting him and that whatever it was might not be something he was especially proud of – or even wanted to admit to.

“Spike? You know I love you.”

It was the only thing she could think of to say, the only thing that seemed to matter. Buffy had realized, sometime after being resurrected, that she wielded so much power over him, able to destroy or exalt him with her words alone. He lived and died by her approval – not in the literal sense – though she realized he based his actions on her reactions. He was her rock, always there to support, and his love was so unconditional, it sometimes brought tears to her eyes. Spike willingly went against his very nature for her, every day. The very least she could do was try and show him she loved him nearly as much.

He was turned away, tension lining the muscles in his back and shoulders, his fists clenched at his
sides. Dark lashes were lowered, hiding his expression from her, yet Buffy could feel the tense sorrow he was trying so hard to shield. Her words had eased some of the tension radiating from him, though they’d alleviated none of the sorrow. Buffy moved slowly around to face him, her hand reaching for one of his.

Unsure of what to do when he didn’t resist her, Buffy held on, forcing his fingers to open. She traced a line down the scars the Cwn Annwn had left him, the marks faintly darker than his normal pallor. Inspiration struck and she laid his hand over her belly, letting him feel the riot going on under her skin. A small foot beat against his hand, making his fingers jump, and Spike finally dared to look at her. Tears pooled in the ocean blue, his face set in harsh lines as he tried hard not to let them fall.

“I do, you know. I just don’t always say it. I know what you are, Spike, and can guess at some of the things you’ve done. But I’m sure your mother loved you.” It wasn’t until she said it, that the truth began to dawn. Angel had once told her he’d killed his whole family after he’d been turned and there had been absolutely no remorse in his tone. Spike didn’t say a word, even so, she knew he believed he was guilty.

A choked sob barked from his throat and the next thing Buffy knew, she was wrapped tightly in his arms, her face tucked beneath his chin. Harsh whispers barely reached her ears, straining as she was to hear him. “Thought I was helpin’, I suppose. Thought she’d be without pain. Didn’t think she’d . . . I hadn’t changed much.”

His words alone told her what had happened, without him having to actually admit it. Buffy stayed still in his arms, the only movement she allowed herself was the soft brushing of her fingers over his back. She kept silent, knowing it would be easier for him if she just listened, not judging his actions.

“She was sick most of my life. Consumption – what you’d call tuberculosis. I was all she had left, ‘cept m’nephew an’ my brother’s widow. But they didn’t live with us. They lived on the country estate, where it was safe for a boy to grow up.” The frantic note in his voice died off, his accent smoothing out, reverting on the cadences he generally reserved for her alone. “Mum’s name was Anne.”

He shifted, his left hand splayed across the small of her back and his right clasping her shoulder. She was leaning into his body, letting his words wash over her. “Dawnie looks a bit like her, save for the bits she got from you. She kept me close, me an’ Janet. After Da an’ Gordie died, she couldn’t stand to have us away. Had the devil of time convincin’ her I should go off to Cambridge.”

Buffy looked up at him, eyes twinkling. “I always knew you were smarter than you pretended.”

“Vamps have no need for educations, love. Darla was proof enough of that. Left that part of me behind,” He glanced away, then back down at her. “Or thought I had.”

The tears in his voice were pooling in his eyes. Twice now he’d tried to continue, his emotions choking him with their intensity. She knew whatever he was attempting to share bothered him. He was rarely at a loss for words, rarer still for him not to be able to convey his emotions.

Abruptly letting her go, Spike paced toward the front door, his back to her. His shoulders were bowed, his usual smooth gait stiff and halting. When he finally spoke, his voice was barely audible.
“Fancied myself something of a poet. Mum was the only one willing to listen and . . . I was a failure as a poet. Didn’t want to run the estates or anything else.” Spike raised his head, staring at a vision long in the past. “Dru found me at the worst possible moment. Jus’ been turned down by a heartless bint, told me I was beneath her.”

He laughed, the sound bitter and harsh. “Funny thing is, m’rank was a tad bit higher than hers, ‘cept she was aimin’ even higher. Bitch.”

At Buffy’s gasp, Spike turned, eyeing her over his shoulder. “Turned me that night.”

Buffy moved, taking a step closer, but he shook his head, keeping his distance. “Wanted to take care of my mother, and since I was stronger, healthier, I thought she’d be the same.”

“Only she wasn’t.” It wasn’t a question Buffy was asking and they both knew it.

“No. She wasn’t. Demon was. . . more like Angelus. Vicious, evil. She killed three of the staff before I could stop her.” Spike looked away, shame coloring his words.

“That’s not all, is it?”

“No.” The pain and guilt shadowed his eyes. “There are things, Slayer, even I won’t do. ‘M a bad, rude. . .”

He didn’t get a chance to finish, because Buffy interrupted. “No, Spike, you aren’t. You aren’t a bad, rude man. You aren’t.” She grabbed his hands before he could brush her off. “A bad guy wouldn’t have taken care of my mom or Dawn. Or watched out for me. And he wouldn’t have wanted to take care of his own mom after he got vamped.”

When he moved to shrug her off a second time, Buffy held on, pulling him into her arms. “Angel told me he killed his whole family. The Watchers’ Diaries say he slaughtered his whole village. How many of your family did you kill?”

“Only one.” He closed his eyes at the admission, finally letting the tears fall.

“Only. One.” Buffy trapped him within her arms. “You tell me again how bad and evil you are.” She rested her head against his chest, over his non-beating heart. “Tell me I could do this,” she continued, placing one of his hands on her belly. “With Angelus.”

His hand flexed over her rounded belly, then wrenched free. At a near shout, he growled, “I killed my own mother!”

“To protect her. To make her better.” Buffy caught his gesturing hand, once more pulling him close. “Okay, so it wasn’t your smartest idea, but I get why you did it. Your intention wasn’t to hurt her.”

“The road to hell, Slayer, is paved that way.”

She stared up at him. “And it just proves to me that you’d do anything to protect someone you love.”

Her smile was crooked and there were tears in her eyes, but Spike couldn’t deny the love he saw shining in the vivid green depths. “Oh, kitten, I do love you.”
“You’d better, otherwise I’ll have to hurt you.” She thumped him gently. “And I’m so not doing this whole parenty thing alone.”

He laughed, releasing the tension. “Back at you, pet.”

Their bodies flowed together and she held him close, her words seeping into his skin. “I trust you, Spike. I do.”

Using his natural ability for organization, Lawson checked and rechecked the reports on the Initiative soldiers. As a Navy man, he had a natural antipathy for Army personnel, which just added to his demonic hatred for the soldiers who’d experimented on his kind because they deemed them something less than human. To him, that smacked of genocidal thinking. At the time Lawson hadn’t actually understood what the Germans had been planning, though he had learned. Everything he’d heard about the Initiative’s ideals convinced him they were ripped directly from the Nazi teachings. Reports from Germany just before he’d been turned were full of the atrocities occurring in the work camps; stories that had horrified and outraged. It had appalled him then and didn’t sit any better after he’d been turned. He had only a bare history of Spike’s experiences with the Initiative though he knew from others who’d survived the incarceration exactly what had occurred in those underground chambers.

The Initiative hadn’t cared what kind of demons they captured; whether they found peaceful demons or violent ones. It hadn’t mattered. Every demon in Sunnydale had been fair game to them, something that never would have happened if Mayor Wilkins had still been in control. Twenty members of the Fire Department had been captured, tortured, some of them the subject of vivisection, and of that twenty, only six had managed to escape when Spike had. Clem, too had been an Initiative captive, though the good-natured demon spoke very little of his experiences. And Spike was so tight-lipped about it, that Lawson doubted even Buffy knew the full extent of his suffering under the Initiative’s hands.

Sam knew some of the survivors and also knew the families of those who didn’t escape. Saw every day the scars crisscrossing Kevin’s back and arms; listened to him when he needed to talk. Rogan and his sister Imelda hadn’t been captured, but their father, Jerry, was one of the ones who hadn’t made it out. Less than two weeks after they’d been introduced, she and Sam were dating and within a month, he’d moved into her apartment.

Four months later, they were still going strong and Sam was like one of the family. He worked with Rogan, doing clean-up after human crime scenes, running their business out of a shop near the Magic Box. They did jobs all over, even traveling as far as Los Angeles. Business was good enough that they had three different crews working for them. And when Lawson wasn’t working with her brother, he was patrolling with Spike.

At the moment, Imelda was behind him, reading over his shoulder, her attention caught between the reports he was looking over and on the conversation in the other room. Twice now, the phone had rung with more information on Riley Finn’s movements, while Rogan and some of the others followed Finn and the other officers throughout Sunnydale.
Clem had only been willing to identify him and the other officer as being not so bad – though he’d refused to say anything further – instead telling them only that he was going to head out of town until the soldiers all left.

Sam figured that was more than enough information for him. Though Spike hadn’t given the order, Lawson knew it was only a matter of time before the soldiers – Finn in particular – were eliminated.

Not two hours past, the additional bad news of the Council’s impending arrival broke. Any of the ‘peaceful’ demons able to move their families out of town were hastily making arrangements, while others, like the Brachens and Glai-Glia were making plans to stay and fight, if needs be. Rogan was coordinating those staying, while their cousin, AnnaMarie and her husband, George, were working with the evacuees. Imelda knew Sam wasn’t leaving and since he was staying, so was she.

“Wait.” Imelda reached over his shoulder. “What was that?”

“Complaint filed by some woman over on Coraline Avenue.” Sam didn’t even look up at her, his eyes focused on one of the other reports.

“I see that, but what’s the complaint about?” Irritation colored her voice and Sam flipped over the paper.

“Says the guy across the street is stealing her electricity and beaming images into her brain.”

“Not something you can overlook in Sunnydale, you know.” His girlfriend grabbed the report, scanning it twice. “Sam. Look at this.” She pointed at the bottom of the report. “See?”

“What?”

“Look.” This time she pointed at the description. “Who does this remind you of?”

“Oh, shit. The hell with reminding me. That has to be him.” Lawson grabbed the report, then rifled through some of the papers strewn on the dining room table in front of him. “Spike needs to know this.”

“Yeah, he does.” Imelda grabbed a grainy surveillance photo of the short, dark-haired male. “We know where he is.”
Information is not knowledge

Book Three

Chapter Thirteen  Information is not knowledge

Information can tell us everything.
It has all the answers.
But they are answers to questions we have not asked,
and which doubtless don’t even arise.
  Jean Baudrillard, Cool Memories, ch. 5

The art of reading between the lines is as old as manipulated information.
  Serge Schmemann, NY Times 10 Nov 85

True genius resides in the capacity for evaluation of uncertain,
hazardous, and conflicting information.
  Winston Churchill

Information's pretty thin stuff unless mixed with experience.
  Clarence Day

As a general rule, the most successful man in life is the man who has the best information.
  Benjamin Disraeli

Information is not knowledge.
  Albert Einstein

Only once before in her life could she remember being this tired, this exhausted. Then it hadn’t
been for good reasons, except that it had been kind of nice being so needed and important. Now,
though, not only was she needed, she was wanted and her exhaustion was something she’d never
expected. Tara closed her eyes, resting her head against the cool glass. The van hummed
underneath her, the steady thumping of the tires on pavement easing her into an almost trance-like
state.

Seven weeks pregnant and all she wanted to do was sleep. She had barely any energy for anything;
forcing herself to get out of bed every morning while fighting the nausea and the constant
queasiness was not making her mornings any easier. Lately, she’d had resorted to little tricks to
keep herself awake during study sessions and tests, only to find they weren’t fool proof. Twice this
morning she’d nodded off during her Abnormal Psych final, and here she was again, falling asleep
between the campus and Revello Drive. At least she was done for the day. Done for the semester
actually.

They were on their way home to Revello Drive to break the news to Spike and Buffy about the
changes about to happen. Together they had told his parents, who were overjoyed about the
upcoming arrival. It hadn’t been easy, explaining the situation to his parents, James and Celine, but to their credit, both of them had taken it in stride and accepted her with open arms.

His family was nothing like hers, accepting her presence without question; Oz loved her, and because of that, so did they. Long before she was ready to spill everything, the whole story – what was fit for parental ears, anyway – came tumbling from her lips. Celine Osbourne had listened with more than her ears and understood. The relationship between the two of them was their own business, so while she accepted, she made no move to interfere or suggest they formalize their union. Something Tara found refreshing and open-minded. Knowing her father and his narrow world view, she found herself grateful that he’d been banished from her life for over a year. He was never going to find out he had a grandchild, nor would he be allowed to exert any control over her baby. Stealing a glance over at her companion, she realized he wouldn’t be much of a pushover – he’d stand his ground.

Oz caught the look and a smile bloomed slowly across his features. He’d known his parents would react the way they had. Both of them had grown up in Sunnydale, and unlike some of the other denizens, they’d had more than a passing acquaintance with the supernatural. His cousin Jordy wasn’t the family’s first brush with demons; another cousin had married a cop who turned out to be half-Brachen.

“So?”

Tara turned to face him fully, her own smile bright. “Your parents are very cool.”

“Yeah. Not much fazes either of them.” Oz kept his eyes on the road, watching the traffic carefully. “They aren’t the ones who’ll be surprised.”

“No, I guess not.” Her smile faltered a little bit. “What do you think the reaction is gonna be?”

“Giddy disbelief.” He schooled his features. “Controlled surprise.” He shrugged, the gesture barely noticeable. “You said Spike could tell.”

“He thinks something’s up. He never asked me about it, though, so he doesn’t know for sure.”

“Vamp senses. He knows.”

She didn’t question him, knowing that he understood far better than she the extent of Spike’s sensory perceptions. “Do you think he told Buffy?”

“Hhhmmmm.” He thought about that for a minute, taking the time to mull over his thoughts. “Nah.”

Tara looked at him for a moment, then broke out into helpless snickers. “So this will come as a real surprise.”

“Big time.”

“Oh well. Nothing we can do about it.” Tara turned around, looking out the windshield. “Not like I’ll be able to hide it forever.”

At that, Oz’ grin bloomed again. “Nope. Be pretty obvious soon.”
They lapsed into silence as they neared the place Tara had called home for almost a year. The house looked deceptively serene, the closed front door and drawn curtains projecting a false image of serenity to the rest of the neighborhood. Not for the first time she wondered how many people on the block realized who – and what – was living on their street.

Oz opened his door, glancing over at her. Catching her pensive look, he closed the door and stared straight ahead. “You okay?”

His question broke her reverie and she shook her head, letting her hair cover her eyes. “Yeah. I think so.” She inhaled deeply, shook her head a second time and repeated herself. “Yeah.”

“Okay.” He opened the door again, hopping out easily. “Let’s do this.”

Tara paused, staring at the front door. Her voice was barely more than a whisper and filled with trepidation. “Yeah. Let’s.”

Fourteen hundred hours was the scheduled change of live surveillance on the Magic Box, though Sloth wouldn’t be moving from his sniper’s position until he was told to stand down. He had everything he needed – from extra firepower and weaponry to food and water – stashed under his blind. Like most snipers, he was equipped with steady nerves and a patient disposition, though Sloth more than lived up to his name. There were times when Riley wasn’t entirely sure if Sloth was completely human, because his ability to disappear was uncanny. Almost demonic.

It was now thirteen twenty, forty minutes before the meeting and Riley was busy in his room, putting together his notes and preparing for the debriefing. Before he’d left South America, Riley had gotten copies of the files the Initiative had on Buffy and all her friends. By far the most extensive file was Spike’s, stemming from his captivity forward, followed closely by the files on both Buffy and Giles.

At the moment, he was going over the notes on Giles, refreshing his memory. Some of the information he knew first-hand, though enough was new to him that he felt it prudent to go over the file again. The information was enlightening. Very little wasn’t known about his early life; except for a brief period sometime in the late sixties through the early seventies, Rupert Giles’ entire life was well documented. That is, until he was employed by an organization whose formal title Riley had never seen before. After that, it was only bare bones, mostly just a listing of dates covering his arrival in the States, his employment at Sunnydale High School and the recent purchase of the Magic Box and some other real estate.

What was missing – and not just for Giles – were the months following Riley’s departure. There was a gap without any information at all. It appeared that the moment he left, the Initiative stopped all surveillance on the Hellmouth. And the Slayer’s support circle.

Leafing through the pages of Spike’s report told him nothing that he didn’t already know. He couldn’t imagine what had happened to change his status from unwanted pest to trusted muscle. After leaving Xander, Riley had gone to Spike’s crypt, hoping to find him alone and vulnerable. Instead, he’d gotten the shock of his life.
The crypt was dusty, obviously uninhabited for quite a while – the refrigerator was unplugged and empty, there was no television, and no signs that Spike was still even using it. Riley had stood in the middle of the crypt, refusing to face what his intuition had been telling him for the last twenty-four hours.

There was something going on between his ex-girlfriend and the vampire.

He had to force himself to go right back to the house, keeping a tight rein on his temper the whole way. Before he confronted Buffy, Riley wanted to be damn sure of his facts, wanted to throw Spike’s unsouled state in her face, wanted to . . . What he wanted to do was run a stake through Spike’s chest, just wide of his heart and then beat him senseless.

What he was going to do was deny Buffy’s request.

There was no way he’d ever help Spike. Even if it also helped Buffy.

With his mind made up, Riley closed the reports, piling them in the center of the table. He’d go through them with his men and brief them on what to expect at the meeting later on, but he was already determined. All he needed was the truth about the babies and then he’d tell her his decision.

Spike would get that chip out of his head over his dead body.

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“We can be there in the back, B, if that’s what you want.” Faith held the phone to her ear, idly watching Jenner sleep. She didn’t bother keeping her voice low, knowing he’d want to hear her conversation – and somehow was – anyway. “Right. We’ll head over there in a little bit.”

She listened while Buffy filled her in on all the details of the meeting and who else they could expect to show up. A deep sigh exploded from Faith. “Geez, B. You really know how to throw a fucking party. So the Council’s heading this way too. That’s just fucking great.”

Despite knowing their decision could bring the Council’s attention to Sunnydale, Faith had known she had little choice. It was either stage her own death or stay on the run, constantly worrying about the California authorities hunting her. Admittedly not much of a choice, and she’d taken the easy way out, though she hadn’t seen many other options.

Buffy’s voice kept going, the words picking up speed as she filled her in on the rest of the situations. The television in the background droned on and Faith caught a glimpse of the news reports. Her own picture flashed across the screen, capturing her full attention. “Hey, B. Check it out. I’m on the news.”

There was a squawk, then she could hear Buffy urging Spike to turn on the television. Faith listened to the newscaster describe her as ‘dangerous and desperate, running from a tragic past’. Rolling her eyes at the melodrama, Faith snickered when Buffy snarked at Spike for his running commentary.

The scene changed to the outside of Sunnydale General, and the voice-over continued. Wesley and Spike had come up with a wildly outrageous tale of Faith’s final hours, culminating in a vicious knife fight outside the Alibi Room, and they’d managed to coerce Willy into backing them up.
Dutifully relaying the story, the newscaster somehow managed to make it all sound plausible, though Faith could hear Spike’s low rumbling laughter in the background. Buffy started to giggle and Faith finally gave in, chucking at the insanity.

When she finally caught her breath, she quipped, “Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.”

Which just made Buffy laugh all over again.

“All right, I’m gonna get Jenner out of bed and we’ll head over to the shop in a few.”

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No sooner had Buffy hung up on Faith when the phone was ringing again. Rolling her eyes, she answered, “Grand Central.”

“Buffy?” Lawson’s surprise came through and she laughed again, knowing how her attitude sometimes confused the vampire.

“Yup, it’s me.”

“I’m going over the police reports from yesterday and I found something you and Spike might be interested in.” The rustle of papers muffled the other background noises and Lawson continued, “I’ve got the report in front of me.”

Buffy motioned Spike closer. “He’s right here.”

“A woman over on Coraline Avenue filed a complaint about her neighbor beaming information into her brain.” When neither of them laughed or commented, he kept speaking. “Which would be strange and not really noteworthy anywhere else but here. Or maybe Cleveland. But that’s not the point.”

Spike snorted his amusement, urging him to keep talking. “Go on, then, give us the rest of it.”

“Right. The point is she also complained he was stealing her electric and cable.” He paused and Buffy got the feeling he was trying to increase the dramatics. “She might not have been wrong about anything. I’ve sent George and a couple of the others over to investigate.”

Buffy and Spike asked at the same time, “Why?”

“Looks like that guy you told us to watch out for. Meers?”

“Shit.” Spike took the phone from Buffy, rapidly firing off questions. “How do you know it’s him? Where’s he located? Who else did you send?”

“Got a photograph. The woman pointed him out to the cops who responded to the complaint and he’s in a house on Coraline. Imelda’s trying to get into the city records to see who the owner is. None of the guys I sent are human and a couple of them are off-duty cops.” Lawson answered the questions as quickly as they were asked, the two vampires practically speaking over each other.

“When you get him, make sure you hold onto him. Don’t let him go. In fact, cage him up in Oz’
place. He shouldn’t be able to break those bars or get out of there at all.”

“Who are you caging?” Buffy and Spike both turned, surprised by Oz’ question.

“Bloke who’s behind the videos.” Spike motioned him into the kitchen, smiling at Tara as she closed the back door behind her. “Figured that’s the best place to keep him ‘til sundown.”

Oz shrugged. “Good idea.”

“Right.” Spike thought for a moment. “Finn and his lackeys ‘ll be at the shop at six. Have everyone in place soon as the git’s locked up. We’ll head over there after we send the soldier boys home.”

Everyone could hear Lawson’s agreement and before he had a chance to continue, Spike hung up the phone. He shared a look with Oz, then pointedly turned his gaze to Tara. “Glinda. Feelin’ better?”

The blush that covered her face extended down to her chest and Tara ducked her head, trying her best to avoid anyone else’s eyes. Her stutter was back, causing her to hesitate more than she wanted to and keeping her from answering his question. When it was obvious she couldn’t respond, Oz took pity on her and answered. “She is.”

Buffy swung her gaze from one person to the next, wondering what was going on. Her eyes focused on Spike and he stared back, his face devoid of any real expression. “Tara, are you okay?”

“Yes.” She swallowed hard, then tucked her hair back behind her ear nervously. “Right now, yeah.”

“Is there something wrong?” Buffy was really concerned now, because both Tara and Oz were avoiding her gaze. “Guys?”

Oz moved a stool away from the island, motioning for Tara to sit. “Do you want me to?”

For a minute it looked like Tara would let him spill whatever she was trying to say. She hesitated again, looking down at her hands. Oz reached over and covered her fists with his own, the gesture giving her the unconditional support she needed. With a shake of her head, she smiled crookedly at him and spoke, never once taking her eyes off him. “We’re gonna have a baby.”

“We are?” The confusion was clear in Buffy’s voice, until she caught on. “We are? We are! Oh my... we are?” She spluttered a bit more, words tripping over her tongue, until Spike leaned over and with a single finger under her chin, closed her mouth.

Eyes big and bewildered, she looked from Tara to Oz and back again, more questions building in her head. Spike stepped closer, wrapping his arms around her, trying very hard not to laugh at her expression. “But I thought you don’t like guys. How did this... Okay, well I know how it happens. Just how did it happen to you two?”

“You know that myth they say about not getting pregnant on your first time?” A sly look entered Tara’s eyes and she smiled knowingly. “Totally not true.”

Buffy spluttered some more, disbelief and confusion warring in her head. She peeked up at Spike, demanding an answer. “Did you know about this?”
“Knew about the nipper.” He shrugged, leaning over to shake Oz’ hand. “Wasn’t sure ‘bout the how.”

Once more Tara surprised Buffy by quipping, “Well, you know, the usual way.”

This time, Spike did laugh.

Unable to help it any longer, Buffy bluntly asked, “You and Oz had sex?”

“That is the usual way, kitten.”

She thwapped him on the chest, glaring up at him. “Shut up, Spike.”

Oz came to his rescue. “It is you know.” When Buffy turned to face him, he held up his hands in a gesture of surrender, then shrugged. “Only way I know how to do it.”

“Augh!” Buffy threw up her hands, looking to the heavens for assistance. “You know what I mean! This is . . . it’s totally insane. Not in a bad way, insane in the good way.” She banged her head against Spike’s chest after she caught the look in Tara’s eyes. “I’m totally happy for you. I’m just really confused.”

When it looked like Spike was going to say something, Buffy clapped her hand over his mouth. “Please don’t make this worse by saying anything else. I’m really happy for them. Let me be confused, coz I’m not sure I want the description. I don’t need the visual on how it happened.”

She threw an apologetic glance toward Tara. “No offense.”

Though she was a little stung by Buffy’s reaction, Tara also understood. She had wigged enough on her own before she broke down and told Oz. There were times when she still had to convince herself that it had all happened and she’d been there. It must be very strange for someone else to see it, especially someone like Buffy, who knew she was a lesbian. Tara glanced over at Oz. Am I even strictly a lesbian anymore? Tara didn’t really have an answer to that question. She loved Oz, but she wasn’t in love with him. Affection, caring, it was all there; without any of the passion she’d felt for Willow. The sex had been different – and what truly had her wigged – was that it had been good different. Very good different.

Maybe I’m not really . . . With a sigh, Tara shook aside the thoughts swirling in her head and focused instead on what Buffy was babbling about. It was far easier to deal with Buffy’s confusion.

Buffy caught the look on Spike’s face and her babbling abruptly shifted focus. “You knew. And you didn’t tell me? How come you didn’t tell me? That’s so not fair.”

Before she had a chance to get really going, Spike interrupted. “Wasn’t my secret to tell, kitten.” He glanced over at the other couple. “Sides, was a mite curious about the how also.”

Tara’s blush deepened, her eyes dropping to the suddenly very interesting counter top. There was an awkward silence and finally Oz cleared his throat. “I’m glad you didn’t say anything, because I didn’t know.”

“What are you going to do about school?” Buffy’s mind was racing from one thought to the next, unable to censor her mouth. “We don’t have a whole lot of room. What are we gonna do about . .
all the babies can sleep in one room! We can have our own little nursery thing going on.”

“Actually, Buffy, that’s why we decided to tell you now.” Her voice was firm, but soft and everyone’s eyes focused on Tara again. She stiffened under the attention, though relaxed once she realized the other couple was merely curious and not upset. “I’m gonna stay in school and Oz is gonna do the parenting thing while I’m in classes. And I’m moving out.”

“What?” The blond duo shared worried glances. “You can’t. We need you here. We don’t want you to move.” Buffy’s lower lip wobbled a bit and tears sprung up in her eyes. “Please don’t go.”

“Rooms are at a premium around here.” Oz placed his hand over Tara’s, calming the agitated movements of hers. “You could start to charge by the hour. My parents are moving to Arizona and they’ve offered me the house.”

It was perhaps one of the longest speeches Buffy had ever heard from Oz and she stared at him, not quite sure what she was hearing. “So . . . what does that mean?”

“It means Tara’s gonna live with me.”

Buffy’s eyes swung to look at the other girl. “Are you?”

Taking more than a minute to answer, wondering how she was going to avoid hurting Buffy’s feelings, Tara once again sought the answer on the counter top. “There isn’t a lot of room here.”

“But this is your home.” For the first time since they entered the kitchen, Tara looked squarely at Buffy. With that one sentence, all the hurt generated by her previous comments was washed away. Home. She hadn’t had a real home since her mother had died . . . and now, Buffy was affirming what Tara had been feeling for the last few months. “We’re family.”

That was the last straw. Tara couldn’t hold back the emotions any longer. She sniffled once, twice and the next moment tears were dripping down her cheeks, falling on her clenched hands. It took Buffy all of two heartbeats to realize what was happening and barely another two before she’d crossed the kitchen to envelope Tara within a strong embrace.

Spike and Oz simultaneously stepped back, wary of the crying females. Neither one had expected the reactions to Buffy’s declaration and Oz, following Spike’s lead and catching sight of the horrified look on his face, slipped out of the kitchen and out onto the back porch.

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It took them only about twenty minutes to reach the Magic Box from the hotel – the same one Jenner had commandeered on his first trip to Sunnydale. Though it hadn’t been at that time, the hotel was now owned by a demon, and since taking over, tunnel access had been installed.

Faith came up through the cellar first, checking the position of the sun through the front windows, and satisfied that there was more than enough coverage, yelled down into the cellar. Her voice startled Giles whose attention was, as usual, deep in the pages of a book. Wesley had gone out to get lunch and a few other supplies, and Anya was behind the counter, knee-deep in sorting out inventory.
“Must you?” Giles had stood up, moving toward the front of the shop, intent on looking out for any spies. “We’re trying to keep your presence – both of you – somewhat of a secret.”

“Sorry, Giles. I keep forgetting that I can whisper and he’d hear me.” Faith shrugged, moving away from the cellar door as Jenner slipped through. At Jenner’s grunt, she grimaced. “Fine. That you’d even listen if I whispered.”

A leering grin was directed her way, then Jenner straightened, all business. “What’s the situation with the soldiers?”

“Lawson’s got his group watching each of them. As far as we know, they still only have the sniper in position.” Giles retreated from the window, refusing to look over his shoulder as he did. “He’s on top of the building across the street, under camouflage. He hasn’t moved since he took up position earlier this morning.”

“Is there a final head count?” Jenner nodded a greeting to Anya, who smiled in return.

“Including Finn, there’s a total of nine.” Giles began gathering up the books, replacing them on the shelves. “We’ve only been able to identify three of them as original Initiative officers. Our sources indicate the medic was Walsh’s third in command.”

Faith shared a very long look with Jenner. “That’s not the best news. Doesn’t make me wanna lay out the welcome mat.”

“No, none of us is please with that information.”

Anya poised, her gloved hands full of stinging nettles. “We could always kidnap him.”

“No, dear. I think we can hold off on that for a bit.” Giles smiled slightly, shaking his head. “I do believe we should negotiate first.”

“And then kidnap him if that doesn’t work.” She blithely went back to bagging the nettles. “I’m sure he doesn’t like former demons any more than he likes current ones.”

Giles knew that was cue. “Well, my dear, we’ll just have to keep you safe from his clutches.”

“See that you keep all of us safe, Rupert.”
Readiness to defend

Book Three.

Chapter Fourteen. Readiness to defend

That is not to say that we can relax our readiness to defend ourselves. Our armament must be adequate to the needs, but our faith is not primarily in these machines of defense but in ourselves.  
Chester W. Nimitz, March 22, 1950

There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all.  
Hamlet, act v, sc. ii

Being on the tightrope is living; everything else is waiting.  
Karl Wallenda

It took him all of ten minutes to convince Janice they couldn’t study, that there was a situation he had to deal with first, before he could tutor her. Janice, being smarter than everyone gave her credit for, and also knowing exactly what constituted his family, didn’t bother arguing. Instead he’d walked her home, surprised both of them by kissing her goodbye, and headed straight to the Magic Box.

He got there just as Oz was parking the van and he waited to help Buffy get out. There was no surveillance in the alley behind the shop, though they’d all been warned about the sniper on the dry cleaner’s building. “Where’s Spike?”

“On his way through the sewers.” Buffy looked upward, scanning the rooftops around them. “Are we sure there’re only nine of them?”

“Lawson’s had everyone watching. So far that’s it.” Connor trailed the others, allowing his heightened scenes to verify what his eyes viewed. “There’s the guy across the street. No one else is here.”

Buffy relaxed, unclenching her muscles and taking as deep a breath as she could. Her left hand rested on her extended belly, reaching for the door with her other hand. “I so need a nap.”

Tara laughed, admitting, “You aren’t alone.”

The door opened before Buffy could pull it toward her, Jenner motioning them in. “Rogan says they’re on the move. How long till Spike gets here?”

“Any minute now. He left the same time we did.” Buffy moved quickly despite her bulk, past Jenner who held the door for everyone. “If he’s not here in five, I want you to go after him.”

Jenner was about to say something over his shoulder when movement in the shadows behind the
building caught his attention. His voice pitched very low, he rumbled at Connor, “Left shoulder.”

Only a barely perceptible nod was his answer and Jenner receded into the room, letting Connor close the door and lock it. “I’ll go out.”

Buffy caught the tension, turning back. “What’s going on?”

“We have company, Slayer.” Jenner moved past her, into the main shop area, addressing the occupants. “Show time.”

Giles was the first to react. “How many?”

“Just one.” Jenner motioned for Faith to hand him the duffle bag they’d brought, and quickly handed out hand guns. “I know this isn’t usual, but these are humans who don’t understand hand to hand combat.”

Faith took one, handing another to Oz, who hesitated briefly. “We can’t let them get close. Not to any of us, but especially the vamps.”

Oz took another look at the handguns and took a step back. “No.”

“No?” Jenner stared at him for a moment, his expression inscrutable. “Any particular reason why?”

“Not my scene.” That was all the explanation Oz was willing to give. He stepped away from the duffle bag, motioning Tara to follow him.

Buffy, with a quick look around at all the non-combatants, took charge. “Keep them out of sight. I don’t want them on the defensive before they even get comfortable. I don’t really wanna have them around.”

“Have what around, kitten?” Spike’s voice preceded him up the steps and everyone turned to face him.

“Guns.”

He stopped in his tracks, looking hard at Faith. “This your idea?”

“Yeah.” She didn’t deny it, squaring her shoulders and almost daring him to confront her about it.

“Not a good one. Soldier boy isn’t expectin’ this much firepower.” Spike moved further into the shop, his eyes sweeping the occupants. “Don’t want him thinkin’ he’s got to prove he’s got the bigger set. Git already has issues.”

He crouched down, shifting through the weapons. “Where’s Oxford?”

Giles answered him. “He went to get food.” Glancing down at his watch, he frowned. “He should have been back by now.”

Spike glanced up, eyebrow raised. “Find him.”

Anyahanded Giles his cell phone, then whirled to reach for the land-line. When they were
engaged in two separate conversations, Spike pinned Faith with a glare. “Not sure why you thought this was a good idea. We got two women here that need to be protected, not worryin’ bout whether a stray shot is goin’ to hit them.”

“What are you talking about?” Faith held her ground, returning his stare with one of her own.

He inclined his head toward Buffy, his glare softening for a moment. “Can’t take chances with the sprogs.”

“Oh.” She glanced over at her counterpart, realizing what Spike meant. “I wasn’t actually thinking about that.”

He motioned her forward, holding the duffle bag open. “There’s only two people who should have these. Give one each to the Watchers, otherwise stow ’em someplace safe. The rest of us don’t need this.”

“What about boy wonder?” Faith looked over her shoulder at Connor, who was lounging idly against the metal stairs.

Spike looked up, catching Connor’s eye. The boy stared back steadily, knowing he was the current subject of their conversation. What Faith didn’t know, since she’d never patrolled with him, was that he had about as much use for a gun as Spike did. Any weapon he needed was close at hand, and he could move as fast as the vampires, with as much strength as one of the Slayers. He smirked, watching Spike shake his head.

“Boy’s fine as he is.”

With a nod in his direction, Spike raised his eyes upward, indicating where he wanted Connor during the coming meeting. “The whole point of havin’ you here, Faith, is in case we need back-up, not to cause the need for back up.” Spike got up, stowing the weapons bag behind the counter. “Won’t do for the toy soldiers to know they’re outnumbered already. We want his help, not a war.”

“His phone keeps going to voicemail.” Giles interrupted, waving his cell phone back and forth.

“Rogan says the last time anyone saw him, he was heading toward Johnny Garlic’s. That was an hour ago.” Anya piped in as she hung up the phone.

“Have Rogan send someone out to find him. We need him here.” Spike paced across the floor.

Giles punched in some other numbers, grumbling somewhat good-naturedly about being Spike’s social secretary, but no one paid him any mind. Everyone’s attention was focused on the blond vampire, who was obviously working out a plan in his head.

“You wanna share with the rest of the class?” Buffy folded her arms atop her belly, a sour look on her face. “We have all done this before, you know.”

He looked over at her, shaking his head. “‘S all different now.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Got you, Glinda an’ . . . Got Nibblet to worry ‘bout.” He shook his head. “Why’re we all here?”
“You mean right now? And not in that crazy existential ‘why are we who we are’ thingy?” She smirked, biting the side of her cheek to keep from laughing at his irate expression. “Because it’s safer for all of us together. Because I don’t trust Riley or the Initiative. Because the Council’s coming. There’s lots of reasons, Spike. You know that.”

His sigh was deep and heartfelt. “Yeah. I do.”

“Then tell me what you’re thinking.”

Their voices had dropped, everyone else around them receding into the background, their collective focus completely on the other. “Think you an’ Glinda should be home. With Dawn.”

“Not happening.” She moved closer to him, and his arms automatically came round her shoulders, hauling her even closer.

“Right. Then she should be up in the rafters with the boy. Thinking you should each have your own bodyguard.” He didn’t need to say it for her to understand. Oz would watch over Tara like—well, the way Spike would be watching out for her. Buffy knew it, understood it, and it finally clicked why he was so worried. He was worried the situation would escalate out of control and he’d be unable to protect all of his family.

“I promise to be good, okay?” She forced herself to hold his intense gaze, knowing he’d see the truth of her promise written in her eyes. He needed her to stay safe at all costs, so she’d do her best. “I promise.”

Another deep sigh broke from him and he shook himself. “Best I can hope for.”

Their surroundings resurfaced and, after a quick kiss Buffy headed over to Dawn while Spike pulled Oz and Jenner aside.

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He hadn’t even made it to the restaurant when the phone at his hip began vibrating. Wesley stopped mid-stride, reached for the phone, and when he recognized the caller-id, flipped it open. “Hello, Leslie.”

There was no pause at all. “Wesley, I’ve got a complete list of who’s gone with Travers and their plans.”

“How many are there?”

“Including the old man, fourteen.” McKeown paused, then rattled off the list of names, and their functions. “I’ve got pictures and C.V. ready to download, if you can get to a computer.”

“Have you?” Wesley thought for a second, weighing his options. He could turn around and walk the nearly ten blocks back to the shop, or he could walk the shorter distance to the flat he shared with Giles and Anya. “I’ll be at one momentarily.”

“Good, I can’t risk leaving the information available from this end. Travers left Smythe-Hynde in
charge until his return. He voted against every proposal Giles made, and then some. Wouldn’t put it above him to scan personal computers. We’ve got to make this quick.”

The urgency was clear in Leslie’s voice and Wesley couldn’t help but respond to it. “Everything’s in the files you’ll be sending? Including the wetworks team?”

“All the files. Two of the team trained under Giles before he got assigned to Sunnydale.”

“That’s a mark in our favor.” Wesley opened the door, heading straight for the office, which also doubled as his bedroom. “Let me just boot up.”

“Right. Fine.” A tense silence filtered through the phone lines and Wesley could picture the sight McKeown must be making.

“I’m in.”

“Grand. Log onto yahoo and I’ll send you the files.”

“Won’t that take longer than an email?”

“No. And it’s a bit more secure. Emails can be waylaid.” The quick tapping of a keyboard filled his ears and Wesley watched while the first of eight files began transferring. “You might want to print these out so the Gaffer can read them.”

“Already started.” And he had. The moment the first transfer was complete, Wesley began printing. He grabbed the first, briefly scanning the information on Travers and Nicholson. He already knew most of this, though the Curriculum Vitae held peripheral information that Wesley neither cared about, nor felt was important. “Where did you get these?”

“From the personnel files. These are updated every six months.” Leslie hesitated, then blurted out, “I’ve also got the files for each of you. Do you want those as well?”

While he didn’t doubt the Council kept tabs on him, Wesley wasn’t entirely sure their information would be accurate, though, as he thought it over, it might be a smart idea to know what their opponents knew about them – and what they didn’t. “Send them. I’m sure Rupert will want to see those as well.”

“That’ll be the last batch. There’s not much in the file on the vampire.”

Wesley chuckled a bit. “No, I’m sure what they do have is contained in the Aurelian Chronicles. And I’m just as positive most of it is hearsay.”

Once the last transfer was complete, they disconnected, Leslie confirming that this would be his last communication until after Nicholson had made contact. He’d also confided, just before hanging up, that it was entirely possible that Travers had ordered a second team to be activated, though neither he nor Nicholson could confirm that. There was enough confusion surrounding their departure – some of it deliberate – that kept all of them on edge.

As he sat reading the reports, waiting for the last of them to finish printing, Wesley tried to make sense of Travers’ decision on some of his travel companions. Nicholson’s presence was understandable, given his position as Travers’ secretary. But some of the others? The questionable decision to name Spencer Whitworth as the Watcher for the new Slayer struck
Wesley as particularly odd. While she’d been a stellar student and a more than adequate researcher, Wesley had always felt Spencer lacked the ruthless streak most successful Watchers had. Something he was able to recognize, since he lacked it also. Or he had. Time and circumstance had tempered him, his softer edges burned away in the face of some very harrowing and foolish mistakes. Whitworth didn’t appear to him, on the surface, to be made of the ‘right stuff’, as Buffy would have phrased it.

And the new Slayer . . . Wesley carefully looked over her dossier, trying vainly to read between the lines. Though the Council had moved forward, it was still unusual for a woman to be named as the Watcher for the active Slayer. And although the Council was well aware of Buffy Summers’ continued existence and her position on the Hellmouth, Whitworth’s appointment still struck him as odd.

The news about the wetworks team was encouraging, and Wesley wondered how much of a hand Nicholson had in the choices. Actually, he scanned the list of names again, comprehension dawning. Nicholson must have had more control over the selection than he’d previously thought, because nearly all the names were ones he was familiar with, and knew them to be on the more progressive side.

Wesley glanced at the clock, surprised to see nearly two hours had passed. Gathering up the reports, he switched off the computer, then reactivated his cell phone. Simultaneously, someone pounded at the door and the phone rang, leaving Wesley a bit flustered. He flipped the phone, heading for the front door, surprised when he got yelled at from both ends.

“Where are you?”

“Are you okay?” Rogan was at the door with Imelda two steps behind him, relief clear on both their faces. “They’ve been frantically trying to get you, dude. What the hell happened?”

Waving the reports at them, Wesley barked into the phone, “I’m fine. Really, Anya. I am. I’m heading back to the shop now. I’ve forgotten lunch.”

Rogan took the papers from Wesley, whistling as he scanned the contents. “This is some serious info. Where’d you get it?”

“From a contact within the Council. I have to get back to the shop.” Ushering them out the door, Wesley took the files back. “Is everything else ready?”

“Yeah, they were all just waiting on you.” Rogan turned to look at Wesley, his blond hair falling over his eyes. “Dunno if you heard, but we nailed that robot-guy.”

“Robot?” His eyes sought out Imelda’s, knowing he’d get more coherent information from her. “What robot-guy?”

“We think we found the guy who built the Buffybot.” Imelda leaned closer, pitching her voice low. “We’re on our way to pick him up. With a few others. Spike said to take him over to the cage.”

Wesley could barely contain his surprise. “That was quick.”

“I know. It came over on a neighbor’s complaint.” Imelda brushed her hair back, pushing Rogan ahead of her. “We’ve gotta head over there. We’ll see you after the meeting.”
“Right.” Wesley watched the two of them head off. Events were coming at them faster than he’d expected, and though he was rather pleased it would all be over and done with shortly, he wasn’t entirely sure that would work in their favor. With both the Initiative and the Council in town, anything could happen.

Wesley just hoped it wouldn’t complicate Buffy’s condition.

As soon as Wesley had been located, the tension in the shop decreased visibly. Spike was still pacing the floor, though his steps weren’t as hurried. Giles and Anya had quickly polled everyone, deciding that lunch was still something they should all have, and the decision was made to switch to pizza, which could be delivered.

Buffy and Tara were sitting at the table, their heads together, whispering softly. After placing the order, Giles approached the two blonds. “What time did you set this meeting for with Riley?”

“We agreed on two-thirty. Why?”

“Because it’s quarter to three already.” He glanced over at the clock, knowing his announcement would catch everyone’s attention. “We haven’t heard from any of our look-outs, have we?”

Spike whirled around, the flare of his coat catching briefly on a display. “Phones would’ve rung. So no.”

“Should we be worried?” Buffy wrinkled her nose, then rested her chin in the palm of one hand. “No news and all that, right?”

“I don’t think we should be concerned at this point. It’s probably just a minor delay.” Giles downplayed his concern, though he caught Spike’s gaze as he looked over Buffy’s head. “What on earth are you reading?”

“Baby names.” Buffy held up the book in front of her and Tara, pointing out one of her choices. “I think we’ve decided against Hortense, but everything else is up for grabs.”

Spike snorted, choking on a laugh at the look on Dawn’s face.

“You’re not serious.”

Buffy’s light laugh had Dawn up on her feet, heading down the steps. “You are so not naming my sibs – giving one of them the name Hortense. That’s just cruel.”

“I dunno, Dawnie. Hortense is a really old fashioned name. Maybe Spike would like that.” Tara’s sly words caught up with the vampire a moment later, and he turned a sardonic look on her.

“Hardly, Glinda. Might like a more traditional name, but that’s just.. no. No Hortense.” Noticing the looks on everyone’s faces, Spike sighed, giving in just a little bit. “We’ve decided on..”
Buffy interrupted him before he could spill the beans. “Names. We have good names. We just aren’t sharing them yet. You’ll see. It’ll be all good.”
Preconceived notions

Book Three

Chapter Fifteen  Preconceived notions

Opinions founded on prejudice are always sustained with the greatest of violence.
  Francis Jeffrey, 1773 - 1850

Prejudice is the child of ignorance.
  William Hazlitt

O Lord, help me not to despise or oppose what I do not understand.
  William Penn

Preconceived notions are the locks on the door to wisdom.
  Merry Browne

there was a man who had a face it looked a lot like me
I saw him in the mirror and I fought him in the street then when he turned away I shot him in the head then I came to realize I had killed myself if you're free you'll never see the walls if you're head is clear you'll never freefall if you're right you never fear the wrong if you're head is high you never fear
  Exploder, lyrics by Chris Cornell

Be honest, decent, faithful and congenial towards members of our own blood but to no one else.
  Heinrich Himmler, October 4, 1943

Wesley arrived shortly after Giles’ announcement about the Initiative’s tardiness. He apologized profusely, indicating the reports in his hand. “Sorry, I was unavoidably detained. I’ve heard from my contact. He sent me a list of the Council members traveling with Travers and information about the new Slayer.”

The announcement went a long way to placating those waiting for him at the shop. As Wesley stepped toward the table, Spike waylaid him and grabbed the majority of the papers from his hand. Giles stood just behind him, reading over his shoulder as the vampire read them. Whenever Spike finished a page, he handed it to Giles, who in turn handed them off to Buffy. Anya and Tara picked up the pages Buffy put down, the former demon grumbling loudly about the delay.
“How many of them are coming?”

“Fourteen, including Travers.”

“Four in the wetworks team; the Slayer and her Watcher and the remaining members are senior staffers.” Wesley ticked off the bare essentials, noting Faith and Jenner coming into the shop from the training room.

“Are the staffers trained in combat?” Faith stripped off the tape around her hands with her teeth, spitting the threads into her hands when she was finished.

“Some are, but probably haven’t seen any real fighting, just training and sparring,” was Giles’ offhand response. A low chuckle escaped him as the first name of the wetworks team was revealed. “Oh, dear.”

Buffy and Anya looked up.

“What?” Buffy demanded.

“Why are you chuckling? Chuckling like that is not good, Rupert.” Anya snapped testily.

“I think perhaps Travers miscalculated a bit.” He passed the page onto Buffy, catching Wesley’s eye as he did so. “Either that, or he was misdirected.”

“I’d say misdirected would be closer to the mark.” The taller Englishman smiled, pointing to the page currently in Spike’s hand. “That name should also be of interest.”

Peering at the page, Giles once again broke into laughter. “Well, that spoils it nicely.”

“Giles... ’splain for the rest of the class.” Buffy read over the page in her hand, then quickly passed it off. “Who is that guy?”

Looking around, Giles realized they were all staring at him, waiting for an explanation for his reaction. “Before I was appointed as your Watcher, I was an instructor at the Council’s small academy. Most of the names on this list belong to former students of mine.” As if that would explain it all, he reached for the next page.

When no further explanation was forthcoming, Wesley took pity on the rest of them. “Giles was considered a bit of a rebel by some of the older Council members. He didn’t always teach by the approved method, nor did he teach blind obedience to Council dictates.”

He indicated the page Buffy was currently reading. “Most of the Watchers who studied under him and Edward Robson are... well, they constantly challenge the Old Guard.”

“So Ripper didn’t just hide in the shadows, huh?” Buffy sent an impish, teasing look in her Watcher’s direction, laughing when he harrumphed loudly at her in response.

Any was the only one to react. “Rupert!”

“Yes, dear?” He sounded so affably henpecked that when Spike raised a brow and smirked, Giles tried to stare him down over the top of his glasses.
“You never told me that was you! Ripper? Did you know that the effects of what you did were talked about at all the best parties for,” she paused, calculating the time and devouring him with her eyes at the same time. “Well, it was at least a couple of months. The idea of humans calling forth Eyghon was very exciting. However did you manage?”

Spike shook his head, laughter playing about his lips as Anya continued to prattle, “You really are much better suited for me. Brains and daring and wonderful orgasms.”

None of them dared to look at each other, knowing the laughter bubbling at the surface would somehow insult Anya unintentionally. Even Dawn averted her eyes and bit her lip, knowing the second anyone tried speaking the giggles would spew from her.

The mood changed drastically though, when Jenner remarked, almost idly, “We’ve still got company.”

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At thirteen thirty hours, Riley sent Watkins down to the Magic Shop, with instructions to get into position in the alley behind it, watching the back entrance. He’d already briefed him on who and what to expect.

As Watkins settled into position, the only known target was the Slayer herself. Everyone else was not on the list Lieutenant Finn had given him. They were unidentifiable and Watkins didn’t like unknowns. Uncertain of what his orders should be, he radioed in after the last of them cleared the door, hoping to get some clarification from his superior officer. What he got wasn’t much help. None of the descriptions he relayed corresponded to any of the core group surrounding the Slayer, though the young teen could possibly be Xander Harris. Settling back on his haunches, Watkins kept his eyes on the alley door, occasionally scanning the entrances on either side of him.

Which explained why almost two hours into his surveillance, when the kid dropped down from the building over his head, landing practically on top of him, he fell back, landing square on his ass. He knew he was at a distinct disadvantage and silently cursed his inattention. The kid stared down at him, intense blue eyes blazing from an almost feminine face. Watkins reacted, jumping to his feet before the kid could move, only to find himself back down on the ground.

“Don’t.” It was the only thing the kid said, his face devoid of any expression. “Just don’t.”

Watkins tried standing again, to find himself again on his ass. “What the fuck?”

The kid stared at him, the only change in his expression a sardonic lift of one eyebrow. “You don’t listen so well, do you?”

“What the hell do you want? And who the hell are you?” Watkins reached for his weapon, flicking open the holster. Before he could clear it, the kid had moved, stepping heavily on his wrist, pinning it to the ground.

“Doesn’t matter who I am. I already told you not to do anything. Guess you Army guys don’t really know how to follow orders.”
Though he tried, he couldn’t shift the kid’s weight off his wrist, unable to knock him off balance. Instead, the pressure increased until he could feel the smaller bones start to shift. “All right, get off. I won’t do anything.”

“Good choice.” Connor leaned down, his face inches from the soldier’s. “Too bad you’re gonna miss all the fun.” Before the older man could blink, Connor had tapped his fist against the side of his head, knocking him out completely.

A satisfied grin crossed his face and he reached out to grab the soldier under his arms. Dragging him toward the Magic Shop, Connor kicked back at the door twice with his boot and waited until Jenner opened it.

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“Finn?”

Riley stopped, waiting for the doctor to reach him. “May I have a few moments to confer with you after the meeting?”

“Sure. Is there something in particular you wanted to discuss?” His mind wasn’t on the current conversation, but on the briefing they were both about to enter. “Are you sure you want to wait until then?”

“Yes, Lieutenant, I’m sure.”

“Very well, Major Gebhardt. I can spare a few minutes after the briefing.” Riley watched the older man head into the dining room of the rented house, which had been converted into the main meeting room. He had no idea what the Major wanted and wondered what might be going on in the man’s head. Gebhardt was one of the few, like himself, who had been with the Initiative on the first tour in Sunnydale and he thought perhaps the other officer wanted to explore the caves and underground area. It might be worth a little reconnaissance to see what remained after the Army had abandoned the post. There might be something useful.

Shrugging off the thoughts, Riley ushered the last of his group into the dining room, intent on the matter at hand.

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Spencer had spent the next four hours of the flight at his side, severely hampering his actions and keeping him from going over his tasks for the next few hours. Every time she opened her mouth, Nicholson fought the urge to yell at her and send her on her way back to the Slayer, who was fidgeting mightily in her seat three rows back.

There was another problem bound to blow up in their faces. The new Slayer, Kennedy – what an awful name for a girl child – was a spoiled, pampered, petulant brat. And those were just her finer points. Nothing anyone did or said was to her satisfaction, from the morning meal to the night’s repast. Nothing pleased her, nothing placated her. And nearly everything out of her mouth revolved around her wealthy father and what he would do if only he knew how is little girl was
being treated. It was enough to give him perpetual heartburn. Thankfully for them, they were flying on the Council’s private plane and not commercially, which would have posed another set of problems.

Nicholson was relieved when Travers signaled for his attention and he could leave Spencer to her own devices. At the moment, it was a choice between the Scylla and Charybdis, but he’d take anything at this point. “Sir?”

“We need to go over latest data from the Hellmouth before we land. I want to make certain there’s been no further changes or other news.”

“I’ll check the fax machine, sir, but I don’t believe anything else has come to light in the last few hours.” Nicholson held his breath, hoping he was correct as he ducked into the information center. Two laptops and a fax machine hummed softly, barely discernible over the jet engines. He pressed a button, activating the first laptop, then punched in a series of passwords.

Swallowing deeply, he realized he’d spoken a bit too soon. The latest report, which had come in just before take-off, or so it appeared, indicated that the US Military had activated a small unit on the Hellmouth. Nicholson waited anxiously while the pages printed, wondering how the old man was going to react to this bit of news. He hadn’t been pleased the last time the military had set up shop in Sunnydale, and had easily conveyed said displeasure to the Prime Minister, who in turn, had conducted hasty meetings with the President. All of which contributed heavily, no doubt, to the official disbanding of the group.

However, more recent reports indicated that the Initiative hadn’t been disbanded, only strategically relocated to one of the South American hot-spots. And if that was the case, having a small cadre of soldiers in Sunnydale did not bode well at all. Especially given Buffy Summers’ current condition. Nicholson shook off his worries and headed down the aisle to where Travers sat.

“Sir?”

Travers looked up and, catching the grim look on Nicholson’s face, urged him to sit. “What is it?”

“There’s a problem.”

In terse, concise sentences, backed up by the printout in his hand, Nicholson relayed his concerns about the information he’d just received. When he was finished, Travers sat back, his eyes fixed on Nicholson’s. The old man was quiet, almost too quiet and Nicholson braced himself for the fall-out. “Get me whatever intelligence you can on who is leading that unit. Find out their purpose and how long they’ve been in Sunnydale. And if you can,” he continued in a deceptively soft tone, “Find out who authorized that and why.”

Nicholson got to his feet, but Travers’ next words made him pause. “I want all this in place by the time we land.” He checked his watch. “Which means you have approximately four hours.”

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The house on Coraline Avenue was small and relatively non-descript. White siding with dark green and black trim covered the walls, and pretty lace curtains fluttered in the late afternoon breeze. Neighborhood noises filled the rest of the block, but the area around number 2218 was
quiet. Almost too quiet.

Rogan had tripped the electric grid for the block, shutting down all the electronics. Here and there a generator hummed, but for the most part, the block was down. Five off-duty members of Sunnydale’s finest were ranged about the house, waiting on his signal to batter down the doors and seize whatever they found inside. Imelda was sitting in the van, earphones on and infrared camera aimed at the front door of the house. He was sitting next to her, radio in hand, relaying instructions to the rest of the crew.

Information spilled over from those who were conducting surveillance on the Initiative, as he listened to their transmissions back and forth. Confusion reigned momentarily, when one of his people mistook a go-ahead from Lawson for his signal, but the situation was back under control long before it could have escalated into something potentially bad.

He waited, restoring calm, while his sister confirmed the identity and location of their target.

“Got him.” Imelda reached for the radio in his hand, speaking as her finger depressed the button. “He’s in the basement level, there is another with him. Second target is unknown, but probably in on it with him. Bring them both in. Watch out for booby traps, boys.”

With a pointed glare, Rogan wrestled his radio back from her. “Okay, guys, you heard her. Take him.”

Low whoops and several ‘about times’ were heard, which barely elicited a retort from their end. Two of the five approached from the rear, while another two knocked on the front door. As cover, they were using the neighbor’s complaint about stolen cable, and though off-duty, were carrying their badges. Imelda and Rogan waited, while the unknown answered the door and, readily intimidated, let them in.

Within minutes, they had disarmed the two weaselly-looking men, subdued and handcuffed both of them. Twenty minutes after that, they were both secured in Oz’ cage, both of them spouting ineffective curses and expletives.

Rogan smiled evilly at both of them and morphed into his demonic visage, laughing when the smaller, a goofy-looking blond – nearly pissed his pants. Ignoring them, he radioed in the information.

Now all they had to do was sit and wait for the other business to be over.

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Riley watched his men file out, Hughes already on the radio, trying to reach Watkins while Lansome was trying to get Sloth to respond. Major Gebhardt was waiting for him, a folder under his arm, doing his best to wait until everyone, including Graham had left the dining room. “Major?”

“Lieutenant. I’d like to have your undivided attention.” Gebhardt stood stiffly, his eyes slightly averted from Riley’s direct gaze.

“Sure, what’s on your mind?” He watched while Gebhardt closed the door to the kitchen, followed
by the French doors leading to the living room.

“Please sit.” The folder was placed before him, but before he could open it, Gebhardt started speaking. “Do you remember what the purpose of the Initiative was?”

“To capture hostile sub-humans and contain them.” Finn’s answer was rote, and he wondered what was the purpose of Gebhardt’s request and why he chose this moment to confront him.

“Not exactly, Lieutenant.” He pointed to the folder in front of him. “The original purpose was to capture and study the sub-humans in order to help create a smarter, faster, stronger soldier.”

“Was that also supposed to include experimentation and the Adam situation?” Riley suddenly didn’t like what Gebhardt was hinting at.

“Those hostiles weren’t human, Finn. However, we have a unique situation here.” Gebhardt leaned on the table, palms against the flat surface, eagerness – and perhaps a bit of fanaticism – lighting his pale grey eyes. Riley had never seen the man so animated before, not even when Walsh had been in charge. “Though you haven’t admitted out loud, I’m almost positive you have suspicions regarding Miss Summers’ pregnancy. I know I do.”

Riley settled back into his chair, watching Gebhardt pace to the end of the table, almost grateful that someone else had picked up on the strangeness of his ex-girlfriend’s situation. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t play stupid, Lieutenant. We both know it’s an act and not a very good one, either.” The doctor pointed to the latest photograph of Buffy. She was standing outside the Magic Box, talking to a young male Riley didn’t recognize. He suspected the boy was Dawn’s boyfriend, though so far all efforts to identify him had failed. Her pregnant belly was prominent and she looked happier and healthier than he could ever remember her being. Judging by the way she looked, her claims about being dead seemed almost delusional.

“According to our surveillance reports, the only adult male living in the house with her and her sister is the vampire. Neither of the other two Englishmen is living there. If the younger one was, in fact, the father of her children, wouldn’t they at least be sharing living space?”

The question was somewhat rhetorical and Riley chose not to answer it. Too much had changed in the past year for him to say he knew Buffy Summers as well as he once thought he did. Instead, he addressed the doctor’s other statements. “So what are you getting at, Major?”

His next statement was uttered so quietly, that Riley was only half-sure he heard him. “If these children are hybrids, we have an opportunity to study them, Lieutenant.”

“Study?” While the idea didn’t exactly sit well with him, Riley wasn’t completely opposed to it. “What do you mean by study?”

“No one is really sure of what a Slayer is, whether she’s other than human. Her abilities coupled with those of a vampire could be unstoppable.” He paused, hoping to somehow appeal to Riley. “Think of the possibilities.”

He had to admit part of him was thinking of the possibilities. Someone with the combined strength of Spike and Buffy would be a formidable ally or an equally deadly opponent. Yet a bigger part of him was thinking about how his ex-girlfriend – a girl he thought would make a perfect wife and
partner – had been sleeping with a thing, a dead man. A vampire. The thought alone disgusted him. *How she could lower herself to* – and then for it to be some soulless, evil... thing. Riley realized, as he was sitting there, half listening to Gebhardt’s arguments, that he absolutely hated Spike. Hated him with nearly the same fervor that he had once loved Buffy. Spike represented everything he hated about vampires; and worse, he represented his own personal failures.

The second he found out that Buffy’s first boyfriend, her first real love, had been a vampire, Riley knew they were doomed. Knew he’d always come out second best or worst. He wasn’t strong enough, wasn’t fast enough, didn’t understand her world enough because he was just a super-charged regular guy. Magic confused him; the manipulation of will based on words and intentions was beyond his understanding. He didn’t believe until he’d seen the things Willow could do and even then he’d still had a hard time believing it. At first, he fought demons because the Army ordered him to, not because of some sacred calling. It wasn’t until he’d had an actual chance to see and watch the demons in action that Riley had understood why the Army had wanted to destroy demons. They deserved to be destroyed. They fed off humans, created chaos, and threatened the lives and safety of real people.

It wasn’t possible to reason with a demon. You couldn’t make them understand people weren’t a food source or slave labor or anything rational, because demons lacked the capacity to understand those things. They were like sharks or lions, focused on feeding and creating new predators. That’s all. And because they were like that, they needed to be destroyed. The fact some of them spoke English and looked human was immaterial. They weren’t human. They were less than human.

And Buffy, the girl he once thought he loved enough to marry, had slept with more than one of them. It was disgusting. *She treats those vampires like their opinions and thoughts matter. Like they’re no different from me.*

Riley stared down at his hands, tracing the lines of scars that crisscrossed the back of the left one. A vampire in Belize had given him those, scratching and fighting after destroying almost an entire village. A vampire. Just like Spike. Like Angel. Riley looked up, surprised to see that Gebhardt was still speaking.

“It wouldn’t be right to take them from their mother. At least not until they’re born. Would you be able to persuade her to agree to some testing? Or maybe just give her an option about safety? Play on her fears as a new mother?”

Riley almost laughed in the Major’s face. “Buffy? Afraid of something?” He pushed the photograph across the table. “She’s not really afraid of anything.” *Which was really one of her problems.*

“Lieutenant, I don’t think you understand what kind of thoughts go through a person’s head when they’re about to become a parent for the first time. She’ll have concerns.” The way he said it set Riley’s teeth on edge, hearing the condescension in his voice.

There was only one drawback to Gebhardt’s whole plan. “I still don’t know who the father is. And until I hear it straight from Buffy, I’m not going to authorize this.”

Gebhardt wisely refrained from saying anything more, somehow gauging Riley’s reluctance to truly take that step. Feeling more than satisfied by the outcome, Gebhardt nodded, then left the converted dining room, leaving Riley alone with his thoughts. He’d laid the seeds of it though, which was more than enough in his mind.
Almost in spite of himself, Riley went through the reports one more time. Only this time, Gebhardt’s words replayed themselves over and over. Those babies would someday grow up. If they were Spike’s – a thought which still boggled his mind – would they inherit more of Buffy’s nature or Spike’s? And would they care about humanity... or want to take over the world?

Riley was beginning to think he couldn’t wait that long to find out. It might be better to take guesswork out of the equation.
Strings of Tension

Book Three

Chapter Sixteen Strings of Tension

No collection of people who are all waiting for the same thing are capable of holding a natural conversation.
   Ben Elton, Airport Rescue

And we shall play a game of chess,
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.
   T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

Strategy requires thought, tactics require observation.
   Max Euwe

The world is all gates, all opportunities, strings of tension waiting to be struck.
   Ralph Waldo Emerson

Two thirty had come and gone. Three thirty had also. It was now nearing the four-thirty mark and everyone was beyond restless. Nearly everyone was in the training room, watching Spike spar with Jenner while Faith and Connor squared off. The pairs kept intersecting and every once in a while, Spike would grimace or flinch in pain when he came too close to hitting anyone that wasn’t Jenner.

Though none of them voiced the issue that was at the forefront of everyone’s mind, it was clear they were all beginning to feel the strain of waiting. The sentry Connor had captured earlier was tied up in a corner, blindfolded and gagged. Buffy found her eyes on him, wondering if he was one of the soldiers that had masqueraded as a student the first time the Initiative had been in Sunnydale and then wondering why she cared. They hadn’t bothered to try and get information from him, since he’d been uncooperative from the moment he’d regained consciousness. The inaction forced by her growing bulk was slowly driving her crazy and she wanted to get up and join the sparring, even knowing that she shouldn’t. Her eyes followed Spike’s movements as he battled Jenner, trying hard to keep from shouting out commentary.

Dawn skirted the training floor, sidestepping around Connor as he tried to slide around Faith, heading straight for Buffy. She leaned down, whispering intently, “Wesley just got a phone call from Lawson. He said there’s something going on with Riley’s dorks.”

Buffy shook her head. “Riley’s dorks? Lawson said that?”

“No, that was me.” Dawn rolled her eyes at Buffy’s intentional ditziness. “I’m like, editorializing.”

“Ooh, big word, Dawnie.” Buffy giggled softly, then started struggling to her feet. “Maybe
“Wouldn’t bet on it, kitten.” Spike ducked under Jenner’s punch, spinning around to help Buffy to her feet. “Wanker’s doin’ this to make a point. An’ I’m thinkin’ he’s not that inclined to help yours truly in any way.”

She sighed, knowing Riley’s presence and the difficulties it brought were all her fault. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have called him.”

“No. ‘S done now. No sense cryin’ over it.” He brushed a kiss on her brow. “Had to take the chance.”

Connor dropped Faith with a left hook, grinning and hooting when she stayed down, staring up at the ceiling. “What the hell?”

Buffy leaned down, laughter in her eyes, looking at Faith upside down. “Oops?”

“Funny, B. Really. Boy wonder packs a hella punch.” Faith flexed her jaw, then easily rolled to her feet. “Damn, kid, what was that all about?”


Wesley stood in the doorway, cell phone at his ear. “Lawson says two of the soldiers just left, and they’re heading in this direction.”

Spike and Buffy shared a look, then proceeded into the shop area. “What about Graham and Riley?”

“They’re still inside. Haven’t seen either of them since Riley left Restfield earlier.” Wesley followed the two of them. “And before you ask, I didn’t know he’d been there either.”

“So we still don’t know when they’re gonna show up.” Buffy slumped into one of the chairs, resting her elbows on the surface and her chin in the cradle created by her hands. “Was he always this way?”

“What way?” Tara glanced up from the book she was reading while Dawn wandered over to the counter.

“Inconsiderate.” Dawn supplied the answer, while Buffy hesitated. “And that would be a big fat yes.”

“He wasn’t that bad,” the retort was out of Buffy’s mouth and it wasn’t until she caught the look on Dawn’s face that she realized what she’d said. “Was he?”

“He was. Trust me.”

Before the two Summers women could get into a shouting match, Giles motioned to his watch. “Whether he was then or not, he’s rather inconsiderate now. Are you quite certain you agreed to the two-thirty meeting time?”

“Well, yeah. He kinda insisted on it. I think he did it because he wanted to try and keep Spike out of the way.”
Various forms of amusement greeted Buffy’s statement, the loudest not coming from the vampire, but from the two former Watchers. “See, that just proves my point. He doesn’t remember Spike can get around during the day.”

“Dawn, please don’t aggravate the situation,” Anya huffed out. “This is already stressful and stress causes worry and lines and, really, I don’t want to spend my money on moisturizers to remove stress lines at my age.”

The fact none of them thought Anya’s remark was in any way odd was a measure of how far they’d all come and how well she been accepted. It was the gagging noises Dawn made after Giles soothed over Anya’s complaints by suavely remarking, “I hardly think you’ll need to moisturize at any age, dear,” that had everyone laughing again.

Nicholson didn’t have the resources at hand to fulfill Travers’ request, but he managed with the tools he had to get as much information as possible. What little he did discover lead him back to a unit of the US Army stationed in Belize. Once he read the list of officers stationed there, Nicholson had his connection to Sunnydale. Grasping the printout, he headed down the gangway to where Travers was.

“You’ve found something?” Travers held his hand out, eyes on his assistant.

“It’s a start, sir. I’ll need more time. However, I do believe I have discovered something of interest.” He pointed to the third name on the list. “That young man dated Buffy Summers just before her death.”

Travers recognized the name from the first reports. “Is he back in Sunnydale?”

“Evidently he’s leading the unit.”

“So I’m to assume the reason he’s returned to Sunnydale – with a unit – is because he’s reconnecting with an old girlfriend?” The sarcasm was biting, though Nicholson didn’t react.

“It is a convenient cover.” Neither one of them believed for one instant that it was anything but a cover.

“Almost too convenient.” Travers read through the list one more time. “How many men did he bring with him?”

“Eight.”

“Eight.” The habit of repeating information back was a somewhat annoying one, but in this instance, Nicholson understood Travers was merely mulling over his responses. “Enough to form a wetworks team and too many for it to be just a casual meeting.” He paused again, glancing out the bulkhead window at the clouds outside. “I don’t like the implications of this, Nicholson.”

“Neither do I.” He dropped into the seat opposite his boss. “I could activate another team.”
“That should be a last resort. However,” Travers kept his gaze steady, “I do want you to alert the Defence and Overseas Secretariat that we have a situation of some concern with our operatives in California.”

Something passed through Travers’ expression, something he’d only once before seen. Shortly after Buffy Summers’ death, the old man had given in to an emotion Nicholson had never expected the Council Chair to experience. In a lesser man, he might have termed the emotion regret; but in Travers it had been something deeper, something a bit darker. While he’d never kept his antipathy for the Summers girl quiet, Nicholson often found himself wondering if Travers didn’t also respect her. She flaunted the Council’s authority at every turn, defied the odds against her own death, and basically did everything she wasn’t supposed to do . . . and defeated every enemy in her path.

“Anything else, sir?” Nicholson eased himself out of the seat, preparing to send off an email to the Ministry.

“Activate that second team.”

Obviously, Travers had rethought his position on the teams. “Sir?”

“We have a delicate situation here, Nicholson. Our Senior Slayer is heavily pregnant and we have an untried new Slayer. The Initiative’s presence, however limited, does not bode well.” He sighed heavily. “I have no doubt that the Military, given their previous stance, would make every attempt to capture Miss Summers. No matter who is in charge of the operation.”

Nicholson did not miss the emphasis the old man had imbued the words ‘our Senior Slayer’ with; nor had he missed the other unspoken communication. Travers didn’t have much trust in the new Slayer, despite the fact she had been identified as a potential and been in Council control for about a year. However, that wasn’t what caused the sudden chill he felt in his bones. No, that was caused by Travers’ last comment.

Until now, Nicholson had contented himself with the thought that no matter what happened, Buffy Summers would be relatively safe, at least from humans. Now that the news was out, any power-hungry individual or group could capitalize on the situation and her vulnerability. Added to that the unknown quantities of her offspring and there was a recipe for disasters of apocalyptic proportions.

World-wide and inter-dimensionally.

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Growing up in Sunnydale, especially as a teenager, Xander thought he’d seen just about every species of demon imaginable. Squidly-type things with tentacles instead of arms, Fyrals, Brachen, everything . . . But nothing had prepared him for the sight in front of him. Cordelia sat quietly at a corner table, away from the crowds lining the bar and the dance floor, her head bent to listen to something being said by the demon sitting next to her. Xander had no doubt it was a demon, because his bright green skin, red eyes and hair – with horns – gave him away. If that wasn’t bad enough, the demon was dressed in a bright yellow suit, offset by a loud blue and green flowered shirt. Xander kept blinking, unsure of what bizarre wonderland he’d stepped into. He knew Los Angeles was strange; he just didn’t realize how strange.
Their first full night in the city of Angels had been nothing short of an eye-opener. Somewhere between Sunnydale and Los Angeles, Cordelia had regained some of her confidence, the sorrow and despair easing somewhat the further they traveled away from Sunnydale. He supposed in some way, it made sense. While her childhood had been nothing but idyllic, Cordelia’s later years had proved more than trying. And her last visit? Xander couldn’t imagine she’d ever want to step foot in the town again. Not that he blamed her. He wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to go back.

Despite the hour, or maybe because of it, there were a fair amount of humans in the audience and every once in a while, someone would take the stage and sing. Whenever that happened, the green guy got up from the table and met the singer before he or she made it back to their seat. Xander didn’t quite understand until Cordelia motioned him over.

“How come you won’t sit?”

He shrugged, staring into his pint glass. “You looked like you didn’t want me to interrupt.” He’d ordered a beer, thinking that at least would be safe, but he wasn’t sure what he’d gotten was actually beer. “Why are we here?”

“How’s Lorne? And why is here so important?”

“He’s the Host. And here is safer because there’s a no violence spell in place.” Though her tone was imperious, Xander got the impression she was trying hard, using her Queen C persona to help her get back to herself. Her next words verified his impression. “I’m not sure I’m ready to stay in my apartment or be alone just yet.”

There was nothing else he could say to that.

Graham stood in the doorway to Riley’s room, watching his fellow officer pace around the small bedroom. “Don’t you think we’ve stalled long enough?”

“I’m not stalling.”

At least Riley had the decency to blush. “Riley, we were supposed to meet with the Slayer at two-thirty. That was three and a half hours ago. Either you’re stalling to piss her off, or you’re stalling because you don’t want to do this. But either way, you’re stalling.”

“Fine.” His answer was terse, his words clipped. Then he sighed, relenting a bit. “You’re right. I’m not looking forward to this at all.”

“You’re the one who instigated this whole thing. Why all of a sudden do you not want to do this?” Graham was perplexed and more than a bit annoyed. Finn had requested this detail and asked to put together a unit. So why now is he balking at actually completing the mission? Is it just because of the girl?

“I thought . . . I don’t know what I thought.” Riley shook his head, then slipped on a button down
shirt over his army-green tee-shirt.

“You thought you were coming home to your ex. The girl you nearly threw away your career over.” Graham had enough of the pity party Riley seemed to be throwing for himself. “You figured you were gonna be able to pick up where you left off and be a hero.”

Riley’s face was once again suffused with red and when he refused to meet his eyes, Graham snorted in disbelief.

“Don’t you get it? With this girl, you’ll never be the hero. She doesn’t need you now and she probably didn’t even need you before.” Graham shook his head, then headed down the hallway toward the stairs. “We need to complete the mission and leave this place. You lose your focus every single time you’re around her. She’s not good for you, man. Wake up and face it.”

“All right. I get it. Are you done?” Riley’s voice trailed after the shorter officer.

“Are you? What are we going to do? Are we going to turn down her request?” The questions were fired at Riley as he descended the stairs.

“I don’t know yet. I need some more information.” He motioned for the remaining soldier to accompany them. “I’ll make a final determination after tonight’s meeting.”

“So we’re going now?”

“Yeah. We’re going.”

With a sort of grim satisfaction, Graham opened the door and headed out into the early evening, followed by Riley and Gebhardt.

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At five minutes past six, the shop’s phone rang, freezing everyone. Wesley was actually closest to it, so he reached to answer it, not waiting for anyone else to react. “Good evening, Magic Box, Wesley speaking.”

“Wes, we’ve got movement.” Lawson’s voice was pitched low, so that Wesley had to strain to hear him. “I’m tailing them now.”

“How many?”

“Three.” The muffled sound of fast movement obscured his words. “They’re heading toward downtown. I’m gonna hand off to one of the others and get in position before they arrive.”

“Right. You, ah, do that. Tell whoever picks up the tail to stay out of sight.” Wesley was very uncomfortable giving orders, it was much easier acting as a second – or even third – in command. That way all he had to do was pass on the orders from someone else. Much easier. So he didn’t protest much when Spike reached for the phone.

“Lawson?”
“Yeah, chief.”

“How far away are they?”

“They’re walking pretty slow, trying to stay unnoticed. They’re another ten minutes away from you.”

Spike could easily discern the noises Wesley only guessed at. “How far are you?”

“Getting in position in the Espresso Pump.” He paused, then huffed out, “Got everyone but George in position. He’s about two minutes out.”

“Right. Jus’ keep an eye on things. Don’t move until you see somethin’, yeah?”

“Got it.”

The connection was severed before Lawson could say anything else and before the phone was hung up, Spike immediately started barking at everyone. “All right, kiddies, seems the soldier boys are on their way. So let’s move it, an’ brace ourselves.”

For a long moment, everyone sort of paused as if they were waiting for more and it wasn’t until Spike just whirled around gazing at each one of them that they finally moved. Anya bustled behind the counter, grabbed the calculator and started totaling receipts. Faith and Jenner headed for the basement door and the training room respectively, while Connor climbed the stairs to the restricted section. Dawn sat at the table between Tara and Buffy, trying very hard to look bored. Wesley and Spike were standing in the middle of the shop, while Oz kicked back in his chair, resting it on two legs.

The second time the phone rang, everyone jumped. Anya grabbed for it, frowning when the line went dead. She looked at Giles and shrugged one shoulder. “Is that the signal?”

“Yes, dear.” He took the receiver from her hand and placed it back in the cradle. “They’ll be here momentarily.”

Collectively they all inhaled, even the vampire, and stared at the door.
A dragon or a tiger

Book Three

Chapter Seventeen  A dragon or a tiger

Enemies and lovers are destined to meet.
  Chinese proverb.

Neutral men are the devil's allies.
  Edwin Hubbel Chapin

One may draw a dragon or a tiger,
but it is hard to draw their skeletons;
one may know a person’s face
but it is hard to know his heart.
  Chinese proverb.

We are a kind of Chameleons,
taking our hue - the hue of our moral character,
from those who are about us.
  John Locke

It was hard watching him, she decided, knowing this was all her own fault. This whole mess with Riley returning and shaking things up was all because she’d opened up her big mouth and babbled. Knowing that they’d exhausted every other recourse and they – Giles, Wesley and Spike – were hesitant about calling the Initiative didn’t really help her cause. Buffy knew Spike was fighting aggravation and a whole host of other emotions he’d been shielding from her. But she knew. She could feel it.

He wasn’t happy.

Not about any of this.

He was outwardly the picture of calm, except for the constant tapping of his foot and the occasional tremor in his hands. She could sense the banked anger swirling under the surface just waiting for the match to set off the flaming inferno within him.

One of the babies kicked hard, forcing an involuntary wince, which Spike, of course, noticed. Usually, he’d be right at her side, his fingers tapping out a rhythm known only to him and the babies that somehow managed to ease the worst of the kicking, but now he hesitated. They had only moments before Riley and Graham walked through the door, and the last thing Spike wanted was to blow the flimsy cover they had going.

The foot or the elbow bounced harder against her insides a second time. Buffy actually yelped, the sound drawing everyone’s attention. “Owie!”
Her reaction was enough to goad Spike into moving, although his hesitation ripped through her. She didn’t like it, his holding back. It was wrong, and despite knowing why he was doing it, it hurt. Hurt more than she liked. Feeling rejected to the tips of her toes, Buffy made a split second decision.

It really didn’t matter if Riley found out, not to her. She wasn’t in the mood to stroke his ego; hadn’t been over a year ago when he’d issued his ultimatum putting all the responsibility on her for their broken relationship. She hadn’t been the one cheating. It wasn’t her fault he felt so inadequate and sought out what was missing from vampire sluts. But it would be her fault if Spike was hurt. And while he’d no doubt forgive her, Buffy wasn’t so sure she’d forgive herself.

He was hovering at her side, attention torn between her obvious growing distress and the soon to arrive soldiers, his hands itching to reach for her. Buffy grumbled softly, grabbing his hand and placing it on the rounded curve of her belly. Spike, jerked off balance a bit, given her accidental display of strength, caught himself before he landed in a heap on the floor next to her.

With his hand firmly captured against her belly, Spike stared into her eyes. “Kitten?”

“Don’t wanna hide. Don’t care if he knows.” A soft pout bloomed across her features and she stretched toward him.

Spike dropped down to crouch beside her, his hand rubbing soothing circles on her belly. “You sure?”

The uncertainty in his voice was her undoing. Big, fat tears formed in her eyes and the lump in her throat prevented her from speaking, though the emphatic nodding of her head clued him in to how serious she was. A slow smile blossomed across his lips and he tipped his head toward her. Buffy scooted forward, her movements eased when Spike wrapped his hands around her hips and pulled her closer. Her forearms draped over his shoulders and the fingers of one hand dug into his curls, loosening the gel constraining them. Spike dropped a kiss on her belly, one hand tapping out the mysterious rhythm. The responding thumps from inside her made Buffy sigh with exasperated happiness.

Her softly whispered I love you was drowned out by the bell over the door, signaling the arrival of Riley and his sidekicks; but Spike heard her anyway. He stared at her for a long minute, ignoring everyone around them.

“With all m’heart, Slayer, even if it doesn’t beat.”

She squeezed his free hand, letting him stand to face the soldiers.

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To say that Leslie McKeown was surprised to hear Nicholson’s voice was perhaps an understatement; enough so that he barely registered the other man’s request. Nicholson had to repeat himself three times before McKeown reacted, the exasperation finally clear to the Scot.

“You want me to what?”
“Get your head out of your ass, would you? Need you to dig up intelligence on the names I’m going to fax to you. The gaffer wants this right away.”

“You told the old man?” The fax line behind him rang to life, a single page coming through. “What is this?”

“The Initiative is back in Sunnydale. Apparently a unit has been dispatched. Travers wants C.V. on those names.”

“We’ve already got a file on the first and second names.” McKeown read through the list, recognizing two of the former ranking officers within the Sunnydale operation. “Ah, also have a bit of intel on the doctor.”

Preparing to ring off, Nicholson replied, “Send whatever you have.”

“Will do.”

He hung up the phone, shaking his head, only to find himself the object of intense scrutiny by his boss.

“How soon can we expect a response?”

“We already have files on three of the men in the Initiative unit. That should be coming over via fax shortly.”

“Good.” Travers leaned down, blocking the aisle from any unwanted interruptions. “Have you gotten through to the Defence Minister yet?”

“No, sir. He’s not at the office. They’re going to ring back as soon as they get him on a secured line.”

Staring pensively at the blank interior bulkhead of the plane, Travers mulled over the situation in his head. There were so many possible explanations for the Initiative’s renewed presence in Sunnydale; none of which pleased him. He’d thought when they’d destroyed the Lowell House base that the Initiative would have heeded the warnings issued by the Defence Minister and stayed away from the active hellmouths. While Cleveland, London, and New York weren’t as active as Sunnydale, they were far from dormant, and all were manned by wetworks teams. Solidifying his earlier decision, Travers spoke somewhat absently to Nicholson. “Activate the New York team and have them on the next plane.”

“Sir?” Nicholson had his hand on the phone before he realized the implications of that order.

“I’d rather be cautiously prepared. These Initiative operatives might only be the overt operation. There is a distinct possibility that we could be outnumbered, and without sufficient back-up.”

“Two Slayers isn’t enough?”

“One Slayer is not in a position to be fighting. And we have the added hindrance of the vampire being unable to assist.”

Nicholson gaped in disbelief at his superior. “Unable to assist? You expect William the Bloody to assist?”
Travers leaned forward, staring intently into Nicholson’s surprised blue eyes. “Yes, I do. That’s his child. I don’t doubt for an instant he wouldn’t do his utmost to protect both mother and child. Not to mention the younger Miss Summers.”

The older man straightened up, fixing his vest and tie. “Really, Nicholson, you must learn to disseminate your information better.”

With that cryptic comment, Travers left him to make his way back to his seat. Halfway down the aisle, Travers stopped and looked back over his shoulder. “How long until we touch down?”

Snapping out of his confusion, Nicholson glanced down at his watch. “In little over two hours, sir.”

“Good. Have the New York team in the air by then.”

Contrary to what Graham had thought and nearly accused him of, Riley hadn’t spent the whole time deliberately delaying the meeting because he was avoiding, or brooding. He’d been giving serious thought to everything the Doctor Gebhardt had spoken to him about. Everything. And he’d used the delay to go over every piece of information they had on the vampire.

Riley hadn’t bothered to read up on Spike’s history when he’d been captured. At the time it hadn’t been an issue. In his mind, the vampires were nothing more than demons, fodder for the tests and experiments conducted by the scientific branch of the Initiative. Their history began and ended with their capture. It was only after Spike’s escape that the soldiers had been briefed on his background and identity, and even then only the most senior officers. Somehow, either by torture – or more likely through drugs – Maggie Walsh had been able to discover Spike’s identity. From there, she’d somehow managed to gather something of a dossier on him, which had survived the destruction of the Lowell House operation.

Afterwards, while he and Buffy had been dating, he’d gone through some of the books at Giles’ apartment. What he’d found in the pages had defied the first-hand knowledge he had of Spike. The Spike he knew was a jerk; useless, aggravating, and irritating. Nowhere near the deadly vampire the Watchers claimed he was. Riley had felt, at the time that there had been way too much exaggeration in the books. There was no way the vampire he knew could have performed that kind of destruction. And claiming he’d killed two Slayers? That was beyond unbelievable.

Even now he had trouble believing Spike would pose much of a threat. Nor did he believe for one second Giles was one-hundred percent behind a relationship – if there actually was one – between Spike and Buffy. He couldn’t imagine the older man would ever approve of such a thing. And if he and the doctor were right, and Spike was the father of Buffy’s babies, then the first person he’d talk to about Buffy and her situation would be Giles.

He had planned on being a little late to the meeting, at most a half hour, but he’d gotten so lost in the records and reports of Spike’s tests and his reactions to the chip that he’d lost track of time. Once he’d realized just how late they were, he’d shrugged off his training and deliberately kept on reading, mulling over the scenarios in his head. And maybe Graham was a little bit right; he’d thought about coming back and rescuing Buffy, or having her welcome him back with enthusiasm,
hopeful that the time apart had given her a chance to re-assess their relationship. Riley wasn’t going to pretend part of him hadn’t hoped for something like that, which just made the reality that much harder to swallow.

Seeing the opposite had thrown him for a loop. Caught him off-guard, and Riley wasn’t exactly sure how to deal with a Buffy who very clearly didn’t need him at all. Hadn’t even missed him. He wondered, not for the first time, if she had even noticed he was gone. It was a sobering thought and one he was reluctant to face. He’d always known he was more invested in the relationship than Buffy was, he just hadn’t realized how much. Hindsight knowledge didn’t make it any easier to tolerate.

She’d moved on. Moved on to what, he wasn’t exactly sure. At least not yet. Walking beside Graham toward the Magic Box, Riley was determined that he’d know before they were done with this farce of a meeting.

And once he did know, then he’d make a decision on what to do.

Sharing a last look with Graham, Riley pushed open the door to the Magic Box. The overhead bell rang softly and he looked around, scoping out who was present. Giles, Dawn, Tara, and the taller, younger Englishman were engaged in idle chatter; not a one of them flinched on his arrival. Anya was behind the counter, counting the till.

Riley let his eyes sweep the area again and stiffened.

Buffy was sitting at the table with Spike practically on his knees in front of her, their arms wrapped around each other.

He had his answer.

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Dawn covered up her sudden case of nerves by babbling helplessly at Tara, who was only half-listening. She couldn’t figure out why she was suddenly unable to contain her anxiety, though Dawn had the inexplicable feeling that everything was about to go south. From the corner of her eye, she could see Spike and Buffy lost in their own moment, which wasn’t all that unusual, though she could’ve sworn they were trying to keep Riley in the dark. What the hell are they doing? Not now. . . let go, he’s gonna walk in the door any second and . . . oh, God. He’s gonna know and then it’s all gonna –

She grimaced, an expression that didn’t go unnoticed by Wesley, who tried to smile reassuringly, even as he grappled with his own apprehensions. Distraction wasn’t working for either of them. It wasn’t working for Giles or Tara. Or Oz. The only one remotely calm was Anya, then again, she was knuckles deep in the register till counting money, something that never failed to calm her nerves. Giles shot a look at his beloved, a reluctant grin lighting his features as she checked and re-checked the day’s invoices.

Buffy had just leaned forward to kiss Spike when the bell over the door rang, signaling the long delayed arrival of Riley Finn and his fellow officers. The volume of Dawn’s voice increased exponentially, although the laughter greeting her comment was, at best, forced, it served its
purpose, distracting the military men long enough for the two blonds to separate.

Unfortunately, their embrace had not gone completely unnoticed.

Riley’s posture stiffened further and a look of such distaste crossed his features that it caused Wesley and Giles to exchanged worried glances. As unobtrusively as possible, Oz eased his chair down, his eyes steadily on the two soldiers.

Buffy, easily sensing the tension, looked over Spike’s head to greet Riley. “You’re kinda late.”

“Couldn’t be helped.” Her former boyfriend’s tone and demeanor were frosty, his grey eyes flinty. “I had some unexpected meetings that couldn’t be avoided.”

“You were so tied up in meetings that you couldn’t call or have Graham call?” Buffy put emphasis on the word meetings that Riley hadn’t, and a very faint snort of amusement erupted from both Dawn and Spike.

If anything, Riley’s demeanor grew colder and he didn’t bother hiding his disdain. “Not that I owe you an explanation, but when my superior officers contact me, it takes precedence over anything else.”

Spike gracefully got to his feet, one hand extended to help Buffy to hers. “So that’s a big no. So much for common courtesy.”

An uncomfortable silence fell over the shop’s occupants, the animosity thick enough to be a physical barrier between the two sides. Riley’s hands clenched and unclenched at his sides and the line of his jaw was so tight everyone could see the muscles jumping. By contrast, Spike was relaxed, and while his attention was clearly on the soldiers, his body language indicated he wasn’t at all concerned.

Buffy’s patience, never one of her strong points, was shredded. “So, didya have a chance in between all your meetings to think?”

“I don’t think we can help you.”

“Like that comes as a surprise. Knew you weren’t goin’ t’ do the right thing. You bastards put this bloody chip in, ‘s your responsibility to take it out.” Spike’s words rang through the shop, overriding everyone else’s muttered commentary, including Buffy’s. “Any particular reason why?”

“The purpose of the chip was to render hostile subterrestrials non-violent. It has achieved that objective. We see no benefit in removing the chip from any vampire, even one that has friends.” Riley sneered and twisted the last word, managing to insult everyone.

“So even if I’m the one asking, you won’t do it?” Buffy questioned him, stepping a little closer to him. “I can handle Spike.”

Riley looked down at Buffy. “I can see how well you’ve handled him.”

“Rude much?” Buffy rested her folded arms over her distended belly. “Kinda uncalled for, dontcha think?”
“Not from where I’m standing.”

Dawn muttered under her breath, loud enough for everyone to hear, “Would that be on a soapbox?”

It was clear Riley wanted to give her a nasty retort, but he held his tongue, waiting for Buffy to continue.

“So you’re just gonna drop in without listening to our reasons for this request, and just say no?” She knew it was something of a rhetorical question, but she wanted Riley to actually admit that it was because she and Spike were together. “Any particular reason why?”

“We have our reasons.” He maintained his rigid stance, refusing to look at her.

“Care to elaborate on them?” Her foot was beginning to tap, a sure sign of her shortening temper and Anya surreptitiously began moving some of the more breakable items from the counter.

“No.”

“No. Wow. So you aren’t even willing to listen to why we need the chip removed?”

Though it was phrased as a question, no one in the shop believed for one second Buffy was actually asking anything. “How long were you going to string us along?”

Finally, Riley’s jealous temper got the better of him and he exploded, taking a step toward her. “When were you going to tell me the truth? When were you going to stop playing games? Are you ashamed, Buffy? Ashamed of who you’re sleeping with?”

Both Giles and Spike stepped forward, the Watcher grabbing Riley by the arm and pulling him away from an equally enraged Buffy. Spike had his hands on her shoulders, moving her to the side, or at least trying to.

Faith had heard enough. She emerged from her hiding place, slipping between Graham and Gebhardt to square off with Riley Finn.

“Dude, you need to dial it back and chill.”

-----------------------------------------------

Faith listened with growing apprehension as the meeting between the new and improved Scoobies and the soldiers degenerated into a sneering match.

She remembered Riley from her last stint in Sunnydale, remembered screwing him silly before ditching him to escape. Their encounter had only been memorable in her mind because she hadn’t been in her own skin, otherwise there had been a serious lack of fireworks until the very end, when he’d said those dreaded – at least in Faith’s mind – three words. She didn’t see the attraction back then and she was seeing even less of it now. Buffy might like to play prim and proper, but she had a wild streak that only someone like Faith could understand. She would never have been happy – really happy – with someone like Dudley Do-Right.

*Is this guy for real? What an asshat! Dude needs to seriously lighten the hell up. Where does he*
get off with that kind of a remark?

She peaked around the cellar doorway, frustrated because her line of sight was blocked by the second soldier. Finally throwing caution to the wind, Faith moved further into the shop as Riley denied Buffy’s request. From her new vantage point, she could clearly see the looks on everyone’s faces, and from what she was seeing, no one was happy, least of all Spike. Though Giles and Wesley weren’t far behind. Connor was quietly fuming in the loft, and Faith raised her eyes to him and shook her head negatively when he moved to jump down into the argument.

Riley made some nasty remark that she missed, though no one else did. It was obvious, at least from where she was standing, that he was threatening her counterpart. Which was so very wrong in her book. It was one thing for him to get in Buffy’s face, altogether another when she was heavily pregnant and not so able to defend herself.

She, Giles and Spike all moved simultaneously, Giles reaching the irate commando first, while Spike had a firm grip on Buffy. Figuring Giles would need her help, Faith stepped between the two soldiers, blocking off any assistance Riley was likely to get from his cohorts.

“Dude, you need to dial it back and chill.”

The commando struggled in the Watcher’s grip and Faith put one hand on his chest, pushing him easily backwards. “I said you need to chill.”

Muscles all over his body tensed and throbbed and Faith raised an eyebrow, a sardonic smile twitching at her lips. “Go ahead, cowboy, take a shot,” she practically purred.

“What the hell? Who the – ” Riley’s voice choked off as he finally recognized the dark-haired girl standing in front of him. “Why are you here?”

He pushed forward, trying to make her back down. Faith easily stood her ground against his efforts and raised an eyebrow, barely exerting any pressure as she held him back. “Doesn’t matter why I’m here, hotshot. You still need to cool those jets.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be in prison?” Riley locked eyes with the darker-haired Slayer.

“Was. Not so much anymore, though. And why I’m here isn’t really the issue now, is it? You still need to calm the fuck down.”

Faith’s appearance proved to be distraction enough to shake and slightly diffuse the force of Riley’s anger. He straightened away from her, taking a full step back, folding his arms over his chest. “I still stand by my earlier statement. The Initiative will not sanction any request to remove the behavioral modification chip from Hostile Seventeen’s head.”

Oz had stood up at the first sign of trouble, and now he moved to stand closer to Spike and Buffy. Dawn stood up abruptly, shoving back her chair so hard that it nearly fell over. She was muttering loudly the whole time, invectives and imprecations falling from her lips that – had Buffy been paying attention – would have earned her more than just a raised eyebrow.

Buffy was too busy fuming to pay attention to anyone but Spike, who, in an odd twist, was the calmer of the two. She was red-faced and almost hyperventilating, waving her arms and trying vainly to get words past her lips.
“Would you be willing to at least listen to our reasons before you make a final decision?” Giles stepped around Buffy and Spike, coming to a stop next to Faith.

Riley wanted a chance to speak with Giles, had in fact been wracking his brain for an excuse to get him alone, and here it was being presented to him. Without a second thought, the reply was out of his mouth, “Yes. On the condition that Spike not be present. Or Buffy.”

Sharing a glance with the vampire, Giles made a split-second decision. “Very well. Wesley?”

The two Englishmen motioned the soldiers to the door, letting them precede them out. As he closed the door behind him, Giles nodded once, then turned resolutely away.

The instant the door was closed, all hell broke loose.
The gravest threat

Book Three

Chapter Eighteen  The gravest threat

Genocide begins, however improbably, in the conviction that classes of biological distinction indubitably sanction social and political discrimination.
Andrea Dworkin, Biological Superiority:

Evil is the shadow of angel.
Just as there are angels of light, support, guidance, healing and defense, so we have experiences of shadow angels.
And we have names for them: racism, sexism, homophobia are all demons - but they're not out there.
Matthew Fox

It is only human supremacy, which is as unacceptable as racism and sexism, that makes us afraid of being more inclusive.
Ingrid Newkirk

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it.
Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness

Racism is man’s gravest threat to man - the maximum of hatred for a minimum of reason.
Abraham Joshua Heschel

“The New York team is activated and preparing to depart for Sunnydale, sir. Is there anything else you want me to do?” Nicholson hesitated, waiting for further instructions.

Quentin Travers looked up from the book he was reading. “No. How soon before we land?”

“Little under an hour. I’ve arranged for transportation to the hotel. We’ve got the entire third floor, sir.”

“Very good, Nicholson. Is Giles aware of our impending arrival?” The question was pointed and very deliberate. Travers was not as ignorant of Nicholson’s machinations as the younger man
wanted to believe, although he believed it was no longer prudent or necessary to pretend his ignorance. While Nicholson hemmed and hawed about answering him, Travers took pity on his protégé. “How he’s been notified is immaterial. Far more important is the issue of his knowledge.”

Caving in, Nicholson miserably answered in the affirmative.

“Very well. The new Slayer, her Watcher, and the two of us shall be proceeding directly to the Magic Box. Have the wetworks team standing by at the airport. The others may go straight to the hotel.” Travers raised an eyebrow when Nicholson hesitated.

“Sir?” The younger man nervously fiddled with the edges of his suit jacket, then inhaled deeply and raised the question most on his mind. “Was I that obvious?”

“No. In fact you were – you are very good at covering your tracks. None of the other Inner Council is aware, not even Smythe-Hynde.”

“So then how did you – ?” Confusion colored his voice and Nicholson dared to sit down in the seat opposite his superior.

“Change is something this organization needs to embrace. Our purpose is not to hinder our Slayers, but to support them. And while Miss Summers is a bit rebellious, she’s very, very good at what she does.” Travers leaned forward, his voice dropping down to a low rumble. “I think she’s rather refreshing.”

He leaned back, watching as Nicholson attempted to digest this bit of news. A smile played about his lips as the wheels began turning. “One more thing, John. Rupert Giles was not the first mutinous legacy to become a Watcher.”

Leaving him to ponder that notion, Travers turned his attention back to the book on his lap.

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Giles led them to the Espresso Pump, knowing the demonic family that owned the shop wouldn’t interrupt, and also knowing Lawson and quite possibly two of the others were already inside, watching the Magic Box. Of all the places he could bring the commandos, this was likely one under the most surveillance, though he doubted the soldiers would be aware of it.

Once they were inside in a little-used corner of the shop, Giles wasted no time. “What is it you didn’t want to say in front of my Slayer?”

Both Giles and Wesley sat, the outward appearance of calm belying the tight rein both were holding on their tempers. Finn exchanged a glance with the older of the other two and after receiving an almost imperceptible nod, he dropped down into one of the chairs surrounding the small table. “There’s no way you support the idea of removing the chip.”

Giles snapped out, “What makes you say that?”

“First of all, you’re a Watcher and you know vampires. Despite the fact Spike is currently playing nice, there’s no guarantee he’ll continue to do so with the chip gone.” His companions relaxed
somewhat and sat down in chairs flanking Riley.

“I’d venture a guess and say you know nothing of the situation.” Giles eased back against the chair, his expression largely unreadable.

Riley leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, as if he were confiding something to them. “I know enough. Buffy contacted the Initiative. Because of our past, my superior officer agreed to send a couple of us here.”

Neither of the two men opposite him reacted, so Riley continued. “Prior to that, the last communication I had from anyone in Sunnydale was from Xander, and honestly, what he wrote in the letter was a little hard to deal with.” He sat up straight. “I certainly didn’t expect this.”

The emphasis he put on the last sentence riled both Englishmen. When a sideways glance revealed an angry Giles, Wesley interjected, “And by this you mean?”

It took a moment, but Riley realized he didn’t even know who this guy was. “I don’t – who are you?”

Not bothering to extend his hand in greeting, Wesley snapped out “Wesley Wyndam-Pryce,” in his poshest accent. “I’m both a colleague and a friend.”

“Whose?” Without waiting for an answer, Riley barreled onward. “Look, I don’t know all the particulars and I’m really not sure I want to know. What I do know is that the Giles I remember wouldn’t stand by while his Slayer got involved with another vampire.”

“What you know could be measured in thimbles.” Giles let his temper get the better of him. “When you left here, your tail tucked firmly between your legs, you left behind a girl who was in desperate need of support. Her mother died within weeks of your departure and then we faced the battle of our lives against a hellgod. That vampire you disparage so freely not only stood by and supported the Slayer, he risked his own life more than once to protect her sister.”

Now Giles was the one leaning forward, his face tense and drawn. “He could have left at any time. Spike wasn’t obligated to any of us, save through his affection for Dawn. He watched over her, protected her and patrolled every bloody night while Buffy was dead.”

The surprise on Riley’s face didn’t stop Giles from continuing. “He wasn’t looking for payment. There was no ulterior motive on his part. Spike did it because he made a promise to Buffy before she died. No chip, no Pavlovian reinforcement would motivate anyone to do what Spike did. There’s only one motivating factor in the world with enough power to do that and it certainly doesn’t consist of silicone and wires.”

He let his words sit, then leaned back in his chair, watching the three soldiers for some indication that they were even listening to him. Wesley folded his arms across his chest, his eyes trained on the figure of Riley Finn. The resemblance to Angel – while not entirely physical – was remarkable. It appeared, at least for a moment, that Rupert’s impassioned speech might sway Finn a little though Wesley despaired of him ever truly getting the point. To Finn and the others of the Initiative, demons were incapable of ‘higher emotions’, which was utter tripe.

Spike disproved that theory. Hell, even Angel had discredited that notion. Vampires could feel the same as humans. . . perhaps even more keenly.
Wesley’s musings were cut short when Riley shook his head. “I can’t authorize the removal of Spike’s chip.”

“Can’t? Or won’t?”

“Either.” Finn shook his head again. “And I can’t believe you allowed her to get involved with him. What are you going to do when she has a demon child? You’re going to let her raise a child that has the potential to destroy the world?”

Fire gleamed in Riley’s normally placid eyes, fanatical fire. Fanned, no doubt, by the officer to his right, who wore an interesting symbol on his uniform, in addition to the caduceus of the medical profession. The insignia, which resembled a skull with red eyes, set off warning alarms in his mind. Giles’ blood ran cold, wondering if this man had served under Maggie Walsh. He had that same look in his eyes that Riley had and Giles realized, rather belatedly, that they may have made a huge tactical error in contacting the Initiative. He leaned over in his chair, catching Wesley’s eye. The two Englishmen shared a look that spoke volumes.

“Any child possesses that ability, whether demonic or not. Genetic background does not predispose one to acts of benevolence or charity.”

“No, but it can predispose toward violence and destruction. Buffy’s probably worried sick over it, but she won’t let it show. Let us take the child. We can contain it and train it correctly.”

“What? Did you just –?” Wesley shot to his feet. “I don’t believe I heard you.”

Rupert was talking at the same time. “Absolutely not. I will not participate in any scheme to take away a child of Buffy’s.”

The doctor laid a hand on Finn’s arm before he could formulate a response. He shook his head imperceptibly, though Wesley caught the motion. There seemed to be some communication that the two senior officers were privy to that the third was unaware of. Judging by the expression on the short blond’s face, the idea of taking the baby was a new development. One that was beginning to stink of more than just Initiative thinking.

The niggling thought in the back of Giles’ mind whispered that this new notion of Finn’s was more than just mere revenge. According to Spike, the Americans had gotten the idea of the Initiative from the Nazis, and the fear burgeoning within told him the doctor was influencing Riley’s thought process. He had no clue how closely any of them had worked with Maggie Walsh, but Giles was under no illusions about where the woman had gotten her ideas from, and it wasn’t Dr. Spock.

“No. Absolutely not.” Giles finally got to his feet and he shared a look with Wesley. The light in his eyes grew flinty and Riley flinched under his unrelenting gaze. “If anything happens to Buffy’s child, you’ll be the first person I come after, Riley Finn. Make no mistake on that.”

Having fired a warning shot across Finn’s bow, Giles and Wesley left the Espresso Pump.

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In the two minutes since Giles and Wesley led the soldiers out of the Magic Box, everyone had erupted. Dawn was yelling at no one in particular, Anya had relaxed then started in, her nerves
getting the better of her, Faith squared off against Spike, who had slammed his hands down on the table. That startled Tara, who promptly burst into nervous tears, which had gotten Oz a bit more agitated, though that only made him pace quietly. Connor dropped down from the loft to land between Tara and Dawn, which just made the blonde jumpier. And through it all, Buffy tried valiantly to get words out of her mouth.

Her arms were flailing and she accidentally hit Spike, who finally noticed her distress. Buffy’s face was bright red and her breathing was erratic. Her face contorted, nose scrunching and lips twisting as something wrenched when she tried to inhale. She crumpled, nearly doubling over.

“Oooowwwww!”

“Slayer?” Spike spun on his heels, grabbing onto Buffy’s forearms to keep her on her feet. “What’s wrong?”

After everyone had choked to silence, the noise and questions started all over again. Giving up on hearing anything other than the elevated heartbeat from Buffy, Spike yelled over the din, “Pipe down!”

Once more silence reigned, until Buffy grumbled deeply. “Help me up.”

Spike lifted her easily, his hand settling around her waist. He could feel the ripples under the surface of her skin and instantly recognized they were different from the normal movement. “What’s going on?”

Desperate confusion laced his voice and Buffy looked at him through the loose strands of hair that were covering her face. Her eyes were bright, vivid green, and holding a spark of something he didn’t – wasn’t – quite ready for, despite all the months of preparation.

“You’ve got to be fuckin’ kiddin’ me.”

“What?” Dawn glanced from one to the other, a hand covering her mouth as realization sunk in. “Is it time?”

Tara got to her feet, heading for the phone. “There’s – is it the first pain you’ve had?”

Buffy shook her head. “Not really, but,” she gasped out as she refused to look at Spike, who was grinding his teeth and growling lowly. “I didn’t think they were all that bad! It wasn’t like the book talked about!”

“Buffy, did you think that maybe it wasn’t so bad because you’re the Slayer?” Anya shook her head, then continued. “How long has this been happening?”

“Off and on all day.” She peeked at Spike, knowing he would be pissed at her. What she saw surprised her. There was more than a faint hint of panic in his eyes and he let go of one arm to run his fingers through his hair.

“Buffy?” His voice was soft, pitched low so only she could hear him. “You okay?”

“You know it could just be the Braxton-Hicks, brought on by the stress.” Tara managed to speak without stuttering, though it was a near thing, since she was so nervous. At Buffy’s incredulous look, she smiled crookedly. “Maybe?”
“Maybe we should call the witches.” Spike grimaced as another pain rippled through Buffy and she gripped his forearms tighter.

Faith looked around, realizing everyone was frozen in shock. She reached for the phone, urging Dawn and Connor into action. “You two need to get to the house to get stuff ready, just in case this isn’t a false alarm.”

Spike managed to ground out, “Take the tunnels”, before they headed for the front door. “It’ll take the commandos longer to figure out what’s going on.”

“Want me to go?” Oz pointed at the teenagers, but Spike shook his head. The pair had stopped, waiting to see if Spike would elaborate.

“Should be fine on their own, jus ’…” He paused, sharing a look with the werewolf no one else could fathom. “‘M not sure if we’re gonna have to make a run for it. Got to worry about the soldiers.”

“Right.” Oz waved off the teens, then flipped open his cell phone. “Sam should know.”

Jenner closed the training room door. “We still have a hostage. Could use him.”

Buffy eased her hold on Spike. “That was interesting.”

“How interesting?” Anya leaned her elbows on the counter, her eyes fixed on Buffy.

“Just felt like really wicked cramps.” She shrugged, unsure how to really describe the pain.

“Was it like having lots and lots of orgasms all at once?”

There was a beat of silence, then Buffy looked at Spike, biting her lip to keep from laughing, but when Tara snickered helplessly, everyone joined her.

The nervous hilarity only got worse when Buffy admitted sheepishly, “Sort of.”

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Giles paused halfway between the Espresso Pump and the Magic Box, fists clenching spasmodically at his sides.

“That. . . was quite possibly the most infuriating conversation I’ve ever been party to.” He pushed his glasses back, the muscles in his neck and jaw pulsing with unexpressed outrage.

“I’m more than a bit taken aback as well.” Wesley then lapsed into deep thought. “It smacks of Nazi rhetoric.”

The older man scoffed. “More than smacks of it. That doctor has the look of a fanatic. Or a sociopath.”

“Wasn’t much difference with the Nazis.”
“True enough.”

The two faced each other, wearing grim expressions. “They have to be warned.”

“Indeed. This is not going to be well received.”

Wesley raised an eyebrow and his chuckle of amusement was not a happy one. “I’ve no doubt. You and I are quite ready to spill some blood. Can you imagine how Spike will react?”

“The way I’d expect any parent to react when his children are being threatened.” He clapped Wesley on the shoulder. “No point in delaying the inevitable.”

The remainder of the walk back was in silence, each man lost in his own thoughts.

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“Kait said Grace was already getting ready. She also said you should get moving.” Faith hung up the phone, relaying the list of instructions from the witch.

“Anything else?” Spike ran a hand through his hair, covering the fine tremors of his hands with constant movement.

“Yeah. She wants Tara to start timing Buffy’s pains.”

“And?”

Faith sighed, sounding very put upon. “Kait wants you to have a drink.”

“What?”

The varied chorus of disbelief greeted Faith’s statement, none of them certain they’d heard her correctly.

“That doesn’t sound like Kait.” Tara tucked some hair behind her ear. “Are you sure she said that?”

“Nah. That was me.” Faith’s grin was Cheshire-cat wide. “It’s wicked good advice, though.”

Buffy was spluttering, “Oh, no you didn’t,” while everyone else was either shaking their head or agreeing with Faith. Spike was about to say something when the door opened, admitting the two Watchers.

“Spike?” Giles closed the door quietly behind him. “We need to alert everyone.”

The vampire was instantly on edge. “Why?”

It was Wesley who realized first that something else was going on. “Is everything okay?”

“We’re not sure. Buffy might be in labor.”
“Oh, bloody... This just tears it.” Giles blew out an exasperated breath.

“So not the reaction I was hoping for. What’s up?” Though her voice was strained, Buffy was still chipper enough to be sarcastic.

“Evidently,” Giles hesitated, at a loss for once. “There appears to be an additional reason for the Initiative’s appearance in Sunnydale.”

He lapsed into silence, which was only broken when Faith prompted him to keep talking. “Which is?”

“Given what Riley just said, I believe they want to take the babies and...” Giles shook his head, unable to continue, the thought of what the Initiative might do more than he was willing to give voice to. However, what he’d implied was more than enough for Spike. A low, subsonic growl began building in his chest and he stepped back, away from Buffy. “I’m sorry, Buffy. I wish this were different.”

“Why are you sorry?” Buffy had to keep talking, had to focus on something other than the very scary thoughts going through her head. “I’m the one that called them.”

“None of us expected them to react this way, especially Riley.” Giles pulled off his glasses. “I’m so very sorry.”

“So that exactly does that mean? Are they gonna try and steal the kids?” Faith glanced from one Watcher to the other, confusion on her face.

“I wouldn’t put that past them.” Wesley sent an apologetic look in Buffy’s direction. “I do believe they think their actions are for the greater good.”

Though she’d been listening to everything the Watchers were saying, Buffy’s attention wasn’t on either of them. She’d been watching Spike, tracking his every move while he paced across the floor. The hold he had on his temper was exquisite, drum-tight and pulsing with the beat of her heart. He was clamoring for action, desperate to protect her and the babies.

Feeling her gaze upon him, Spike pivoted on his heel, his eyes pinning hers. They were incandescent, lit from within by the fire of his temper. Pale blue and vivid, they stood out sharply from his dark lashes. Buffy didn’t flinch, didn’t blink. His look defied her to deny him the right to protect her, dared her to call him a monster, to belittle how desperately he loved her – them. He let his eyes bleed to amber, let the planes and angles of his face morph into the brow ridges and fangs he normally hid from the rest. The low vibration thrumming through his chest erupted into a window-rattling growl, and she still didn’t look away.

Knowing exactly what he was doing, she stepped closer, her heartbeat steady. She wasn’t afraid of him, wasn’t afraid for him either. She knew why he was doing this, understood it as much as he did. His growl intensified and still she approached him. Buffy stopped just in front of him, as close as her extended belly would allow. One hand reached for his face, fingers tracing over the rougher features, while the other grabbed one of his and placed it on her belly.

“Take me home, Spike.”

The demon slipped away, momentarily placated, though neither pretended it wasn’t just below the
surface, waiting for the moment to strike.

Behind them, the shop’s door opened and a gasp from some of the others caught their attention. Buffy looked over Spike’s shoulder and groaned. He whirled around, preparing to strike, only to be confronted by an older gentleman in a Savile Row suit, flanked by a younger man and two females. “Who the bloody hell are you?” he snarled belligerently.

“Quentin Travers.” Giles and Wesley spoke simultaneously.
Let every eye negotiate for itself

Book Three

Chapter Nineteen. Let every eye negotiate for itself

Let every eye negotiate for itself,
And trust no agent.

Much Ado About Nothing, act ii, sc i

A bargain is in its very essence a hostile transaction . . .
do not all men try to abate the price of all they buy?
I contend that a bargain even between brethren is a declaration of war.

George Gordon Noel Byron, Letter, July 14, 1821.

In the way of bargain, mark ye me,
I'll cavil on the ninth part of a hair.

Henry IV, Part I, act iii, sc i

“And now, my day is complete.” Buffy grimaced and her face flushed dark red. “This is just icing on the cupcake. Why are you here?”

“Good evening, all.” Quentin Travers smiled, his gaze taking in everyone arrayed around him. It wasn’t until his gaze rested on Faith that his equanimity faltered. “Miss Lehane. This is a surprise. I’d thought only one Slayer was defying death’s odds.”

Faith shrugged nonchalantly, though it was clear to Jenner she was a bit on edge. “Well, you know me, don’t like to let Summers have all the fun.”

Momentarily dismissing Faith, Travers turned his attention to Buffy. “Congratulations, Miss Summers, on the impending arrival.” He forestalled her retort with a raised hand. “Please, let’s skip the back and forth. Giles, Wyndham-Pryce, I would have expected one of you to inform the Council of the situation here in Sunnydale. Either of them.”

He proceeded down the steps, stopping just in front of Buffy and Spike. “William the Bloody. I’ve heard much about you.”

Spike stiffened. “Sure you have. Why is it you’re here?”

Travers inhaled deeply, his gaze again roaming about the room. “I’d rather not play games. I’m aware you have all been notified of our impending arrival. It would have been far better had we been informed of circumstances here in Sunnydale.”

He indicated his companions. “This is John Nicholson, my personal aide. I’m sure at least one of you is aware of his identity.” When both Wesley and Giles moved to speak, he waved them off. “Spencer Whitworth is also known to both of you. The young lady is the newest Slayer,
She preened under the attention, though she bristled when both of the other Slayers ignored her. “It appears that we have a bit of a conundrum. Two Slayers was unprecedented, but three? This is definitely one for the chronicles.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Buffy couldn’t keep the sarcasm from her tone. I so don’t have the patience for this. “Can you get to the point?”

“Very well.” Travers motioned Buffy toward the table, holding out a chair for her. “Initially the decision to visit was precipitated by the dual reports of your condition and Miss Lehane’s demise. However, additional information came to light while we were en route.”

Thinking better of declining the proffered chair, Buffy sat down heavily. Spike moved to stand behind her while the two erstwhile Watchers approached the table. Travers sat down opposite Buffy, then waited for the others to follow. Faith took Spike’s usual position on the stairs, with Jenner leaning against the steel risers. Tara and Oz settled onto the stools at the counter, which left Nicholson and the two women standing.

“What is the additional information?” Giles questioned his former employer, after exchanging a heated look with Spike.

“Two years ago, when the Initiative’s base in Sunnydale was dismantled and ordered destroyed, the Council, through the Defence Ministry, exerted considerable pressure upon the U.S. Military and obtained an agreement preventing any future presence on the Hellmouth. That agreement has been breached.”

Buffy groaned, dropping her head into her hands. “Great. Just great. Try to do one thing right and it all backfires. I’m never thinking again.”

Spike dropped a hand on her shoulder, squeezing it in support. “Told you it wasn’t your fault, Slayer.”

“It doesn’t matter who is to blame. Their presence in Sunnydale poses a considerable risk for Miss Summers, especially given her condition.”

“Gee, and here we thought the Council was gonna be more of a problem.” Buffy kept her eyes trained on the table, afraid to look up and find disapproval everywhere.

“I have to say, Miss Summers, your lack of faith in our organization is rather disappointing.”

“Oh, please. I can’t believe you’d even think for one second I’d trust any of you. Cruciamuentum come to mind?” She glared at the Council head. “How about not giving me info on Glory? Sure could have used your help then.”

Travers had the grace to look apologetic. “The Cruciamentum is a necessary test of ability.”

“Sure it is. How able do you think a slayer is gonna be when you take away all her strength?” Drumming her fingers on the table, Buffy continued. “Huh? Just how stupid do you think we are? That test is designed to eliminate problem slayers.” She used air quotes around the word.

“Actually, that is quite far off the mark. That test is designed to test our best slayers.” Travers
shifted his attention between both Slayers. “It differs for each girl. Miss Lehane would have had to undergo the test on her eighteenth birthday, however, she spent that day in a coma.”

“Gee, really glad I lucked out on that one.” Faith’s derisive comment garnered smiles from some of the new Scoobies, however the look on Travers’ face remained grim.

“The Council has never had to face a situation quite like this one. For the first time in history there are three active Slayers.” A pensive look crossed his features and he brushed a hand over his goatee. After a glance at Nicholson, Travers leaned back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest, then fixed his gaze on Buffy. His scrutiny lasted so long, that even Giles grew uncomfortable and when he started to speak, Travers held up a hand to forestall him. “A moment, Rupert.”

When he finally did start speaking, it was on a topic so far removed from what they had been discussing that everyone but Travers was thrown for a loop. “Tell me, Miss Summers, how is your sister?”

“What? Why do you wanna know how Dawn is? What is this all about?” Buffy struggled to her feet, trying to ease some of the cramps in her lower back. “You came all the way from London just to drive me crazy?”

“No, that was not my intention. My intention was to obtain information on your current situation. And your sister is part of that.”

Spike’s patience was at an end. “She’s fine. Get to the point, got more important things to worry about.”

Travers answered, “Very well,” then lapsed into silence.

“Oi!” Spike angrily slapped his hand down on the table. “Get on with it, you old git.”

Preferring to ignore the insult, Travers focused instead on Buffy, who was pulling Spike away from the table. “Miss Summers, as head of the Council, I’m prepared to offer you protection from the Initiative.”

“Sheyah. Don’t really need protection.” She waved off his statement, silently urging Spike to step back and away from the table.

“While that is quite possibly true, that isn’t the entirety of my offer.” He looked pointedly at her extended belly, then shook his head. “What lengths would you go to, to protect your child?”

Spike and Buffy both froze at the question. While seemingly innocent, neither of them applied that attribute to the Council. The vampire stepped in front of Buffy, shielding her from Travers’ intense gaze. His low growl reverberated in the shop, but the older Englishman just waited patiently for an answer.

“What would you do, Miss Summers?”
“You wanna tell me what the hell that was all about?” Graham stepped in front of Riley before the bigger man could exit the Espresso Pump. Major Gebhardt had already exited, though Graham didn’t particularly care. He wanted Riley’s undivided attention. “You did not just threaten to kidnap the Slayer’s baby.”

“I wouldn’t call it kidnapping.” Riley had the sense to not look Graham in the eye, as if he knew what the blond was thinking.

“No? What the hell would you call it, then?” Graham’s eyes flashed and his jaw tensed.

“We have no idea if what she’s carrying is even human. So it’s not kidnapping.” Riley moved to step around him and had almost made it when the shorter man grabbed his arm.

His grip was strong and he dug his fingers into the muscles of Riley’s arm, holding him in place. “Are you kidding me? You aren’t sure? It doesn’t matter if you’re sure or you aren’t. That kid is not yours. You can’t just take it away from its mother. That’s wrong.”

“How wrong is it if that ‘baby’ is a demon? If that kid has the potential to destroy everything?” Riley glared down into Graham’s eyes. “We can’t take that chance.”

“Demon or not, that baby has a mother and I’ll bet the mother – the Slayer – your former girl? I’ll bet she loves that baby already.” Graham pushed Riley away. “I don’t understand you, man.”

“What’s to understand?” Riley stepped into Graham’s space, looming over the shorter man. “Your orders are to make every effort to obtain the infant.”

Graham didn’t back down. He refused to. What Riley was asking him to do was wrong. He stared at Riley’s back as the other man finally moved away, shaking his head. “It may be orders, but that doesn’t make it right.”

He wasn’t sure what he was going to do, though Graham thought he’d better figure it out soon, before Riley really went further off the deep end.

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Willow raced through downtown Sunnydale, long red hair flying behind her like a banner. Sundown was only minutes away, and she knew there was a possibility no one but Giles and Anya would be at the shop, but she had to try. Someone – or something – had broken into Warren’s house and stolen everything, including the nearly-assembled robot. Her first and only thought had been to warn them. Whether they rejected her wasn’t important, it didn’t matter. She just needed to tell someone.

Dodging around a group of people outside the Espresso Pump, Willow slammed into the back of a man who’d moved across her path. “Ow!”

His companion steadied her, holding her upright when she started to fall. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah. Sure. Thanks.” Willow shook her head and made as if to move around them, only to stop dead in her tracks. “Riley?”
“Willow, how are you?”

She wasn’t sure which of them looked more surprised. Riley Finn was one person she’d never expected to see ever again, not after the way he’d left. Warning bells went off in her head and Willow figured she’d better play it cool. Her eyes darted from his figure to the man standing beside him and she flinched from his intense gaze.

“I’m good. What brings you back to Sunnydale?” The forced cheerfulness wasn’t noticed by either of the two males and Willow relaxed fractionally, until another man joined them. She recognized him immediately and stepped away from Riley.

“Ah. I, uh, heard about Buffy and came back as soon as I got leave. Didn’t realize it was a – ” He searched in vain for a word to describe what he’d found. “That Xander’s letter was wrong.”

Confusion flooded her. “Xander’s letter? He wrote to you?”

“Yeah. He... ah, said Buffy was, um, gone.” Riley shrugged. “But you know, not possible since she’s here and... ah, obviously healthy.”

Willow stared at him, unable to believe he was as stupid as he was trying to make her believe. “Right. Healthy as a horse, that’s our Buffy.” Nervously, she wrung her fingers together and she tried to come up with some way to extract herself from this awkward meeting. “So, I’ve gotta go. Got a couple of things to do. How long are you staying?”

“Just a couple more days. I’m hoping Buffy will let me take her to dinner or something.” Riley shifted restlessly, his eyes never meeting Willow’s.

“Um, Riley? You do know Buffy’s kinda moved on, right?” Willow was having more and more trouble with this whole conversation, though she wasn’t entirely sure Riley was either. It didn’t take any magical or special ability to figure out he was hiding something. His body language was clear enough. And the fact he didn’t introduce his companions was both rude and weird, though Willow was pretty sure she didn’t want to know who the older guy was. He was giving off some very creepy vibes.

“Yeah. Got that message. Still, for old time’s sake, maybe she’ll go for coffee or something. During the day.” The slam was obvious and so heavy-handed that Willow winced.

“Yeah. Maybe.” Willow shrugged, then put on her best cheery, ditzy smile and waved her hand. “You never know. Gotta run, see ya.”

She raced off, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. This is not good... Maybe the Initiative guys nabbed him and... Whoever it was, Willow had to tell the others about Warren – and Riley.

What would I do? Buffy’s hand brushed over her belly in a classic motion as she carefully contemplated Travers’ question. Movement from Dawn caught her eye and Buffy realized exactly what she would do. She’d died for Dawn when she believed she was only her sister. A sarcastic quip surged to her lips, but Buffy fought it back. Travers had been deadly serious, so she would,
for once, continue in that same tone.

“There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do.” Her voice was quiet, deadly, and dangerously soft. “But I think you already knew that.”

Travers nodded his head, confirming her suspicion. “Very well.” He glanced over her shoulder and posed the same question to Spike. “And you? What would you do?”

Ignoring the whole matter of how Travers knew he had anything to do with Buffy’s condition, Spike didn’t hesitate. “Whatever I had to do.”

“As I suspected.” He paused, eyes never leaving Spike’s. “And yet, according to all reports, you are hampered by the presence of a behavioral modification chip that was implanted by Initiative scientists that limits your violence against living things.”

“Doesn’t matter. ‘ll do whatever I have to.” Spike’s tone was resolute and there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that he wouldn’t live up to his vow.

Travers nodded thoughtfully, once again lapsing into silence. After a few long, tense moments, he raised his head. “I propose an agreement.”

Buffy waited a beat, glancing at Spike from under her lowered lashes. “For?”

“There are currently three issues of importance. The Initiative, Spike’s chip, and your child.” Travers rose to his feet, clasping his hands behind his back. “Am I correct in assuming that you contacted the Initiative in the hopes of gaining their assistance to remove Spike’s chip?”

Spike growled softly and Buffy wrapped a hand around his upper left arm. It was Giles who responded, though, before either of the others could think of a convincing lie. “Why is that your first assumption?”

With a glance over at his likely successor, Travers raised an eyebrow. “You surely don’t believe I am that naive to assume otherwise?” He turned his attention back to Buffy and Spike. “In order for you both to be effective fighters and protectors of your child, neither of you must be hampered by a disability. And the chip could be considered just that. Or am I mistaken?”

Startled by his statement, both blondes just goggled at the older man. “How? What? Huh?”

Buffy was eloquent in her confusion and she looked to Wesley and Giles to rescue the situation. When neither one of them could, Travers continued, “Logic, Miss Summers, leads one to that conclusion no matter what the external variables.”

Again she was stumped. “Huh?”

“There will always be some group or another seeking to gain control of your child. Whether it is a demonic faction or a human one bent on destruction, there are always evil forces seeking an edge.” He stepped closer, his gaze alternating between the two.

“What would you do to protect your child?”

The repetition of the question did not go unnoticed. Nor did the fact that Travers was leading them up to some devil’s bargain that they might not be able to refuse.
Spike, though, was the one to speak before any of the others. “An’ what is it you’re proposing?”

Travers looked positively happy at the prospect of laying out his proposal. “The Council would like updates and information on the child’s development and abilities.”

“That’s all?” Not one to look into a gift horse’s mouth, Spike was skeptical.

“Ah, no. The Council would require some other concessions from you.”

“So, you’re negotiating?” Spike looked to Giles who arched his eyebrow in response and then looked pointedly to his left, where Anya was tucked behind the counter, watching the proceedings avidly.

“The Council is willing to assist you with both the Initiative and the removal of your chip, in exchange for what I just mentioned and other considerations.” The excitement in Travers’ voice was hard to miss.

“Other considerations?” Anya caught the unspoken communication between Spike and Giles and she interrupted the conversation for the first time. “Exactly what do you mean by other considerations?”

She started to move out from behind the counter, but caught herself when everyone focused on her. “Or maybe I don’t want to know.” An odd look crossed her face and she ducked her head, bracing herself for an onslaught of comments.

When none was forthcoming, Anya picked her head up, her gaze darting from one encouraging expression to another. However, it was Buffy’s smile that put her mind at ease and Anya stood her ground.

“We haven’t been introduced. I’m Anya Christina Emmanuella Jenkins. I run the Magic Box with Rupert.” Her smile was engaging and Travers could do nothing but respond and shake her extended hand. “So, what did you have in mind?”

Both Wesley and Giles hid smiles behind their hands and Buffy leaned into Spike’s back, trying desperately to hold back her laughter. Spike’s lips twitched and he leaned toward Anya, whispering something into her ear. Her returning grin was wide and bright, and everyone from Sunnydale knew Travers was about to engage in the negotiations of his life.
No eternal allies

**Book Three**

**Chapter Twenty  No eternal allies**

**Death and taxes and childbirth!**
*There’s never any convenient time for any of them!*
  
  *Scarlett O’Hara*

**Surprises are foolish things.**
*The pleasure is not enhanced, and the inconvenience is often considerable.***
  
  *Mr. Knightley in Emma (Jane Austen)*

**Allies are always former or future enemies.**
  
  *La margrave Josépha,  Le Jugement de Dieu, (1952)*

**We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies.**
*Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.***
  
  *Henry John Temple, 3d Viscount Palmerston, remarks in the House of Commons*

Willow certainly wasn’t expecting the reception she got when she practically ran into the Magic Box. Moments after practically fleeing from Riley, she pushed open the door to be confronted with a scene she’d never have predicted. Dawn was the first to see her, and she sort of half-smiled, but didn’t say anything. Willow gaped like a guppy, her eyes flitting from one person to the next, hoping to find someone not openly hostile. Or even was paying attention to the fact she was there. She caught both Buffy’s and Faith’s eye, and though neither of the others smiled, at least Faith acknowledged her presence with a nod of her head.

It wasn’t until Wesley and Giles saw her hovering by the door that anyone said anything. Wesley broke off his conversation with Giles and Spike to approach her. “Willow? What’s wrong?”

She’d been standing just inside the doorway, trying hard to avoid searching through everyone for a glimpse of Tara. Willow jumped, having been caught off guard by Wesley. “Hey. Um. I . . . how come everyone’s here?”

“We’re in the middle of a couple of things.” Wesley struggled not to say something cutting. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Ah, actually, there’s something I need to let you know. Remember Warren? He’s missing. And I just ran into Riley Finn, Buffy’s ex-boyfriend, you know, or maybe you don’t know, but he’s from the Initiative and he’s here with a couple of other guys and it really doesn’t look good and I’m not sure why he’s here.” She finally took a breath when Wesley grabbed her arm, pulling her outside.

“Willow, relax.” The door closed behind them and Wesley moved off to the side, ensuring that Willow would follow him.
“We know about Riley.” He didn’t elaborate further and when she nodded her head, he continued. “Don’t worry about Warren, he’s being dealt with by the proper authorities.”

Willow waved her hands in the air. “Are you sure? Because it didn’t look like the police came and got him. It looked like he’d been kidnapped,” she protested.

“No, Willow, I’m sure. I made the call to the authorities myself.” Wesley neglected to mention that the authorities in question were Brachen demons he and Spike had recruited to help guard the Hellmouth, but he figured that was information Willow didn’t need to know.

She regarded him for a moment, her head tilted a bit as she tried to accept his explanation. “So the Initiative is the reason why everyone’s here?”

He didn’t want to give her more information, or give her hope that anyone inside would be willing to speak with her, since he highly doubted that would be the case. Wesley suspected that Buffy might be willing to see her, but probably not while in the midst of what was currently going on. “Yes.”

Ordinarily, Willow would have pushed, but something about Wesley’s posture warned her not to force the issue. With a longing look through the glass, Willow conceded. “Okay, Wes. I just wanted to let someone know. And I did. So I’ll just go now.”

Her smile was sad and the slump of her shoulders touched him. While he understood completely why the distance between the group and Willow hadn’t been bridged since the big fight, it suddenly struck Wesley just how hurt the red-head had been by the whole situation. Until now, he’d only been able to see things from Buffy’s or Tara’s perspective – and his own. But Willow seemed broken, adrift without any real anchor or connection and it moved Wesley to pity. Before he could re-think his actions, he reached out to stop her. “Willow?”

“Yeah?”

“Perhaps in a couple of days, maybe a week, you might be able to see the girls.” It was all Wesley could give her, the hint of hope, but evidently, it was enough. The tears pooling in her eyes were blinked away and she managed a tremulous smile.

“Thanks, Wesley.”

As he watched her go, Wesley caught sight of one of the soldiers – the shorter, blond one – standing in front of the Espresso Pump, obviously lost in thought.

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“Lieutenant? We’ve got some unusual activity.” Sloth radioed in, keying the frequency to Riley’s. “Two unidentified males and two unidentified females have entered the shop.”

Riley stopped in his tracks, unable to see the front door of the shop from his current vantage point. “Describe.”

“Older male, mid to late fifties, possibly older. Younger, early thirties. Female subjects, one in
thirties, one in teens.”

“Very well, keep frosty. Report back upon their departure.”

“Roger and out.”

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If the situation weren’t so dire, Giles might have laughed. Quentin Travers had the most unusual look on his face and it was clear, though the old man wasn’t quite aware of it, that Anya was running rings around him. He and Spike, on the other hand, had known exactly who to call upon to handle the negotiations for their side. And Anya was doing exactly as they’d hoped she would.

Nicholson was sitting between the two negotiators, rapidly recording all the concessions on both sides, with an occasional correction from either one. Travers had already agreed to pay Spike a salary in exchange for his assistance any time the Council needed someone with his particular skills. Anya had moved on from that rather quickly, launching into a convoluted deal which would cover Buffy’s insurance needs, as well as medical coverage for any of the rest of them should something arise. She was negotiating with a skill and savvy none of them, including Travers had ever witnessed before, and it caused a thrill of pride to run through Giles.

He glanced over at Spike, who was watching the proceedings closely. Spike’s jaw was clenched and Giles thought for a moment that it was in reaction to a particular point that Anya had just conceded, although when Spike’s attention shifted from the table to where Buffy was pacing, Giles knew something else was on his mind.

“Spike?” Giles dropped his voice to a near whisper, knowing the vampire would have no trouble at all hearing him. “What’s wrong?”

“Need to get her home, Rupes. She’s ready.” Spike didn’t look at the older Englishman, keeping his eyes on Buffy.

“What? Now?” Giles whipped off his glasses, peering at the still pacing Buffy. “Oh, good heavens. This is most inopportune.”

Spike chuckled. “Have you ever known babies to wait ‘til everyone is ready?”

“That’s beside the point. How far apart are the pains?”

“Hard to tell at this point. She’s got a higher threshold than most. The witches told us to get movin’ while you were meeting with the boys from Brazil.”

“Good Christ.”

“Yeah. ‘S what I’m thinkin’.” The last was said with a wry tone, and Spike’s attention wavered for a moment when Wesley re-entered the shop. “We need to get movin’.”

No sooner had he spoken, when Buffy yelped, drawing everyone’s attention. She glanced down at her belly, one arm wrapping around herself reflexively. Spike was at her side in an instant, one arm supporting her around the waist, the other reaching for her free hand. “All right, kitten?”
“No. Not really.” She grimaced, then realized everyone was staring. “Sorry.”

Travers shook his head. “Is it time?”

“Almost.” Giles was the one who answered, since both Buffy and Spike were otherwise occupied.

Making a snap decision, Travers looked at his aide. “Nicholson, make arrangements for the surgeon to meet us at the house.”

“What?” Surprise was clearly evident on everyone’s faces.

Travers spoke again. “Have the surgeon meet us at Miss Summers’ residence. He’ll perform the surgery there.”

“Are you certain about this, sir?” But even as he asked, Nicholson was flipping open his cell phone, only hesitating while he waited for confirmation.

“Very. Make the call.”

The head of the Council turned his attention back to Anya. “Miss Jenkins, I commend you. You are one of the finest negotiators I have ever met. I’d like to engage upon further dialogue with you, in an effort to secure your exclusive services on behalf of the Council.”

“Me?” She looked aghast. “You want my exclusive services? For what purpose?”

“As a negotiator, of course.” Travers smiled at the girl, pleased that he’d turned the tables on her this once. “It would not be on a full-time basis, and somewhat similar in nature to the agreement we’ve already discussed in regard to William’s contract.”

Anya stared at him for a few moments, busy calculating revenues and possibilities in her head. “This discussion will have to wait, Mr. Travers, but I believe we can come to some kind of an agreement that is mutually beneficial.”

Travers leaned forward and shook her hand. “Very well, Miss Jenkins. I look forward to having you as a part of my team.”

Nicholson interrupted. “He’s on his way, sir. However, there seems to be an issue of surveillance on the shop.”

“We already knew about that, Nicholson.” Giles spoke, gesturing to the others. “There are several Initiative operatives watching the premises, and we also believe they are outside the house.”

“Do you have safeguards already in place?” Travers asked the question, though he suspected the answer.

“We do. However we did not anticipate the onset of Buffy’s labor quite just yet. Right now our biggest concern is safety during the move.”

“How did you propose to get her away from the shop and home?”

Faith interjected, warily watching the other Slayer. There was something about the new girl that
was rubbing her the wrong way. “We have a safe route, we just need a diversion so the commandos won’t realize until later that we’ve all gone.”

“I’m sure we can arrange that.”

He motioned Giles, Wesley, and Faith over, pointedly excluding the new Slayer and her Watcher. Neither one of them had any field experience, and their contributions would come only after the others had determined what actions they would be involved in. Conferring rapidly, the four, with some asides from Nicholson, quickly came up with a plan.

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The radio crackled to life again. This time it was Lansome. “One male and one female teen entering the subject premises.”

“Identify.”

“Female subject is Dawn Summers. Male is unknown.”

“Very well. Report back when situation changes.”

“Over.”

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“Do you know what we’re supposed to be doing?” Connor moved from the living room into the kitchen, following Dawn.

“Yeah, there’s a whole list of instructions Grace sent home with Buffy and Spike the other day.” She headed straight for the refrigerator, grabbing the long note that was on the front. “See? It’s all right here.”

The list was long and in a looping handwriting that was hard for Connor to follow at first. “So what’s it say?”

“We have to get old sheets on the bed upstairs, and take off the new blankets and stuff. Have to make sure we have plenty of warm water and stuff to sterilize the knife.”

“Anything else?”

Dawn perused the list, flicking off the items one by one. “Yeah, we have to get the babies’ stuff together, blankets, diapers, and stuff to clean them up. The biggest thing is making sure we have enough towels.”

“Want me to do that?” Connor took two brownies from the airtight container, swallowing them almost whole. “I can get all the bedroom stuff done while you get baby gear ready.”

“Kay.” She put down the list, then watched as he swiped another brownie. “Hey, save me some of those!”
Connor slid the container over the counter top. “There’s plenty left. I think Tara’s been in a
domestic mode again. She’s been baking. There’s another cake in the cabinet, plus the cookies
she made yesterday.”

“Wonder what’s up there. It’s like she’s gone weird with the homemaking stuff.” Dawn headed
for the stairs, Connor trailing behind her. “Makes for mucho sweets for us.”

“Yeah. How many towels do you think we’re gonna need?”

“Dunno. Could be pretty messy though.”

“So I should get them all, just in case?” Connor opened the linen closet, looking at the shelves of
towels and sheets. “Do I have to change the sheets too?”

“That’s what Grace said. Find the oldest sheets and put them on the bed.”

Connor rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

They were almost done when the phone and the doorbell rang simultaneously. “I’ve got the
phone!” Dawn yelled from the babies’ room. “You get the door.”

“Sure, coz that’s what I am around here... the doorman.” Connor thundered down the steps,
yelling at whoever was at the door, “I’m coming, hold your horses.”

He opened the door to find Grace and Kait, holding two large baskets and wearing big hats.
“Hello, ladies, out for a stroll?”

They laughed, Kait brushing a kiss against his cheek as she entered, remarking, “You sound more
and more like Spike every time I speak to you.”

He grinned, then took the basket from her. “That’s a good thing, right?”

Grace shook her head. “It’s a thing, kid. Spike’s not so bad, as far as vampires go. You could do
worse.”

Kait shuddered, agreeing, “Too true. He could be just like... well, never mind. You’re fine.”

Before he could say anything else, Dawn was yelling from the top of the stairs. “Connor! Total
change of plans!”

“What?” He stood at the bottom of the steps, waiting for her to come down. “What happened?”

“They got the Council to help. Some surgeon is gonna take out the chip. And they’re doing it
today.”

The two witches shared a look, waiting for Dawn to elaborate. “That’s all I know. They’re gonna
be here soon.”

“So are we not having babies today?” Connor’s confusion showed as he looked from one of the
females to the next.
“No, we’ll probably be having babies today.” Grace patted his arm, leading him away from the stairs. “Any idea how soon the rest will be arriving?”

“In about a half hour or so.” Dawn shrugged. “At least that’s what I think.”

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“Two unknown females just entered the residence.”

“Identify.”

“Subject one is a tall, African-American female. Approximate age, mid-forties.”

“Subject two is a short redhead, approximate age, mid-forties.”

“Any other identifying characteristics?”

“Both are carrying large baskets. And they are wearing hats, sir.”

“Hats?”

“Affirmative.”

“Over.”

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“That’s the plan?” Spike looked from one face to the other, shaking his head. “That’s the best you could come up with?”

“Given the time constraints and your own limitations, we have not much choice.” Wesley was the only one brave enough to point out the obvious.

“Sun’s down. We could do this a different way.” Spike absently rubbed a hand over Buffy’s lower back. “Could send you lot with Buffy out through the alley an’ Rogue, Oxford, an’ I can head out the front door, weapons in hand.”

It was Buffy herself who rejected the plan. “No, I want you close.” She caught his free hand in hers. “Don’t want to – ”

She actually didn’t have to finish what she was thinking, because he picked up on it, gauging accurately her unspoken need to have him close and to not be worrying about him while she struggled to get home. “Right. Okay, so we stick to the original plan, then?”

“It’s the best one we could come up with, on short notice.” Giles handed off weapons to Faith and Wesley. “I agree it’s rather short-sighted, but I feel it’s best if we keep your whereabouts questionable for as long as possible.”
Buffy rolled her eyes at his wordiness. “We have to do this sometime soon, people. I’m working on a really short time table.”

“Very well. Nicholson’s already alerted the surgeon, who is on his way. Travers, Spencer and Nicholson will be returning first to their hotel and then departing. Their task is to get the wetworks team on the Initiative soldiers, maintaining surveillance.” Giles paused for a moment as another pain worked its way through Buffy. “Oz, you don’t mind patrolling with Faith and Wesley, do you?”

“Nope. I’m cool.” His laconic response was predictable, however, he looked over at Tara and then back at Giles, reminding the other man of her presence.

“I’d imagine Tara will want to go with Buffy and Spike, just in case?” The blond nodded her agreement, trying to draw little attention to herself.

“Buffy, Spike, and Kennedy will be going through the tunnels to your house.” Faith handed a stake and a small sword to Kennedy, who was clearly not happy with having to travel with a vampire. “I believe Jenner should also accompany you.”

When the other Aurelian vampire merely nodded, Kennedy bristled further and moved away from both vampires. She voiced her complaint, immediately raising the ire of both of the other Slayers. “Why do I have to head into the tunnels? Why can’t one of the others go?”

Giles and Wesley both stared at her, eyes hard behind their lenses. However, when she started to complain further, it was Travers who spoke. “They have no idea who you are. I’d prefer to keep your abilities and your identity secret. If you were to go out prepared for patrolling, that would negate any advantage we might have.”

When she started pouting, Travers merely raised an eyebrow in her direction and any further resistance she might have exhibited deflated. After the brief interruption, Giles continued explaining the plan to Buffy. “Any and I will stay here at the shop. We’ll close a bit earlier than usual and head over to your house. By which time, hopefully, the chip will be out and we’ll have something else to celebrate.”
Strings of tension

Book Three

Chapter Twenty-One Strings of tension

No collection of people who are all waiting for the same thing are capable of holding a natural conversation. Even if the thing they are waiting for is only a taxi.


The world is all gates, all opportunities, strings of tension waiting to be struck.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

“So we got the right stuff?” Connor showed the supplies he’d put in the bedroom to Kait, motioning her to the bed. “Is that what you wanted us to do?”

She patted his arm, bestowing a bright smile on him. “You did fine. Just get the good blankets off the bed, and strip the pillows also.”

“Strip them?” Connor cocked his head, confusion furrowing his brow.

“Take off the pillow cases, and pile them up on the floor next to the bed.” Kait moved to help him, after putting her basket down next to the bed. “We might need them later on.”

He stopped, looked at her for a moment, then decided he really didn’t want to know the answer to his question and kept working. Though after a moment, Connor started talking. “How long is this gonna take?”

“Usually it takes hours, sometimes days.” The short redhead moved around the room, clearing away all the breakables and making sure there was a clear path between the bed and bathroom. “Although in this case, I’m not sure. Buffy might surprise us all and have them quickly.”

“So we won’t have to worry about drugging Spike if it goes on too long?” The teen glanced at Kait with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

A deep laugh shook through Kait and she wagged a finger at him. “I don’t think he’d take too kindly to that.”

“Yeah, well, you haven’t been living with him for the past two weeks. He’s driving us crazy.” Dawn stood in the doorway, her hands on her hips, watching the two of them finish. “He’s beyond insane.”

Kait looked at the two teenagers, folding her arms over her ample breasts. “My guess is he’s nervous, worried, and a whole lot of other things.” She paused, searching for a way to help them
understand a little bit. “You have to remember, probably the last time he had any contact with a pregnant woman was before his turning, so there’s the issue of how dangerous childbirth used to be.”

When the two exchanged thoughtful looks, Kait plowed on, “He’s also a vampire.” She nearly laughed when the two looked at her as if she was dumber than dirt, however she shook her head. “You forget, because he’s different around you, but he is still a deadly force, someone to be reckoned with. His woman is going to be in excruciating pain, and there’s going to be lots of blood.”

“So you think he’s worried he might lose control?” Dawn gave voice to the question neither of them had thought of prior to this.

“I think it’s on his mind.” Kait shrugged, dismissing their sudden worry. “He’s got the ability to control himself, he’s a lot stronger than any of you realize.”

Changing the subject, Kait asked, “Dawn, did you get the basinet?”

“Crap!” Dawn hurried from the room, heading down the hallway toward Buffy’s old bedroom.

“Everything will be fine, don’t worry.” Kait smiled at Connor, then followed Dawn.

Buffy ignored all the chatter going on around her, looking straight at Spike. He took the hint, urging everyone to move a little faster. “Let’s get a move on, yeah? Got no time to waste.”

Quentin Travers shook hands with Giles and Wesley, and in a surprising move, reached forward for Spike’s hand. The vampire looked at him, eyebrow raised and a clear question in his eyes, but Travers never hesitated. They shook hands vigorously, neither one bothering to comment on the silence surrounding the actions.

“Good luck,” was all that Travers said before he swept out the door, followed by Nicholson and Spencer Whitworth.

Spike grabbed a hold of Buffy’s hand, leading her to the basement. He didn’t bother checking to see if the new Slayer was behind them, completely ignoring her presence, though he made sure Tara was ready. “Now’s the time, Glinda.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming. Don’t need to nag me so much.” She jibed at him, before sharing a pointed glance with Oz. “I’m right behind you.”

They were gone in the next instant.

Jenner waited a few moments, then ghosted after them.
“Lieutenant? We’ve got more movement at the shop. Three unknowns exited.”

“Direction?”

“North-northeast, sir, heading past the ice cream shop.”

“Stay on a visual until out of range.”

The radio crackled to life again, a different voice this time. “More movement at the shop.”

“Report.”

“English male, tall, glasses. Approximate age, mid-thirties. Subject two appears to be Hostile two nine four; captured and released. Subject was not tagged. Subject three is female, early twenties. Known to be Slayer number two.”

“Direction?”

“South. Subjects are armed.”

“Affirmative.”

“Team two, track known subjects. Do not engage.” There was a break, then, “Repeat. Do not engage.”


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Anya shrieked softly when the radio in the training room crackled to life. “Rupert! We forgot our hostage!”

“No, dear, I haven’t forgotten him. I’m just waiting for the most advantageous time to utilize him.” Giles began to gather up the unused weapons, keeping his hands occupied while his mind focused on other things. “Would you mind checking on our hostage? Just see if he’s awake yet.”

She stared at him for a moment, a bit perplexed by his request. “You trust me to do that?”

“Of course I do.” Giles looked up sharply, not understanding her confusion. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“You never would have before.” Anya blinked her eyes at him, clearly at a loss. “Xander wouldn’t have let me.”

“Anya, dear, I would really prefer if you never compared me to Xander Harris ever again.” A muscle in his jaw flexed, and she realized a half second later what she had done.

“Oh! Rupert!” She rushed to him, enveloping him in her arms. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to imply that you were in any way deficient. I was comparing you favorably to him.”
He hugged her back, shushing her repeatedly. “Really, dear, it’s nothing to get yourself worked up over. I do believe I was over-reacting to the stress.”

“We could work on relieving that stress.” She broke away from the hug, grabbing at the lapels of his jacket. “Wouldn’t take very long at all.”

His grin was positively roguish. “Then it shall have to be memorable.”

“Every time with you is memorable.” Anya walked backward, pulling him closer and closer as she moved toward the office. “Every. Single. Time.”

Giles laughed, picking her up by the hips, his lips nipping at hers. “No more talking, dear. We’re on the clock.”

Her laughter echoed through the empty shop.

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Wasn’t hard to hear the grumbling from the human caboose of their little train; her muttering and near constant complaining were echoing off the concrete walls, countering the sloshing of their feet through the almost ankle-deep muck. Jenner was staying very far back – barely at the edge of Spike’s awareness. The two vampires hadn’t spoken about it, however Jenner knew it all the same; their priority was the two blonds. The baby Slayer was on her own if it came to a fight.

The normal traffic through the sewers was nearly non-existent, no doubt every demon in Sunnydale knew who was in town. Not that the lack of demonic activity came as a surprise to Spike, since he’d done most of the rumor-spreading himself. Between himself, Lawson, and Rogan – not to mention Clem’s loose lips – the news of both the Council and the Initiative’s arrival did not go unnoticed. Every demon with half a brain was laying low; the rest were on their own.

Buffy was quiet, her attention focused inwardly, with little attention being paid to her surroundings. She let Spike take the point position, following behind him, her eyes on his back. Tara was right behind her, trying hard to avoid all the gross stuff they were slogging through, to no avail. Her nausea was slowing her down and she kept having to breathe through her mouth in order to avoid the stench.

“Spike.” He whirled around, retracing his steps. “How much longer?”

He checked overhead, then ducked back for a look at the next manhole cover. “Not long. ‘Bout two more blocks.”

Tara swallowed heavily, then gagged on the saliva pooling in her mouth. It was a futile effort and before Spike could reach her, Tara was leaning against the wall, her head hanging down and the contents of her stomach spewing out. Buffy wasn’t much better, and she stepped away from the other blond, holding a hand over her mouth.

“All right, ladies, let’s get you out of here. Can you walk, Glinda?” Spike laid a hand on her back, taking care to keep clear of the growing puddle of vomit.
“Oh, my God, this is gross.” The grating voice finally reached him, and Spike reacted.

“Might wan’ to have a bit of consideration there.” He leaned back to take a closer look at Tara. “Ready, pet?”

She shook her head, then stepped around the puddle, holding onto his outstretched arm. “I think I’m okay now.” Tara wiped a hand over her mouth, catching his eye. Her smile was grim, but she didn’t falter. “The faster the better, right?”

“Right.” He guided her down the sewer, passing Buffy, who was gingerly making her way forward. “Do you need me, kitten?”

Buffy waved him off, not opening her mouth. “Be right back, Slayer.”

Spike guided Tara the last two blocks, opening the manhole cover and waiting until she was halfway up the ladder before turning back to get Buffy. The manhole wasn’t on one of the streets, but in the parking lot just outside of the high school, which was only a couple of blocks from Revello Drive. At most, they had a two block walk in the open, and Tara didn’t hesitate, heading right for the house. She didn’t want to be caught waiting and it might be easier for one of them to slip past the Initiative soldiers.

Buffy had made it halfway, with Kennedy still trailing behind. Spike reached her side in moments, urging the other Slayer forward. “You go. I’ll help her up.”

“I can still make it up the ladder.” Buffy glared at him in the dim light, pouting when he shook his head.

“Not takin’ the chance. She’ll go first, an’ then you, pet.” He leaned into her, letting his nose rustle her hair. “Don’t trust the bint. Rather let her go first.”

For once, Buffy didn’t argue, didn’t even question him. She merely nodded and held onto his hand, watching while Kennedy ascended the ladder. Buffy waited until Kennedy was clear, then she grabbed for the first rung. It was harder than she expected, until Spike put a hand under her rump and gave her a boost. “Up you go.”

She scrambled up the ladder easier than Tara had, and though she couldn’t lean down and give Spike a hand, Buffy was still smirking when he crawled out of the hole. “Told you I could do it.”

“Never doubted you for an instant.” Spike took her hand and headed off toward the house. “Let’s go, Slayer.”

For a second, Buffy wasn’t sure who he was talking to, until she realized that Kennedy was staring at the pair of them, obviously struggling for something to bitch about. Spike leaned in close to Buffy, wrapping his arm around her waist. “Not sure I like that one.”

“All she does is complain.” Buffy kept her face forward, but he could see the set line of her mouth. “She complained in the shop, she complained about who was going out to patrol, she complained all the way through the sewers. I’m so not in the mood for a whiny brat.”

“Better brace yourself then, we’re about to hit the homestead.”

“Funny. Ha. Ha. Ha.” The last ‘ha’ ended on a strangled note, as Buffy once more wavered on
her feet. “Really need to get home.”

“Couple more feet, pet, an’ we’re safe inside.” Spike fought the urge to pick her up and carry her the last half a block, knowing if he did, she’d probably pop him good for the presumption. Even if she was on the last bit of her strength.

“We’re not safe inside, because then I have to push these babies out.” She gave him a gimlet eye. “You are so lucky I love you.”

Spike was quiet for a moment, then he looked down at her. “Too right you are, kitten. Too right.”

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“Got movement!”

“Acknowledged. Report.”

“Subject three. Blond female, residing at target premises, approximate age early to mid twenties.”

“Location.”

“Approaching target premises on foot.”

“Do not apprehend. Observe only.”

“Roger that.”

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Graham Miller listened with half an ear to the incoming reports from his unit, his mind contemplating a course of action that he’d previously thought untenable. The actions of both Riley and Gebhardt had opened his eyes to a possibility he hadn’t wanted to entertain previously. One was blinded by rhetoric; the other by jealous rage. Neither was thinking clearly.

While Riley Finn believed Graham’s presence was merely in a support capacity, their commanding officer had issued differing orders, to be used only in case of a breakdown in command. He and Finn were of equal rank, though Graham had seniority time-wise, which meant almost nothing barring the difference in their paychecks. Except in scenarios like this one.

Gebhardt was a problem. Potentially he could be a greater problem than Finn, since he out-ranked both of them. However the whispering in Riley’s ear only fed Finn’s jealousy. The tall Iowa native had never been able to see clearly when dealing with Buffy Summers. The girl wasn’t right for him; she never would be. Graham understood, though, that in matters of the heart, logic very rarely prevailed. And Riley had been smitten from the first, though he’d been a bit slow to figure it out. And although Riley had jumped whole-heartedly into the relationship, it appeared to Graham that Buffy hadn’t. While she’d clearly been interested and flattered by Riley’s infatuation, it was obvious to Graham’s eyes that her heart wasn’t engaged. And as time passed, she became less
invested in the relationship. By the time she and her cronies had destroyed the Initiative base, Graham could tell she was only going through the motions. *So how come it took Finn months to notice?*

His fellow soldier wasn’t stupid, not by any stretch, but he’d been blinded by what he thought was real love. Right now, he was feeling the backlash and finally facing the realization that it hadn’t been. The news of Buffy’s death had hit him hard, and for weeks afterward he blamed himself. More than once, Graham had to pull him out of a cantina or hide the stash of alcohol Riley had in his bunk. He’d been a mess.

When Riley had gotten the message from the Major about Buffy, Graham knew it was going to cause problems. He’d debriefed Major Ellis on all the points of concern and, thankfully, he’d been heard. It didn’t hurt that Graham had some serious military connections – running all the way to the Pentagon and White House – that forced Ellis to listen.

Faced with the dilemma of revealing Finn’s growing rage, Graham dithered about making a decision. If Finn came to his senses before issuing the order to kidnap either Summers or her infant, then he’d never forgive Graham. On the other hand, if Finn did issue the order and Gebhardt got his hands on the hybrid child – Graham might never forgive himself.

Unable to reach a decision, Graham listened while the radio crackled to life again.

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“Lieutenant! Targets One and Hostile Seventeen are in sight.”

“Report.”

“Subjects are approaching target residence. Unknown female appears to be following them.”

“Unknown? Identify.”

“Dark hair, approximately late teens or early twenties. Could be of Arabic or Middle Eastern nationality. Approximate height is five feet, six inches. No distinguishing marks.”

“Obtain photographs if possible.”

“Affirmative.”

“All units converge on target residence. Do not approach until further orders.”

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“We’ve got a tail.” Oz barely moved his head, though he pitched his voice so that the other two heard him clearly.

“Doesn’t surprise me.” Faith was equally unimpressed. While she hadn’t fought any of the
Initiative soldiers, she’d fought more than her fair share of vampires and demons; and been training extensively both before and after her faked death.

Wesley didn’t bother to turn around, but kept walking. “It’s exactly what we planned. Any idea on how many?”

“So far only one. Doesn’t mean there aren’t others out of my range.” The werewolf sniffed the air, then shrugged. “Can’t tell.”

The dark-haired Slayer moved ahead of the two males, flipping a stake easily in the air. “Are you seriously thinking anything is gonna be moving around? Between all the visiting white hats,” she deliberately put quotes around the phrase, “and everything else we’ve been doing, there’s nothing going on. Place has been deader than dead.”

“It’s always been my experience that whenever we believe nothing’s going to happen; it does.” Wesley fiddled with the collapsible crossbow, double-checking his pockets to make sure he had enough arrows.

Oz barely raised an eyebrow. He was focused on what was going on behind them. “Cynical.”

“I prefer pragmatic.”

Before they could argue word usage and meanings, Faith cut them off. “Either way, it’s probably true.”

They had agreed earlier to keep the patrol to the more active areas, including the college, and that’s where they headed first. Faith would do a sweep later on, since the campus was notorious for early morning attacks, right now they were just wasting time. “Any idea how long we should stay out here?”

Always the voice of reason, Wesley looked at his watch, stating, “Give it a couple of hours, at least.”

“Great. This is gonna be wicked boring if all we’re doing is walking around.”
Not exactly pleasant

Book Three

Chapter Twenty-Two   Not exactly pleasant

Giving birth may be all intense and magical and stuff
but the act itself is not exactly pleasant.
But it's also the beginning of something incredible...
something new...
something unpredictable...
something true...
something worth loving...
something worth missing...
something that will change your life forever.

Dr. Meredith Grey: Grey's Anatomy, Piece of My Heart

“Targets are nearing the subject location.”

“Affirmative. Do not approach.”

“Roger.”

“All units report.”

“S-One.”

“S-Three.”

“S-Four.”

“S-Five.”

“Unit One, remain in position.”

“Unit Two, report.”

Riley was getting frustrated. No one had seen or heard from Watkins since his second report at approximately 13:45 hours as he was getting into position behind the Magic Box. A niggling worry was beginning to form and he wondered, not for the first time, if Watkins had been compromised or captured.
Graham hadn’t reported in either. In fact, he hadn’t followed Riley and Gebhardt when they left the Espresso Pump. At least not directly. Riley had no idea where he was now, since he wasn’t reporting in or responding on the private radio frequency they used.

Abruptly, Riley changed his mind about leaving Sloth in position at the Magic Box. All reports indicated that no one was there, and likely none of them were about to return. “Unit One, belay that order. Rendezvous with all other units at target location.”

“Affirmative.”

It was time they all settled in. Riley had a funny feeling things were going to happen tonight.

Grace was in the kitchen when Dawn thundered down the stairs. “Sweetie, you’re gonna have to learn to be lighter on your feet.”

“Why?” Dawn looked around, wondering what Grace was doing. There were three pots of water going and she had a tray set up with bandages, scissors, cotton balls, antiseptic wash, and a few other things Dawn was sure she’d never seen before.

“Well, for one thing, there’s gonna be two new babies around, and for another, it’s always a good idea to be graceful.” The tall woman busied herself at the stove, covering two of the pots. “Be a dear and get me the pasta.”

“You’re making pasta?” Dawn shot her a quizzical look. “I thought you were boiling water for the babies.”

“What do you think I’m adding to the pasta?”

Dawn whirled around, grabbing the first sharp knife she could find, only to see Grace pointing at her and laughing hysterically. “You should see the look on your face!”

“Not funny.” Slamming the knife down on the counter, Dawn grumbled some more. “Really. There’s enough going on without you going crazy, too.”

“Oh, come on, Dawn, you have to admit it was a little funny.” Grace’s grin was infectious, as was her laughter, and despite the scare, Dawn found herself giggling a little.

“You’re very twisted, you know that?”

“Yup. I sure do.” Their laughter died down and Grace covered the last pot. “Actually, I am making pasta. It’ll keep, and everyone can eat when they get in, without any of us having to worry about fixing food.”

“That’s a good idea.” Tara’s voice accompanied the closing of the back door. “I need to get clean and then I’ll be back to help, okay?”

“Sure thing, sweetie.” The sewer stench hit both of the other females at the same time and Dawn wrinkled her nose.
“Ew. You guys came through the sewers?”

“Yes. They... Giles a-- and Wesley figured it was the safest for us. Can this wait? I really need to shower.” Tara kept edging her way through the kitchen, trying to keep her distance from the other two and at the same time head for the basement. “I won’t be long.”

Grace waved her off, “Don’t worry. I figure we’ve got a couple of hours before anything really starts happening.”

“I don’t know. Buffy’s pains were coming closer together.” Tara slid through the door, clattering quickly down the stairs, leaving Grace to re-assess the time table.

“Damn.”

Jenner emerged from the sewers halfway between the house and the Magic Box after backtracking from the spot where Spike and the girls left the sewers. He was heading back to the shop, his job to protect the two still there and keep an eye on the sniper.

The streets were quiet, even the downtown area. It was eerie, the lack of humans on the streets of this town after dark. He’d never been around during what Spike and Buffy referred to as ‘apocalypse season’, though he imagined it was a bit like this. Every living thing, demonic or human was hunkered down, avoiding whatever disaster loomed.

A shadow moved behind him and Jenner smiled into the darkness. “Paulie, I told you to stay away.”

“Can’t do that.” The little Welshman shrugged. “Wouldn’t feel safe doing it.”

“Alright then.” The older vampire studied him for a moment, reaching a decision. “Head back to the shop and watch out for the humans there. Don’t get caught.”

“Won’t.” Paulie skulked away with a wave of his hand over his shoulder while Jenner ruefully shook his head. Don’t know why I bother giving orders. Isn’t a damn one of them that listens to me.

Staring up at the building in front of him, Jenner made quick work of the climb up. Three rooftops away, the sniper was folding up his gear, obviously preparing to move. Looks like their orders have changed.

“Can I change my mind?” Buffy looked up at Spike as they neared the front porch. “This probably is just a false alarm, you know, from all the stress.”

He stared at her for a moment, half convinced she was out of her mind.
“Really. It could just be that.” Buffy pulled away from him, turning to get a look at his expression. “Don’t look at me like I’m a ‘daft bird’, or whatever it is you’re thinking. I could just be having Biggston thingies.”

“Braxton-Hicks, you daft woman.” An indulgent smile was playing about his lips, though he was shaking his head. “Don’t think so, sweetheart. ‘M thinkin’ you’re going to have those babies tonight.”

“You can’t know that. It could be days. Maybe even weeks.” Her tone was beginning to sound petulant, and he just chuckled at her.

“Hours, pet. That’s all we’ve got before they arrive.” He opened the door, sweeping his arm so that she preceded him. “Mark m’words.”

“Nah huh.” Her nose and chin tilted imperiously in the air as she walked past him, which was marred when she faltered over the threshold. “Oh. Ow.”

Buffy’s arm cupped her belly and she bent over, trying to alleviate the pain wracking her insides. The strongest contraction she’d felt so far ripped through her and she faltered again as she tried to step forward. “Uh oh. Oooh.”

Spike was at her side instantly, his arm supporting her as he bellowed out, “Niblet!”

“Owie, owie. . . . owie.” Buffy stopped moving, unable to do anything but breathe through the pain. “Augh! This is . . . .” She lapsed into silence, rocking sideways into Spike.

“Oh boy. This is not good.” Dawn stood by the stairs, eyes riveted to the pair stuck in the doorway. “We’re not ready.”

“Doesn’t look like that matters much, right now,” Spike ground out. “Where’re the witches?”

“Right here.” Kait was standing on the stairs, while Grace hovered behind Dawn. “You need to get her upstairs.”

“Wait. . . wait.” Buffy panted heavily, then inhaled deeply through her nose. “Ooops.”

“Best get her in the shower, Spike.” Grace stepped around Dawn, moving to Buffy’s other side. “Her water’s just broken.”

He reeled back, the smell hitting his nose the same time Grace’s words did. Even so, it took him a moment or two to make some sense of it. “Oh.” And then, “Bloody hell! Now?”

Soft laughter greeted his reaction. “Yes, Spike. Right now.”

“Wonderful.” Buffy still couldn’t take a step and Spike’s patience ran out. “Picking you up, kitten. Brace yourself.”

“Wait, I can walk.” She tried pushing him away, but he was prepared for it, capturing her hand in one of his.

“No. Not gonna make it up the stairs on your own, so stop fightin’ me.” He slid his left arm around her waist, tipping her back into his arms. “Work with me here.”
“Fine.” She capitulated petulantly, a pout blooming on her lips. “But you’re not carrying me everywhere.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, pet.” Spike shouldered his way past the women, easily taking the stairs by twos, despite his burden. “Humor me for a bit.”

Their squabbling drifted away down the second floor hallway while Grace and Kait shared a look.

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“Targets have entered the subject premises.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Unit Three, what is your location?”

“Trailing Unit One.”

“What is your ETA?”

“Ten minutes.”

“Affirmative.”

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The bell over the door startled him, and Graham ducked away from the entrance quickly, almost running down the steps to the counter. “Hello?”

No one answered, though he could hear noises from down the hallway. “Hello?”

Giles poked his head out of his office, straightening his shirt and trying not to look overly flustered. Suspicion colored his voice, “What can I do for you?”

The soldier had the courtesy to look the Englishman in the eye. “I want to give you a heads up.”

“Forgive me if I don’t trust you.” Giles peered at him over the rim of his glasses, a flinty look in his eyes.

“Wouldn’t blame you, sir. I just want you to know,” He paused for a second, looking away from the intense scrutiny, “I don’t condone his decision and I’ll be informing my superiors.”

There was no give in the older man’s gaze. “Of what exactly?”

“This mission was approved conditionally, sir. And only then if Hostile Seventeen was apprehended.” Graham flicked his eyes to the clock. “We had ten days. We’ve used up four. It’s my belief that Lieutenant Finn will spend the rest of the time trying to relieve Miss Summers of –
trying to do what he said in the coffee shop.”

“Will you be informing your superiors of this course of action?”

Graham’s answer was punctuated by a short nod of his head. “Within the hour.”

“Very well.” Giles relaxed his posture minutely. “I expect your team to be removed from the Hellmouth within forty-eight hours. If that does not happen, Lieutenant, I will make my own arrangements.”

“Understood, sir.” Graham didn’t bother to say anything further. They both knew where they stood, and the time frames they were working with. Snapping a short salute, Graham turned and headed for the door.

“Lieutenant?” When the younger man paused, Giles continued, “I was entirely serious earlier, when I warned Finn. Keep that in mind.”

“Will do.”

Anya stood in the office doorway, struggling to get her shoes on. “Do you believe him?”

“I’ve no reason not to. He’s effectively undermined his fellow officer.” He reached for the phone, punching in the speed dial for the house on Revello. “Doesn’t mean I won’t warn them that Finn was serious.” A sigh shook him. “This is the last thing we need to be worrying about right now.”

“Maybe you should call the Council and let them know. Travers said he had a nethers team available.”

“That might not be a bad idea.” He thought about it while he waited for someone to answer the phone.

“Dawn? Where’s Spike?” There was a lengthy pause, which Anya could hear despite the distance. “Oh, dear. We’ll be there shortly.”

“What’s wrong?” Anya righted her skirt, then ran her fingers through her hair.

“Buffy’s waters have broken.”

She stared at him for a moment, then grabbed her purse from beneath the counter. “I’m ready.”

“I need to secure the hostage.” Giles hit the speed dial again, this time reaching Lawson. After a perfunctory greeting, Giles spoke. “Can you send someone to the shop? We’ve secured a hostage and no one can be spared to sit and watch.”

He waited while Imelda radioed his request, listening to the various responses. “Ten minutes? That’s fine. We’ll wait.”

“Oh good, that gives me time for a quick wash.” Anya headed to the bathroom, snatching up her discarded pantyhose. “I’ll be ready before they get here. Don’t forget to lock up the cash.”
In the end, it was easier to get into the shower with her than it was to stand outside and get soaking wet. Spike stripped down while Buffy leaned against the wall, grumbling and groaning the whole time. “Should I wash my hair?”

“I’ll do it. Just stand there an’ wait for me.” The thud of his boots hitting the door was muffled by the running water and he scooped the clothes off the floor, stuffing them into the laundry bin. “Two shakes, an’ ‘ll be there.”

“What does that mean? Two shakes? Two shakes of what?” Buffy was babbling, her brain focusing on the weirdest things. She knew Spike had explained this expression once before, but she couldn’t remember what it was. Or why she was even caring about it.

Spike stepped inside the tub, shaking his head. “Don’t worry ‘bout it. Jus’ keep breathin’.”

“I’m breathing.” She huffed out a full breath at him. “See?”

He chuckled, turning her around to push her head under the water. “I see. Keep it that way.” Dumping shampoo onto her head, Spike quickly washed her, not taking his usual time. “Don’t have much time to lollygag in here. Gotta get done an’ get out.”

“It feels good though, I like this.” Buffy leaned into his chest, ignoring the rhythmic pains gripping her internally. “Can we stay here for a little while?”

Spike watched the muscles bunching and tensing under her skin, listening intently for the steady thumping of the three hearts, timing the movements. “Close your eyes.” He angled her head under the water again, rinsing the soap suds. “Don’t think so. Think you’re gonna have to get out of here shortly.”

He didn’t need to see her face to know she was pouting. Before she could argue with him, Spike shushed her. “Can’t stop everything, kitten. Some things just have to happen. Don’t wan’ anything to happen to you, or those little ones. ‘Sides, don’t you wan’ to know if our girl’s here?” His hand rubbed across her belly, momentarily soothing the tremors. “Wonder if she knew all along, an’ that was one of the things she didn’t tell us?”

Buffy let her hand join his, their fingers meshing together over her belly. “I think she did know. Remember when she told us not to ask her too many questions?”

“Yeah.” The soap was all gone and he worked the conditioner through her hair. “Think it’s both girls?”

“I don’t know. Do you mind if they’re both girls?” Buffy turned to look at him over her shoulder and he nearly laughed at the bedraggled picture she presented. While she may be ignoring the pains, the signs were clear to see. Her eyes were tired, their color reduced to a dull, mossy greenish-brown while lines of fatigue and dark circles etched her face.

“Talked about this, didn’t we?” He shrugged, motioning her to duck again. “Don’t rightly care one way or the other. This is all a bloody miracle to me. ‘S long as everyone is fine an’ healthy, doesn’t matter.”

She was quiet while he washed the rest of her, her mind drifting along, her senses registering the
feel of his hands soothing her, the sharp smell of the body wash, and the pulse and pull of her body. “Might be nice to have a boy.”

“Hhmm.” He didn’t comment further, just let her ramble as he made sure she was clean.

“Don’t you think so?” She looked down at his head, idly noting the strength in his muscles and width of his shoulders. “What happens if we have a little girl and she’s – she’s all girly?” She fretted. “I don’t think I know how to be that kind of a mom. Little boys could be easier. Trucks and swords and all sorts of things. I know how to do all that stuff.”

Spike stopped for a moment, resting his head against her belly. “Sweetheart, you’re . . . You’re . . .” He shook his head again, trying to find the words to explain how groundless and irrational her sudden fears were. “You know all about being a girl.”

He grabbed her hand, looking at her fingers. “You fight and slay demons all the time, yeah? But you still get your nails done. Still make sure you’re a girl. Don’t think you have anythin’ to worry ‘bout there.” Spike turned her hand over, laying a kiss in the palm of her hand. “You’re going to be a fine mum, jus’ like Joyce was.”

Sudden tears sprung up in her eyes and Buffy stared down at him. “How come you always know what to say?”

“Years of saying the wrong things.” He stood up, stepping out of the shower. “C’mon, kitten, we’ve stalled here long enough.”

“Spike? Are you sure about the names?” She let him lift her out of the tub, holding onto him tightly.

“I’m sure.” He dried her off, wrapping her old bathrobe around her. “Go on inside, sweets, I’ll be right behind you.”

“Promise?”

“Silly question that. Already know the answer.”

Buffy waddled out of the bathroom. “Just checking.”

“Cheeky.” Snapping up a towel and winding it around his hips, Spike followed behind Buffy, his eyes riveted on her. “Everything’ll be fine, love.”

“Hah. You’re just saying that so I don’t wig.”

Spike caught up with her just inside the bedroom door. “Sayin’ it so we both don’t.” He nuzzled her for a moment, then pushed her to the bed. “Sit. Rest. ‘M gonna get dressed.”

Instead of sitting, Buffy curled up on her side, watching him. “I think I’m more comfy like this.”

He watched her in the mirror as she closed her eyes and immediately fell asleep. Momentary relief flooded through him, though the worry and fear were still there. Can’t be that close if she’s sleeping . . . right?
The long wait for angels

Book Three

Chapter Twenty-three: The long wait for angels

For he who can wait, everything comes in time.
   François Rabelais, Panurge, Pleiade edition

Miracles occur,
   if you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait’s begun again,
The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent.
   Sylvia Plath, Black Rook in Rainy Weather

When you see a rattlesnake poised to strike,
you do not wait until he has struck to crush him.
   Franklin D. Roosevelt

A soft knock on the door broke into his musings, and Spike slid into his jeans before answering it. Grace was standing in the doorway, a tray of supplies in hand. She smiled at him and started to speak, but a finger held to his mouth shushed her immediately. In a whisper, she asked, “Is she sleeping?”

“Appears to be.” He glanced over his shoulder, then turned back to the witch. “Not rightly sure why that is.”

“It’s her body’s way of gearing up for the stress ahead of it.” Grace moved around him, putting the tray on the dresser. “She won’t sleep long.”

Even as Grace was speaking, Buffy started stirring. Her legs curled up and a low groan of pain sounded in her throat. “How far apart are those pains?”

“Every couple of minutes. No more than two, I’d guess.” Spike grabbed a tee-shirt, slipping it over his head. He flinched when she slapped a pair of sweats into his chest.

“Change. Those jeans aren’t gonna be comfortable in a little while and you might as well lose the shirt.”

“Why?” He tugged it over his head, hanging it on the chair.

“Two reasons. It’s gonna get all nasty and,” Grace sighed as she stared at him unabashedly. “You are too fine for clothes.”
It took him a minute, though when he did grasp what she’d said, Spike leered at the witch, laughing when she sighed dramatically. “Thought you were one for the Sapphic view.”

A loud snort was his answer. “Not this girl. I prefer outdoor plumbing.”

His laughter was loud and only interrupted by Buffy’s long whine of pain. “This is not fun. Can this be over?”

Spike was at her side in an instant, helping her to a semi-sitting position. “Doesn’t sound like much fun, sweets. But you’ll make it through.”

Grace was suddenly all business. She handed Spike an oversized tee-shirt, obviously one of her own, saying, “Help her get into this.” Once Buffy was covered, Grace sat on the edge of the bed. “I need to take a look and see how close you are. So just lay on the bed and spread ‘em.”

Buffy’s eyes went wide and she glanced between the two. “What?”

“You knew this was gonna happen, sweetie. I need to take a peak.” The older woman smiled, tapping her hand on Buffy’s leg. “Can’t do this without looking.”

With more reluctance than was warranted, Buffy sighed loudly, then laid down on the bed. Spike moved aside, but Buffy’s hand reached for his and he dropped to kneel on the floor beside her. “At least it’s not everyone takin’ a peak.”

Startled greenish eyes widened and Buffy gulped a bit. “Everyone?”

Her hands busy positioning Buffy so she could get a clear grasp of how far along the labor was and how soon they could begin working on her breathing, Grace answered distractedly. “In a hospital setting, everyone looks. Doctors, nurses, interns, and sometimes if you’re lucky a midwife. If you aren’t lucky, sometimes the janitor gets a peek.”

“Oh, no way. I’m so glad we opted for this.” Buffy glanced over at Spike, a slight grimace on her face.

“Would’ve been a bit more difficult for Spike, you know.” Grace stated. “He would’ve had a helluva time hiding, and hospitals aren’t as forgiving when their doctors and nurses get drained.” She looked up at Buffy. “Relax, sweetie, this’ll only take a minute.”

Grace ducked down, her hands probing gently but firmly. Buffy squeezed Spike’s hand as a new pain gripped her innards. Within moments, Grace was moving back. “Well, want the good news?”

“Sure.” Both blondes spoke at once.

“You’re fully dilated and ready to go. So whenever you feel like pushing, you can go ahead and do that.” She slapped Buffy on the calf, grinning madly.

“What’s the bad news?” Spike was the one to ask, because Buffy was still struggling through the pain.

Grace stood up, reaching for a towel. “Buffy’s got to watch the strength. This could go a lot faster than we think, and we have to remember that those little babies aren’t as strong as their mother. At
least not yet. So push but don’t push with all your strength, okay?”

Buffy gritted her teeth. “Right. I’m sure I can do that.” Her tone and the slightly wild look in her eyes belied that agreement. “I’ll just hold back.”

“We could still go to the hospital and get you some drugs.” Grace focused on the two of them, waiting for their decision.

“No. No drugs. No hospital.” Buffy was emphatic, leaving no doubt in anyone’s mind what she wanted. “Wanna do this here.”

The rooms weren’t up to his usual standards, however Quentin Travers realized that Sunnydale was not known for its appreciation for fine details and the standards of English aristocratic amenities. All in all, the hotel – going by the inappropriate name of The Sunnydale Arms – wasn’t quite as bad as he’d imagined. Though it certainly wasn’t The Savoy.

Quentin had dismissed Spencer Whitworth the instant their lift doors had opened. He wanted no eavesdropping for what he was about to instruct Nicholson. While he trusted that – for the moment at least – there were no hidden motives behind the quest to have the behavioral modification chip removed from William’s head, he wanted to be certain there would be no reprisals.

And he also wanted to update the Defence Minister.

The military presence, albeit a small squad, did not sit well with him at all. He’d expected that the orders to stand down would have been delivered. The conversation he’d had with the Minister had been – he checked his watch – almost four hours previously. Either the squad in Sunnydale was incommunicado, or they were ignoring the orders. Travers would lay odds that it was the latter.

Since that was the case, he wanted his wetworks teams, the New York and London operatives, in place before the military was prepared to strike. He, along with Giles and Wyndam-Pryce were all in agreement about the need to protect the infants. There wasn’t a doubt in Travers’ mind that any number of organizations would want to secure them. Daywalkers, or more properly dhamphyrs, were a rarity. Those born to Slayers were even more . . . They were prizes, priceless on the demon markets, their blood powerful and if something were to happen to either of the infants, or their mother, the history books would be filled with the rampage of William the Bloody.

The Scourge of Europe would no longer be the bedtime story to scare the newer Watchers.

“Nicholson.” Quentin motioned him over to the window. “Make sure that surgeon is on his way. And after you’ve done that, get the Defence Minister on the phone.”

“Again, sir?” There was a hint of questioning in the Scottish voice.

“Yes.”

When it was clear that was all he was going to say, Nicholson reached for his cell phone. “Is there anything else, sir?”
A deep sigh broke from the older man, and he suddenly looked every day of his age. “Find out how soon Miss Summers is going to be delivering those babies.”

“Right.” Nicholson turned his attention to the phone, only to pause when Travers spoke again.

“Give the order for the teams to go out. Surveillance only, for now. They are only to engage if the Americans do.”

“Yes, sir.”

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Willow knew she was being followed.

Twice now, when she’d ducked into different shops along Main Street, the same man had stopped, doubled back, retracing his steps. It was a dead-give-away. He didn’t have the look of a vampire, but there were lots of other demons able to pass for human. She didn’t, for a minute, fool herself into believing he was one of the good guys. He looked too. . . He just didn’t look like a good guy.

Hiding behind the counter at Finyl Vinyl, Willow watched the dark haired male double back again. The girl behind the counter, sporting pink dreadlocks and numerous piercings, interrupted Willow’s inner mumblings. “You wanna slip out the back?”

Startled into a yelp, the redhead jerked and turned around. “What? Huh?”

“Looks like you’re trying to avoid tall, dark, and stalker.” The girl pointed a heavily hennaed finger toward the back of the store. “Go through the incense at the end of the reggae section, then head towards the left. Back door is just past the bathrooms.”

Willow goggled at her for a minute, stammering out a much garbled, “Thanks,” then fled.

She had to warn someone – anyone. But Willow wasn’t sure if any of the others would even talk to her.

And the only safe place she could think of was the one place in all the world she wasn’t wanted. Or welcome.

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“There is jack shit going on out here. Only ones stupid enough to be out are the brand new baby vamps.” Faith tossed a stake end over end, sighing deeply. “Why are we out here?”

“Because someone has to provide a diversion.” Wesley was beginning to question the wisdom of their earlier decision.

“Yeah, coz there’s a real need for one of those.” Faith turned around, walking backwards.
Before she could continue, Oz interrupted. “Maybe we should circle closer to Buffy’s. Keep an eye on the homefront.”

Faith gazed expectantly at Wesley, knowing his was really the deciding vote. If it were up to her, she would’ve called it a bust an hour before. Wesley glanced down at his watch, nodding his head. “Agreed. The danger is much closer to home. Perhaps we should do a reconnaissance sweep of the blocks adjacent to Revello.

“Cool.” Faith headed to her left, with Oz right behind her.

Giles was just locking the door when the phone began ringing. He weighed ignoring it, but when the answering machine kicked in and Nicholson’s voice filled the shop, he changed his mind. Throwing an apologetic look in Anya’s direction, he reached for the phone.

“Rupert here.” His expression darkened almost immediately, and he motioned Anya to stay silent. “Thank you.”

With a sigh, he pulled her close. “Travers believes Finn is ignoring orders. The Defence Minister has already contacted the American Chief of Staff and been assured that the Initiative squad was ordered to stand down and retreat.”

“What does that mean?” Anya’s chocolate brown eyes flashed with dark fire.

“I believe that means he’s operating outside acceptable military channels.” Giles grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the door. “We really must get to Buffy’s.”

Old Mrs. Khan watched the dark vehicle idling in front of her house, peering surreptitiously through the curtains in her second floor bedroom. The nondescript SUV had pulled up almost an hour before and since that time, no one had gotten out, nor had anyone from the block approached it. She’d been feeding the baby koi in the front yard pond when the black vehicle arrived and she’d been spying on it ever since. Mrs. Khan had lived her whole life, at least since her family had been freed from the Internment Camps after World War II, in Sunnydale and she’d never pretended the town was normal. Two of her children had married Brachens, something her old-fashioned husband never forgot, while another one had married a Jewish lawyer from New York and moved away. She was never sure which was the bigger sin in her husband’s eyes, though at least the first two had stayed in town.

Right now, she was on the phone with her son, Nick; who was in turn, on the phone with his brother in law. Every detail she gave them was being broadcast through the underground network Spike and Lawson had set up, via the friendly demons.

Halfway across town, listening to George’s end of the conversation with Nick Khan, Lawson was marshaling the remaining friendly demons. They were spread thin, what with some of them
guarding the hellmouth, some trailing after the Initiative soldiers and still others following the Council operatives, there were few to spare. On the upside, reports corroborating Mrs. Khan’s indicated that the vehicle belonged to the military. Whether Initiative or not, was still unclear.

Either way, someone was going to have to keep an eye on it. Someone other than eighty-six year old Mrs. Khan.

As he was trying to find someone to keep an eye on the vehicle, Lawson’s phone rang. Hoping it was someone volunteering to swing by Mrs. Khan’s, he barked without a greeting, “I need you to cover something that’s just come up.”

“Really? What’s that?” Faith practically purred into the phone, her words ending in a husky laugh as she listened to Lawson back-track and splutter. “Dude, chill. What’s just come up?”

“Unidentified vehicle on Hibiscus. Informant says you can’t miss it.” Sam breathed a deep sigh, listening as Faith conferred with Wesley and Oz.

It didn’t take more than a moment, when she was back on the line, intoning, “We’re heading over there. See what’s what.”

“Great.” He hesitated, adding, “Thanks.”

“No worries. We’re on it.” Faith clicked off, allowing Lawson to reassure – through George and Nick – Mrs. Khan that someone was on the way.

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“All units, give your twenty.”

One by one they reported in, all except Watkins. “Deployed and ready.”

“Affirmative. Move on my mark.”

“Sir!” The radio crackled to life again before Riley could give the order to move on Buffy’s house. “Subject approaching target premises at rapid pace!”

“Identify.”

“Redhaired female. Subject matches description of Rosenberg.”

“Stand down. Do not apprehend. Target could be dangerous.”

“Affirmative.”

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Tara was just heading for the second floor when someone started frantically pounding at the front
door. “I’m coming. Hold on.”

She flung the door open, not prepared to find Willow on the other side. Tara flushed, stammering out a hesitant greeting. “Willow – what . . . Hi.”

“Tara.” Willow gaped at her for a few moments, eyes bulging and lungs gasping for air. “Um. Hi.”

The two former lovers stared at each other for a long while. For once, it was obvious Tara was the more composed. Willow was flushed and panting from her sprint to the house, while Tara, fresh from the shower, was the picture of nonchalance.

“Hey, Willow.” The blond blocked the door, only opening it just enough to slip through, keeping Willow outside. “What’s up?”

Willow stammered out nonsense for a bit, growing more agitated, until finally, her hands flapping wildly and face bright red, Tara took pity on her. Tara’s right hand clasped Willow’s bringing the other girl to a standstill.

“Breathe, Willow.” A slight smile curved Tara’s lips. “Okay. What’s got you so upset?”

She was proud of herself – able to keep her own emotions under control – while Willow visibly fell apart. “Riley. And . . . and Warren. He’s back and now Warren’s missing and I tried to tell Wesley about it, but he . . .”

Just as Willow was about to get going again, Tara motioned her to silence. “We know about Riley. He was at the Magic Box earlier.”

That deflated the redhead considerably. “Oh.” Willow’s shoulders drooped and, although it appeared to dishearten her, she calmed somewhat. “Well that’s good. That you know.”

“Yeah.” The sound of heavy footsteps pounding down the stairs distracted Tara for a brief second, so she missed Willow’s mood change.

“Okay. Well. I should go then.” She paused, hoping expectantly that Tara might try to persuade her to stay, but Tara didn’t. Sudden tears filled Willow’s eyes and she felt like her heart was breaking all over again. “I’ll just, you know, go.”

Tara’s attention focused on her former lover. “Willow?”

When all the other girl did was pause, Tara extended an olive branch. “Maybe, after the babies are born, it’ll be okay to stop by.”

She nearly laughed when Willow whirled around, confusion and expectation warring with hope on her features. “Really?”

Then, when the full import of what Tara said hit her, she gulped. “Babies? As in more than one? When? Huh??”

“Sometime today, I’m guessing. And yeah, more than one.” The blond smiled, opening the door as Dawn’s voice calling her name finally reached her. “I gotta go. I’ll . . . I’ll call you, okay?”
She left a still stunned and spluttering Willow on the porch.

Willow stared at the front door, reeling from the last few minutes. She hadn’t expected Tara to be the one answering the door. Maybe Dawn or Spike, but not Tara. She hadn’t been prepared, hadn’t been ready. All the feelings she had for Tara resurfaced, leaving her bereft when Tara closed the door in her face. Willow sagged against the post, defeat written in her posture.

A throat clearing off to her left startled her and Willow jumped.

“Hi.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Kennedy. The new Slayer.”

Willow gaped at her, unable to process the girl’s statement. “Who?”

“I’m the new Slayer. I just got Called.” Kennedy took a step forward, almost crowding Willow. “Who are you?”

“Oh. Sorry. I’m Willow... A friend of Buffy’s. Well, I sorta, kinda... yeah. Tara was... um... she was my girlfriend.” Willow knew she was babbling, making absolutely no sense, but she couldn’t help herself. She’d been flustered and off-balance all day, since she discovered Warren was missing.

Kennedy was smiling, finding the insane babbling more than a little adorable. “Wanna try that again?”

Blowing out a breath, Willow tried calming herself. “Sorry, I’ve been rattled all day.” At Kennedy’s questioning look, Willow offered more. “It’s a really long story.”

The darker girl shrugged. “No big deal. I’m not really welcome around here and I’ve got nothing else to do.”

“Oh. How come... You know, I get what you mean.” Willow stared out into the early evening, understanding why Kennedy wasn’t comfortable. Willow was caught in a dilemma, obviously they wanted Kennedy close by, and she knew they didn’t want her around. “How come you’re out here?”

“The vampire told me to stay out here.” Her contempt wasn’t hard to hear, it was clear in the disdain dripping from her tone. “Told me I needed to stay alert in case something happened.”

Understanding finally dawned. *Tara said babies! That means... “Buffy’s in labor?”*

“Yeah.” There it was again, the clear disapproval. Willow didn’t comment, instead pulled the younger girl around the side of the house.

“We can stay in the backyard.” The former witch had her own reasons for wanting to stick close, the least of which was another attempt to draw Tara out, hopefully even just a glimpse of her. At least Kennedy’s a Slayer. She probably wouldn’t let anything happen, right? Willow led the other girl to the backyard, plopping down on one of the chairs while Kennedy did the same.
“So how did you get Called?”

Never happy unless she was the center of attention, Kennedy willingly launched into a biased version of the last few days of her life.
Welcome to the human race

Book Three

Chapter Twenty-four. Welcome to the human race

Children are the only form of immortality that we can be sure of.
   Peter Ustinov

A new baby is like the beginning of all things — wonder, hope, a dream of possibilities.
   Eda Le Shan, The Conspiracy Against Childhood 1967

Where did you come from, baby dear?
Out of the everywhere into the here.
Where did you get those eyes so blue?
Out of the sky as I came through.
What makes the light in them sparkle and spin?
Some of the starry spikes left in.
Where did you get that little tear?
I found it waiting when I got here.
What makes your forehead so smooth and high?
A soft hand strok’d it as I went by.
What makes your cheek like a warm white rose?
I saw something better than any one knows.
Whence that three-corner’d smile of bliss?
Three angels gave me at once a kiss.
Where did you get this pearly ear?
God spoke, and it came out to hear.
Where did you get those arms and hands?
Love made itself into bonds and bands.
Feet, whence did you come, you darling things?
From the same box as the cherubs’ wings.
How did they all just come to be you?
God thought about me, and so I grew.
But how did you come to us, you dear?
God thought about you, and so I am here.
   George Macdonald, Baby

Welcome to the human race
with its wars, disease and brutality
you with your innocence and grace
restore some pride and dignity
to a world in decline
Welcome to a special place
in a heart of stone that’s cold and grey
you with your angel face
keep the despair at bay
send it away, and
show me the meaning of the word
show me the meaning of the word
‘Cause I’ve heard so much about it
I don’t want to live without it
I don’t want to live without it
Oh, I want love, I want love, I want love
Welcome here from outer space
the milky way still in your eyes
you found yourself a hopeless case
one seeking perfection on earth
that’s some kind of rebirth, so
show me the meaning of the word
show me the meaning of the word
‘Cause I’ve heard so much about it
don’t make me live without it
don’t make me live without it
Oh, love, I want love, I want love, I want love

Chrissy Hynde, Show Me, from the Album Learning to Crawl, 1984

“What do you think is going on upstairs?” Connor sat in front of the television, the soundtrack just loud enough to drown out any possible screams, though his mind was obviously not on the movie. Dawn was no better off, constantly shifting and fidgeting, unable to sit still.

“How should I know?” Irritation laced her tone. “They won’t let me anywhere near the door.”

“Yeah. But you’re a girl. You should know this stuff.” His leg bounced once, twice, then settled into a steady rhythm.

“Are you nuts? Just because I’m a girl. . . that’s completely sexist, you jerk.” Dawn smacked him with a pillow, uncurled her legs and stomped into the kitchen. “I don’t just know this stuff.”

He somehow managed to look a bit contrite, though Dawn wasn’t fooled at all. Connor had followed her into the kitchen, though neither of them knew why. Dawn was just looking for something to do and Connor was anxious – neither of them wanting to admit they were worried.

There was a loud thump from somewhere over their heads, freezing both of them. Connor glanced at Dawn, and in the next heartbeat, both were bolting for the stairs. As they were fighting to be the first one to the second floor, a high-pitched, piercing wail split the silence.

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Buffy no longer had any concept of time; everything was reduced down to the next – the next
breath, the next pain. She was shaking, straining against the pressure, battling her own body.

Grace had told her to push only when she felt the urgency, otherwise she could let her body do all the work on its own. The stately witch was wearing a watch around her neck, and every once in a while Buffy would catch her glancing at it. Grace’s watch was the only working timepiece in the room. First thing she’d done was unplug Buffy’s alarm clock. The second had been to set up a nest on the floor. Hospital pads lined the bed and nest, everything else they might need was organized on the dresser.

Somehow - Buffy didn’t remember when – Kait had entered the room and now the two witches were sitting on the floor, chatting softly. Tara was in the bathroom, getting the tub ready to wash the newborns, occasionally adding something to the witches’ conversation. Spike was sitting behind her, knees bent on either side, shielding her as well as giving her something to hold onto.

His hands brushed over her belly, his unnecessary breathing keeping time with hers. A low rumble gathered and rolled through his chest, thrumming into her skin. Strange pressure pulled at her and Buffy felt like her groin was going to slowly explode. “Spike, I need to move.”

“All right, sweetheart.” He maneuvered out from behind her, then helped her to her feet. Once she was upright, he held her hands, facing her. “Better?”

“Yeah.” Buffy took a deep breath. This is better, but still not what. . . “I wanna move. Can I move?”

Graced looked up from her position on the floor, “Let’s take a look before you walk around, okay?”

Suiting actions to words, Grace scooted over to Buffy. Gently guiding her legs a part, she peered between Buffy’s thighs. “No walking, toots.”

“Why?” Spike crouched behind Grace, watching everything she did. She took his hand, pulling him down to his knees and guided his fingers over Buffy’s vaginal area.

“Feel that?” The witch glanced at him over her shoulder. At his nod, she continued. “That’s the first baby’s head.”

Spike left his fingers there, tracing the new curves and the slick slippery mess covering the baby bump. Lifting his head, he gazed up at Buffy. “Jesus Christ, pet.”

“What?” There was panic in her question and Grace quickly answered, soothing her somewhat.

“Everything’s fine. It’s just that one of our new arrivals is ready to enter the world. You need to push just a little bit.”

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“This is very exciting. Isn’t it?” Anya was chattering away, successfully distracting Giles from the dire thoughts ranging through his brain. “I haven’t been near a birth since. . .” She thought hard for a moment, then smiled brightly. “It was probably sometime in 1784. Some Frenchwoman
had just given birth to her fourteenth – or was it fifteenth? – child and she called for a vengeance
demon.”

Attention fully caught, Giles couldn’t help himself from asking the inevitable question. “Why is
that?”

“It seems her husband had wanted boys, and, well, that baby was her tenth daughter. The husband
had told her to rest up because he wanted to try again. She wasn’t very happy.”

Anya’s grin was infectious and Giles couldn’t help the amusement from showing on his face. “I’d
imagine she was less than thrilled with him.”

“She was. That’s why she called for vengeance.” A sudden thought struck her and she reached for
Giles’ free hand. “You know, this is so different.”

“Why is that?” She had him confused again. Giles glanced over and caught the slight frown now
marring her features.

“Xander wouldn’t have wanted to hear this. He would have just told me to shut up and not talk
about it.” She squeezed his hand, then let go as he struggled to shift gears. “Thank you, Rupert.”

“For what?” Giles eased the car into the driveway, parking it smoothly.

Anya was still talking as they closed the car doors. “For letting me be myself.”

Her plaintive tone was enough to get him moving, and Giles folded her into his arms, hugging her
tightly. “I much prefer you to be yourself, dear.”

They broke apart, moving in unison to the porch. Loud thumping sounded behind the door, and
they exchanged a look before Giles reached for the doorknob. As he opened the door, the audible
wail of a newborn infant reached their ears, and Anya clapped him on the back, squealing almost
as loudly. “Rupert! We’re just in time!”

As they crossed the threshold, the source of the thumping became evident, since Dawn and Connor
were in a pile at the bottom of the stairs, both looking a bit worse for wear. Giles’ reaction was a
mere shaking of his head and the admonition was more in his dry tone than his words. “Do get up,
both of you.”

Another cry sounded from the second story and this time, everyone scrambled for the stairs. Anya
hopped over Dawn, landing on the second step, and reached out to grab Rupert’s hand. “You’re
going to be a grandfather!”

All three of them laughed outright at his indignant expression, then laughed even harder when his
feet and Connor’s got tangled up together and Giles landed on his butt in the middle of the
hallway.

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Harsh, rapid panting filled the room, punctuated by grunts and gasps of pain. Buffy was crouched
on the floor, resting almost atop Spike, his legs and lower body supporting her. His arms were
wrapped around her, their hands clasped just beneath her breasts. Grace kept up a low litany of
instructions, letting them know how close they were. Kait hovered off to her right, ready to take
over after the first baby was born. Tara was leaning against the bathroom door, her eyes focused
on Grace.

“Just a little bit longer, sweetie. Baby’s head is pushing through.”

“Easy for you to say,” Buffy growled. “You’re just standing by.”

“None of this is easy.”

A bitter, exhausted laugh escaped Buffy. “Okay. Wanna switch?”

“And spare you the pain?” At Buffy’s enthusiastic nod, Grace chuckled. “Not a chance, cupcake.
I’ve already made my contribution to humanity.”

Buffy muttered, “Meanie,” just as another strong contraction ripped through her, elongating the
word. “Yeewwwwwwaaahhh!”

Grace ducked her head, crowing excitedly as the first baby’s head emerged. “Stop! Don’t push!”

An inarticulate moan of disagreement burst from Buffy’s mouth, ending in a strangled scream of
frustrated pain.

The midwife was quiet, and no one dared breath. All attention was riveted on Grace, who was
crooning wordlessly. Buffy felt a wrenching tug, like her entire body was being pulled inside out,
then a rush of fluids and finally, the sound of high-pitched squalling filled the room.

“Well, hello there, baby. Welcome to the world.”

Grace lifted her eyes to see both blonds staring at her. “Guess who’s here?”

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Spike was supporting all of her weight, his thighs and lower back tensing and spasming from the
position he was forced to maintain. Buffy’s legs were practically draped over his thighs, their
hands clasped together just beneath her breasts. His entire body was strained, and he kept a count
of her heartbeats, countered with her panting breaths. Gasp, beat, gasp . . . beat. He had to,
because the demonic part of him was pushing, swimming just under his skin, howling to be freed.
The scents clouding the air, the tension of his woman, the pulsing heartbeats . . . surrounded him,
drowning him in emotions. Emotions he ached to taste, to feel, to be a part of, to revel in. Each
noise that escaped Buffy sounded a clarion in his ears and he was overwhelmed . . . The nearest he
could liken it to was the first time he’d heard a full, electrified orchestra, the sound turned up so
loudly his ears rang for days. Or when he was at Woodstock and the drugs made him see colors
that didn’t exist before that moment.

Everything was . . . it was too much and yet, at the same moment, not enough.
He wanted to be where he was, holding her, feeling the life flow from her body and at the same time he wanted to be where Grace was, watching the life come from her. Spike wanted to be everywhere, see everything. But mostly, he wanted to take the pain wracking Buffy, contorting her insides, making her shake and shudder as she forced his children from her womb.

Grace’s voice was a distant murmur, something he heard, but could not comprehend as his perceptions narrowed down to the sound of Buffy’s heartbeat. She was sweating heavily, her entire body awash in fluids, drenching the both of them. They were skin to skin now, the shirt Grace had given Buffy discarded because of need.

Spike had been living in a haze, not really believing this moment would ever come to pass. He’d known, intellectually, what it meant for Buffy to be pregnant; hell, he’d lived through the aches, the morning sickness, the cravings, the mood swings, all of it, like a man in denial. Patience he’d never before called on had been a constant companion, though he’d never betrayed once to Buffy all the fears and confusion her miraculous announcement engendered. It was enough for him that Buffy had come back from the dead. More than enough for him to share her life. . . And beyond his wildest expectations for them to be in a relationship.

This?

This moment was something he’d long given up dreaming of.

And yet here he was, Buffy draped over him, body stressed and trembling, waiting for his children – children – to enter the world.

An ironic chuckle gurgled in his throat and Spike fought the urge to collapse in nervous laughter. If only his mother could see him now. . .

The cessation of all noise and the hushed suspension of Buffy’s entire body brought him from his distraction. Her head fell back against his shoulder, and she shuddered, nearly coming apart in his embrace. A low, desperate moan burst from Buffy’s mouth, ending in a strangled scream of frustrated pain.

The witch was crooning again, soft, hushed words and then she was quiet. Spike found his eyes drawn to her, unable to look away; although her attention wasn’t on him. Wasn’t on Buffy, either.

Her attention was on the squalling, wriggling red-faced infant cradled in her capable hands. “Well, hello there, baby.” She brushed a hand over the baby’s face, cleaning off some of the fluids. “Welcome to the world.”

Spike’s unneeded breath was choked in his throat and tears filled his gaze. Grace finally looked up and smiled, addressing her comments to them. “Guess who’s here?”

She held the baby up, and Spike’s legs finally gave out.

Spike.

Buffy, in tears, in pain... hurting.

Dawn, yelling... Giles...

Voices, yelling, talking over and over and no words, no sounds... 

One crisp flash of pain arced through her brain, blinding in its intensity, then faded off like a distant thunderstorm, leaving the white noise of nothingness behind. Cordelia ran a tired hand over her brow, pushing her dark hair back behind an ear. She closed her eyes, letting her brain recover from the vision, gather the strings of disjointed information into a little ball so that she could process it; make sense of it.

It certainly wasn’t the first vision she’d had since her rescue, however it was the only one she was willing to share. For one thing, it wasn’t about her, and for another Cordy felt she owed more than a bit of gratitude to Buffy and Spike.

She glanced over at her dinner companion, knowing what she was about to tell him would probably cause a fight. A little sigh escaped her. Xander had been wonderful, both while she was in the hospital and now, since she’d come back to Los Angeles. He understood, without her needing to explain, why she never wanted to set foot in Sunnydale ever again. He gave her space, let her set the pace of their... well, whatever it was they had. Friendship, definitely. More? Cordelia doubted she’d be up for any of that for a very, very long time. And it seemed Xander was okay with that. Another sigh escaped her. Subject, Chase, stick to it...

“Xander?” Cordelia put her fork down, waiting patiently for him to pay attention. “You need to go back to Sunnydale.”

“What? What the hell for?” He dropped his own fork, wincing when it clattered against the china, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Keep your voice down.” She very nearly hissed that at him, leaning forward over her own plate. “We’re in a restaurant. Try to remember that.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Xander glanced around, smiling apologetically at the people closest to them. “Fine. I’ll be quiet, but only if you tell me why the hell you want me to leave you.”

Shaking her head and rolling her eyes, Cordelia fought the urge to smack him. “That’s not why you need to go back.” Under her breath she muttered, “Dumb ass,” just because it needed saying.

“Buffy’s in trouble.” When Xander angrily pushed back the chair, she reached out over the table to grab his hand. “Wait. It’s not what you’re thinking. Buffy and Spike are both in trouble. They need your help.”

He snorted once, the noise ending in a bitter laugh. “Sure, Cordy, they need me. They’ve never needed me.” Xander didn’t bother telling her that he wouldn’t walk across the street to help Spike, much less travel a couple of hours. “Gimme one good reason why I should bother.”

“I can give you more than one, dork brain.” Cordelia tightened her grip on his wrist when he tried pulling away. “They saved me. That’s really the only reason you need, isn’t it?”
“I was there, too!”

She rolled her eyes again. “I know that.” How am I going to make him understand... “Xander.” Cordelia stared at him, floundering for a way to appeal to his better nature. Yes, Spike had done some pretty awful things, but... he’d also done some pretty good things. And Buffy? Lighting on an idea, Cordelia started in again. “You won’t really be helping just Spike, you know. Buffy needs your help. There aren’t many people she can trust. And if what I saw comes true, she’s going to need everyone’s help.”

The inner battle Xander waged was written on his expressive features. Cordelia waited, hoping — praying — he’d make the right choice. She kept her silence, knowing anything else she said might backfire and keep Xander from doing the right thing. When he glared at her, Cordelia knew he’d chosen.

Without saying another word to him, she motioned to their waiter for the check.

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Buffy felt Spike’s legs give out, and she clutched at his thighs, her fingertips digging into the corded muscles standing out from the strain. He slid down the wall gracefully, mindful of her precarious and still gravid state. She was still draped all over him, their torsos nearly glued together from the sweat standing out on her body and Buffy was more than aware of the second infant swimming in her belly.

Grace was on her knees, barely inches away from her splayed legs and all Buffy could do was stare at the tiny form in her hands. Buffy wiped a cramped hand over her face, hair sticking to her everywhere and then, forcefully relaxing her hands and arms, she reached for the baby.

“Gimme.” Okay, so it wasn’t clear, the words sounding better and not garbled in her head, though Grace understood her all the same. Buffy couldn’t tear her eyes away from the slimy, wailing baby, and she trembled; a long, slow, tremor wracking her body. “Oh, my God.”

She didn’t know what to say, to think, to feel. Every emotion she’d ever... waves of differing feelings surged through her and Buffy touched a finger to the baby’s face. It calmed, little mouth forming a tiny, itty-bitty circle and she burst into tears. The tears somehow became quavering laughter when something warm and wet hit her belly and she glanced further down to see what had splashed her.

“Spike!” His body tensed beneath her again and Buffy quickly covered the baby’s bottom. “It’s a boy! He’s got a penis!”

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She gave a good imitation of growl when she wanted to, his Slayer. Spike rested his head back against the wall, his eyes riveted to the squalling, scrunched up features of the tiniest human he’d ever seen. Grace’s hands completely covered the infant, stretching from cheek to toes. He’d never been on such a roller-coaster of emotion in his entire existence; his emotions running the gamut from elation to abject terror.
At this very instant, though, he was just . . . Spike realized he must be coasting on the most intense high of his life, and he couldn’t quite make sense of what was going on around him. Buffy had just growled at Grace, demanding the infant. It was now nestled in her embrace, tucked up in her arms. The baby was still crying, but as Buffy touched the tiny cheek – it was smaller than her finger! – the little mite stopped. He could smell the tears, hear the tiny hiccuped breath Buffy emitted and he started to tighten his arms around her. Her exclamation of his name halted his movement, and Spike inhaled deeply, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

When it did, he could barely contain his amusement. “He’s got a penis!”

He finally glanced down at the baby, his brain registering what his eyes had already seen.

There, looking decidedly unremarkable and rather big for such a small baby, was the evidence of his son’s gender.

Holy. . . Sweet Mother of God.

Spike gaped down at the baby for long moments. He felt like he was moving in deep waters, where there was nothing to hold onto, nothing to do but float and hope for the best. . . His left hand stroked up the baby’s leg, reveling in the desperately soft skin.

A boy. . .

He’d been prepared for a girl. . .

A boy.

Grace stifled the joyful laughter bubbling inside of her, knowing neither of the two superblondes would appreciate her amusement at their expense. She’d known right away that neither of them realized the child was a boy, since their eyes hadn’t strayed from the baby’s face. Buffy’s utter surprise was priceless to see when the baby decided to mark his territory.

Typical to form, the baby had peed almost immediately. She’d done a quick check of all his vitals, making sure all was well with him and hadn’t even reacted when the Slayer had growled at him. Girl has no idea what she’s just unleashed on the world. . . Slayer with children? Mama bears have nothing on this one. . .

It was Spike’s reaction, though, that had Grace sniffing away her own tears. There was so much emotion. . . absolute awe written on his features, she’d had to look away. Her gaze collided with Kait’s and she knew the other woman had picked up on what she’d felt also. If ever she doubted Spike’s emotions or feelings for Buffy, all that was laid, finally, eternally to rest. He adored her. Loved every bit of her and he’d do no less for their children.

Children. . .

Oh, dear Gods!
Sending up a small prayer that all would go well for the next part, Grace motioned for Tara to come further into the room. Quietly, so as not to overly disturb the new family, Grace outlined her plans for the next stage of Buffy’s labor. She should still be having contractions, heavy ones, but it seemed that all had quieted for now; a situation neither Grace nor Kait was pleased about. The second baby needed to be delivered, and soon.

Bracing herself, Grace retook her position on the floor in front of the two. “Buffy? You need to get ready. We have to do some work to bring baby number two, okay?”

Dazed and more than just a bit befuddled, Buffy finally registered what Grace was saying. “What?”

“Here.” Grace repositioned the baby in Buffy’s arms, aligning his mouth with her nipple. “We just need to get things started again. This will help everyone.”

The baby needed very little prompting. His mouth latched onto Buffy, clamping down, causing her to squeak in surprise. Grace wrapped a towel around them, tucking the ends in between their bodies. She had no idea how long this might take, whether Buffy’s body would take the cue quickly and recommence contracting or more would be needed. “Spike, when you can, you need to lift her up and get into the position again.”

His low expletive wasn’t as raunchy as she’d expected, though it was probably due more to his emotional state than any real fatigue. “Balls.”

“I know,” she soothed him as she patted his knee. “But we’re halfway there, so this part shouldn’t be as bad.”

“Right.” He inhaled deeply, a smile blooming slowly on his face. “He’s perfect, isn’t he?”

Grace couldn’t deny the truth. “He is. Now we just need to get his sibling here, too.”

Buffy was staring down at the scrunched, red face of her child, no one coherent thought racing through her head. Everything was jumbled, confused. She almost didn’t, couldn’t wrap her head around what had just happened. They had... she had... He was perfect, even covered in icky, slimy blood and other stuff she didn’t want to think about, this baby was still perfect.

A hysterical giggle bounced around in her throat and Buffy realized in the same instant she was fighting tears. Whoa, mood swing. She couldn’t focus on anything and it wasn’t until she heard Grace calling her name, that she stopped looking at the baby. “Buffy? You need to get ready. We have to do some work to bring baby number two, okay?”

Work? What work?

Unable to make sense of Grace’s words, Buffy just stared at her. “What?”

“Here.” Buffy felt Grace shifting the baby, aligning his mouth with her nipple. “We just need to get things started again. This will help everyone.”
“Ooohh!” His mouth latched onto Buffy, clamping down harder than she expected. Buffy’s world narrowed even further, not going past the infant suckling at her breast and she vaguely heard the conversation between Spike and Grace. She couldn’t focus on anything other than the baby, nothing else existed beyond him for long moments, until a sharp pain brought her back into her body.

“Owww!”

“It’s alright, Buffy, just let the pains wash over you.” Grace’s voice was steady, lulling her into a false sense of security.

“That’s what you said last time.”

Low laughter greeted her retort, and Grace reached up to take the baby. “True, but it was all worth it, right?”

Buffy ignored the question, focusing instead on the baby. “Where are you taking him?”

“Nowhere for the moment.” The baby was once again in her arms, only this time with his head on her other breast. “Just need to shift him. He’s gonna help bring his sibling into the world, like any good big brother.”

This time, he needed no guidance to find his mother’s nipple, his mouth aiming for her unerringly. He suckled hungrily, little tiny grunting noises escaping from him and his legs thumping against her belly. Buffy smiled, brushing her hands over his face. Spike’s voice rumbled in her head and she turned to look at him.

“Bloody hell, Buffy. Never. . .” He lapsed into silence, one of his hands covering hers, their fingers entwining.

“Me either.”

They both felt her body contract, the muscles in her womb responding to the stimulation of the baby’s nursing. “Whoa.”

“That’s good, Buffy.” Grace watched her carefully, timing the new contractions. She wanted to make sure the labor was steady and strong before taking the first baby away. “Let him go as long as you can.”

Her only answer was a low grunt. Buffy could already feel this time was different, everything seemed more urgent. “Grace. Oh. . . take him.”

She tried to hold the baby out so Grace could take him, but her arms suddenly wouldn’t support him. “I need to push, now!”

“All right sweetie, I’ve got him.” Grace took the infant, swiftly handing him over to Tara. “Wash him up good, and make sure you retie the cord.”

Buffy’s cry of pain caught everyone by surprise and before Grace could turn around and see to her, she was growling. One look at her face and there was no question this baby was going to be faster than its older sibling. “All right, start pushing.”
“I am!” And she was. Buffy was bearing down heavily, her fingers already digging into Spike’s forearms. “Aaauuuggghhh!”

Spike tensed beneath her, fighting with himself to maintain control. Buffy’s pain was calling to him, and he briefly burst into game face, though no one in the room even noticed, except for her.

It was over in a rush. Just as Buffy thought she couldn’t take much more, that familiar pulling sensation occurred and she dropped into it, letting nature and gravity take over. The gush of fluids was the same, only this time there wasn’t any more pressure, just an empty, hollowed out feeling. Grace barely had time to clean off the baby’s face before Buffy was reaching, arms outstretched to take the baby from her.

Spike, however, had been watching the baby, paying no attention to the witch holding her. “Buffy, Buffy, look.”

“What?” She glanced back at him, a wild look in her eyes.

“It’s a girl.”
A dream of possibilities

Book Three

Chapter Twenty-five:  A dream of possibilities

A new baby is like the beginning of all things – wonder, hope, a dream of possibilities.
   Eda Le Shan, The Conspiracy Against Childhood

What are little babies made of, made of?
What are little babies made of?
Diapers and crumbs and sucking their thumbs;
That's what little babies are made of?
What are little boys made of, made of?
What are little boys made of?
Snips and snails and puppy-dog tails;
That's what little boys are made of. And such are...
What are little girls made of, made of?
What are little girls made of?
Sugar and spice and everything nice;
That's what little girls are made of.
   Attributed to Robert Southey, What Are Folks Made of?, about 1820s

She was tiny.

Her entire head fit perfectly in the palm of Buffy’s hand. Unlike her older brother, their baby girl
appeared unaffected by all the excitement. She yawned, stretched, and settled down quickly.

He was almost afraid to touch her. Her skin, despite the current reddish hue seemed paper-thin,
more delicate than the finest linen. Spike watched through teary eyes as Buffy brushed a gentle
finger over the baby’s head.

The baby smacked her lips and angled her face toward Buffy’s breast. Her eyes opened and bright
aqua eyes peeked out from surprisingly dark lashes. Buffy murmured something and the baby
mewled, her eyes blinking languidly.

At first, Spike thought it was a trick of the light coupled with the tears he kept fighting, but it
wasn’t. Buffy’s gasp of surprise told him otherwise. Because as he watched, the baby’s eyes
changed colors again.

“Spike?” Her voice was soft, thready and charged with emotion.

His response was low, barely more than a rumble of sound, just as laden with emotion. “I see,
love.”

“Is it – do you . . . ?” Every time Buffy spoke, the infant in her arms reacted.
Finally moving, Spike brushed his hand over the top of the baby’s head. He choked on his answer. “Think so, pet. Think this is our girl.”

Sensing his attention, the tiny infant arched her body, her fingers reaching for Spike’s hand.

Watching their daughter react to each of them and the changing eye color, Buffy’s emotions finally got the better of her. Tears streamed down her cheeks, dropping onto the baby.

“She made it! Oh, Spike. Look at her!”

Double-checking the directions and address one last time, Doctor Ian Darrow wondered why he’d agreed to travel to California.

It had taken him more than an hour to adjust to the driving styles and by that time he was more than halfway to his destination. He was tired, and the headache from cabin pressure and time change wasn’t helping his stress levels.

He also wasn’t entirely comfortable with the dearth of information about his patient. The two gentlemen who had asked for him hadn’t been very forthcoming, only identifying the patient’s status as dire.

No name, no consulting physicians’ reports, only a series of x-ray images identifying a foreign substance – too small to be a bullet – in the patient’s brain. That object, roughly the size of a postage stamp, had to be removed without causing any damage.

Even before he’d seen the x-rays, Darrow had known he couldn’t refuse. For one thing, the two men carried credentials that made his head spin; and secondly? They’d endowed his charity with two million pounds Sterling.

Ian knew an inside job when it stared him in the face.

This wasn’t the first time British Intelligence had sought his assistance. They hadn’t flashed actual badges – they were still British Intelligence officers.

So, he’d packed his bags, contacted his office, and boarded the charter flight waiting at a private airstrip at Toronto’s airport.

There was only about an inch or so of water pooled in the bottom of the tub, most of it spilling over from the small, plastic insert. Somehow, that small amount translated into Tara being just as soaked as the unusually active, squirming newborn.
“Hey, you, settle down. You’re not supposed to be squirmly-wormy.” When the baby didn’t appear to get the message, Tara kept talking to him. “Gimme that arm, buster. Gotta wash all of you clean. What will your momma say when she sees you again? How could that messy arm belong to my handsome baby? Silly boy.”

Finally capturing the wayward arm in question, Tara managed to scrub the after affects of his birth, all the while continuing the one-sided conversation.

Kait bustled in behind her, holding a huge blue towel. “How’s our boy doing?”

“He’s wonderful. Didn’t even complain when I washed behind his ears.” Tara glanced over her shoulder, motioning for Kait to help her rinse.

“Well, that’s the last time he’ll do that.” Shielding his eyes, Kait sluiced water over the dark fuzz covering the baby’s head. “Look at all that hair!”

Soft laughter greeted the older woman’s exclamation. “Lotta hair for a little guy.”

Tara placed the now soap-free infant into Kait’s capable hands. “All right, little man, how would you like to see your sister?”

Xander had no idea why he listened to Cordelia or why he hadn’t put up much of an argument. The only reason (or maybe it was an excuse?) was because Cordelia had asked him.

She rarely asked for anything these days, preferring to do all the difficult things on her own. Even to living on her own again, though it was very clear there were a lot of sleepless nights filled with tears. Xander knew a lot of strong women, yet of all of them, Cordelia was far and away the toughest.

Which probably more than explained why he hadn’t argued. When Cordelia said ‘do it’, he did. Thought he still wasn’t sure why he’d done it or why she’d insisted.

It wasn’t like Cordelia and Buffy were all that close; or that Cordelia even liked the blond or her current boyfriend. *Maybe Cordy feels like she owes them for the rescue?* He figured that might be part of why she insisted, although one look into her dark eyes had kept him from asking more.

There was nothing Xander wanted to do less than what he was doing. Leaving Cordelia alone in Los Angeles and returning to Sunnydale. *To help Spike. I’m actually prepared to do this. . . Help Spike.*

*Okay, so Cordy says I’m helping Buffy too, but . . . Spike. I gotta help that bleached blood sucker.*

“Sheesh.” His own voice sounded strange and he reached down to raise the volume on the radio.

The Sunnydale exit loomed just ahead and Xander wondered – once again – why.

Cordelia hadn’t given him much information at all, just kept repeating, “Buffy needs your help.”
Which told him nothing about the situation.

Hoping to avoid Anya, Xander headed straight for Revello Drive.

He never even noticed the dark SUV parked at the end of the block.

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Travers waited impatiently for the Defence Minister to call. Nicholson was pacing through the suite while the older man stared out the window. The view wasn’t much; nothing in fact like London, New York, or even Los Angeles. And yet the night here was surprisingly lively for such a deceptively small town.

Earlier, Wesley had called to relay necessary information about The Initiative and then, just short minutes ago, Rupert Giles had called with more of the same. Thankfully, that information had not been redundant.

The most welcome news had been from Giles; who’d imparted the information that dissension was brewing in the ranks of the Initiative. It boded well for the success of the Minister’s negotiations with the Chief of the U.S. NSA.

It might bode well, however Travers hadn’t risen to his position by waiting for events to unfold. While they awaited word, Travers had given additional orders based on Wesley’s information.

Wetworks operatives were converging on several locations with explicit orders to engage only if The Initiative moved. Thanks to the foresight of the Sunnydale contingent, they had a captive – and through him – radio surveillance on The Initiative.

His teams would be just seconds behind The Initiative operatives.

There were only two things Travers was waiting on – word from the Defence Minister – and the surgeon’s arrival.

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Wesley and Faith hung back, watching intently while Oz crept around the side of Mrs. Khan’s house. With his supernatural abilities, it was only logical to send him ahead as a scout. The three of them were pretty sure the dark SUV was Initiative, since any other group would have already been identified. In the ten minutes they’d been watching it, no one had appeared; nor had anyone emerged.

Oz crouched by the porch, scenting the air. Behind his back, he motioned the other two forward. When he sensed them behind him, Oz whispered, “Three inside. One is Riley.”

“The other two?” Wesley breathed the question.

“Don’t know them.”
“Great.” Faith shifted, peering around Oz’ shoulder. “What do we do now?”

Wesley flipped open his cell, shielding the light behind the other two. “We wait.”

“Are you sure waiting is a good thing?” Faith shifted again, turning to look at her former Watcher. “Waiting isn’t really helping.”

“Technically they haven’t actually done anything yet.”

“Right. Just made threats against B and the kidlets.” Faith’s sarcasm didn’t go unnoticed.

The Englishman sighed deeply. “It is disturbing, I will grant you. Though we daren’t tip our hands. If we move too soon, they’ll claim it wasn’t their intention to separate the. . . to kidnap the babies.” He placed a calming hand on her arm. “It is best that we wait.”

Faith was quiet for so long, Wesley wasn’t sure she’d listen to him. “Waiting doesn’t make me happy.”

“Nor me.” Wesley conceded the point, then spoke again, “I’m going to drop back and call the house.”

The only reaction was a terse nod from Faith and a barely discernable grunt from Oz.

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Cooler heads had prevailed after the hilarity was done. Giles had regained his feet with assistance from Anya and was pacing the hallway from front door to kitchen, waiting for a sign from the second floor that all was well.

Every time he stood in the kitchen doorway, more and more of the earlier mess was gone, thanks to Anya’s habit of compulsive nervous cleaning. Dawn and Connor were playing a distracted game of something on the television, looking up at every noise and footfall.

It came as no surprise then, that everyone jumped when the phone rang. Anya was first to it, outpacing Dawn by mere seconds.

“Summers residence, Anya…”

“Hey, Wes. What’s up?”

The two females spoke simultaneously, and despite his irritation, Giles relaxed visibly upon hearing them.

“He’s right here.”

“Rupert? Take the phone.”

Since he was closer to the living room, Giles motioned the teen to hand over the phone, smiling at
her when she did. “Wesley?”

“We’ve located Finn. He and two others are parked in an SUV less than two blocks away.”

“What are they doing?”

“At the moment, nothing. Mrs. Khan’s been watching the truck since it parked there and no one’s gone near it.”

Giles thought hard for a moment, weighing the options. It was still within the time frame he’d given Graham Miller, though time was running out. “Very well. Stay put and don’t do anything unless they move.”

“Right.” There was nothing more Wesley could add, however before Giles could hang up, he asked, “How are things progressing?”

“I have to assume well. No one’s emerged from upstairs to give us an update, though we did hear an infant’s cry just moments ago.”

It took Wesley about half a second to register what Giles was saying, though when Giles kept speaking, he couldn’t contain his laughter. “What’s so funny?”

“You. Whenever you’re off balance you get excessively wordy.” The younger man chuckled, adding, “You babble just as much as Buffy.”

Chagrined over the good-natured mocking, Giles retorted, “I’d be hard pressed to compare the two, thank you very much.” He harrumphed a bit, continuing, “I’d hardly describe it as babbling.”

Wesley didn’t bother containing his laughter when he heard Anya quip, “Yes, Rupert, you do babble. Except you use big, sexy words.”

“On that note, I’m hanging up.” Giles cast a gimlet eye at his partner, grumbling all the while about how his descriptions were not akin to babbling.

Anya took the phone from his hand, then stood up on her toes to kiss him quickly. “I find it very sexy when you get all intellectual.”

“Really?”

“Oh, God, not you two now! I’m so scarred for life.” Dawn gagged, covering her eyes. “I know way too much about everyone’s sex life.”

Now completely flustered, Giles couldn’t think of anything at all to say. Thankfully, though, footsteps on the stairs brought a very welcome distraction.

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His instructions, along with the directions, were very clear. The agents told him to go directly to Sunnydale’s only bed and breakfast, call the number on the card and await their next contact.
Check-in was quick, the concierge efficiently handling all his arrangements. Within minutes of his arrival, Ian was dialing the number. It went straight to voice-mail and Ian left a simple message indicating his arrival.

Before he could even get unpacked, there was a knock on his door. Unsurprised to see the two agents who had contacted him in Toronto, although this time accompanied by a third man, Ian let them in, saying, “I didn’t expect you this soon.”

The third man was the one who answered. “Time is of the essence. Our operation has been compromised. We must act now.”

Glancing at the other two, Ian realized the new one was definitely in charge. “What kind of facilities will I have access to?”

“Right now the facilities are severely limited, however you will have adequate assistance.” The younger man had a distinctive Scottish burr, though Ian had no trouble following his words. “We haven’t much time. Shall we?”

“Will I at least have an operating theatre?”

Nicholson shared a look with the other two. “The best we can provide is a clean and sterile environment.” When Ian stared at him open-mouthed, Nicholson urged him onward, “Doctor, time is very short. Please?”

Deciding he didn’t have much choice now that he actually was in Sunnydale, Ian allowed them to lead him out of the door.

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Like before, Grace didn’t let their baby girl nurse for long. It was just – in her words – “Just a quick nibble so mom and baby can get acquainted.”

She didn’t need to explain the other mechanics; neither of the blonds cared. Spike was too intent on the females in his arms and Buffy’s attention was totally riveted upon the infant.

Kait was busy getting the boy into a diaper and a onesie preparing to wrap him into a soft blanket, humming softly. Grace watched the new parents for a bit, waiting for the right moment to interrupt. Tara stepped into the bedroom, asking, “Do you want me to tell everyone?”

It was just the break Grace needed. “Okay, Buffy, let’s hand off your little girl so she can be washed up, just like her brother.”

When Buffy made a face, Grace play slapped her bare thigh. “Don’t you want two clean babies to meet the rest of the family?”

A low, pouting grumble was her first answer, although Buffy reluctantly held out the baby. “How soon can I have them back?”

“Just a little bit more work, then we can clean you up.” Grace handed off the baby to Tara. “Bout another half hour or so. It’ll go quickly, I promise.”
“Okay.” A slight contraction rippled through her and Buffy grimaced. “I thought this was all over!”

“It is, for the most part.”

Buffy growled, this time audible enough for everyone in the room to hear it. “What do you mean ‘most part’?”

Grace tapped her leg a second time, regaining Buffy’s full attention. “Sweetie, that’s normal. Your body now has to get rid of what’s left. The placentas.” She looked at Spike. “This is the really bloody part. You gonna be okay?”

He was already reeling from all the emotions and scents – *now she’s telling me more was on the way?* Spike wasn’t entirely sure, but steeled himself for the inevitable. “Have to be, right?”

“It would help.” Grace stared him straight in the eye. “You’re the only one strong enough to help her but if you can’t, we’ll manage.”

“No, ’ll be fine. Got this far.” Spike shifted his hold on Buffy, easing the pressure on his legs. “What do I have to do?”

“Not much. Just hold her.” With her hand on Buffy’s upper belly, Grace thumped her side. “Might have to massage your belly a bit.”

Suiting actions to words, Grace gently kneaded, running her hands down Buffy’s skin, in an effort to force out the afterbirth.

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Before Kennedy could lose interest, Willow blurted out, “So you don’t want to stick around here?”

“*Please.* Like I wanna be around all these failures?” Kennedy scoffed loudly. “Bad enough there’s one other Slayer. Now I have to deal with two of them? Neither one of which was actually trained correctly.”

When Willow started to argue, Kennedy cut her off. “I don’t understand why Mr. Travers thinks I can learn anything from Buffy.”

Surprising herself Willow surged to her feet. “I may not be part of the Scoobies anymore, but maybe it’s because Buffy’s been a Slayer since she was only fifteen and she knows how to survive?”

“Survive? According to my old Watcher, she died twice. Doesn’t sound like she’s all that good.” The dark haired girl shrugged. “Maybe she’s just lucky.”

The redhead wavered, biting her lower lip. “Is that what you think? She’s lucky?”

“She’s got no discipline. And she’s shacked up with a vampire. How disgusting is that?”
“Oh.  Well. . .” Willow’s voice trailed off, unable to counter Kennedy’s prejudice. She had to admit, she wasn’t a big fan of the Spike and Buffy show, but at least Spike was better than Angelus. Which wasn’t really saying all that much.

The two girls lapsed into silence, neither entirely certain how to proceed.

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It isn’t all that late. Xander checked his watch again. I could probably find Dawn and Tara at home.

Every light was ablaze when he parked in front of the house; the Jeep and the DeSoto were in the driveway. Giles’s mid-life crisis mobile was just in front of the neighbor’s and Xander cursed his luck. Maybe they aren’t all here. And maybe I’m just fooling myself. Cordy wouldn’t have had a vision if everything was okay. And if something’s wrong, everyone’s either here or out fighting. . . .

I’ll just have to deal with seeing Anya.

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The radio crackled to life. “We’ve got movement.”

“Report.”

“Unknown male, six feet tall, approximately eighteen to twenty-five, dark hair.”

“Location?”

“Approaching target location.”

“Check electronic equipment.”

“Two heat signatures at the rear, possibly the exterior. Four more on the first floor. Five. . . wait! Six signatures with one hostile on the second floor!”

“What? There should only be five.”

“There were. Last reading was at two-oh-one-seven hours, sir. Only five heat signatures were present.”

Riley thought for a minute, counting off the signatures and assigning identities to each. When the numbers didn’t add up, he realized something was wrong. His gut was telling him now was the time to move.

“All units, all units. Converge on target. Neutralize the hostile and acquire the package.” He waited a moment, then repeated his orders.
From his place in the back seat, Gebhardt smiled grimly as the SUV roared to life.
We sometimes feel the shadows have got hold of us,
the shadows of evil.
But still, it’s up to us to fight.
  Dan Totheroh and Stephen Vincent Benet, *The Devil and Daniel Webster*

The awful shadow of some unseen Power
Floats, tho’ unseen, amongst us.
  Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*

Fascism is not defined by the number of its victims, but by the way it kills them.
  Jean-Paul Sartre, “On the Execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg”

I’m afraid, based on my own experience,
that fascism will come to America in the name of national security.
  Jim Garrison

I can taste more than feel
This burning inside is so real
I can almost lay my hands upon
The warm glow that lingers on
Moved, lifted higher
Moved, my soul’s on fire
Moved, by a higher love
I surrender all control
To the desire that consumes me whole
And leads me by the hand to infinity
That lies in wait at the heart of me
Moved, lifted higher
Moved, my soul’s on fire
Moved, by a higher love
Heaven bound on the wings of love
There’s so much that you can rise above
Moved, lifted higher
Moved, moved, by a higher love
By a higher love
I surrender heart and soul
Sacrificed to a higher goal
Moved, moved, by a higher love
By a higher love
  Depeche Mode, *Higher Love*, from *Songs of Faith and Devotion*, 1993
Both babies were washed, dried, and diapered. They were now sleeping together in Connor's old crib. Each one wrapped in an appropriate colored blanket, thoughtfully provided by the two visiting witches.

Buffy was still trying to expel the afterbirth, and judging by her grunted complaints, all was going well. Tara dried off her hands, watching from the bathroom door. Hesitating for a moment, she waited until Buffy panted between pains before asking quietly, "Do you mind if I let everyone know you’re all okay and about the babies?"

Spike shook his head. "No, tha’s all right, Glinda. Imagine they’re dyin’ to know. Might as well tell ‘em."

"Okay. I need to change anyway." A wry frown crossed her lips when she glanced down at herself. The smell finally hit her and she blanched. "Yeah. I really need to change."

"Go on, pet. We’ll be fine." He focused on Buffy then, tightening his hold on her. "Easy now, kitten, ’m not made of steel."

Tara giggled at Buffy’s disgruntled expression, then eased from the room. Once in the hallway, she leaned her head against the wall, inhaling deeply. She didn’t realize how hot and close it had been inside the bedroom until she’d left. Sweat pooled between her breasts and her head was swimming.

Relieved exhaustion flooded her muscles and her belly clenched. *I can’t believe how hard that was . . . and Buffy’s the Slayer. Tara’s eyes drifted closed. Oh Goddess! I hope it goes easier for me!*

A shaky laugh escaped her, and Tara finally started to head for the stairs. *I wonder what everyone’s going to think? They got lucky. . . One of each.*

Tara started down the stairs.

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While they waited for the elevator, Ian took stock of his companions. The first two were as he remembered, nondescript features: one dark-haired, the other a bit lighter, both with a lean and competent look. Obviously field operatives, since he’d spotted tell-tale shoulder holsters on them.

The newcomer, though, was a bit different. He wasn’t armed – at least not that Ian could tell, nor was he unremarkable. He was strikingly handsome, with bright blue eyes and sandy blond hair, and unlike the others he sported a goatee and mustache tinted heavily with ginger. His looks, though, weren’t all that set him apart. His Scottish burr and demeanor did more. This man was quite obviously in charge.

He flipped open his phone, hitting one number. Before the elevator arrived, he was speaking rapidly into the phone, using – of all things – Latin. Ian was only able to identify the language because of his background. Medical terminology used enough Latin for him to recognize the
sounds, if not the words. Sudden suspicion clouded his mind. *Would British Intelligence agents be speaking Latin?*

Ian was no longer so certain that he was dealing with British Intelligence.

The elevator doors opened and the other two held the door while the Scot hesitated.

“*Bloody*. . . *Right.*” The Scot shoved his phone into his pocket. “We have a problem.”

“*Sir?*” Dark brunet queried.

“Our opponents have initiated movement. I’m sorry, doctor, but this may take a bit longer than anticipated.”

Before Ian could respond, the cell crackled to life. “My manners are horrible, forgive me. I’m Nicholson.’

“Ian Darrow.” They clasped hands and Ian noticed right off how strong Nicholson’s grip was.

“Our time table’s all shot to hell.” He directed his comments to their still nameless companions. “The gaffer wants us to hold back until all’s clear. We may need to intervene.”

Neither man spoke, though both nodded in understanding. Directing his next comment to Ian, Nicholson continued, “Your patient may run into a spot of interference. However, I’m to bring you along.” Turning his attention once more to his ringing phone, he added, “You’ll need to be briefed.”

His initial suspicion that it was British Intelligence seemed to be confirmed. Strangely comforted by that fact, Ian relaxed.

There wasn’t much else he could do otherwise.

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Oz smelled the gas fumes seconds before the engine smoothly clicked into motion. His quiet warning, “They’re moving,” almost wasn’t necessary, because Faith stiffened at nearly the same instant.


She never had the chance, because no sooner had she finished speaking, because the engine roared into gear and the truck slid away from the curb. Wesley had flipped open his phone, momentarily fumbling with it. He juggled it awkwardly, grimly nodding his thanks to Faith, who caught it before it hit the ground.

Moments later, he was back on the phone with Giles, issuing a warning. “They’re on the move. We’re just behind them.”
Not wasting time on further conversation, Wesley clicked off, then followed after the other two. Oz was already half a block ahead, Faith about midway between them. Realizing her reluctance to leave him alone, Wesley waved her on. “I’ll alert Lawson and the Council. You go on ahead.”

When she hesitated, Wesley got more insistent. “Faith, I’ll slow you down. You have to get there first.” He made a shooing gesture, urging her, “Go!”

Faith didn’t wait to be told a third time. She backtracked, then took off running through Mrs. Khan’s yard heading straight for Revello Drive. The Initiative still had to follow streets, she was on foot. Wesley watched her go, punching in numbers rapidly.

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The phone and doorbell sounded simultaneously, causing a dilemma until Connor opened the door before Dawn could, though she was right behind him. Giles reached for the phone.

Connor’s rather belligerent, “What the hell do you want?” was very nearly drowned out by Giles’ uncharacteristically loud expletive – “Oh, fuck!”

Realizing all eyes were upon him, Giles held up his hand, forestalling all comments until he hung up, just seconds later.

“The Initiative is on the move.”

His announcement far overshadowed Xander’s completely unexpected presence.

“That was Wesley.”

Before he could elaborate, the phone rang again, and Dawn reached around Connor to pull Xander inside. “Hello, Xander. Why are you here?”

“Cordy had a vision, said I needed to come. To help Buffy.” He took a quick glance around, freezing when he spotted Anya hovering in the hallway.

“Well this is awkward.”

Dawn looked around helplessly, completely nonplused. Connor shrugged, his attention drawn to the agitated and hushed conversation Giles was having, leaving Dawn on her own with the others. She nearly jumped out of her skin when a hand touched her shoulder, then breathed a sigh of relief when Tara’s voice broke the charged silence.

“Close the door, please, Xander.”

He absently swung it closed, his eyes still on Anya. A slight smile crossed his features when she made a funny face, though his heart was breaking. “What’s going on?”

“We’ve got a bit of a crisis.” Giles clicked on his cell phone, punching in a series of numbers.
“The Initiative is . . . well, Riley’s come back and brought a. . . Oh, dear.”

“How about somebody fill me in?” Xander pointedly looked away from Giles, hoping Tara’s answer might be a bit clearer.

And it was. Quickly, Tara gave him a rundown of the past few days, leaving out the most relevant information – the babies. She was saving that news for when she had everyone’s attention.

“Tara?” Dawn interrupted, motioning her head toward the stairs.

Unable to keep her bright smile to herself, the blond broke into a wide grin. “We should wait until Giles is off the phone.”

Anya slipped behind Tara and tiptoed up the stairs, fleeing from a confrontation with Xander. She didn’t want to see him, let alone speak with him, and the very last thing she wanted was to be left guarding someone with Xander as back up.

While Anya was heading upstairs, Dawn was pestering Giles to get off the phone. Instead he held it to his ear, motioning Tara to explain.

“Everyone’s healthy, Buffy’s labor was pretty easy and well, it’s a boy and a girl.”

Dawn’s happy squeal had Xander and Giles covering their ears, however Connor just tapped her between the shoulders, effectively cutting her volume in half.

“One of each! So cool! Which one was first?” Rapid fire questions spewed from Dawn’s mouth, not giving Tara any time to answer.

“Labor?” It was Xander’s question she focused on, knowing she was going to have to explain everything. “Boy? Girl? What’s going on?”

“Well, they’re a little early, but since they’re twins, it’s okay.” Tara moved to sit down on the couch, Xander following her.

“How? Who?” He straightened, his eyes boring into hers. “Oh. . . Spike? But vamps. . . they can’t!”

Connor’s ironic laughter echoed in the sudden quiet. “Dad said you were dense, but I didn’t believe him.”

“Dad? Who are you?” The former Scooby jumped to his feet, squaring off against Connor.

Rolling her eyes, Dawn grabbed Xander and forced him back onto the couch. “That’s Connor.”

“No way. Connor’s just a baby.”

“Yeah, well, not so much. Willow’s spell sent him away and he came back older.”

“Holy crap! So he’s Angel’s kid?” Xander stared, his eyes focused on Connor, though not really looking at him. “And Buffy’s . . .”

Xander’s voice trailed off and Dawn shared a concerned look with Connor. She sat down beside
him, her hand on his forearm.

“So why did Cordy want me to come here?”

“You said she had a vision.” Giles finally put away his phone, concentrating on Xander’s questions. “My guess is the vision had some insight into our current situation.”

“Which is?”

“Not quite dire.”

When Giles hesitated, Dawn jumped right in. “Buffy contacted The Initiative so they could come take out the chip.”

Judging by his expression, Dawn could tell Xander wasn’t entirely happy with that news, but she quickly forestalled his negativity. “It’s their decision, Xander and it’s gotta come out. What’s happening right now is proof enough.”

“Because Riley’s here?”

“It’s not just Riley.” Giles picked up the explanation. “They want to take the infants and, most likely, experiment on them. We cannot allow that, Xander.”

It took Xander less than a minute to make up his mind, and when he did, it was exactly as Cordelia had predicted.

“Well, we can’t let that happen.”

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It was getting to him.

His hands were shaking. He could feel her trembling in his arms, her muscles taut and bunching from hours of stress. Strands of her hair clung to both of them, plastered against their skin by her sweat. Spike’s legs were cramped and sore, feeling like leaden weights beneath him.

The air was heavy, pressing down, rich with the scent of Buffy’s blood mixed with the sweet tang of mother’s milk. Each scent played on his nerves, pulling at them, leading toward one direction. Spike fought the draw, fought to keep his own raging hormones under control. He wanted to put his fangs deep, reaffirming their bond, touching her the deepest way he knew. Wanted to be buried deep inside, feeling every inch of her, surround himself in her warmth.

A low growl pealed through his chest, causing ripples of reaction to roll through Buffy’s exhausted body. She whined softly in response, the sound high in her throat. The iron grip he’d been exerting abruptly snapped. His low, rolling growl morphed into something stronger, becoming deeper and more guttural. Grace looked up from her position between Buffy’s legs, unsurprised to see Spike in game face, fangs scraping over Buffy’s neck and shoulder. She clamped down on her own fear, though she quickened her movements. Sneaking a glance over her shoulder, Grace managed to get Kait’s attention and silently urging her to leave the room.
Spike’s hands flexed around Buffy’s waist, twitching from his suppressed energy. The air around him fairly crackled. Deciding she could wait to finish cleaning up Buffy, Grace got to her feet.

He could hear their hearts’ reactions, the beats speeding up in response to the increased flow of adrenaline, but Spike was beyond caring. He needed to mark his woman, needed to reaffirm their bond, to acknowledge the enormity of what had just transpired. His eyes snared Grace’s, flashing amber and gold, though he only growled softly – mostly in content – as she edged toward the door.

His sex was hard and heavy, pulsing with borrowed blood, responding elementally to Buffy’s state. Blood and fluids coated her inner thighs, clung to the short hairs covering her womb. By tiny increments, one hand crept over her skin as Spike’s better angels warred with his base need.

From somewhere outside himself, Spike watched his inner battle, unable to stop his own actions. Buffy’s head leaned back, falling naturally into the hollow of his shoulder, a soft sigh escaping her lips. She blinked twice sleepily, when his right hand cupped her breast, this time allowing another, deeper sigh to run through her. Tracing his tongue over her steadily throbbing pulse, Spike finally gave into his desires.

His fingers dipped into her, sliding through the sticky fluids covering her. She was plump, swollen from her earlier exertions, the skin soft and tender. Buffy flinched, mewling a bit in protest. His need abated somewhat, mollified by her pliancy. Spike rumbled into her shoulder, dropping open-mouthed kisses on every inch. Soft whispered words were spoken into her ear, and it took Buffy long minutes to grasp what Spike was saying, and even longer for her to react.

Her voice was equally soft, the hand she brushed over his face gentle, however, her words were laced with iron. “I love you more than I’ve ever loved any other man. But if you don’t keep your hands to yourself, I’m gonna hurt you.”

Spike cupped her sex almost protectively, his voice deep in his throat. “Fuck, kitten, need to touch you. Can’t help myself.”

“You so aren’t getting any closer than this, not for a while, buster.” She flinched again, shying away from his touch. “Spike, I’m serious.”

“So am I, sweets. Wanna taste you, to feel you all soft an’ swollen. . .” He nipped her earlobe, then ran his fangs over her skin.


It wasn’t really her words, or the please that made him rethink his wants, but the tone of her voice. A sigh shook him and Spike reluctantly slid his fingers from her body. “All right, love. It’ll kill me, but I’ll be good.”

Spike let his legs give out and they both dropped to the floor. “Gimme a minute, pet, an’ we’ll get into the shower.”
Silence had lapsed between the two girls and Willow was desperately searching for a way to keep Kennedy talking, and herself at the house. Why she wanted to stay, Willow couldn’t begin to guess. It was obvious none of them wanted her around. Tara barely spoke to her; hardly even looked at her. She could admit – at least to herself – that all the fault for the rift was hers. She’d been the one out of control, unable to face the enormity and reality of what she’d done. All that power and talent had gone to her head, so much so that her morals had been corrupted. In the last few months since her powers had been stripped, Willow had been forced to reexamine her actions. What she’d discovered about herself hadn’t been pretty.

Willow had been forced to self-realization and she hadn’t liked what she’d seen. For the last couple of weeks, Willow had wanted to talk to her old friends – to Buffy and Xander – and apologize. But mostly she needed to see Tara, to make amends for . . . To just see her.

Kennedy turned to say something, though Willow’s attention was caught by the sudden appearance of Faith, who burst into the backyard at a full run.

“Move it.”

“What’s going on?”

“The GIs are on the move. Get inside and get armed.” When Kennedy hesitated, Faith paused, then walked toward them. “If they catch you outside, they’ll roll right through you.”

“Aren’t they the good guys?” Kennedy got to her feet, facing off against Faith.

The older Slayer stared her down, knowing there was no time to argue with the newer girl. Instead, Faith just turned her back, flinging over her shoulder, “Do what you like. They aren’t here to protect or save anyone.”

Willow bit her lip, torn with confusion. She glanced over at Kennedy and made her decision. “Faith! Wait!”

She hit the deck just steps behind Faith and with a last look at Kennedy, Willow slipped inside the house.

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Encountering the two witches in the hallway, Anya wasted no time breaking the bad news. “We have a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Grace dried her hands on the towel Kait handed her, eyes on the former demon.

“I don’t know if anyone’s told you about Buffy’s ex-boyfriend showing up and being in charge of his demon hunting Army buddies, but he’s back.”

Kait stared at her partner. “The Initiative?”
“You know them?” Anya shifted nervously, having no other outlet for her pent-up, nervous energy.

The two witches shared an emotional look. “We had to. . . We lost some friends to their experiments.” Kait covered Grace’s trembling hands, her own voice scarcely above a harsh whisper.

Anya calmed a little, somehow reassured now that the witches might be of some assistance. “Rupert might want to speak with you both.”

Another look passed between the two and Kait nodded to an unspoken comment from the taller woman. “You stay with them. I’ll talk to Giles.”

Grace closed her eyes in gratitude. “Okay. That’s fine. I’ll let Spike know.”

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“Location in sight. Perimeters are secure.”

“Confirm location of targets.” Riley’s voice was devoid of any emotion; no one would ever guess one of the targets had been his first love.

“Hostile Seventeen is still on the second floor.” There was a break in communication for a moment, then the disembodied voice broadcast over the airwaves. “Target one is with the Hostile. Unknown A and B are also in proximity.”

“Acknowledged. Move on my signal.”
Rampart of defense

Book Three

Chapter Twenty-Seven        Rampart of defense

In battle it is the cowards who run the most risk; bravery is a rampart of defense.
   Gaius Sallustius Crispus, Catilina, LVIII.

From camp to camp, through the foul womb of night,
The hum of either army stilly sounds,
That the fixed sentinels almost receive
The secret whispers of each other’s watch.
Fire answers fire, and through their play flames
Each battle sees the other’s umbered face.
Steed threatens steed, in high and boastful neighs
Piercing the night’s dull ear; and from the tents
The armorer accomplishing the knights,
With busy hammers closing rivets up,
Give dreadful note of preparation.
   King Henry V (IV, Prologue)

Our real problem, then, is not our strength today;
it is rather the vital necessity of action today to ensure our strength tomorrow.
   Dwight D. Eisenhower

Nicholson ushered the surgeon into the suite’s main room.  “Please have a seat, Doctor.  I’ll be with you in a moment.”  With a quick glance at the two guards, he slipped from the room.

Quentin Travers was listening intently to the radio communications from the field operatives already in place.  He stared into the darkened window.  “Revello Drive is there.”  Travers lifted his left hand, pointing at a spot just left of the high school.  “Our men are in position.”

“So I understand, sir.”  Moving to stand next to his superior, Nicholson followed his gesture.  “The New York team will be arriving in two hours.”

“I’m afraid they’ll be too late.”  The older man slumped a little.  “Though I have every faith in Giles and his allies, I’m afraid it may not be enough to keep Miss Summers and her infants safe.”

He paused for a moment, waving off Nicholson’s comment.  “The Defence Minister called.  Military Police and Special Agents are on their way.  However, they are at best thirty-five minutes away.”
“Giles is an experienced mage.” Nicholson couldn’t help his response.

“Rupert is human. Bullets have a way of distracting even the most experienced.”

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Anya knocked once on the bedroom door and cracked it open without waiting for an answer. Her normally chipper mien was suppressed, concern etching her features. “Hey, you two.”

Spike lifted his exhausted eyes. “C’mon in, pet.”

She slipped inside the room, snagging a sheet and tossing it gently over them. “While you’re normally quite lovely, Buffy, your current state isn’t very appealing.”

When Spike grunted his thanks, Anya waved him off. “I came up to warn you, not ogle. Riley’s goon squad is on the move and Xander’s come back to help.”

“Why’s the whelp here?” Spike knew exactly how very heartbroken Anya had been over their split. She’d spilled it all out to him one night after they’d done a long patrol, over a shared bottle of whiskey and his sympathies were completely on her side.

“Cordelia had a vision and sent him to help.”

Her nonchalant shrug didn’t fool him. Spike snorted his disdain, his brain finally registering her first comment. “Soldier boys are moving? Isn’t that swell. Bastards.”

Spike struggled to get up, an uncooperative Buffy hindering his progress. “C’mon, sunshine, focus.” Once on his feet, Spike lifted Buffy easily. “Gotta get washed.”

He eyed Anya again. “You still got that deal with D’Hoffryn?” At her quick nod, Spike paused, swallowing hard. Eyes focused on the sleeping infants, his voice deepened with emotion. “‘M trusting you, Anyanka, with them. First real sign things are goin’ south, you protect them.”

“With my life.”

Anya acknowledged Spike’s brief nod of acceptance with one of her own before he headed toward the bathroom with Buffy cradled in his embrace.

*Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that.*

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Oz didn’t spare the new Slayer a glance as he raced past her. He couldn’t. There was too much wolf adrenaline rushing through him for that. He knew Faith had out run him, because he deliberately held himself back as much as he dared for Wesley’s sake.

They couldn’t afford to lose anyone. Even though it appeared their allies were thick on the ground – Oz knew their current truce with the Watcher’s Council hung by a veritable thread.
He’d wanted to run, to leave Faith behind and protect his family. Tara was at the house, and if, by some bizarre twist, she got caught in the Initiative’s nets, Oz would never forgive himself. Sooner or later, her pregnancy would be discovered. There was no doubt in his mind the soldiers would use her – and their child.

All the children were at risk. Not just the newest arrivals, but Dawn and Connor as well.

Oz paused by the back deck, crouching low in the bushes as he waited for the last of their group to arrive.

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Wesley watched Faith dart between houses, running full out. Instead of following her, he waited, calmly punching numbers into his cell phone. On the second ring, Lawson answered. Wesley didn’t bother with polite greetings.

“They’re mobilising. Alert everyone.”

“Will do.”

“Stay just out of visual contact. Do not engage unless the Council moves first.”

“Right.” Lawson paused, relaying Wesley’s orders while he listened. “Anything else?”

His reply was terse. “No. No more contact until there’s movement.”

“Aye, aye, chief.”

Wesley was no longer paying attention. Slipping the phone into his pocket, he addressed the vampire at his side. “You shouldn’t be seen.”

Jenner shrugged. His offhand and glib retort of “Council doesn’t scare me,” made Wesley laugh. When Jenner merely raised an eyebrow, Wesley explained himself. “The sheer audacity of an enterprise the likes of yours operating in Watcher home territory alone proves you don’t scare easily – if at all.”

It was Jenner’s turn to chuckle. “Fair enough.” He sobered quickly, though. “These Americans are another story.”

“Agreed.” Wesley started walking. “We’ve already wasted too much time. I’m needed at the house.”

The Welsh vampire nodded. “I’ll watch your back, then head over to meet Lawson.”

Contemplating the merits of Jenner’s suggestion, Wesley quickly agreed. He didn’t believe for one instant that Jenner would do other than what he thought best, and there was no way Wesley could force him into doing otherwise. Jenner took orders from no one, and even Spike was hard pressed to get him to agree if he felt his idea was better. “I believe that’s for the best. Thank you.”
“Giles?”

Kait’s voice interrupted their conversation, drawing everyone’s attention to the witch. “Anya said the Initiative’s back.”

“Unfortunately, she is correct.” His glasses were off, a sure sign of agitation.

“We’d like to help with whatever it is you’re planning.” Piercing blue eyes filled with righteous anger focused on Rupert’s face. “And before you ask, no, neither one of us is drained. We weren’t the ones who did all the work upstairs.”

He nodded, acknowledging her statement. “Very well. I’d like to set up a few shields, if you can manage them.”

Hesitating at the bottom of the stairs, Grace finally spoke, her voice low and steady. “Show us where. We’ll do the rest.”

Faith slammed in through the kitchen, nearly plowing into Grace. Thanks to her lightning quick reflexes, she managed at the last moment to sidestep the older woman. “They’re on their way. I cut through to get here before they could.”

“Where’s Oz?” Tara looked over the Slayer’s shoulder, trying to catch a glimpse of the werewolf.

“Behind me, making sure Wesley gets here okay. Should be here any second.”

“And Cordy said you needed me? What the hell for?” Xander’s griping drew everyone’s attention. Though Giles opened his mouth to respond, Grace beat him to it.

“Perhaps because you’ll be needed.” A look of clear disdain crossed her features as she looked him up and down. “Why is it so important that you know exactly what you’re needed for?”

Unable to respond, Xander wisely kept his mouth shut for once.

“How many of us will you need to power the shields?” Giles asked Kait. He pulled her aside, studiously avoiding Willow, who hovered in the hallway, afraid of her welcome.

“Ideally both you and Wesley should help, but I don’t think you can be spared for magic.”

“I can help.” Dawn stepped forward, already holding out a hand to forestall Giles’ next comment. “I’m still the Key. My blood is strongest.”

“Dawn.”

“No, don’t say it. It’s my family we’re trying to protect. So anything I can do to keep them safe, I’ll do.”
“We don’t have much choice.” Wesley spoke up from behind Willow. He placed his hands on her shoulders, gently moving her out of the way. The movement caught Grace’s attention and she recognized the redhead immediately.

“Willow can help.” Stunned silence greeted her comment and though every eye was on her, Grace didn’t retract her statement, nor did she flinch. Both Giles and Wesley started to speak, but it was Willow herself who denied the witch.

“I can’t. My – I’ve been stripped of everything.” Willow bit her lip and looked away in an attempt to hide the tears from them.

“That’s fine.” Grace stepped closer, a somewhat sympathetic look on her face. “She can act as a conduit, channeling all the energy as a focal point.”

Giles pursed his lips, thinking hard. While none of them knew exactly what had transpired during Willow’s judgment, Giles wasn’t sure if this might somehow back fire on the girl and cause her more pain. “I’m not certain this is a wise course of action.”

“No, it’s perfect.” The taller witch shook her head. “Believe me, if it wasn’t permitted, the thought would’ve never entered my head. We’ll be fine.”

“All right. Do it.”

There was something going on. Something was off; this much Buffy was aware of – however she couldn’t get herself together enough to make sense of it. Exhaustion flooded through her and all her muscles felt spent. She couldn’t remember ever feeling this tired. She couldn’t get her limbs to answer her brain’s commands. If not for Spike nagging and pushing at her, she’d have stayed put and done nothing.

Except for that niggling little tingle at the back of her neck.

It was the same kind of awareness she called her ‘spider sense’, the one presaging utter disaster. The one that told her something was off and she couldn’t just let it all pass her by.

Buffy barely protested when Spike put her down on the bathroom floor, didn’t complain that the floor was too cold. Though she was freezing and shaking in reaction to the stress her body had been under for the last few hours, Buffy was too out of it to complain. The shower rained down behind her, the soft chlorine smell waking up her senses even more. She cracked open her eyes to watch as Spike slid the grimy sweat pants down his slim legs and tossed them into the open hamper by the door.

A grimace crossed her features when he turned around and she could see blood smears across his chest and upper arms.
Anya stood at the window, peaking out into the darkness from behind the curtains. The twins were sleeping in the crib, an amulet of protection hanging over them.

Two dark SUVs pulled onto the street, headlights off and taillights covered. One parked three doors away while the other continued past, parking a little further down the block. The former demon held her breath, silently counting off the seconds as she waited for the soldiers to emerge.

Movement in the back yard of the house next door caught her attention. Anya smiled when she recognized Rogan’s distinctive shape. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, more and more shadows took on familiar shapes.

Two dark figures appeared at the top of the fence, silhouetted briefly against the sky, then disappearing as the figures dropped into the backyard. Grim satisfaction filled her. *Looks like someone got through to Lawson. Good.*

Turning away from the window, Anya breathed a quick prayer and crossed her fingers for luck. Hopefully, Buffy would be recovered enough to help herself if they had to escape to Arashmaharr.

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“Unknown target in sight. Orders?”

“Identify.”

“Female, late teens. Caucasian, possibly Middle-Eastern.”

“Location?”

“Rear of target premises.”

“Status?”

“Alone, sir. Target is alone and appears unarmed.”

“Neutralize. Do not eliminate. I repeat, do not eliminate. Neutralize only.”

“Affirmative. Zeroing in on unknown.”

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Oz circled around the house keeping low and tight to the ground so he presented a small target. They still didn’t know exactly how many soldiers were with Riley, and Oz had no idea which of the humans was Council or Initiative. He was guessing those closest were Initiative, with the Council setting up position just outside the Initiative’s range, but he couldn’t be positive.

He stopped at the window to Tara’s bedroom, his acute hearing picking up the faint sounds of someone rustling about inside. Though separated by the glass and curtains, Oz knew it was her.
He tapped twice on the glass, waited a beat and tapped again.

The curtain barely moved, just enough for her slim hand to reach through and unlock the latch. Dropping down, Oz wriggled through the small window to find Tara shaking her head at him.

“Couldn’t find an open door?”

“You know me, I like to take the scenic route.” A fleeting grin crossed his face, though the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “How is it upstairs?”

“Everyone’s here.” She paused for a second, obviously hesitating. “Buffy’s fine. The babies are fine. They had one of each. Xander’s here . . . And so is Willow.”

That last bit had her wringing her hands and biting her lip. Knowing how much any encounter with her former girlfriend left Tara sad and off-kilter almost had him trying to reassure her, but as was typical for Oz, he downplayed it and focused instead on the other information.

“Xander?”

Grateful for the redirection of her thoughts, Tara composed herself. “He said Cordelia had a vision and sent him.”

“Huh.” Oz smiled and leaned closer to her. “Guess he’s really happy about that.”

Her lips twisted into an equally ironic smile. “He’s thrilled.”

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“Clear your mind, Willow. You need to be completely blank.” Kait guided the other redhead to the dining room, away from the suddenly crowded living room.

“I’m not sure I can do blank. Especially under pressure. Are you sure this is okay? I don’t want this to backfire or become more of a problem.” Willow wrung her hands, glancing from one witch to the other. “The Gods were really, really specific about me doing magic.” And it took me a while, but I did get the message . . .

“We know, dearie.” Grace followed Kait, then detoured to grab some candles off the sideboard. “If it wasn’t already okay with them, we wouldn’t have even thought of it.”

Dawn stood in the doorway, a belligerent look in her eyes. “That doesn’t mean it’s supposed to be.”

Kait faced the teen. “We do know what we’re doing.”

“Every time she’s around magic and spells it all gets screwed up.”

Grace moved away from the other two, pulling Dawn with her. “Listen to me, Dawn, coz I’m only going to say this once.” The teen started to object, but Grace held up her index finger. “Just wait. Kait’s gonna run this show, using Willow – just stop. Hear me out before you start yapping at
When Dawn finally calmed down, Grace pulled her further away, into the kitchen. “It’ll be nothing like whatever Willow’s done in the past, trust me on that. Kait’s calling up earth magic, sweetie, only the good stuff. You’ll be the source and Willow’s going to act like a prism, sending everything out to cover all of us. She’s not the one in control. That’s you – through Kait.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Your energy, your emotions. Kait’s gonna direct them and Willow’s just gonna broadcast it.” Grace waited until Dawn understood her meaning.

“So what’re you gonna do?”

“Tara and I will support Kait. We’re her grounding, because no doubt all your energy is gonna pack a helluva punch.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Yes, really.” Once more Grace looked into Dawn’s eyes. “You ready for this?”

“Yup. Let’s do it.”

“Pop?” Connor approached the two Englishmen, leaving Xander sitting on the couch.

“Hmm?” When Giles lifted his eyes, Connor was standing beside them.

“Where should I be?”

The two men shared a look. “We’re trying to determine that now.”

Wesley tossed him a wickedly sharp short-sword, which Connor easily caught by the hilt. “Might as well get yourself some throwing stars.”

“How armed are these guys gonna be?”

Faith’s arm reached around him to grab another blade. “Very armed and they’ve probably got tasers, so don’t let them get too close.”

“Not planning on letting them get anywhere near any of us.” Giles faced the two of them. “We have to keep them busy and away from the house. Under no circumstances are we to let any of them close enough to the house to get inside. These aren’t vampires or demons; they’re humans who don’t need an invitation to enter.”

“Still no idea on how many?”

“Call Lawson. Tell him to get the information from the hostage.” Faith didn’t waste any emotions on playing nice. They didn’t have time for it, and they had two helpless babies to protect. “How’s
“She’s okay.” Tara’s voice sounded from the kitchen doorway, where she stood quietly watching as they all armed themselves.

“Kidlets?”

The witch moved aside so Oz could enter the living room. “Born and safe. One of each.”

“Cool.” Faith was quiet for a moment, attention focused on strapping a knife sheath to her forearm. “Where’s Jenner?”

“He went to join Sam and the others. They’re going to stay behind, hopefully out of the Council’s sight.”

“Good idea. But get that info from Lawson.” Fairly bristling with weapons, Faith moved swiftly to the nearest window and peered out. “This has the potential to get really ugly, really fast.”
The noise of battle

Book Three

Chapter Twenty-Eight The noise of battle

*The noise of battle hurtled in the air,*
*Horses did neigh, and dying men did groan,*
*And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets.*
*   Julius Caesar, act ii, scene ii*

*The trumpets sound, the banners fly,*
*The glittering spears are ranked ready;*
*The shouts o’ war are heard afar,*
*The battle closes thick and bloody;*
*   Robert Burns, The Silver Tassie*

*Doomsday is near, die all, die merrily.*
*   Henry IV, Part I, act iv, scene i*

“Are you sure we should be doing that?”

All eyes focused on the speaker, then shifted attention to the opposite side of the room. Jenner leaned against the wall, imposing even in his seemingly relaxed state. He uncrossed his arms, sliding his hands into his pockets. “We could let the humans handle this. Stay completely out of it.”

He shrugged, stepping away from the wall, addressing his next comments to the Bracken who’d posed the question. “But I’m not so sure we can trust the Council.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“Pick them off, one by one, when they’re alone and the Council’s otherwise occupied.” Jenner moved closer to Lawson, watching the younger vampire carefully. “We have to get ready now, though.”

“It’s going to be hard, getting more than one or two.” The former Navy man shook his head. “Do we really want to get between the Council and The Initiative?”

Imelda looked at the list in her hand. “We know how many soldiers are here. Do we have an accurate count of Council members?”

One of the Bracken answered. “Our guy at the airport counted four wetworks operatives, two women – one of them is a new slayer – and two other men.”
“Are you sure there’s only a team of four?” Jenner took the list from Imelda, reading it quickly. “Council usually has more than that ready to go.”

“Those are the ones that came in on the private jet. There could be others.”

There were mutterings among the others present. Most of them unaware another Slayer had been called. If it weren’t for the fact that the two known Slayers were involved with vampires, there would be more consternation in the noise.

“All I’m suggesting is we even the odds a bit. Grab the ones we can and no – ” Jenner looked around at all of them. “No killing; disabling, disarming, and anything else short of killing is fine.”

“Why no killing? This is the Initiative. These bastards need to die.”

The low rumble of discontent rolled through the room, gaining strength, though Jenner ignored it. “We can’t bring the Council down on us. Let the humans deal with this.”

“But they’ve been targeting us and the Council did nothing.”

“Why should we care if the Council’s around?”

The comments were almost shouted, though Jenner didn’t flinch. He was far and away the oldest demon present and not a one of them posed much of a challenge if he decided to play hardball. “No killing. The Council will turn a blind eye to our involvement if we leave the soldiers alive. If we don’t – ”

He let the comment hang long enough for everyone present to get his point. When they had all agreed, even if a few did so reluctantly, Jenner laid out the rest of his plan.

It took them only moments to agree and less than five minutes to clear the room.

Jenner shared a look with Lawson as he followed the Brackens out the door.

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She was still tired; still sore, though the shower woke her up, so now Buffy was more aware of her surroundings. And just how exhausted she really was.

“What’s going on?”

Spike slid his jeans on, then reached for a tee shirt. “Soldiers are on the move.”

“Crap.” Buffy got up gingerly from the bed where Spike had just deposited her moments before. “I gotta get dressed.”

“No, pet, you need to stay put.” He turned to face her. “I know you’re the Slayer, but sweetheart. . .”
She interrupted him before he could finish. “Don’t. Those are my babies they wanna take.” At his narrow-eyed look, she amended herself. “Our babies. I need to be dressed to protect them.”

“Buffy . . .” Spike knew it was a losing battle. He sighed, grabbing a pair of sweats and a loose tee-shirt for her.

“I have to do this.” She bit her lip, slowly shuffling her way over to the crib. “I have to be ready.”

He joined her there, his arms wrapping around her. “We’ve got enough people who can fight. Stay here with them.” Before she could protest further, he spun her around to face him. “Yeah, you’re the Slayer, but you aren’t the only one. There ’re two others who can fight. Hell, even the carpenter came back.”

“Xander’s here?”

When he nodded, Buffy smiled a little. “Bet he’s so happy about that.”

“Don’t know. Don’t care. He’s here, right?”

Anyah stuck her head in the doorway. “Spike, Giles is on the phone with Mr. Travers.”

Barely acknowledging the interruption, Spike kept his eyes on Buffy. “Demon girl’s got a plan, so if it all goes south, you take the nippers and go. ‘ll find you.”

He squeezed her arms, dropped a kiss on her nose, murmured “I love you” once, and left the room.

Buffy stared at his retreating back. “So, Anya, what’s this plan?”

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Kait wasted no time pulling Willow behind her and motioning the other women, except Faith, to follow her.

“Sit there.” Pointing to a spot just in front of the hearth, she let go of Willow’s hand.

“Dawn, come here.” When the teen stepped forward, Kait took both her hands, laying them atop her own, palms upward. “No matter what happens, sweetie, you have to keep breathing and concentrate.”

“Okay.” Dawn preened a little under the attention, though it was tempered by the gravity of the situation.

“Grace?” The taller witch nodded. The doors to the living room were closed, shutting the women inside. Kait rocked forward on her toes, drawing on the amassing energy. “Just follow my lead. Willow? Please stay back and keep your mind clear.”

Kait breathed deeply and the lights extinguished, though no one flipped a switch. Grace extended her hands, like Dawn. Beginning a soft chant, her eyes still on Dawn, Kait exhaled and flames sparked in the empty fireplace behind her.
“Gaia, Isis, Ceridwen, Hera, hear our plea. Guard the hearth of this home. Keep all those within safe and free from harm.”

Tara added her voice to Kait’s, repeating the invocation three times. Flames appeared on Grace’s palms and Dawn’s eyes drooped.

Willow sat silently watching the others work, acutely feeling the loss of her power. Her ability to assist in any way was gone due to her own arrogance. Instead of sitting on the sidelines, she could have been – it should be me! Instead of sitting on the sidelines, I should be the one . . .

Willow’s thoughts stopped abruptly as tingles shot through her body. Her heart raced, clammy sweat broke out on her skin and nausea roiled in her belly.

Oh Gods. . .

Oh, dear.

She swallowed heavily, tried breathing shallow breaths to ease the pounding of her heart, but nothing helped. The room swam, the flames on Grace’s hands flickered and Willow felt like she was engulfed in jello.

Blood rushed through her body as the flames rose up toward the ceiling and Willow’s eyes rolled back in her head.

None of them noticed when she slumped forward, nor did they pause in their chanting.

Willow’s unconscious body rolled off the hearth and onto the rug, her mouth open wide in a soundless scream and a pale green mist emerging from it.

Oz appeared at Connor’s side, both of them crouching against the rooftop. Silently the werewolf signaled his intention to slip over the top to the other side, but stopped when Connor motioned him forward. Whispering rapidly, Connor kept his eyes scanning the other yards. “Giles said there are four Council operatives. They’re supposed to have – ”

The older man cut him off. “They’ll have a different scent.”

“Yeah. But they won’t be as heavily armed.” Connor pointed, careful not to let his arm appear over the roof. “That looks like one.”

“No.” Oz narrowed his eyes. “That’s Lawson.”

“What? Spike’s gonna be pissed.”

“He’s doin’ what I expected him to do.” Spike’s voice was barely a hum in the dark. “Trust the Council only a bit more ‘an I trust the soldiers.”
Spike surveyed the street and properties adjacent. “Our boys’ll be picking ‘em off, one at a time.”

When the other two looked at him strangely, he shrugged. “‘S what I would do. Disable an’ disarm.”

He headed back toward the attic window. “Watch out for infrared. Wankers’ll have that and heat sensors. Be careful.”

And with that, he was gone.

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“Have you got that crossbow loaded?” Giles pushed his glasses back, while he calmly laid out more bolts on the dining room table.

“Armed and ready.” Wesley shifted aside the lace curtain, staying out of sight.

Faith pushed Kennedy into the kitchen, grabbing her upper arm as she went. “Stick with me, chica.”

“Why? This isn’t part of being a Slayer.” Bitching at the older girl over her shoulder, Kennedy resisted as much as she could, but Faith was far stronger and they ended up at the island.

“What the hell do you know about being a Slayer? You’ve been one for what? Two days?” Faith snorted her disapproval. “You’ve got lots to learn, girlie.”

Kennedy whirled on her, fists lifted in a classic fighting stance. Faith chuckled and popped her hard, bloodying her lip and bruising her jaw. “That’s your first lesson.”

When Kennedy glared at her while wiping her lip, Faith laughed again. “If you’re gonna attack, do it. Don’t wait until your opponent knows it. Demons won’t wait, you shouldn’t either.”

Faith stepped in front of the other girl, blocking her way to the back door. “If anything comes through that door, kill it.”

There was a mutinous gleam in the younger Slayer’s eyes, telling Faith that she was only going along with her because she couldn’t think of anything better. Grinning to herself, Faith shrugged internally. Oh yeah, you think you’re such a badass. . .

She’s so not gonna last long. . .

Oh, well, not my problem.

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“Got movement nearby, sir.”
“Range?”

“Five hundred feet and closing.”

“Direction?”

“All directions, sir. I repeat, all directions.”

“Specifics, soldier.”

“Non-humans by the readings.”

Riley Finn covered his mouthpiece, cursing violently. Once he calmed, he spoke slowly and clearly into the mike. “Report in, and tighten up. Line of sight formation.”

They all reported in, except Watkins, who was still missing.

“Move on my mark.” Riley crept forward, bridging the distance from 1636 Revello Drive to the side yard of the Summers residence.

“Cut power on my mark. Three, two... mark.”

The lights went off on the west side of the block, dimming the visibility, reducing it to almost nothing. Using arrowhead formation, Riley motioned his soldiers forward. His voice barely above a whisper, he gave his next order. “Switch to infrared and initiate extraction.”

Taking point, Finn moved closer to the house.

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Travers had been looking out of the huge picture window, focused on the street he’d been told where the Summers girls lived. Since his last conversation with Nicholson, Travers had turned over different scenarios in his head. Giles hadn’t sounded panicked or even overly concerned at the presence of the Initiative soldiers. Though, the Council chairman had to admit, Giles wasn’t the type to panic and his training wouldn’t permit it. Something else had to – “Nicholson!”

“Sir?” Nicholson came in from the sitting room, responding to the urgency in his superior’s voice. “Do you need something?”

“He’s allied with the non-hostiles.”

Nicholson blinked, not entirely following Travers’ train of thought. “Sir?”

“Giles, through William the Bloody, has formed alliances with the non-hostile demons residing in Sunnydale.”

Before blurt out how absurd he thought that idea was, Nicholson mulled it over. In a way, the theory did explain much, especially the unusual calm Giles had heretofore exhibited. Though
knowing his former instructor, that was mostly an act. “You believe that, sir?”

“I’m very nearly certain of it.” Travers stroked a hand over his goatee. Almost to himself, he added, “It’s what I would do in his position.”

Nicholson was too stunned by the admission to comment.

“Give the team orders not to engage any but obvious Initiative officers.”

“Are you certain?” The look of disbelief was hard for Nicholson to disguise.

“Yes, I am. Go on, give the order.”

Shaking his head in complete incredulity, Nicholson did just that.

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Spike purposely kept his distance from their bedroom. The temptation to stay with Buffy and protect the three of them was great and he knew he didn’t have the strength to resist. He wanted to be with her, watching over their babies.

But he couldn’t.

He had to keep clear of the humans, directing Lawson and the others. They lacked the sophisticated communications equipment the soldiers had, but had the advantage of stealth and ruthlessness. None of his people would hesitate.

He paused just outside of Dawn’s room, torn between his responsibilities. Frustration grew as he faced the truth of his situation. He was useless in this fight.

He was physically incapable of fighting – hindered effectively by the very group threatening his family at this moment.

A low growl rolled through his chest, growing with his helpless anger.

There was nothing he could do.

_Nothing._

The growl rose to a roar.

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Kait watched as Dawn’s eyes slid closed, the only outward sign of the drain on her life force. Drawing steadily in time with the teen’s pulse, Kait directed the energy through Willow, visualizing a pulsing shower of sparkling rainbows arcing up and over the house. Green firelight,
like a mid-winter aurora began to flow from Dawn, emanating from her open palms.

The color of the flames on Grace’s hands altered, glowing with the light of Dawn’s energy. Exchanging a look with each other, Kait and Grace began to chant again.

Once more, Tara’s voice joined theirs, all three imploring the Goddesses of hearth and home to protect the family within.

Power flared, the lights emanating from Dawn darkening and lengthening, reaching up to flow over the ceiling and walls.

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Riley moved forward, methodically checking the perimeter with each step. His men were ranged behind and flanking him, weapons poised and ready.

“Steady.”

Static crackled on the earphones. Riley stepped forward, only about two feet away from the exterior wall of the Summers’ house, next to the chimney.

The static bloomed into a high-pitched whine.

“Take them out.” The hushed order followed a collective groan of complaint. Removing the earpieces helped only nominally, the whine continuing to sound.

“Turn them off.” Riley’s next command was harsher, his voice sounding funny in his own ears. His ears felt clogged with water and he swallowed convulsively to rid himself of the effect. Popping twice cleared them and Riley hand signaled everyone forward.

A muffled noise – a cut-off yelp – sounded to his left and Riley focused his attention there.

“Sound off.”

“Lansome.”

“Miller.”

“Sloth.”

“Gebhardt.”

“Finn.”

“Lowenstein.”

“Rivera.”

Riley waited a beat, hoping Richards would sound off. When he didn’t, Riley repeated the order. Before he finished speaking, there was a low, pained grunt from behind him. Riley whirled around
grabbing Lansome’s arm when the two collided. “Steady.”

Simultaneously they breathed a sigh of relief. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Lansome pointed over his shoulder. “Lieutenant Miller’s gone.”

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Graham hung back, watching the others blindly following Finn’s misguided attempt to kidnap the Summers’ babies. He’d already made up his mind that he wasn’t going to sabotage the mission, though he was going to slip away at the first opportunity.

Which didn’t present itself until they were at the girl’s house. Twice he’d detected movement on his far right, and guessing whoever was there wasn’t an idle passerby, Graham figured if he surrendered, he had an outside chance of surviving.

He used the confusion to his advantage, dropping back enough to confront the mysterious stalker. Graham raised his hands in surrender, after dropping his automatic weapon to the ground. Without speaking, he motioned the other to punch him.

The stunned vampire shrugged, confused by the human’s actions, but hesitated only a moment. Two successive punches to the stomach and a third aimed at his jaw had Graham grunting, then falling gracefully to his knees.

Securing his hands behind his head, Graham spoke the only name he knew might spare his life. Startled by the complete surrender, the vampire stepped back.

“Lawson!”

“Psst, Lawson!” The noise was barely audible, barely loud enough for the other vampire to hear him. The former Navy officer appeared, only to be brought up short at the sight of an Initiative Officer on his knees.

“What’s going on?” Dark eyes settled on the Graham’s features, though the question wasn’t aimed at him.

“He just surrendered. Asked for the Watcher.”

Lawson raised his head, listening to the sounds all around him. “Okay. Bring him around to the front. Keep him tied up.”

Just as the vampire had picked up Graham’s weapon, a window-rattling roar, muffled through layers of wood and drywall, sounded in the night. Taking that as a signal, Lawson hissed out another order.

They faded back into the landscaping, taking their captives with them. Once off the property, Lawson lifted Graham up, holding him against the neighbor’s house. “Tell me what you know.”
“Don’t know much. And what I do know I’m not telling until I see Rupert Giles. I’ll talk to him.”

Lawson kept his eyes trained on the Army officer. Something about his surrender was too easy.
“You regular Army?”

“West Point, class of ‘98.” Graham tried his best to stay calm, but the hold the vampire had on him was constricting, nearly cutting off his airway.

“Giles is a little busy. If you have any intel that might be useful, I suggest you give it up now.”

“I think Finn called in reinforcements. This wasn’t our objective, to take the Slayer’s children. He’s gone off the res.”

There was a snort of amusement from one of the Brackens, and Lawson whispered a harsh rebuke.
“Anything else?”

Graham closed his eyes, thinking quickly. “Command doesn’t know about this.”

“Which command?” Lawson narrowed his eyes, their lights flashing with gold.

_In for a penny. . . “Pentagon.”_

“And how the hell would you know that?”

The vampire’s fingers flexed, squeezing this throat. Graham was barely able to choke out his answer. “I called it in myself.”

“You did?” Lawson eased up, allowing Graham a few breaths. “Why?”

Graham gambled it all on his answer. If the vampire didn’t understand, then he was fucked, because there was no other way he could explain it. “Because I am West Point, sir.”

Evidently, that was sufficient enough, because the vampire stepped back, nodding his head. “Okay, soldier boy.” Stepping away, Lawson motioned one of the Brackens over. “Tie him up and hold him away from the others. Two of you stay back and watch them. The rest of us,” Lawson pointed at the others, “Are going back. Keep your eyes open in case extras show up.”

Graham watched them drift away, relieved that the other had believed him. Now all he had to do was hope his reinforcements arrived before Riley’s.

He wasn’t very optimistic.
The thundering line of battle

Book Three

Chapter Twenty-Nine: The thundering line of battle

The noise of battle hurtled in the air,
Horses did neigh, and dying men did groan,
And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets.

Julius Caesar, Act II, sc. ii

Robin once said the whole world's a battle field, not just Sherwood.
A neverending war between the powers of good and evil.

Little John, Robin of Sherwood (1984), The Enchantment

The thundering line of battle stands,
And in the air Death moans and sings:
But Day shall clasp him with strong hands,
And Night shall fold him in soft wings.

Julian Grenfell, Into Battle

The creepy thing about battle is you always feel alone.

Zab (Robert Carradine), The Big Red One, Samuel Fuller, screenwriter.

The roar rattled all the knick-knacks, shaking the walls and windows. Buffy sighed, knowing exactly why Spike had lost his temper. She could feel the frustration flooding his muscles, the barely suppressed rage rolling through him.

Slowly she walked toward the closed bedroom door, waving off Anya’s protests, and very conscious of her body’s reluctance to move. Every part of her ached, and she wanted nothing more than to return to bed and sleep off the pain. But she couldn’t. No more than Spike could go out and fight the soldiers on his own.

What she could do, though, was talk him down from his all-consuming rage. The Council had agreed and so far, there was no reason not to trust their assurances. They’d promised they would remove the chip. Maybe if he stays here with us, he’ll feel better?

Buffy had barely opened the door when another growl rattled the walls. “Spike?”

He whirled around to face her and she wasn’t at all surprised to find him in gameface. “Go back inside.”

Gingerly she waddled toward him, the whole while leaning heavily against the wall. “Spike, stay with me?”
It was all so eerily quiet in the hallway, except for his harsh breathing. There were no sounds of fighting, no one other than the two of them. Buffy stretched out her hand, silently entreating him to take it, to stay with her.

Spike shook off his gameface, his bright blue eyes glistening with a bevy of emotions. His eyes swept her form, coming to rest on her hand. The band he’d given her at Christmas glittered under the lights, further proof, if they needed it, of how bonded they were.

Buffy breathed a quiet sigh of relief when his hand grasped hers.

Spike caught her in his arms, holding her against him tightly. He could feel her wobbling, feel the drain on her strength. Knowing he’d unwittingly added to her stress had him berating himself.

“Oh, kitten.” He lifted her up easily, noting with some regret the tears in her eyes. “You should be in bed resting.”

“I can’t. You – the babies, I have to be ready.”

“No. You don’t. ‘Ill stay here with you. Won’t go anywhere.” Spike shouldered through the partially opened bedroom door, idly noting Anya’s position between the window and the crib.

Angling her head to watch them, Anya remarked almost idly, “Lawson and the others are here and it looks like they’ve started to pick off the soldiers.”

“Good. ‘S what they’re supposed to be doing.” Spike laid Buffy down on the bed, pulling up a light blanket to cover her. “Seen Jenner yet?”

“No, but I guess he’s running the show.” Anya turned back to watch what was going on outside. “Spike?”

The sudden urgency in her whispered voice galvanized him into action. He was at her side in seconds. “What?”

Anya pointed at the eerie greenish mist clinging to the exterior walls. “Look at that.”

“What’s that?” As they were talking, the mist began seeping outward, covering the lawn. “What the fuck?”

“The witches said they were going to help.” Anya stated bluntly. “I didn’t think they would use Dawn.”

“Hell.” It was clear Spike wasn’t happy with this information, but there was little he could do at this stage. He slumped slightly, reality once more rearing its ugly head.

Anya patted his arm. “Don’t worry. Once the chip is gone you can squash Riley like a bug.”

Spike stared at her, noting her bright smile and twinkling eyes. Unable to stop his own grin, he quipped, “Oh, pet, you say the sweetest things.”
There was no end to the amount of energy she could call forth. It was boundless, bottomless, and infinite. Kait closed her eyes, reveling in the power flowing through her and into Willow.

Kait felt her own heartbeat flutter and a low ringing in her ears. She felt bigger than her own skin, her head swelling making her body feel smaller and smaller, until she was nothing more than just her cranium. She had a momentary feeling of vertigo, though she hadn’t moved at all. Lurching forward, Kait straightened, then stepped past Dawn’s still form. She refused to look back, knowing her own body was exactly where she’d left it, standing in front of the teenager, hands still clasping Dawn’s.

Her insubstantial spirit glided past Grace, idly noting her counterpart’s rigid form. Methodically, she moved through the rooms of the first floor, the green witchlight of Dawn’s energy following her.

Both Giles and Wesley marked her passage, though the other – Xander? – didn’t notice anything other than the light. Kait paused at the bottom of the steps, sending a prayer to Brigid, the Morrigan, Epona, and all the other Celtic Gods to protect Buffy, Spike, and most especially their newborns.

As a tendril of light crept upwards, Kait felt a sense of peace and rightness flood her and she turned away. Passing through the kitchen, she eyed the two Slayers. While the older waited patiently, the younger one paced, complaining about everything. *Trouble would come from that one – or for that one.*

Kait drifted toward the door, knowing she had to go outside in order to fully ward the house. Her footsteps would mark the territory, warding the area inside.

Though she hoped her efforts would lead to an avoidance of bloodshed, Kait knew the Initiative didn’t care who or what stood in their way. Once the soldiers had sight of a goal, they were single-minded, pursing the target until they’d gotten it.

That deadly ambition had caught Grace’s partner and their middle child. Neither had survived their captivity.

Kait’s spectral form moved off the back porch onto the grass. The vampires and Brachens shied away, easily able to see her spectral form moving through the darkness. The soldiers, as she expected did not. Electronic equipment whined and squealed at her passage, the energy disrupting their effectiveness.

A small smile bloomed on her still form.

*Take that, you bastards.*

Poised at the edge of the roof, Connor watched while the vampires began picking off the soldiers.
one at a time. He practically vibrated with tension, and though Oz knew he wanted to jump into
the fray, Connor managed to avoid the temptation.

It was a good thing he had, because in the next instant, Oz heard a noise that chilled his bones.
The distinctive whooping of a helicopter reached his sensitive ears and Oz had enough time to grab
Connor’s arm. “Heads up.”

“What?”

Pointing to his right, the werewolf barely suppressed a growl. “Chopper.”

“Oh shit.” The teen laid out flat, pulling Oz down with him. “Soldiers?”

“Probably.” The two scanned the sky, waiting for the aerial assault.

“We’re gonna have to take them out up here.”

Oz thought hard for a moment, then rolled over onto his back. Reaching for his boots, Oz quickly
began untying them. Connor observed him for a moment, then followed suit. Both dropped the
footwear into the bushes below.

“Do you think we have time to get more weapons?” Connor’s query was barely audible over the
growing noise, though Oz heard him clearly.

“No.”


The first commando dropped onto the roof, landing lightly on his feet. He was followed in rapid
succession by five more of his brethren, all of them heavily armed.

“Shit.”

Xander glanced at the two Englishmen, wondering what had happened to the scholarly, bookish
nerds they’d once been. At this moment, armed and battle-ready, neither of them resembled their
former personas. Gone were the tweedy exteriors, replaced with almost James Bond-like
expressions.

I’m needed? Who the hell was Cordy kidding? These two don’t need my help at all.

He was about to say so, when Giles held up a hand, needlessly motioning the other two to silence.
“Do you hear that?”

“What?”

“Don’t hear anything.”
The two younger men shrugged, putting Giles’ actions down to nerves. Xander rechecked his crossbow, noticing for the first time the pale green light drifting mistily through the house. “Giles? What the heck is that?”

The older Englishman had been following the light since Kait’s spectral progress earlier and he replied nonchalantly, “That is the manifestation of the protection spell.”

“Oh. Cool.” Xander watched it swirl and darken, curling around his legs almost sentiently. “It’s pretty neat.”

“Giles.” Wesley looked away from the window. “Listen.”

Now the sound was unmistakable.

“Bloody hell.” Giles grabbed some bolts, urging the other two to the stairs. “Faith!”

Her voice sounded from the hallway. “On it!”

The sound of numerous feet racing up the stairs broke Xander’s immobility.

“This isn’t good.”

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They weren’t close enough to hear the tell-tale thumping of the helicopter blades, but there was no mistaking the flying lights or the dark silhouette against the lighter night sky.

As it was, had he not been nearly glued to the window since their arrival, Quentin Travers would’ve missed it. “Oh, no! Nicholson!”

For the second time in as many hours, his subordinate came running. “Sir?”

“Is that a United States Military helicopter?”

Nicholson glanced out the window and froze. “I believe that is indeed a Black Hawk.”

“Damnation! They’ve had forces in reserve this whole time!” Travers hung his head for a moment, thinking hard. “We cannot afford to sit here. Gather whatever weapons you can scavenge.”

Completely flustered, Nicholson gaped at the Council head.

“Mr. Nicholson, time is of the essence.”

“Right.” Nicholson shook his head, clearing away his confusion. “Weapons. We don’t have many.”

“No time to worry about that.” Travers swept past him. “I’m fairly certain there will be sufficient weapons at the Summers residence.”
“I’d imagine so, sir.”

Travers shot him a look that had Nicholson scrambling to follow.

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Riley heard the familiar whomping of the chopper blades and called his men to regroup. “Back up has just arrived.”

There was an edge to his voice that hadn’t been notable before. Now it was pronounced.

“Sir?” Lansome glanced at his commander, only to find him staring upward, eyes trained on the night sky.

“ Didn’t trust the situation. Hostile Seventeen appeared too confident. So I called in reserves.”

Finn’s smile wasn’t pleasant. “This was just a diversion.”

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Jenner heard the helicopter blades beating through the sky with a sense of dread. His previous orders to disarm and disable might actually backfire.

He wasn’t about to allow the Initiative access to the Summers’ residence. For one thing, Buffy would never forgive any of them if something happened, especially not herself. Jenner respected her too much to stand back; he’d already thrown in his lot with theirs. No time to back out now.

Whistling to get the attention of his men, Jenner contemplated the quickest route to the roof. Paulie and two others followed by a handful of Brackens appeared at his elbow. Taking in their eager, worried faces, Jenner gave his orders.

“Up on the roof. Do not let anyone in the windows that you don’t recognize.”

The Brackens began climbing the trees and Jenner sprung upwards, jumping the twenty feet easily onto the front porch roof. His vampires followed his example, quickly positioning themselves in front of the windows.

Jenner scrambled over the peak, heading for the spot where Connor and Oz were battling the newest arrivals.

The other two were overwhelmed, barely holding their own. It was clear, without Jenner’s timely appearance, they wouldn’t be able to hold out much longer.

Oz ducked under a punch from one solider, but got caught from behind by a different one. He teetered on the roof’s edge, arms outspread. Digging in his toes, he managed to find his balance. Jenner sucker punched one of the soldiers in the back, spinning him around, easily stripping off his
flak jacket. The vampire swung again, catching his opponent squarely on the jaw, knocking him out. With a grin, Jenner pushed him off the roof, into the awaiting arms of some of Sunnydale’s Finest.

As he turned to avoid a blow from behind, he caught sight of Faith battling two soldiers. The odds were more in their favor, since Wesley and some other man joined the fray. He didn’t recognize the newcomer at all, though he relaxed when Oz laconically greeted him while dodging a vicious blow from one of the soldiers.

The unknown started to slip, his feet sliding on the roof and Jenner grabbed his collar, pulling him clear. A brief recognition of thanks, and Jenner was off again, looking around for another soldier to subdue. Oz sidestepped casually, knocking his opponent into the other soldier, sending both flying. The first one seesawed briefly on the roof’s edge, arms flailing as he tried to maintain his balance.

Jenner had barely moved in the soldier’s direction, intent on knocking him off the roof when the distinctive whine of an arrow whistled past his ear. The bolt struck the soldier chest high, avoiding the heart, but sending him off the roof.

The fighting on the roof came to a standstill, when a commando caught Faith from behind. Gun held to her head, he ordered, “Stand down.”

Giles eased his crossbow down to his waist though it was still aimed directly at the soldier, while Xander and Connor held up their hands. Oz shifted on his feet, looking at Jenner for his reaction. The vampire was blocked, Xander’s still form between him and the captive Faith, though Oz could see he was trying to decide how to handle this.

The soldier grabbed Faith’s hair, pulling her closer. Jenner’s low growl resounded in the darkness, causing varying reactions from the humans. Luckily, the soldier couldn’t pinpoint the origin of the noise. Xander’s shoulders tensed for a heartbeat, then he eased to his right, giving Jenner a better angle.

Oz dropped to his haunches, feeling the shift start, his canines elongating and claws strengthening. His eyes never left the soldier’s face, though he could sense the others moving imperceptibly. Jenner’s calm demeanor masked the agitation surging beneath.

“Don’t anyone move.” The unnecessary cliche didn’t fall from his lips, though all of them knew what was implied.

“You’re outnumbered.” Giles raised the bow, aiming it clearly at the soldier’s throat.

“She’ll be dead before you can shoot.” Faith’s head was pulled upward, shielding as much of the soldier as possible, given their height difference.

“She dies, you die.” None of them flinched at the statement, though Jenner raised an eyebrow. There was an edge to Rupert Giles’ voice that none of them had ever heard before. “We have reached a stalemate. It is your choice how this progresses.”

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When Sloth and Lowenstein disappeared Riley tightened their ranks, placing Gebhardt on his right and Lansome on the left. Stealth was no longer an issue, so Riley had them proceeding – cautiously – to the back door. He chose that route, believing it would be the lesser protected.

What he hadn’t anticipated at all were other military men stepping out from the back garden, guns drawn. Dressed completely in black, even their faces were masked. Not recognizing any of them and unable to glimpse any identifying insignia, Riley at first assumed they were additional back-up. At least until one of them spoke.

“Drop your weapons.”

Riley raised his gun aiming at the speaker. “Don’t think I should do that.”

The other didn’t flinch. “Suit yourself, Yank. We’ll just wait about until you see reason.”

“Four on four. Odds are pretty even. I’ll take my chance.” Riley’s voice was confident, believing his air support would be sufficient.

That smugness lasted all of five heartbeats.

There was a slight rustle behind them, the barest hint of a sound, then Riley felt cool air waft past his neck. “Should have listened to him.”

The weapons were wrenched away in the next instant, all four Initiative officers pushed to the ground face first.

“Odds just changed, Yank.”

Spike managed to coax Buffy to stay in bed, her obvious fatigue and distress somehow breaking through his anger. Despite his current status as a liability, Spike didn’t fool himself into believing he could actually fight. He’d just end up getting hurt – or worse – endangering Buffy because of his foolishness.

It wasn’t smart for her to be thinking of fighting. Didn’t matter that she was super human and blessed with strength and healing no mortal could boast. She’d just given birth to twins.

And while he had no doubts in his mind or heart that she couldn’t go ahead and walk around, do laundry or hell, even spar, Spike didn’t want Buffy fighting.

Besides, he knew Wesley was just looking for a reason to beat down Riley Finn. Hell, he was also fairly certain Faith wanted a shot at him as well.

So instead, Spike focused his considerable attention – and his frustrated anger – on keeping Buffy calm and distracted.

Luckily for him, his children rose to the occasion. First one, then the other stirred, though neither
broke into an outright cry. They didn’t get the chance. Spike scooped them up, bringing them both to Buffy’s side.

“Need their mum.” He laid the pink bundle down next to her, depositing the blue one in her arms. “Need to be close, to keep warm.”

Buffy stared down at the baby’s tiny face, unable to look away. “They’re so small.”

“They’ll grow.” They’d almost forgotten Anya’s presence. “You’ll need to start preparing for college.”

A shaky laugh broke from Buffy’s lips. “Oh, god, Anya! They’re not even a day old! Give us a little bit of time.”

“It’s never too early for financial planning. And with your Calling, you should have a couple of contingency plans.” Anya faced them squarely, arms folded across her chest. “We should invest our earnings aggressively. And charge the Council double for out of town jobs.”

Spike shook his head, sharing a bewildered look with Buffy. “How ‘bout we let you handle the dosh, okay, pet?”

The former vengeance demon nodded sagely. “I’ve already got some ideas.”

“Great.” Buffy sighed, “We can talk about this later.” In the next breath, she asked, “What’s going on outside?”

“The house is surrounded by Lawson and it looks like most of the Brackens.” Anya peered out the window. “And whatever the witches decided to do seems to be working. There’s a green mist covering the grass and sliding up the walls. It’s really quite pretty.”

“Witches?” Buffy looked up sharply. “What was that about the witches?”

Once more Anya turned away from the window. “Kait and Grace offered to help. And so did Dawn.” She waited a beat, then blurted out, “They’re using Willow.”

“Willow’s here?” Buffy’s gaze swung from Anya to Spike. “Why’s Willow here?”

“She wanted to warn us ‘bout the Commandos, though that was the other night. Don’t rightly know why she’s here now.”

Anya shrugged, picking up where Spike left off. “She showed up earlier. I guess she stayed.”

“Huh. Xander and Willow.” Buffy lapsed into silence, her attention caught by the now fully awake baby. “Didn’t see that one coming.”

Silence filled the bedroom until Spike’s ears picked up a sound he dreaded. “Bloody – those bastards.”

He sprung up from the bed, heading for the window. Both women reacted, one talking over the other, their words blending together into just white noise.

“Should’ve seen this one coming, Slayer. Bastard called in air support.”
“What?!"

“Oh, no he didn’t.”

Buffy nearly dumped the baby on the bed, changed her mind and gingerly lifted his sister into her arms, holding them both close.

“Might want to get that call to Arashmahar ready, pet.”
An equal failing

Book Three

Chapter Thirty  An equal failing

We have friends but they have not been made by silence or pussyfooting.
If we have enemies, we do not placate them.
   William H Grimes, A Newspaper’s Philosophy

You may either win your peace or buy it: win it, by resistance to evil;
buy it, by compromise with evil.
   John Ruskin, The Two Paths, Lecture 5

It is not enough to do good; one must do it the right way.
   John, Viscount Morley, On Compromise

I trust you because I need you.
   Mason Cooley, City Aphorisms, Thirteenth Selection

I do not trust them out of my sight, or in it.
   Kenneth Kolb and Nathan Juran, The 7th Voyage of Sinbad

It is an equal failing to trust everybody, and to trust nobody.
   18th century English proverb

“Are you really sure you want to do that?” Buffy looked at Spike, both babies cradled in her arms.

He raked a hand through his hair, drawing it down over his face. Out of nowhere a wave of fatigue crested through him and right before her eyes, Spike looked tired. More tired than Buffy had ever seen him.

“Spike?”

“Yeah?” He lifted his head, staring at her. A crooked smile twisted on his lips. “You look a picture, kitten.”

She blushed, lowering her eyes his intense gaze. His soft voice brought her attention back to him. “An’ no, ‘m not sure this is a good idea. But I need to keep you safe. All of you.”

They stared at each other for a few minutes, communicating without words. Buffy looked down at the babies, then back up at Spike. “Maybe you should go see what’s happening.”

“You sure?”

“I am. We’ll be fine.” She’d barely finished gesturing toward the door wen he was through it.
Buffy brushed a kiss on each little forehead, whispering softly, “Your daddy is so transparent.”

Lawson watched as the Council operatives confronted the remaining Initiative officers, keeping the Brackens and vampires with him out of sight, in the shadows. When he realized who the group leader was, a low laugh emerged from his throat.

The sound carried to the rest of his companions, who reacted similarly when his whispered identification filtered down.

“So that’s Finn?” Charlie, one of the Brackens and an off-duty cop, asked derisively. “Doesn’t look all that impressive.”

“He’s not.” Sam pointed left and right, motioning the vampires forward. “Seems they need a hand.”

With the others behind him, Lawson ghosted forward, gesturing silently to the Council operatives. Lawson stepped directly behind Finn, breathing heavily at his neck. When Finn resisted a second time, Lawson smiled, adding his own opinion on the matter of surrender. “Should have listened to him.”

Before he was finished speaking, the vampires had all moved, wrenching away the soldiers’ weapons, and knocked the four men face down in the dirt.

Sam shared a grin with the Council Operative, as he ground out, “Odds just changed, Yank.”

Finn spluttered something into the grass and Lawson placed his foot on the back of Finn’s neck, leaning in slightly. “Don’t really see how you’re gonna get out of this mess, soldier boy.”

There were nasty chuckles from the others and corresponding grins on their faces. Lawson leaned in a bit, lowering his voice. “Just wait until Spike sees this.”

“Our orders are to disarm and capture.” The Englishman nodded his head in the direction of the prone Americans.

Sam glanced once in his direction, then back down at Finn. “Yeah, well, I’ve got my own orders. And they don’t include turning over this particular human.” He crouched down, taking the zip cord from Finn’s pockets and securing his hands. “The rest of them you can have. Don’t care what you do with them.”

The Englishman started to argue. “I can’t let you do that.”

The distinct sound of slamming car doors reached their ears, and both males turned to see who was bold enough to interrupt.

“Stand down, gentlemen.” Travers’s tone of voice brooked no dispute from his men and they relaxed, lowering their weapons. “What is the situation?”
“We’ve neutralized the ground forces, sir. The rooftop situation is unknown.”

“Very good.” The elderly man assessed the tableau in front of him. Six vampires stood over the prone Initiative officers, facing off against his wet-works team. Quickly calculating the possible outcome, Travers made a decision. “I assume you are working with William.”

Lawson nodded once, waiting to see what this new Englishman had to offer.

Noting the position of one of the officers and the vampire standing with his foot firmly planted on his neck, he asked, “Is that Finn?”

“It is.”

Travers nodded thoughtfully, contemplating the state of affairs. He’d heard the vampire’s comments and while he didn’t actually condone the idea of turning any human over to the tender mercies of a group of vampires, Travers couldn’t honestly begrudge William his pound of flesh. The man had engineered this entire mess. He’d been asked, in good faith, for assistance, and instead had concocted a plan to kidnap two infants and possibly engineer the demise of their father.

And while he didn’t for one moment believe that keeping a vampire happy and relatively alive were good things, Travers couldn’t dismiss the possibilities with this union between Miss Summers and the vampire. There were, after all, numerous prophesies that could be fulfilled by them and the children. Only time would reveal all.

Travers knew if he didn’t placate the vampire, both of his experienced Slayers might revolt, leaving him with a petulant, spoiled brat who should never have been called because she was very nearly too old.

Making a snap decision, Travers waved off his men. “We’ll take the others.”

He didn’t even flinch when Lawson roughly hauled Finn to his feet.

Travers merely watched them dissolve into the shadows at the back of the yard.

“Take the rest into custody.”

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Kennedy hadn’t followed them up the stairs. Instead she’d stayed in the kitchen, pissed and angry because Faith had punched her and then, when Giles had called her attention, she’d pushed past her and basically dismissed her completely.

She wasn’t used to that kind of treatment. She was way more important than the other Slayers gave her credit.

Born into a world of privilege, Kennedy was used to traveling first class, the kowtowing of servants and sycophants however the last four days had been a very rude awakening.
The Council had identified her as a Potential on her fourteenth birthday, when she’d gotten an inexplicable jolt of something. It had made her stronger, faster, and less prone to injury. The Council liaison had shown up within days of her birthday, armed with information and answers for every single one of her father’s questions. What they hadn’t expected was the depth of information and the sheer impossibility of what being a Potential meant.

However, in typical fashion, her father had gotten all the information and promptly enrolled his only pampered princess in martial arts training, weapons training, and engaged tutors approved by the Council to instruct her in all things demonic. Kennedy was trained, and trained more, and, if her father had to have a daughter destined to fight the forces of darkness, then by God, he was going to have a daughter prepared for that eventuality.

So Kennedy had been groomed to become a Slayer, like she’d been groomed to become a debutante. Endless hours of sparring, swordsmanship, hand-to-hand, and any and all disciplines she’d need to be the best Slayer ever. She’d been lauded, praised, and preened mightily under the constant supervision.

She was ready.

Kennedy knew she was going to be a Slayer. It was, after all, her god-given destiny.

What she hadn’t ever been told, what the Council had kept from both her and her parents was the awful truth. She might be called as a Slayer, but she wasn’t ever going to be The Slayer.

No. That title belonged to one girl and one girl only.

The first time she’d heard the whisperings had been just over a month ago. Kennedy had been on her way to small arms training – short swords and daggers – when she’d overheard a whispered conversation between two Watchers. She never caught all of their conversation, though what she did hear had her reeling. The Slayer had been resurrected by a witch and was now back among the living.

The Slayer.

*When had a Slayer died?*

*And why hadn’t she been Called?*

*Had some other girl been Called? What had happened?*

After two intense weeks of snooping and digging through the archives that she’d never previously paid attention to, Kennedy found what she was looking for. And the information had her reeling.

There wasn’t just one other Slayer. There were two.

And they both had seriously long entries in the archives.

Buffy Summers and Faith Lehane.

Kennedy hated both of them before she’d ever laid eyes on either of them. That emotion didn’t dissolve upon their first meeting.
Kennedy had been over the moon and celebrating wildly when she finally felt the tingles indicating she’d been Called. She was thrilled.

The excitement had only increased when Mr. Travers, the head of the Council had informed her there was emergency on the active Hellmouth and they were going immediately to California. Finally she was going to meet the other Slayer.

Summers, the first, wasn’t what she expected. She was shacked up with a vampire and heavily pregnant. It had disgusted Kennedy, turned her stomach and made her want to heave. That she had to play second fiddle to a disgraced Slayer who didn’t bother slaying the vampires but instead . . . it left her with such a bad taste in her mouth, she wanted to vomit.

And if that wasn’t bad enough, Faith Lehane wasn’t dead after all.

Faith Lehane was *supposed* to be dead.

Instead, both of the elder Slayers were still alive, and still ready to kick ass and take names. Buffy Summers didn’t look like much. For one thing she was short. Really short. And if she wasn’t bulging with a huge belly, Kennedy bet she wouldn’t be more than a hundred pounds soaking wet. There was no way she could fight demons. Or, as rumor had it, defeat a Hell-God. Kennedy didn’t believe that one for an instant.

Faith, though, had given Kennedy pause. Not only because she wasn’t supposed to be breathing, but because there was a dangerously deadly difference about the darker Slayer that Kennedy couldn’t deny. She was trash, and that was evident by the way she dressed and talked, but there was a wildness in her eyes that Kennedy didn’t trust.

Lehane and Summers.

Kennedy wasn’t happy that she had to compete with anyone else. She was finally supposed to be the One. The Only. The Chosen One. The Slayer.

Except she wasn’t.

She wasn’t *ever* going to be The Chosen *One*.

She was one of three. And the bottom one at that.

Summers had done things – destroyed the Scourge of Europe, killed Angelus and Darla, two of the deadliest vampires ever sired; averted and prevented more than her fair share of apocalypses, and defeated a Hell-God – that Kennedy might not ever get to do. Buffy Summers was one of the most successful Slayers ever. And the fact she’d been called at fourteen and survived nearly eight years? That alone merited an entry into the archives.

There wasn’t as long an entry for Lehane, but what was there was enough to make anyone take a second look. She’d allied with the forces of darkness, then spent nearly a year in a coma. Once awake, she’d taken responsibility for the murder of the Deputy Mayor of Sunnydale, and spent almost two years in prison. Upon her escape she’d rejoined Buffy Summers on the Hellmouth and going by the newest notes, was fighting alongside the other Slayer.

It sucked.
Kennedy was supposed to be *The One*.

Finding out she wasn’t was a blow her ego had never expected.

Getting punched in the face by Faith hadn’t done her ego any favors either.

Kennedy didn’t even want to be here with these losers.

Which explained why she hesitated going after Faith and the others when they raced up the stairs. Her ego didn’t get any other stroking when Travers opened the door and swept past her like she wasn’t even there.

Kennedy was seriously pissed.

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As he passed through the hallway, Spike could hear the sounds from the roof. Their bedroom had been somewhat isolated, being on the side of the house away from the fighting, however once he was out in the hallway, Spike could hear it more clearly.

He’d planned on heading down to the first floor to see what was going on there, but changed his mind. Buffy’s old room had the best roof access, so he headed there. Stepping out onto the lower roof, Spike encountered two of Jenner’s vampires guarding the area.

“Boys.” He raised a brow, questioning their presence.

“Boss said not to let anyone we don’t recognize through.”

Spike considered that for a moment. “Good plan, that.”

He vaulted onto the upper level. “Keep it up.”

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Her heart was pounding, adrenaline rushing through her system as her feet pounded up the stairs. Faith didn’t hesitate, didn’t bother to waste time checking on Buffy or Spike, she just raced through the hallway and straight to Buffy’s old bedroom, the one Dawn was now using. Nor did she slow down, diving feet first through the window. She almost over-shot the roof landing, managing at the last moment to stop her forward motion, twisting her body to land on the edge. Without so much as a backward glance, Faith vaulted over the upper roof, landing in a crouch next to Oz.

And then there was no time to think, as she was thrust into the middle of hand-to-hand fighting, trying to keep the soldiers from getting into the house. She barely registered the arrival of Jenner’s vampires, though when Paulie got tangled up in her fight, she snarled at him and pushed him toward the lower roof.
Faith had just managed to disarm one of the soldiers, and was about to drop him over the side when she was grabbed from behind.

The muzzle of a gun was pressed to her temple, the soldier’s other hand wrapped around a fistful of her hair, pulling on it hard.

“Hey, asshole, ease up.”

“Shut up.”

Gun held to her head, he ordered the others, “Stand down.”

Giles eased his crossbow down to his waist though it was still aimed directly at the soldier, while Xander and Connor held up their hands and Oz shifted on his feet. Faith couldn’t see Jenner, Xander’s broad body between them.

He pulled harder on her hair, bringing her closer, shielding himself behind her. Tears sprung to her eyes, as he twisted his fist again. Jenner’s low growl resounded in the darkness and Faith blinked rapidly, fighting the tears. His growl made her smile because she knew he was losing patience and warning the others he was going to move soon, with or without their assistance. She could see Xander’s shoulders tense, then he eased to his right, giving her a straight look at Jenner’s face.

Their looks gave nothing away. Nothing to anyone who didn’t know them and Faith braced herself for the distraction she knew had to be coming. One of them would move, or do something, and then she’d be in a better position to get out of this situation. There were no doubts about that. And seconds later, Faith wasn’t disappointed.

Oz started to drop to his haunches.

“Don’t anyone move!” His voice was right at her ear and she could smell the stench of his fear. _This guy is so over his head . . ._

“You’re outnumbered.” Giles raised the bow, aiming it clearly at the soldier’s throat.

“She’ll be dead before you can shoot.” He pulled her closer, until there was almost no space between them and Faith was up on her toes, struggling to maintain her balance.

“She dies, you die.” Faith had never heard that particular tone in Giles’ voice ever before. It did not bode well for the soldier holding her hostage. “We have reached a stalemate. It is your choice how this progresses.”

“Buffy?” When the Slayer didn’t respond, Anya tried again. “Buffy?”

Finally, after the third time Anya had called her name, the new mother looked up from her perusal of the twins. “What?”

“It looks like all the soldiers on the ground have been – it looks like our guys have them.” Anya
flipped aside the curtain, peering out the closed window. “I can’t really tell for sure from this angle.”

“Oh. That’s good.” Buffy struggled with the babies for a moment. “Anya, come help me.”

“Sure.” Suiting action to words, the former demon lifted the pink bundle easily. ‘Do you think I could convince Rupert to let me have one of these?’

Buffy looked at her strangely for a moment, watching while Anya cooed at her daughter. “Um. Could we not talk about you and Giles having sex?”

“Oh, c’mon, Buffy. He’s not really your father and you do know he and I have sex. Often.”

Buffy groaned. “Yes. I know. I just don’t want to know that I know. Can’t I just swim in the river for a little longer?”

Anya huffed out a sigh, then placed the baby down in the crib. “I suppose you’ll stay in denial until we reproduce. After all, he’s not getting any younger and I’m at prime childbearing age, as you should know.”

Shaking her head and trying to control her laughter, Buffy put the other baby down. “Anya, can we table this discussion until after the current crisis?”

“Oh! Sure thing.” Anya shrugged, completely fine with the change of topic. She looked up to see Buffy opening the window. “See? It looks like everything’s under control.”

And from the safety of the bedroom, with only a view of the backyard, it certainly did look like everything was under control. Six men, clad in black were prone on the grass, four armed guards standing over them with three other men standing off to the side near the back gate. The three looked somewhat familiar, but Buffy couldn’t be entirely sure in the darkness.

“I think that’s Rogan.” Anya’s finger pointed at one of the men and Buffy realized she was right.

“It’s him.” Her hold on the window sill eased a bit and Buffy stepped back from the window. “The glowy bit is very pretty.”

“That’s Dawn’s energy.” The former demon’s expression was pragmatic. “It is very pretty.”

Buffy’s face turned grim. “I need to see what’s going on up on the roof.”

She was halfway to the door before Anya caught up with her. “Are you sure that’s a smart thing to do? Spike won’t be happy if you put yourself in danger.”

The blond shook off the other girl’s hold. “Anya, I have to check. I have to know what’s going on.”

Anya stared at the door as it closed behind Buffy. She threw up her hands in exasperation, remarking to the air, “She’s just as bad as Spike.”
Travers, with Nicholson trailing right behind him, swept past Kennedy into the hallway. Both men could feel the energy emanating from the living room without needing the visual evidence of the same. Neither man headed in that direction.

Instead, Travers ascended the stairs, intent on finding either Buffy Summers or a way onto the roof. At the top of the stairs, he stepped into another hallway and came face-to-face with his elder Slayer.

“Good evening, Miss Summers. Should I offer congratulations instead of wondering why you are up and about?”

Buffy stared at him for a moment, confusion marring her features. “Why are you here?”

“We are here, Miss Summers, to offer what little assistance we can.” Travers indicated his companion. “Nicholson is a fair hand, if you’ve got weapons to spare.”

She bristled visibly. “Why should I trust you?”

Travers sighed. “I had hoped we were beyond this point.” He raised his hand in placation. “We mean no harm to you and yours. I’ve given my word, Miss Summers, and I’ve no intention of withdrawing my support now. The surgeon is waiting in the car. Once this matter is concluded, we’ll see to your vampire.”

She eyed him for another moment, then relaxed. “I think he’s up on the roof.” Buffy looked upward. “I think there’s a whole lot of reindeer up there.”

“Reindeer?” Travers was rightfully confused.

Buffy shook her head, realizing neither of the men would get her bad pun. “Never mind.”

She motioned them toward her old bedroom, urging, “This is the best way to the roof.”

“Should you be up and about?” For the first time in her presence, Nicholson spoke. “You look a bit rough.”

Her smile was as wobbly as her legs, though Buffy didn’t let on about the latter. “I am – ” she spoke while shrugging tiredly, “the Slayer.”

Buffy said it resolutely, as if that explained everything. When Nicholson stared to respond, he realized it did. *She is the Slayer.*

He watched her slide easily through the already open window. *Just given birth to twins and she’s ready to do what she must. Remarkable girl.*

*No, she’s not a mere girl. She’s a woman. One hell of a woman.*
Intemperate in Your Blood

Book Three

Chapter Thirty-One. Intemperate in Your Blood

Anger is short-lived madness.
   — Horace

Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
Brief as the lightning in the collied night,
That in a spleen unfolds both heaven and earth,
And, ere a man hath power to say “Behold!”
The jaws of darkness do devour it up.
So quick bright things come to confusion.
   — A Midsummer Night’s Dream, act i, scene i

The flash and outbreak of a fiery mind,
A savageness in unreclaimed blood.
   — Hamlet. Act ii, scene i

In rage deaf as the sea, hasty as fire.
   — King Richard II. Act I, scene i

You seem to me as Dian in her orb,
As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown;
But you are more intemperate in your blood
Than Venus, or those pampered animals
That rage in savage sensuality.
   — Much Ado About Nothing, act iv, scene i

Spike appeared at the top of the roof as Faith signaled Jenner that she was going to make her move. Using the other vampire’s arrival as a distraction, Faith swung her hand down, grabbing the soldier’s genitals in a tight grip and squeezing hard. Jenner barreled forward, knocking Xander out of the way, intent on grabbing the gun.

The soldier shrieked in pain, loosening his grip on Faith’s hair. His finger squeezed reflexively, but Jenner had his arm, pushing the muzzle away from Faith’s head.

Bullets spat out, whizzing through the air. Oz bellowed, “Down!”

Xander didn’t react quickly enough and was tackled from behind by Spike, who covered the stunned human, shielding him from further injury.

With Jenner exerting pressure on the soldier’s upper body and Faith maintaining her death-grip on his genitals, the soldier had no way to escape their hold. Jenner slipped into game face, roaring
and snapping his jaws. He was shielding the humans as best he could, blocking the bullets that were spraying recklessly into the air. Faith yelled for someone to grab the gun. Connor surged up from his prone position, coming up behind the trio, pinning the soldier between them. The gun was still spewing bullets, though now it was pointed skyward. Wesley lurched forward, reaching around Jenner’s shoulders and wrestling the gun away.

The sound of popping bones was barely discernable over Jenner’s angry growling. The soldier collapsed, his upper arm broken, falling backwards and landing awkwardly atop Connor.

Utter silence descended, broken only by hoarse panting. Giles raised his head from the roof tiles, peering around cautiously. “Faith? Connor?”

A low pitched feminine groan answered him, followed by a somewhat credible growl from Connor. “Get this asshole off me.”

Spike rolled away from Xander, grumbling and grimacing as he wiped blood away from his nose. Xander sat up, brushing tar and grit from his hands and arms, wincing at all the scrapes. He paused, finding a hole in the sleeve of his tee-shirt. He stared at it for a few moments, stuck his finger through it and blanched. “That could’ve hurt.”

He looked around, checking to see if anyone had been hit by the bullet. “Everyone okay?”

“Just the question I was going to ask.” Buffy stood balanced on the roof, peering down at them. “Anyone hurt?”

It was clear that some of them were more battered than others, but at first glance, nothing seemed serious. Oz stretched, then leaned forward to help Xander to his feet. Noting the bullet hole, the werewolf remarked almost idly, “Close call.”

“It’s a good thing you’re so tall.” Wesley unloaded the semi-automatic, discharging the magazine deftly. “Any shorter and a couple of those might have caught you between the eyes.”

Xander gulped visibly. “Spike saved my life.”

Buffy looked up from where she was kneeling beside her vampire, catching the disbelief on Xander’s face.

Just because he didn’t believe it the first time, he repeated himself. “Spike saved my life.”

“Don’t let it go to your head. Doesn’t mean we’re picking out china.” Spike ignored the look Buffy shot him. “Jus’ didn’t want to explain to anyone why you didn’t make it.”

Nervous laughter erupted from Xander. “Right. Still, you did it. And it means a lot to me. So yeah,” Xander leaned down, offering Spike a hand up. “Thanks, Spike.”

Spike stared at the proffered hand for a moment, then took it. Rising quickly to his feet, he quipped, “An’ look at tha’. The world didn’t end.”
Grayson, the Council wetworks team leader, had just finished securing their captives when gunfire erupted overhead. “Take cover!”

Hands reached for the Americans, dragging them to their feet, guiding them to take cover against the house.

“Don’t fire!” Grayson shouted, scouting around to ascertain location. “Hold fire!”

As abruptly as it started, the hail of gunfire ceased. One of the captured soldiers had been hit and he was groaning softly. Working quickly, Grayson and one of the Brackens staunched the bleeding; applying a rough dressing to the thigh wound.

“Non-fatal injury, but he should get to a hospital.” Frank, a Sunnydale cop, held his hand on the wound. “We can have an ambulance here in minutes.”

Covering his microphone, Grayson nodded, then motioned Frank to silence. Directing his comments into the speaker, he gave a status report to Nicholson. “Area is secured. All targets acquired. One target is wounded and requires medical assistance.”

Up on the roof, Nicholson waved a hand to get Travers attention. Quickly he relayed Grayson’s information to his boss, who okayed the ambulance.

The next orders were ones Grayson finally expected. “Secure the rest. We’ll be down shortly.”

Within moments, the soldiers were gathered under watchful eyes in the backyard.

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Jenner lifted the wounded soldier off Connor. He whistled once and when Paulie and two other vampires appeared, he shoved the soldier at them. “Give him to the Watchers. Let them decide what happens to him.”

Grabbing Faith roughly, he growled when she started to protest. Without saying another word to anyone, Jenner pulled the dark-haired Slayer close, then deliberately stepped off the roof.

Landing lightly on his feet, Jenner wasn’t surprised when Faith clipped him on the chin. “Warn a girl next time, jackass.”

“Shut up, Faith.” He spun her around as she tried to walk away. Dropping his shoulder, Jenner tipped her into a fireman’s carry, slapping her ass sharply once she was settled. “I’m really not in the mood for any bullshit.”

Faith was quiet for a heartbeat, then groused, “You can be a real asshole, you know that?”

“Yes. Yeah.” He slapped her again for emphasis. “Bitch at me later. After I’ve fucked you senseless.”

“Ha!” Faith squirmed in his grasp. “Not likely to happen.” When her movements didn’t slow him down, she bit his side. “Let me down.”
“Fuck!” He stopped, shoving Faith away. “What the fuck was that for?”

“Because you wouldn’t stop. The caveman routine is getting old.” She didn’t back down, getting into his space, crowding him. “What’s the deal with that anyway?”

The Welsh vampire rubbed his side, grumbling about her being childish. He was effectively stalling, unwilling to answer her question.

“Giving me shit about biting you isn’t working. So get over it and tell me why you went ten thousand B.C. on me.” Crossing her arms over her chest, Faith struck a pose that clearly said she wasn’t buying his attempted distraction. “Besides, a vampire complaining about a bite? Wicked ironic, dude.”

Mimicking her pose, Jenner stared her down, not speaking. Faith eyed him speculatively, her mind whirling with all sorts of possibilities. Finally, after a few tense moments, Faith’s expression changed.

“I get it.” She stepped closer, a knowing smile playing about her lips. “It’s okay.”

Faith leaned into his suddenly open arms. “I was freaked too.”

Buffy was still crouched on the roof, her attention on the spot Spike had just vacated. The roof looks wet. Why’s the roof wet? “Spike?”

He swung around to look at her, noting the expression on her face. “What?”

“Turn around.” She gingerly got to her feet, her eyes boring into his. When he shrugged, ignoring her, Buffy reached out for him. “Spike, why didn’t you say something?”

“No need. I’ll just get the doc to dig it out.”

“What?” Xander stared at the blond vampire. “What’s going on?”

“Nothin’. Slayer’s just overly worried.” Spike pushed past the carpenter, hiding the grimace of pain from everyone. Or so he thought.

“Spike?” Wesley and Giles spoke simultaneously, the younger Englishman actually spying a glimpse of the seeping blood staining his shirt.

He growled, ignoring their concern. “‘M fine. Let’s get back inside, yeah?”

Without waiting to see if any of them bothered to listen to him, Spike disappeared into Dawn’s room.
Giles eyed the tableau in the living room. The five women were all in a deep trance, unaware of events occurring around them. Now that the crisis was past it was his task to help them surface. It would take delicate balance, waking them without disturbing them overly.

The last thing he wanted to do was cause dangerous side effects. Waking any of them abruptly could trigger debilitating headaches, nausea, and vomiting.

Contemplating the women, Giles decided he would start with the two solitary figures. The group of three by the hearth would be a bit tricky and he needed a little extra time to decide who he should attempt to waken first. Tara was standing beside the kitchen entrance, so he headed there first. A quick check of her heartbeat told Giles she was fine, though in a deep trance.

Inhaling deeply, Giles gently placed one hand on her shoulder and with the other, he cradled her chin. Using his thumb, Giles gently brushed over the spot at the middle of her forehead, between her eyebrows, known as the “third eye”. Every third pass, Giles spoke her name, calling her out of the trance.

It was slow going, though Giles knew it would, in the end, be the smarter choice.

Besides, it gave him something to do while Spike was prepped for surgery.

Buffy was up and after Spike before the others even realized he was gone.

“Spike?”

He didn’t slow down, heading straight for their bedroom. “Spike?”

“Not now.” He slammed into the bedroom, startling Anya, who was standing over the twins. She jumped, preparing to scoop them up when she realized it was Spike.

One look at his expression had her scrambling from the room. “I’ll just go now.”

As she headed for the door, he cast a look over his shoulder. “Thanks, pet.”

“No problem.”

The two girls swept past each other in the doorway, and Buffy aimed right for the bathroom and the first aid kit.

“Leave it, kitten.” He snapped at her, stripping out of the blood soaked shirt. Spike grimaced, mopping the seeping blood from his abdomen. The bullet was lodged in his upper right chest, very close to his arm. Had he been just a bit quicker, it might have missed him altogether.

Buffy stepped toward him. “What’s with the bad mood?”

Spike probed the wound, trying to discover how deep the bullet was. He ignored her, his complete
attention focused on his side.

“Spike?”

“Not now, Buffy.” He wouldn’t even look at her and she knew he was pissed. Buffy moved closer, grabbing the shirt away from him.

“Let me see.” Instead of letting her help him, Spike shied away, heading on his own for the bathroom. As if she needed more proof that he was pissed at her, he slammed the door shut in her face.

Oh crap. Buffy shifted her weight from foot to foot, biting her lip and wondering if barging into the bathroom would make it worse. He’s really mad. Should I?

What is he so pissed about?

Blankets shifted behind her, forcibly reminding Buffy of why they were in their current situation. And suddenly it dawned on her what had ticked off Spike.

Me. He’s mad at me. ‘Coz I didn’t listen to him and wait. Oh hell.

Because I didn’t stay put.

Buffy sagged against the door, aware of just how badly she’d screwed up.

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For the first time in a very long time, Quentin Travers was in the trenches. While he didn’t fool himself into believing his very small contribution had any part in the outcome, he was still exhilarated.

The resolution of the current situation had him reeling. Not so much the ultimate outcome, but the efficiency and ease with which Buffy and her allies had dispatched their foes that had him taking stock of the situation. Though he’d never really doubted her, nor her Watcher. Rupert Giles, for all his teenaged rebellion, had been the top of his class and a valued instructor during his years in the academy. And Buffy Summers had defeated Nest and Glorificus, as well as averting more than her fair share of apocalypses.

Neither was to be taken lightly.

Descending the stairs to the lower level, Travers was hit with further proof of how effective their loose organization was. Anya Jenkins, she of the formidable negotiating skills, was coordinating via telephone with at least two other people, ordering them about like the seasoned veteran she appeared to be. Catching his eye, she imperiously motioned him to wait, and Travers grinned at her next words.

“Mr. Travers, your men are holding the Initiative agents in the back yard. We thought it would be less conspicuous that way. Though why that’s something to worry about doesn’t make any sense to me. No one pays attention anyway.” Her blinding smile made him chuckle and he followed her outstretched arm toward the back of the house.
“How many were captured?”

Anya did a quick mental calculation, subtracting both Graham Miller and Riley Finn from the total. “Ah, there are thirteen. Well, fourteen counting the one we caught earlier.”

When he looked at her questioningly, she blurted out, “He was spying on the Magic Box.”

“Ah. Very well.” Travers stepped out onto the back porch, flanked by Nicholson and the former demon. He surveyed the situation, noting how his men were in control. “Is there somewhere we can hold these men until their superiors arrive?”

Pursing her lips, Anya contemplated the question. On the one hand, she had a feeling none of the others wanted to reveal how extensive their networking was, but on the other, she didn’t think Buffy wanted a makeshift prison in her backyard. She needed to consult with Rupert before giving the Council and more specifically, Travers that information.

“I’m not sure.” She smiled again, only this one was a bit forced, and never truly reached her eyes. “Rupert is the one you should be talking to about this. Or Wesley. Yes, let me get Wesley.”

Anya fled so fast, Travers barely had time to respond.

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Connor watched as Jenner stalked off, Faith slung easily over his shoulder. “Guess he’s pissed.”

Oz chuckled while Xander stared at their retreating forms. “Who was that?”

“Jenner.” Connor shrugged, collecting all the discarded weapons. “They’re . . . um, dating. I guess.”

“One way to explain it.” Oz slipped to the other side of the roof.

Xander shook his head in confused exasperation. “What’s his deal? And how come she’s not bitching?”

“Could be that Aurelian mojo he’s got working.” Hefting the guns over his shoulders, Connor followed Oz.

“Aurelian?” The carpenter gaped at him. “You mean he’s a vamp?”

“Older than Angelus.” Dumping the weapons on the floor of Dawn’s room, Connor waited until Xander was back in the bedroom before slamming the window shut. “She’ll kill me if I don’t reset the air conditioner.”

“Faith’s dating a vamp? What is it? Some weird Slayer thing that only dead guys get them horny?”

Xander realized a second too late that he’d said something wrong. The weapons clattered together and Connor was glaring at him. “Dude, that’s seriously messed up. And I don’t think it’s a
vampire thing. Not the way you mean it, anyway.”

Oz had halted when Xander started speaking and he was watching the other two. Connor was spluttering, trying to intimidate Xander, who wasn’t backing down from the teen. He shook his head and interrupted, “It’s a strength thing.”

“What?” Xander’s attention was caught.

Deciding to elaborate, Oz continued. “How can you respect someone you can lift with one hand?”

The other two stared at him, waiting for him to explain more. Oz merely smiled a little, then left them to their own thoughts.

Xander started to speak, his mouth opening and closing a couple of times, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. Huh. Not really a vamp thing . . . nah, he can’t be right.

Could he?

Buffy was still debating about barging into their bathroom when Wesley’s voice sounded through the doorway. “Buffy? Spike? May I come in?”

Spike flung the bathroom door open, barely missing her inert form. He didn’t apologize, just frowned at her, then moved past. He opened the hallway door, leaning on the frame. “Oxford.”

“Oh, good. It’s not as bad as I thought.” Wesley gestured to the bullet hole. “Is it still in there?”

The vampire looked down. “Yeah. Can’t get m’finger in. ‘s at a bad angle.”

“I see.” Wesley peered closer. “Travers said the surgeon is here. It might be prudent to have him remove the bullet as well as the chip.”

Spike nodded, then ran a hand through his hair. “Where do you think we should do this?”

Wesley’s eyes sought out Buffy’s. He could feel the tension between the two blondes, though he wasn’t certain of the cause. Wesley suspected it had something to do with what had just occurred. Buffy bit her lip and she looked at Spike. When he refused to meet her gaze, her lip quivered. He could make out the sudden sheen of tears and wasn’t surprised a moment later when two fat tears slid down Buffy’s cheeks.

She sniffled hard, then drew in a deep breath.

Before either of them was able to react, Buffy’s face crumpled. “I’m sorry. Really, I should’ve listened and . . .”

Spike sighed, the tension leaving his body in a whoosh. “Go on back to bed, kitten.”

“Spike, I’m sorry.” She covered the distance between them, her arms circling around his waist,
head resting against his bare chest. “I’m a dope.”

The vampire chuckled, his arms holding her close. “No, you’re just a bossy controlling bit o’ goods that doesn’t trust anyone else to get the job done.”

Wesley couldn’t help his chuckle, though he tried. Almost choking on his laughter, he wisely turned his attention to the crib.

Two tiny bundles barely took up any space on the mattress. One blue and one pink, both with chubby cheeks and downy blond hair capping their heads. Wesley reached in, his fingers gently touching their faces. The little girl didn’t react, but the blue bundle stirred, stretched, and opened his eyes.

“He’s got your eyes.” Wesley looked over his shoulder. Buffy leaned up to kiss Spike while he was trying to maneuver her back to the bed.

“Hmmm?” Spike pulled away from Buffy to join Wesley by the bed. The baby’s eyes were still open and Spike looked down at him. “Hello there, nipper.”

Buffy linked arms with Spike. “Oh! He’s right.”

“Have you picked out names?”

Spike ran a hand over the baby’s head, smoothing down his hair, feeling the fragility of his form. “We have.”

When neither of them offered to tell him, Wesley stepped back. “Going to wait?”

“Yeah. Just until everyone’s together. Wan’ to let Dawn know first.” His fingers brushed over the girl’s cheek, mimicking his earlier movements with her twin. “But this is our girl.”

Buffy’s smile was blinding. “And we’re so glad she made it.”

Wesley had no idea what they were referring to, however, he figured that whatever it was would be revealed sooner, rather than later. The trio was quiet for a long time, just looking at the babies, until Spike winced. “Need to get this done soon.”

“Right. Shall I tell them to set things up in the dining room?” Wesley headed for the door.

The blondes shared a look, Buffy was the one to answer. “That’s the best place, right? We’ve got old sheets to put on the floor.”

“Won’t need ‘em. Shouldn’t bleed much, if at all.” Spike reluctantly pulled away from the crib. “You should go back to bed, kitten.”

“Nah huh. I’m gonna make sure there’s no mistakes and Travers doesn’t pull a double cross.” Buffy trailed behind the two men, her eyes on Spike’s back. “I’m not really big on trusting right now.”
Wondrous strange

Book Three

Chapter Thirty-Two  Wondrous strange

Day and night, but this is wondrous strange!
   Hamlet. Act I, scene v

People are strange when you're a stranger
Faces look ugly when you're alone
Women seem wicked when you're unwanted
Streets are uneven when you're down
   Robby Krieger and Jim Morrison, People are Strange,
   from the album Strange Days, 1967

Nothing unreal exists.
   Spock, Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home

Yet, the Universe is real enough to the conscious beings in it,
which are as unreal as it is itself.
   H. P. Blavatsky

All phenomena are real in some sense,
unreal in some sense, meaningless in some sense,
real and meaningless in some sense,
unreal and meaningless in some sense,
and real and unreal and meaningless in some sense.
   Robert Anton Wilson

Ian watched with dawning horror the events occurring in the yard of the small suburban house. This had seemed like such a nondescript, ordinary place, and yet evidence to the contrary kept appearing right before his eyes.

Armed men on the ground, surrounding the house, and a helicopter discharging more of the same onto the roof weren’t the strangest thing he’d witnessed in the last hour. By far, that honor belong to the sight of four men literally springing into the air some twenty feet, to land atop the roof. It had him gaping in awed disbelief.

Everything he’d seen only confirmed what he’d assumed. He’d been asked by MI6 to help them. Ian had never been so excited and scared in his life. More than once, he’d thought about leaving the car to get involved. Doing what, he wasn’t entirely sure of, though he’d felt the pull of the fight, because there was no doubt in his mind that’s what he was witnessing, and he’d wanted to join them. Ian supposed it was his own reckless nature responding to outside forces.

He wasn’t surprised when another group appeared on the lawn. Ten or so men, arms bound behind
them were being herded from the back yard into a van that had just pulled up in front of the property. Fully armed guards were directing their progress, nudging – not so gently – the ones who lagged behind.

Ian was so involved with watching, he nearly jumped out of his skin when someone tapped on the window. It took him a few moments to recognize Nicholson, but when he did, Ian opened the door.

“Bring your kit, doctor. We’re ready for you now.”

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“Connor.” The teenager turned around, waiting for Wesley to catch up to him. “Need you to slip out and meet with Lawson. He’s probably close by.”

“What am I supposed to do when I find him?” Connor glanced at the taller male, wondering if they were just trying to keep him occupied and get rid of him for a while.

“Convince him, if he needs it, to bring Agent Finn back here.”

One pair of blue eyes surveyed the other. “You really think he’s still alive? And that Sam will listen to me?”

The questions were a little too loud for Wesley’s liking and he admonished Connor, pulling him into the kitchen. “Don’t let anyone from the Council hear that. And, to answer your question, yes, I do think both those things. None of them would dare go against Spike. Finn’s alive and they’re waiting for Spike to determine what happens.”

Wesley looked around, checking to see who was about. Finding none of the Council members, he pushed Connor toward the back door. “Go. And try not to let anyone see you.”

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Surprisingly, Kait was the easiest to wake. With a bare touch of his hands and calling her name only twice, the witch was alert, coherent and slightly cheerful. Giles was amazed at her recovery.

When he remarked upon it, Kait smiled knowingly into her cup of tea and quipped, “This is far from my first time at the dance, Rupert.”

He helped Dawn to the couch, a steadying hand around her waist. “Indeed.”

“How are you feeling, Dawn?” Kait shifted her attention to the teen, who was looking more than a little pale, highlighting her resemblance to Spike.

She blinked, smiling wanly. “Okay, I guess.” Dawn slumped back, resting her head on the back of the couch. “I’m pretty tired.”
“You should eat something.” Grace put a soda next to her. “Drink that and you’ll feel better.”

Kait nodded. “A cheeseburger and some chocolate would be best.”

Dawn groaned. “Not ready for that.”

The two older witches laughed. “You will be.”

Giles, who was helping Willow to her feet, agreed. “Give yourself a little time, Dawn. You should trust these ladies, they do know a bit about what just occurred.”

“Yeah, yeah. Right now I just wanna sleep.” Dawn closed her eyes, shutting out everyone around her.

Faith only put up with Jenner’s high-handedness for a couple of blocks before she just gave up. Punching, kicking, and grousing hadn’t worked any other time he’d done this. He’d barely hugged her when she was back up, slung over his shoulder like some helpless floozy and he’d just rescued her from a fate worse than death.

It wasn’t like she couldn’t fight him – she was a Slayer, after all. It was more that she didn’t actually want to fight him. Not unless it was for the fun of it.

So this time, when Faith had hung upside down over his shoulder long enough, she just asked. Nicely. For her, anyway.

“Hey, big guy, you wanna put me down?”

“No.”

She sighed, contemplated smacking the back of his head, then changed her mind. “C’mon, let me down.”

His pace paused and Faith realized in this instance, softer might actually work. “All the blood is rushing to my head.”

“Not my problem.” Jenner kept going, even lengthening his stride.

“C’mon, let me down.”

“Well that seemed to do the truck, because he stopped dead in his tracks. “You will?”

“Yes.” Just the thought was making her squirm and Faith wiggled a little bit. His big meaty hand slapped her butt and then she was on her feet, facing him.

Jenner’s face was set, his jaw muscles flexing and jumping. His eyes were dark, smoldering with reddish amber lights. Faith had never seen him in this mood and she wondered if this wasn’t such
a good idea after all.

His eyes traced her from the toes up and his nostrils flared when he got to her face.

“Run.”

Faith took off like the devil was on her heels.

Travers motioned the youngest Slayer toward him. “I suggest you stay nearby, in case further reinforcements arrive.”

It was clear she wasn’t at all happy with the task. When she started to balk, Travers held up a hand. “I very much doubt it will be taxing, since I expect a representative from the U.S. Military to arrive shortly. I do however, believe it is still prudent to have someone available should the situation warrant it.”

Kennedy didn’t bother hiding her contempt. “Why should I worry about these people?”

A stern look met her whined complaint. “For a variety of reasons, Kennedy. Not the least of which is protecting two innocent lives. Perhaps you should think about putting your childish anger aside and focus on what needs doing.”

Quentin didn’t wait for Kennedy to splutter out some further nonsense. He wanted to see how the doctor was going to proceed with the chip removal. There had never – at least to his knowledge – been documented, and by that he meant Council, evidence of the effect of brain surgery on a vampire. While he was certain The Initiative had some working knowledge of vampire physiology and anatomy, he believed much of their information had been derived from human subjects. Capture of vampires was a notoriously dangerous undertaking, resulting very often in the death of one or more of the potential captors. That William was willingly allowing the Council not only access, but active participation, spoke more to the desperation and drive to protect his family than Travers had heretofore been willing to credit to vampires.

Obviously, there was more about William the Bloody that the Council needed to learn.

Travers could only hope they’d continue to be seen as allies. He had no desire to be on the receiving end of the kind of ferocious protectiveness he’d exhibited.

He’d much rather have that kind of man on his side.

And right now, he’d do everything in his power to keep it so.

There were prophesied battles ahead that would take all their abilities.

Even those wooed from the darkness.
Nicholson escorted the doctor into the house, closing the door gently behind them.

“This way, doctor.” Nicholson swept his arm toward the dining room, which had been stripped down, and all breakables had been removed. “Your patient will be down shortly.”

“Will I have a sterilized operating theater?”

The Scot smiled thinly. “I very much doubt it.”

Ian goggled at him. “You can’t expect me to perform brain surgery in these conditions. The patient will not survive! Without adequate facilities he’ll be dead!”

A strange laugh emerged from the other man. “I sincerely doubt that.”

The doctor shook his head. “You can’t possibly predict a different outcome! The patient will, most assuredly, be dead before I finish.”

“Reckon so.” A dangerous looking blonde man appeared in the doorway. Despite his short stature and semi-dressed state, Ian could feel the power emanating from him. “Then again, I’ll be dead before you start.”

“What?” Ian’s eyes darted from one man to the other. “I don’t understand.”

“Don’t expect you to.” The blonde sauntered into the room, stopping in front of the Canadian. “Just ‘xpect you to do what you’re asked. Without questions.”

He couldn’t help himself from backing away. Ian didn’t cower, however something about the blond frightened him. There was a predatory gleam in his eyes that Ian had never seen before.

“Spike, stop scaring the doctor.” A small hand slapped the back of the blond man’s head and his look changed to one of chagrin.

“Let a man have a bit ‘f fun, eh, Slayer.” The grin this Spike sent the tiny blonde girl at his side was nothing short of little-boy mischievous.

“Not now, Spike.” She turned her gaze to Ian. “Hi. I’m Buffy. Thanks for coming. Can you really do this?”

Ian’s normal manners fled. This young girl was enormously pregnant and as flustered as he was, he blurted out the first thing on his mind. “Good lord, you’re very pregnant! When are you due?”

The two blonds shared a look and bright smiles broke out on both their faces. “About four hours ago. The babies are upstairs.”

Their reaction thankfully gave Ian a moment to recover. “Forgive me.” He held out his hand. “My name is Ian Darrow. Very nice to meet you, Buffy.”

“Thanks. This is Spike.” She slapped a hand across his bare belly. “We need you to remove some hardware. You don’t mind a two for one deal, do you?”
“Two for one?” Ian was sizing up his patient, only now noticing the bullet hole in his upper right chest and blood smears across his chest and abdomen. “When did that happen?”

“’Bout an hour ago.” The blond shrugged, clearly unconcerned. “Give or take. Itches like hell.”

“So can you do it?” Buffy smiled brightly. Ian felt like he’d stepped into a story – a movie set – where he didn’t quite know or understand the plot.

Swallowing heavily, he answered with as much assurance he could muster under the circumstances. He certainly didn’t want to be the one to break the bad news to the new mother – since these two were very clearly a couple – that her husband would most definitely not survive two surgeries under these conditions. “I can.”

Buffy clapped her hands together. “Great! Let’s get started.”

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Xander stuck close to Oz, the only person he thought he knew, or maybe it was that Oz didn’t appear much different from the guy he’d been in high school, while the others all bore little resemblance to the people he’d known.

Giles, and Wesley especially, had changed from book nerd to almost Bond guy. And while he did have memories of Giles getting into the trenches with them, Wesley had never been a go-to kind of guy. In fact, when Xander first met him, he was pretty sure it was his picture next to ‘nerd’ in the dictionary.

Xander hated to admit it, but hanging around with Spike seemed to have been a benefit to Wesley. He was almost cool.

Another thing Xander didn’t get was the change in Dawn. Once upon a time she’d had a huge crush on him, though now, she barely registered his presence. Dawn hadn’t gushed over him the way she used too. He couldn’t even remember if they’d even spoken since he got back. **Okay, so arriving in the middle of crisis wasn’t the time for heart-to-heart conversations or catching up, she still could’ve acted happy to see me.**

And yet, none of those were the biggest changes.

He knew a huge part of his exile from the group was because of his inability to accept Buffy’s relationship with Spike. He understood that his feelings about demons – vampires in particular – had caused a rift between himself and Buffy and also with Anya.

He left Sunnydale, half expecting everything to blow up in their faces. So that he could be the voice of smug reason and be able to say ‘I told you so’ when it all fell apart.

What happened was something completely different.

Buffy and Spike were as joined as any two legally unmarried people could be. **Legally unmarried? Was that even a thing?** With house and home, two teenagers and – and Xander still
had trouble with this – two brand spanking new babies. Twins! Babies! Xander had no idea it was even possible for that to happen. Vampires couldn’t have babies.

Anya’s voice echoed in the hallway as she moved between rooms, her voice confident and assured.

She’d changed.

Gone was the girl always eager for his approval, the girl who blurted out strange and personal details with aplomb. In her place was a woman who had settled on a hair color, who was confident, in control, and obviously garnered more respect than he’d ever given her.

Her watched her deal with vampires and other demons, his eyes trained on her back. She was standing on the back porch, the door wide open and at least six demons listening intently to her detailed instructions.

She was undeniably in her element and he wondered, with no small amount of regret, if she still resented the way he’d treated her. Would she forgive me? Does she even think about me? Does she still care?

The demons moved off and Anya re-entered the house. Without really glancing at the two males, she began cleaning, loading the dishwasher and putting away food.

“It’s going to be daylight soon. We’re going to need stuff for breakfast.” Her tone was matter of fact, completely devoid of any emotion. Almost as if they’d only ever been friends and not even close ones at that.

*I guess I’ve got my answer.*

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No amount of training in the world could have prepared him for this. Ian Darrow had practiced medicine for twenty years, the last ten at nearly the top of his field. Neurosurgery was a highly specialized area – requiring hours of preparation before each foray into the patient’s brain. He was usually assisted by an entire team of crack professionals, in a sterile, contained environment.

What he was doing right now was nowhere near normal.

Half expecting Hawkeye Pierce to scrub in, Ian kept thinking a third world clinic would be less weird.

More than half the room’s occupants were British, all male. While the females – at least the little blond – were obviously in control and all Americans. Everyone seemed to be deferring to Buffy.

She’d ordered one of the men, a tall, lanky male with round glasses and a quiet assurance, to obtain sheets for the floors and furniture. After he’d gone, she’d turned her attention to Nicholson, asking for a tactical update.

Ian was completely bewildered.
His astonishment must have shown clearly on his face, because Spike, the dangerous one, laughed at him. “She’s somethin’, isn’t she?”

He could only nod, unable to verbalize his impressions.

“Don’t worry, doc. Her bite is worse than the barking. An’ so long as you patch me up proper, she’ won’t be bitin’.”

Ian fixed his attention back on his patient. “Are you certain you don’t want any painkillers? This will hurt.”

“Jus’ dig the bloody thing out. I promise I won’t bite.” Spike’s grin didn’t comfort Ian at all.

“Somehow I’ve a feeling that your bite is just as bad as hers.” He was totally unprepared for the reaction. Spike laughed so hard he nearly fell from his perch on the table.

“Too right, mate. Too bloody right.” Spike calmed himself, visibly relaxing. “C’mon, doc. Time’s wastin’.”

“Is there alcohol in the house?” Ian was unpacking his bag, laying out everything he thought he might need.

“Already drank most of it. But there’s some thirty year old Macallan’s in the cupboard.” Spike leaned back, fumbling for the handle. He caught sight of Ian’s expression and chuckled again. “Yeah, doc, ’m not a complete idiot. Know you mean the other kind.”

The tall lanky one – Wesley? – returned, old sheets piled in his arms. “These were all I could find.”

Buffy came back in from the kitchen. “Oh, those are good. Anything else we need?”

“Rubbing alcohol.” Ian swabbed Spike’s chest, wiping away much of the blood smears. He peered intently at the wound. “You’re very lucky. This missed your lungs and hitting a pair of major arteries. Not a lot of bleeding.”

The other two shared a strange look. To Ian it almost appeared they were trying desperately not to laugh, which he thought was rather odd. Buffy was biting her lip, avoiding the other fellow’s eyes.

With a strained exhalation, the male muttered something sounding suspiciously like “No blood, of course not, dead men don’t bleed,” before exiting the room.

Not bothering to hide his laughter at all, Spike yelled after him, “Oi! Oxford! Get me some bloody alcohol!”

He ducked back through the doorway. “Right. I’ll get on that, straight away, because we can’t risk infection.”

The comment, loaded with sarcasm, was enough to set off both of them. Buffy clapped a hand over her mouth to stop the giggles while the male’s laughter followed him up the stairs.

Spike was grumbling under his breath about ‘cheeky bints’ and ‘gits’ and other things Ian suddenly didn’t want to understand. Gaining the blond’s attention wasn’t difficult, though Ian wasn’t sure
he wanted it when Spike’s mood turned.

Abruptly, he changed from likeable grump to deathly serious. Ian held his breath, as Spike seemed to growl out, “Get on with it. Jus’ take the bloody thing out.”

Using a set of narrow forceps, Ian probed the bullet hole. Thankfully it wasn’t very deep, so he was able to remove it easily. Blood only trickled from the wound, stopping long before Ian had it ready for suturing.

Spike’s hand on his arm stopped him. “Don’t bother stitching me up. Waste of time.”

Ian stared at him. “Are you mad? The wound is bound to bleed without them. The risk of infection –”

“Is nil. Stitches aren’t needed.” Spike pushed away his hand. “Best move along to m’noggin. ‘S why you came, not this.”

He reached for some pressure bandages. “These’ll do.”

Wesley returned with a rather extensive emergency kit in hand. The thing was bigger than Ian’s bag, and contained more than enough supplies, far more than Ian brought with him. “Good lord! Who’s the resident on staff?”

Spike snorted his amusement, leaving it for Wesley to answer. “The potential for injury is rather high in our field.”

Once more Ian was speechless. His gaze swung between the two as he struggled to keep his thoughts – and questions – to himself. Finally, after a long moment, Spike gestured to the bullet still in Ian’s hand. “Gonna save that for souvenir?”

“Should I?” He gazed down at the bloody lump sitting in his palm. “Will I be allowed to?”

“We’re not in the business of hurting people that help us.” Buffy’s voice sounded from behind him and Ian turned to face her.

“That’s good to know.”

She neared the makeshift operating table, her eyes on Spike’s wound. “How long is he gonna be on the sidelines?”

“That very much depends on whether he survives the next surgery.” Ian couldn’t sugarcoat this at all, not even for a brand-new mother. “I’m not at all sure I can perform surgery under these conditions. I’d feel much better in a hospital.”

He sensed a change in Buffy’s confidence, so he continued his arguments. “Without access to at least an x-ray machine, I can’t tell how close I am to the foreign object.”

“It’s a chip.” Spike bluntly stated. “Behavior modification chip implanted in my brain to control me.”

“What? A computer chip?” Ian was thoroughly baffled. “Why would anyone want to control someone like that?”
“Military types looking to create the perfect soldier.”

“What!” The doctor was stunned. He couldn’t think and none of the others was forthcoming with any more information. Backing away from the trio, Ian blurted out, “Isn’t that – isn’t – didn’t the Nazis try that?”

No one answered him.
Nothing so powerful as truth

Book Three

Chapter Thirty-three Nothing so powerful as truth

Truth stood on one side and Ease on the other; it has often been so.
   Theodore Parker, A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion.

Truth has never been, can never be, contained in any one creed or system.

There is nothing so powerful as truth,— and often nothing so strange.
   Daniel Webster, Argument on the Murder of Captain White, April 6, 1830. Vol. vi. p. 68.

Despite her complete skepticism about eating and drinking, within minutes of being woken from the trance, Dawn found herself downing the soda and looking for something to eat.

Anya had cleaned up the uneaten dinner stuff, putting away all the pasta and sauce Kait made, but Dawn was too hungry to wait for it to be reheated. So she was eating cold noodles and staring into the open refrigerator.

“I can’t believe there’s nothing to eat.” She slammed the door closed. “How come there’s never anything good to eat?”

“Probably because you’re a teenager who likes peanut butter and fluff quesadillas with bananas.” Buffy opened the refrigerator. “Is there any extra special good stuff in here for Spike?”

“In the freezer.” Dawn headed for the cabinets. “Ohh! Look, Connor left some brownies!”

“Better save some for later.” The microwave whirred to life, heating two blood bags. “Either that or be prepared to make more.”

“I’ll do it. I’m craving some bacon and eggs.” Tara entered the kitchen from the living room. “And chocolate.”

“Mmmmm.” Dawn whirled to face them. “Chocolate covered bacon.”

Both blondes made icky faces. “Ew. No.”

The microwave pinged and Buffy grabbed the bags. “Still frozen. Keep an eye on these, would ya? I’m gonna go check on the debate.”

“Who’s debating?” Suddenly the kitchen was full of women and Buffy wasn’t sure which one of them had spoken.

“The surgeon wants to head to a hospital and Spike and Wesley are trying to convince him
Kait asked, while slicing open the bacon package. “What’s his reasoning?”

“He’s afraid Spike won’t make it through the operation because he won’t be able to tell how close he is to the chip.”

“Is that all?” Grace pointed Buffy toward the dining room. “I can help with that.”

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Wesley had been right. Connor always hated when that happened. Lawson was in the backyard, where he and two others were standing guard over Riley Finn and Graham Miller.

“Dude.” Connor approached cautiously, knowing how on edge the vampires were. “Wes sent me out here to find you.”

“Haven’t gone very far.” Lawson’s smile eerily echoed Spike’s. “Figured he’d want us to stick close.”

“That’s what they’re telling me.” The teen looked over the captives, smiling when he realized they’d gagged Finn.

“Sun’s going to be up soon. We’re going to have to move.” Sam stated the obvious, though sunrise was still nearly two hours off.

Connor shrugged. Wesley hadn’t discussed this, but he figured something had to be done. “Yeah. I think you should head for the shop.”

“It is closer.” Lawson thought for a moment. Reaching some internal conclusion, he nodded. “Yeah. Get them up boys, we’re moving.”

He shook Connor’s hand. “We’ll wait there.”

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Grace followed Buffy into the dining room, her hand outstretched to greet the doctor. “I’m Grace Martinez. I do believe I can help you.”

The doctor turned away from his argument with Spike and Wesley to stare at her. “How is that possible?”

“Well, for one thing, I’m a registered trauma nurse. For another, you’ll just have to suspend your disbelief and trust me.”

Somewhat mollified by her assurances, he calmed a bit. “Ian Darrow.”

“Now that we all know each other, can we get this show movin’?” Spike’s temper was fraying and
he could feel the need for violence swimming in his body.

Before he could lie down, Grace grabbed his left hand with hers and with the fingers of her other, she gently stroked the line between his eyes.

“Relax, William. This’ll be over before you know it.” It took more than a few moments before Spike visibly relaxed. Once his body gave in, Grace removed her hand, motioning for Buffy to take over. In a hushed whisper, she told the doctor, “Your patient is ready.”

Between Grace and Wesley, they managed to follow Ian’s instructions to position Spike at the table. He fluidly moved into a chair which backed up to the table. Still holding Buffy’s hand, Spike leaned forward, his eyes closing.

Grace grinned at Ian. “Now for the fun part.”

Taking the x-ray of Spike’s head from the table, Grace stood at the window and pushed aside the curtains. “I need something sticky.”

Wesley grabbed tape from the first aid kit and ripped off pieces, handing them to Grace while she taped the x-ray to the window. “Ready?”

Muttering something unintelligible under breath, Grace passed her hand over the plastic. Light glowed from behind it and a faint trace of blue sparked around the chip itself.

Ian stared, gape mouthed, at what Grace had done. “Is – how did you? Is that what you meant by suspending my disbelief?”

“Well,” Grace looked over at Buffy, who nodded. “That’s only the start.”

“Well?” Ian shook his head. “I’ll just have to take your word.”

“Oh, please do.” Grace swept closer to the table. “It’s so refreshing when a man isn’t telling me I can’t do what I know I can.”

Ian laughed. “I think I understood that.”

Spike’s grumble interrupted them. “If you two are done chattin’ each other up, I’d like to get movin’.”

“Oh. Right.” Ian grabbed a scalpel and cut a thin line across the back of Spike’s head. Immediately the perspective on the x-ray changed, morphing from profile to the back of Spike’s head, and a thin red line appeared where Ian had made the incision.

“Stop staring, doctor.” Grace teased him.

“Right.” Ian shook his head and inhaled deeply. “Focus, Ian. Focus.”

None of them laughed.
The instant everyone’s attention was off her, Dawn was on her feet and heading for the second floor.

There hadn’t been time earlier to go up and see the babies before the trance, but now, with everyone’s attention diverted elsewhere, she was free to go. So Dawn didn’t waste another moment.

The bedroom was quiet, the hustle and noise on the first floor far removed. Only the barely discernable respiration from the tiniest people Dawn had ever laid eyes on broke the silence.

Dawn didn’t realize she was holding her breath until she choked on a little sob. “Oh my God! Look at you guys!”

She leaned over the crib, one hand trailing next to them. She was almost afraid to touch them. They were so very small.

“Wow.” Dawn tucked the pink blanket around her baby sister, and unable to resist, she brushed her finger over the porcelain cheek. The baby reacted, eyes blinking. Bright blue peeked out from barely open eyes and Dawn flipped. “Oh, God. You are so sweet.”

Her baby brother must have been disturbed by the small commotion because he stretched and blinked, his mouth opening in a soundless yawn.

“Oh, hey there, baby blue.” Dawn shifted her attention between the two. “Damn you two are – you’re just too damn cute.”

Almost as if they heard her, both pairs of sleepy blue eyes stared and little tiny mouths opened, lips smacking.

Finally giving in, Dawn reached in, lifting both bundles in one easy move. “You know this is probably the last time I’ll be able to do this at once.”

She didn’t go far, just to the bed, where she laid them down side by side. “You’re my family. My real brother and sister.”

Leaning over them, Dawn kissed both their foreheads.

“Welcome to the family.”

There was no blood.

No bleeding.

Head wounds, even controlled ones, like he was employing, bleed copiously.

The head was nothing more than bone and skin covering the brain. There was little cushion of
muscle and sinew, and almost no fat. Consequently, any cut – accidental or deliberate – bled. Usually heavily.

Except this patient didn’t bleed.

Ian knew the mind was powerful. There were numerous studies about shamans, Indian holy men, Buddhist monks, and some devout Christians who were able to control bodily functions – heart beat, breathing. All astounding.

Almost all unbelievable. Ian had always been fascinated by these accounts, but very skeptical. There had to be entirely logical explanations for those extraordinary abilities. And while he might be willing to stretch his skepticism to extend to allowing holy people those abilities, that in no way extended to his current patient.

Spike was no holy, sainted person. Buddhist or otherwise. Ian doubted Spike had stepped foot in a church willingly since becoming an adult.

Though he didn’t doubt Spike was capable of controlling his body. Ian had never seen a more physically fit person in his life. He’d treated a couple of professional athletes, and Spike had them beat.

Yet no matter how fit any human could be, physiology still followed rules. Flesh is cut – it bleeds.

Spike didn’t bleed.

No matter how many cuts Ian made, Spike did not bleed.

And despite not trying to focus on it, Ian couldn’t keep it out of his mind. Even as he used the thin forceps to extract the chip, the lack of blood preyed on his mind.

He’d tried so hard to keep it from his mind that when he pulled the chip through the flap he’d cut, Ian didn’t say, ‘I’ve got it’, instead he blurted out, “There’s no blood.”

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As much as she would’ve liked to stay awake and alert, Tara was feeling the effects of the last few hours. The burst of energy she’d employed was petering out by the time Oz and Xander returned with donuts and other breakfast pastries. Added to that was the stress of avoiding Willow.

There were too many people crowded into the small kitchen. It was almost impossible to move around and everyone was talking, albeit in soft tones. The air was cloying, thick with the smell of cooked bacon and eggs, unsettling her pregnant belly.

Tara could feel eyes on her, watching her put out all the sweets. It couldn’t be Oz, because he was outside – Tara knew exactly who was watching her.

It had been a long time since Willow’s close scrutiny had warmed her. Instead of feeling cherished and wanted, Willow’s gaze caused the skin on the back of her neck to crawl. For the first time, Tara felt as though Willow was judging her, assessing, trying hard to gauge Tara’s feelings.
The back door snicked open and Willow’s attention wavered. Tara needed no sixth sense to tell her who was now in the kitchen. She didn’t even need to hear his voice. It was obvious, though, that his comments were for her.

“I’m gonna sack out on the couch.”

“Okay.” Before she could suggest he go downstairs and crash on her bed, someone else interrupted their conversation.

“Sounds like a great idea. I’ll take one of the chairs.” Xander followed the redhead into the living room, his yawns punctuating his agreement.

Kait sighed. “A nap sounds wonderful, but there isn’t nearly enough room for everyone.”

Tara smiled and started to answer, but the older woman silenced her with a look. “No, dear, you’ll need your own bed. I’ll just wait for Gracie and then we’ll head on home.”

“You’re sure?”

Kait glimpsed at Willow while her attention was fixed on Tara. “We’ll make sure Miss Rosenberg gets home also.”

Gratitude flooded through Tara. She didn’t want to appear rude, however Willow’s continued presence would shortly become a problem.

“Right.” Willow’s startled expression indicated she hadn’t been expecting Kait’s manipulation, though had no other avenue of escape. She had to go along. Willow knew she wasn’t entirely welcome. Unless she could manage to change someone’s mind, but from the look of relief on Tara’s face, she didn’t think that was forthcoming anytime soon. Tara’s next words confirmed Willow’s thoughts.

“That would be great.” A crooked smile broke out on the blonde’s face. “Everyone’s really wiped out. And we honestly don’t have enough room.”

“There’s no blood.”

Buffy and Wesley shared a look the doctor completely missed. Grace breathed a laugh, though none of the others echoed her sentiment.

Ian looked up from the back of his patient’s head. “There should be blood.”

“Well, yeah, about that.” Buffy finally looked at him. “That’s one of the things you’re going to have to trust us about.”

The doctor stared at the blonde. “There is a lot I have taken on faith, Miss Summers, but there has to be a logical explanation for at least some of the things I’ve seen.”
At that Buffy did laugh a little. “Oh, my God. Where are you from?”

“I live in Toronto, but I’m originally from London.” Ian had no idea why he was answering her tangential question. “What has that got to do with this situation?”

“Because you sound like one of – you sound like a Watcher.” She shrugged, as if her statement explained everything.

“What, pray tell, is a Watcher?” He laid the chip on the table, along with the forceps.

“Wesley and Giles. And the guys that brought you here are all Watchers.” Buffy caressed the back of Spike’s hand. “They provide me with all sorts of information.”

He started to stitch the wound closed. Ian thought about asking another question and was in the process of forming one, however she continued without prompting.

“I’m the Slayer. Well, the oldest Slayer. There’s a glitch right now, because there’s only supposed to be one. Faith got called when I died. And the new girl got called when we killed Faith.”

At his horrified look, Buffy backtracked. “No, she knew we were killing her. It was her idea. Spike thought it was crazy, but Wesley thought it would work. And it did.”

Ian was staring at her like she was completely out of her mind, and Buffy abruptly realized she’d made things worse by trying to explain. Panicked, she threw a glance at Wesley. “Help?”

He chuckled, amused at her expression.

“Very well.” Wesley turned his attention to the flummoxed surgeon. “Vampires and demons are real. Buffy is the Vampire Slayer. It is her responsibility, her duty, her Calling to fight the forces of darkness.”

His voice had taken on the weight of gravity, lending the utter nonsense he was spewing some depth of reality. Had the words not been countered by such a tone, Ian might’ve laughed outright. However, the tall, thin Englishman was utterly serious, forcing him to listen.

“A vampire slayer? What exactly is that?” Though they sounded so certain of themselves, Ian still reserved belief.

“She is chosen to fight the forces of darkness. Vampires, demons, and other-worldly beings bent on destroying everything.” Wesley gestured toward Spike. “You said there is no blood. That’s because no blood flows in his veins. Spike is a vampire.”

“What?” Ian dropped the needle, his mouth gaping wide. “He’s a what?”

“Spike is a vampire.”
Connor had just turned away from watching Lawson corral the two soldiers when the upstairs light flickered on. Curiosity got the better of him and before he could second guess himself, he was more than halfway up the tree, heading for Buffy and Spike’s bedroom.

Dawn was sitting on the bed, the newborns laid out in front of her. She turned as he slid through the window, motioning him to keep quiet.

“Hey. Ever hear of a door?” Her whisper was barely more than a sound, although Connor heard her clearly.

“Was quicker to come up this way. There’s way too many people in this house right now.” Connor edged closer to the bed. “Are they supposed to be that small?”

“They’re early, so yeah, I think this is normal.” Dawn shrugged, running her finger over a small cheek. “You weren’t so scrawny, so I’m not really sure.”

“They look really little.” Connor sat down on the bed next to her. He reached out to touch the pink bundle, then pulled his hand back. “I’m afraid to touch them.”

“Don’t be. They’re a lot safer than they look.” Dawn scooped up the baby girl and almost dumped her in Connor’s arms. “Just hold her head straight. You’ll be fine.”

He stared down at the tiny infant, confusion on his face. “She’s so tiny. My gym bag is heavier.”

She laughed, nudging his shoulder. “Dork. She’s probably only five pounds or so. I think my history textbook is heavier.”

Connor shied away, growling at her. “Be careful.”

“Please. Like you couldn’t hold a teeny baby?” She scoffed at him, laughing at his expression. “Lighten up!”

“Dawnie, we can’t let anything happen to them.” His eyes were drawn to the bright green eyes suddenly blinking up at him. “We can’t. They’re family.”

She sobered immediately. “I know. How cool is that? We’ve got babies.”

Connor wasn’t really listening. Instead he was making noises at the baby in his arms, cooing and gurgling at her, hoping for a reaction. Almost as an afterthought, he mused, “Besides, Spike would kill us if something happened to either of them.”

“For real.” Dawn lifted up the blue bundle, her pose mirroring Connor’s. A thought struck her and Dawn looked over at him. “I wonder what their names are?”

A rather tall glass of amber liquid was placed at his elbow, drawing Ian’s attention away from his patient.
In the long moments since Wesley’s bombshell, Ian hadn’t been able to stop staring at Spike. When it was clear Ian didn’t believe anything Wesley and Buffy told him, Spike had taken matters into his own hands and shown Ian the truth. At which point, Ian had dropped into the nearest chair, his face frozen in shock.

The older Englishman, the distinguished looking gentleman with round John Lennon glasses smiled at him kindly.

“Rupert Giles.” He paused, glancing briefly at the others. “I apologize for the abrupt denouement. My colleagues sometimes show a distinct lack of finesse.”

“Oh. No worries.” Ian stared up at the man blankly, unable to think of something more proper or profound to say.

“You must forgive us all. We’ve had a rather trying week.” Giles sat down on the far side of the table, his eyes kind and understanding. “I realize this is a bit much to take in. I’d be happy to answer any questions you might have.”

“I can’t – I don’t think I have any.” Ian held onto the glass like a lifeline. “Perhaps later.”

He kept his eyes on the glass a bit longer, then with a shaky smile directed at the air, he downed the contents.

It was probably a measure of how shocked he was when the whiskey didn’t even register.

“Vampire?” Once more Ian’s gaze fixed on Spike, who was holding Buffy’s hand. “That explains so little.”

Giles barked out a laugh. His eyes sparkled with mischief, and Ian thought perhaps he was rather enjoying his discomfort. “And that, dear doctor, is truer than you know.”
Nothing can make bitter into sweet

Book Three

Chapter Thirty-four. Nothing can make bitter into sweet

I think you have to pay for love with bitter tears.
   Edith Piaf

It is so much more difficult to live with one's body than with one's soul.
One's body is so much more exacting:
what it won't have it won't have, and nothing can make bitter into sweet.
   David Herbert Lawrence

In your white lace and your wedding bells
You look the picture of contented new wealth
But from the on-looking fool who believed your lies
I wish this grave would open up and swallow me alive

For the bitterest pill is hard to swallow
The love I gave hangs in sad coloured, mocking shadows

When the wheel of fortune broke, you fell to me
Out of grey skies to change my misery
The vacant spot, your beating heart took its place
But now I watch smoke leave my lips and fill an empty room

For the bitterest pill is hard to swallow
The love I gave hangs in sad coloured, mocking shadows
The bitterest pill is mine to take
If I took it for a hundred years, I couldn't feel any more ill
The bitterest pill is mine to take
If I took it for a hundred years, I couldn't feel any more ill

Now autumn's breeze blows summer's leaves through my life
Twisted and broken dawn, no days with sunlight
The dying spark, you left your mark on me
The promise of your kiss, but with someone else

For the bitterest pill is mine to swallow
The love I gave hangs in sad coloured, mocking shadows
The bitterest pill is mine to take
If I took it for a hundred years, I couldn't feel anymore ill!
   Paul Weller, The Bitterest Pill (I ever had to swallow), The Jam, Snap! (1983)
Exhaustion was beginning to set in and the effects of all the emotional ups and downs of the last twenty-four hours was starting to wear on Buffy. She wanted to go upstairs, collapse on her bed and just sleep for hours. If not days.

She couldn’t though, because there were a dozen people still in her house and she had two babies needing her attention. Thankfully, at the moment they weren’t clamoring for it, though that could change on a dime.

Her biggest problem right now was to get all these people to leave. Oz was snoring lightly, his head resting on the back of the couch. Kait and Grace were making noises about leaving and hopefully they were taking Willow with them. Buffy had no idea where Dawn and Connor were, but Anya was in the kitchen, hiding from Xander who currently was in the living room. He was talking to Wesley and the other Watchers. Kennedy was around somewhere but at the moment Buffy didn’t care about her.

Only she, Giles, and Spike were in the dining room. The doctor had just wandered into the kitchen, searching for something other than whiskey to settle his nerves. Buffy dropped into the chair next to Spike, slumping forward, her head pillowed on her arms. Spike had rested his elbows on the table, cradling his head in his palms. Giles was sitting opposite them, his gaze settled on the blond duo.

Taking pity on them, Giles got to his feet. “You should get some rest. I’ll send everyone home.”

It was a measure of how tired they both were when his only response was a series of grunts.

Within moments, the noise level had dissipated, punctuated by the soft opening and closing of the front door.

“I’ve sent everyone off. Xander is going to stay with Oz.” Buffy barely acknowledged his announcement, but Spike swiveled to face him. “Wesley’s going to stay. Anya and I will be back later.”

“Thanks, Rupert. ‘Preciate it.” Spike pushed away from the table. “C’mon, love, let’s go on upstairs to bed.”

“Kay.” When she didn’t move, Spike nudged her gently.

“Kitten, you’re goin’ to have to get up an’ do this yourself. I can’t carry you.”

Giles stepped into the room. “I’ll get her. You head on up.”

“Cheers, mate.” Leaning heavily against the wall, Spike watched as Giles helped Buffy to her feet.

“You’re going to need your sleep, my dear. You best go on up now and get some while you can.”

Some muffled complaint emerged from Buffy, but she moved, getting slowly to her feet. At the doorway, where Spike was waiting, she leaned into him, whining softly. “Mmmm, I’m so tired.”

“I know, sweetheart.” He curled his arm around her shoulder. “Some kip ‘ll do us both.”

“Ah huh.” She turned to Giles, who was watching them both, bemused affection lighting his eyes. ‘Don’t call, Giles, even if the world is ending.”
A soft chuckle escaped the Watcher. “I think we’re safe for the rest of the day.”

Both blondes groaned. “You’ve just jinxed us, you know.”

The sound of several sets of knuckles hitting wood resounded in the dining room and in the hallway. “That should cover us.”

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Tara hadn’t wanted Oz to go, which surprised her. She normally wasn’t the clinging type, though right now, she was feeling a bit shaky. Between all the stress and strain of the last few hours, coupled with the unexpected addition of Willow’s presence, Tara was off-balance.

It would be nice to just settle into her bed with the added security of Oz by her side. Funny how with Oz, the tables were turned. With Willow, Tara had been the grounded, practical one, while Willow was the flighty, free spirit. Perhaps it was because Oz was naturally grounded, his feet firmly planted. He allowed her to be weak, to be flighty, to be the dreamer, to be the one with wings.

Right now, though, as Tara slipped out of her clothes and into her oversized nightgown, she just wanted someone to cuddle up to.

Her bed was lonely and cold.

Dropping heavily onto the mattress, Tara flopped down, her head just barely hitting the pillow before her eyes were closed.

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Anya held her tongue only long enough for the door to close behind them. “I can’t believe he came back.”

Giles didn’t need to ask whom, it was patently obvious who Anya was complaining about. There wasn’t much he could say, except, “He was rather helpful during the fight.”

A sarcastic snort greeted his statement. “How helpful was he? Did he trip over his own feet and knock out one of those soldiers?”

“Nothing quite so dramatic, dear.” He held the car door open for her. “He was in the way of a bullet and Spike saved his life.”

She was silent as he walked around the car, her eyes tracking his movements. “Really? Spike saved Xander’s life?”

Putting the car in gear, Giles nodded. “He did.”
Anya was quiet for a moment, then a suppressed giggle burbled from her. “I bet that sticks in his throat.”

A smile played about Rupert’s lips. “I’m quite sure it does.”

He outright laughed when Anya primly responded with one word. “Good.”

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Willow was quiet on the walk home, while the two older women chatted softly. She hardly needed the escort since it was mid-morning by the time everything had been squared away and the women were ready to leave. Kait had checked on the babies just before, declaring them healthy and developmentally fine.

So here she was, walking home with the others trailing behind her, their voices no more than quiet buzzing in her ears.

For the first time since losing her powers, Willow felt like she had a purpose. While it wasn’t what she had become used to, at least it was something. It gave her some hope. What didn’t offer any hope at all was how she’d been ignored by both Buffy and Tara. Neither one of the girls had spoken to her and Buffy hadn’t even looked at her. It hurt.

She knew they were both angry. She understood that. The damage – the way she’d hurt both of them – was almost too great to overcome. There wasn’t anything she could do to change it, though, because that would just cause even more hurt. What was done, was done.

How could she apologize when the wounds were deeper than any she could imagine?

There was no way. And it finally dawned on Willow that she’d caused all this pain.

It was all on her conscience.

And that was the bitterest pill of all.

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Nicholson held the door for Travers and Ian Darrow as the two men followed him into the suite. The doctor was still stunned by the revelations about his patient and he was listening intently as Travers elaborated on the explanation Giles had given him.

The questions he’d posed had, so far, been intelligent, well-thought, and insightful. They were also probing and putting Travers more and more on the spot.
More than once during their conversation, Nicholson had been forced to suppress a grin. Though the old man was in his element, expounding on what the Council was, their objective and the whole reason for a Slayer; it was obvious the doctor wasn’t cowed by his gravitas.

As he closed the door behind them, Nicholson abruptly realized what Travers was doing. *The old man is recruiting.*

Darrow was a perfect candidate. Unmarried, no children, no extensive family ties, a highly-skilled and qualified physician, who didn’t happen to be squeamish or flinch in the face of the new and strange. Eyeing the doctor with dispassion, Nicholson gauged how fit he was. Judging his age to be about late thirties to early forties, Nicholson could see why Travers would think the man might prove a decent candidate. A hair below Nicholson’s six foot one, and the bare beginnings of a less active lifestyle starting to show, Darrow was a more than decent prospect. He was obviously smart, skilled, and adaptable, qualities the Council always looked for.

He caught the look on Travers’ face, realizing the chairman was waiting for his assessment. When he nodded, Travers smiled thinly.

“Come, doctor, I’m sure you’re in need of a hot shower and some rest. Shall we meet again,” Travers checked his pocket watch, “Say about half two?”

It was clear Darrow was going to decline until a wide, jaw-cracking yawn stretched his mouth. “Oh dear, pardon me.” Registering the offer only at face value, Darrow agreed. “Very well, sir. I’ll see you both then.”

His room door was barely closed behind him when Travers handed Nicholson a glass of whiskey. “An interesting evening, don’t you agree?”

“Rather, sir.” Nicholson lifted the tumbler to his lips. “Was this really the right course of action, sir?”

“Bit late to be re-thinking things, John.” Travers sipped his scotch slowly. “This is the path your actions put us on. Why question it now?”

It was the opening Nicholson wanted. “True, but why did you follow it? It’s hardly your style.”

“Ah, Nicholson, you forget. This Council has been mired in tradition for centuries, moving forward only when outside elements force radical change.” Travers settled onto one of the chairs, facing his protégé. “When I joined the Council following the Second World War, I was determined to change nearly everything.” A rueful sigh shook him. “Unfortunately, the old guard in charge wouldn’t allow it.”

“I’d no idea.” Nicholson dropped into the chair opposite.

The warm smile Travers directed at him undermined his harsh words. “Yes, well, Council history was never your strong suit.”

Nicholson could feel the embarrassment bloom on his face. He couldn’t deny the observation – he hadn’t paid all that much attention during those particular lectures. At the time, he’d thought them more than boring, they were utterly stultifying to his twenty-something brain.
About to respond, he was interrupted when Travers continued, “That is neither here nor there. The truth is, I must either adapt or relinquish control of the Council to younger, less tempered men.” He paused, closely watching for Nicholson’s reaction. “And that is something I’m not quite prepared for yet.”

John was tempted to respond, though some inner instinct had him merely nodding in understanding. He had a lot to think about, knowing Travers was onto all the scheming and subterfuge within the ranks.

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After the witches had gone, Dawn and Connor switched babies, each holding their respective, younger counterpart. Connor was intently staring at the boy, his eyes riveted on the tiny features.

“What are you looking at?” They were facing each other on the bed and Dawn had been watching Connor instead of the baby in her arms.

“Who do you think he looks like? I think she looks more like Buffy.” Connor shifted so they were sitting side by side, his gaze roving from one baby to the other.

“Not sure. It’s kinda hard to tell, coz they’re so small.” Dawn shrugged, cooing when the infant pair blinked up at them. “Her eyes are so blue!”

“No, they’re green.” Connor prodded the baby, making her open her eyes again. “See, they’re just like Buffy’s.”

Dawn laid the baby girl down on the bed and she protested a little, screwing up her mouth, preparing to cry. Her eyes popped open and both teens jumped a little.

“Whoa! Did you see that?”

“See what?” Spike’s tired voice sounded from the doorway, startling them.

“Gah! Don’t do that!” Dawn jumped off the bed, hands on her hips. “You need a bell.”

“Not so loud, Dawnie, I’m really pooped.” Buffy grumbled from behind Spike, sounding equally exhausted.

“Yeah, you look like hell.” Lifting the baby up, Dawn stepped away from the bed. “You should lie down.”

“That’s why we’re here.”

Somehow sensing their mother’s proximity, the two previously quiescent infants started mewling and whining. Stumbling tiredly toward the bed, Buffy gestured for one of the babies. “Give me one and try to keep the other calm.”

“What are you gonna do?” Connor got up from the bed, reluctantly handing the boy over to Spike.
“They have to nurse. And Kait seems to think the best thing for them is me.” Buffy pointed to the burping cloth on the changing table, trying to get herself and the baby settled. “She thinks that’s one of the reasons why you were always so hungry.”

“What?” Confusion colored both teens voices as they spoke in tandem.

“Superhuman babies needed superhuman food, or some such.” Spike paced back and forth, holding the infant on his shoulder. The baby quieted, nuzzling against his father’s neck.

Understanding came swiftly to Dawn. “Huh. I guess that makes sense.”

“Only time will tell.” Buffy eased the baby under the cloth, peeking to make sure she aligned the tiny mouth with her nipple.

“I was hungry?” Connor voiced the question stuck in his head.

“Always.” Dawn sighed. “Dude, it felt like all we did was feed you every hour.”

Her comment embarrassed him, which angered Connor a little. “Wasn’t really my fault,” he retorted. He shrugged, moving toward the door. “Sorry.”

Spike stepped in front of him, blocking his way. “Wasn’t like that, pup.” He shot a dark look at the other teen. “All babies are like that. Nothin’ but appetites, is what they are.”

“Oh.” The defensive stance deflated and Connor’s shoulders drooped a little.

Buffy laughed, then quipped, “Dawnie made up for it, because she’s still constantly eating.”

“Haha. Funny.” Dawn started to flounce away, but Buffy called her back.

“Can you take her? She’s asleep but she needs changing.” Handing her up to Dawn, Buffy gestured Spike over. “Thanks, Dawnie.”

Luckily for all of them, once fed the twins stayed asleep, even through the diaper changes. Buffy was asleep before Dawn laid the baby boy down and she and Connor slipped quietly from the room, hoping not to disturb any of them.

It wasn’t until the teens were out in the hallway that Dawn realized – “How stupid are we?”

“What?” Connor looked at her like she was insane. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“We forgot to ask their names!”

They stared at each other for a few seconds, then broke into barely suppressed laughter.
Walking the familiar route between Buffy’s house and the Magic Box, Riley found his thoughts drifting to the past. Countless times he’d traveled this way during his first time in Sunnydale. When their original orders to move operations here were given, Riley hadn’t understood why. Understanding dawned, though, when he’d been on location for less than a week. Sunnydale was a hot spot for hostile activity – the hot spot – even better than Quantico was. He’d quickly grown to love the town.

Once he’d met Buffy, he could see himself in Sunnydale for good. While it wasn’t a big town, there was more than enough going on to satisfy someone like him. The fact it was his girlfriend’s hometown only made it better.

Yet somehow it had all gone wrong.

Buffy didn’t turn out to be quite the perfect fit he’d thought she was. Slowly but surely, everything around him unraveled, became unglued. Too much changed too quickly and he wasn’t able to keep up. Within a few months, he’d gone from Maggie Walsh’s – and The Initiative’s – fair-haired boy to being an outcast and fugitive.

Eventually, it got so bad that nothing made sense but the military. His relationship with Buffy fell apart completely, his career seemed almost irretrievable. And then his health failed. All those drugs and supplements Walsh had pumped into him damaged his heart and it all crashed. Buffy’s lack of support during that time just highlighted how empty their relationship had become.

That emptiness had driven him to seek validation elsewhere. It probably wasn’t the smartest thing in the world to look for what he craved with vampires, but Riley laid the blame for that particular kink right at Buffy’s feet. The startling information that his girlfriend had slept with a vampire had severely impacted his self-esteem. Part of The Initiative’s testing was vampire stamina, reaction to stimuli; which invariably led to sex. Riley had seen how vampires responded to sexual stimuli and he’d been shocked.

He’d always felt threatened because of Buffy’s strength and skill. Her abilities wounded his pride and sense of self-worth. Those things had taken another beating with the discovery of her past. Watching the increasing sexual tension between his girlfriend and Hostile Seventeen only made matters worse. There were times he could almost see the passion between them.

In order to preserve what little sense of self he had left, Riley felt he had no other option except to leave. There was only a twinge of guilt when he’d issued that last ultimatum to Buffy, although at the time, he’d believed it was justified. Buffy’s response hadn’t really disappointed him. He’d expected her to react exactly as she had.

So he’d gone, attempting to put Sunnydale and his disastrous relationship with Buffy behind him. Weaning himself off vampire floozies wasn’t easy, but his buddies – especially Graham – were there for him. He’d thrown himself back into The Initiative in an effort to prove himself all over again. In that process he’d become more zealous, become the best Initiative officer; began believing wholeheartedly in the mission.

Never expecting to set foot in Sunnydale again, Riley had begun the long, slow path to restoring his psyche. Xander’s letter opened a score of barely healed over wounds, but it was Buffy’s request that truly had him bleeding again. Seeing her in person wasn’t at all the way he’d imagined.

She’d moved on.
Unfortunately, she’d moved on with Hostile Seventeen. Worse, she was happy. Happy and – unbelievably so – heavily pregnant.

Initially revenge hadn’t been on his mind.

But the hurt and anger and disgust had all swirled together in his gut, forming a hard core of hate and Riley hadn’t bothered to tamper it.

Compassion, understanding, and acceptance all burned away in the face of his anger and disdain. Spike didn’t deserve Buffy, or anything else.

That disgusting thing had stepped into Riley’s place, taken the life he – Riley Finn – deserved. This was the life he should have been living with Buffy.

Anger had drive him to the decision to remove the abominations Buffy was carrying.

It was disgusting.

Whatever it was in her belly had to go, and Spike had to die.

It was that simple.

Riley didn’t know how they’d beaten him and his men, but this couldn’t be the end. He had to think of some way to survive this, had to escape.

Because this wasn’t the end.

He was going to get away.

And Spike was going to suffer.

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She didn’t feel the blanket being pulled up over her shoulder. Didn’t feel the mattress shift beneath another body.

Never felt the body lay down beside her. Nor did she feel the kiss that was brushed on her shoulder, or the arm that slid around her waist.

She didn’t feel any of that, but somehow, through the exhaustion and deep sleep, Tara knew she wasn’t alone anymore, so she settled further into the arms holding her and slept easier.

Oz pulled her close, satisfied with his decision to return.
Two Brachens – off duty detectives – arrived at noon to relieve them, giving Lawson and George a chance to sack out and get some sleep, though neither of them went very far; only downstairs to the basement, where Spike had put in a small makeshift bedroom. While Sam trusted the Brachens, he also knew Spike wouldn’t blame anyone but him if something went wrong, and he’d rather not tempt Spike’s temper.

Finn and Miller were secured by chains to different pieces of training equipment, although only Finn was gagged. By using the Watcher’s name, Miller had bought himself something of a reprieve, though not enough for them to let him roam free. Unlike his counterpart, Miller seemed to understand exactly what their situation was.

Sam settled down to sleep on one of the cots after leaving instructions for the Brachens to wake them in case of any problems. Not that he was anticipating any, since they’d pretty much neutralized any potential difficulties during the night. But Sam had learned in the long years since his turning, whenever something appeared over and done with, that’s when things could really go south. That lesson had only been driven home even more forcefully in his short time on the Hellmouth. He’d learned to be very wary and careful. Spike would have his head if Finn escaped.

The last thing he wanted to do was disappoint Spike. That could be deadly.

Kennedy had watched while the vampires herded the two soldiers away from Buffy’s house, wondering what they were planning.
Before she’d been Called, she never would have dreamed she’d be placed in this position. Nor could Kennedy believe the Council would side with any vampires.

What the Council had done had disgusted her.

It also confused her.

For the last four years, ever since she’d been identified, the Council had drilled two things into her. Slay vampires. Slay demons.

No one had ever told her differently.

So why were they allowing these vampires to stay undusty? Why did they get a pass?

What made these vampires so damn unique?

Not trusting the vampires to let the humans live, Kennedy trailed them.

It wasn’t until they were walking down the main street toward the shop that Kennedy finally got her bearings.

What the hell is going on now? I thought this shop belonged to Summers’ Watcher? Why are the vamps bringing these guys here? Why haven’t they killed them?

Kennedy clutched the stake in her hand, creeping as close as she dared. She could barely see through the darkened interior, but it looked like the vampires were leading the soldiers further inside, where she couldn’t see at all.

More confused than ever, Kennedy hunkered down to watch.

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Just about five hours after the twins were fed, they woke their parents by mewling loudly. Spike heard them first and he was up and out of bed before Buffy could even react.

They were side by side, wrapped together into one multi-colored blanket. It was obviously not a new one and he detected the faint scent of lavender. He wondered if it had been Buffy’s and the thought made him smile. His woman liked to play it tough by hiding her emotions behind an impenetrable facade, but that was just a cover to hide how deeply she felt.

It was just one of the many things they had in common. The two tiny beings in the crib were merely the latest.

The mewls changed in timbre, becoming full-throated whines, and Spike realized he didn’t have any time to muse about them. They were demanding to be fed and – he sniffed again – have their diapers changed.

Since they were now squalling equally, Spike decided he would hand the pink bundle off to Buffy,
who was finally beginning to stir. His baby boy was soaking wet by the time Spike got back to him, needing a full change of outfit.

Buffy was mumbling sleepily and he realized with a chuckle, they were in sync, yet again. She was busily checking fingers and toes, while he was doing exactly the same thing.

Once the baby was changed, all warm and dry, Spike lifted him easily. Swapping infants with Buffy, he paused, watching her for a moment. “Are we set with names, kitten?”

She glanced up at him, a sleepy smile playing on her lips. “Your father and my grandfather, right?”

“Yeah.” He hefted the baby girl, smiling down at all three of them. “An’ what about princess?”

Instead of answering directly, Buffy marveled, “I can’t believe she’s here. I thought she’d changed everything and we’d lose her.” Her free hand brushed over their baby boy’s cheek, and though the baby blinked, he didn’t stop suckling. “She has to be our girl.”

Spike paused while changing her, turning back to look at Buffy. “Not sure how all that works, but makes sense she’d have to be here first to make the change, yeah?” The rapid pattering of her tiny heart thrummed beneath his fingers and Spike caught her changeable eyes staring up at him. “Hullo there, princess.”

The baby gurgled at him happily and Spike nuzzled her belly.

“I want her to have my mother’s name.”

“Tha’s fine, love. Don’t mind that ‘t’all. Your mum was a fine woman.” He nuzzled the baby again, reveling in her scent. “Can’t do wrong that way.”

Buffy pressed kisses onto their boy’s palm. “So we’re good?”

Spike lifted a dry and dressed baby girl, turning to face her mother. “Appears so, kitten.”

“Good.” The sight of him holding one of their infants formed a lump in her throat, and Buffy could barely get her next words out. “I wish my mom could see this.”

“Whassat?”

A teary giggle bubbled out and Buffy wiped away a few stray tears. “This. Us. All of us. You!” She gasped for breath. “You’re covered in powder!”

Spike looked down at himself. A fine sheen of baby powder covered his bare chest and the dark sleep pants he’d put on before rising.

“Bollocks.”
A low groan filled the room, followed by soft grumbles. Bed springs protested loudly as the occupants shifted. The mattress was off-kilter, opposite corners hanging off the box spring. Sheets and clothing were strewn about the room, covering most of the floor area.

“IT’s a damn good thing you bought this place.” Faith sat up, reaching for something to put on. “Otherwise you’d be thrown out.”

Jenner ran his hand down her bare back, smirking at her shivered response. “Just me? Takes two, baby.”

“You’re the one with the control issues.” She moved away, getting up gingerly.

There was an edge to her voice that he didn’t like, but Jenner didn’t bother to answer, knowing that anything he said could provoke another argument. They spent as much time fighting as they did fucking, and though one invariably led to the other, Jenner wasn’t in the mood. He wanted to just be, relaxing in the moment, grateful that everyone – especially Faith – had made it through the latest fiasco.

Faith moved about the hotel room, kicking over clothing, looking for something, yet not finding anything to her satisfaction. She wasn’t all that hard to figure out – once he knew what to look for. His Slayer hated being needed, but craved it all the same. Wanted love – to give and receive it – but had no idea what real love was about. What it meant. Even how to accept it.

He had issues?

A mental snicker of amusement rolled through his brain. Jenner was willing to admit part of Faith’s assumption was true, only not the way she’d meant it.

He knew how short life could be. He’d watched too many of his loved ones slip away; all the while aching because they refused his offer, refused to be turned. It had broken his heart when Susana refused the change. Her reasons hadn’t made sense to him, at times they still didn’t, and no matter how hard he’d pleaded and begged her, he hadn’t been able to persuade her differently – no matter what argument he’d used.

Faith’s fears ruled her and Jenner knew she was afraid of getting too close, of needing him more than he needed her. And try as he might, Jenner also knew no amount of verbal reassurance would ease her mind. Court-ordered counseling in prison had helped somewhat, but Faith still had a lot to work through.

Her vulnerability, hidden behind hostility and bravado, drew him. Faith was a complex, conflicted woman. Being a Slayer gave her the physical strength to keep everyone at bay, yet being a Slayer also highlighted her emotional weaknesses.

Jenner tracked her movements as she traipsed into the bathroom. He sat up, scrubbing a hand through his short hair. Sitting on the edge of the mattress, staring down at his feet, he faced the truth.

Despite her shortcomings and, perhaps even because of them, Jenner loved her.

He just didn’t know if he’d ever be able to tell her.

He didn’t know how long it would be before she left – because she would leave him.
And if I don’t let her go, she may never come back.

By unspoken agreement, singly and in small groups, everyone began making their way back to the small house on Revello Drive. Giles and Anya were the first to arrive, carting supplies of both the consumable and highly useful – a case of preemie diapers being just one of the items they brought – type.

Surprisingly enough, Xander wasn’t far behind them, bringing along a peace offering for Buffy in the form of flowers and gifts for the twins.

Only Dawn and Connor were awake when the first wave arrived, however by the time Xander knocked on the door, Tara was awake. Xander had worried about his reception, given how chilly it had been just the day before, but judging by Dawn’s reaction, he needn’t have been. She squealed softly over the flowers, grabbing his arm and pulling him into the living room. “Oh! Xander, these flowers are gorgeous!”

The flowers were impossible to hide, though Xander had no trouble concealing the bottle of Jack Daniels or the cigars. Those were in his backpack, and he was fully prepared to eat crow and offer Spike his thanks for the timely rescue and congratulations.

Connor eyed him warily as he moved over, letting Xander sit beside him on the couch. “Hey Dawnie, have you seen Oz?”

She shrugged, not sure exactly where Oz was, but preferring to keep her suspicions to herself. Dawn had no problem playing dumb for Xander, since Oz’ sleeping arrangements weren’t really Xander’s business. He wouldn’t understand anyway. Coz I’m not really sure I understand, but hey, this is my life. Freaky is so the norm!

Anya and Tara were rattling around in the kitchen, their voices nothing more than indistinct murmurs while Giles was in the dining room cleaning up the mess from the night before. It fell to Wesley to engage Xander in polite conversation.

“How is Cordelia these days?” Though he’d grown more comfortable – less stuffy, and much more at ease with himself – Wesley was not a gifted conversationalist, and his awkwardness sometimes still shone through. Even as he was asking, Wesley winced at his own stilted attempt to be sociable.

“She’s doing okay. Every day she’s a little bit better.” Xander shifted in his seat, unsure how to respond.

“That’s good.” Wesley was at a loss, though he felt Xander’s willingness to return in order to help Buffy spoke volumes about his maturity. “And yourself? How are you getting along?”

Xander appreciated Wesley’s pitiful attempts to make him at ease, and for the first time, he warmed considerably. “Good. Got a job working with a big construction firm.” At Wesley’s encouraging expression, he continued, “Just got a promotion to crew chief. So it’s good.”
Dawn chirped in then, smiling brightly. “That’s great, Xand.”

The doorbell rang, interrupting whatever else any one of them might have said. They all froze for an instant, looking from one to the other when Connor huffed with exasperation. “Can’t one of you figure out how to answer the damn door?”

He stepped around and over their feet, arriving at the door just ahead of Giles. “Got it, Pops.”

Xander’s surprised exclamation of “Pops!” drowned out whoever was at the door, but Connor’s surly, “What the hell do you want?” wasn’t.


The former Watcher ushered the three men inside, waiting until they were past Connor before he whapped the teen on the back of his head. “Completely out of order, young man. You will apologize.”

Duly chastised, Connor grimaced, knowing Giles wouldn’t back down until he did as instructed. Waiting for the older men to take their seats around the dining room table, Connor mumbled his apology. He was about to walk away when Spike’s voice from the top of the stairs halted him.

“Do it again, pup, this time so they can hear you.”

Connor’s groan echoed throughout the two rooms. He knew better than to complain, so he shuffled his feet and ducked his head in an effort to prolong the inevitable. When he caught sight of the expression on Spike’s face, he inhaled deeply and spoke. “Right. I’m sorry for my rudeness.”

Travers recovered quickly and let the boy off the hook. “You’re forgiven.”

Spike came completely down the stairs, laid a hand on Connor’s shoulder, squeezing just hard enough to let the boy know he really was forgiven. “Go on and see if Buffy needs a hand.”

Shooting a look over his shoulder at Dawn, Connor raced up the steps. Realizing belatedly what had just happened, Dawn yelped out, “HEY!”, then raced after him.

“Someone care to tell me why you all decided to come here?” Spike wasted no time getting to the point. He’d expected the Scoobies to show, however the Council representatives were something of a surprise. A rather unwelcome one considering they had yet to decide what to do about Finn and the other Initiative soldiers.

The short silence that fell was only broken by the sound of thundering footsteps upstairs and the rather enthusiastic slamming of doors.

“We came to offer our congratulations. And,” Travers indicated the satchel Nicholson laid on the table, “We’ve brought some reading for Giles.”

“What’s that?” Spike leaned against the wall, eyes fixed on Travers.

“The Council’s copy of the Pergamum Codex.” Travers saw no point in being coy, or lying.
These people were, after all, the Council’s newest allies. While most of the Codex had been translated, there were still parts that, so far, had defied their efforts at translation. Perhaps Giles would have more success.

Additionally, Travers was convinced portions of it referred specifically to Buffy Summers.

“You’ve brought me the complete copy?” Giles held himself back, but only just. “Why?”

“I believe it will prove useful.” Travers allowed his gaze to travel from one ex-patriot to another. “Indeed.” Giles wasn’t fooled. “How many?”

The older man sighed, his age beginning to catch up with his fatigue, motioning Giles forward. “At least four.”

“That many prophecies?” Wesley pointed to the satchel. “All regarding Buffy?”

“It is possible.”

Spike snorted, shaking his head. “Tha’s just bloody fuckin’ wonderful.”

Xander waited only a few moments for Wesley’s attention to drift toward the conversation in the dining room before grabbing the vase of flowers and heading up the stairs after the teenagers. The second floor hadn’t changed all that much from the days when he and the girls hung out all the time, but what changes there were, were dramatic.

Buffy no longer slept in her old room at the front of the house; instead she and Spike had taken over Joyce’s old room, while Connor used Buffy’s.

He could hear the soft murmur of voices coming from the master bedroom, so he followed the sounds. Completely uncertain of his reception, Xander hesitated before knocking.

Moments later the door was flung open and once again, Xander was face to face with an overly protective teen. Connor glared at him, his blue eyes full of distrust. “What are you doing up here?”

Buffy’s voice sounded from deep inside the room. “Connor, knock it off.”

“It’s that guy.” Clearly Connor wasn’t prepared to forgive Xander, even though he barely knew him.

Dawn caught sight of Xander in the doorway and lightly shoved Connor aside. “Hey, Xander.”

“Let him in, Connor.” Buffy pulled a light sweater on over her loose tank top as she walked toward the crib. “It’s okay.”

“Hey, Buffy.” Xander thrust the vase forward. “I brought flowers. And other gifts. But I left those downstairs.” He abruptly realized he was starting to babble, so he audibly shut his mouth.
The small, sad smile on his face brought Buffy up short. She recognized the expression – Xander was afraid of being rejected. She’d seen the look many a time on his face. A part of Buffy wanted to do just that, but she couldn’t. He’d somehow managed to return, offering to help her without even knowing the full story, which was a start. And it went a long way toward an apology.

So she gushed over the flowers, knowing they were a peace offering. “Oohh! So pretty.” Buffy took the vase, inhaling the scents deeply. “Thank you.”

Luckily, all the normal clutter which usually adorned her bedroom hadn’t returned, so there was room for the vase on the bedside dresser. Buffy placed it there, then gestured Xander toward the crib. “Come look.”

He’d watched her, his mind registering all the changes to the room, but mostly Xander marked the changes in Buffy herself. She was calmer, less anxious, and though she looked beyond tired, her smile was bright and real. Brighter than he could remember it being for a very long time. It was sobering; when he tried to recall the last time he’d seen that kind of smile on Buffy’s face, he couldn’t.

He followed her to the crib and let his eyes drift down. At first he didn’t actually see what she was exclaiming about, then his brain processed the objects in front of him.

They were tiny. Pink cheeked and, oh, so tiny. “Ah! Little! Wow, Buff!”

Xander shut up again, aware he was spewing senseless word salad. Taking a moment to compose himself, Xander focused on the infants. When he finally had himself under control, he started whispering, “Congratulations, Buffy. They’re cute kids, even if they are Spike’s.”

Belatedly realizing he’d just stuck his foot in his mouth again, Xander started to splutter out an apology.

Buffy was holding up a hand, laughter sparkling in her eyes. “It’s okay, Xand, I know you’re trying. But trust me,” she laughed, her eyes landing on Dawn, “We already knew Spike and I make pretty babies.”

“Huh? Wha? How?” Xander glanced from one Summers to another, clearly confused.

Connor laughed. “He doesn’t know? Dude, that’s funny.”

“Know what?” Xander’s bewildered expression had even Dawn snickering.

“The Initiative took DNA from me and Spike, which the monks stole.”

Buffy didn’t need to say anything more, because Xander immediately got the message.


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It took every ounce of restraint he’d ever possessed for Giles to resist snatching up the ancient
volume. As it was, he could barely contain himself.

“Are you certain it’s an original?” He hesitated from reaching for it, allowing his hand to drop onto the table’s surface.

Travers opened the satchel carefully, drawing out the moment. “Althenea and two others have verified its origins. As have two historians. I’m confident this is an original.”

“And you feel comfortable leaving it here?” When Travers merely nodded his head, Giles – and Wesley – breathed out a sigh of relief. “Very well.”

Gently pushing the deceptively small book across the tabletop, Travers explained his decision. “There are numerous prophecies contained inside these pages. And while some are quite cryptic, none are nearly as difficult as Nostradamus. You’ll find it fairly easy to interpret.”

He inhaled deeply, continuing, “That being said, there is, as you know, a series of quatrains describing a set of circumstances that could occur—” He hesitated, his gaze drifting from one fellow Englishmen to another. “And we believe that sequence began with Miss Summers’ defeat of Glorificus.”

Travers let that hang in the air for a moment, eyes intently on Giles. “If that is the case, then you, Rupert, should have a complete Pergamum in your possession.”

The silence was all encompassing for long moments, until finally Giles broke it. “It’s been many years since I read the quatrains. Are you certain?”

As Travers was about to answer his question, Buffy’s voice broke into the conversation. “Certain about what?”

All eyes focused on her and she smiled, though it appeared a little forced. Unconsciously she patted the baby in her arms, repeating her question when no one answered. “What’s to be certain about?”

“The Pergamum Codex.” Wesley answered, pulling back one of the chairs for her to sit on.

“Gee, I haven’t heard of that one in a long time. What’s the big deal now?” Buffy sat, easing the infant down from her shoulder to cradle him in her arms.

“Travers is leavin’ us a copy.” Spike lifted the baby girl easily away from Dawn, ignoring her whiny protest.

“Oh. Great. Good.” Buffy mocked sarcastically, scrunching up her nose. “Can’t we have one day of baskin’ and non-crisis-havin’ before we run into the next big thingie?”

Wesley looked up sharply, catching the wistful look in Buffy’s eyes. Correctly reading her mood, he motioned to Giles, “Agreed. I’m sure we can sacrifice a few days of preparedness in order to bask in our current state.”

Giles snorted when Spike muttered, “Layin’ it on a bit thick, Oxford. Don’t go too overboard.”

Buffy’s “He’s just being nice, Mr. Gloomypants,” was drowned out by Wesley’s quick backtracking.
Several conversations broke out at once, though it was Dawn who finally brought the entire group around to what was, at least in her mind, the most important issue at hand.

“This is really kind of important and all, but could you please – please! – tell me what their names are?”

Everyone stopped talking, realizing that none of them knew – in fact, had no inklings at all – what Buffy and Spike were naming the babies.

Spike grinned, sharing a look with Buffy, though he let her do the talking. She lifted the baby up, showing him to everyone. “This is James Robert and that,” pointing to the baby in Spike’s arms, “Is Joyce Kirsten.”

Connor groaned, pushing at Dawn when she smirked and teased him with, “I told you so!”

Giles stared at Buffy for a moment, his glasses in hand and a smile on his face. “Lovely names, Buffy. James and Joyce.”

It took him scant seconds, then Giles shook his head. “Really, Spike? James and Joyce?”

A big grin broke out on the vampire’s features and he shared a laugh with Wesley. “Didn’t take nearly as long as I ‘xpected it would.”

Laughter and congratulations filled the air, everyone bestowing kisses on Buffy and shaking Spike’s hand. Nicholson was the last to offer congratulations to Spike, but he’d designed it that way. The room was mostly quiet, though Anya and Tara were cooing over the infants, their voices soft and low. “Congratulations, Bayham.”

Spike stopped short, drawing attention. “What?”

Nicholson repeated himself. “Congratulations, Bayham.”

“Wait. What did you call him?” Buffy looked from one to the other, confused by Spike’s reaction.

“No one’s used that title in years.” A hard look entered Spike’s eyes and Nicholson blanched. “What gave you the notion to use it now?”

Nicholson cleared his throat, suddenly realizing his timing might have been faulty, though he was convinced by the reaction that his hunch was correct. “My apologies. Perhaps I am mistaken.”

Neither confirming nor denying whether Nicholson was incorrect, Spike asked him again, “An’ why did you think you could use it?”

“My great-grandfather was Sir William Gull.”

That was all he said, which drew strange looks from everyone, especially Wesley and Giles. Buffy wasn’t paying attention to anyone except Spike. His expression was caught between chagrin and something she would have called wistfulness. It was gone in an instant, though; his eyes darkening and the set of his jaw firming before she truly identified the look.

He growled out a question. “An’ that’s supposed to mean somethin’?”
“He kept copious notes in his journals, even after his stroke.” Before Spike could bluster his way out, Nicholson dropped another bombshell. “There were also some portraits.”

He hesitated a moment, adding, “There was also a lovely note from the dowager Marchioness of Camden.”

Their exchange caught everyone’s attention, although it was Wesley who interrupted first. “Doctor Gull? Wasn’t he suspected of being Jack the Ripper?”

Nicholson bristled visibly, snapping, “It wasn’t him. He’d suffered a massive stroke a few years before the murders and he couldn’t have done any of them.”

His vehemence was understandable, especially if, as he claimed, the man was his great-grandfather. However, it was Wesley’s comment that jogged some information in Giles’ head. “Did you know the doctor, Spike?”

Instead of answering him, Spike directed his answer to Buffy, his eyes never leaving her face. “Wanted to tell you this in time, Slayer. Not have you find out like this.”

He shifted the baby on his shoulder, feeling awkward and on display. “Sir William was my mother’s physician. She was sickly – had consumption. What you’d know as tuberculosis.”

Buffy nodded, letting him know she was following him, though the fear he’d confess to being Jack the Ripper was there, lurking in the back of her mind. His next words alleviated that fear. “Wasn’t me. Wasn’t Angelus, either.”

A deep sigh shook him and his smile was self-deprecating. “Wasn’t the same. Was a different sort of man.”

He was struggling with something, that much was clear. Rescue came from a very unexpected source. “My lord? Perhaps if I?” Nicholson hesitated, but at Spike’s off-handed nod, he took up the story.

“My – Sir William Gull treated all sorts of patients, though was best known for being a Royal Physician.”

And suddenly, Buffy could see where this was going. Sparkles of mirth filled her eyes and a bright smile teased her lips. Everyone else was watching Nicholson except for Buffy and Dawn. Their gazes were fixed on Spike.

“The Marchioness of Camden was a widow, with adult children. Her oldest son, the Earl, had died before his son reached the age of five. Her youngest son handled all the family’s estates. At least until he disappeared.”

“What year was that?” Giles asked the question, though he suspected he already knew the answer.

“Just after Guy Fawkes day in 1880. Isn’t that right, sir?” Nicholson looked to Spike for confirmation of the date.

Spike shrugged, not wanting to answer.
“Lady Anne was heartbroken, as she was very close to her son, William.”

Silence reigned for long moments. Comprehension was dawning, because all eyes riveted on Spike, who was becoming more and more agitated as the silence stretched out. Finally he exploded, “Bloody hell! Enough!”

He looked around helplessly for a moment, completely at a loss. His eyes settled on Buffy, who was staring back at him. “Was a very long time ago, pet.”

Before all the questions could start again, Spike dumped the baby into Dawn’s arms and stormed from the room.
As man sows, so shall he reap.  
In works of fiction, such men are sometimes converted.  
More often, in real life, they do not change their natures until they are converted into dust.  
Charles W. Chesnutt

Hunger, revenge, to sleep are petty foes,  
But only death the jealous eyes can close.  
William Wycherley

Love has its place, as does hate.  
Peace has its place, as does war.  
Mercy has its place, as do cruelty and revenge.  
Meir Kahane

Revenge is an act of passion; vengeance of justice.  
Injuries are revenged; crimes are avenged.  
Samuel Johnson

Jealousy is the fear of comparison.  
Max Frisch

It's amazing the clarity that comes with psychotic jealousy.  
Rupert Everett

Jealousy - that jumble of secret worship and ostensible aversion.  
Emile M. Cioran

He was exactly where she’d expected him to be, under the shade of the big tree in the backyard. The screen door banged twice after she pushed through it, though he didn’t react. His eyes were unfocused, fixed on an internal vision and Buffy made no move to interrupt his thoughts.

Content, for once, to wait him out, she sat next to him. Whatever it was eating at him, he was more likely to let it slip sooner, rather than hold his tongue and let it fester.

No more than ten minutes passed and his quiet voice broke the silence. Haltingly at first, then gaining speed as he went on, Spike retold his human family’s existence.

“Wasn’t old money, least until someone married into it. The titles were just as new. Family
earned them, kept at it. My father was the third Marquess of Camden, m’mother was his second wife. The first had three sons and I was the fourth. Never was expected to have the title. My older brothers died young though. John was barely thirty-five, an’ George wasn’t even thirty. Gordie – Joseph Gordon died when I was ten. Janet died soon after. She was only eight.”

He paused, still not looking at her. “Was just John’s widow, his infant son, Mother, an’ me.”

“John died when I was nineteen. His son was barely three months old. Mother and Alice were both confidants of the Queen – constantly at Court, until Mother fell ill.”

Her hand slipped through his and her head rested against his shoulder. At first, Spike resisted her silent attempt at comforting him, but his body knew hers and he slowly relaxed into her.

“Was a top scholar, bookish. Worse than Rupert ever was. Worse than Oxford. Since my brothers were all older – ” Once more he paused, embarrassed by his own past, his face flushed and voice tight. Buffy squeezed his arm, ducking her head away so he wouldn’t see the smile she couldn’t fight.

He’s too funny. I wonder if he realized how much of an airhead I was before I got Chosen. I was way worse than Cordelia ever was – but, wait! He was someone with a title? A title? What the heck does that mean?

Spike was speaking again and Buffy refocused her attention on him.

“Was a bit of a useless tit, before Drusilla found me. I managed the estates, which didn’t mean much more than approving what the managers an’ lawyers decided. Truth was, pet,” and he finally turned to look at her, “I was spoiled rotten by my mother. She’d lost everyone but Alice and young John, ‘cept me. I was hopeless, useless. Tied up in apron strings an’ a definite mother’s pet.”

Once more he fell silent, letting his words fade into the air. Spike didn’t want to reveal anymore, didn’t want to share anything else. Sharing what he had was difficult enough – how badly did she want to know the whole of it?

She’d said it once, just days ago, that she understood why he’d turned his mother, though Spike had no clue if she really, truly understood. What had emerged from his mother after had horrified even him. Spike never felt the urge to turn his entire family. Truth was, he’d loved his family, cared for the quite a few of the servants as well. The only ones he’d wanted to kill – the ones he’d hated even as a human – weren’t even close acquaintances. As much as he’d craved their respect and companionship, there had been a part of him that had held nothing but contempt for them.

His tormentors hadn’t been nice people, even if they had been members of society. They’d been worse than Xander. Which, he admitted, was telling.

Buffy stared back at him, no condemnation in her eyes, only acceptance.

“So what you’re saying is that you were a lot like Wesley was when I met him. All stiff upper lippy and pompous?”

A reluctant laugh burst from him. “No. Was too shy to be pompous, love. Was more like Red. Brainy and . . .”

“And not so confident.” Leave it to Buffy to put a better spin on it. She paused to play with the ring on her left hand. “I kinda figured that all out already.”
“Did you?” A skeptical look crossed his features and his scarred eyebrow arced in question.

“Gee, Spike – ‘I’ve always been bad’ was a dead give-away you were hiding something.” The sarcasm and air quotes weren’t lost on him. “I’m not that much of a ditz.” Buffy paused, realizing she caught herself. “Am I?”

This time his laughter was genuine, untinged by anything other than his amusement. “No, kitten, I had that sussed out in early days.”

“Really?” She bit her lip, flapping her eyelashes innocently.

“Really. Any chit who fought the way you did had to be having one on the competition.”

In response, Buffy stuck out her tongue, teasing him. “So why the shame?”

“Dunno, really. Getting turned allowed me to shed that shy boy an’ leave him behind. Did things as a vamp I’d only dreamed of. Traveled, shag. . . traveled.” Spike cursed his slip, knowing Buffy wouldn’t let that tidbit go.

“What? You never? Drusilla was? Really?” Her voice rose with every spluttered question, until his ears rang with her disbelief.

He pulled back from her, trying to bluster his way through, at least until he realized Buffy wasn’t buying his piss poor cover-up.

“Times were different. I was different. Wanted a wife, family. Just couldn’t make it work.” She almost missed his next words. “Couldn’t make anyone love me enough.”

The pang inside her heart constricted her breathing and unbidden tears welled up in her eyes. Buffy reached out her hand, bridging the gap to touch him, to bring him back to her. “Oh, Spike.”

There wasn’t anything else she knew to say, nothing she could think of. Buffy wanted to give him words, but, like always, they failed her. It was easier for her to show how she felt.

A wry smile crossed his lips, twisting with self-deprecation. He started to speak, but her thumb brushing over his lips made him pause. “Did you ever think it was because of them and not you?”

“Wha?” He looked genuinely confused, until she continued.

“Spike, you love – I don’t know how to – it’s just,” Her smile matched his now, but from out of the ether, Buffy finally hit upon the right thing to say. “No one’s ever loved me the way you do. You love with all of you and you love all of me. And maybe that’s why I love you just as much right back.”

Buffy didn’t wait this time for him to respond. She just wrapped her arms around him, her lips landing unerringly on his.
Unlike his erstwhile comrade, Graham Miller was harboring no illusions about his fate. There was nothing but a faint, distant hope nestled in his heart that his mention of Giles would delay his execution.

Graham knew the moment he’d surrendered that it was over. At the very least, his military career path with The Initiative was. If he somehow managed to survive the next twenty-four hours, his entire career might be salvageable.

As the hours wore on though, and no words were exchanged with his captors, Graham’s faint hope faded further and further away. He was going to die because he hadn’t done enough to block Riley. Had he called Washington a day earlier, this entire mess might have been averted. The only consolation he held was that he had tried, though it was precious little, and now looking back he realized it hadn’t been nearly enough.

He wasn’t gagged, and he’d been given water and latrine breaks, but he refused to beg. Finn hadn’t been given either of those things, nor had his gag been removed. Graham understood those concessions were dependent upon his continued good behavior.

So he kept his head down, eyes lowered and mouth shut, all the while praying for the smallest of reprieves. But he wasn’t banking on anything.

The vampire in charge appeared in the doorway to the training room, his features obscured by shadows. Without looking at either him or Finn, he addressed the others. “Get them up. Sun’s down.”

Graham knew he wouldn’t live to see another day.

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Thoroughly flustered when Buffy all but dumped her son in his arms, Wesley struggled to maintain his calm. She was after Spike like a shot, gone too fast for the others to follow. It was Dawn who broke the sudden silence, demanding imperiously, her gaze pinning Nicholson like a bug, “Explain.”

When it looked like a few of the others were going to interrupt, Dawn barked out, “Alone. No one else. Spike is who?”

“Viscount Bayham, the oldest male heir to the Marquess of Camden. Or he was.” Nicholson took a step back warily watching Dawn.

“Go on.”

“His mother was the dowager Marchioness of Camden, one of Queen Victoria’s most trusted confidants. Her daughter-in-law was one of the Queen’s ladies in waiting.” Elaborating further, the Scot continued, “Camden town in London was once part of their estates. It’s named for the Pratt family.”

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“Lawson’s on his way.”

They were still out on the back porch, Buffy’s head resting against Spike’s shoulder.

“Hmmm.” Buffy was basking in the stress-free moment, her mind blissfully blank. She didn’t really snap to until the back gate opened and Lawson stepped into the yard. “Oh.”

It wasn’t actually his presence, it was those with him. Trailing behind Lawson were Riley Finn and Graham Miller, followed by Rogan and two of the off-duty Brachens.

Before she could say anything, Spike said, “Know we haven’t talked about this, pet.” He waited briefly, watching Lawson come to a stop in the middle of the backyard. His voice was low, almost whisper soft. “It’s your decision, love. I’ll do whatever you think best.”

Buffy picked her head up, finally looking at the two Initiative officers. Her eyes settled on Riley, her mind whirling with disjointed thoughts. There was a time in her life when she’d thought he might have been it or at least she had tried to convince herself of that. She shook her head, minutely, trying to shake the cobwebs of fatigue and think clearly.

Did I ever really love him?

At some vague time in their relationship, she might have, but there had been too many issues between them. He’d lied to her, almost from the beginning. And he’d cheated.

Neither of those compared to his recent actions, though.

The lying could have been forgivable. Even the cheating might have been. But not both.

And this? This was not. He’d threatened her family. He put Dawn and Spike in danger. Riley put the two most innocent – Buffy couldn’t even think about it. Her throat dried up and her muscles tensed, while her heart rate rocketed and tears hazed her eyes.

Sitting up straight, Buffy pulled a little bit away from Spike.

I died to protect Dawn.

We killed Angel to protect her. I wanted Willow dead because of what she’d done. I loved Angel. And I loved Willow . . .

Those two babies inside were miracles.

It was her responsibility to protect the world from evil. It was doubly her responsibility to protect those babies from evil. Wherever it came from. Even if it came from someone she’d once cared about.

Still clutching Spike’s hand, Buffy slowly got to her feet. Spike’s gaze followed her and for a long minute, she refused to look at him. Her fingers tightened on his and following her lead, Spike rose to his feet. When he stood next to her, Buffy turned into his embrace. Breaking away from him, she said, loud enough for all of them to hear, “Do whatever you think you should.”
With one last quick hug, she left him alone on the porch.

“So Spike was somebody important?” Connor sent a confused glance around the room, not completely understanding everything Nicholson had said.

It was Giles who answered. “He was. His family was very influential and still is somewhat.” The glasses came off and Giles pinched the bridge of his nose. “I should have known.”

“How?” Dawn hugged – baby Joyce. Uh, no, that’s just weird. Kirsten – she’s definitely a Kirsten. “It’s not like Spike shared his life before being vamped. There’s no way you could have guessed this.”

“Well no, not this specifically, but I should have at least suspected part of this. Spike’s education alone should have alerted me to the fact.”

“But this doesn’t mean anything beyond knowing what Spike’s family was.” Wesley shifted the baby in his arms, getting to his feet. “He can’t claim any precedence over the current Earl, since, according to your information, his nephew survived.”

“True.” Nicholson scratched at his goatee, looking thoughtful. “I didn’t mean to cause a problem. I was–” He shook his head, belatedly realizing what he’d done bordered on rude. “I was trying to prove a theory. I never expected this.”

“Perhaps you should have thought this out a bit better.” The tone of Travers’ voice was a bit sharp, and Nicholson understood the reprimand for what it was.

Spike stood still, watching as Lawson pushed Finn closer. Did she just? She did. So now. . . what should I do?

Fool deserves to suffer.

There was no need to talk himself into rage, even twenty-four hours later, it still boiled just below the surface. Anger and the need for revenge swirled together in a maelstrom of emotions, sending his thoughts careening toward violence. He wasn’t one for torture, but even he could admit there were times the lessons learned from Angelus might come in handy.

Images flickered through his mind, snapshots of moments. Buffy, her eyes wide with confusion, sparkling with laughter, darkened with lust and that look, just this morning – a look he’d never seen on her face before. That look had been filled with awe and wonder and so much love he’d been humbled by it. She’d just finished nursing one of the twins and was reaching for the other and her face. . . Spike felt his heart clench just remembering that look.

Although it wasn’t just Buffy he thought of, no, for Dawn’s image was there also. His thoughts
took the same turn Buffy’s had just moments earlier. He had, and would kill to protect her again. 

*The twins* ... he’d tear apart the world to keep them safe.

And they weren’t the only ones he would kill for. *Glinda, Anya, hell, ‘d even kill for Rupert or the whelp, if push came to shove.*

To his credit, Finn didn’t falter once while Spike stood contemplating him. Didn’t flinch or move. The only indication that Finn might be worried came as Buffy closed the door behind her. His eyes had widened and his expression changed slightly, though that was all.

The other one Spike recognized easily. Miller had been part of the group that had captured him and though he’d been Walsh’s dog, he hadn’t treated him the way Finn or some of the others had. Miller had never made it personal. It was a job.

Spike also knew Miller had been the one to try and warn them of what Finn had been planning. It *might* be enough to save him.

“Set them loose.”

Sliding a knife through the zip cords binding the soldiers, Lawson raised his eyes to Spike, waiting stoically for his next order. Spike let his eyes drift over Finn, contempt and disdain riding his features. A feral light shined in his eyes and Spike smiled sardonically. “Give him a weapon.”

Lawson’s answering grin was equally dark having caught the look on Spike’s face and reached into his boot to hand Finn a wickedly sharp blade. With a silent nod to Spike, Lawson and the others faded back into the trees. After a look around at all the hostile faces, Graham stepped away from the two men facing each other.

Stepping down onto the grass, Spike’s nasty smile never wavered. “Here’s your chance, soldier boy.”

He crooked his hand, waving Finn closer, inviting him to attack.

Buffy only went as far as the back door, unwilling to return to the muted conversation in the dining room and equally unwilling to miss the confrontation brewing in the back yard. If the impossible happened and Riley somehow managed to gain the upper hand at any point, Buffy wanted to be there. Whether she would step in would only depend on the moment.

Riley might still be human, but he’d lost whatever humanity he may have once possessed. There was nothing left of the innocent, naive farm boy from Iowa. If there had been, he wouldn’t have concocted the plan to separate her from the babies, from Dawn or from Spike. That boy was long gone.

And Buffy felt nothing for the lack.

She watched dispassionately as Spike stepped off the deck and onto the grass.
Kennedy had trailed behind them, a frisson of awareness skittering along her spine every time she ventured too close. The demons had the upper hand, for now, though she stealthily weighed her options with each step. It took her long minutes to realize where they were headed, however when the landmarks got familiar and she recognized the houses, it was clear they were aiming straight for the Slayer’s house. A sneer of contempt twisted her lips at the thought. *Buffy Summers is no real Slayer.*

She allowed the demons to live. She lived with one. Slept with a vampire. And not just any vampire, she slept with the *only* vampire to have killed two Slayers. It disgusted her every time she thought about it.

Waiting while the vampires and their captives entered the yard, Kennedy searched for a way inside without alerting everyone to her presence. She circled around the house, listening intently at the windows, trying to identify the voices. The preponderance of English accents, in varying intensities, gave her momentary pause, since she easily identified Quentin Travers and thought she recognized one of the others, but Kennedy shook off the fleeting worry. *If they’ve allied themselves with the . . . with Buffy and her demon, too bad for them. Eventually it will come back to bite them.*

Not even registering her own pun, Kennedy backed away from the windows and looked upward. The roof overhang wasn’t that far out of her reach and she lightly sprung up, catching the edge easily. Pulling herself up and surveying the roof, she paused once again, plans running through her head. She needed to get up and over the peak, to the back of the house. Kennedy had a good idea what was going to happen to the soldiers and she needed to be in a position to stop it. Treading lightly over the rooftop, she quickly made her way to the back, in time to see one of the vampires release the taller soldier and hand him a sharp blade.

*Need to get closer. Can’t really see what’s going on from here.* Kennedy stood, her eyes scanning the tree directly in front of her, looking for an ideal spot to wait. Finding the spot proved easy and she silently moved forward, barely disturbing the branches as she crouched in wait.

The conversation died off following the admonishment Travers delivered to his aide. Just as Giles was about to speak, Connor held up his hand and jerked his head up toward the ceiling. “There’s someone on the roof.”

Both Wesley and Giles reacted immediately, their eyes following the teen’s upraised arm. “Are you certain?”

“Yeah. Heard them.” Connor listened intently, his eyes closed in concentration. “Only one.”

“Right.” Wesley handed off the baby to Anya, much like Buffy had done a few minutes earlier.
and moved into the living room, heading for the weapons chest. “Can you sense anyone else?”

“Nope.” Connor was already moving up the stairs, followed by a sleepy-eyed Oz. “Gonna scope it out anyway.”

Giles watched the two reach the landing and split in two directions, Connor heading to the back of the house and Oz stepping into Dawn’s room. His voice floated up to them. “Be careful.”

Neither of them acknowledged his statement. Wesley handed Giles a crossbow followed him into the kitchen. Buffy turned at his entrance, noting the crossbows both former Watchers cradled in their arms. “What’s up?”

“Connor heard someone on the roof. He and Oz have gone up to take a look.” Giles moved to stand beside her. “Where’s Spike?”

Buffy gestured with her chin. “Right there.”

Both Englishmen followed her motion, focusing in time to see Riley rush at Spike. The vampire easily sidestepped the charge, whirling about to throw a solid left at the side of Riley’s head. Spike’s unmistakable chuckle filled the air and Buffy shook her head at his obvious fun. Her muttered, “Stop playing with him and just do it”, didn’t go unnoticed by either of her companions, though neither remarked on her statement.

When Riley recovered and swung around to slice the knife across Spike’s torso, Buffy growled low. “Damn it, Spike, just – ”

Spike leaned away, avoiding most of the sliding cut, then brought up his right foot in time to catch Riley square on his chin. Riley’s head snapped back, the attack rocking him back. Blood flowed from his mouth, trickling down his chin. He shook his head twice to clear the ringing, hatred and anger flooding his being. “That all you got, Seventeen?”

With his arms crossed over his chest, Spike stared down at the crouching soldier. “Hardly, Agent Finn. ‘ve barely started. You had enough yet?”

“Never.” Riley exploded upward in a rush, aiming straight for Spike’s gut. He miscalculated wildly, because Spike, anticipating the move, had sprung up and over the bigger man’s charging figure. Unable to stop his momentum, Riley bounced off the back fence, only to whirl around right into Spike’s fist. The first blow knocked the soldier into the fence and Spike took advantage, raining a series of punches onto his opponent before Riley could recover and retaliate.

He finally ducked a punch, letting Spike’s hand connect with the fence and while he was still wincing, Riley brought up the knife and sliced a long cut underneath Spike’s upraised arm. Spike reeled away, panting heavily.

Lawson and Buffy moved at the same time, the other vampire covering the distance in two strides. Buffy nearly barreled through the screen door, stopping only when Spike shouted, “No!”

“’M all right.” When Lawson moved closer to Finn, Spike shook his head. “Don’t. This is between me an’ him. No one intervenes, yeah?”

He swung his gaze around the yard, encompassing all the bystanders. Noting Buffy on the steps, poised to move, he gestured to Wesley and Giles, who had come out of the kitchen. “Keep an eye
on her. Don’t let her...” Spike didn’t finish his thought, letting his fellow Englishmen draw their own conclusions.

Giles rested a hand on Buffy’s shoulder, pulling her back onto the deck. “Let them be, Buffy.”

Connor made his way over the rooftop, his gaze sweeping relentlessly over the perimeter, looking for the one that he’d sensed earlier. He couldn’t see anyone and he was beginning to doubt his senses when Oz tapped his shoulder. “That way.”

He pointed toward the back of the house, then loped quietly to the peak. “Connor.”

The teen joined him, both their eyes scanning through the trees. Unable to spot the interloper, though knowing whoever it was, was still present, Oz cautiously slithered over the peak. “Still here.”

“Okay.” Connor joined him on the other side, then nudged Oz. “Spike’s kicking his ass.”

The two focused on the action below them, momentarily forgetting their quarry.

Despite the two slashes bleeding sluggishly on his torso, Spike wasn’t feeling at all weak. With the constant infusion of Slayer blood – even though it had been a while since he’d bitten Buffy – his wounds weren’t anything more than just a momentary distraction. They also served to refocus his attention. Let the boy think he’s got more of a chance than he has. ‘m still gonna break a few bones.

Backing away from Riley, Spike gave them both a breather. He pulled the tattered shirt off, wadding it up and wiping away the worst of the blood. When he’d satisfied himself that he’d cleaned off as much as he could, Spike tossed the shirt away, letting it land on the steps. Stepping closer to Finn, Spike asked, “Had enough yet?”

Glaring at the vampire with hatred, Finn growled out, “Not by a long shot.”

Returning the glare with a laugh, Spike quipped, “Didn’t think so”, as he spun into a kick that caught Riley at the top of his thigh and his closed fist. The knife flew out of his hand, landing with a thunk against the fence.

Wheeling away, struggling to stay upright despite the amount of pain blinding him, Riley swung his left a bit wildly, the punch glancing against Spike’s side. It was Spike’s turn to falter slightly, though he recovered faster than Riley had. Pivoting on his right foot, Spike snapped two rapid-fire punches, a left followed by a right, that had Riley’s head spinning. Blood splattered from his already wounded jaw, and Riley reeled back, swiping at the cuts.

He spit out a mixture of blood and saliva, letting it land on Spike’s boot, and he charged again at the vampire, this time catching him directly across the chest. Their combined momentum carried
them into the tree, grinding Spike’s bare back into the rough bark. Riley held Spike by sheer weight, and managed to get his right hand free to pummel Spike’s chest. Spike brought his legs up, using his knees to block Riley’s punches, then pushed up and away, throwing Riley ten feet across the yard.

This time, Spike didn’t give him the benefit of a breather, instead chasing him across the grass. Lifting the taller man up by the ripped collar of his shirt, Spike hit him with a heavy left, once again snapping his head back. Still holding him, Spike dragged Finn to his feet, then let go. With both fists, Spike pounded Riley’s face and torso, beating him mercilessly.

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She held her breath, her eyes tracking every movement, every thrown punch, every hit, waiting for the moment. The taller captive was bleeding profusely now, most of his injuries centered around his head and upper chest. Kennedy knew she had to time this perfectly, otherwise she’d screw the whole thing. C’mon, you blood-sucking sonovabitch. Gimme a shot, c’mon.

It looked like the bigger man’s face was one big massive ache, with one cheek completely caved in, and blood was splattered over both of the combatants. Spike shook him, said something she couldn’t hear and dropped him onto the grass. He stared down at the prone form for another moment, his chest heaving with exertion.

As he turned to leave the soldier alone, Kennedy realized her moment had come. When his back was to the beaten, she dropped down from the tree, an outraged yell emerging from her. “You’re an animal! A demon and you need to die!”

She aimed for his heart, the stake she’d carried with her for hours heading right for its target.

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Spike was done with him. Finn was down and very definitely out. The sound of bone and soft tissue squelching under his knuckles heralded the end for Riley Finn. His face was a mass of broken, battered bones, and Spike could sense the instant the soldier lost consciousness. He dropped his fist, loosening his hold on Finn, then, coming out of his rage, shook his head.

“You’re not worth it. Not worth the shite killing you will stir up, an’ ‘m not gonna let you come between us.” Spike dropped Finn’s body, a satisfied, grim smile gracing his features. “You’re gonna have to live with what you tried doin’.”

He stepped back, turning away from the prone figure of Finn, his eyes searching for Buffy. There was a rustle of leaves behind him, and then a voice he didn’t recognize yelled something he didn’t quite catch. Buffy shrieked out his name and Spike twisted aside at the last instant, whirling around to face the new threat.

The stake caught him in the right shoulder, just underneath his shoulder blade and his roar of pain echoed up into the night sky. Buffy was beside him in an instant, her hand reaching for the stake and he brushed her aside, prowling toward the baby Slayer. . . what the fuck is her name?
No matter. ‘m gonna kill the bitch.

Rage once again hazed his reason and Spike growled low in his throat, snarling and slipping into game face. “Fatal mistake, little girl.”

Kennedy cursed her luck. Her eyes scanned the ground, looking for the weapon Finn had dropped earlier, and she darted toward the fence while Spike stalked after her. She feinted left, then raced to her right, trying to stay out of his reach until she had a secure grip on the weapon.

“Isn’t gonna help you.” He didn’t fall for the feint and he was on her in a heartbeat. Kennedy brought the knife up, sliding it into his arm, fending off his left with her crossed arm in the same motion.

Spike roared again, the muscles in his jaw standing out, his fangs snapping at her. He grabbed the knife, ripping it from his arm, and flung it over her head into the tree trunk. His movements were fluid, exhibiting no effects of the wounds she and Finn had managed to inflict, and he easily caught her fist, pushing her back. His gold eyes bore into hers, and he reached out with his other hand, wrapping his strong fingers around her neck. With a smooth rolling motion, Spike grasped her and snapped her neck, nearly wrenching her head in a complete circle.

Kennedy’s lifeless body dropped to the ground and Spike stood over her, his gaze slowly coming up to rest on Buffy’s face.
Acting Prematurely

Book Three

Chapter Thirty-Seven – Acting Prematurely

In fighting and in everyday life you should be determined though calm.
Meet the situation without tenseness yet not recklessly, your spirit settled yet unbiased.
An elevated spirit is weak and a low spirit is weak.
Do not let the enemy see your spirit.
  Miyamoto Musashi

The two worst strategic mistakes to make are
acting prematurely and letting an opportunity slip;
to avoid this, the warrior treats each situation as if it were
unique and never resorts to formulae, recipes or other people's opinions.
  Paulo Coelho

Spare me through your mercy, do not punish me through your justice.
  Anselm of Canterbury

If you get all the facts, your judgment can be right;
if you don't get all the facts, it can't be right.
  Bernard Baruch

Entire ignorance is not so terrible or extreme an evil,
and is far from being the greatest of all;
too much cleverness and too much learning,
accompanied with ill bringing-up, are far more fatal.
  Plato

“Spike!” Buffy shrieked his name, her breath held in horror as Kennedy swooped down from the
tree and threw a stake aimed at Spike’s heart. Her warning came in time, because he turned at the
last moment, the stake embedding itself in his back, just under his right shoulder.  Oh, God . . oh, no.

Buffy closed her eyes in gratitude, her knees weakening. Giles was right behind her, muttering
under his breath about stupid girls, but it was Wesley who held her up, his arm under hers. “He’s
fine, Buffy. He’s fine.”

Oh, he better be, because if he isn’t, I’m gonna kill her myself. She couldn’t talk, couldn’t force
enough air into her lungs to manage the trick. Instead she wrenched free and was at Spike’s side
before the thought finished forming. Buffy reached for the stake, but his pain-filled growl stopped her. Spike turned around, his stance predatory and nearly feral.

Connor dropped down into a crouch from the roof, poised to take over if Spike faltered, even just a little. His own knife was clenched between his teeth and he prowled forward, halting when Spike reached the girl.

“Fatal mistake, little girl.”

Buffy heard Spike clearly and she spared a brief glance at Wesley and Giles. Thankfully, neither man appeared to want to stop Spike so she turned her attention back to where Spike was stalking Kennedy. How could she be so stupid? She's nowhere near ready to face a vampire like Spike.

And in less then a minute, Buffy was proved right.

Kennedy was dead, Spike standing over her, his chest heaving with pain and exertion.

His eyes fixed on hers and she didn’t hesitate.

The instant Kennedy dropped down from the tree, yelling about vampires, Giles had one thought in his head, one he couldn’t and didn’t shake – foolish child is about to get herself killed.

There was no preventing a different outcome. Kennedy had involved herself in a situation she knew nothing about, against a fighter she didn’t know at all. Spike’s reputation wasn’t unwarranted. He was – far and away – the best fighter Giles had ever seen, at times even surpassing Buffy. He’d fought bigger, stronger, and sometimes more technically skilled opponents, yet he’d never truly been beaten. Kennedy hadn’t stood a chance.

She died far quicker, though, than Giles had thought she would. Barely five minutes into the fight.

There was no censure in his thoughts. Spike had been pushed beyond even his limits. The Initiative’s threat and the stress from that, coupled with the twins’ birth less than twenty-four hours before, Giles couldn’t blame him for his reaction.

He wasn’t over the moon about it. But he understood.

What he didn’t understand was his own lack of reaction. Giles knew he should be angry. Knew that he should be – reacting. Yet he couldn’t move, couldn’t do anything beyond stare at the two blondes standing two feet away.

Blood dripped from his fingertips, pat-patting onto Kennedy’s still body. Spike’s game face slipped away and he clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth against the pain and bracing himself for a confrontation with Buffy. He didn’t dare look away, couldn’t. Though he had spared Finn, Spike
knew his killing of the baby Slayer wasn’t a smart move.

Buffy crossed the distance between them, her eyes never wavering from his. “Oh, God, Spike.” She reached around, pulling the stake from his back, grimacing at the sickening squelch. Her arm curled around his waist, holding him upright. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” He looked at her, disbelief clouding his eyes. “Yeah, ‘m fine.”

“We need to get you cleaned up and see how bad it is.” She led him to the deck, ignoring all the blood to hold onto him. “Good thing the doc is still here. He can patch you up.”

“Buffy?” He halted at the bottom step, grabbing onto her wrist and slowing her as well. “Buffy?”

She knew what he was asking, understood what he wasn’t able to say. “Not your fault. She attacked you. Kennedy didn’t have a clue what was happening and she didn’t bother to find out. She just – attacked.”

Spike stared at her, unable to wrap his brain around what just happened. What Buffy had said, what she’d done. He’d been braced for – in the scant seconds he had to think – her outright rejection and condemnation. Expected it. Known it was coming. He’d spared Finn and killed the girl.

Nothing prepared him for Buffy’s reaction. She’d acted like the baby Slayer was wrong. She reached for him. Not in anger, but with concern and caring. With – dare he think it? – complete and utter trust.

He couldn’t help himself. Wouldn’t have been able to stem the emotions even had he wanted to. Unwanted tears flooded his eyes and Spike gave in to the fatigue and drop in adrenaline, and let Buffy lead him inside.

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He heard the rustling tree branches seconds before the shadows above him shifted, and a blacker darkness dropped down from the tree. Wesley moved forward the instant he recognized the threat, his warning cry drowned by Buffy’s outraged shout.

Reacting instinctively, Wesley grabbed Buffy, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of her upper arm. Uttering words he wasn’t sure he even believed, Wesley kept repeating, “He’s fine, Buffy. He’s fine.”

And then, “Spike’s okay. He’s okay.”

He only realized she wasn’t listening when she pushed away from him, surprising him when a low growl erupted from her throat.

For long seconds, time slowed and the thudding of his heart and the harsh intake of air was all Wesley could focus on – even Connor’s sudden appearance didn’t register. Blood flowed from Spike’s shoulder wound and his visage shifted, demonic ridges and golden eyes blazing. Spike will be fine. . . He’ll – he’s going to kill her.
Damned stupid... he’s going to kill her.

Wesley waited for his conscience to galvanize him into action, to prod him into preventing Kennedy’s inevitable death.

There was nothing.

No inner outrage, no overwhelming need to avert the outcome. He waited, breath indrawn and suspended. Waited and watched while William the Bloody killed his third Slayer.

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She was running, hiding, trying to get away from the group of girls chasing after her. Rona had spent her day avoiding each one of them, until her luck ran out at sundown. Now she was tired, out of breath, and her whole body was shaking. Ducking into a boarded up building, Rona doubled over, trying to ease the stitch in her side and slow the thunderous pounding of her heart.

Their voices carried, calling out as they searched the surrounding buildings. This shit isn’t working. What the hell am I gonna do now? Eyes scanning the growing darkness, Rona looked for an escape. Any escape.

So far, she’d avoided the gangs, avoided the problems of growing up in a violent neighborhood, but it was becoming more and more difficult. This particular group wasn’t taking no for an answer and now they were out looking specifically for her. Rona suppressed the shivers and muscle spasms in her legs, forcing herself to move further into the decaying building. If the staircases are okay, maybe I can make it up to the roof.

The dangers were more immediate down on the ground. She had to take the chance.

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The kitchen was crowded, too many people in such a small room and everyone was focused on the two blondes at the counter. Spike was slouched over the sink, facing away from everyone, Buffy gently washing the puncture wound in his back and checking the rest of him for bruises.

Dawn and Anya had been the first ones to respond to the noises from outside, though the others had crowded in just behind them. Ironically, Ian Darrow didn’t enter the kitchen until he heard Dawn’s rather loud exclamation of “Holy crap! Is all that blood Spike’s?”

He was inside the kitchen, Nicholson and Travers at his heels, before Buffy could remove the towel staunching the blood. Ian’s fingers circled Buffy’s wrist, pulling her hand away from the still bleeding shoulder wound. “I need to get a better look.”

There was a confusion of voices, everyone talking over and around each other, barely any of them making any sense, even after Giles and Wesley entered the crowded area.
“He’s going to need stitching this time.” Ian directed his comments to Buffy, ignoring the clamoring for explanations behind him. “I don’t think cauterizing this will help.” He thought for a moment, obviously caught by surprise. “Will regular stitching work?”

“It’ll work.” Spike growled lowly, his voice suddenly showing the strain of the last three days. “They’ll just be a pain in the arse to remove.”

Ian leaned over to catch his eye. “Would you rather I cauterize the wound?”

A deep sigh broke from the vampire and he slanted a look at Buffy, who was hovering to his right, straining to hear what was being said. “Dunno. Smell’s right nasty, an’ the arm’ll be no good for a week.”

Before he could go any further, Buffy interrupted. “Stitch him. We’ll take them out tomorrow.”

Her voice was soft and low, barely audible, yet it sounded clear to each one of the kitchen’s inhabitants. They’d all fallen silent once Giles motioned for quiet. He paused, waiting for the three at the sink to realize they were the only ones speaking.

Anxious eyes, all different hues and with varying degrees of concern, waited for Giles to finally speak.

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She was shaking with exhaustion, every inch of her weak while her muscles burned. Panting through her mouth, Rona eyed the teetering staircase leading up and away from the gang chasing after her. Any chance she had was that way. Down would lead her to a beating. Or worse.

Wiping the sweat from her neck, Rona took a deep breath and tested out the first step. The creak was ominous, but she couldn’t hesitate. The voices from below were becoming more distinct, their angry and strident tones goading her into moving. *Gotta get the hell outta here.*

Ten steps up, the stairs gave under her weight and she panicked, adrenaline surging through her tired limbs. Praying with every molecule of her being, Rona flailed for the railing, her fingers scrabbling to grab hold of the splintering wood. *No. . . no. Not gonna fall. Not.*

The noise attracted her pursuers and Rona stared down into the hostile faces, one hand wrapped around the precariously hanging railing.

Another surge of adrenaline flowed through her, startling her into movement. Hands gripping the wood tightly, Rona swung dangerously three floors above the taunting gang members. Using the momentum of her swaying body, Rona inhaled deeply and trusted the sudden instinct to aim for the sturdy-looking floor opposite where the stairs had been. At the last possible moment, Rona let go, rolling herself into a ball and willing her body upwards, ignoring the pull of gravity.

She didn’t open her eyes until she rolled into the wall, crashing heavily against a solid, heavy door. The wood splintered under the impact and Rona laid there, heart thundering in her chest, eyes tightly shut and waited for the first blow.
When nothing happened, she touched the floor below her, slowly opening her eyes. The tin ceiling glittered dully from the reflection of the streetlights, and Rona shook her head. *What the fuck? I made it? I made it!*

Rolling to her side, Rona stared down at the gang, noting the disbelief on every face. With a glance to her left, she saw the piece of railing she’d flung herself from swaying from the force of her jump. “Holy shit.”

Without wasting any more time, Rona got to her feet and headed for the roof.

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Connor crouched down, his attention focused on the dead Slayer. “That was pretty stupid.”

“Probably not the smartest thing she ever did.” Oz looked down at Connor, a slight frown marring his features. He looked over at Lawson, noting the other’s game face. “Maybe you should go.”

“Huh?” Sam’s gaze swung between the two, confusion clouding his expression.

“Game face, dude.” Connor looked up at Lawson, then got to his feet. “What should we do about her?”

Oz stuffed his hands in his pockets, rocked back on his heels and blinked slowly. “Let the Council deal with her.” He looked at Sam. “You need to motor.”

Sam had finally shaken off his game face, which only made his confusion clearer. “Why?”

“Probably not a good idea to be a vampire around a dead Slayer.” Oz moved away from Kennedy’s corpse, toward the house.

“Oh. Right.” Sam shook his head, trying not to let his momentary stupidity get the best of him. “What about them?” He motioned to the Initiative soldiers, who were still being held by the other demons.

“Give them back to the Army, with the others.”

Connor followed Oz up the steps and into the house, not watching as Lawson and the others melted back into the shadows.

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*How in the world am I going to – Travers isn’t going to take this well. Bloody hell, what a stupid thing for that child to do! And Spike –*

Giles opened his mouth more than once in a vain attempt to broach the news of Kennedy’s demise, yet each time he stifled himself. He just had no words to impart. Nothing he could say would soften the blow for any of them. Spike *had* killed the girl.
He cleared his throat. Twice. Looked up to find nearly every eye on him, waiting for his – “Kennedy – is ... She’s – ”

His uncharacteristic loss for words, coupled with the tight look the elder Slayer fought to suppress told the story Giles was unable to express.

Silence prevailed in the over-crowded kitchen and most eyes were averted from the two members of the Council.

“Rupert.” Travers motioned his fellow Englishman to quiet. “Details only.”

Relief flooded through more than one person in the kitchen at the Council head’s calm demeanor. Surprisingly, though, it wasn’t Giles who started the explanation, it was Wesley.

Leaving out much of the personal background between Riley Finn and Buffy, Wesley time-lined everything from the moment of their awareness of Buffy’s actions forward. In little over seventy-two hours, the stresses had compounded, with any given event possibly resulting in disaster. That major bloodshed had been averted weighed heavily in their favor. Hopefully – and Wesley wasn’t alone in that hope – that would mitigate some anger. Although even as he was recounting the events, Wesley was still uncertain of Travers’ reaction.

*Spike had killed another Slayer.*

As he was winding down, Travers once again interrupted. “Who planned all this? Who mobilized the non-hostile demon population?”

“Spike did.”

Inhaling deeply, Quentin motioned once more for silence. “She attacked him, without provocation, after he had already turned away from the Initiative Agent, correct?”

“Yes.”

“How close was the wound?”

“Had Buffy not given warning, it could have proved fatal.”

The kitchen echoed from several indrawn breaths, the loudest bordering on a choked sob.

Travers, however, remained silent, keeping his thoughts hidden. Long moments elapsed, the only real sound the snick of Ian Darrow’s scissors.

“Giles, Wyndam-Price, if you please?” Quentin gestured toward the dining room, excluding everyone else.

It took barely any time for the Watchers to file from the kitchen, though no one protested or even spoke. Pointed looks were shared, but even Anya held her tongue.

Buffy laid her head on Spike’s uninjured shoulder, in an effort to hide her tears.
Though it had been more than a hundred years since the last English Slayer, the Council – and by extension the British Crown – considered the Slayers British assets. There was a proprietary concern that was separate and apart from the Council’s interest, and in more than a few cases, the Slayer had been given British citizenship. Passports, documents, any paperwork necessary to confer that status was usually a formality and done once the Slayer had been called and often without the girl’s knowledge.

He’d been a member of the Council, in one capacity or the other since his teens, and Quentin Travers had seen his fair share of Slayers. They were, as a whole, impossible to define, yet each one of them had an independent streak that very often proved their downfall. And they didn’t always share confidences with their Watchers. Buffy Summers and Rupert Giles were an anomaly.

That was to their advantage.

Quentin knew his decision to remove the behavior modification chip and to cement the alliance with William the Bloody could prove a mistake. Under normal circumstances, he was certain of it. However, these were far from normal circumstances, even by Slayer standards. There were three active Slayers – a situation no one had ever foreseen, nor planned for. At current count, there were two active Hellmouths, the one here in Sunnydale and the second one in Cleveland. There were four more, dormant ones that had been opened in the last two hundred years; and six more that hadn’t been active since before the year 1500. Having three active Slayers allowed for possibilities the Council hadn’t planned for, but could surely take advantage of.

Faith could remain at large, going wherever she was needed, while Buffy would remain stationed on the Sunnydale Hellmouth. The new Slayer could be sent to Cleveland. It was an ideal solution.

Travers merely needed to be reassured that William the Bloody wouldn’t turn on his Slayer.

If he couldn’t secure that promise, Travers knew he’d be looking at removal from the Council.

He barely waited for Nicholson to enter the dining room before he was speaking. “Assure me, gentlemen, that this is not a colossal mistake.”

“What’s that?” Giles stood across the table from him, arms at his sides. Wesley stopped just beside him, his expression deceptively blank.

“This alliance and trust you have in William the Bloody.” Travers leaned his palms on the table, eyes steadily on Rupert’s face. “Convince me I shouldn’t take retaliatory actions for his.”

“Would anything I have to say convince you otherwise? Would it make any difference, since it appears you have already decided upon a course of action?” Giles didn’t flinch, and nor did he bother to veil his rising anger. “Why bother with this interrogation at all?”

“Because this isn’t an interrogation, Rupert.” Travers stood straight, crossing his arms. “Because I’m not – because I don’t believe it’s entirely unreasonable, given his history, to expect some deeper explanation for the complete about-face in his behavior. Why has he aligned himself with the Slayer? Why this Slayer?” He paused again, clearly waiting for answers. Travers needed to
know if his intuition was correct that Spike had engineered the entire defensive operation of the last two days. “And how in bloody blue blazes did he get my Slayer pregnant in the first place?”

In a reflexive action, Giles took off his glasses, and slowly laid them on the table. “Suffice to say that Spike’s alignment with this Slayer was probably inevitable, given their natures. As to why? He loves her.”

Travers looked from one to the other. “He loves her.”

“Undoubtedly.” Giles mimicked Travers’ earlier pose, his hands leaning on the table. “He’s proven so on more than one occasion. There isn’t anything Spike wouldn’t do for Buffy.”

“Can you guarantee that he won’t turn on her?” For Travers, this was key. If he understood this, then there was a possibility he could convince the remaining members of the Inner Council that William could be trusted.

“I can.” Sharing a look with Wesley, Giles came to a decision. “They have claimed each other. Spike and Buffy consider themselves married.”

“Ah. That answers both questions, doesn’t it?” There’s the answer I was waiting for. Abruptly feeling tired, Travers sat down, lifting his eyes to Giles. “That explanation should satisfy the other members of the Council.”

It would have to suffice.

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Calls from the Department of Defense, Secretary of the Navy, the NSA, and the Joint Chiefs had poured in, causing a flurry of activity in Holdfast Camp. Immediately following the first phone call from his immediate superior, Major Ellis had the entire camp on Alert Status. Each subsequent communication amped up the sense of urgency pervading the camp. Long before the Joint Chiefs’ call, Ellis had mobilized the remaining Initiative squads and all troops were awaiting air transport.

Three Chinooks airlifted the troops to Texas, where further transport was waiting to take them to Sunnydale, California.

By eighteen hundred hours of what Ellis considered Day Two, approximately twenty hours since the first communication from Major General Smith, he and his troops were in Sunnydale.

Ellis surveyed the battered remnants of the squad sent with Finn and questioned his own judgment. He’d believed Finn, knowing the younger officer had more time in the Initiative than he did and had done two tours of duty at the Hellmouth. The current circumstances indicated he should not have entrusted Finn with this mission. Finn had overstepped his mandate by a wide margin.

Though there was only one fatality, Finn and Miller were still unaccounted for, and every other officer was sporting some sort of injury. Triage had been set up, treating the minor injuries, and the corpsmen were moving from pallet to pallet quietly. He’d already been debriefed by most of the team and though most of them had been hand-picked by Finn, the only one with any insight why this mission had gone tits-up was Kramer. Gebhardt wasn’t talking, so Ellis had no way of discovering how much of the blame lay on his shoulders. All in all, this had been one definite screw-up.
The local police department was guarding their perimeter, though it was clear to Ellis that the ones truly in charge were the English Special Forces unit. They looked to be some sort of counterpart to the Initiative, only their weaponry was superior, their tacticals and night-vision equipment surpassing theirs easily.

“He bled out in the operating theatre.” Grayson, the British team leader was relaying information to his superiors, his attention focused on the movements around him. “Affirmative, sir. Six operatives from the first team and twelve additional support troops.” There was a brief pause on his end of the conversation and then, very dryly added, “We had outside assistance.”

Ending his call, Grayson faced Ellis. “We have orders to hand over your men.”

“Thank you.” There was nothing else he could say, so Ellis kept it to a bare minium. “Is there any word on the two missing officers?”

“None as of yet.” Grayson had the class to look a bit concerned, though Ellis got the impression that the emotion was merely for show. He was about to add something when there was a commotion by the holding area. There was a loud thumping at the steel door and several of the police officers headed for the door before any of the others reacted. “A moment, if you will?”

Grayson didn’t wait for his answer. And once the door was opened, Ellis didn’t care that he’d been dismissed. Graham Miller was pushed through the entrance, visibly free from any injuries and unrestrained. That answered one of his questions.

Seconds later, the other pressing question was answered. The inert form of Finn was carried in and dumped unceremoniously on the closest pallet. Four men stepped away from the body, the one clearly in charge delivering a brief explanation to Grayson, and then all four waited at the doorway. Medics converged on Finn and the flurry of activity had Ellis moving in that direction.

Low murmurs were being exchanged, medics firing off information about Finn’s condition even as they stripped the tattered remnants of his fatigues from his upper body. “Blood-ox is good. Pulse is slow and thready. BeePee is one-seventy over one-ten. Contusions along upper right side, possible broken ribs and internal bleeding.”

*Christ. Looks like Finn took a . . .

“We need to run lines and get head ex-rays, sir. His jaw is broken in several spots.” Two of the medics looked to him for permission to move, and Ellis stole a quick glance at Grayson before nodding his head in approval.

It was Grayson, again, who spoke. “Call for an ambulance.”

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Xander had watched and listened to all the conversations, for once keeping his mouth shut and not interjecting any comments at all. He’d had a lot to think about in the last day, and more information poured in by the minute. *I guess Cordy was right. There is a lot I need to think about.*
He’d stood at the back door while Spike had fought with Riley, torn between wanting his erstwhile
friend to beat the vampire and rooting for the vampire to get back at the man who wanted to tear
apart his family. It was a position Xander wasn’t at all comfortable with, and he didn’t enjoy the
internal tension.

He also couldn’t deny, at least to himself, that Buffy would be devastated if something happened to
Spike.

The flurry of activity after Spike had walked away from Riley hadn’t registered until Buffy had
cried out. His brain couldn’t catch up with the over-before-it-really-started thing with Kennedy. In
fact, he hadn’t realized it was Kennedy until she was dead. It had happened so fast.

Too fast for him to really focus on exactly what had happened. He was still floored by Spike
walking away from Riley to process the other stuff.

He was still staring out the back window when they all came trooping in, subdued and quiet.
Xander couldn’t tear his eyes away from the new Slayer’s corpse.

Dead bodies were nothing new in Sunnydale.

Hell, dead Slayers weren’t all that unusual.

Buffy had died – the first time – in a puddle of muddy water.

Kendra had died in the old high school library.

And now this girl – Kennedy – had just breathed her last in Buffy’s backyard.

Xander tuned out the conversations behind him, although his mind registered the gist of them. The
brief debate over stitches. The stuttering admittance that Spike had just killed another Slayer.
Travers and the other Watchers hammering out assurances and promises in the dining room. It all
made for mundane, every day conversations. At least on the Hellmouth.

But Kennedy’s body was still.

Abandoned on the grass.

Xander couldn’t bear it any longer.

The backdoor slapped against the frame, making him wince from the sharp snap.

His feet carried him down the steps, over the moonlit grass. Over his shoulder, the motion-
detecting lights flickered on, lengthening his shadow.

Only the odd, twisted angle of her neck stood out as wrong. Otherwise she looked like she’d just
fallen asleep, stargazing at the night sky. Xander crouched down beside her, his breath shaky and
shallow. He reached out to close her eyes, then drew his hand back in sudden reluctance. A breath
gusted out from his chest and Xander fought the inexplicable wave of grief and sadness washing
through him.

It didn’t matter that he didn’t know this girl at all. Didn’t matter that before this moment, he’d
barely set eyes on her.
What mattered was what she had been. What she represented to him.

She was just a girl. Just a formerly living, breathing, vibrant girl.

Like Buffy.

Like Faith.

Like Kendra.

Xander had known four Slayers in his life. And only one of them hadn’t died.

It was a mind-numbing statistic. It only reinforced his decision to distance himself from the Hellmouth.

But first, he had something to do.

Gently gathering up Kennedy’s body, Xander headed for the house.

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The discreet vibration of two cell phones disrupted the uneasy silence reigning in the dining room.

Following Travers’ last statement, Giles had dropped heavily onto one of the chairs, his elbow thumping loudly onto the wooden table. Wesley’s attention diverted to the kitchen, since he was closest and it was as he was about to give an update, when he thought better of it and kept his mouth closed.

Nicholson reacted first, answering his cell before Travers had even found his. “Already?”

He listened intently for a few moments longer, then disconnected the call without anything more than a terse “Thanks”. His gaze swept over the room, coming to rest on his boss’ stoic expression. “They’ve identified the new Slayer.”

When he had everyone’s undivided attention, Nicholson continued. “She’s in Los Angeles.”

Travers nodded briefly. “We’ll need her location.”

“Sir?” Wesley broke his silence. “I’d like to make the identification, if you don’t have any objections.”

Having no real reason to deny him, Travers nodded his approval. “It would be best if you brought the girl here.” Continuing one of his earlier thoughts, as though they’d all been privy to them, he stated, “She should train here and then be stationed in Cleveland.”

“Sir?” Various voices responded to Quentin’s last statement, in varying degrees of concern.

“It would prove beneficial to have one of the Slayers in Cleveland. Miss Summers can remain here
in Sunnydale.” He paused a bit dramatically, then added, “That would allow Miss Lehane the freedom to travel wherever her presence was most needed.”

Giles was quick to add, albeit somewhat under his breath, “Thereby keeping her one step ahead of the authorities should our attempt at subterfuge fail.”

Travers didn’t bother pretending he hadn’t heard. “Precisely.”

“I’ll be leaving shortly.” Wesley moved away from the wall, his mind already on the logistics of his trip. “We need to locate her before anyone else does.”

“If you’ll permit me, sir, I’d like to accompany Wyndam-Pryce.” Nicholson looked from one to the other, requesting permission from both men.

Travers nodded, leaving the final decision up to Wesley, who quickly acceded. Glancing down at his watch, Wesley remarked, “It’s nearly nine. Can you be ready before midnight?”

“Won’t take but a brief stop at the hotel to pick up a change of clothes and an overnight kit.” Nicholson followed Wesley out the front door, his voice trailing behind.

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Oz caught the movement in the darkness before anyone else, his senses more attuned to the night. Xander struggled with the back door for a few moments until the werewolf held it open. The kitchen’s occupants lapsed into silence, none of them certain how to react. Without waiting for any comments, Xander carried Kennedy’s body straight through into the dining room, where the Watchers were gathered.

“I didn’t know what to do.” Xander shrugged, his motion dislodging Kennedy’s arm. It thunked against the table with finality, the sound dull and muffled. “It seemed wrong to leave her out there.”

He smiled weakly, the expression not reaching his eyes.

“Indeed.” Travers rose to his feet. “Thank you.”

Giles reached to take her, pausing when Xander stepped back. “Yes, thank you, Xander.”

An awkward silence descended abruptly, growing more pronounced the longer it lasted.

Xander floundered, until he couldn’t stand the lack of noise or action. “So?”

A deep sigh shook the eldest Englishman. “Unfortunately, this is an event we are rather well prepared for. I must make arrangements.” He looked to Giles to answer his question. “Is there somewhere we can bring her?”

The sight of Xander cradling a dead Slayer conjured up memories and images Giles hadn’t ever wanted to revisit. He didn’t know this girl – barely remembered her name – but that was immaterial. She was a Slayer. She had the same sacred Calling as Buffy; the same gifts and
abilities as Faith. The same instincts of all the Slayers before her. While her actions had been rash and ill-advised, she’d been following those instincts. She’d gambled, without knowing all the information, and had paid the ultimate price.

He could barely stand to look at her.

It was just about a year since Buffy’s death, though it hardly mattered. Whenever Rupert reflected on that day, the ache in his heart was just as fresh, just as immediate. He could barely think about it, and talking about it was entirely out of the question. Only the fact Buffy had been returned mitigated the depth of his emotions. He knew there would be no such relief for this girl’s family.

She was gone and no one was going to revive her.

Giles shook his head, returning to the present. “I believe I can prevail upon the Fishers to give us assistance.” Taking one look at Xander, Giles motioned him into the living room. “Perhaps you could let her rest in there while we wait.”

Xander didn’t speak, merely nodded his agreement. He laid her gently on the couch, half listening while Giles made the phone call to the morticians.

Not really knowing her didn’t make it any easier for any of them.

She was still a dead Slayer.

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He could feel the trembling and tremors quaking through her tired and sore muscles. Could almost taste the fatigue running sluggishly through her body. Silent tears slid down her cheeks, running in tiny rivers across the bare skin of his arm. She was warm against him, heat radiating and seeping into his own tired and battered body. Spike wanted to move, wanted to shift away from the cold counter top and sink into her arms, let the world recede from around them until the aches and pains were things of the past.

The knowledge that within days all the physical fatigue would be gone hovered somewhere in the back of his mind, though at the moment it gave him no peace. Buffy was tired. Probably more tired than she’d ever been in her whole life and Spike could feel every nuance of it. And because she was tired, he shared it.

The others shifted and moved in the space behind them, murmured conversations muted and muffled by the haze of pain and fatigue. Spike ignored them. Ignored the doctor hovering at his injury, closing the wound with almost unnecessary stitching. Ignored the distraction when the backdoor thumped and new noises filled the kitchen. Ignored everything until a soft cry pierced the fog of his muddled senses.

The first mewling noise was followed rapidly by a second, and within moments, those tiny noises were all Spike heard. His head was filled with them, his heart almost thumping in time with them. Buffy stirred at his side, her hand wiping away the tears and she inhaled deeply, gathering her strength. Her heart rate quickened and Spike could feel the brief surge of adrenaline loosening the bonds of her fatigue. Her scent changed, piquing his interest and making his demonic side stir.
It finally registered with him, the source of the wailing and Buffy’s response— and that wonderful, sweet, soft smell emerging from her. *The babies...* Their twins were stirring, no doubt looking for their mother; the primal hunger all infants had rousing them to seek her out. Buffy eased away from his side, a silent apology crossing her face as she did. Spike tipped his head in the direction of the cries, urging her to go.

The noises settled down, the returning adult murmurs adding to the distraction of his own injuries. Fatigue he’d been fighting weakened his knees now that Buffy had gone and Spike knew it was only a matter of moments before he would succumb to the need for rest. Buffy would, no doubt, be just as drained, just as in need of sleep.

Spike wanted all these people crowding the house to leave. *Needed* them to leave.

He was swaying on his feet, staying upright only by force of sheer determination and utter stubbornness. Neither of those emotions was going to work for more than a few moments.

Strangely enough, it was Anya who caught on before any of the others. She must have been watching him, paying attention when no one else around was. “Time to go, people.”

Within moments, almost faster than Spike thought possible, the former vengeance demon had his house cleared of all intruders, leaving behind only those living between the walls. Dawn drifted up the stairs, one of the now-sated infants held tight against her. Connor looked at him owlishly from beneath his ragged hair, remarking, “Dude, you look like you need help getting up the stairs.”

The growling caught his blurred attention and Spike realized with a start that it was his own throat making those menacing noises. *Bloody hell...*

He waved a hand in the general direction of the living room. “Help Buffy first. ‘ll get there m’self.”

Minutes later, the pounding of Connor’s feet heralded his arrival back on the ground floor. Spike refused his help, pushing slowly off the wall he’d been leaning against. “Lock up the doors, whelp. ‘m going.”

“I can see that.” Connor hid the smile when Spike arched his scarred eyebrow in his direction. “I’ll go ahead and get the doors.”

Connor watched him from the hallway, following the weaving vampire up the stairs and into the bedroom he shared with Buffy. Spike slid face-first onto the bed, his body angled to take up the maximum amount of space. Buffy sighed from her spot at the crib, shaking her head. “Can you move him?”

“Sure.” Connor rolled and pushed, getting Spike situated to Buffy’s satisfaction, then undid the laces and removed his boots. “How long do you think he’s gonna sleep?”

“As long as we let him.” Buffy laid down next to her vampire, and motioned the two teens out. “Don’t call. Don’t write. Don’t...”

They were both asleep before Buffy finished speaking.
Despite the fact they had much in common and so much to discuss, most of the drive to Los Angeles was spent in silence. Nicholson was very aware that had Wesley Wyndham-Pryce not failed miserably during his first tenure in Sunnydale, he never would have risen in the ranks. And Wesley was all too aware of that fact as well. Wesley’s father was a senior member of the Council and he’d been the golden boy until his spectacular fall from grace.

As if he could read his thoughts, Wesley’s first comment in nearly an hour mirrored Nicholson’s musings. “You rather surprised everyone. Taking on the old man as you did.”

“How so?” Nicholson half-feigned confusion.

“Being a bit of a dark horse and willing to take a rare gamble.” Wesley glanced over at his companion. “The risk of plotting behind the throne. He could’ve destroyed you.”

Nicholson gave up the pretense. “True enough. But it wasn’t just the gaffer I wanted to shake up. The Codgers haven’t budged in ages an’ they’re too mired in politicking to get forward.” He inhaled deeply, his eyes on the darkness of the road. “Slayers have been changing, getting stronger, older, smarter, and sending Watchers who aren’t prepared for that is a bit of unfair.”

Wesley was silent for a few moments, wondering for the first time just how his failure had been viewed by his contemporaries. “Well –”

Nicholson didn’t wait for Wesley to respond. “They’ve been setting us up for failure – us and the
girls. World has changed, old man, and the sooner they realize the better we’ll be.”

“Us and the girls?”

“The internet and instant communications. Cell and vid-phones. Sooner rather than later some idiot news reader will catch a vid, or some Yank will you-tube a Slayer in action and all this will be front page news. World-wide.”

The Scot’s vehemence caught Wesley by surprise. *Hadn’t actually thought of all that . . .*

Either he’d said that out loud or Nicholson could read his mind, because the response was immediate.

“None of the elders have either. Information moves fast, Wesley. Technology is moving faster. If the Council doesn’t step up, we’ll spend the next twenty years doing damage control.”

“Bloody hell.”

“Exactly.”

“So what would you rather see happen? Everything subrosa?”

“No. It can’t – won’t work. The minute someone captures a vid, we’ll be exposed. Better to bring it forward. Best defense and all that.”

“You’re not thinking of full disclosure?” Wesley was horrified by the idea that everything would be exposed and their lives the subject of news and tabloid fodder.

“Again, no. Just bits and pieces. Don’t think the general population is quite ready for vamps and demons.” A hint of humor crept into Nicholson’s voice and Wesley barely suppressed an answering chuckle.

“Heavens no,” he paused, a sudden hilarious thought crossing his mind. “Could you imagine? Spike would – ”

“Oh, Christ. He’d be hounded by the paps.”

“Too right.”

They lapsed back into silence, each man thinking hard about the future of the Council.

She’d managed to give them the slip, running away long past the point of her own exhaustion and now Rona was sitting on her bed, watching the clock tick its way toward morning. The rush of adrenaline caused by her flight was now exhibiting its downside and she was still, hours later, unable to settle herself into sleep.

None of the gang members had even come close to catching her. That crazy jump in the abandoned building had been enough to give her a huge advantage. Staying hidden until well after
three o’clock in the morning had also helped.

**Bitches will be knocking on my door soon enough. Well, screw them. Made it this far... Ain’t going down. Not to them.**

Rona had, despite every disadvantage thrown at her, managed to stay in school, get really decent grades and keep it together outside of school. Staying away from the gangs was hard and more than once she’d had to back-up her ‘nos’ with her fists. This time, though, this particular gang was proving more difficult. They weren’t taking any of her negative responses at face value. And she was tired of having to dodge fists, knives, and the occasional bullet.

*I’m done with this hell.*

The usual middle of the night noises started ebbing, dissipating into the ether as the neighborhoods of South Central Los Angeles slowly gave into sleep. Rona let her eyes close, knowing this was her window of safety, when she could let her guard down and rest.

Harsh pounding at the front door of the house she shared with her older sisters and their children woke Rona from sleep. Rosetta, her oldest sister, made it to the door just ahead of her, bleary-eyed and grumbling under her breath about .

Neither of them was prepared for the sight of two very out of place men, one of them marginally less conspicuous than the other.

Rosetta was less than pleasant, realizing that these men had knocked at three forty-seven in the morning, so she figured they weren’t big on manners. “What the hell do you want?”

“Is this the residence of Rona Jefferson?” The taller, thinner of the two spoke, his voice oddly accented.

The sisters shared a look, neither of them willing to give any information to the strangers. “Why you wanna know?”

“My name is Wesley Wyndam-Pryce and this is my associate, J. R. Nicholson.” He paused, motioning to the man beside him. “We represent a branch of the British government and we have some information for Miss Jefferson. Is this her residence?”

Wesley was gambling on the information from the seers and a quick internet search of the area and the local high school’s database. Luckily for them, they’d also managed to secure a picture and the minute the door had opened, he’d recognized the younger woman. It had also gone a long way to proving Nicholson’s point about the ease of obtaining information. Wesley was somewhat grateful the younger man hadn’t belabored his point. Another thing Wesley was grateful for was that Nicholson hadn’t once said ‘I told you so.’

“What the hell does the British government – what kind of crazy-assed shit is this? You knocking down my damn door at four in the morning with some lame bullshit story about the British government?” Rosetta was spluttering almost incoherently, her sleep-fuzzy brain struggling to make some sense out of this craziness.

“Please, Miss, just answer the question. Is this the residence of Rona Jefferson?” Nicholson was tired and he wanted to get this done with and get back on the road to Sunnydale before too long.

With Rosetta, and now some of the kids grumbling and groaning from the living room, Rona
stepped out onto the porch. “That’s me. What do you want?”

“Miss Jefferson, my name is – ”

She brushed aside Wesley’s second attempt at introductions. “Yeah, yeah, I heard you the first time. Now I’m asking you. What the hell do you want?”

“The branch we represent is covert, Miss Jefferson, and while we can give you some of the details, it would be more prudent for you to speak with the head of the division, Mr. Quentin Travers.” Their approach was a bit different from the standard, which was stodgy at best. “He’s currently in Sunnydale, approximately two hours away.”

The look on Rona’s face clearly said she wasn’t going anywhere with anyone. “And what does this guy want with me?”

“You possess certain skills and talents that might benefit our organization.” Nicholson took up the explanation as Wesley started to falter. “We believe you could be of use to our division.”

“Do I look like I was born yesterday?” Rona shook her head. “What the fuck would the British government want with me? Hell, my own government wouldn’t want me.”

Taking the plunge, Wesley inhaled deeply. “Have you noticed any changes in the last few hours? Increased stamina? Heightened senses and awareness? Inexplicable strength?”

Suspicion filled her eyes and Rona edged away from them. “What? How the hell did you know that?”

“It’s inherited.” Wesley paused, trying to gather his thoughts. “I assure you, this is not some sort of joke or mistake. Please accompany us to Sunnydale and I promise all your questions will be answered.”

“And what happens when I don’t like those answers? What if I don’t care and I just want to come back home? You gonna bring me back here or you gonna lock me away and pretend I never existed?” All those crazy spy movies she’d ever seen flashed in her mind and Rona wasn’t buying their stupid excuses about why they were interested in her. “Why me?”

Nicholson shot a glance at Wesley, who was clearly floundering. “Miss Jefferson?” When he had her full attention, Nicholson tried to explain without raising any further alarms. “We recruit worldwide, looking for people with certain abilities and skills that are unique. We believe you possess those abilities and skills.”

“Yeah, I heard you say that. I’m wondering where you got the info.” Rona crossed her arms, disdain mixed with fatigue creasing her features.

“The fact you’ve managed to avoid gang entanglement is one major tip-off.” Nicholson kept his expression neutral, not wishing to get involved in a battle of wills against a Slayer – even if the Slayer in question had no clue about her true nature.

They were losing her. Skepticism and angry confusion wafted from her and Nicholson knew if they didn’t reach through those emotions, she would refuse to accompany them to Sunnydale. He searched his brain for something to break through her defensive stance and came up with nothing. It was Wesley, who inadvertently hit upon the solution.
“You’ve already admitted to the inexplicable strength and increased senses. Aren’t you curious about their sudden appearance?” Catching the slight change in her posture, Wesley continued. “Don’t you want to know exactly what you can do?”

It was clear she was curious. So Nicholson pressed the advantage Wesley had given them. “We can provide you with the answers. With all the answers.”

Rona did want to know. She had no reason why all of a sudden she could run for hours without getting tired. Or how she could have made that crazy jump to get away from the gang. Nerves and adrenaline only answered a little bit. There was no logical explanation why she could suddenly do all those things. And how she knew she could do them. I need answers. I need to know.

She caved.

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Sunlight hit the front windows of the house on Revello Drive, refracting and bending light. The illusion that all was well behind those solid walls was shattered by the big black coroner’s van parked in the driveway. Wesley slowed the Jeep, parking it behind the large DeSoto. Rona stirred in the back, blearily brushing the sleep from her eyes.

“What the hell? I’m not so sure about this – What kind of place is this?” Her confusion and distrust were clear. The questions devolved into mutterings and mumblings under her breath, though neither man mistook that for a lessening in her distrust.

Wesley was at a loss to explain exactly why the coroner’s van was parked in the driveway of 1630 Revello Drive, especially when it was their destination. “A bit of misfortune.”

He ignored Nicholson’s dark look and the further grumblings from the back seat. “I’m sure it’s all sorted out.”

They exited the vehicle, the doors sounding loud in the early morning. Two men were chatting on the porch, their faces grim and somewhat uninviting. Rona’s unease grew and she felt extremely out of place. She was the only person of color – and it was unnerving. All these tall white men were making her skin itch and crawl. This wasn’t her gig. And if this is what they were expecting of her, well, then she was just going to back out now and head right home, to South Central. Where she knew exactly what was expected, and what she had to do to protect herself.

The older of the two men on the porch stopped speaking and nodded at her, a small smile playing about his mouth. “Good morning. I’m Rupert Giles. Welcome to Sunnydale.”

“Uh. Yeah. Thanks.” Rona stuttered her greeting, unsure of how to react to the sudden turn-about. He’d looked forbidding and scary, but the minute his mouth had opened and he looked at her that changed. His eyes had twinkled and the smile had warmed his whole face.

He waited expectantly for her to say something, and Rona belatedly realized he was waiting for her to introduce herself. “Oh. I’m Rona Jefferson.”
Turning his attention back to the man he’d been conversing with, Giles shook his hand, saying, “Thank you, Nate, for coming so quickly.”

A rueful laugh escaped from the younger man. “All part of the job, Giles.”

“Indeed.” He paused for a moment, gravity setting on the scene once more. “I’ll call you later with the rest of the arrangements.”

“Good enough.” Nate stepped lithely down the steps, waving a final time before getting behind the wheel of the hearse.

Herding them all into the house, Giles questioned Wesley. “No problems?”

“None. She was a bit reluctant at first, but we managed.” He stepped into the hallway just behind Rona, edging around her when she didn’t move any further. “I thought it best to wait until we had . . .”

Wesley’s voice trailed off, as if he were unsure of how to end his thought, though Rona was completely confused when the others either nodded, or in Giles’ case, actually said, “No, you made the right choice. I believe the others will be up shortly.”

“It is rather early.” Nicholson remarked idly, after looking down at his watch. “How soon do you expect them to wake?”

Giles shook his head. “Sleeping patterns have been off for weeks, though Buffy’s – she hasn’t slept well since her – ” His voice died away into silence and Rona felt like such an outsider. What the hell are these crazy dudes talking about?

Before she could open her mouth and demand to be taken back to Los Angeles, Giles touched her arm. “Would you like some breakfast? I believe we can offer you coffee as well as tea. And if the hordes have left anything, there might even be pastries.”

She let him lead her into the dining room, where an even older man was sitting at the far end of the table, his attention riveted on an old musty book in front of him. He looked up as they entered and Rona could see the tiredness in his eyes. “Rona Jefferson, this is Quentin Travers.”

“Good morning.” He extended his hand and though he looked tired, Rona noted it didn’t extend to his handshake. “I trust you made the trip without any trouble.”

Rona still didn’t know how to react to the situation she found herself in. Nothing in her life had prepared her for anything like this at all. These crazy guys were treating her like she was important, but she still got the feeling that there was something really, really significant they weren’t telling her. And the way they blew off the coroner? Freaky.

“Trip was good.” Deciding she was never going to get any answers by playing it cool, Rona jumped right in. “Don’t know why you need me. Or why you would even want me. And I’m really getting tired of everyone talking about me like I’m not here.”

Looks were exchanged over her head and Rona headed for the door. “I’m outta here.”

“Wait.” Travers gestured to the chairs around the table. “Miss Jefferson, please give us a moment. If you’re still not satisfied with our explanations, we will make arrangements to return
Grasping her backpack, Rona thought for a moment, her eyes sweeping over the various males. A deep sigh heaved her shoulders and she reluctantly nodded her agreement. “Fine.”

“Very well. Before we start, I’d like some sustenance.” Travers raised an eyebrow at the two younger men, and they both jumped. “I’m sure we could all use some caffeine.”

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When they had finally finished their explanations, Rona sat back, looked at them for a long moment and very nearly laughed. “You people are all crazy.”

“I’ll admit that it sounds a bit preposterous.” Giles wasn’t the only one to meet her gaze, though he was the first to speak.

“If that means insane and crazy, then yeah, that’s what it sounds like.” Rona shook her head. “I’m just supposed to believe that I’m a – What did you call it? Slayer? That I’m supposed to believe that vampires and demons are real?”

Giles and Travers shared a look. “It is a bit much to take on faith.”

Wesley moved away from the wall closest to the stairs. “However, we aren’t asking you to take it all on faith. We can offer you some proof.”

“Proof? How the hell are you supposed to prove that vampires exist? That I’m a Slayer?” Rona crossed her arms. “This is all just crazy bullshit. And I’m still outta here.”

“Wait, please? Give me a few moments.” Wesley held her belligerent gaze, not flinching away when anger pursed her lips.

“Whatsoever. It’s not gonna change a damn thing.”

“We’ll see.” On that cryptic note, he left the room and headed straight up the stairs to the second floor.

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The soft mewls of the twins had escalated to full-throated cries, and though Buffy had grabbed both infants, she couldn’t manage to feed both of them together. Spike was up, pacing the floor with Kirsten, his voice rolling and rumbling deep in his chest, an old lullaby doing little to soothe her pitiful wailing.

“Ssshh, baby girl, Mum’s got to deal with your big brother, an’ then she’ll be right with you. M’promise, Kirstie-girl.” His words had better luck and she calmed enough to turn toward the sound of his voice. “Ahhh, there’s my wee little sweet bit. Daddy’s got you.”
Buffy’s soft laugh caught his attention and she shook her head at him. “Do you realize you’re
dancing with her?”

“So? Seems to like it, doesn’t she?” Spike semi-glared at her, his attention going right back to the
infant in his arms. “Least she’s calmed a bit. Won’t wake up the rest of the house.”

Lifting the now-sated baby boy to her shoulder, Buffy motioned him closer. “Time to switch.”

“Right then. Gimme that greedy-gus.” Spike easily swapped one baby for the other, looking down
into the bright blue eyes of his son. “Doesn’t seem like a James. Or Jimmy. Does he?”

Getting Kirsten situated pulled Buffy’s attention away from Spike’s comments, and she didn’t
answer him right away. “Jimmy?” She wrinkled her nose. “Ah. No. That doesn’t fit him at all.
What about Jaime?”

It was Spike’s turn to make a face. “Not sure how I feel about that.” The baby in question
scrunch up his own face and Spike took that as agreement with him. “Don’t think the boy likes
it either. Best come up with something else.”

“There aren’t too many other James-type names we could call him.”

“Maybe he’s not a James.”

She laughed a bit. “That would be just like us. Naming them backwards.”

“Meaning?” Spike’s lips twisted with a wry grimace as he listened to the baby’s stomach settle.

“Joyce Kirsten.” Buffy placed more emphasis on the baby’s middle name and then did the same
with the other. “James Robert.”

Whatever comment Spike would have made was interrupted by a soft knock on their bedroom
door. The two blondes shared a look, then Spike pulled the door open a bit. Recognizing Wesley
before he had the door opened fully, Spike invited the other Englishman inside. “Might as well
come in, Oxford. She’s gonna hear it anyway.”

“Good morning. I trust you both slept well?” He framed it as a question, however Wesley wasn’t
truly expecting an answer. “We’ve managed to locate the new Slayer.”

“Already? That was quick.” Buffy tried to catch Spike’s eye, but he was suddenly busy, tending
to – “Robbie. I like that one.”

His head snapped up, blue eyes clouded with momentary confusion. “Oh. Right then.” Spike
gazed down at the gurgling baby and since there seemed to be no objection from that corner,
agreed. “Seems fine to me.”

Without missing a beat after gaining his agreement, Buffy returned her attention to Wesley. “So.
New Slayer. Where is she?”

“Downstairs. The seers managed to locate her in Los Angeles, of all places.” He shoved his hands
in his pockets. “Nicholson and I made the identification and brought her here.”
“Downstairs? What? The house is trashed! I haven’t cleaned in days and . . .” Buffy looked helplessly to the two men, who were both shaking their heads.

“Why on earth would you be concerned about that?

“Really, pet, who cares what the house looks like? Watchers have been here for days an’ this is the first you’ve cared.” Spike rolled his eyes, disdain lacing his words. “The new bird ‘ll learn soon enough that a clean house isn’t what’s important. Safety is.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want her to think we’re all heathens and that we live in a hovel.”

“Walls are up. Roof’s secure. No demon hordes are camped out on the front lawn.” Spike shook his head. “I’d say we’re doin’ fine.”

Belatedly realizing exactly what Wesley had implied by coming upstairs to their room, Spike changed the subject before Buffy could angst more about the state of the house. “She the reason why you’re up here?”

He sighed, then nodded affirmatively. “She’s finding our explanations a bit hard to believe. I’m afraid she’s going to bolt.”

“So what? Gonna parade out the troops and prove to this one she’s another Chosen?” Spike chuckled when Buffy made a dismissive noise. “Where’s Faith?”

“No one’s tried to locate her. Or Jenner for that matter.” Wesley crossed the room to look out the window. “I doubt she’d be of much assistance anyway.” He paused for another moment, finally admitting what the other Watchers had been thinking. “Travers believes it might be best for Faith to act as a – roving agent. Freelance. He wants to place the new girl in Cleveland.”

The blondes shared a look that didn’t go unnoticed by Wesley. It was clear what they were thinking, and it was Buffy who finally confirmed it. “That would fit best for Faith. She’s not gonna stick around long. She’d be way better off doing the traveling.”

“That is what Travers believes. Besides, you are already entrenched here in Sunnydale and are more than capable of handling anything that might arise here.” Wesley leaned against the wall, watching her intently. “The new girl’s name is Rona.”

“Got to train this one better than the last.” The comment was out of his mouth before he could censor it, and Spike tensed, waiting for the other two to chastise him over his callousness. It never came.

“Kennedy’s failings weren’t lack of training as much as excessive arrogance. And rather rigid thought patterns.” Wesley moved away from the wall, heading for the doorway. “Perhaps this one will benefit from training with a Master Vampire.”

He opened the door. “Either way, I think you should both meet her before she decides we’re all escapees from Bedlam.”
The remains of breakfast were piled on the dining room table, remnants of a hasty meal. Giles had kept the conversation innocuous while Wesley tried to convince Buffy and Spike to come meet the new Slayer, though he failed miserably as uncomfortable silence descended over the room’s occupants. Rona was poised at the edge of her chair, eyes focused on the front door. She had rebuffed every attempt from Giles to draw her out and from her posture, it was clear she was mentally counting down to zero.

Travers waited patiently, his attention seemingly caught once again by the musty book in front of him. Nicholson had retreated to the kitchen, replenishing the supply of caffeine and escaping the uncomfortable atmosphere of the dining room. Has it only been three days since we landed? Nicholson counted off the time in his head, while he silently urged the coffeemaker to speed up. Time had begun to merge and he was still figuring out the days when he heard Wesley’s tread on the stairs.

He wandered back into the dining room as Wesley was again reassuring the new Slayer that all her questions would be answered, if she’d only give them a few more minutes.

It was more than clear that Rona wasn’t blessed with patience. She shrugged her shoulders in response to Wesley, almost blatantly ignoring him. They had only a few moments before she made a break for it. Probably the only reason she’s staying put is because he’s between her and the door.

Another set of footsteps sounded on the stairs and Nicholson didn’t need to look up to guess who it was. Despite his short stature and deceptively thin build, Spike exuded a presence that screamed for acknowledgment and automatic respect.

“Mornin’.” He leaned negligently against the doorframe, his arms crossed and a slight smile on his face. “See we have another house guest.”

Various responses were mumbled to his greeting. It was Giles who answered his non-question, though, while the others remained quiet. “Yes. Rona, this is Spike. Spike, this is Rona Jefferson.”

He very clearly sized her up, and they could all see Rona reacting differently to him. Her eyebrows rose and she shifted in her chair. The backpack she had been holding onto like a lifeline dropped to the floor and her back stiffened. Giles could see the tension rising in her and he got to his feet.

Spike did no more than just nod once in her direction, then directed his next comment over her head to Travers. “Might want to give this one more of a chance than the last little girl you let loose.”

It was the perfect opening and though the four Watchers knew it, none of them replied. Looks were exchanged, and not a one escaped Spike’s notice. A deep sigh shook him and he sauntered over to the table. Palms flat down, he leaned past the new Slayer to stare directly at the senior Watcher. “Gonna cost you, if you want to keep her here for a bit.”

Again, not one of the men pretended they were unaware of the true discussion.

“An addendum to our original agreement?” Travers didn’t waver from Spike’s gaze. “Room,
board, and upkeep?”

An amused, huffy snort was Spike’s counter argument. It was Giles who shook his head in
disagreement. “Both the girl and her Watcher will need additional training.”

Travers mulled over the idea, realizing it had more merit than he believed the rest of the Council
would be willing to admit. Kennedy’s training had lacked, and he wasn’t entirely certain it was
due to the girl’s rigid mindset and reluctance to take orders from men. Especially those that
weren’t her father. Her field training had also been lacking. And as for her Watcher – Spencer
Whitworth had the credentials and background, although she hadn’t been truly prepared to have an
active Slayer.

“For both, then.” Conceding the point, Travers waited while Spike decided.

Sensing his opponent’s need far exceeded his original expectations, the vampire smiled. “Up the
ante for the Slayer.”

Knowing full well he meant Buffy, Travers capitulated. “Agreed.”

Smirking at the Watchers ranged about the dining room, Spike nodded his head. “Looks like we
have a deal.” He stepped away from the table, once more eyeing the new Slayer. “Training starts
tonight. Best have a Watcher assigned.”

“What the hell is going on?” Rona finally broke her silence, confusion marring her face. “You
people haven’t proved a damn thing. I’m out.”

“Perhaps you should introduce yourself.” Giles motioned to Spike, waiting for his reaction.

Spike’s eyes danced with mirth. He paused a moment, gaining her full attention, then shifted into
game face. “Hello, Slayer.”

Rona scrambled to her feet, eyes wide with disbelief. “What the fuck?”

“Spike.” A decidedly feminine voice chastised the vampire and he stepped back from looming
over the new Slayer. Buffy rounded the doorway into the dining room and surveyed the situation.
“Hey guys, what’s going on?”

Buffy’s gaze drifted from one Englishman to another, waiting for an answer. “Who’s this?”

“This is the new girl.” She sensed Spike’s smirk and turned to face the girl to get a better look at
her. Rona was backed up against the table, as far away from Spike as she could get in the crowded
space. “Her name’s Rona.”

Buffy snuck a glance at Spike, who was out of gameface. “Really?”

Taking a step forward, Buffy held out her hand in greeting. “Hi. I’m Buffy. The Vampire Slayer.”
Several hours and quite a few demonstrations later, Rona finally began believing what the Watchers had been trying to tell her. At first, it was very clear the poor girl hadn’t wanted to trust anything they were saying, but after the third sparring session with Buffy, she finally got the picture.

They had purposely kept Spike out of the fighting, his injuries precluding any real effort on his part. Rona had been sufficiently cowed, especially when the seemingly more fragile, and slightly out-of-shape Buffy threw her the entire length of the back yard. It hadn’t been graceful, none of their sparring had been, though it had been effective. The impression it made upon Rona had been lasting.

It had also made an impression upon Travers. Nicholson had used his cell phone to record the entire session, and he’d emailed the file to himself. Twenty minutes after it was all over and done with, and the two girls were in the kitchen talking quietly, Nicholson had replayed everything. Twice.

After the first replay, Rona had slumped into one of the dining room chairs, her expression grim and, at the same time, thoughtful. “So you’re telling me I can do everything she can?”

“That you’ll eventually be able to.” Giles reached across the table for the teapot. “With training and time, you should be fine.”

“She kicked my ass. Every time.” Rona couldn’t believe the crappy looking, flabby white chick had beaten her. Not when numerous girls from South Central couldn’t. “How the hell did she do that?”

“Buffy’s been the Slayer for,” Giles had to do the quick calculation in his head and reality struck him momentarily. Hard to imagine it’s been that long. “Since she was fourteen. She was called just before her fifteenth birthday. Seven years.”

Rona stared at him, a couple of different thoughts rolling through her head. “So how many of us are there?”

This was the part Giles was dreading, and judging by the looks on the faces of Wesley and Nicholson, they hadn’t been too happy with it either. The three shared a pointed look, then almost together shifted their gazes on Travers. Who, unlike them, was lost in thought and not paying attention to the conversation. Buffy was no help at all, since she and Spike were in the kitchen, low voices carrying on their own conversation. Giles cleared his throat, preparing to answer when the front door slammed open, bouncing off the wall.

Faith’s disheveled appearance in the front hallway wasn’t a surprise to anyone, except perhaps Rona.

“Oh. Look at this. Council Convention.” At the varying looks she was getting, Faith quipped, “So does this mean I’m the entertainment? Coz the lap dances are gonna cost ya.”

Spike, halted just beyond the edges of sunlight streaming in the door behind Faith, griped, “Close the door, pet.”
She reached behind her and slammed the door, hard enough to rattle the windows. “So, this the newest Chosen One?”

There was enough emphasis on the last word that even Rona picked it up and she looked around the room. “Chosen One? What does that mean?”

The aborted sigh Giles had nearly choked on finally emerged from his throat. “It means that there is traditionally only one Slayer at a time. Due to a serious of unforeseen circumstances, we now have three Slayers. Buffy, Faith, and yourself.”

Silence reigned in the dining room. Rona sat in the chair, digesting the information she’d just been given and trying to put all the pieces of it together. Faith looked around, shrugged and headed toward the kitchen. Spike’s attention shot toward the stairs, hearing muffled mewling that no one else picked up and he motioned Buffy forward. “Be right back.”

Rona looked at Giles, anger sparking in her brown eyes. “You’re telling me there’s only three of us? And we’re supposed to fight vampires and shit all on our own? You people are crazy.”

“You got that right.” Faith lounged in the doorway, eating cereal directly from the box. “Except we’re wicked strong chicks.”

“Which means we can slay whatever runs across our paths.” Buffy’s voice preceded her down the stairs. Touching down on the first floor, she shifted the baby in her embrace. Looking pointedly at the others, Buffy moved into the living room, followed by Spike, who had their other infant tucked carefully in his arms. She plopped down somewhat gracefully on the couch, sliding the complaining baby onto her lap and deftly covering herself with a light blanket. Shielding her exposed breast from everyone except the baby, Buffy started nursing.

“Check you out. All domestic and motherly.” Faith teased her, the glint in her eyes displaying an almost wistful expression.

Travers finally shook himself from his reverie. “I believe it is time we took our leave.” He rose to his feet, reaching for Giles’ hand. “Rupert. I trust you’ll keep everything well in hand.”

“I shall endeavor to do my best.” His gaze swept the rooms. “I’ll have my hands full.”

“Indeed.” Travers did the same to Wesley, remarking, “You’ve come a long way since you left. Would you be willing to discuss further options?”

Wesley looked over his shoulder to catch Spike’s eye. There was an assessing gleam as the vampire waited for the other’s answer. “Not something you have to answer just this moment, but expect to hear from us in the coming fortnight.”

Travers didn’t bother to shake Spike’s hand, merely inclined his head to bid him goodbye. “Ladies, we’ll be in touch.” Pausing for a moment, he spoke to Faith. “Miss Lehane, I’d like to see you privately before we leave. Say tomorrow at half past two?”

“Yeah, sure.” Faith looked puzzled, but shrugged the implications of a private meeting with the Council into something not really to worry about.

“What’s gonna happen to me?” Rona got up from the table, arms crossed over her chest and a decidedly aggravated look on her face.
“For the time being, you will be staying in Sunnydale, training with Miss Summers and her partner.” Travers motioned to the living room. “After I’ve spoken to Miss Lehane, and you’ve had some time to train, we’ll reassess your situation.”

He inclined his head to everyone. “Good day, all. Nicholson?”

“Coming, sir.” Nicholson paused for a moment at the door, a smile creasing his normally stoic features. “Good bye.”

Buffy handed off Kirsten to Spike, taking the fussing Robbie from him. “So, pet, ‘pears we’ve been saddled with the newest in the Slayer brigade. Can’t say that I’m all over with happiness.”

“He either.” Buffy surveyed the faces peering at her; only one that she was truly concerned with. “But we’ll deal. Just not today.”

“Okay, Scarlet. We’ll suss it all out tomorrow.” Spike lifted Kirsten to his shoulder, humming softly under his unnecessary breath.

“We will.” Buffy smiled at him, happiness shining from her eyes. “We’ve got lots of time.”

_Little did they know, there was lots and lots of time ahead of them._

Chapter End Notes

[End notes: This is my chance to say, one more time: Thank you. Each and everyone single one of you that’s read, reviewed, nominated, voted, and enjoyed these stories. I cannot express enough how much your support (through writer’s block and worse) have bolstered me. It is for your enjoyment that I’ve sweated through some of this. So thank you. And also, if you’ve the time or the inclination, I’d love to hear from you. Yeah, everyone. So if you read and never reviewed, or faithfully reviewed all along, please, let me know what you think and how these stories affected you. I wanna hear it all, good, bad, complaints, compliments, everything; from a simple “thank you” to a “oh my god, you wordy bitch, thank god you’re finished”. Slainte, cheers, and much love, Niamh]
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