i will make you hurt

by Gabrielle

Summary

*Set in BTVS S6 after Doublemeat Palace* Willow's decision to give up magic has dire consequences no one foresaw, bringing Angel back to Sunnydale and taking Tara and Spike down a path neither one of them ever expected in the quest to save Willow from a fate worse than death.
Prologue

It seemed like Willow had been groaning for half the night and Buffy was tossing and turning impatiently. Not that she didn’t sympathize with what Willow was going through - magic withdrawal seemed to be pretty painful – and she totally supported Willow in her sobriety, but tonight’s shift at the Doublemeat had been rough, as had the brief encounter she’d had with Spike, and what Buffy needed more than anything was sleep, as much as she could get of it.

Oh thank… whoever. Finally. Silence.

There was a sigh of relief and anticipation of imminent rest, then Buffy turned onto her side, closed her eyes and…

A loud, shrill sound startled her completely awake.

What the…? Oh god! That was a scream. A really bad, horrible scream… and it had come from Willow’s room. In seconds, Buffy was out of bed, down the hall, and through Willow’s bedroom door, Dawn following on her heels.

“Will? Willow, are you…?”

The rest of the question stuck in her throat as she looked at the peaceful figure lying on the bed. There was no evidence of anything that could have made her cry out. Nothing at all. In fact, she looked… serene. It was as if all her pain and sorrow had left her and for a terrible moment Buffy hated and envied her. Why did she get to feel like that when Buffy…

No, don’t go there. You’ll never get any rest if you go there.

So she brushed it off… like dirt from the grave.

Well, since it seemed that Willow was okay, she guessed she was going to just chalk the screaming up to a nightmare and hustle Dawn back down the hall so they could both get some sleep – after all, it looked like that was what Willow was doing.

But then, call it her spider senses, something told her that there was something wrong with this picture. Willow was a notoriously light sleeper, especially lately. The noise of two people barreling into her room should have woken her immediately; instead, she hadn’t even moved. Not a twitch.

Not even the flutter of an eyelid.

A cold chill went up her spine. This was bad. This was very, very bad.

“Dawn, go back to bed,” Buffy ordered. She was annoyed but not surprised when Dawn ignored her.

“What’s wrong with Willow?”

She tried again, sterner this time. “Go back to bed.”
But Dawn paid her no heed, almost barreling into her as she rushed to the bed and shook Willow. “Wake up!” she yelled. “Be okay! Please be okay!”

There was no response from Willow. She was limp as a rag doll.

Why wasn’t she moving? For that matter, why wasn’t Buffy moving? Why was she almost frozen, unable to make herself do anything, watching as Dawn felt for a pulse and exclaimed, “She’s alive!” before collapsing in tears because Willow still wouldn’t wake up?

Then her eyes fell on… the phone. She needed to call an ambulance, right? Because Willow was still alive. Somehow, she managed to reach out and grab it, punching in 9-1-1 and giving them her address and hearing a voice she barely recognized as her own calmly describing Willow’s condition.

For a split second, when she looked at the figure on the bed, she saw blonde hair.

Mommy.

This could not be happening again.

This was happening again.

Death was here – in her house – and she was the Slayer and she couldn’t fight it, couldn’t make it go away.

Was it her fault? Was Willow dying as some sort of payment for pulling Buffy out of Heaven?

She wasn’t the only one who was wondering things, though, because Dawn was sobbing something about ‘my fault, this is all my fault, it’s the magic, isn’t it?’ and now Buffy had no idea what to think.

Just then, she heard the sound of the ambulance pulling up and she ran downstairs to let the paramedics in.

There’d be time to figure out what this all meant later. Right now, she just hoped Willow would be alive to help.

Flinging open the door, Buffy greeted them with “She’s upstairs,” and watched as they raced to the bedroom.

Everything was chaos and the sound of Dawn crying.

To be continued…
You know you’ve spent way too much time in hospitals when nurses and orderlies remember your name.

At least three of them had called out to Buffy, one giving a cheerful wave, and she was starting to wonder if her life – the life she’d been dragged back to against her will – was ever going to be about anything other than death.

All she knew was that all the anger and resentment she’d been repressing towards Willow had first burst forth… and then disappeared. What was left? Terror that her best friend was never going to wake up and they were never going to talk and she was never going to get to share with her the things she should have shared with her in the first place. The things she’d shared with Spike.

Oh not the sex. Just the… feelings. The alienation and the darkness and the loneliness. Willow would have understood; Buffy was sure of it. If only she’d been willing to admit to her issues so she and Willow could have worked through them. Because that’s what friends did. Right?

Or was this just the rose-coloured nonsense you always thought of when it was too late and was the truth something awful and complicated and sad and end-of-friendship-as-they-knew-it-y?

Wake up, Willow. Please?

“All right. This was like a pop quiz. She could answer the second question. “They’re running some tests on her.”

“Dawn said she’s in a coma. How did she…?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? She lives in your house!”

Xander was almost yelling and it was Anya, of all people, who admonished him. “Don’t make a scene or they’ll throw us out. Maybe even call the police. You can’t get arrested before the wedding.”

Thank you, Anya.

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even postpone telling Tara until Willow was awake and fine. Guess that wasn’t going to happen now.

Well, maybe this was better after all. She’d just tell everyone what she knew all at once.

Tara was scared and confused and lost and it didn’t take her long to realize that she was hugging Buffy, but Buffy wasn’t hugging her back and… this was bad, wasn’t it? She let go, stepped back, and tried to get her emotions under control. “Dawn said something happened to Willow.”

“Yeah.” Buffy sighed and looked away for a moment, clearly trying to compose what she was going to say. That was never good and Tara was more frightened than ever, especially when Buffy’s words ended up coming out in a rush. “I was in my room and Willow screamed and I ran in and she was… just lying there. She looked so peaceful, at first I thought she was sleeping, but the scream and then she didn’t move. Dawn checked her pulse and I called the ambulance and… she’s in a coma. That’s all we know so far.”

Oh god. This was… Willow in a coma and no one having any idea why. How long had it been before Buffy got to their… Willow’s room? If Tara had been there, would Willow be okay now?

For all that she knew she’d been right to leave… No, right now she didn’t know that at all. She felt guilty and horrible and scared to… not death. Don’t think about death.

“What kind of scream was it?”

Normally, Tara felt empathy for Anya’s odd behavior and strange questions, but right now she just didn’t get it. “Why do you want to know?”

But of course, Anya wasn’t talking to her so she paid her no heed. “What kind of scream was it, Buffy?”

Buffy seemed confused, but she answered. “It was a very high, loud scream. I thought she was in pain.”

“Were there words. Or was it just a sound?”

Okay, at first Tara hadn’t really thought anything of Anya’s question except that it was weird and inappropriate, but now – now that she was getting so specific? The hair on the back of her neck stood up. Looked like Buffy felt the same, because her voice shook when she answered, “It was just a sound. Why?”

“Oh well, I was just curious. I mean, if Willow were a natural witch, like Tara, then she’d be doomed, but luckily she’s not, so…” She shrugged and looked around, seeming confused. “It’s good news, right? Willow not being a natural witch and all and this not being…”

This time, Xander was the one who chimed in, “Not being what, An?”

“Well, not being a magic leech. Once, back when I was…,” she looked around, making sure none of the nurses were in earshot, “still granting vengeance wishes, there was a woman I’d been sent to help, only it turned out she was a witch and it was a waste of my time, at least I thought so. Kind of a failure on my part, actually, at least that’s what D’Hoffryn said. Almost got my powers taken
away."

"An? Can you get to the point?"

She glared at Xander, but she got back to her story. "Anyway, it turned out she’d renounced her magic. Which is fine if you’re just an abnormally powerful wannabe, like Willow, but when you’re a natural witch, the magic doesn’t really go away. It just sits there, building up, waiting to be used, and if someone who’s on the same magical wavelength decides they want it… well, they can take it. Like the sister of the witch I was supposed to help did. She took her husband and her power. Lucky for the witch, her sister just killed her and took the power that was there. It’s possible, if you’re really skilled, to keep the power source alive so it keeps generating magic – at least for awhile. Of course, even though they look like they’re sleeping, they suffer horrendous, agonizing pain while their magic keeps being drained. Eventually, though, they die from it, so that’s the upside. But like I said, Willow’s lucky, because she’s not a natural witch, so this has to be something else. Maybe she had a stroke!"

Halfway through Anya’s story, Tara began to feel ill. By the time Anya finished, it was too much. "I have to go," she blurted out, before she raced out of the hospital and into the night.

This was all her fault, wasn’t it? For encouraging Willow and then for making her give up magic. Because maybe Willow wasn’t… but what if she was? What if, even though no one in Willow’s family had ever been a witch, she somehow…?

Tara knew one thing: Whatever Willow was, she wasn’t a wannabe. What she had was big and it came from somewhere inside… and now it was being drained by someone or something and she was suffering and Tara had no idea what she was going to do about it.


Buffy barely noticed Tara leaving, but to be fair, she didn’t notice much. Arms, legs, breathing… pretty much all of it was off her radar. All she knew was that Anya had just described a fate worse than anything she could imagine and for all that it didn’t seem possible – not like Sheila Rosenberg was a witch except in the most colloquial sense – she knew, knew, that Willow was a victim of this magical leech thing.

It was clear from the muffled sob she just heard that Xander did too. "Oh god. What are we gonna do? Willow…"

"Why is everyone so upset?"

Was she kidding? Oh wait. She was Anya. "Willow’s in horrible danger right now."

"But…” You could almost see the little light bulb go on over her head. In any other situation, Buffy would have laughed. "You mean Willow is a natural witch?" Anya suddenly turned irate. "No one told me that. In fact… Xander, you told me Willow’s mother tried to burn her at the stake back when she was just reading books and floating pencils! No one in her family was a witch, right? I mean, yes, I called her a powerful Wicca back then, but that was just flattery to trick her into
helping me get my necklace back and it didn’t even work, except…” Memories – you could almost see them shuffling like a deck of cards behind her eyes. “This is bad, isn’t it?”

Understatement, thy name was Anya.

Buffy sat in a chair and began to cry.

Angel woke up with a start, pain tearing through his body like heat lightning in his veins. No! It couldn’t be…

Was he back in Hell?

He looked around, taking in the familiar surroundings, and he was comforted, but only slightly. Because his next fear was for his soul. Was it being ripped from him again?

How could it? Yes, he loved his son, loved him more than anything or anyone he ever had, but it wasn’t perfect happiness and… no this pain wasn’t like that. Plus, it was fading now and he was still…

The voice! There had been a voice. It was important, he knew, and he had to remember. Think. Think. What had the voice…? It had been familiar; he recalled that now. He knew that voice.

Something told him that the pain belonged to whoever that voice… Oh god! Oh no!

Make it stop. Please. Somebody. Anybody. Make it stop!

He knew the woman whose voice he’d heard, the woman in unspeakable agony. He knew her well – he owed her his soul.

It was Willow – and this nightmare wasn’t just some sleeping fancy.

Leaping from his bed and pulling on a shirt as fast as he could, he raced to Cordelia’s room and pounded on the door. “Cordy! Wake up! Willow’s in trouble!”

Tara wasn’t sure why she was here, but here she was, standing in front of Buffy’s house. The house that she’d once called home – the home she’d shared with Willow.

It was empty now. Everyone was at the hospital still. She should be there too; she knew that. But how could she when…?

“Witch. Whatcha doin’ here? Thinkin’ about her?”

She swiped hastily at her eyes, not wanting to share her pain with someone who… yes, she guessed she knew him, but not really, so in a way he was a stranger.

A stranger who’d given her back her humanity once.
Then again, so had Willow, hadn’t she?

Thinking about how Willow had returned her mind to her brought on a fresh wave of guilt and she began crying again.

Spike stared. What was going on with the girl? He got that being apart from the one you loved was pretty rough – oh did he get that – but Tara’d had more than good reason to break up with that little bitch. He was still right furious with her for nearly getting Dawn killed, not to mention that nonsense with their memories. So why the waterworks? “Something wrong?”

Now she was the one who was staring. “No one told you? Oh yeah. I f-forgot. You don’t… I guess there aren’t any ph-phone lines in crypts.” There was that slight stutter, the one she almost never got anymore when she was talking to the others – the ones she trusted. It reminded him of what he was, what he’d always be: an outsider.

But hell, wasn’t she one too?

Now, though, didn’t seem the time to get offended. He got the feeling something very serious had happened. Reaching out with his senses… the house was empty, wasn’t it? No Buffy, no Dawn, and no… “Something happened to her. Your girl.”

Tara nodded, unsure of just what to say “Uh huh.” Maybe she should tell him. Would he even care, though? Still, he was one of them, wasn’t he, and he had the right… and – oh gosh! Anya wasn’t the only one who’d lived for centuries. He had too. Maybe he’d know of a way… “Willow’s magic. Something’s draining it from her. She’s in what looks like a coma, but it-it isn’t. She’s being k-kept alive to produce more magic and she’s in terrible p-pain. She can’t move. Can’t speak, She’s just… She’s in pain, Spike! She’s in pain and it’s all my fault and… Do you know anything? Do you know how to save her?”

Angel slammed the phone down. No answer. He’d called Buffy’s house, Willow’s house, no answer. He’d even called Giles, only to find that the number had been disconnected. Something was wrong – he knew it – but he had no idea what it could be. One thing was certain: The fact that he couldn’t reach anyone made him more anxious than ever.

“Maybe they’re just out on patrol, Angel.”

“And my dream?”

Cordelia looked away.

“I have to do something.”

“Doesn’t she have Buffy? Besides, wouldn’t I have had…?”

Just then Cordelia slumped against the desk. That was alarming. “Oh god, Angel. This is bad. There’s something… I can’t see what it is. But something is draining Willow’s magic and… How powerful is she now?”

“She raised Buffy from the dead, Cordy.”
“Oh. Yeah. Pretty powerful then. Something wants it – and they’re taking it. We need Wesley.”

Angel thought back to the unanswered phones and the disconnected number for Giles. “Call him. Tell him to pack a bag. He’s going with me to Sunnydale.”

For a moment, Cordelia seemed about to argue. Their eyes locked and all the complications between them flared up for a moment. He got it, but… “You need to stay here with Connor. He needs you and I wouldn’t trust anyone else to take care of my son. Gunn and Fred will be here for the clients.” He paused, a flicker of that nightmare agony passing through him. “She gave me back my soul. I have to help her.”

A few seconds passed, but then Cordy nodded. “I know. She needs you. Just don’t get distracted, okay?”

They both knew what – or rather, who – she meant by ‘distracted.’ “I won’t. This is about Willow.”

“Go talk to Gunn. I’ll call Wesley. Do you want to wait until sundown or…?”

He shook his head. “We’ll rent a car. Something with dark-tinted windows. We don’t have time to waste.”

“I’ll tell him to get here right away. Go.”

“Thank you.” He took her hand in his for a split second and then raced back upstairs to find Gunn. Something told him that every minute was already a minute too late.

Stop! Please! What’s happening to me? Somebody help me! It hurts! Oh god, it hurts!

To be continued…
“Drive faster,” Angel barked from the back seat, hating the helplessness that approaching daylight forced upon him. Damn it. Wesley drove like an old woman.

“Would you like for the police to pull us over?”

All right, the man had a point there. It was just… “She’s in trouble, Wesley. It’s bad. I know that you and she weren’t very close in Sunnydale, but she gave me back my soul and…”

“I know how much good she’s done.”

The words weren’t reassuring but the tone in his voice was and Angel knew enough to know that it meant he could trust his friend to do everything in his power to help.

“Cordelia told me of the content of her vision. That something is draining Willow’s power. Do we know what it is? Were you able to reach...?”

“No. I tried calling Buffy’s house and Willow’s house, but there was no answer at either number.”

“What about Giles?”

“His number’s disconnected.”

“Disconnected?” There was a pause and the mood in the car became even grimmer as Angel could almost feel Wesley’s growing unease. “Clearly there are things going on in Sunnydale of which we have not been made aware.”

Nothing more was said… but the car speeded up. They’d be in Sunnydale soon. Angel only hoped they weren’t too late to save Willow.

Nothing. No change. Not that Buffy had expected it, but she’d… oh how she’d been hoping they were wrong and that Willow had had a stroke or something like Anya had thought.

But no, Willow wasn’t that lucky, was she?

What was happening to her? How bad was it? Was there anything they could do? Anya had said it was hopeless, but… she could be wrong, right? She’d been wrong before, after all, when she’d said Mayor Wilkins was unstoppable.

She should ask for more details, but right now she was the one doing Willow-duty here at the hospital. Xander and Anya had taken Dawn back to the house. Hopefully they’d all be able to get some rest, especially Dawn. She was taking everything hard, blaming herself for Willow giving up magic, and no matter how hard Buffy had tried to convince her that it wasn’t as if she knew… No,
it hadn’t worked.

It wasn’t working on Buffy, either.

Not that she’d known what would happen to Willow, but… shouldn’t she have? Anya should have told them about this magic leech thing way before now, back when it could have done some good. Or… shouldn’t Tara have known? Tara was a born witch. She should have told them. And if she hadn’t known… well, she should have. Because people who came from whole families full of witches…

What about Giles? Wasn’t he supposed to know all there was to know about this magic stuff?

Someone should have known, that was all Buffy could think right now.


Never thought he’d be playing host to Glinda, but here they were – her dissolving into sobs at the drop of a hat, and him trying to brew up some tea and lamenting the fact that her tee-totaling ways meant that he ought not to imbibe from the nice supply of Jack Daniels he’d just laid in.

“We’ll figure something out,” he offered, not that he believed a word of it, not that Tara did either.

As angry as he was at Willow… no, she didn’t deserve this. Not this kind of horrible suffering.

But he had no answers, did he? Not a one. Dru had never talked of something like this, and he was sure if she’d known it were possible, she’d have been draining magic right and left – daft bint always did lament that she didn’t have more power.

“We’re just gonna have to find folks who know about this stuff. Can’t be that hard. This is Sunnydale. Have to be some right smart occult types around here. I mean, isn’t there even a Wicca group at that university you girls attend?”

Tara had been staring at the floor, trying to lose herself in the dark and the dust, when Spike’s words drew her gaze upward. She shook her head sorrowfully. “They’re not really Wicca. They just like planning mixers and calling themselves goddess-worshippers. They don’t actually believe in magic.” Her mind drifted back to seeing Willow at those very meetings… falling in love with the first witch she’d ever met, well, the first one who wasn’t her mother. “Willow was the only one…” She couldn’t finish before breaking down in tears again.

A second later there was an arm awkwardly draped over her shoulders and a hand patting hers. “We’re gonna save her. We will. You’ll get your girl back.”

“How? How, Spike? Every minute… she’s in so much pain. I know it. Anya said… Anya said she’d be l-luckier if she was… if she w-was dead!”

She collapsed against him, hating herself for insisting that Willow give up magic. She should have known… she should have known. Why hadn’t she known? Had her mother told her? Had she just
somehow forgotten?

A horrible thought came to her. “If Anya’s right,” she whispered, “should we…?”

Her eyes met Spike and she knew she didn’t have to finish her question. They were both thinking the same thing: Should they kill Willow?

Daylight had arrived just as they hit town, but luckily it hadn’t been nearly as tricky to get into the hotel as Angel had feared it might be. Wesley checked them in and Angel came up through an elevator in the parking garage. Business hotels – they were worth the extra money.

So here they were in what passed for the penthouse, this was a Marriott and not the Ritz Carlton, the curtains drawn tight, nerves as taut as piano wire. “I’ll call the Summers home,” Wesley offered. “I’m sure it will be less awkward for…”

“Thanks, but I need to do this. No offense, but I think I’m more likely to get the whole story.”

Wesley nodded. “Yes, you’re quite right. I… well, I was never one of the inner circle here, so to speak.”

There were memories behind Wesley’s eyes and Angel felt for him. “They didn’t know you. Not really. If they knew the man I know…”

Gratitude shone through the clouds now, but they both knew there were things more important than past slights and pain. “I’ll call right now.”

He picked up the phone and dialed “9” for an outside line, then Buffy’s phone number. His hand almost shook. This was going to be awkward. They hadn’t spoken since… well, since she’d come back from the dead. But nothing was more important than finding out exactly what was happening to Willow and rescuing her from it, so…

The phone rang… and rang… and rang again. He was about to hang up when. “Hello? Buffy?”

Xander? What was Xander doing answering Buffy’s phone? “It’s Angel,”

“Look, Angel. Buddy. It’s really swell to hear from you again, but as much as I’d love to chat about old times, I…”

Angel ignored the sarcasm and interrupted the boy. “I know about Willow.”

Silence, thick and heavy, and then… “How…?”

“Cordelia had a vision. I know that something’s draining her magic and that she’s in pain.”

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line. “Does she know…?” The hope, raw and naked, in the question Xander couldn’t bring himself to finish… for the first time Angel felt for the boy, saw that there was more to him than the buffoon trailing after Buffy he’d been so wont to disdain.
“We don’t know yet. But I brought Wesley and I’m sure he and Giles…”

“Giles is gone,” Xander almost spat, and as much as Angel realized he’d already known that deep down, once again he felt for Xander. Giles hadn’t been just Buffy’s Watcher, had he? He’d been a father figure to the rest of the group as well – a duty he’d clearly abandoned.

“I’m sorry.” And he meant it. But he wasn’t going to force Xander to tell him the whole story. Besides, time was of the essence. “Look, Wesley is very knowledgeable about magic and computers, so I’m sure he’ll be able to do everything we need on his own.” He paused, mindful that the man himself was right there listening to every word, but knowing he had to convince Xander. “I get that he wasn’t always that way and that you don’t know him the way I do. But believe me. I rely on him every day and he’s never let me down. I would never have brought him if I didn’t know… She saved my soul, Xander. This matters to me more than I can say. We will save her. Now tell me everything you know.”

Hurts! Help me, please! Somebody! Anybody! Help me!

The floor of Spike’s crypt was more comfortable than a hospital waiting room chair, and Buffy had the sore neck and back and butt to prove it, but she wasn’t going anywhere. She wasn’t going to leave Willow all alone. The minute she was allowed back in the room… But that wasn’t going to be for another – she glanced at the hideously institutional clock on the wall – half an hour or so. So what was she going to do until then?

Maybe she should call the house and check on Dawn, see how Xander was doing, but no, if they were sleeping, she didn’t want to wake them up.

A part of her wished that Spike were here. A quickie in the stairwell to make her forget? That sounded like a terrific idea right now… except that nothing could make her forget – not this.

So she settled back into the horrible chair and picked up a copy of Time Magazine dated… oh. Five years ago. Think she could get history credit for reading this?

Tara was sleeping fitfully on the sofa after Spike had all but forced a couple of shots of Jack into her while he…? He was pacing his crypt, smoking cigarette after cigarette, trying to figure out what the hell he was supposed to do now.

A hero. That’s what was needed, but damned if he saw himself in that role – at least not when Buffy wasn’t involved.

But she was, wasn’t she? What would happen between them if he saved Willow? Would she finally look at him and see a man? A man she could love? Or would she throw it back in his teeth the way she did when he gave her anything that wasn’t a hard cock inside that tight quim?
Somehow, though, none of those doubts caused him to falter. Whether his shining golden Slayer
cared or no, he was going to do whatever he could.

He stared at the face of the girl on the sofa, still fretful and anguished even in slumber, and he
knew he couldn’t let her down. She could’ve left him back at Revello Drive, gone looking for
Buffy or Harris, but she’d stayed with him. Yeah. She trusted him and out of all of them, he was
the one she was with today – pouring her heart out and begging him for answers.

Now all he had to do was come up with them.

“You mean to tell me that they… They made her renounce her magic? Good god! Even if she
hadn’t fallen on this terrible misfortune, something awful was going to result.” Wesley was pacing
angrily now, gesturing with a vehemence of emotion that surprised Angel. “I blame Giles for this.
He never took her in hand. Never taught her… well, clearly he never taught any of them or this
would not be happening. No it would definitely not be happening. Oh that poor girl!”

Angel was still trying to make sense of everything he’d been told. The power-hungry addict
Willow had supposedly become? That wasn’t the girl he knew. How could she…? No, there had to
be more to it. Something was missing. He stared at the curtains as if he could see through them to
the world outside – the sunlight, the light Willow couldn’t see either.

“What can we do?”

“I don’t… Well, first thing is that we need to learn more about the source of Willow’s magic.
That’s the key to finding out who – or what – has latched onto her magic.” Just then, there was a
noise and Wesley blushed. “I neglected to eat anything before we left,” he explained.

“Order something.”

So Wesley did. While he was listing off the food he desired, Angel grabbed a bag of blood from
the cooler he’d brought and, not bothering to try and find a mug to use the microwave, he sank his
fangs in and drained it.

When he was done, he realized Wesley was staring. Oh. He was still in his true face. So he
allowed that human mask which was usually second nature to fall back over his features. “Sorry.”

“No need. I know how upset you are.”

A knock at the door startled them both. “Well, I must say. The service in this hotel is a wonder.”
Angel was impressed as well as he went to the door, opened it, and…

“I have the keys to the Magic Box and I can take Wesley there right now to get anything he needs.
Books, supplies, anything.”

It was Xander Harris barging in, not room service, and he was clearly not standing on ceremony.

Angel was about to say something when Wesley jumped in. “My meal can wait. Xander, I think we
should go right away. Thank you.” Then he turned to Angel. “Call Cordelia. Let her know where
things stand and check on…” He stopped just in time as Angel glared at him. There were secrets he
was not yet ready to share… and maybe never would be. “Yes, well. We’re off then.”
He headed out the door, but Xander… Xander stopped for a moment before exiting with him. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said softly and with genuine feeling. Angel was about to pass out in shock, but then… “And if you tell anyone I said that, I’ll call you a liar. Oh, and stake you.”

With that, he was gone.

Now all Angel could do was wait. Wait and hope.


To be continued
Angel was sitting on the bed, reading page after page of a book on dark magic, growing more frustrated and worried by the minute, and finding no answers. Not one.

Every minute he was wasting was a minute Willow was suffering. He’d been in Hell and he knew what toll it had taken on a demon. What damage was being done to a fragile human girl? “These books are useless!” he growled, leaping to his feet and pacing like a caged animal.

“I’m with Angel,” Xander said, slamming his own book shut. “This isn’t getting us anywhere.” Any astonishment Angel might once have felt at Xander’s pronouncement was lost in their mutual concern for Willow.

“I’m afraid I must agree.” And Wesley made three. “I think the answer lies with Willow herself. How much do we know about her magic?”

Xander seemed confused, so Wes elaborated. “The source of her power. I gather her relatives were not magically-inclined, at least those in her immediate family, but…” His voice trailed off, and Angel realized that the fact that he had barely gotten to know the girl was now weighing heavily on him.

“I don’t know,” Xander replied softly before standing suddenly and screaming, “I don’t know, okay? I don’t know!” Then, just as suddenly, he slumped back in his chair and there were tears. “She’s been my best friend forever. I should know. Why don’t I know?”


It wasn’t any easier to rest here at home than it had been at the hospital, but Willow’s condition hadn’t changed and Buffy knew that they weren’t going to give her time off at work, so she had to at least try to get an hour or two of sleep. It wasn’t working and all her tossing and turning was just making her more tired.

So she got up, grateful that Anya had insisted Dawn go to school, and walked down the hall to Willow’s room – the room that had once been her Mom’s.

It felt so different now. There were hair clips on the nightstand and a sweater on a chair and it looked for all the world as if Willow were just out running errands and would be back any minute.

If only that were true.

Not even thinking about what she was doing, Buffy climbed onto the bed and lay down, inhaling the fruity scent of Willow’s shampoo on the pillow.
In minutes, she was asleep.

Tara stood in front of the Magic Box, confused and sad and feeling helpless. It was closed. She hadn’t expected that. Anya never closed the store during the day; money was the goddess she worshipped above all others.

But she had left the store shuttered and locked today.

What was she going to do? Her own occult library was composed of books on blessings and white magic – nothing likely to contain answers about the evil that was currently feeding on Willow more cruelly than any vampire.

Even at his worst, she couldn’t imagine Spike being this horrible. Especially given how understanding and helpful he was being.

He had promised to meet her tonight and take her to Willy’s – pooling their resources, he’d called it. He’d be the muscle and she’d ask the questions to find out if there was a magician or mage in town who might be the type to do this. Tara only wished they didn’t have to wait until nightfall, but not only was it nearly impossible for Spike to get around during the day, there was also the matter of the people they needed for information not being likely to show up there before sundown.

She sat down on the curb and tried not to cry. For the first time in her life, she hated the sun.

_Hurts. Hurts. Oh god. Hurts._

“Xander? Are you here?”

The sound of Anya’s voice calling out from downstairs awakened Buffy from the sleep she’d managed to find. She was about to be angry when she realized it was 2:30 in the afternoon and she was going to need to be at work in two hours – filling in for Stacy.

Why couldn’t she just quit? Worry about working after Willow was saved and everything was okay again?

Because the bills wouldn’t pay themselves just because Willow was being used as a magical battery by some psycho-sadist who wanted her power, that was why.

It wasn’t fair! It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t fair, it wasn’t _fair_!

What else wasn’t fair was that now she had to deal with Anya. But she got out of bed with a sigh and trudged downstairs. “He’s not here.”

Anya sighed dramatically. “He has the keys to the Magic Box and I thought he’d be there, but he isn’t. I haven’t been able to open the shop today.” She looked away briefly. “If I wasn’t worried about Willow I’d be very angry about all the money I’m losing.”
“Where would he have gone?”

“I don’t know. He answered the phone right before he left and then he asked me for the keys. I thought he had talked to you and was meeting you there.”

Buffy’s eyes shot wide. “It wasn’t me.” Now she was worried about more than just Willow. Could something have happened to Xander?

Just then, the phone rang, startling both women. Much to Buffy’s annoyance, Anya raced to answer it ahead of her. “Summers residence. How may I… Xander? Where are you? And where are my keys?”

There was silence on this end of the phone. “You’re with… but… all right. Buffy and I are on our way.” Anya hung up, but said nothing.

“Anya?”

“Oh. That was Xander. He’s with Angel and Wesley. Apparently they’re here to try and save Willow.”

“And her Mom used to call Esther a witch, but I think she was just using that as a substitute for the b-word. Sheila hated her sister-in-law. I remember this one time she was supposed to visit and… yeah, well. Anyway. Pretty sure she’s not the source of Willow’s powers.”

Xander was sharing everything he knew about Willow’s family and… it was depressing. Not just because there seemed to be nothing in there to lead them to the answers they needed but because Willow in no way had the family she deserved. Then again, he had to admit that the little bit he’d learned about Xander’s life through all this made him feel the same way for the boy as well.

Hell truly had frozen over, hadn’t it? Feeling sympathy for Xander Harris.

It occurred him that Willow would probably be really pleased by that if she knew. He’d be sure to tell her when… Dammit! When were they going to figure this out?

Then there was a knock at the door. That had to be Anya… and Buffy. Angel was not looking forward to this. But he needed to put his personal feelings aside and focus on how much help they could be. No one except Xander knew Willow as well as Buffy did. Her help could be key.

So he went to the door and opened it.

The scent that greeted him? That was definitely not what he was expecting.

“Hi.” Boy was it weird seeing Angel again. Made especially awkward by the fact that she was screwing Spike, which she really, really did not want to share with him.

Okay, did Angel’s nostrils just flare? He didn’t say anything though, so it was probably nothing. He was just worried about Willow like they all were and it was some weird, reflex-y breathing
thing, right?

“It’s… it’s really good of you to be here. Thanks.”

“She gave me my soul.”

Oh yeah. Can’t forget the soul. The soul she’d almost cost him forever.

“I can’t stay long. I have to go to work, but…”

“You’re going to work?” Oh goody. Wesley. Who was as big a jerk as ever, it seemed.

“You think I want to go to work right now? I would like nothing better than to spend every minute helping fix Willow, but I have bills to pay and a sister to support and none of that is making room for my life or Willow’s life or…” She stopped, frustrated and sad and desperate not to cry. But she was tired and terrified and she was pretty sure a stray tear or two had escaped.

“We understand, Buffy.” You know, right now she kind of loved Xander. Especially when he came over and gave her a hug. It felt… very much of the needed. “She’ll be back after her shift.”

As Xander let go, Buffy saw Angel nod and Wesley had the decency to look sort of ashamed – and to apologize. “I’m sorry, Buffy. I… well of course you have to take care of your responsibilities. I was thoughtless. Do forgive me, please.”

She nodded. “Yeah.” She looked at her watch and cringed. “I better change into my uniform. Anya, would you mind giving me a ride?”

“Of course I will.” The expression on her face… There were times when Buffy forgot that Anya really was human and that she really did care and now she was the one who felt ashamed.

“Thanks.”

So she went into the bathroom, duffel bag in hand, and… Oh god. Angel and Wesley were going to see her in this stupid Doublemeat outfit. This was the worst… No, it really wasn’t. Compared to so many things – like being ripped out of Heaven… like what Willow was going through right now – it was nothing at all. So she changed her clothes and, shoulders back and head high, she walked out of the bathroom.

Angel managed not to stare as Buffy emerged from the bathroom, but it was a close run thing. It was hard to believe she was working at some fast food place and wearing… that. Then again, it was hard to believe she was having sex with Spike. But his eyes and his nose told him both were true.

When it came to the job… he realized his initial reaction was shallow and unfair. With a moment’s thought, he realized that he admired her for being willing to do whatever it took to take care of her little sister. He hoped he’d be willing do the same for Connor. But while he didn’t have any right to judgment or jealousy on the score of her sex life, he was honest enough to admit that the fact that it was Spike was almost more than he could take.

Almost.
He’d meant what he said to Cordelia. He wasn’t going to let Buffy distract him. Willow was in terrible pain and in danger of losing her life and that was a hell of a lot more important than any issues he had with Spike or about Buffy being involved with him.

“We’ll talk when you get back,” he told her, as she was saying something to Xander.

“Oh.”

There was something in her eyes… He knew she knew that he knew. So he hastened to reassure her. “I have questions about Willow and I know Wesley does as well.”

“Oh.” Yes, she’d said ‘oh’ twice. It was a sturdy syllable and held up well to repeated use. She looked at her watch. Again. “I better go. I’ll be back around 11:30, okay?”

“I’ll make sure and pick her up,” Anya said cheerily, and Buffy smiled at her.

“Thanks.”

“Thanks, An,” Xander added. “Hey, maybe by the time you get back we’ll have this all figured out and we’ll have saved the day and Willow will be here with us.” He was trying so hard and it made Buffy’s heart ache and oh god did she wish she could believe his words were prophetic.

If only… if only.

So many things she wanted to say, but she didn’t – or couldn’t – and everything was awkward and she was running late, so she said her ‘I’ll be back soon’ spiel again and she and Anya headed out the door.

Once they were in the elevator, Anya turned to her and said, “Wesley sure was a creep about you working. Is he a Communist? Or is he just one of those chauvinists who think women should stay home and have babies?”

There were times when Anya was wonderful. Now was definitely one of those times.

Make it stop. Stop. Stop. Make it stop. Please, make it stop.

Tara knocked on the door of Spike’s crypt. The sun was setting and she was anxious to get going.

Why hadn’t she gone to Buffy or the others? She hadn’t even thought about it until now.

But what would that have accomplished? They were probably doing whatever they could and they… well, they really never saw her as part of the team, did they? Even when Buffy was dead. Even when Willow was the boss. It was like the circle was closed and no one was willing to scooch over and make even a little bit of room.
Was Willow one of those immovable objects?

Not what she wanted to think about now. And honestly? Even if Willow had been part of why she was always an outsider, even if they never worked things out and got back together, even if she was never able to forgive Willow completely for the things she’d done… yes, she was still one hundred percent committed to saving her. Because for all that they might not have a future and in spite of the bad things, Willow was the first person who had ever loved Tara truly and completely, the first person who had ever made her feel good and whole and special, and she would always, always be grateful for that.

In a very real way, even before Willow had rescued her from Glory, Willow had saved her life.

It was time to return the favour.

So she knocked on the door again – harder this time – and it finally opened. “Spike? You ready? Let’s go to Willie’s.”

“She was in the hospital when she did the Restoration spell?” Angel asked, surprised when Xander started talking about it.

“Yeah. She was really weak. We were all worried about her using magic when she’d just been in a coma. But you know Willow, she…”

“A coma?” Wesley cried. “She did a spell of that magnitude in that condition?” Xander glared, but Angel saw Wesley’s point – or he thought he did. “None of you… my god, I could throttle Giles. Of all people… He should have known.” Wesley took a deep breath and then he asked Xander a question. “Did Willow ever say anything about the spell. What she experienced?”

Xander looked puzzled for a moment, but then his brow furrowed in thought. “She said she felt something pass through her – Angel’s soul, I think.”

Really? Angel hadn’t… but then again, he’d been sent to Hell immediately after, so no, he didn’t remember. He wished he could. But now he understood why he’d had the dream.

There was more, though, because Xander suddenly exclaimed. “Oh god. Willow didn’t… but Cordelia told me. When Willow was doing the spell – she and Oz didn’t think Willow would be able to finish. She was weak and she was about to collapse when suddenly – it was like she was suddenly strong and all the words and the power just came rushing out.” Wesley’s eyes shot wide and Xander immediately noticed. “Is that it? Did something happen when…” He turned to Angel and glared. “This is all your fault!”

_Hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts._

To be continued…
“It’s all your fault!”

The venom and hatred in Xander’s voice were as forceful as a punch and Angel felt every bit of his fury; he wasn’t sure he didn’t deserve at least some of it.

“I’m sorry.” Were there two more useless, meaningless words in the English language?

Wesley stood, eyes narrowing, clearly thinking, as Angel wondered if Xander was going to attack. It was probably a good thing when Wes spoke up because the last thing Angel wanted was be forced to hurt the boy in self-defense. “I heard… at least there was some discussion when I was here… wasn’t Willow somewhat close to Ms. Calendar? The Romani woman who was…”

“The one I killed,” Angel confirmed, deciding not to play at semantics, especially not when it would only lead to an argument with Xander. Not as if he ever saw any difference between Angel and his demon.

Sometimes, Angel agreed with him. Especially when he thought about how much damage he’d done with his soul.

Yes, all right, he was thinking about Buffy again – her and Cordelia and Darla… and now Willow. Women weren’t much safer around him than they were around Angelus, were they?

Xander spoke again, this time to Wesley. “Yeah. Willow really looked up to her. She wanted Ms. Calendar to teach her magic. She probably would have, too. Ms. Calendar really liked Willow. She even had her take over her class one day. That might be why… Anyway, it became sort of semi-permanent in a temporary way after…” Xander’s voice trailed off.

Maybe he was tired of being bitter. Or maybe he realized he’d just revealed what might be crucial information. Wesley was clearly mulling over his words… and so was Angel. No one had discussed Jenny Calendar around him – for obvious reasons – and this was the first he knew of how close Willow had become to her teacher. It was a good thing Angelus hadn’t known, that was for certain.

It hit him just then, just how miraculous what she’d done for him truly was. My god. He’d killed one of the most important people in her life and yet, she’d given him back his soul, had even been his friend.

More than ever, he knew he had to save her. “Do you think this means something, Wesley? That this…”

“Has something to do with the Kalderash? Yes, I think it’s highly possible. If the two were close… the fact that she was using Ms. Calendar’s reconstruction of the spell… yes, there might have been a connection forged and… it’s… I, of course, am still very curious about Willow’s peculiar natural
aptitude, which was far beyond the common for her to even attempt the spell, but… yes, I do feel that she might now be channeling…”

Wesley didn’t need to finish his sentence. Willows magic came, at least in part, from Janna Kalderash, the daughter of the tribe whose princess he had killed… the daughter who had sought to betray her people’s vengeance and give him back what they’d meant to be lost forever.

Xander was right. This really was all his fault.


Spike held the door for Tara as they entered Willie’s. He sure hoped this visit panned out. The chit was this close to a breakdown over Willow’s predicament, not that Spike could blame her. Had to admit to more than a bit of concern himself. Yeah, all right, Red had gone wrong in a big way, but it wasn’t as if he lived in a house where throwing stones was such a fine idea.

Besides, he was feeling more than a bit of solidarity with Glinda now and any cause she was backing, he figured he might as well back too.

So here they were. A room full of assorted demons of known and unknown species, bit more crowded than usual, in fact. The place could pass for that bar in Star Wars. Saw that in the theatre when it first came out, he had, and a right fine spectacle it had been. Plus, the candy counter had offered up a tasty treat – sexy little blonde whose fear had been almost as delicious as her blood. Despite his love for Dru, he had to admit to a taste for golden hair. Guess he and Angelus had that in common, eh?

And wasn’t that a thought to make him nauseous.

Especially when he thought about the girl he was chasing these days.

Was he ever going to stop scrounging for the scraps off that bastard’s table?

No time for that nonsense now. He spotted a potential source in the corner. A Leewak demon who’d sell his own mother for a tip on a good source of kittens for the weekly games.

Tara followed when Spike tilted his head to indicate a scaly brown demon seated in a booth in the back corner. Guess he was someone Spike thought might know something.

Oh how she hoped he was right. Willow was suffering and every minute… Tara couldn’t bear to think about it.

It looked like the demon wasn’t exactly Spike’s biggest fan, though, because the moment he noticed they were on their way to the table, he slid out of the booth and made a dash for the back door.

“Well that’s right unfriendly of him, pet. Let’s go teach him some manners, shall we?” Grabbing
her hand, he raced right behind and in seconds, they were in the alley, where Spike dropped her hand and wrapped both of his around the demon’s throat. Oh gosh.

“Weren’t thinking of leaving, were ya?”

“Spike? Spike, old buddy. I didn’t recognize ya. How ya doin’?”

Did anyone ever believe things like that? Because even Tara didn't buy it and she had to concede that she wasn’t the most cynical or suspicious person in the world.

Spike sure didn’t seem to be buying it, because he tightened his grip on the demon’s throat and squeezed. “You know, it’s a sign of disrespect to lie to an old friend. You wouldn’t want to disrespect me, would you?”

“No,” the demon choked out.

“Good. So let’s start over. The lady and I,” he tilted his head to Tara… who smiled. She was supposed to be ‘good cop,’ right? “We have a few questions. And you’re gonna answer ‘em. Honest and truthful-like. Got it?” The demon nodded vigorously and Spike loosened his grip.

There was silence and Tara wondered… but then Spike glared at her. Oops. The questioning was her job, wasn’t it? Okay. “H-has anyone been in here? A-asking about magic?”

Great, she was stuttering and the demon was looking crafty and… Spike dug his fingers into its throat again. Normally, Tara deplored threats and violence, but she had to admit that sometimes they had their uses. Like right now, for instance.

She asked again, remembering how serious this was and drawing herself up straighter and taller than she’d ever stood before. “I asked you if anyone has been in here asking about magic. Have they?”

Wow. She hadn’t stuttered once. Spike even winked at her. And the demon? He looked scared all over again. Then he answered. “There mighta been… well, there was this girl. Kinda hot. Long brown hair. Said her name was Malina. Anyway, she bought me a drink or two, we were talking… she wanted to know who the big guns were… I… I mighta told her that Rack was the guy she should be talkin’ to, but that’s all. I swear I didn’t say nothin’ about that Willow you pal around with or anything.”

Even Tara knew that meant he’d thrown Willow’s name at this Malina person right away… but she also believed he’d told the girl about Rack. Oh god. He was the one, wasn’t he? The one who was doing this to Willow. She wanted to… she wanted to torture him until he begged for death, make him suffer the way Willow was suffering.

They needed to go find him. Right now. So why was Spike still standing there? Facing the demon? Looking like he had questions of his own?

All right. Spike knew his ‘chum’ here had sold out Willow and sent this Malina chit to Rack, but there was still something missing – several somethings, in fact. The name was eating at him. There was something… He remembered something…
“This brunette?” he asked, hands still around the traitor’s neck. “Tell me more about her.”

“What’s to tell?” Spike let his eyes flash gold to let him know there better be and suddenly more facts emerged. Fear was a great motivator. “She was about 5’2, weighed about, oh, hundred pounds, nice pair o’…” he glanced at Tara, “earrings. Brown eyes.” Spike wasn’t budging, so there was more. "Uh... uhh... she uh... kinda, sorta, mighta been...a... you know... gypsy.”

Damn it! He knew it! He’d known a Romani name when he heard it! Didn’t take him a second to arrive at a conclusion. “Damn Kalderash,” he growled. “Has to be. But how the devil are those buggers connected to Red’s magic?”

_Hurts... hurts... hurts... hurts... hurts... uh... uh..._

“So this... what’s happening to Willow. You think it’s one of Ms. Calendar’s relatives?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

“So how far away do they have to be for this to work? Could they be right here in town?”

Those were excellent questions; Angel might have asked them as well. Wesley, unfortunately, didn’t seem to have the answers. “I’m not sure. I have to admit that there’s very little about this phenomenon in the literature. What Anya revealed to Xander is the best information we have. Do thank her for me. We’d be lost without her.”

But Willow was the one who was lost, and Angel was beginning to lose hope. What if they were too late? What if they failed?

A loud and insistent knocking at the door got their attention and Angel went to answer it. It was Anya, who had Dawn in tow – ‘someone has to be babysat’ as an explanation along with a teenage glare from the girl in question – and Angel was almost pathetically glad to see them. Maybe Anya knew even more than she’d already revealed.

Stepping back, he allowed them inside and Xander immediately embraced Anya. It surprised him, honestly, the intensity of emotion Xander seemed to feel for his… fiancée? Wasn’t that what they’d said? It was strange, thinking of Xander Harris as a man – a man who could make a commitment and lead an adult life – but there he was and suddenly he looked older somehow, mature and wise… or wiser, at any rate.

Time had truly passed, hadn’t it, since the day he’d left Buffy at the high school? Since the day that never was. Since...

And now here they were. He had a son and a new family and a seer for whom he had feelings that might be… but probably weren’t. Xander was a man about to be married. Giles was gone. Buffy? Buffy was the matriarch of her family now… and sharing her bed with Spike.
Willow was a woman and a witch who had taken another witch as her lover… and her power was being drained by a member of the clan who’d cursed him with a soul.

“An?” Xander asked, “Do you know if the person who’s doing the magic leech thing has to be near their victim?”

She seemed about to ask questions of her own, but instead she just said, “Well, yes, it does help. If they’re a really powerful magician, they could do it from a distance, but why would a magician that powerful need to steal someone else’s?”

Dawn was the one who started an interrogation. “Why did you ask…?” Then her eyebrows rose and she cried, “You guys know something, don’t you? What is it? Who did this to Willow?”

Angel answered. “We think the one responsible might be one of the Kalderash. The people who cursed me with my soul.”

Anya snorted. “But that’s silly. Willow’s Jewish. She’s not Romani. At least no one ever said…” She turned an accusing eye on Xander. “Is this one of those things you never bothered to tell me?”

Xander hastened to explain. “We think she channeled Jenny Calendar’s magic. You know, when she did the spell to give Angel back his soul, and that it’s part of her now.”

With that, Anya’s eyes grew wide. “Oh! Oh! Well that changes things. That changes things a lot.”

Buffy was about three quarters of the way through her shift and counting the minutes until she could leave. The restaurant was empty except for some old guy who’d been sitting at a table for ages, slowly chewing his burger as if it tasted so yummy he wanted to make it last. Guess he had no one to go home to, huh? Funny how she’d felt like that ever since she came back – even though there were plenty of people in her house.

Was time as long and scary for him as it was for her right now? Tonight every minute was an hour long. She was sure it was even more so for Willow. She stared at the clock on the wall, willing the hands to move faster, but they didn’t budge. If only controlling time was a Slayer power.

Why wasn’t it? Why were all the things she most wanted to do – the people she most wanted to save – completely outside her abilities? It wasn’t fair! She slayed vampires and hell gods and giant snake Mayors and what did she get for it? She didn’t get paid, that was for sure, and she couldn’t even save…

Her Mom.

Willow.

Herself.

She hated when her thoughts turned against her like this. Customers. Please, let there be customers.
People to take her mind off… her mind and maybe even make the minutes move faster.

As if in answer to her prayers, the doors opened and… it wasn’t a customer.

Spike headed for the counter, Tara in tow. She was right. They needed to bring Buffy in on this, needed the information only she and that prat Xander were likely to have, but… oh bugger him for a selfish bastard, but he’d liked the way things were going. It felt good, not being the outsider, the grudging ally, the annoying-but-useful muscle. He and Tara made a good team and he was going to miss the sense of being respected and important something awful when they both got shoved back into their same old roles in the order of things.

Would she miss it too?

Hell. This was about Red, wasn’t it? So he walked straight up to Buffy and got to the point, not even bothering to look around for people who might be listening in. “Tara and I’ve been doin’ a bit of sleuthing. Seems some Kalderash chit’s in town and she might be partnered up with Rack.”

Buffy’s eyes went wide and round – a bit like when… but no, best not to think about that now either.

“My shift isn’t over until 11:30. You guys need to go to the Marriott. Room 1201. Everyone’s there researching.”

Tara was confused, as was Spike. “Everyone’s there? But… Why are they…?”

“Angel’s there. With Wesley.”

It was all Spike could do not to vamp out right here. Angel. Poncey, stupid Angel. The white knight riding to the rescue. Spike had half a mind to…

But Red needed saving and his wounded pride and century of hatred for that prick of a souled vampire were gonna have to go on the back burner.

Grabbing Tara’s hand, he growled “We’re off then,” and without a backward glance, headed back out the door.

“Angel,” he spat once they were out of the restaurant. “Why is that bastard here?”

hurts…hurts…uh…uh…hurts…

To be continued…
Another sharp set of knocks at the door. Angel was about to ask if anyone expected someone when… his senses told him exactly who was demanding entrance. Dammit. Why the hell was Spike here?

He was still reeling from what Anya had just told them – that the probable hybrid nature of Willow’s magic changed the timetable… and more. She might well last longer, but she’d sustain more damage. Whether it was mental or physical or both? That Anya didn’t know.

What he knew was that ultimately nothing was changed: Willow needed to be rescued as soon as possible. She was suffering and every second of it was a second too long – a second she didn’t deserve.

Which meant that if Spike could help, Angel was willing to put his personal feelings aside and work with him. So he went to the door and opened it. Spike immediately brushed past him into the room, accompanied by a woman Angel didn’t recognize. Fortunately, Dawn immediately identified her, by rushing to her and calling her “Tara,” before wrapping her arms around the woman and sobbing.

“We’ve got some information we figure might help save Red.”

Under other circumstances, Spike would have enjoyed that gobsmacked expression on Angel’s face, but now? No time for savoring the moment. Had a job to do, didn’t he? “Talked to an acquaintance o’ mine at Willie’s. He says some Kalderash bitch was nosing around, asking about the magic in this town. He steered her to Rack… and Willow.”

There was a hush and all eyes were on him expectantly. One more glorious moment he didn’t get to fully enjoy. You know, if Red’s predicament weren’t so dire… yeah, he’d be looking for payback. As it was, however… “Her name’s Malina. Young, pretty, nice… earrings.” No, he couldn’t resist that bit of raillery, and he was gratified when Tara pinked a bit. Figured she’d seen through that idiot’s feeble attempt at a cover. Plus, anything that could cheer the girl up, even for the briefest moment… it felt good.

“That fits in with everything we’ve been able to put together,” Angel said, nodding at Spike. “Thanks.”

No one but Dawn, and of course he himself, had spared Tara a glance since she walked in and Spike felt it keenly. They were partners, or something like it, so he immediately shared the credit. “Don’t thank me. Tara’s the one who asked the right questions.” Was that a smile – the ghost of one anyway? “Anyway, it never hurts to have a looker along when you’re trying to drum up some information.” Yeah, that was a smile all right.
Tara ducked her head shyly at the compliments. “Spike was the one who found the demon in the first place.” Now everyone was looking at her too. A part of her was uncomfortable, but another… she had to admit she appreciated the way he gave her credit, the way he seemed to really think she was useful and important. It felt good. But there was no time to think about that now. Now was the time for pooling information and saving Willow. “We just need to figure out how this Malina and Rack can be draining Willow’s magic since they aren’t…”

“But they are.” A man with a British accent interrupted her. She assumed he must be the Wesley Buffy had mentioned. “We believe that Jenny Calendar, that is, Janna Kalderash, is the source of at least some of Willow’s power. That it became part of Willow when she was performing the spell to restore Angel’s soul.”

How could that…? Tara had never heard of anything like that before and she was about to dismiss it, but she had to admit that she didn’t know nearly as much as she had once thought she did. Of course that left her with questions, but each question led to a different question and nowhere near an answer.

One thing she was clear about, though, was that – irrational though it might be – she was angry with Willow’s friends and with Angel. She’d been young and completely inexperienced and as much as the way Willow told it always made it seem like she’d been oh so eager to do the spell, Tara still thought someone should have discouraged her. Her mother had taught her that magic was about progression, about learning, and every stage was important. It was like the growth of a child; you needed to crawl before you walked.

Willow? Willow had run without even knowing what crawling was.

uh…uh…hurts…hurts…uh…can’t…

Xander got up from his chair, steely-eyed and serious and Angel saw yet again just how devoted he was to Willow. “Okay. I think the conversational portion of tonight is over. I say we weapon up and go find this Malina bitch and make her stop draining Willow. Is everybody with me?”

Angel wanted to answer with a resounding ‘yes’ when Wesley stepped in and shot them both down. “I’m afraid that would be a very bad idea. There’s a great deal we don’t yet know. For instance, why she needed to ask questions in the first place and why Rack would even need to be involved…”

Just then, Anya interrupted. “If this Malina Kalderash person didn’t inherit any natural ability, she’d need an intermediary to facilitate the transfer.”

Oh.

Why did this just keep getting more complicated? Every minute that needed to be spent on research and strategy was a minute Willow was enduring untold agony. One other thing he wanted to know. “Who is this Rack you were talking about?”

This time Dawn spoke up. “He’s a magic dealer. Really creepy. Willow used to go to him until I
almost got…”

“Red was all hopped up on his magics and Dawn was almost killed. That’s why she went cold
turkey.”

Another question. “Why would a witch with her own power…?”

“His power’s different. It doesn’t come from nature. Witches sometimes use it because it’s more of
a high and it’s something you can use for quick spells. It also has no moral parameters, so you can
do things with it that you can’t do with natural magic – but like most demonic magic, it tends to
corrupt the people who use it.” She had a sad, faraway look and Angel recalled she’d been a
Vengeance Demon. That gave her more insight and empathy than he’d expected, along with
information. There was more to her than met the eye and Angel had to tip his hat to Xander’s taste
in women.

You know, Spike had to admit that, while he’d never thought of it before – and felt more than a bit
embarrassed about that – Angel’s question had been a good one and he was glad it had been asked.
Glad too that Anya had been able to answer it. Made sense, didn’t it? Because he knew Tara
couldn’t have committed a single one of the horrible deeds that had turned Willow from White Hat
to Wicked Witch in his eyes.

Of course, as he’d already conceded well before this, throwing stones wasn’t wise where he lived.
He wondered: If what Willow had done hadn’t affected him or Buffy or Dawn personally, would
he have disapproved even a little bit?

He wasn’t sure enough of the proper answer for his own liking, especially when he took another
glance at Tara. She’d have felt the same if the victims of Willow’s wiles had been that awful
family of hers instead of Dawn and Buffy and Spike and herself, he’d wager.

Yeah, she was better than him. She was better than anyone he knew – or had ever known. No
situational ethics for her. No, just a bright line that separated right from wrong and woe to those
who crossed it.

Why the devil had she relied on him for help?

The phone was ringing. Who the…?

“Yes?” That uptight Brit – Wesley – answered and then handed the phone to Anya. Didn’t take
much of a listen to figure out who it was.

“Dawn’s here with us.” A short pause. “I’ll be there in a minute.” She hung up and turned to Dawn.
“Your sister says you can stay here and research while I go pick her up.”

“Okay.” His little Bit had a sad, serious expression that threatened to turn to tears any second.

“I’ll be right back.” The she gave that boyfriend of hers a kiss and left.

“Right then,” Spike said to all assembled. “Let’s get back to it, shall we? What are we gonna do
about Rack?”
Buffy was overwhelmed. She’d shut down just to get through her shift but now… now all she could think about was how much Willow was suffering and how helpless she was. It didn’t make sense. She was the Slayer. She was supposed to have everything it took to face down the forces of darkness singlehandedly.

It hadn’t worked out that way, had it?

Anya’s car pulled up. Oh goody. Back to the hotel, where she’d get to see Angel again… and Spike.

Funny, as much as she had sort of expected to dread that, it didn’t seem nearly as important now. Maybe later, when Willow was safe, she’d be upset at how upset Angel wasn’t about her and Spike. Maybe then she’d be more embarrassed about Angel and Wesley seeing her in the stupid Doublemeat uniform that was tucked back into her duffel bag.

For now, she just got into Anya’s car. “Thanks. Any progress?”

“Well, we figured out that Willow got some of her magic from Jenny Calendar. You already know that Spike and Tara learned that a Kalderash woman is here in town, right?”

Buffy nodded, but inside she was taking in… Jenny Calendar? Even when she was dead, she was somehow screwing up all their lives. Manipulating… keeping secrets… and this time the one paying the price was Willow.

Jenny Calendar was just one more thing Giles had been wrong about, huh? Like thinking that Buffy was ready to be on her own – that she didn’t need him at all. “They said something about Rack.”

“Oh, well, if this Malina Kalderash didn’t inherit any natural magical ability, then she’d need an intermediary to help extract the magic for her. Which is where Rack comes in. He connects to her and uses her energy to connect to Willow’s magic and them with his power he pulls it out of her and… well that’s it, really.”

The more Anya told her, the more questions Buffy wanted to ask… so many things. Like why Rack would want to help this Kalderash bitch take Willow’s power. Why Willow would need Rack’s if she had Jenny Calendar’s power. Why…

Damnit, Giles! No, she couldn’t do this by herself. She felt alone and scared and like some ordinary citizen stumbling in the dark without a clue what was lurking in it.

Wow. They were here already?

Okay, Buffy. Take a deep breath. Because you’re not really alone at all, are you? At least not when it comes to saving Willow.

She and Anya got out of the car and headed inside to the elevator. Next stop: Angel’s suite.
“Explain to me again why killing Rack is a bad plan?” Xander was upset, and impatient, and pacing, and sounding a whole lot like the rash teenager Angel remembered from years past. He had to agree with him though because he was pretty fuzzy on why killing first and asking questions later would be the wrong order of business.

“Like to see you lot pull it off,” Spike snorted. “I’d have already done the deed myself.”

Angel glared at his bête noire, but he had to concede that Spike probably knew more than he did about the man. Angel had never even heard of Rack before.

“I still say we need to know…”

A knock at the door interrupted Wesley.

Tara went and answered it. She needed to feel part of things again. It seemed as if, unless Spike intervened, she kept getting pushed to the margins. While she hated herself for it, she was starting to feel resentful. Willow was her girlfriend – well, estranged girlfriend – but no one seemed to remember she even existed.

Buffy and Anya bulldozed right into the room.

Was it her or did Buffy and Spike just exchange a very strange look?

Maybe it was the fact that they made her think of subterfuge, but Tara suddenly had an idea. It was probably dangerous, probably stupid, but possibly the only idea anyone had, so… “What about me? I could go looking for him. Make him think I don’t have any idea what’s really happened to Willow but that I’m looking for power to try and help her. I’m a witch. I could get close enough…”

Of all the… Leave it to Tara to come up with the most cockeyed, hair-brained, appallingly dangerous… “No!” Spike growled. “You’re not gettin’ anywhere near that bastard.”

All right, why the devil wasn’t anyone else…

“I have to agree. We don’t know what would happen to Willow should Rack be killed.”

“Oh, I know!” Anya volunteered, sounding like some eager schoolgirl. “It will sever the connection and, if she’s still alive, she’ll probably stay that way. Of course, there’s the matter of this Malina person, who will have a bunch of her power and might get angry – unless she’s killed by a magical backlash. But Willow should be okay. Of course, that’s kind of a relative term, since she’s endured…” Everyone was staring at Anya now, including Spike, and Xander, who seemed terrified of what she’d say next.

Guess she figured that out because she stopped before she finished her sentence. What do you know? Demon Girl was going soft as a human. Harris must really be a bloody Viking in the sack.

“So that’s it then,” Tara said. “I’ll find him and…”
And what do you know? Anya stepped in to save the day again. “Oh, he’ll be very cautious now – staying way under the radar. He won’t be tempted out for anything ordinary.” She stopped short for a second and shrugged apologetically. “No offense. It’s just that you’re not anything really that special in a supernatural way.”

Buffy just stood there, that feeling of helplessness washing over her again. For a moment she thought of offering but she knew it was a stupid idea. Everyone knew she was Willow’s best friend. No way was Rack going to stick his neck out just to let the Slayer behead him.

Once again, she was useless. Couldn’t save her Mom, couldn’t stay in Heaven, couldn’t hold her life together… couldn’t save her best friend.

“What about me?”

Angel?

“I have the soul the Kalderash gave me. No one knows I’m back in town so they have no way of knowing I’m in touch with any of you. Say I put the word out that I want to see Rack, that I’ve heard he could… make my soul permanent. Think he’d find that tempting enough?”

For a second – just a split second, but it lasted for eternity – Buffy wondered: What if he could? What if Rack… But no, even if he could, Buffy knew too well that Rack’s gifts came with a price and that price was always too high.

“Sounds like a plan,” she said, and suddenly she saw an opening – maybe a way to actually be useful. “Need some back-up for the slice and dice?”

He nodded, while Wesley made some sort of objections to which no one was listening and Xander hugged Anya and Dawn hugged Spike and then… “Can we go outside and talk?” Angel nodded toward the balcony and she followed.

The moment the sliding glass door was closed, Angel turned to her and said, “I know about you and Spike. I just want you to know that it’s okay. I’m not going to let it interfere with what we’re doing.” Then, before she could even process what he’d just said, he put his hand on her shoulder and added, “So. Where do I go to put the word out that I’m looking for Rack?”

hurts…kill me…please…kill me…kill me…kill me…hurts… too much…hurts

To be continued…
i will make you hurt (Chapter 6)

It’s just that you’re not anything really that special in a supernatural way.

It was a small thing, and it made Tara feel petty that she was even thinking about it, but Anya’s words had stung. They *still* stung.

She felt small and plain and very unimportant and somehow the way she kept getting pushed to the back made sense now in a way that… No. She wasn’t going to do this. Now was not the time to be selfish. Whatever her insecurities and hurts were, they paled in comparison to what Willow was enduring and she wasn’t going to let them distract her.

“Peaches gets to ride in and save the day, impress his lady fair. This fix Willow’s in is a dream come true for him.” Spike’s voice was low, clearly meant for only her to hear, but there was a bitterness in it that Tara didn’t understand and the words were almost spat, as if they tasted of something poisonous and rotten.

“You hate him.” It wasn’t a question, though maybe it was. Tara wasn’t sure she’d ever truly hated anyone. After all, Glory had been killed almost the moment Tara was restored to herself. It was hard to build a fire when the kindling was ash.

What would Spike say, she wondered, if he found out she didn’t even hate her family?

“Got reason to.” He didn’t elaborate, though, and Tara noticed that his eyes were locked on Buffy as she came in from the balcony with Angel.

Normally, she’d chalk it up to the crush everyone knew he had on her, but there was something else in his eyes and Buffy had given him that nervous look earlier and… Oh god. “There’s something going on, isn’t there? With you and Buffy?”

What? Oh bugger. Luckily, Tara’s voice was even lower than usual and it looked like no one else had heard that bit of unfortunate insight, but he was still uncomfortable. This wasn’t a subject he’d ever intended to discuss with her.

Wonder why that was?

Least he had a readymade escape hatch. “Now’s not the time,” he said, his words softened by a kindly tone.

That nod of hers told him she heard the subtext as well, and it clearly read that something was indeed going on between him and Buffy. If only Spike knew what the hell it was.

Well, besides the shagging.
“So what’s the plan, Angelus?”

The glare he just got from his sire? At least it got him a bit of his own back.

Leave it to Spike to act like a juvenile. Under other circumstances, Angel would have taken the boy aside and had a talk with him – let him know that he knew the way things stood with Buffy – but as of right now there were much more crucial matters to which they all needed to attend.

“Anyah? Who do you know who might still have contact with Rack?” Xander’s fiancée had been a font of useful information so far and he hoped that continued.

“Well, Amy, naturally, but she’s probably a bad choice.” Anya’s brow furrowed and she seemed to be considering this carefully. “Oh! There’s this guy who comes into the shop – always has dark circles under his eyes. I think it’s obvious that magic isn’t his only problem. In fact he looks just like this man back when I was a Vengeance demon who dumped a girl I…” Xander shot her a look and she got back on topic. “But he’s definitely been to Rack and he might know where to find him now.”

“Does this fellow have a name?” Thank you, Wesley. That was a question Angel had been about to ask.

“I don’t know.” Great, that was just… “But I know he hangs around at a goth place called The Doom Room. Stupid name. I gave him some flyers to put up there for the store, though, and we actually got some business from them. Total wannabes. I only sell the fake stuff to that type, but that’s where the real money is, anyway. It’s so much more expensive to buy…” This time Angel was the one who glared and again she stopped her tangent and got back on track. “I’m sorry. I know this is about Willow and we need to hurry. And if you go to the Doom Room, I’m sure they know him. He wears this Edwardian coat all the time. I mean he never takes it off. Not even during a heat wave.” She snorted contemptuously, then added, “The Doom Room took over the old biker bar near the motel.”

“I know where that is.” With that, Angel grabbed his jacket and headed for the door. “I’ll be back,” he told the room. Then he turned to Buffy and added, “Be ready to go when I get here.”

hurts… hurts… make it stop… kill me… let me die… kill me…

Buffy was reeling. After all this time when it felt like nothing was happening and no progress was being made, all of a sudden plans had been formed and things were being done and… Willow would be saved. She would be. Buffy was sure of it.

“Should we go to the store and get food or something?” Dawn’s voice broke through her thoughts. “You know, like Willow’s favorite stuff? Maybe some lox or those cupcakes with the sprinkles and the chocolate filling?”

She pulled her sister into a hug. “The bakery and the seafood department close at nine. But we can go first thing in the morning. I’m sure she’ll just want to rest for awhile anyway.”
“Big sis is right, Bit.” Spike was smiling at Dawn, but she could feel the tension and the anger radiating from him and not using her name was another indication that there was going to be a talk soon – and not one she wanted to have. “Best to just leave Willow be for at least a few hours.”

“I could bake cupcakes,” Tara offered. “And you could help. I think all the baking stuff I bought is still at your house.”

“Thank you,” Buffy could not have been more grateful to Tara. Speaking of people she wanted to hug. “Anya? Would you do me a favour and drive Tara and Dawn back to the house?”

But Spike seemed to have his own ideas. “No need. I’ll walk the ladies there. Keep ‘em company ‘til you bring Willow home safe and sound.”

The next two minutes were consumed with the usual sisterly admonitions and then the trio departed.

For a moment, she felt like she could breathe. It was just her and Anya and Xander.

“Are you sure he can be trusted?”

Oh great. Yeah, Wesley was here too.

And now she had to launch into a defense of Spike that didn’t sound suspiciously warm. Because too many people – and the most wrong of wrong people at that – knew too much already and even though what she meant by ‘too many people’ was Angel, his knowing was as much pain as she could bear.

No, she couldn’t breathe at all.

Dawn was walking up ahead of them, chattering to herself and sometimes turning back to exhort them to hurry up, but Spike was keeping Tara back and it seemed like there was a reason.

There was.

“Don’t pay attention to Demon Girl’s nonsense.”

How did he…? “It’s okay. I know what she meant.”

He stopped walking and so did she. A second later, his hand was under her chin, making sure she was looking into his eyes. “You can try that line on the others. I saw your face. And you shouldn’t listen to any of it. You’re special, pet, and you can take that from someone who’s known more women than that chit’s done vengeance wishes.” Tears threatened at the corners of Tara’s eyes and Spike seemed to understand. “ ‘Sides. You’re gonna take anything serious when it’s comin’ from someone who’s about to marry Xander Harris?”

Tara giggled and then turned serious again. “You’re special too.” Then, without quite knowing
why, she kissed Spike on the cheek.

It startled both of them and they hurried to catch up with Dawn.

The Doom Room was almost a carbon copy of The Sunset Club run by Buffy’s old flame, Ford, and Angel had to resist the urge to sneer in contempt. Keeping his mission in mind, helped. He scanned the room, but… damn it! Not an Edwardian coat to be seen, It was a sea of capes and vests over Renaissance style shirts or satin shirts of the type he’d abandoned years ago.

Being mocked by Xander Harris could do that to a vampire.

He thought of finding a table and waiting, but… he remembered the sound of Willow’s voice in his dream. No. There wasn’t any time. Too much time had passed already.

Twenty-four hours.

It was nothing to him now, but in Hell it had been an eternity and he knew that Willow was experiencing each minute – each second – the same way.

So he decided to wing it, find someone who looked serious, ask a subtle question or two.

Again, he scanned the room. Wannabes, poseurs, dabblers… but then… the bartender. Something about him… he had what Angel could only characterize as an aura. So he strode up to the bar. Casually. Perfectly normal for a patron to approach the bar, after all. He waited for the scraggly young man and the girl with badly-dyed black hair to take their silly cocktails and walk away before even making eye contact, but when he did…

This one wasn’t some goth idiot looking for friendly monsters in the dark. He knew exactly what was out there – and he was part of it. “What can I do for ya?” The casual greeting belied the shrewdness in the man’s eyes.

“Any Jameson’s?” Angel asked, knowing damn good and well this place wouldn’t have it.

He was right, of course, and the bartender chuckled and shook his head ruefully. “Had the feeling you weren’t really here to drink.”

Good. He could get down to business right away. “I’m looking for someone. I was told there’s a guy who comes here who knows where to find him, but I don’t see him, so…”

“Maybe I know who you’re looking for.”

“Maybe you do.” He paused and lowered his voice. “I’m looking for Rack.”

For a split second, the bartender’s eyes shot wide, but he managed to resume his former attitude of calm confidence. “Rack? Not sure I know…”

Angel shrugged… and then he let his true face flicker for that same split second the bartender had betrayed himself.
That seemed to function as something of a password. “Why are you looking for him?”

“I have a problem. A special problem. I’ve heard he’s the one who can fix it.”

The man looked him up and down, seeming to assess him. “What’s your name?”

“Angel.”

No recognition this time, but… “Lemme go talk to… my boss. He might know this Rack guy.”

The bartender then slipped through a door at the back of the bar and was gone.

He stayed gone for what seemed like a long time – long enough that some of the surly poseurs were beginning to complain that they weren’t being served – but then…

“You’ll have to wait,” he said to the grumbling patrons without even glancing their way. Then he turned to Angel. “Follow me.”

This was off-script. Way off-script. If Angel followed him, he’d be going alone – no back-up and no time to prepare, not even the chance to call Wesley and ask for some advice on dealing with a powerful magic user. The danger was great and the chances of success were small.

There was no choice. No choice at all.

He nodded and walked to the end of the bar. “Lead on.”

Time was passing… and passing. No word from Angel. Not even a phone call. Something had gone wrong. She was sure of it. “He should have been back by now.”

Anya and Wesley had been sniping at each other over some point of demon lore in one of Wesley’s books that Anya found insulting, but Buffy’s words broke up the argument. Wesley looked at his watch and turned… well, even paler than usual. “You’re right. We should have heard from him by now.”

Xander, who’d been busy trying to keep the argument from turning into a war, looked more than ready for a different war right now. In fact, he immediately went to the chest of weapons Wesley and Angel had brought with them, and, ignoring the sounds of protest Wesley was making, opened it and grabbed a sword. “I think it’s time we showed the folks at the Doom Club what doom is all about.”

Anya hopped up and joined him, grabbing another, shorter, sword. “I’ll drive.”

“We can take my car.” They all turned and stared and Wesley explained. “It’s a rental. If anything happens…”

“Right! I won’t be stuck with the repair bills and driving that crappy little Pontiac that my mechanic has as a loaner.” Anya snatched the keys right out of Wesley’s hand as she spoke. In the meantime, Buffy grabbed an axe, looking at it approvingly as she did. It was heavy and shiny and
sharp. Better than the one she had at home.

When this was over, she was keeping it.

Wesley reached into the trunk and grabbed the crossbow. “We’re off then.”

And so they were.

Buffy only hoped they weren’t too late – and that they would save Willow as well as Angel.

Dawn had fallen asleep on the couch ages ago and Spike decided to stop watching whatever nonsense was on the telly and go help Tara finish the clean-up in the kitchen. Amazing how much of a mess baking could make. Had it been like that in his day? He hadn’t spent much time in the kitchen then. It wasn’t a congregating area for the family the way kitchens were today.

Nothing was the same, was it?

Well, one thing hadn’t changed.

Every woman he loved saw him as beneath her.

He made sure to make some noise as he entered the room, not wanting to startle Tara, who was at the sink – arms elbow deep in soapy water. “Hi,” she greeted, looking back over her shoulder. She smiled, but there was sadness in those eyes.

Guess that made sense. Willow was still in agony so far as they knew. There hadn’t been a word from Angel the Magnificent and his Merry Band of Avengers.

But they’d be back soon. Spike knew that. If there was one thing Angel usually got right, it was saving damsels in distress. Probably the only way the prat had gotten a leg over back when he was human if he was anything like the souled ponce he was now. Never could understand what Buffy found so appealing in all that brooding and sighing and woe-is-me’ing.

She did, though, didn’t she? Barely spared a glance to the bloke who scratched her itch – who made her feel when the whole world left her cold and numb – saving her attention for the bastard who’d left her high and dry without a backward glance.

Women. Why the buggering hell did he even bother?

His thoughts had so consumed him that he hadn’t noticed Tara finish her work or heard the sound of water draining from the sink. “Spike?” She was in front of him now, eyes full of kindness. “I won’t say anything, okay? I guess you and Buffy want to wait to tell everyone…”

“Tell everyone what?” There was a question, eh?

“That you’re, you know… dating now.” She pinked slightly as she spoke and cast her eyes down. It was the delicacy of bygone femininity and it made Spike’s heart ache though he wasn’t sure why.
He hated to sully it, maybe that was it, but it had to be done. “We’re not dating.”

“You’re not?” She looked puzzled. “But I thought…”

“We’re shagging, that’s all. ’S all I’m good for. Service the girl. That’s all a soulless thing like me could ever mean to her.”

She turned her eyes on him again, wide and certain. “You love her.”

“Doesn’t matter, does it? She’ll never love me back.”

If Tara had anything more to say, she wasn’t going to get the chance. Dawn came bursting into the kitchen. “Guys? It’s after two. Have we heard from Buffy or Xander or… any of them yet?”

hurts...uh...uh...can't...please...uh...hurts

To be continued…
Chapter 7

The bartender opened the door and gestured for Angel to enter. The door closed behind him.

Too late to turn back now.

It was a non-descript room. Peeling paint and a dilapidated couch and a long-haired man seated on a chair in the corner. Facing the wall so Angel couldn’t see his face.

Cheap theatrics.

Still, despite the amateur moves, it wouldn’t behoove Angel to underestimate this man. After all, it was possible he acted like an amateur precisely because he knew it would make him seem weak.

For a moment, Angel wondered something: If Rack was in here, alone, not doing anything magical that Angel could see, was it possible he wasn’t involved in this brutal assault on Willow? But then he thought about what this man had done to Willow before.

He was involved all right. Even if it seemed implausible. After all, Wesley had pointed out that they didn’t know much, if anything, about the mechanics of a magic leech.

And even less about just who this guy was and what he was capable of doing.

“Rack?” He kept his tone flat and even, neither commanding nor deferential.

“You must be Angel.”

The man arose and turned around.

Angel’s first impression? This was one of the ugliest men he’d ever seen. A bone deep ugliness that came from more than just scars and an unfortunate arrangement of features. No, this was the ugliness of a soul that had sucked the marrow from the bones of darkest cruelty and evil and then broken them to bits to lick the traces.

This was no amateur. This was a man who left Angel’s demon in the dust staring after him in awe and envy.

“I was told you might be able to help me,” Angel said, maintaining his calm, not betraying his anger – or his knowledge.

“And what would a vampire want from me?”

“It’s my soul.” He wasn’t surprised when the man’s expression didn’t change.

“Your soul.” A statement, not a question. He knew. Of course he knew.
“I was told you could anchor it for me.”

The moment he finished speaking, Rack smiled. It was a terrible thing, that smile. “Of course, but first... I’m guessing you already know I don’t take payments the way most do.” Angel nodded. That smile grew wider. “I’m just gonna take a little tour. All right?”

Fear chilled Angel, the kind of fear he hadn’t felt in so very long, as Rack reached out.

Somewhere inside, he knew that Willow was no longer the only one in mortal danger.

“hurts...hurts...hurts...hurrrr...hurr...”

“We’d better not be too late.” Though, to be fair, Buffy knew that if they were, it wasn’t Anya’s fault. She had an awe-inspiring ability to ignore stop signs, red lights, and other vehicles and somehow not get them killed despite her disregard. Honestly, a career as a stuntwoman might not be a bad future plan.

Those were thoughts for later, though. Now? Now, they all grabbed their weapons and, heedless of what anyone in this stupid goth club might think of armed newcomers, she led the charge through the doors.

“Whoa. Cool!” Great, some wannabe in a ratty cape and a satin shirt thought they were poseurs like him. He was blocking her way, clearly wanting to engage in some cheesy flirting.

She didn’t have time for this.

A second later he was tail over teacup across the room. Oops. Gosh. Guess she didn’t know her own strength.

Her gaze swept the room and everybody else decided it was Mind Your Own Business Night. Good.

Xander and Wesley looked at her approvingly; Anya added a rather dramatic thumbs-up gesture. It would feel like old times, sort of... except that Willow was suffering and there was no time for nostalgia.

The guy at the bar... there was something... With a gesture to the gang, she headed straight for him. He made a run for the back door. God, what a cliché. Did Willie teach classes?

In seconds, he was slammed against a wall with a Slayer’s hand around his throat. “Going somewhere? I haven’t even ordered a drink yet.”


“I’d like an Angel and a Rack. Think you could get that for me?”
hurrr...cannnn’t...uhhh...hurrrsss...

It was all Tara could do not to rush out to try and find Buffy and the others. Only knowing that Spike would run right after her and drag her back prevented her from even trying. What was happening? Why hadn’t anyone called?

“Finally got Bit to go to sleep.” Spike’s voice was soft as he descended the stairs. “Told her when she woke up, Willow would be here.” He paused. “That bastard better not make me a liar.”

Angel.

Spike wasn’t the only one uncertain about whether he’d come through. Sure, Spike had paid him a backhanded compliment as far as his ability to rescue damsels in distress, but thanks to Willow, Tara also knew his history of abandoning people when they needed him. Look at what he’d done to Buffy.

And obviously Spike.

He’d even killed his own family.

Yes, all right, he hadn’t had a soul then, but… Tara was very fuzzy on this whole business of soul-possession being the arbiter of goodness. Horrible people had souls. Murderers, rapists, despots, child molesters. They all had souls.

Spike was as soulless as soulless could be.

When Buffy was gone, Spike had fought by their sides, taken care of Dawn, protected… And here he was, helping her, standing up for her, being her friend, even though…

“Do you wish you’d stayed at the hotel? With Buffy?”

She knew what he’d told her in the kitchen; she also knew that it didn’t matter. Spike was the kind of man who loved not wisely, but too well, and even if Buffy didn’t love him back, he’d be by her side to the bitter end.

Why would Buffy choose Angel over a man like that?

That Glinda didn’t half ask the tough questions, did she?

“I’d rather be here – with you and the Niblet. Anything to avoid the spectacle of that prat posing and preening and basking in…”

He stopped, but Tara filled in the blank. “Buffy’s attention.” A moment later, she surprised him by
coming to him and putting her hand on his arm. “If it helps, I don’t see the attraction at all.”

For a split second… but then he chuckled mirthlessly. “You’re gay, pet. Can’t say as you’d see the attraction in any man.”

He’d meant for his words to close the topic to any further discussion. After all, he was right, wasn’t he? But she was a defiant little thing and she wasn’t taking the hint. “I know when someone’s worth loving, and he isn’t.” His eyes were on hers when she added, “But you are. She’ll see that someday. She has to.”

Those words… they were absinthe weren’t they? Beautiful and intoxicating and too dangerous to trust. Oh how he wanted to, though.

Did she believe them? Really?

He stared hard – hard – into her eyes. She really did, didn’t she? Selling promises of happily ever after with that sweet, soft gaze and she wove truth into every stitch of silver lining she sewed in the clouds.

Pity that sky wasn’t the one under whose bright daylight Buffy would ever walk.

But there was one truth Spike could give Tara right back. He pulled her into a hug and half-whispered, “Red’s the luckiest girl in the world. And when she gets back, you better tell her I said so.”

When… he’d said when. Once again, he’d all but promised that his wretch of a sire would deliver the goods.

For the first time in nearly a century, he was counting on Angel.

That worthless excuse for a vampire had better not let him down this time.

_hurrrs...hurr...caaaaann’t...uhhhh..._

The feel of magic working its way through him – it was like being electrocuted from the inside. He could feel Rack taking that ‘tour’ … and every moment screamed danger in a high, keening wail.

It sounded like Willow.

The seconds ticked and Angel realized he couldn’t move.

“Strawberries,” the man crooned, “you taste just like her.” Then he smiled. “You taste like power.”

Oh shit.

He knew. Angel didn’t know how, but Rack knew – knew why he was there. And here he was,
helpless and almost paralyzed, no match for the man currently holding him tight in magical bindings.

“There are no secrets here.” Rack paused, hand still extended, touching Angel without touching him “You asked me about your soul. I don’t think I like the coin you offered, but maybe we can work something out. Tell you what – you give me what you have no use for, and I’ll give Willow… death.”

Rack was lying; Angel knew it. He was going to take Angel’s soul and sooner or later Willow would die anyway. But he wanted Angel to give in, wanted that final capitulation, that submission to his superior will.

“No,” Angel spat.

Laughter; it wasn’t unexpected, but that didn’t mean it didn’t chill Angel to the bone.

This was it, wasn’t it? He’d failed. Failed completely. Willow would die after untold agony and he? He was going to lose his soul.

Rack’s words confirmed his fears. “I wasn’t asking for permission.”

Just then, the door flew open. “Sorry. I know we don’t have an appointment, but you take walk-ins, don’t you?”

Never had Angel been so happy to see Buffy, and Wesley, and Anya… and even Xander.

Especially given Buffy’s next move.

Before Rack could even think of what to do, Buffy had spun the axe she carried and…

…that face was looking up at him from the ground as Rack’s body collapsed beside it.

“You know, that should have been a lot harder than it was,” she quipped, brow furrowed.

“The axe is made from pure silver. Or purified, I should say. It’s specially made to work against anything protected by magic. I felt, given Willow’s dilemma, that it would behoove us to have weapons that…”

“Yeah, we get it, Wesley.” Xander sounded angry and for a moment Angel wondered why. Then he got it.

“I’m sorry. He didn’t tell me where Malina…”

An unholy scream interrupted him before he could finish his sentence.

“Was that…?” Of course, it wasn’t like Buffy had any idea what Malina sounded like, but it was a scream, it came from behind the wall, and they needed to investigate, stat. “Guys? Help me!” she cried as she began frantically feeling for a hidden doorframe, a secret button, anything.

“Use the axe,” Wesley suggested, and for once – well, maybe more than once – Buffy thought he
wasn’t so bad to have around.

Before she could pick it back up, though, Angel hoisted it and smashed right through the wall. There was a door there after all. Which they opened.

“Oh god!” The sight that greeted them was gruesome. The woman – Buffy guessed it was Malina Kalderash – was lying face down… but her back was split open, as if something had burst from within her.

Xander turned green. “I will never eat again.”

Anyá was made of sterner stuff. “Oh. Magical backlash. I’ve never seen one this big before. Wow. Willow’s really powerful.”

Willow… Willow. Oh no! If this is what happened to Malina… “Anyá, are you absolutely sure that this magical backlash thing didn’t hurt Willow?”

“We better go.”

You know, this was not the first time on this trip that Angel agreed with Xander and he had the oddest feeling it wouldn’t be the last. “The hospital.”

Buffy, Wesley, and Anyá nodded and they were all out the door as fast as they could go. They’d have to leave the bodies, but Angel had a feeling no one was going to be asking questions. If they did… well, that was a bridge they could cross when they came to it. In the meantime…

They all headed for the car. To Angel’s shock, Anyá got behind the wheel. He shot Wesley a look. “She’s quite an… extraordinary driver.”

All right, fine. Angel got into the front seat beside her, ignoring the grumbling from Xander. Let them all grouse. He didn’t ride in back seats.

Anyá started the car and hit the gas pedal even harder than Angel usually did. She was startling… but not reckless. Oh, she seemed reckless, and he was sure the others thought she was heedless, but for all that she was ostensibly human now, it was clear that a demon’s sharp instincts still clung to her and she could call on them for a few tasks. Driving was clearly one of them.

Buffy’s team… For some reason, seeing them now, he felt less guilt than ever about leaving and for the first time he thought… she had good people. Her death… well, maybe he couldn’t have prevented it either.

He turned to the back seat – to Buffy. “Thanks.” It was the least he could say. She’d saved him – saved Willow.

It hit him all of a sudden. Why was he even here? Was being the near-sacrificial lamb really enough to call him away from Los Angeles – from his son? He had a hard time believing that his role had been important enough for this.

Then again, it might just be the PTB putting him in his place.
There was a chorus of thanks going on now, as everyone processed what had just happened – realized just how heroic Buffy had been. It was good. She deserved it. And if Angel felt a bit deflated… no, he didn’t really. Curious and puzzled, but in a way, maybe it was good enough just to be here, to know that Willow was going to be okay.

Of course, it was easier to feel that way when the vermin who’d just taken a ‘tour’…

God, what had Rack seen?

Yeah, well, he could brood about that later. Here they were.

Anya had barely had a chance to park the car when they all tumbled out, racing to Willow’s room.

There were doctors around her bed.

“Miss Summers? We’re glad you’re here. We tried to reach her family, but…”

“They’re in Europe,” Buffy said.

“Ah, yes.” The doctor seemed to accept Buffy’s practiced lie. How often had she had to tell some version of it? “She’s awake, but she still seems to be… well, she hasn’t said anything yet. We were hoping her parents… perhaps you and her other friends will get some response.”

The staff all cleared, moving away, allowing them all to go to Willow.

As they approached the bed…

Her eyes were fixed on her friends. “No! No, no, no! Hurts! No! No!”

Then she reached out and grabbed Angel’s arm, pulling him close and hiding her head behind his back. It was clear she was terrified… of everyone but him.

This was not what he expected.

But maybe it was why he was here.

To be continued…
Chapter 8

"i will make you hurt" (Chapter 8)

Buffy had been praying for this moment since she’d found Willow unconscious last night – except this wasn’t exactly how she’d expected it to be.

Because in her daydreams – evening dreams, night dreams, constant dreams – Willow had been glad to see her. Willow had been tired and achy, but okay.

Willow hadn’t been cowering and incoherent and hiding behind Angel.

But she didn’t have time to worry about that, because the doctors were huddled and muttering to each other. They didn’t know she was the Slayer. They thought she couldn’t hear them.

Not daring to approach Angel, for some reason she went straight to Wesley. “They want to transfer her to the psych ward.” Her voice was a fierce whisper and what it meant was ‘we better do something.’ Because she was not letting them lock Willow up. It had been bad enough when they had to leave Tara here overnight. The place was overwhelmed; she’d been sure they’d get Tara out right away and of course she’d been right.

Now? Now it wasn’t like that.

Amazingly, Wesley got it. He spoke, loud enough for the doctors to hear. “I’m entirely confident that Dr. Rosenberg will know what to do about Willow’s condition. There’s nothing to worry about. I have already called them and he and Mrs. Rosenberg will be on the next plane home. In the meantime, of course, I will take charge of her.”

One of the doctors – Buffy recognized him from one of Giles’s many concussion visits – broke away from the others and asked, “Her father is a doctor?” That was news to Buffy as well. Willow had never said...

“A psychiatrist. World-renowned, in fact,” Wesley replied, continuing his smooth and believable lie as he once again elevated Willow’s father’s status. Buffy was in shock. Who was this Wesley and why hadn’t he been around before? “He was scheduled to deliver a paper at an important conference in Brussels, but I’m a close friend and colleague and I can assure you that the moment I gave him the news of his daughter’s condition, he cancelled his lecture and instead he and his wife are on their way back.”

Was it the British accent? Because the doctors were totally buying it. Even when Wesley continued with, “Since she’s conscious and clearly in no further danger, I’ll be taking her home. Her parents will be there within 24 hours and until then I am perfectly capable of attending to her.”

Angel was overwhelmed. As Willow clung to him, all those feelings he’d had in his dream… shadows that had lingered all day… that connection he’d thought he’d never feel… it was there. Everything his soul had seen on its journey home was within him now.
What did it mean? What would happen now?

He shook it off, not wanting the others to sense what was happening, and listened to Wesley talk to the doctors. He couldn’t have felt better about his decision to bring his friend with him to Sunnydale.

It was strange. Angel had always thought about his mission in terms of his own redemption, but maybe it was about more than that. Because right here, right now, he was watching Wesley’s.

Xander and Anya were silent and sad-eyed – though Anya was clearly struggling not to say anything – and Angel understood the pain he saw on their faces. Especially in Xander’s case. Willow was his dearest friend, but she was clearly terrified of him. Of him, of Anya…

… and of Buffy. Buffy, whose pain was palpable; he could almost taste it.

“That I help you get her out to the car.” He turned to Buffy, willing her to understand, to be okay with this. It wouldn’t be forever; Angel was sure of that. A day or two and Willow would be back to being Willow again. She and her friends would be huddled together on the sofa at Buffy’s house, eating ice cream and watching silly movies together, and Angel? Angel would be back in Los Angeles.

With his son. The son he had told none of them about.

“We’ll go tell everyone what’s happened.” Buffy was standing straight and tall as she spoke, keeping her emotions in check, despite the lines of anguish around her eyes… Had he ever respected her more than he did right now? Because this wasn’t slaying. This was personal – as personal and painful as could be. Yet she was every bit as much the warrior right now as ever she was in battle. “C’mon, Xander. Anya. We better go. Let’s let Angel and Mist… Doctor Wyndham-Pryce take care of Willow.” She went to Xander, taking him by the hand and leading him and the also-reluctant Anya to the door.

One look back with liquid eyes and then she was gone, along with the others. The only ones left were Angel and Wesley.

And Willow.

Time to take her home.

Tara hadn’t realized she’d dozed off until the ringing of the phone woke her up. Oh god! How many times had it rung? She leapt off the couch and raced to answer it. “Hello?”

It was Buffy! “Hi. Is there…?”

“She’s awake, but…”

“Spike! She’s awake,” Tara cried, tears filling her eyes as she cut Buffy off without thinking. After all, what other news could there be? And what could possibly be as important?
Dawn came bounding down the stairs. “Willow’s okay?” Her voice was a giddy, high-pitched squeal. “I knew it!”

Spike was suddenly just… there. He was smiling but far more subdued than she and Dawn were and she wondered… It was then that Buffy’s voice broke through the euphoria. “… afraid of us. Well, of everyone except Angel. And Wesley. She’s not coming back to the house right now. She’ll be staying at her house – but Angel and Wesley will be staying there with her. Just for a little while though. Angel’s just going to be taking care of her until she gets better.”

What?

At first, Tara felt heartsick, but then… Well, the important thing was that Willow wasn’t in agony anymore. The rest? Well, the rest would just get sorted out in a little while, that was all. For now she could focus on the positive.

“I’ll tell you all about what happened when we get there, okay? I just figured you guys should know right away. Can you explain things to Dawn?”

Tara nodded vigorously as she answered. “Of course I will. Bye.” She hung up and turned to face the others, telling them what Spike seemed to have already overheard. “Willow’s okay. She really is. She’s just… she won’t be coming back here right away.”

Spike had heard Buffy’s side of the conversation, so Tara’s words were no surprise, but the look on Niblet’s face was a gut punch, and Tara… She looked as if someone had kicked that cat of hers. Bloody hell! His sire couldn’t…

All he’d wanted was for that souled prat to rescue the girl and send her home where she belonged. Was that too much to ask? Apparently so, because the girl wasn’t coming home. Trust Peaches to leave a job half-done. Bastard! He kicked the wall, hating himself most of all for trusting the others to make things come right. He went to Dawn and pulled her into a hug. “It’ll be fine, you’ll see. Hell, after a day with that louse of a sire of mine, Red’ll be begging to come back here. Believe me.” He rolled his eyes dramatically and was gratified by the soft giggle he got from Dawn.

Unlike Angel, however, he was seeing his job through to the finish. He turned his eyes to Tara. “She’ll be all right, pet. She will. With a girl like you waiting for her, how could she not?”

Tara’s answering smile was far from sincere and Spike’s heart ached for her. If Angel were here, he’d stake him on principle right now. Tara didn’t deserve this pain. Speaking of angels… His sire might wear the name, but Tara was the one who earned it every day of her life. He’d never seen the girl do wrong. Not once. Not even once.

Turning his attention back to Dawn, he told her, “You better get back to bed, Bit. Big sis’ll have my hide if she comes home and you aren’t tucked under the covers.” She was about to argue and he stopped her. “Now, now. You know Tara and I will tell you everything later. So no more fuss. Upstairs.” Then, with mock seriousness, he commanded, “On the double.”

She grumbled under her breath, but it was good-natured teenage nonsense and she did it while her feet were in motion, carrying her back to her room, so all was well on that score.
When she was out of earshot, Spike offered Tara the one ray of hope he could find. “No reason to believe she’s afraid of you. Why don’t you go on over and see her in the morning?”

“I don’t understand. Why is Willow afraid of us?” It was the question on all their minds, but only Anya was willing to ask it out loud. Buffy was pretty sure that Xander, like her, had been trying to find a way to ascribe Willow’s reaction to something else.

No chance of that working now. Thanks, Anya.

Maybe that wasn’t sarcastic. The truth was something they all needed to deal with. There was no fixing Willow otherwise.

“I don’t understand either.”

Xander chimed in with insight borne of years of Willow-friendship. “Hey! If it doesn’t make any sense, she has to get over it soon, right? Willow’s logic-girl. She isn’t capable of not making sense.”

He was conveniently forgetting Willow’s visits to Rack and her problems with bad magic, but Buffy still wanted to believe he was right. After all, the Kalderash were involved in this and maybe… Could they be the reason Willow had gone off the deep end in the first place?

Probably not, but it would be a nice thing to believe so maybe she’d just believe it anyway, because this was a dark and difficult world and Buffy desperately needed a fairy tale – one that ended with ‘And they lived happily ever after’ and it was true, really and truly true.

“She’ll be better soon,” Buffy said, probably after too long a pause, but she couldn’t stop the noise in her head. The noise and the dream of Heaven – a dream that seemed farther away than ever. Like a place she’d never really been.

They were still walking, but Anya – Anya of all people – came up beside her and put her arm around her for a brief moment. “Of course she’ll be okay. She has to be okay. She’s Willow.” And that was that, wasn’t it. Because Anya lived in a world of definites and absolutes and things simply were.

It was a wonderful world, Buffy thought, and for tonight, she decided, it was the world they all lived in. “You’re right. She’s right, Xander.”

Anya beamed at the endorsement and then she sighed. “I wish I’d come in my car.”

Guess Buffy sort of did, too. Even a Slayer could get tired. “We’ll be there soon. Not like any of us knew…”

Her voice trailed off. They kept walking.
Willow’s house was dark and felt as deserted as the mansion. Angel hoped they’d be able to get in – and that Willow still had some things here. Xander had told him she’d moved into Buffy’s house months ago, and of course before that…

There was Tara, wasn’t there? Willow’s girlfriend. He’d met her tonight, though he couldn’t say he knew anything about the girl – well, except what he’d learned from Xander, and that hadn’t exactly predisposed him in her favour.

She’d left Willow. Just walked out. And while Xander had made a case for it being entirely justified… no, Angel didn’t see it that way. Maybe because he’d done worse than she had ever dreamt of and not one bit of it had ever made Buffy leave his side. Even losing his soul and killing her classmates… even the necessity of sending him to Hell. She’d been there for him from the moment of his return. Only his leaving had split them apart.

Didn’t Willow deserve as much? More, even?

“We’re home,” he said softly but cheerfully as he carried her into her empty house, grateful to Wesley for his skill at picking locks. His friend had been indispensable in so many ways. Now he turned on the lights.

It was a sterile house and there was nothing welcoming about it. How could Willow be from a family who could create…

He’d never even thought about this before, though he realized he’d held fragments years ago; he just hadn’t cared to put the pieces together and really know.

That would change. It already had changed.

Because it wasn’t just knowledge he needed to assemble now, was it? No, it was the broken pieces of the girl he was still carrying.

The girl who hadn’t said a word since the hospital.

This was her living room. How had she…?

Everything was flashes and confusion and Willow couldn’t think.

Angel. Angel was holding her. That was it. He brought her here. Not Buffy’s house.

He knew. He knew, didn’t he? What Rack had told her.

This is the last tour, Strawberry. I should thank your friends for buying me the ticket, because you’re one – sweet – magic carpet ride.

Hurt. Oh god it hurt. It hurt so badly that it was hard to remember that it didn’t hurt anymore.

That’s right. This is what they gave you. Your friends. That sweet little girl of yours. Enjoy it, my Strawberry, because pain is all you have for as long as you still taste good to me.
But it was over, right? She could move again – breathe. Everything was okay.

Everything was okay because of Angel. Her soul… no his soul. That was it. That was what passed through her when… again. Or was it just once?

It was too hard to think.

What was she feeling right now? Because it was something, right? Something different. Something that wasn’t hurt.

Tired! That was it. She was tired. So tired. Very tired.

So she said it out loud, because Angel would know what she should do. “Tired.”

He cuddled her close when she spoke and it felt like… No, not Mom-Dad-Sheila-Ira. They never cuddled her. She didn’t know what this felt like. It was good and it wasn’t pain. That was enough.

“Shhh. It’s okay. You’re safe now. You can sleep.” And so she did.

To be continued…
Chapter 9

"The only one she wasn’t afraid of was Angel."

Tara had already known that, but Buffy’s words still affected her painfully. Willow had told her about Angel – about the horrible things he’d done when he lost his soul. How could Willow trust him now, especially when she had been so terribly hurt all because of that spell she’d had to do for him? It didn’t make sense.

A glance at Spike… no he didn’t understand it either. And yes, okay, there was a lot of animosity between him and Angel, but Tara was willing to give Spike the benefit of the doubt. There could be very good reasons for him to dislike Angel, reasons that made the decision to entrust him with Willow’s care all the more inexplicable.

“Oh and Wesley,” Buffy added, which Tara at least could sort of understand. Willow had barely mentioned the man to her, but what she’d said… it hadn’t exactly painted the picture of anyone would ever find frightening. What had Willow called him? Oh yeah, “Captain Ineffectual.”

Spike snorted. No one could possibly be frightened of that Wesley character, that stood to reason, but he was a bit surprised about one thing. “That bloke’s still here? Woulda thought Angel would have sent him toddling back to Los Angeles. Or does he keep him around just so he can look manlier and more competent in contrast?” No, he wasn’t saying that just because he was right brassed off about the way Buffy was all but ignoring him.

All right, yes, he was brassed off, but hell, he’d been givin’ her the old in-out and damn well only to see her making cow eyes at a poof who couldn’t even get a hard-on without risking Armageddon.

And yeah, he was in love with her, there was that, not that it mattered. Not that it mattered one bit.

Then he looked at Tara. Poor chit. Her heart was breaking. She loved Willow as much as he loved Buffy. The difference was that before this wretched business had occurred, Willow loved her back. “So how long do we think this nonsense will go on, anyway?”

That was a good question, Buffy had to admit. It was also one she couldn’t answer. The truth was that none of them had any idea what Willow had experienced.

Kind of like no one knowing about her and Heaven.

The difference was that she could talk about it.
She just didn’t.

Why was that, anyway? Why was it that the only one she’d allowed into her pain at all was Spike? It made sense once, she thought – maybe – but she couldn’t figure it out now. If she’d reached out to Willow… Was it arrogant to think that maybe their friendship would have been strong enough to keep Willow from going down that dark path that led to Rack? And to this?

“I don’t know how long it’s going to take,” she admitted. “No one knows what happened to her. I remember when Angel got back from Hell…”

“Willow’s nothing like that pathetic ponce.” Nice interruption there as she tried to share something important, but had she really expected Spike to react any differently?

“Spike,” she sighed wearily, “All I’m trying to say is that…”

“I’m with Spike.” And Xander was heard from. “There’s no reason to think Willow’s going to be anything like Angel was. She wasn’t being magic leech for that long.”

Rolling her eyes now. This was not going well. Was she the only one who’d seen the helplessness and fear? The only one who saw how disconnected Willow was from reality?

It was so good for Tara to see that she wasn’t the only one who had faith in Willow. Maybe it was knowing that not just Spike but even Xander thought that Willow was still in there – strong and true – that gave her courage, but Tara suddenly spoke up. “We don’t know that she’d be afraid of me. I’m going to go see her in the morning.”

Buffy looked slightly skeptical – as did Anya – but Xander seemed to think it was the right idea. That made her feel… good. She hadn’t always been sure how he felt about her relationship with Willow, so his support right now was incredibly heartening. “She’s going to need my help, you know,” Tara said straight to Buffy, the ideas coming to her only just before she spoke. “Giving up magic was the wrong choice, and yes, I thought it was what she needed too, but now that we know… Someone has to help her ground her magic so this doesn’t happen again. No one else here is Wicca.” She didn’t add, ‘especially not Angel,’ but it was certainly implied.

No, she didn’t think about what would happen if Willow were afraid of her too, because that wasn’t going to happen.

It wasn’t.

Spike was knocked back by Tara standing up for herself, but in a good way. There was fire underneath that stutter, now wasn’t there? He was proud of her, he was, and he only hoped this was a change that was here to stay. It was all he could do not to give her a thumbs up, but… yeah, Buffy was looking grim and Love’s Bitch couldn’t bring himself to upset his lady fair any more than he already had.

Luckily, Buffy seemed to come ‘round. “You’re right. Willow’s going to need your help with her magic. I just think maybe we need to wait, give her a little space.”
Oh hell! Who was she kidding? He knew what this was about. Buffy wanted that pathetic excuse for a vampire to stay for as long as she could stretch this out.

Explain to him again why he even bothered.

Then he remembered that last fevered shag in the alley behind the Doublemeat Palace and... yeah, all right, she was like no other woman he’d ever been with and the sex was fantastic enough to make him put up with well more than he should and wait far too long for her to realize who the real vampire was – the one to whom she should give all of herself. There it was, wasn’t it?

Tara’s eyes found his, though, and once again he had the chance to make that same choice. So what to do? Stay at Buffy’s heel like some besotted puppy or stand up for the one person who’d given him friendship and respect?

“Yes, well, I’m sure there’s no harm in Tara going over there for a visit in the morning.” So a different choice was made. “Besides, not as if Peaches even knows what sort of food Willow likes. Sure he could use some advice from someone who’s actually spent time with the girl.” That last bit was verging on a guess, but he knew the souled version of his sire and his solitary ways. Not like those years in the New York alleys eating rats were any sort of secret. The demon grapevine had had a field day with those ridiculous antics. Couldn’t he have just worn a cilice or something? Woulda been less degrading. Angel had almost made the whole Aurelius line a laughingstock.

Spike had a point, loathe as Buffy was to concede it. Still, she wondered: Why was he even here? He didn’t think they were going to have sex, did he? Because now was not the time – and not just because Angel was in town, although Buffy had to admit to herself that his presence was making the chaos in her head even more chaos-y.

He knew. He knew what she was doing with Spike and he didn’t... he didn’t care. Or he didn’t care very much.

God. She didn’t want to think about it right now – shouldn’t think about it now – but that didn’t drive any of it out of her head.

It hurt, okay? It hurt. He’d been worked up over Riley – had even become violent – so why...?

He was over her, wasn’t he? His life was in L.A. now and she was just a memory.

One more reason she wondered why she had to be here. Why couldn’t she still be in Heaven? There was no pain there. No tears. No anguish. No bills she couldn’t pay or places she couldn’t go or vampires she couldn’t stop fucking even though she hated them or friends she couldn’t get it right with or lovers she couldn’t have. In Heaven, everything was beautiful and there was nothing but peace.

Angel had been to Hell and part of Buffy wanted to ask him how it could possibly be worse than this.

The world was horrible and bleak and sad and wrong... and Buffy was stuck here.

So okay, that Slayer inside herself chided. This was life and it sucked, more now than it ever had. But this was what it was and she had to make the best of it.
There was a best of it… right?

“All right, Tara. Tomorrow maybe you should take the stuff you baked over to Willow’s house. It can’t hurt. And hey, maybe she’ll want to see you.”

Angel sat in the living room of Willow’s house, wondering about her family. There was a fine layer of dust on the furniture, the curtains had clearly been closed for a long time… where were those parents of hers? Had Buffy told the truth? Were they in Europe? Or did anyone even know?

For the first time ever, he thought – really thought – about the families of Buffy’s friends, and he felt terribly guilty for not thinking about them before. Bits and pieces of today’s conversation at the hotel and Cordelia’s chatter came to mind, filling in some blanks about Xander with uncomfortable truths. The boy’s home life had been anything but ideal and now, finally, Angel understood the bumptiousness and the almost frantic bravado.

What would have happened if he’d allowed his vision to extend beyond the curve of Buffy’s tits years ago? If he’d seen… Yes, Xander’s jealousy over Buffy would still have been an obstacle but… maybe… maybe they’d have been friends.

He looked over at Wesley. There was something to be said for friends.

Which brought him back to Willow. Why had it taken him so long to think about her anyway? When he was thinking of dysfunctional families and friends he hadn’t made when he had the chance, why had he thought about Xander before her?

Then he thought about the sensation – the connection – he’d experienced in the hospital and how it hadn’t felt… new.

He was afraid, wasn’t he? Though of what exactly he couldn’t say.

In his head, he could almost hear Cordelia telling him to get over it and it was a voice worth listening to.

So he plunged in and thought about a girl who should have been his friend from the start. What about her family? Her mother had tried to burn her at the stake, that he’d been around for, and thanks to Xander he knew that her parents had cut themselves off from most of their families, but that was almost all he knew. Cordelia never talked about Willow, except to have a bit of an uncomfortable afternoon when she found out Willow had a girlfriend. It hadn’t been Cordelia’s shining hour, though he was proud of her for getting past it and even becoming more accepting in the wake of it.

Maybe… “Wes?” Wesley looked up, slightly startled. Guess he’d been lost in thought as well. “Back at the hospital, you said Willow’s father was a psychiatrist. Is he?”

The first response he got was a very puzzled look, but then… “No, but he is a psychologist, I believe, as is her mother. Willow wasn’t given to discussing her family much, though I was aware that they were rarely home. I thought something ought to be done about that, perhaps a
conversation with them, but Mr. Giles felt the situation was best left alone.”

Yet another issue Angel now had with Rupert Giles, but he didn’t let that crowd his mind. Especially since he recognized just how hypocritical it was for him to take umbrage at Giles’s neglect of a girl Angel had worse than abandoned after she’d done… well, more for him than he could even begin to repay.

It suddenly occurred to him that maybe he should let her get to know him as well. “I’m going to tell her about Connor,” he blurted out. Wesley’s eyes went wide and Angel explained, “I just think… I think if she knows I trust her, she’ll know… she’ll feel safe with me. But more than that, we’ll be friends. I think… I think she needs a friend.”

Wesley nodded sagaciously. It was possible he’d heard the words Angel hadn’t said: that he needed Willow’s friendship too. Not because of what she’d done for him, but because of who she was. The girl he’d come to know through Xander’s stories and the memories he dredged up...

And you. I mean, you’re gonna live forever. You don’t have time for a cup of coffee?

You’re old and you already know stuff.

If I say something you really don’t wanna hear, do you promise not to bite me?

All this ‘leaving for her own good’ garbage…

He’d cut her off then, hadn’t he? Told her had no time for her ‘personal stuff.’ Why had he always been so averse…

That connection he’d felt in the hospital… how long? How long had it been there, lying quiet, dormant? Was it because only now was he willing to accept it? Was that it?

If it had been strong and active and something he’d held onto, would Willow have been safer?

“It’s my fault, isn’t it?” he said, and if it sounded like a question, it really wasn’t.

Wesley reached over and put a hand on his shoulder. “You couldn’t have known.” It wasn’t absolution, but it was the only honest comfort available and Angel took it.

Once again they were silent as they wondered what would happen when Willow awoke.

Pain. Pain. It was everywhere and in everything. It was big and dark and it was coming back to swallow her whole.

“Straaaaawberry? Where are you? Don’t you know you can’t get away? They’ll give you back to me, don’t you know that?”

No! No, no, no! No, they… Where was her voice? She couldn’t find it. Couldn’t scream. Couldn’t move. But she could see. Yes, she could see. Buffy, Tara, Dawn, Xander… they were so angry. They hated her. Just like her Mom. Only they didn’t burn her at the stake. They gave her to… “No,
no, no! Please! Don’t! I’ll be good!”

Her voice, it was there. And the others were gone. Even him. She looked up. The light was dim, but she could see… “Angel?” She was crying now. Tears. She hadn’t had those before either. “Don’t let them take me. Please?”

“Shhh… you’re safe. I promise. No one’s going to take you.” She was in his arms now and she almost believed him but his next words left her stunned and uncertain. Was he on their side after all? Lying to her? Trying to trick her? “Rack is dead.”

She didn’t believe him. After all, look at what had just happened. “He was here.”

To be continued…
Chapter 10

_i will make you hurt_ (Chapter 10)

“He was here.”

Should she have told Angel? Could she really trust him? Too late. It was done.

“It was a nightmare.” His voice was gentle and kind, but she didn’t understand what he was saying. “You were sleeping.” She was still confused but then... oh. She remembered now. Sleeping. He’d suggested that, hadn’t he? Before. She knew what sleep was. It had just been so long. So long. So very long.

Hadn’t it?

“Sleeping?” He nodded before she whispered, “It felt real. I thought...” Nightmares. That’s what he’d said. She’d had those before too. Not like this, though. Not like this.

He sat beside her, wrapping an arm around her and pulling her close. “I know.” He understood, didn’t he? He really did. So she relaxed, allowing the tension to leave her body as he told her, “I wish I could tell you that there was a way to make them go away, but you’ll have nightmares again. Fewer as time passes, but...” Somehow, his words were comforting. It was easier, knowing what lay ahead. She hadn’t known – there was always new pain and it would stop and start and she never knew when or how. This was better.

Her head was resting on his shoulder and she let out a deep breath. Another memory emerging. She sat up straight and gazed into his eyes. “You were in Hell. I remember. She sent you there. Just like me.”

What? Angel was taken aback by Willow’s words, but he willed himself to be calm and not to betray any emotion. Besides, at least now he understood her reaction in the hospital; for some reason, she believed that Buffy – and the others, most likely – were responsible for her ordeal. He was going to have to be very careful and very patient to get her to see things rationally again and to believe in her friends.

That meant he was going to be here for longer than he’d anticipated, didn’t it?

What about Connor? How could he be away from his son?

“I was in Hell,” he agreed, saying nothing about Buffy.

It occurred to him that now there was one person in the world who would understand what he’d endured. When she’d been confused about sleep... god, he’d almost forgotten, but it had been just like that for him. So many things had confused him when he returned.
More and more, it was becoming clear why he’d been sent here.

But oh he missed his son.

He was going to call Cordelia first thing in the morning and ask about him, have her put the phone up to his ear so at least the boy wouldn’t forget his father’s voice.

“If I stay here with you,” he asked Willow, “do you think you’ll be able to go back to sleep?” He stroked her cheek. “You need rest.”

She seemed nervous and fearful for a moment, but then she nodded. “Okay.” She lay back down and he sat beside her, a pillow behind his back, legs outstretched, feeling the warmth of her next to him. He’d intended just to wait until she was deeply asleep and then go back downstairs, but the thrum of her heartbeat and the comfort of her body heat lulled him into drowsiness and in no time at all he was asleep too.

Tara felt restless, twitching, and she was pretty sure that the strongest anaesthetic couldn’t put her to sleep. Of course, it wasn’t like Buffy’s couch was the most comfortable bed, either.

The room she’d shared with Willow, though? No, she couldn’t sleep in it right now.

She wished Spike was here, but he’d gone home – or back to the crypt, anyway. Did he really think of it as home? She didn’t think so and it made her sad. Spike deserved a home. Someplace cozy and warm where he could have cocoa and watch cable.

Someplace where he could cuddle up with Buffy after a long night of slaying.

Except they didn’t do things like cuddle, did they?

Why did he love her? She was curious about that. Loving Willow… that made sense. Willow was sweet and kind and supportive – she’d made Tara feel so much better about herself, made the world seem like a better place, just because they were sharing it. Buffy didn’t seem to do that for Spike at all.

Of course men were different, weren’t they? Everyone always said that sex was what mattered most to men and maybe Buffy… she was a Slayer, and that probably made a difference, at least to a vampire.

But if that were the case, then why was Spike so miserable? Yes, okay, so was she, but she’d left Willow when things got bad. Spike was tagging along at Buffy’s heels and clearly willing to endure whatever abuse she dished out.

Then the part of Tara that believed in always trying to see both sides kicked in and…

Buffy was hurting – Tara got that, she did – but was that a good excuse for her not to see what she was doing? Tara had never been ripped out of Heaven, so she couldn’t say she had any real idea of what Buffy was going through. Should allowances be made? Was Spike right for waiting it out? Being patient? Accepting her behavior?
What would Willow be like now? After her ordeal?

Tara sighed and lay back down. It would be sunrise soon. She should try to get some sleep before going over to see Willow.

Spike lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, inhaling the scent of Slayer that still clung to the pillow beside him. A part of him wished he hadn’t changed the sheets, but he was a fastidious sort, filthy crypt notwithstanding, and he couldn’t forsake the laundry for any reason… even if it meant washing away the last traces of the woman he loved.

Why the hell did he love her anyway? Yeah, he’d asked himself that question a lot in the last few hours, hadn’t he?

It was spending time with Tara, wasn’t it? Glinda was such a pure-hearted angel of a girl. She made it damn hard to accept the way things were, what with her shining all that wholesome light of hers on everything and everyone, making him wish the world she lived in was the real one – or at least one he could find his way to.

How the hell could Willow have been such a stupid cow? He’d always thought she was quite a bright thing, with her books and computers and such, but after all that memory spell nonsense… well, the chit might well be an intellectual, but when it came to what counted, she was as thick as two planks. If he had someone like Tara…

But that was silly, wasn’t it? He’d never even looked at a girl like that, and even if he did… and if he found one even close and she wasn’t batting for the other team…

Nah. That wasn’t what he wanted anyway, no. Spike wanted what he’d always wanted – the brass ring. The shining golden goddess. The girl who could rule the darkness with him – conquer it.

Yeah, that’s what he wanted. And that’s what he would get.

Angel would be gone as soon as Willow was back to her old self, which wouldn’t be long at all what with Tara helpin’ her, and then Buffy would be right back in his bed where she belonged. All would be right with the world. Buffy would love him, she would. They’d put Tara and Willow’s soft looks and handholding to shame with the heat of their passion and perfection.

The ceiling was black and dull. No good-girl light mucking up his field of vision.

That was the way it was supposed to be.

Buffy woke up after a fitful sleep, a sleep so troubled and full of shadows that it scarcely felt like sleep at all. She was drained and still tired and she could only imagine just how awful she’d feel if she weren’t a Slayer.
A Slayer.

How was Faith doing? What was it like for her in jail? Yes, okay, she was a killer and she was where she belonged but… sometimes, Buffy almost missed her. How weird was that?

Faith had stolen her body, slept with her boyfriend… done so many horrible things, but… She was a Slayer too and that was a bond Buffy shared with no one else in the world. A bond she never could share with anyone else. For a brief, crazy moment, she thought about visiting Faith, having a face to face through that thick prison glass, talking to her through one of those phone things, pouring her heart out, but then…

No. Bad idea. Not like Faith would even want to see her, and even if she did, what kind of advice would she give her, anyway? Want, take, have – the same as before – and that wasn’t who Buffy was… or it hadn’t been, way back when. Now, though… What was she doing with Spike if not…

Had some of Faith clung to her after that body switch? Was that it? Was that why she was using Spike? Using his feelings for her to fill up the space where her own feelings lay dead and cold?

She grabbed her pillow and put it over her face, groaning, as if that could somehow drown out all these thoughts, make them go away.

It didn’t work.

Then again, Buffy hadn’t expected it to.

I hereby call the first meeting of the We Hate Cordelia Club to order

It was those words in a voice too incongruously serious for a 12 year old girl which woke Angel from a sleep filled with dreams… dreams that weren’t his. Or at least had nothing to do with him.

No, instead his sleep had been filled with visions of a little redheaded girl – old beyond her years yet more innocent than the modern world should have allowed.

He saw her in preschool, breaking a yellow crayon and beginning a friendship with Xander Harris.

Telling her first grade class that she wanted to be a scientist, only to have the boys jeer: “Girls can’t be scientists.” Not daring to raise her voice above a whisper as she muttered, “Marie Curie was,” and returned to her seat with eyes full of tears.

Getting angry as she watched a movie with Xander and a boy he didn’t recognize. Again muttering under her breath instead of speaking up. “They shouldn’t make fun of Hedy Lamarr like that. She was a brilliant inventor.”

Jumping up from the desk in her bedroom and bouncing with delight when she wrote her first computer program.

Tripping as she played some foolish game on the playground and being surrounded by jeering
girls. One of them was Cordelia.

Playing piano all alone, her fingers soft and tentative on the keys, as if she were terrified of someone hearing her.

Writing in her diary about how much she longed for Xander to look at her and see a girl instead of just a friend.

All of those memories… it was as if they’d been there all along, waiting to emerge.

His hand brushed the hair of the girl – no, woman now, wasn’t she – beside him and he stared down. She looked… peaceful, and he was impossibly grateful for that. She needed rest, dreamless rest.

He wanted to go downstairs and call Cordelia, but he wondered if moving would disturb Willow.

Did Cordelia remember? Did she ever regret the things she’d done in her childhood? Think about how cruel she’d been? Angel knew the person she was today, but only now did he realize just how far that was from the girl no one in Sunnydale missed enough to ever call or even ask about. Before today he’d counted that against them. She should visit someday, he thought, talk to them, at least let them all see that she was a very different person from the one they’d known before.

And she should apologize.

The memories…

He was sure Cordelia didn’t think most of what she’d said or done meant anything, but for those images and words to be part of what Angel saw… Yes, they’d had an effect, meant something after all – at least to Willow. If Cordelia knew that, he was sure she’d regret them. Yes, she was tactless, but she wasn’t cruel. Not anymore.

As gingerly and undetectably as he could manage, Angel got up from the bed. Willow didn’t move or make a sound. Good. She was still asleep. So he crept downstairs and found the phone in the kitchen.

“Angel Investigations. We help the… Oh, Angel! Have you…?”

“She’s safe. Not out of the woods yet, but safe.” He spoke quietly, mindful of Wesley, who was snoring softly on the couch in the living room. “She suffered a lot.”

There was silence for a moment. “Tell her… I don’t know what to tell her,” Cordelia confessed. “Hi seems sort of weird.” Her awkwardness was both unusual and telling. Angel had been wrong; she did realize that she’d left some damage behind.

“I’ll tell her you were worried about her.”

“Oh. Good. Because I was.”

He could almost hear her nod and he smiled, especially when she said, “There’s someone right here who’s been waiting for a call from you.”

Then there was a soft cooing on the line. His son. His precious miracle of a son. “Hey, Connor,”
and he was rewarded with a happy baby squeal. His heart, that supposedly dead organ, almost burst with the love he felt for that small boy, the child he never imagined he could have. He thought of Darla with a pang, and of the sacrifice she’d made for that same child.

“I love you,” he said softly, and he heard the phone move. Cordelia was back on the line.

“He was glad to hear your voice.”

There was a question hanging in the air and he decided not to wait for Cordelia to ask it. “I have to stay here for at least a few more days. Willow… she’s not in good shape. She’s afraid of everyone – except me and Wes. What she went through… For some reason she thinks that Buffy and the others were part of it.”

Silence, but somehow it was clanging and tumultuous. He knew he’d only add to the psychic noise, but he continued. “I need you to find out where the Kalderash are now,” and before Cordelia could interrupt, he finished, “They were part of this. One of them was trying to take Willow’s power.”

The phone. At first Buffy didn’t hear it over the noise in her head, but then she leapt from the bed and raced downstairs. Oh god! This could be about Willow!

Everyone else seemed to have the same idea, because Dawn followed her downstairs and Tara was standing in the doorway of the living room as Buffy picked up the receiver…

…and heard the last voice she had ever expected to hear. “Hello, Buffy.”

Giles.

Giles was calling.

What in the hell was she going to say to him?

To be continued…
“Giles. Nice to hear from you.” Buffy’s tone belied her words; it was cold and hard as she responded to a voice she’d once wanted to hear more than any other.

Silence for a moment and she wondered if maybe he’d just hang up since she wasn’t giving him the ‘gosh I’m so happy you called’ warmth that he probably expected.

But he didn’t. “I should have called sooner and not waited for… I’ve been contacted by a local coven. They seem to believe that Willow is in some sort of danger and…”

You know? Whoever thought up that ‘better late than never’ saying was an idiot. “You’re giving a history lesson, not a news report. We already did the rescue mission and the slice and dice. Wesley even showed up to help, by the way. But gosh. Thanks so much for calling.”

She was about to hang up on him – and who would have ever thought she’d hang up on Giles? – when she heard him call out, “I’m sorry.” Okay, no, he hadn’t specified what he was sorry for yet, but it was something and Buffy put the receiver back to her ear. “Is she… is she all right?”

What was the right answer to that? Should she lie, say Willow was fine, and brush Giles off (the way he’d done to her, right)? Or should she… “She’s in bad shape. She’s afraid of everyone except…” Buffy paused. For some reason there was something – more than a something – she decided to hold back. “Everyone except Wesley. So he’s taking care of her right now and we’re… waiting.”

More silence from Giles and the puzzled looks from Dawn and Tara told he she had explaining to do when the call was done.

“I’m sorry.”

“You said that already.” Was that rude? Too bad. Months of pain from being abandoned by the man who’d become more of a father to her than Hank Summers ever was were bursting through her defenses and… god, could she please go back to the days when ‘feeling’ was all about Spike pounding her into the mattress (or the wall… or the floor)? “We have everything under control. Thanks for calling.” As she was hanging up, she only just remembered to call out ‘goodbye.’ Maybe he heard her. Or maybe not. She didn’t really care.

After all, it wasn’t like he cared about her.

She turned and faced Dawn and Tara. A part of her wanted to run off without a word and find oblivion in a familiar crypt, but she realized there was no getting out of this. “That was Giles,” she began needlessly.

Dawn was tightlipped, standing hipshot with arms akimbo. “What did he want?” Was it wrong that Buffy was comforted by Dawn’s hostile posture and angry voice? Tough. Right now she was in the mood to be petty and unforgiving and she appreciated the company.
“Apparently some coven got in touch with him and he decided to warn us that Willow’s in danger.”

Tara’s eyes were wide and disbelieving. She also asked a question that left Buffy reeling. “How long ago did they tell him?”

Oh god. Maybe she shouldn’t have said anything, because Buffy looked pale and stricken, but… Had he really called as soon as he found out? Why wouldn’t a warning from a coven have been timelier than this?

Tara realized that she wasn’t as close to Giles as everyone else was and he’d never been her mentor the way he was to the others, but that didn’t mean she didn’t know him well enough to pass judgment. It might even mean she was better qualified, seeing as how she had less of an emotional attachment to cloud her view.

From where she was standing? Giles had once again let them all down.

The memories of Willow’s face when she’d learned he was gone… even though it was all tied up with having to leave her lover (another abandonment – no, it was different and it wasn’t like she’d left the country) – Tara would never forget the pain in Willow’s eyes.

Did Giles even realize the role Willow had cast him in? That she considered him almost her father? Did he know how little her actual parents were involved in her life – how little they had ever been involved in her life? Did he know that they had dismissed “Terri” as a college feminist experiment? That they didn’t even know Willow was living in Buffy’s house now?

Did he have any idea how awful it must have been to realize Giles didn’t care about her any more than Sheila and Ira Rosenberg?

There was one person in the room who certainly did understand. Buffy was still chalk-white and radiating pain so intense it hurt to be near her. “It’s a good thing it didn’t matter, huh?” Tara offered, trying to be comforting. Yes, she’d been having all kinds of conflicting thoughts about Buffy in the last day or so, but that didn’t mean she didn’t care or that she thought Buffy deserved to suffer like this.

So she went to Buffy and pulled her into a hug. A moment later, Dawn joined them. There weren’t any tears, and maybe Tara was surprised, but then again, there’d been so many tears lately. Besides, there’d be more later, somehow she was sure of that, so not having them now? That seemed just fine to Tara.

The house was quiet and still and the absence of life in its walls was palpable. Angel was struggling to place Willow here. How could anyone so alive not have left traces…? But maybe she carried them with her; maybe she couldn’t spare them. It had to take so much to be such a bright spirit when life kept beating down on you. His life had been strikingly similar and he had succumbed – diving into drink and debauchery, the path of least resistance.
It made it easier to understand why she’d been drawn like some tragic moth, not to the flame, but to the darkness.

Time felt as if it were crawling, but he knew it was too much to expect that Cordelia and the others would have already found out anything. Especially not when the best researcher they had was here in Sunnydale with him.

Speaking of which… “How is Connor?” Wesley spoke in hushed tones.

Angel’s reply was just as muted. “He’s fine.” He supposed they were both afraid of disturbing Willow’s fragile rest.

Just then, Wesley brought up a topic he hadn’t even considered. Blame it on his own inhumanity. “I should go to the grocers and get something for Willow to eat. The cupboards and refrigerator here are quite empty.” He paused. “I’m afraid I didn’t… don’t know her well at all. Do you recall what she’s fond of?”

Good question. Angel cast his mind back to the days back when he’d spent time in the library with Buffy and her friends, but… He’d been so narrowly focused then. The world consisted of Buffy Summers and no one else. Other than a vague recollection that Giles had a weakness for jelly doughnuts and Buffy’s references to Xander’s fondness for Twinkies… no, there was nothing. Not even his recent dreams gave him any clue. “I… I didn’t pay attention,” he admitted rather shamefacedly.

Wesley put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Neither did I and I spent some considerable time with her. You’re not the only one with regrets.”

Again, he was grateful for Wesley’s company. As much as the crew back in L.A. could probably use him right now, Angel was selfishly glad he’d brought the man with him. “We get to make up for it now.” Too little, too late? How very much he hoped not.

Back to the practical topic at hand. “I guess you should get… eggs. Everyone likes eggs, right?” They were the only food Angel knew how to prepare and that was certainly a factor in his suggestion; the expression on Wesley’s face told him that fact was lost on no one in the room.

“I’ll certainly get a dozen or so, as well as some other items. Oh, and I’ll stop at the hotel, check out, and get our things, since I doubt we’ll be returning there.”

One more thing to be grateful for about Wesley – his attention to the small, but important, details. But something else just occurred to Angel. He waited a moment, almost afraid, but then… “Stop at Willie’s. I think I need… it’s just that…. How to explain the sense he had that he – they – might need his demon a little closer to the surface and that human blood was the most controlled and safest way to bring it there?

Luckily, Wesley seemed to somehow get it. He said nothing at first, but nodded and his eyes locked on Angel’s as an understanding passed between them.

Reaching into his pocket, Angel got out his wallet and handed Wesley his credit card, then watched as the man turned and left the house. He listened to the car pull out of the driveway and then decided to check on Willow. Hopefully she wasn’t awake and hungry already.
Tara, Tupperware tray full of cupcakes in a bag slung over her arm, made her way up the walk to Willow’s house. She hadn’t been here since that awkward and depressing dinner with Willow’s parents. She’d never told Willow that she overheard that conversation in the kitchen.

“I understand, dear. You’re making a statement. I raised you to be a feminist and it’s only natural. But don’t you think moving in with Terri sends the wrong message to her? I have a feeling she might think this is more serious than… well, than it is.”

“Tara isn’t an experiment, Mom. I love her. So yes, moving in with her sends the right message, because it is serious. Very serious.”

Maybe she should have told her. Told Willow how much it meant to her that she had told her Mom the truth and not waffled to keep the peace. Would it have made a difference in how things went later? Would Willow have felt more secure?

Probably not, huh? Willow had pain and damage that defied easy fixes… and so did she.

Guess being raised to think you were a demon would leave scars.

Funny how she’d never thought about that until now.

There was no car in the driveway. Huh. Was there anyone even here? Had they gone back to the hotel after all? But she knocked anyway and she heard a voice – Angel’s – ask, “Who’s there?”

“It’s Tara.”

“Come in.” At first, she wondered why he didn’t open the door, but then she remembered: He was a vampire. He needed to stay out of the sunlight.

“Hi.” She held out the bag of cupcakes. “I brought these for Willow and I thought… I’d like to see her.”

Voices. Willow had been awake – awake, not asleep, and there was no pain – but now she heard voices, but she wasn’t sure whose. Who was here? Who was in her house? She got up off the bed and made her way out of her bedroom. Walking toward the living room, she could still hear…

Oh no. Oh no. Ohnoohnoohnoohno! “Back. She’s going to give me back! You promised! You said he was gone! You said I wasn’t… You promised!” she screamed at Angel before she ran frantically back to her room. The door. She could barricade the door. That would give her time. She could escape. Go somewhere – anywhere. She had to get away.

She was pushing her dresser – block the door, block the door, block the door – but she was too slow (weak, so weak, too weak, but power was bad – pain, so much pain – so what was she supposed to do?) and before she could get it there, the door burst open.

“Willow, it’s okay. I mean it. No one is going to hurt you. I promise.”
Before, she had believed him, but she didn’t now. Not when she saw who was standing behind him. “You’re lying!” But then she thought… maybe he would take pity on her. “Please let me go. I promise I’ll be good. You’ll never see me again. Please, please just let me go.”

The panic in Willow’s eyes… Angel was furious with himself that she was experiencing this. For now, though, his fury was focused outward. He whipped around and, letting his eyes flash golden, growled, “Go!” at the woman standing behind him.

His demon might already have been closer to the surface even without Willie’s specialty of the house because he took great satisfaction in Tara’s terrified rush from the premises.

The door slammed and Willow relaxed. Angel approached her slowly. “See? I told you. You’re safe. She’s gone.” Add Tara to the list of people Willow seemed to believe were responsible for what had been done to her.

“She’s gone?”

“She’s gone and she won’t be back.” He pulled Willow into his arms and held her close. “Rack is dead, Willow. I swear. I saw him die.”

The feel of her in his arms… it was as if he were holding all the Willows he’d come to know: The little girl, terrified of not being perfect. The misfit, crushed by the weight of her difference. The lovelorn maiden, despairing of ever being seen as a woman. The naïvely courageous sidekick, willing to risk it all to help Buffy save the world. The misguided witch, taking her Icarus-flight too close to the sun of power.

And now, the broken pieces of all of them were cradled against him. “Everything’s going to be all right,” he said softly. He’d never meant anything more. This latest episode was distressing, but it had at least clarified something – that not one of Willow’s friends was someone with whom she felt safe. There were a lot of repairs that needed to be done. Add that to the fact he had a nagging suspicion that the Kalderash were still a threat and he knew that he was going to be here even longer than the few extra days he’d posited to Cordelia.

No, he couldn’t live without his son for that long.

When Wesley got back, they were going to have a talk.

Tara raced, almost running, down streets, through the park, heedless of where she was going, which made sense since she was crying and could hardly see. Willow was scared of her. Scared of her. The irony of that… when she’d been so terrified of Willow not long ago…

The look on Willow’s face – eyes wide enough to see the roundness of her eyeballs – brought home the magnitude of her suffering in a way that made Tara feel utterly helpless. It would be one thing if she trusted the people caring for Willow, but what she knew of Wesley, and even more so of Angel? No, she wasn’t comfortable with this at all.
It was a shock when she suddenly realized where she had run to.

She was at Spike’s crypt.

He’d be sleeping now, wouldn’t he? He needed rest after all he’d been through. So did she, not that she would get it, but…

As she stood there, wondering what to do, the door opened, and she could see Spike standing in the shadows inside. “What is it?”

Despite his gruff tone and unwelcoming manner, Tara hurried inside, where she promptly broke down completely. “She’s afraid of me! She hates me! What am I going to do?”

To be continued…
“What am I going to do?” Tara’s eyes were so full of tears that Spike could barely see the colour through the ocean.

Damn it! He’d just been working out how to ease the chit out of his life – to make everything the way it had been – and now here she was, pouring out her heartache and making it impossible for Spike to send her away. Not unless he was as worthless and inhuman a bastard as the Slayer was wont to claim.

He pulled her close, immediately regretting the surly manner in which he’d greeted her. “Red’s just been through a bit of an ordeal. Like I said before, she’s nothing like Angel, but you should have seen him after he got his soul - bloody lunatic, he was - and even he came right in the end. ” He paused before adding, “For a pathetic, souled prat, anyway.” A soft, mirthful sound was her response.

Should he tell her more? Tell her about Angel coming back, trying to fit in with the family? Might help, eh? Well, except for the part where it didn’t work out. Nah. Guess he’d said too much already.

Oh hell. He had no idea what to do or how to make the girl feel better. At least she’d giggled when he called Angel a name. That was something, right?

“You think she’ll love me again?”

What the…? It was a question he could have predicted she’d ask and a natural one at that, the kind of thing anyone would say at a time like this, but… Why the devil was it making his gut clench?

Must be some lingering anger at Red. That witch did make him think he was the Watcher’s boy, after all. Yeah, that must be it.

“She still loves you,” he replied, ignoring the tightness in his chest that gripped more firmly with each word. “She just needs a little time to recollect herself. You’ll see. In a day or two, you girls’ll be holding hands and braiding each other’s hair.”

Spike was being so kind and so comforting and he was saying all the right things, so why wasn’t it lifting Tara’s spirits? Just a minute ago she’d been in tears because of Willow’s reaction to her visit and she’d just asked if he thought that she’d love her again. Didn’t that mean she wanted Willow to love her the way she did before?

Or was the truth more complicated? Had asking that question been a reflex? Was she upset because – just because?

Deep down, Tara wasn’t so sure of what she wanted anymore at all, was she?
The only certainty was her relief that Willow was safe now, but everything else was unfocused and hazy, as if she were looking for answers in one of those silly Magic 8-Balls.

“I just want her to be herself again,” she said softly.

So many things she hadn’t really given much consideration to yet flooded her mind: Like the fact that it seemed very clear that Willow wasn’t going to be able to give up magic after all. Sure, she’d sort of thought about that last night, but not with any depth, and now…

Magic had brought them together, but magic had also torn them apart and Tara wasn’t sure she could be with a Willow who used magic again, not even knowing that it had to be so. Not even knowing that she was probably the only one who could safely guide Willow back into the practice.

“This is so hard,” she whispered as a few fresh tears escaped from beneath her lashes.

Spike kept holding her; she felt safer than she had in a long time.

He was the most caring and considerate… yes, he was a person, even if he wasn’t strictly human.

Why didn’t Buffy love him?

How long had it been since she’d sat here in this living room with other people? Willow was trying to piece things together, make everything linear again, but it was hard. Things insisted on being out of order and she hated it. This wasn’t how her mind worked – well, not how it used to. Everything had always been neat and orderly and in the right place. She remembered that.

Angel wasn’t talking. That was normal for him, wasn’t it?

"I too know the love of a taciturn man."

She’d said that, hadn’t she? Who was she talking about? Oh! Oz. That was it. Oz. Oz had been silent, like Angel.

Where was he now?

He hadn’t liked her magic either, had he? Was he one of them? Had he helped give her to Rack and the other?

You thought you were better than me.

The woman had said that, hadn’t she? Those were the words – the words right before… Willow had wanted to ask what she meant, but then the pain had come and everything had been swallowed up in it and all Willow could manage were pleas to just make it stop – or to kill her and give her peace.

There was something else. Something… Willow needed to know.
“She sounded…” Willow paused. Angel wouldn’t know what she’d been thinking about. She needed to explain, didn’t she? “There was someone else. Someone with Rack. She sounded like Ms. Calendar. Why did she sound like that?” She turned pleading eyes on Angel and hoped he wouldn’t miss the silence.

Willow’s plaintive question was a loaded one, though she didn’t know it. How should Angel answer her? As of now, he and Wesley were the only two people in the world she trusted and if he told her the truth, what would it do to her? Just a short while ago, she’d been ready to jump out the window and rush off hell knew where, and she was in no condition to take care of herself.

Lying, though… what would that do if she either figured out or somehow learned the truth before he decided she was ready?

Memories of her fleeing from Xander – not his memories, but hers – assailed him. Being deceived was no small sin in her eyes, and while he knew she’d transgressed lately herself, he decided that honesty – careful honesty – was going to be the best course of action.

“She… she was a relative of Jenny Calendar’s. Another member of the Kalderash clan.” Would that be enough? No, she was looking at him with wide, confused eyes. “We don’t know for sure what her motives were.” Which was true, to an extent at least. He didn’t think theories were a safe thing to float at present.

“Were? Is she…”

“She’s dead. Just like Rack.” He moved to sit beside her and put his hand on her knee. “You’re safe now.”

A heavy sigh from Willow and then she leaned against him. “Thank you.”

Angel put his arm around her. “You don’t need to thank me.” For a few moments he sat there, enjoying the closeness. Funny how having a child had created this need for warmth and contact and connection. Or had it been there all along, dormant, just waiting for be brought forth… like his connection to Willow?

He made a decision suddenly and without thought, and he acted on it the same way. “I have a son,” he blurted out. “You’re the first person I’ve told. The first one in Sunnydale, I mean.”

She stared at him, wonder in her eyes. “Vampires can have children? Wow.”

Her question… it made him realize two things. One: She hadn’t experienced the same tour through his memories that he had of hers – at least not yet. Two: She hadn’t lost herself in this ordeal. That off-kilter view which he’d always been fond of was still there.

“His name is Connor. He’s…” How to explain…? “He’s a miracle.”

Those green eyes of hers were searching and as he met her gaze he could almost see wheels turning and hear clicks and whirs. “You really love him, huh?” There was an almost-sadness in her eyes, even when she smiled at him. It wasn’t hard to deduce its origin. He’d seen so much of her life, enough to know… His son was never, ever going to be alone, never going to question whether his father loved him, never going to jump through endless, desperate hoops.
“I love him.” Three simple words, but oh how much meaning they contained. She was still staring but her eyes had gone soft and gentle. The sadness had faded and he had the strangest feeling he’d passed a test.

“Can I meet him someday?”

Another day. Another uncertain, awful day.

Okay, Buffy. Focus on the positive. Willow was no longer in agonizing pain, having her magic drained out of her by some wacko warlock and his vengeful gypsy sidekick. That was very much of the positive.

Of course, on the other hand, there was the fact that Willow was terrified of her… and of Xander… and Anya.

And then there was…

Oh god. Don’t think about…

Angel.

The fanged elephant in the room where Buffy’s thoughts all caromed around like pinballs.

Angel, who didn’t care that she was sleeping with Spike. At least not very much.

Speaking of agonizing pain.

One more thing that sucked since she got back from Heaven. One more thing, added to everything.

She should be crying right now, shouldn’t she? She sure thought so. But she wasn’t. There was this space where tears should be, but they were nowhere to be found and the space was dry and arid, a desert where the bones of feelings littered the landscape, bleached and pale.

Bleached and pale like…

She hated herself for this. She would hate herself more later. But that didn’t stop Buffy from getting up off the couch, grabbing her purse and keys, and heading straight to the last place she should go.

But damn it, she needed to feel.

So Spike’s crypt was where she was going.

Let the self-hate and disgust come when they would. Not like it made anything worse.
The comforting embrace had ended what felt like an hour ago, but Tara was still in Spike’s crypt – silent and awkward, not wanting to leave but having no idea what she was doing here. It occurred to her – in the clumsiest stumble of a thought – that she and Spike had never had a conversation. Not one that wasn’t about saving the world, or saving Willow, or about their disastrous love lives. She should change that, shouldn’t she? But what did you say to a vampire? “Do you ever think about it?”

“About what?” He seemed startled by the sound of her voice and confused by her question. Which made sense. She hadn’t exactly been precise.

Guess he should fill in the blanks. “Sunlight. You know, walking in the daylight. Do you remember it?”

Now he was staring at her. “They didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

He snorted and then… “Guess that’s no surprise. Not like I’m important to that lot.”

The words were spoken softly, though, so softly that she knew she hadn’t been supposed to hear them. Should she let him know that she…? No. She wished she had the courage, but she didn’t. So instead, she just repeated her question. “Tell me what?”

“The Gem of Amara. It’s a bit of magical jewelry that makes a vamp invulnerable. Came back here for it. Found it.” He was staring off into the darkness. “Wasted my whole day in the sun fighting the Slayer. Never stopped to enjoy a bit of it.” His voice trailed off and he went to the corner, picking up a bottle of some kind of liquor and downing what seemed like a whole lot to Tara.

She’d seen something, hadn’t she? Spike – soft and vulnerable and regretting something human. Guess she understood why he was drinking now. Still, she wished he didn’t feel like he needed to hide in alcohol.

Screwing up all the courage she could muster, she shared her own regret. “I… I used to complain so much when my mother would ask me to help her in the kitchen. Baking, cooking – I… I used to hate it. N-now I wish I… You never realize…”

Spike stared, eyes piercing through the murk of the crypt to fix on that sweet, guileless face. He couldn’t believe she was sharing herself this way with him – with a soulless monster she barely knew… and who she wouldn’t trust a bit if she had a clue.

Was it wrong of him to be grateful she didn’t? To enjoy being a confidant? Well, if it was, it wasn’t the first sin to his charge, and he’d glory in this one while he could.

But before he could respond to Tara’s painful revelation, the crypt door burst open. Buffy was stripping off her jacket as she entered.

Then she realized that the crypt had an extra occupant.
Yeah. It would be a bit of all right watching the awkward explanation she came up with, wouldn’t it? Nice payback for those cow eyes she’d been making at Angel.

“Tara?” Buffy looked like a deer caught in the headlights of one of those huge trucks. For a moment, he felt badly for her… and then his mind went back to the way she’d all but ignored him the second Angel appeared.

"You’re beneath me."

Yeah, well, Spike was getting more than a little tired of chasing after women who sneered at him, who threw his love back in his face, who treated him like dirt unless they needed what was between his legs. Cecily, Dru, Buffy.

What was that American saying? Three strikes and you’re out? Maybe it was time to stop being love’s bitch… or love’s anything.

His voice was airy and careless as he asked, “What brings you here, Slayer?”

She should have stayed home. Tara was staring and Spike was looking at her as if she was the last person he wanted to see and she wasn’t going to get what she came for and…

Why? Why was everything so bad every minute of every day?

When was the universe going to give her any reason not to regret every moment she wasn’t in Heaven? “I just… you know, never mind. You have company and…” Something occurred to her. Something important. She turned to Tara. “How did the visit go? Were you able to see Willow?”

Okay… someone else might also be having a really terrible day, because Tara looked down and away and that wasn’t a good sign. “She’s… she’s afraid of me too.”

That had to hurt. Buffy got that. So she went to Tara and gave her a little hug. “I’m sorry. I know she’ll get over it soon though. She has to. She’ll recover and she’ll realize how much we all love her and she’ll…” Buffy paused for a moment, unsure of what exactly she thought would happen. There were so many issues that none of them had worked through yet.

Like the magic.

“I’m heading back home. Dawn’s home from school today. I’m sure she’ll want to talk to you about… everything. C’mon, I’ll walk with you.”

To her total shock, Tara declined. “No thanks. I’ll visit Dawn later. I still have some stuff I want to talk to Spike about.”

What was she supposed to say to that? “Oh. Okay.”

She cheated a glance over at Spike… who was smirking. Damn him! Without another word, Buffy turned and walked out of the crypt.

Looking up at the sky, she could see bright blue and fluffy, fleecy clouds. It was if nature was mocking her.
Once again, she searched inside for tears. Once again, they weren’t there.

To be continued…
Wesley was here. It was weird to Willow. They hadn’t been friends before. Still, she liked him now. He was different, though she was still figuring out how, and he was Angel’s friend, so she trusted him. “Thanks,” she said, holding up a slice of the frozen pizza he’d bought for her. “I think… I mean I know I wanted to try the Wolfgang Puck. It’s just that…” Her voice trailed off. She didn’t want to talk about Xander. Not after what he’d done to her.

“It’s not bad,” Wesley agreed mildly. “I’m afraid I don’t know… well, we never really got the chance to get to know each other before. I did remember you being fond of pizza, but since I don’t know how to make it myself…”

To her own surprise, Willow giggled. She couldn’t help it. Picturing Wesley in an apron? It was funny.

He and Angel were staring. Oh god! Had she hurt Wesley’s feelings? She stopped immediately. “I’m sorry.”

The sound of her light laughter had been heartening and Angel felt like an idiot when the laughter suddenly ended. He understood immediately why she was reacting that way. “No, you don’t need to apologize. We were just so glad to see you happy.”

That seemed to calm her, at least a bit, and she smiled nervously. “Okay.” She went back to munching on her pizza.

Wesley made a slight motion with his head, indicating a desire to speak to Angel somewhere, so he said, “I’m going to help Wesley organize the rest of the groceries, okay?” and then headed for the kitchen, followed closely by his friend.

They spoke in low voices as Wesley asked, “Has she spoken of her ordeal?”

Angel shook his head. “Not much, but she did say that she heard a woman’s voice and that it sounded like…” he paused, “like Jenny Calendar.”

Wesley nodded. “That must have been devastating for her.”

“It was,” Angel agreed. Then he dropped his small bombshell. “I told her about Connor.” Wesley raised an eyebrow. “Not everything. She doesn’t know who his mother is or the details. But she knows I have a son.”

For a moment, Wesley seemed lost in thought, but then said, “Yes. I think you did the right thing. Willow needs… I think she needs to feel connected. To you. Sharing that secret with her will show her that you trust her and that she can trust you.”
That approval from his friend was a relief because Angel had one more thing he needed to share and he hoped Wesley would support him in his plan. “I want to bring Connor here. With everything going on in L.A., he’ll be safer with me.”

Wide eyes and an expression of shock were his answer. He’d expected that and he expected to have to argue logistics and the competence of the others, but Wesley didn’t bring any of that up. Instead he asked, “How on Earth are you going to explain this to Buffy?”

Buffy stared blankly at the note she’d been holding for who knew how long. Dawn was at Janice’s. Great. Just when she needed company for distraction.

What had she done? First dragged out of Heaven and now… now this. No Willow, Xander was preoccupied with Anya, Angel didn’t love her anymore, and even Spike…

“Mommy,” she said softly in a small, broken voice, “why aren’t you here?”

More than anything, Buffy wanted to wake up and find out this was all a dream and be sitting with Mom on the couch, watching Thelma and Louise for the billionth time and pigging out on leftover Chinese and Ben & Jerry’s. In fact – scratch the dream part. She’d accept every horrible thing and then some being real if she could just have one more day with her Mom. Just one. Just one more day, even if all her Mom did was nag her and get on her case. One more day.

One more hour.

One more minute.

“Mommy?”

But she wasn’t there.

It was then, though, that Buffy found something.

Those tears she had lost?

She had them now, streaming down her cheeks.

It hurt.

Everything hurt.

“Mommy,” she repeated over and over.

No matter how many times she said it, though, her Mom wasn’t there. Would never be there.

Buffy was all alone.
It took a moment for it to register, but Buffy realized that her phone was ringing. If that was her boss telling her to come in today after all… She should just let it ring. But she answered, because as much as she hated the Doublemeat Palace, she needed the job.

“Hello?”

“Buffy?”

Just like this morning, an unexpected voice greeted her. It wasn’t her boss after all. “Angel?”

“We need to talk. Is it all right if I come over in a couple of hours?”

Before she knew what she was doing, she’d said yes and hung up. Oh god! Her face was all blotchy from crying and the house was a mess and… Racing upstairs, she decided to start with her face. Ice-cold water and lots of it were imperative. Then she could try to make the living room look less like ground zero. So much to do and so little time. Soon she was lost in frantic activity.

Angel was coming over. He wanted to talk. This could be good… right?

How long had it been since Tara had sat with someone in companionable silence? Not since the good days with Willow. She’d forgotten how nice it was when you could be with someone without feeling the need to fill the space with sound. When you could just be.

Now here she was sharing long, quiet moments with Spike. Moments that were peaceful instead of awkward. How unlikely was that? “This is nice,” she sighed, her own voice startling her. She hadn’t intended to ruin the mood.

Spike ran his hand through her hair and she realized with a start that she was snuggled up against him. Oh gosh. She’d never been like this with a man before. Very strange and it should have been uncomfortable, but it wasn’t. It was… like she’d said, it was nice.

“Glad you’re here,” he said softly and she wondered if this was as strange for him as for her. Had he ever had someone to just sit and enjoy the small moments with? She didn’t picture him sitting like this with Buffy. She’d seen how tense and wound up Buffy was when she was here earlier and she wasn’t dim – she knew exactly the way Buffy had expected things to go.

“Glad I’m here too,” she replied, staying nestled against him.

She really was glad to be here.

Not for the first time, Spike wondered how Red could ever have been so bloody stupid as to let this one go. From where he was sitting, you lucked into a girl like this, you hung on and never let go. If she wasn’t playing for the wrong team he’d… Still be trailing after Buffy, most like. He never had
a lick of sense when it came to love. Not a trace of it. But Willow…

‘Course it was hard to hold a grudge against the witch now, even for what she’d done to Bit. She’d more than paid for her sins, hadn’t she? Spike had been tortured more than once and even as a demon it had been no picnic. An ordinary human girl going through an ordeal like that?

Yeah, he guessed they were square now.

Still, rotten business Tara being hurt more. Out of all of them, she deserved it least. Bet the worst thing she’d ever done was hang onto a library book for an extra week. Oh, yeah, there was that business of her keeping it a secret when she thought she was a demon, but he could excuse that easily enough. To a girl like her, the thought of being a demon must have been shameful beyond belief.

So what the devil was she doing here? Giving aid and comfort to the enemy of all that she was.

“What’s it like?” she suddenly asked in that low, sweet voice.

“What do you mean?”

“You and Buffy? I mean I know you said… but you love her. Doesn’t that…?”

“Doesn’t mean a thing to her.” He all but spat the words, suddenly uncomfortable.

“So why…?”

He turned his head and caught that rapt gaze of hers, as if she could see him as well as he could her in the dimming light. Did he really want to spill all the sordid details to her? Would she hate him for the truth? Guess if she would it was best to get it over with, eh? “She’s an amazing shag. Bloke would have to be crazy to kick her out of bed.”

“But you did.”

Her words were ice-water-truth. He had, hadn’t he? This was all Tara, wasn't it? Her being here made him feel… made him want… oh bugger! She was all the complications he didn’t need. Time to end this conversation. It’d be dark soon and he could head for the liquor store. Jack was calling his name. “Wasn’t in the mood. ‘Sides, I had company, didn’t I? Not like I was gonna strip and get down to business with you here.”

Was she supposed to laugh, brush off the topic now? Tara got that impression, but she couldn’t do it, couldn’t allow him to dismiss himself that way. “You should have more,” she said, eyes fixed on his and hoping he could see how sincere she was. “You want more and…” There was so much she wanted to say, but she had no idea what words to use to say it, so she just repeated, “You should have more.”

The light was dim and her vision was cloudy from the tears that were building, so maybe that’s why she wasn’t sure of what she was seeing until…

Spike was kissing her. Oh god. A man… no, not a man, Spike, but still…
And it wasn’t horrible and awful and sloppy and gross the way it had been when Billy had grabbed her back in high school to ‘cure’ her of being a… (she wouldn’t even think that word, she hated that word)…. No, it was sweet and soft and gentle and…

Wrong.

Wrong.

It had to stop.

Pulling away from Spike, she leapt from the couch and said, “It… it’s l-late. I h-have to go.” With that, she rushed from the crypt.

Halfway back to her dorm room, she started to cry. She’d just lost her only real friend.

Willow sat in her childhood bedroom, looking at an old photo album, memory gears turning and pieces sliding into place. There they were: Buffy and Xander and her. They’d looked so happy then. They’d been friends then. She had trusted them then.

It had been better before the magic, huh? A lot better. Why had she been so stupid? Why had she gone chasing after some rainbow that turned out to have a pot of brimstone at the end? For someone who was supposed to be… had she actually been smart at all? Ever? Or was she just a really talented parrot, repeating back whatever she was taught but incapable of complex thought?

That didn’t explain everything though. It didn’t explain why everyone had turned on her the way they had. Okay, they hated her and the way she remembered things, they probably had a right to, but… Rack. Why had they given her to him? Why hadn’t they just thrown her out? Told her to go away? She would have. She’d have been hurt and upset, but she would have gone.

Why had they hated her so much that they’d do…? Her limbs twitched and the ghost of recent pain crackled along her nerves.

There must be something she didn’t remember. That had to be it. There was something… she needed to know something. Until she figured out what it was, she was going to stay far away from them – all of them. Buffy and Xander and Tara and everyone. Everyone except Angel and Wesley. She could trust them. They’d keep her safe.

Just after sunset, Angel left Willow’s house. Luckily, his lie about needing to go chase down some information on the Kalderash was believable and Willow trusted Wesley enough to feel secure with him there. He hated deceiving her in even the smallest way, but he wasn’t sure she was ready
to hear of him going and meeting with one of the friends she feared and this was a meeting that had to happen.

He needed for Buffy to know about his son before he brought him to this town. After all, there were still forces pursuing him and she’d need to be on her guard as well.

Memories emerged into consciousness, memories of being with Buffy, talking about the future, wistful plans made and possibilities bravely discarded.

Like children.

How would she react to finding out that, at least with Darla, children had been possible after all?

As hard as it was to admit, his love for Buffy had become the stuff of dreams now, not the all-consuming motive force that had cost him his soul. But that didn’t mean he didn’t care. In some ways he realized that he felt even more protective of her and her feelings than before, absent passion leaving a certain tenderness in its wake.

Buffy had endured so much in such a short time – her resurrection from the dead, dreams deferred in order to care for her sister, the troubles with Willow’s magic, and now the temporary loss of her friend to the ravages of Kalderash evil. He didn’t relish the thought of adding even a small amount to her pain, but it couldn’t be helped. She needed to be told, gently and kindly but immediately.

Here he was. That once-familiar home on Revello Drive. He parked in front of the house and exited the car. The yard was rougher than he remembered. Not badly-kept, but ragged around the edges. No more gardener. He guessed there were many small luxuries that were no longer a fixture in their lives. If there was a way to do it without bruising her pride… yes, he’d find a way to help out. After all, he got paid for the work she had been doing for nothing since her teen years. It seemed like an injustice to him and it ought to be rectified.

But all that was for later. Right now there was a story to tell. So, with a small amount of trepidation, he knocked on the door.

He could see the shadow of her waiting… waiting… and then answering the door.

“Hi.” Her voice was as false in its studied casualness as her appearance. He knew full well that every article of that ‘oh this old thing?’ outfit had been chosen with care, her hair carefully tousled into a simulacrum of unstudied messiness.

The same went for the living room, he could see as he walked in. Magazines artfully spread on the suspiciously shiny and dust-free coffee table… the effort made his gut clench and he hated himself more than ever.

Small talk and easing into this would only make things harder for them both, he decided, so he turned to her and blurted out, “There’s something I have to tell you.” Her eyes were wide and eager and he felt her gaze like holy water on his skin. “I have a son.”

To be continued…
Chapter 14

i will make you hurt (Chapter 14)

“I have a son.”

Angel’s words rang in Buffy’s ears and all she could really think was “Huh?”

What did he mean? He couldn’t mean… No. Not that. He must have… but he wouldn’t do that either, would he? With his soul? Still, it seemed like the only logical possibility so she said, “You sired someone?”

He shook his head and Buffy’s own head began to spin. It wasn’t possible. Vampires couldn’t… but he was saying… Oh god. “How… who…?”

His voice was low and solemn as he said, “There was a prophecy. It was Darla.”

Okay, this was a dream. She had fallen asleep on the couch after all the frantic cleaning and this was a dream. It had to be because… “Darla’s dead. You killed her.”

Again, he shook his head. “A law firm – they’re evil. They brought her back. She was human but then Dru sired her. She and I… I guess you get that… She’s dead again. For good. She killed herself so Connor would live.”

Connor. The name was a splash of cold water. It wasn’t one of the names she’d fantasized about back when she was young and foolish enough to hope…

This wasn’t a dream at all, was it?

Angel had a son.

With Darla.

With someone who wasn’t Buffy.

When was the universe going to stop punishing her?

A second later, Angel had her by the arm and was leading her to the couch. It was good she had his help; she couldn’t have made it on her own.

“You have a son,” she said, the sound of her own voice making it fact.

Angel’s heart ached for the woman sitting beside him on her living room sofa. Doing this to her… The pain in her eyes made it clear as a bell that whatever was going on between her and Spike had nothing to do with love. That made sense – he couldn’t imagine Buffy loving that soulless bastard – but he wondered anew why the hell she was with him at all.
Not his business anymore and he was honest enough to admit that most of his feelings were coloured by centuries-old rivalry and male vanity. Giving voice to any of it would only mislead Buffy into false hope and that would be crueler than Angelus at his worst.

He wondered if he hadn’t already achieved that summit.

Something. He needed to do something… say something… “I need your help.” That probably wasn’t it. Damn it. But it was too late now. She was staring at him as if he were crazy. Say something else. “There are people after my son. Because of who he is. Because he’s my son. I’m bringing him to Sunnydale but… They might follow. I’m going to need help protecting him.”

“Okay.” Her voice was indistinct and he could tell she was still blindsided. Damn him for an oaf.

Then again, maybe it would easier to get her to forget pride in this state. He forged on with his hastily concocted plan. “It’s that law firm. Wolfram & Hart. The ones who brought Darla back. As you can guess, they’re not your typical law firm. They have a lot of resources and no scruples. There’s nothing they won’t do to get what they want.” He assessed Buffy’s expression. It was only slightly less vacant. Mentally, he went through his accounts, setting aside any frugality or selfishness. He was asking no small favour and damn it, Buffy deserved at least this. “I’ll pay you $1000 a week.”

Buffy was still trying to process the concept of Angel having a son. She was vaguely aware of having agreed to help protect that same son when… “You want to pay me?”

“Yes. Of course.”

War was declared in Buffy’s brain. On the one hand, the money… they needed it. The car needed a tune up and the mortgage loomed and… so many things. But then there was…

This was guilt money, wasn’t it? Angel thought he’d hurt her and this would fix it. The amount he offered was so generous that she knew he didn’t mean it anyway. He just wanted to feel better about himself. Fine. She’d say no. He could feel like a good guy for offering.

She could pretend she wasn’t dying inside.

“You don’t need to pay me. I’m the Slayer.”

There. Now he was off the hook.

To her shock, he didn’t back down. “Wolfram and Hart – they’re human. Your job description doesn’t cover lawyers.” His gaze was steely as he continued. “Look. I pay Wesley. I pay Gunn. I pay Fred. I pay Cordelia. That’s the way it works. You’re getting paid. Either that, or you can take a vacation from fighting evil when they show up. I’m not letting you do this unless I pay you for it. You’re already working two jobs as it is.”

His argument was logical and it made it sound a lot less like guilt and pity. It also revived some long-standing resentments, but she wasn’t going to think about that now. Instead she just said, “Thanks,” and felt like she’d won the lottery when he explained ‘you’ll be paid in cash’ and she thought of all the deductions there wouldn’t be.
It wasn’t love. It wasn’t the old days back again. It was practical and mundane and unsentimental and probably tax evasion and… It was better than anything that had happened to her since she’d clawed her way out of her own grave.

How sad and pathetic was that?

He got up and she realized with a shock that there was something she hadn’t asked. Something that meant so much more to her than the money. “How’s Willow? Is she any better? When can I see her?”

Victory won, Angel had been about to leave when Buffy asked her questions. She had a right to ask them and he’d have thought less of her if she hadn’t, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t hoped to escape without putting yet another knife in her heart.

How to frame the answers.

“She’s getting better, but…” He paused, hating himself anew. This was going to hurt. “She’s still afraid of you. It… Rack told her that you and the others gave her to him. She thinks you wanted her tortured.”

If he’d thought telling Buffy about his son had been brutal, it was nothing compared to what his latest news had done. He watched Buffy crumble before his eyes. “She hates me.” Her voice was toneless and flat.

“She’s been through a terrible ordeal,” he explained, knowing even as he said it that nothing he said from now on was going to matter.

He was right. “She hates me,” Buffy repeated.

“She doesn’t hate you. She just… She’s not completely recovered yet. It’s going to take time. But she’ll realize that he was lying. That it was just part of the pain he wanted to inflict on her.” He should know about that, shouldn’t he? Angelus would have done the same.

Then she asked the question he might have feared most. “How long?”

He shook his head. How could he answer that? “I don’t know.”

“Are you going to stay with her?”

Angel nodded. “As long as it takes.” He sat back down and put his hand on her shoulder. “I’ll bring her back to you. She’ll be Willow again. I promise.”

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Thank you.”

Should he stay? A part of him wanted to, but another part of him understood that as cruel as it would be in the short term to leave, in the long run he needed to make the break as clear and clean as possible. If Buffy was ever going to be happy, really happy, she needed to be free, and she never would be if she clung to a dream that no longer existed.
So he got up and, with a polite ‘bye,’ an assertion that he’d be calling as soon as he had more information on what Wolfram and Hart were plotting, and a promise that she’d be receiving her first payment soon, he walked out the door.

He’d done all the right things, for all the right reasons. But knowing that didn’t change the fact that he felt like a bastard.

Spike was already on his second bottle of Jack and he hadn’t found a bit of the oblivion he’d been seeking. He kicked the wall and swore as his foot throbbed in pain. What a stupid, worthless git he was. He was no better than Xander Harris. How could he have been such a prat?

Kissing Tara? What the devil had he been thinking?

The answer to that was clearly that he hadn’t been thinking at all. No. He’d let himself get carried away by her kindness and her sweetness and yeah, alright, by those pretty eyes of hers.

Good one, William, you bloody awful moron. One kiss and now you’ve gone and lost the best – hell, the only – friend you had. Was it worth it?

He remembered the softness of her lips and the beauty of those eyes, the taste of her and the scent of her and… No, for all that, how could it ever have been worth it? Because she wasn’t here, was she? She’d never be here again.

Last night he’d thought that getting her out of his life was what he wanted and now… Now he’d give about anything to have her back. To be sitting next to her on this lumpy, filthy couch and listening to her talk or just enjoying the quiet while he stroked her hair.

Too late. The first wish was always the one that was granted.

If he didn’t know any better, he’d have sworn that Halfrek was in back of this.

With a thud, he sat down on the couch, right where Tara had been not long ago. He drained the last of his second bottle and grabbed a third from the floor. If this one wasn’t the one, there was a fourth. Oblivion had to be in one of these.

It did.

And he’d find it.

Angel walked back through the door of Willow’s house, surprised to see Willow sitting on the sofa.
“You should be resting,” he chided her.

“I… I was worried.”

He was touched by her concern. When this was all over and she was herself again… when she realized what he’d done to Buffy…

Or would anything ever be the same?

“Have you eaten?” He already knew the answer and that was one more issue to address. “You need to take better care of yourself.” He took her hand and she rose from the sofa, then he led her to the kitchen. “I hope you like eggs, because they’re all I know how to cook.”

“You cook?” She was surprised and he supposed it made sense. How many centuries since he’d needed to eat… food?

He was getting the eggs out of the refrigerator when a sudden noise startled him. It was the phone. Luckily he didn’t drop anything. He set the eggs down. “I’ll get that,” and he went out to the living room to answer the call where he could have some privacy.

He picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

“Angel. We have trouble. And it’s after Connor.”

It wasn’t unusual, being alone in the kitchen, Willow had enough of her memories organized to know that, so why did it feel strange? Why didn’t it feel normal to be alone?

Would it help if she knew exactly how long she’d been…? Her body shook and she decided that thinking about that was bad right now. So she stared at the eggs on the counter and decided that maybe she should make her own dinner. It would help to do familiar tasks, right?

How weird was it that she was just normal enough to be able to tell how off-normal she was? Back in high school, she’d have wanted to draw on this for the Science Fair or something.

Curious Willow, always sticking her nose where it didn’t belong.

With a sigh, she got up from the table and got some cheese out of the refrigerator and some bread out of the drawer. She didn’t want eggs. She wanted a grilled cheese sandwich. So she got out butter and a pan and sliced some cheddar. Mmmm.

When Angel came back in, she was just turning the sandwich for the first time. “I thought I’d make something for myself.” She grinned, kind of proud of herself for her progress.

Angel though, he was frowning. “You should eat something healthier.”

Stupid Willow. Always getting things wrong. “I’m sorry.” She turned off the stove and was about
to throw the sandwich away when Angel grabbed her arm.

“I’m the one who should apologize. You can eat whatever you want..”

Cautiously, she asked, “Are you sure? Because…”

He nodded and said, “Of course. I’m sorry. I just… I hate to spring this on you like this. I thought there’d be more time and that I could ask more politely but… My son. He’s in… they’re busy in Los Angeles and so he’s being brought here. Tonight. He needs to be with me so I can… take care of him.”

Watching her eyes, Angel worried that she’d noticed the way he’d stumbled during his explanation. He didn’t think she was ready to hear about possible danger. But with him and Wesley here and Buffy on their team, he was sure he could keep it away from Willow, so it didn’t seem like such a terrible lie – certainly it was kinder than the truths he’d told today.

Her reaction surprised him. “I get to meet Connor? Wow.”

Angel couldn’t help it, he smiled and pulled her into a hug. “Yes, you do. Now I need to go talk to Wesley. Is he…?”

“He’s upstairs. He said he had some research he needed to do.”

“Good. Finish making your sandwich, all right? Because you should eat. In a few hours, you’ll see my son.”

Willow grinned. “Okay. Oh! We’ll need stuff. Like diapers and… oh, a crib!”

“It’s covered.”

“Oh. Good. Because I don’t think… I mean, why would my Mom have saved that stuff, you know?”

Angel smiled at her again. “I appreciate you caring. Thank you for letting me bring him to your home.” He turned and left the kitchen. He and Wesley definitely needed to talk. The danger was real and it was going to follow his son, but Angel still felt joy.

He was going to hold his son again soon. That was enough to make him nearly dance to the room where Wesley was holed up with his computer.

Let Wolfram and Hart do their worst. Nothing was going to harm his boy.

To be continued…
Chapter 15

*i will make you hurt* (Chapter 15)

It was late when the doorbell rang, but Angel answered it even as the sound of the bell still echoed.

Gunn was standing on the front steps. Holding Connor. “The stuff’s in the car,” he said, handing the little boy to Angel, “I’ll go get it.”

Angel barely acknowledged him. In that moment, the only thing that existed in the world was the little boy he was holding in his arms. “Hey,” he said softly to the miracle staring up at him, “Did you miss me?”

“I’m sure he did.” Wesley was smiling, but Angel knew that seeing Gunn… He was grateful Wesley had been willing to leave Los Angeles. To put thoughts of Fred behind him to focus on the greater good. Would he have done the same back in the days when Buffy was the center of his world?

The honest answer to that made him realize that he was a better man now. He’d loved Buffy, but she hadn’t been good for his redemption. If he was truly honest, he hadn’t been good for her either – not as a woman or as a Slayer. Loving him… hell, it was still holding her back.

Maybe now, after the talk they’d had, now that she knew he had a son and his life had changed… maybe she’d shake off the past and find the today she deserved.

“He’s so small.” Willow had come in during his reverie. He wanted to chide her for not being in bed, but after his faux pas with the sandwich earlier… she might be damaged, but she wasn’t a child. Besides, this was her house and she had a right to see who’d be living in it for a while.

“Connor? Meet your… Aunt Willow.”

His tongue stumbled over the word ‘aunt’ and that confused him, but he put it aside as Gunn came in with the portable crib and a suitcase. ‘I’m goin’ back for the diapers.” Gunn and Wesley barely even looked at each other. There were definitely things the two men would need to work out, but it could wait and Angel was wise enough to know that it should.

He turned back to Willow. “That was Charles Gunn. He works for me.” She seemed to accept that with no anxiety. Good. Then he surprised himself by asking, “Would you like to hold Connor?”

Angel wanted her to hold his son? Oh gosh. When was the last time she’d held a baby? Would she remember how?

Too late, he was handing the boy to her and it wasn’t like she could say no, so she tried to imitate the way Angel was holding him and hoped for the best.

Connor was beautiful, wasn’t he? So innocent and perfect. All the time in the world to grow up to be a good person. Not like Willow. Nothing like Willow.

Oh god. She was holding him. Holding him with… She shoved him back into Angel’s arms. “I
shouldn’t touch him. I’m… I don’t want to hurt him.” Then she turned and fled the room.

Tremors and cold shook her body as she sat on her bed, terrified that the magic and the evil she contained – all the things which had drawn Rack to her and made her friends hate her – had somehow infected that poor little boy. How could she live with herself?

There was a knock at her door. “Come in.” To her surprise, it wasn’t Angel. It was Wesley.

“I thought I should come see… perhaps we could talk.”

What did he want to talk to her about? She was wary. Yes, she trusted him, but… “What do you…?”

“I saw how you reacted downstairs, how afraid you are. I… well, I’m certainly not at the level you were, but magic… I do practice it as well and I thought maybe you and I might have some common ground that would… that you could talk to me.”

His voice shook. That was more important to Willow than anything he said. At first she’d thought he was nervous around her because of what she’d become – all the bad things she’d done – or maybe just because of what had happened, but now… Now she didn’t know. “Are you afraid of me?”

“No, why would you think that?” He looked genuinely confused.

It seemed like he was being sincere and she felt like a bad person once again. She always got everything wrong. “I just thought… you seemed all nervous and…”

Smiling softly, he shook his head. “I was actually concerned that you might not trust me. I… I know our history isn’t the best.”

Huh? She shuffled through her memories – things were still out of order and she knew it – and it was frustrating because she couldn’t find anything bad. Just that they weren’t close. Was he someone she should be afraid of? She started trembling again.

“I am very sorry,” he said and she wanted to ask him why but she was nervous. Angel trusted him, though, and that meant something. She would give him the benefit of the doubt. “I was so obsessed with the Council and its rules and regulations I… well, I was rather an arse in those days and I can admit it. Can you forgive me?”

It was then that she remembered something. “You wouldn’t help us save Angel.”

He reddened and looked very ashamed, but he met her eyes and admitted, “I… I acquiesced to the Council’s wishes. You’ll never know how much I regret that now.”

Strangely, she realized she trusted him more now. He’d done bad things, but he owned up to them and… well… he wasn’t the only one in this room who’d made mistakes that almost cost someone’s life, was he? “It’s okay,” she said, and it was.

“Thank you.” He smiled as if her words really meant something; a moment later he was sitting next to her. “We do need to talk about something. Something important.” She stared at him, a feeling of foreboding welling up within her as he continued. “We need to discuss your magic.”
It was late and Tara felt trapped in her dorm room, but she knew she couldn’t go anywhere. The dark was full of danger and she wasn’t nearly as powerful as… as Willow.

She’d known that all along, hadn’t she? From the moment she’d met Willow in that silly Wicca group. She’d known that Willow blazed with a power bigger than her own, even if hers was hereditary and Willow’s… they hadn’t known where it came from then, but now that they knew it seemed to have come from Jenny Calendar…

How could she? How could that woman have done something like that? How could she just force that power into someone like that?

Then she thought about Buffy and… it was the same thing, wasn’t it? No one ever asked Buffy, “Hey, would you like to be a Slayer and risk your life to save the world?” Instead, they just decided for her and she was stuck with it.

But Buffy had a Watcher and people to explain stuff and Willow… She was all alone and no one had ever told her the truth. The fact that no one had known didn’t make it any more fair as far as Tara was concerned and she felt a sympathy for Willow that she hadn’t before, it was just that…

None of this made it any easier. None of this made her any less afraid of what her first real love could do – had done – and none of it meant that she was ready to pick up where they’d left off and none of it…

None of it made her forget the way Spike’s lips had felt against hers tonight.

Lesbians were not supposed to feel like this – were they? They weren’t supposed to be attracted to guys – especially vampire guys who were sleeping with close friends – and they were supposed to stand by their woman and forgive her, especially after their woman paid such a heavy price for the bad things she’d done and…

All she could think about was how nice Spike had been. How he’d seen the pain Anya’s ‘you’re nothing special’ had been and how he’d made her a real part of the search for a way to save Willow and even given her credit when he’d told everyone and how he’d listened and how he was the only one who didn’t judge her for not being sure about taking Willow back and…

Her thoughts were chaos and she began to cry. Now, more than ever, she missed her mother. She needed someone to talk to so badly. If only her mother were here.

But she wasn’t, was she?

For a moment, she thought maybe Spike had the right idea and she considered… No, it was late and dark and the liquor stores weren’t open and she didn’t feel safe getting drunk with a bunch of fellow students.

So Tara got out a mug, filled it with some water from the mini fridge, and put it in her tiny microwave. Guess she’d have to settle for weak, tasteless tea.

Somehow, she didn’t think it was going to help.

Angel was waiting anxiously in the living room, holding his son, when Wesley finally emerged from Willow’s room. He looked grave. “She’s a bit upset,” he said, and Angel knew Wesley well
enough to know that was probably an understatement. He had enhanced hearing, after all, and the sound of sobs had been unmistakable. “Understandably, she’s very concerned about using magic, not only because of her recent history, but…”

“She’s afraid of what Buffy and the others will do,” Angel finished.

“Yes. She’s still convinced that they are the ones responsible for Rack’s torture of her and I… well, I hope I did the right thing, but I didn’t argue the point with her. I assessed the situation and…”

Angel nodded his agreement. “It’s not the right time.” Yes, he felt sympathy for Buffy and Xander and even Tara, but he also knew that pushing Willow to see things differently after what she’d been through would not only do more harm than good, it wouldn’t work. “Would it help if I talked to her?” He noticed the look on Wesley’s face and added, “Gunn went back to Los Angeles.”

Though he did his best to hide it, Angel noticed Wesley’s sigh of relief, but then the man got straight back to the matter at hand “I think your talking to Willow would probably help. She seems to trust you most of all.” His expression grew grave again. “We don’t know for sure that the danger has passed or that Wolfram and Hart won’t pose a new threat to her. Her magic must be secured again and as soon as possible.”

Wesley had just given voice to Angel’s fears and the urgency was great. But how to explain the gravity of the situation without upsetting a girl recovering from a terrible trauma?

There was their connection, though, wasn’t there? Reaching inside himself, Angel called on the memories he had – both his own and the ones of Willow he’d seen in his dreams. The answer was there. It had to be.

He handed his boy to Wesley. “Can you put him down for the night? Gunn… The crib is set up in the master bedroom.” With a nod of assent, his friend took the most precious thing in Angel’s world and left the room.

Angel sat down for a moment, quiet and seeking calm, then he got up and went to Willow’s room. He had to convince her to claim her magic again.

“It’s not that simple.” Buffy’s head hurt. She was as upset as Xander was about the way things stood with Willow, but she knew that the answer was definitely not to go storming over to her house and forcing her to see them.

“Why not? Don’t you think seeing us would make her remember? We’re the ones who love her. I mean, I’m grateful to Angel for what he’s done.” Buffy clearly looked as astonished as she felt because Xander immediately took offense. “Hey, I’m not in high school anymore, okay? And this is about Willow.” He was right and she’d been unfair. If there was one thing Buffy knew was never in doubt, it was that, in spite of everything, Xander still cared about Willow more than almost anyone in the world. “I know he thinks that she can’t handle seeing us yet but… This is Willow.” He was pleading now. “She fights hell gods. She restores vampire souls right after coming out of a coma. She’s… She’s doing better than he thinks she is. I know she is.”

“This is different, Xander.” Anya’s voice as unusually soft and gentle as she put her hand over her fiancé’s. “This isn’t like anything she’s… that any of us have ever been through. I don’t like it
either, but I think that right now we have to trust Angel. I mean, it doesn’t make sense that he wouldn’t want her to come home to us, does it? He could be making money in Los Angeles, but instead he’s stuck here and I’m pretty sure Willow isn’t paying him.”

Something about Anya’s logic… it was weirdly endearing and it did make an odd sort of sense and Buffy was grateful to her because it seemed like she was sort of getting through to Xander. “And after all, she didn’t want to see Tara and they even used to have sex! If she doesn’t want to see someone who gave her orgasms, well… I’m pretty sure she doesn’t want to see anyone.”

Great. Anya would have to bring up sex. Exactly what Buffy did not want to think about right now.

Did Tara know? About her and Spike? Oh god. What did she think about it if she did? Would she tell anyone? Was there even anything to tell anymore? Spike sure hadn’t seemed sorry that…

Anya and Xander were talking and Buffy hadn’t been paying attention and she could tell she was supposed to say something. Think, Buffy. Think.

Just then… saved by the bell. The doorbell. Someone was there.

But who could it be at this time of night? Well, morning, she amended, her eye falling on the digital clock displaying 1:30 AM. No way to know unless she answered the door, so she got up and wet to the entry. “Who is it?” she asked, figuring it was probably Angel or Wesley.

She heard a mumbled voice that she couldn’t quite make out. It seemed familiar, but long experience had taught her that that didn’t necessarily mean good things. Okay. This was getting creepy. Picking up the axe she’d left by the coat rack, she opened the door and…

“Oh my god! What are you doing here?”

To be continued…
Chapter 16

"What are you doing here?" Buffy stared at her very unexpected and not exactly welcome visitor. Giles.

In the flesh.

And the tweed.

He had a hell a lot of nerve, didn’t he? Did he think he could just abandon her and all of them and then knock on her door like nothing happened and expect a warm welcome?

Yes, he clearly did.

"May I come in?"

You know, that was a harder question than you’d think. Because… But she said, “Yeah. Sure thing. Come right in,” and in he walked, though he was looking at her with a puzzled expression he had no right to. Yes, her tone was sarcastic. So what? He deserved it and he knew it. Or he should know it. Same difference.

How were Xander and Anya going to react? She had to admit to being terrified that Xander would rush over and hug him, but instead…

"What are you doing here?" She wanted to cry when Xander repeated her question. It was support and it was validation and it made her feel that sense of ‘family’ she had been missing and… she really loved him right now.

Three sets of eyes were fixed on the British elephant in the room – Was that the right metaphor? God she missed Willow – and she almost enjoyed the way he seemed to wilt beneath their glare.

He was looking from one to the other of them and he seemed almost… fragile. Good. It was about time someone else broke; Buffy was tired of shattering. “I… I thought perhaps I could help.”

Before Buffy could say anything, it was Xander who spoke up. “Well you thought wrong. We got this. We. Us. As in the ones who actually care about Willow. Me, Buffy, Tara,” he turned to the woman beside him, “Anya.” Buffy watched as Anya slipped her hand into Xander’s. She wasn’t jealous. Okay, maybe she was a little bit. But more than anything she was glad they were here for her. There was something great about not having to be the strong one all alone.

Of course then Xander started talking again. “Even Angel, who’s doing a great job of taking care of her, by the way.” Buffy winced. She’d forgotten to tell him that she hadn’t actually told Giles that part.

“Angel?”

Buffy straightened, head up, meeting Giles’s eyes with a forthright stare. “Yes, Angel. He helped us kill Rack and save Willow. He’s at her house right now. Taking care of her. With Wesley.” Oh god. That reminded her. There was something else she had yet to tell anyone else about. Well, no
time like the present and at least this way she’d be getting it over with all at once. “And his son.”

Willow stood up when Angel entered the room. Had something happened to his son? Was he mad about what she and Wesley had talked about? Because… “I’m not doing magic, I swear.”

He smiled. Okay, that was good. But he looked… worried? Sad? Something that wasn’t happy and now she didn’t know what to do. She went through the memories she had, trying to organize them, find something to tell her how to handle this, but everything had… them in it and she was too scared to think.

“That’s what we need to talk about.” He sat down on the bed, patting the space next to him. She was supposed to sit there, huh? So she did. “Willow, I know you’re afraid, and I understand. But what Wesley told you? He’s right. You need to use your magic.”

She was on her feet in a flash. “No! No, no! They’ll get mad. They’ll give me back. Don’t make me! Please don’t!”

This was the reaction he’d anticipated, so Angel stayed calm. Matching her anxiety with equanimity was the key to soothing her fears. So he got up and pulled her into his arms. “Shh. It’s okay. I am not going to let anyone hurt you.” He waited until he felt her relax and then continued. “That’s why you need to do magic.” She looked up at him, brow furrowed in confusion – it brought back memories, his own this time. The library. Research sessions. She was still so young, wasn’t she? In spite of everything. “Can you sit back down with me? There are things I need to explain.”

With a nod, she let him lead her back to the bed where she sat beside him once more. Good.

“Did Wesley tell you why you need to do magic?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so.” That made sense. She had panicked and he was pretty sure that it blocked out anything Wesley had tried to tell her.

“Can you trust me and listen to me now?” She nodded her assent. “Your magic… you were vulnerable because you weren’t using it. That’s the reason Rack and that woman were able to do what they did to you.”

Her eyes were wide and fearful, but she was listening and she was staying where she was. That was a positive. “I’m not saying you need to do spells or anything big, but you need to claim your magic again. It’s part of you and it’s not going away.”

For a moment there was silence and he thought he was getting through to her but then she burst into tears. “I’m bad. I’m bad.” With that, she collapsed against him and began to sob.

What was he going to do?

Buffy was so grateful that Dawn was at Janice’s. She was having a hard enough time dealing with
Xander and Giles right now. “Look. I don’t have any more information to give you, okay? All I know is what I already told you: Some law firm called Wolfman and Hart – or something like that – brought Darla back from the dead or undead or… whatever, and that she and Angel… well, you know, and she got pregnant and had a baby and then killed herself and… Angel has a son.”

“Gosh. I’ve never heard of that happening before. It’s kind of cool,” Anya said cheerfully.

At least someone was happy about it.

That someone was never going to be Buffy.

“Angel has a kid?” Buffy rolled her eyes. Xander had repeated that same question at least twenty times.

Clearly she wasn’t the only one not eager to hear it a twenty-first time. “Xander, are you hard of hearing? Because if you are that’s something I need to know before the wedding. We might need a sign language interpreter and you’ll have to find out how much one costs and hire them because I refuse to pay when I’m not the one who needs one.”

“Are you quite sure?” Another question asked more than once. This time by Giles. Who then continued on and in a different vein. “Because this is… well, there are all sorts of disturbing possibilities. A child of those parents… Are you quite sure Willow should be in that house with… him?”

Okay, that was it. Yes, maybe Buffy had sort of wondered about what the kid was like, but ‘spawn of Satan’ hadn’t been something she’d considered, or would consider, because while it was true that she didn’t know the baby, she knew Angel, and even though he’d broken her heart – again – that did not mean… “Angel isn’t doing anything to endanger Willow.”

“No… no, of course not. Not intentionally. However…”

Mollifying her. Patronizing her. That’s what Giles was doing and it had been sort of forgivable in the days when he’d been her Watcher – a presence in her life – but now? Oh no. Not now. She rounded on him, hard as steel. “Angel. Is. Not. Hurting. Willow.” Arms akimbo, spine straight, she watched as he shrank slightly and she kept right on going. “He came the second he found out – from a vision, by the way – and he’s been here helping from Day One.” She looked at Xander and Anya before continuing. Xander nodded and she realized he was okay with anything she said. That was all she needed – and then some. “I get that you think you get to come back and have everything be the same as it was before. But you left. You just left. And you didn’t email or call or anything.” She took a deep breath, determined not to show him just how much pain he’d caused her. “Anyway, that’s not the point. You’re the one who said I didn’t need you anymore and you know what? I think you’re right. I think we’re doing just fine without you. So why don’t you just head on back to the airport and use that round trip ticket to go home to England.”

“I… I don’t have a round trip ticket.”

What? Buffy’s jaw went slack and she stared, silent as some grave that wasn’t hers – no, that one had been noisy with her own terror – and wondered what she was supposed to say now.

She couldn’t come up with anything so she was almost glad when Giles spoke again. “I realize that I… well, I handled things rather badly. There are things I could say, excuses I could make, but I don’t suppose they mean much, they certainly don’t seem terribly credible at this moment and… I wish there was something I could do to undo the damage I’ve done. I can’t. But what I can do is to apologize. To all of you.” He had the most beseeching look she’d ever seen on his face, more
desperate than he’d looked after that horrible Cruciamentum. The Buffy she’d been before she
died… she’d have been moved to tears. The Buffy she was today… no, she wasn’t bought so
easily.

Did she wish she could be?

No, no, no. She was too exhausted to deal with complicated feelings right now. She needed to just
stick with resentment and leave it at that. She could handle that. So, with a flippant tone, she tossed
off a non-responsive, “Well. Guess you’ll be heading to your hotel now. If you want, you can come
back tomorrow after my shift is over and say hi to Dawn.”

Giles looked very confused. Maybe she should have explained about her job but then again, it was
late. Had she mentioned that she was tired? He hadn’t exactly called before barging in, so he could
deal with not knowing stuff. She walked him to the door and exchanged stilted goodbyes before
closing the door behind him and returning to the living room, feeling as drained as if she’d fought
twenty vampires.

“Well. That wasn’t awkward.” Xander sat down heavily on the sofa. “Anyone kind of want to
punch him?”

Buffy smiled ruefully. “I wouldn’t have stopped you.” The look on Xander’s face… She wasn’t
the only one who’d been abandoned by a father figure.

That wasn’t what he wanted to talk about, though. “You know, he could have warned us, about
Willow’s magic. He was Dark Magic Guy back in the day and I know he knew… This is all his
fault.”

Maybe he was being unfair… but then again, maybe he wasn’t. Either way… Buffy was still
exhausted and she wanted to go to sleep. There was one more thing, though, that Xander and Anya
needed to know. “Guys? There’s something I didn’t mention about Angel’s son. That law firm?
The Wolfman guys who brought Darla back? They’re after the baby. Angel says they might come
here to Sunnydale. So we need to keep an eye out for anybody strange in town.”

“He has a lot of nerve!” Anya exclaimed, almost giving Buffy whiplash with the attitude change
about Angel. “I mean, first he basically cheats on you and gets his ex pregnant, but now he’s
asking you to protect his illegitimate child?” She turned to Xander. “You better not ever do that to
me.”

Another occasion tonight when her friends made her feel… She kind of loved Anya. But she did
have to defend Angel on one point. “He didn’t actually ask me to do him a favour. He’s… paying
me.”

A split second after she spoke, Buffy regretted it. Oh god. Should she have just kept her mouth
shut? Anya was so obsessed with money. Please don’t let her be jealous and upset.

“He’s paying you?” Buffy cringed, but nodded… and suddenly found herself enveloped in an
exuberant hug. “Well it’s about time! No offense, but you’ve never been good at capitalism. I’m so
proud you’re finally learning!” Before Buffy could process Anya’s joy and think of an appropriate
way to say thank you… “So. How much are you getting?”

Willow had finally calmed and Angel felt that he could finally talk to her again. He put his hand
under her chin and tilted her face to where he could look into her eyes. “You’re not bad. And your magic isn’t bad. Look at all the good you’ve done.” He paused, seeing doubt and fear in her eyes. He pulled out his trump card. “You gave me back my soul. Was that bad?” She shook her head vigorously and he smiled. It was a victory and it boded well. “I don’t think so either.” The she smiled, really smiled.

She was beautiful, wasn’t she?

Why was he thinking about that?

“I know you’re scared,” he continued, putting his other thoughts aside, “but you trust me, right?” Another nod. “I trust you. And I want you to be safe. You need to own your magic, Willow. That’s the only way. I promise you, it will be okay.”

A long silence and he kept his eyes locked on hers, watching the wheels turn behind them. Damaged she might be, but she was still Willow and it was fascinating how he could see who she was in those wide open eyes.

Angel’s words rang in Willow’s ears as she tried to figure out… was he right? Was she safe if she used magic again? Was she safe if she didn’t? Everything was so confusing. If only she could put everything in order again, then she’d know.

That wasn’t going to happen in time, though, was it? No, she had to decide now.

It came down to trust… and she trusted Angel.

“Okay. I… I’ll do it.” With that, Angel smiled and hugged her and she felt like she’d made the right choice. But then… “What will I be doing?”

He chuckled, but it was warm and not mocking. “Wesley’s going to help you with that. He understands magic.”

Right. She knew that. He’d told her that. Even though Angel hadn’t been making fun of her, she felt so stupid. Thinking was harder than it used to be.

Wait a minute. Time. She’d thought about that before but not… She needed to know… It wasn’t another stupid question, right? Well even if it was, she had to ask it. “Angel? How long was I… you know… how long was I with Rack?”

She braced herself, waiting to hear how long it had been and to realize how much she’d missed.

She wasn’t prepared for his answer.

“About 24 hours.”

A day? No. It couldn’t have been just a day. It was longer. It was so much longer. But she looked at Angel and realized… “It was only a day?”

Oh god. A day. Just a day. “I’m weak and pathetic. Just like he said.” Once again, she broke down in tears.

Even though Angel was holding her and telling her she was wrong, she knew he was lying.

Willow was worthless. Absolutely worthless.
To be continued…
Angel awoke. It was morning.

Keeping human hours was strange business, but he did his best. His son was human and he was hoping that the boy could have all the opportunities and freedom of the human world.

All the opportunities Angel himself would never know.

All the opportunities which had been stolen from Buffy and which Willow had enthusiastically sacrificed to join Buffy in the shadows.

The shadows that had very nearly swallowed her whole.

He’d held her last night while sobs had wracked her body and until she’d finally fallen into what looked like a deep, dreamless sleep. Hopefully it would last long enough to give him time – time to figure out a way to get her to see that she wasn’t somehow to blame for her plight.

His son lay peacefully in his crib, as normal a child as any born to humans. Not a bit of awareness that to a law firm in Los Angeles he was a mystical object and who knew what nefarious ideas they had in mind.

Angel didn’t know and he didn’t care. All he knew was that no one was going to hurt his son.

A soft knock at the bedroom door. Wesley. He let him in and closed the door behind him, wanting to keep as quiet as possible so that Willow’s sleep would be undisturbed.

It wasn’t Willow who was disturbed, however, when Wesley spoke, his voice low but grave. “I’ve been on the computer, keeping my ear to the grapevine out there. We may be in far more trouble than we initially believed. Wolfram and Hart aren’t the only ones interested in Connor – and they might not be the most dangerous.”

There were classes she was supposed to attend and papers to write and none of it could drag Tara from her bed. She was sad and lost, her dreams had been chaos, and… could she please just stop thinking now? Because awake or asleep, her thoughts took her straight to Spike.

Spike – the one person who looked at her and saw something besides Willow’s girlfriend.

Spike – the one person who treated her like she was smart and capable.

Spike – the man who’d kissed her.

That last completely destroyed the first two, didn’t it?

She was so angry with him. Why had he done that? Why did he give her something so special and then take it away?
But that was the story of her life in Sunnydale, wasn’t it? First Willow – bright and shining love turned to lies and bad magic – and now Spike – whose friendship had lit up the dark corners and made everything… maybe not okay, but better, definitely better.

Did it really have to be gone though? Now that she thought about it… you know, he’d been drinking a lot.

Maybe he hadn’t meant it.

Maybe he had thought she was Buffy.

That was it! That had to be it! She’d been so silly, hadn’t she? Spike had been drunk and in the dim light he’d become confused and acted the way he would if she were Buffy. As for her reaction to it… Well, she had run away, hadn’t she? Anyway it wasn’t like she’d really liked it; she was just sad and lonely and confused.

Everything was going to be okay after all!

Jumping out of bed, she grabbed some clothes and raced for the bathroom.

She was going to go see Spike.

The sun had Spike trapped in his crypt without a single hair of the dog that bit him, church bells were bonging inside of his head and… dammit! There was no bloody justice in this world. Why the devil did vampires get hangovers?

This was about Tara, wasn’t it? The angels of goodness – nothing like that bastard who stole their name – wreaking their vengeance on him for daring to sully one of their own. Couldn’t disagree with ‘em, now could he? He deserved all this pounding in his head and the pain in his heart.

Sod him for a stupid wanker! If he could go back, he’d forget the girl even had lips. She was the first friend he’d had in… Hell, he’d never had a friend like her. Not even when he was human.

It hadn’t been a day and he already missed her. He missed her so much. If he were given a choice… Would he give up shagging Buffy? The hope that she might love him someday?

What did he want the answer to that question to be?

His head was still pounding so that it took him a moment to register that part of the incessant drumbeat was a knock at his door. Who could it be at this hour? Prob’ly the Slayer, lookin’ to get her itch scratched. A second later, though… no, he didn’t get that ‘Slayer’ buzz at the edge of his senses at all. That was about all his senses were up to the task of telling him though, so he moved carefully into the shadows and said, “Come in.”

What the… Was he hallucinating? “Tara?”

She thought she knew what she was going to say, but now that she was here – no, she didn’t have any idea. It didn’t help that her tongue was always tied under any kind of stress and this? This was kind of stressful. Especially the part where she was remembering how conflicted she felt about that
kiss.

But it hadn’t meant anything. It hadn’t. Not enough to destroy their friendship anyway.

Or had it? Because Spike wasn’t saying anything. Please Spike. Please say something. Because if Tara tried to talk, she was going to stutter and she hated that – hated how weak it made her sound.

“Glad you’re here,” he said, and she was so grateful – for what he said as well as the fact that he spoke. “Been hoping… wanted to apologize.”

She was right! She was right about everything! Tara could have cried. It really had been a mistake and Spike was sorry. “I figured… I knew you didn’t mean…” She almost stuttered after all, the tension and anxiety not fully having left her. Still – everything was going to be okay and that was what mattered. Not her stupid tongue and its refusal to work the way she wanted it to.

“We’re… friends then?” He sounded so hopeful. It was… she hadn’t known what it was like to have someone value her that highly in… well, it had been Willow and that was a long time ago. No, not that long ago. Why did it feel like a lifetime?

Spike’s eyes never left Tara as he spoke, sizing her up, gauging her reactions. How did she feel? Was she going to be his friend again? He wasn’t sure.

She was there, though. That had to mean something. The few words she’d spoken had been encouraging. So as much as he was more terrified of getting his hopes up than anything else in unlife, he took a chance and reached out his hand to shake hers. “Friends?” he repeated.

A tentative hand came out to take his. “Friends.”

Why did that word give him all the joy he’d imagined feeling if he’d heard words of love from his Slayer?

He had no desire to think about that. Luckily, his head was still pounding steadily enough to make his brain gratefully compliant in giving up on serious cogitation. What do you know? That bloody hangover was good for something after all.

“Want to sit down? We could talk.” He sounded desperate, he knew, but at least he knew Tara would never use that against him. No matter what, he could trust her.

When was the last time he could say that about anyone?

She sat, and he pushed away the memory of his mother – of who she’d been before he stupidly and cruelly transformed and damned her. “Sorry I don’t have any tea.”

Tara smiled. “It’s okay. I’m not thirsty. Besides, I’m… I’m sick of tea. That was more of a…” She paused and a name hung between them. A name she wound her words around instead. “Everyone else drank it, so I did too.”

He smiled back. “So what do you like? I can lay in a stock of it.”

Her smile broadened and her cheeks pinked. “I… I really like coffee. You know. Just plain, really strong, black coffee. No funny flavours or foams. Just that Espresso Roast coffee.” Her expression went sad. “I couldn’t have it around because of Willow’s caffeine reaction so I just pretended I didn’t really like it.”
Spike couldn’t help himself; he sat beside her and took her hand. “We always make sacrifices, don’t we? We act like they’re nothing, but…”

Then her eyes met his – liquid and sad and so full of understanding that he wished he could drown in them. Gods below. He wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and kiss her senseless.

He didn’t. Instead he just guided her next to him; she laid her head on his shoulder and sighed softly.

“I’ll get some of that Italian roast tonight and you can have pots of it whenever you like,” he offered. He could feel her nod but she said nothing. Didn’t need to, now did she?

They stayed like this, silent and quiet, for a long time.

Whatever he couldn’t get from Tara… well, it was nothing compared to what he *could* and he decided – it was enough.

Willow knocked on the door of the room Wesley was using and waited. “Come in,” he said, in a British accent that sounded nothing like… No, she didn’t want to think about him.

“Hi,” she looked around, though what she thought she’d see she didn’t know, “Can I talk to you?”

“How was she supposed to say what she wanted to say? She had questions and she wasn’t sure… should she be asking Angel? She’d already bugged him so much. Anyway, he was really strong and he’d survived hundreds of years in Hell. How could he understand? No, asking Wesley was probably better. “Was I really only… you know – what happened to me… Was it really only a day?” Her voice broke and she could feel the tears forming in her eyes. Damn her for how weak she was. Kind of proved Rack’s point, didn’t it?

She shivered at the memory as Wesley came and knelt beside her. “Willow, you can’t judge time spent being magically tortured the same way you judge time every day. The agony, the supernatural component… those things take the experience entirely out of the normal realm. During torture… minutes are the equivalent of hours, even days – especially when you are being tormented on so many different levels. Rack… he tortured your mind, your body, even your soul – your very essence. It’s a miracle you survived and that your mind and body are whole. I don’t know anyone who… Quite honestly, I don’t think I’d be bearing up nearly as well. In fact I’m certain I would not.”

Her eyes locked on his, searching for deception, for the signs that he was just trying to placate her and make her feel better. Instead, she saw… “You mean that?”

Angel had heard Willow’s knock from down the hall and – even though he knew it was wrong – he couldn’t stop himself from going to the door of Wesley’s room and eavesdropping.

She’d gone to someone else for reassurance and something inside Angel twisted uncomfortably.
It felt like jealousy.

He shouldn’t feel that way and he knew it. After all, wasn’t it good that Willow was reaching out at all? That she trusted Wesley as well as him? The important thing was for her to heal. His life was in Los Angeles and the sooner he was able to return, the better.

His feelings were still there, though, and he struggled to understand them, even while he listened with a demon’s focus to the conversation going on between Wesley and Willow.

“I mean it.” Wesley’s voice was clear and honest. He did mean it. He really did. Willow was almost sure of it and it… Was he right? Maybe she wasn’t weak and pathetic after all.

“Thank you.” What else could she say? Oh. Yes. There was something else she needed to ask about. “I… I know you guys think I need to do something with my magic and… I believe you… I just…” She didn’t know how to explain.

“Control and discipline are what is key. I can teach you and then you’ll have a very different relationship with the power inside you.”

She sat silent for a moment, letting his words sink in. It would be easier if everything in her head made sense, but there was still so much chaos, so many memories out of order or fragmented into nonsense.

Guess she was just going to have to trust him. “Okay.”

Before Wesley could tell her anything else, there was a knock at the door and Wesley went and opened it. “Angel.”

Wes was looking at him strangely and Angel couldn’t blame him. What reason was he going to give for interrupting them? He wasn’t even sure himself – or more accurately, he didn’t want to peer into his feelings that closely. So he stood, searching for words and not finding them. Now even Willow seemed curious.

A knock – this time at the front door – startled all three of them. Angel might have been grateful for the distraction, but he was certainly not happy that there was a visitor. Who the hell could it be? Hadn’t Buffy told everyone to stay away?

To his shock, Wesley said, “I’ll deal with this,” and went downstairs.

Leaving Angel alone with Willow.

“How are you?” he asked, acting as if he’d heard nothing of her conversation with Wesley.

“Oh, I guess.” She shrugged and looked lost and something inside him twisted again.

He went to her and pulled her into a hug and she relaxed against him. “It’s all right.” Should he feel guilty for how glad he was that he was the one she allowed to hold her and console her? As if on cue, he flashed back to two times in the past when he’d held her – and neither had been comforting.
How much he regretted… not just what he’d done when he lost his soul, but how careless he’d been as Willow’s so-called friend. When he’d come back to town to help Buffy… why had he been so cold and inconsiderate towards Willow?

“What on Earth made you think had the right to come to this house?”

Wesley’s cry from downstairs made them both stiffen and the embrace abruptly ended. “Stay here,” he told Willow, his voice low and stern. “Close the door and don’t come out until I tell you.” She nodded and Angel hastened downstairs to see who could possibly have Wesley so upset. It couldn’t be Buffy.

Maybe he should have figured it out, but he was genuinely surprised by the man he saw standing in Willow’s living room. “Rupert. What the hell are you doing here?”

To be continued…
Chapter 18

There were people in the world Angel hated more than Rupert Giles, but none of them had once been his ally and that gave a unique dimension to the loathing he felt for the man standing in his… no, not his – Willow’s living room.

Memories – not his… had she really once had a schoolgirl crush on the man? It only made him feel even more anger. How dare he! “I asked you before. What are you doing here?”

Giles had the nerve to look nonplussed, even wounded. “I thought I could help.”

Angel couldn’t keep the scornful burst of laughter from emerging before he said, “The way you already have?” He exchanged a glance with Wesley. They were both wondering the same thing: Should they tell him? Tell him just how much damage he’d done? Did they want to reveal so many details?

Ultimately, it was up to Angel, wasn’t it? He flipped a metaphorical coin and it landed on… “If it weren’t for you, none of this would have happened to her in the first place. Were you just stupid? Or was it jealousy?” Giles had a stunned expression and Angel just kept right on going. “That was it, wasn’t it? You were so angry at how much better than you she was that you were willing to guide her right into harm’s way. Telling everyone she needed to give up magic completely even though you had to know what a risk it was.”

How the man could stand there so silently, looking stricken, was a mystery to Angel. He had no sympathy whatsoever. He knew Buffy and the others, even Willow – well, before what she’d been through – would have urged him to give the man the benefit of the doubt, but he wasn’t in the mood. Never would be. If Rupert had done this to him, then it would have at least made sense, but Willow? She deserved better.

Finally, Giles spoke. “This… but how…?”

Wesley snorted indelicately and Angel agreed entirely. But he didn’t let him speak, instead keeping control of the conversation. That jealousy he’d felt earlier again? Maybe, but he didn’t care enough to think about it. “Magic isn’t something she does. It’s part of her. You had to know that.” Then, deciding that any weapon he had was worth using, he revealed the last bit of knowledge Giles didn’t have. “Actually, it’s kind of ironic, you almost destroying Willow. Because Jenny Calendar gave Willow her power.”

Buffy was drained and tired and all she wanted was to be home in bed… with her Mom bringing her a cup of hot cocoa and some wise, motherly advice. But Mom was dead and since the money from Angel wasn’t going to be coming in forever, here she was – The Doublemeat Palace. The stench of grease and mystery patties was everywhere. Each day she worked here brought her one step closer to being… well, maybe not vegetable-phobic, but very much less than the sympathetic to counterfeit meat for sure. Blech.
Another customer, another forced smile. She could feel the stretch of her lips across her teeth. It was odd and strange and her face felt like something she was wearing that didn’t fit quite right and not like a part of her at all.

One person after another – the lunch rush – and the ease with which she slid into the machinery of it was one more reminder of how human she wasn’t since…

Willow.

Since Willow had yanked her out of Heaven. Deprived her of peace. Forced her back into…

This.

She’d actually hated her for a while, hadn’t she?

God. How awful did she feel about that now?

Now her thoughts were all Willow; even as she took orders and stuffed ersatz food into bags, she had question after question about her best friend. Was she okay? Was she getting better? Had she realized yet that her friends weren’t responsible for what happened?

Was Willow ever again going to sit on the bed with Buffy, eating Ben & Jerry’s and watching John Cusack movies?

Then she started thinking about life. About the things that made it more than just breathing and going through the motions and waiting to get back to Heaven.

Once upon a time, one of those things had been Willow.

Boyfriends had come and gone - soulmates had been sent to Hell and returned – but through it all, there’d been Willow. The friend who’d supported her love for Angel, then turned around and insulted him appropriately for abandoning her; who hadn’t judged her for the stupid mistake that was Parker; who had cautiously and judiciously cheered her on as she moved on with Riley… and then hated him even more than she had Angel for leaving town and…

A new customer approached the counter - but it wasn’t actually a new customer at all.

Oh god. She stood, mouth open, staring for the second time in less than 24 hours at someone she never thought she’d see again.

“Hey, Buffy.”

Great. For the second time this week, an ex-boyfriend was seeing her in this ridiculous outfit.

“Riley?”

Tara sighed, breaking the silence that had prevailed between her and Spike for quite awhile. She hadn’t brought her watch, but she knew she’d been here for at least an hour, maybe two, and she had things she should do today. One of them was “I need to go see Dawn.” She felt an obligation to Dawn, but that wasn’t all of it. When Buffy had been… well, dead, Tara had filled an almost maternal role for the young girl and…
Okay, yes, she missed it. Not that she begrudged Buffy or anything, it was just… in a weird way, things had been kind of idyllic. Willow hadn’t completely given herself over to power, their relationship was… maybe not perfect, because nothing was perfect, and yes, everyone missed Buffy, it was just…

Everything was so confusing and Tara wasn’t sure how to feel. Before she could stop herself, she asked, “Do you think sometimes that things were better? Before?” She knew he’d know what she meant and… Oh god! What had she just said? Spike was going to hate her. He was in love with Buffy. How had she forgotten that? She’d just ruined everything.

But then Spike pulled her head down to his shoulder and whispered softly into her hair, “Yeah, love. Sometimes… yeah.”

He couldn’t believe he was saying it aloud, or that someone else felt the same way he did but… gods below, sometimes he wished the Slayer had been allowed to rest and that they’d all just figured out how to keep the world safe without her. They’d been falling into a routine, hadn’t they? A pattern that was working – in its way – and with time… yeah, with time it would all have settled into a decent sort of life.

At least then he could have held onto his fantasies of how things might have been – and of the girl Buffy had once been. Now… now it was hard to remember why he’d fallen for Buffy in the first place. She hadn’t been this cold, hard, miserable girl – not when she’d claimed his heart.

Stroking Tara’s hair, he wondered why he was still in love with what Buffy had become.

It wasn’t more of Willow’s nonsense, was it?

Nah. Much as he wished he were able to blame someone – anyone – else, his own history as love’s bitch was a trail of breadcrumbs leading right back to his own foolish heart. The heart that did him wrong alive or undead.

Supposed he should feel guilty about his response to Tara’s question. He knew she felt guilty for asking, tenderhearted thing that she was. “Not something any of us talk about,” he offered, softly as before. “Bet even Red second guessed what she did at least once.” He planted a soft kiss on the top of Tara’s head as he let go of some of the bitterness. Tara had been part of it, after all, and that meant she’d had to believe… “As long as there was a chance she was suffering, that she’d gone to the wrong place… ‘sides, guess of all people I could see thinkin’ anything’s better than being dead.”

Tara looked up, her eyes meeting Spike’s. She could get lost in them.

The thought made her uncomfortable, but not as uncomfortable as the fleeting thought that she sort of, kind of, maybe hoped that he’d…

No. No. Not that. She got up from the couch. Too suddenly and she realized she’d hurt his feelings. She didn’t want to do that. They were still friends and she was going to hang onto their friendship. “I’m sorry. I just remembered I told you I was going to go see Dawn.”

He relaxed and got up to escort her to the door. He was a gentleman, wasn’t he?

Had he been when he was… alive?
“Thank you,” she said just before she made to open the door. “You get it and… I appreciate that.”

For no reason she could think of – and it was definitely something that if she’d thought first, she would never have done at all – she kissed him on the cheek before rushing out the door into the sunlight.

She could feel the coolness of his skin all the way to Revello Drive.

Riley Finn, the second man to leave town and leave her, was standing right in front of her, looking soldierly and manly and annoyingly handsome. This was so not what Buffy needed. “My hat has a cow,” she said, which she was pretty sure had nothing to do with what he was talking about. She couldn’t be certain though because she wasn’t able to pay attention to what he was saying. The first time this had happened, she’d been too worried about Willow to experience the complete and utter sense of shame. Now? Not only was she in uniform, but she was behind the counter and had no apocalypse-type distractions to get in the way. Her abject humiliation was roaring in her ears.

“Huh?” she asked, realizing that the word ‘demon’ had just sailed over her head.

“Suvolte demons,” Riley repeated, and Buffy was just glad no one was near enough to hear him. Or maybe it was just that good old-fashioned Sunnydale ability to ignore the obvious and fear the barbecue forks. “I need your help. Between the demons and the weird intel we’ve been getting, I’d say you could use my help too.”

Okay, that last bit? Yeah, that had Buffy’s complete and total attention.

It also made the hair on the back of her neck do the lambada.

“My shift’s over in ten,” she said. “I’ll tell Todd I’m leaving early.”

“Todd? I have to go,” she called out. No way would Lorraine fire her over leaving a few minutes early, not when Buffy could spill the beans about the fact that this so-called burger joint was PETA-approved.

So she went to the back… and stopped. Because something occurred to her. Riley had something about weird intel, and while he had said nothing specific about it, Buffy immediately thought of Angel… and his son. She raced to the payphone by the break room, rummaged for coins, and dialed, hoping someone who wasn’t Willow would answer.

The phone was picked up on the second ring. “Angel? It’s Buffy. I thought you should know – Riley’s back in town and that could mean the Initiative. He’s waiting for me out front so I have to go. I’ll let you know when I find out anything.” She didn’t say goodbye or even wait for him to say anything before hanging up. Not like she wanted Riley getting suspicious. So out she went, hopping over the counter and joining the man she’d once sided with over Angel.

Funny how things changed. Especially considering the part where Angel had a child with another woman.

Still, even if Angel weren’t paying her, she’d have done the same thing.

Not that the money wasn’t nice. Anya might be onto something when it came to capitalism.
But for right now, she needed to just act normal, pretend she didn’t reek of greasy mystery glop, find out about these Chipotle Demons, and then artfully steer the conversation to that intel.

“Glad I got here before dark,” he said. “Gives me a chance to bring you up to speed before we encounter any Suvoltes. But I do have a favor to ask.”

A favor? Okay, he’d already gotten her to leave work and he was clearly going under the assumption that she’d be doing the heavy lifting on his anti-demon mission, so what did he think was such a big deal he was bothering to ask first?

“I need to talk to Willow. Get her to do a locator spell.”

Oh great. “Willow?” Yes, she sounded like she’d just been sucking helium. What could possibly be weird about that? “I… uh… Can we go somewhere where we can talk? Because it looks like I’m not the only one who needs to be brought up to speed.”

Angel held the phone receiver for a long minute before replacing it in the cradle. Damn it! This had been one hell of a day so far. First, he had basically declared war against Rupert Giles and now… now it looked like the bastards who’d planted a chip in Spike’s head might be after his son.

Why had the Powers That Be set everything in motion to bring him and Connor here? Away from Gunn and Cordelia and Fred?

Of course, if he was without his entire team, he still had Wesley…

…and Buffy.

Buffy, who was, after all, the Slayer.

Buffy, who had called right away to warn him.

Funny how, even though their love was a thing of the past, he admired and respected her maybe more than he ever had. Had she always been this committed to doing what was right, even ignoring her own pain? Had she always been so loyal?

That was the strange thing about love, wasn’t it? Because while it shone on some virtues, it left others in shadow.

He could see them now and in an instant all the questions evaporated.

Leaving some new ones – but ones he had a hunch he could find the answers to. He headed upstairs to Willow’s room. They had already talked briefly about Giles, but now he hoped she could shed some light on another subject.

Knocking softly on her door, it was only a moment before she let him in. “I have something I need to ask you about,” he said, sitting down on the bed and patting the space beside him. Once she had joined him, he continued. “But we don’t have to talk about it if it makes you uncomfortable, okay?” She nodded. It was permission. “What can you tell me about Riley Finn and the Initiative?”
To be continued…
“What can you tell me about Riley Finn and The Initiative?”

Angel’s question was unnerving. Willow remembered stuff, but it was all such a jumble. Still, the way he was asking made her realize this could be important so she closed her eyes and tried to focus. “I thought they shut it down,” she said after a moment. Then she furrowed her brow and thought harder. “Oh. Wait. They sort of started up again. It’s supposed to be different, at least that’s what Riley told…” She paused. She could say her name. “He told Buffy that he was joining some military operation to stop demon attacks. It has some of the same people as The Initiative, though.”

Did he want to know more? “Do you need to know about when they were still The Initiative? Or did I tell you enough?”

He took her hand. “If you can handle it, I’d really like to know as much as you can tell me.”

Yeah. That was kind of what she’d been afraid of. “They did a lot of experiments. On demons and anything supernatural. They didn’t seem to care… I mean they didn’t always worry about whether the demons were violent or anything.” A long pause and then she told him, “They got Oz. We had to rescue him.”

Oz? Angel hadn’t known about that. Now he was more concerned than ever. Especially because…

“Didn’t Oz go to school with you? Didn’t Riley know…?”

Willow nodded nervously and Angel’s jaw clenched. Those bastards. It was bad enough what they’d done to Spike, but the thought that they could experiment like that on people they knew?

Then she cocked her head. Something was occurring to her and Angel had a hunch he knew what it was. He hoped he was wrong.

“Why did you want to know?”

He wasn’t wrong.

How was he going to explain? Start with the bare bones and hope she wouldn’t press. “Riley’s here. In Sunnydale.”

The moment he said it, he wished he’d been more delicate. She was shaking. Thinking about what she’d just told him, he realized she had good reason to be afraid. Damn it! Why hadn’t he made up some other reason for his enquiry? He took her hands in his and made a solemn promise. “I won’t let him anywhere near you. I told you I’d never let anything harm you again, and that was a promise.”

His words seemed to help. At least to the point where her trembling had ceased. But he knew he was going to have to tell her the rest, if only because any minute now she was going to wonder how he found out. “Willow? I need you to trust me, okay? Whatever I tell you, you have to trust that
everything will be all right.”

There was a long pause during which Angel feared the worst, but then she nodded. Okay. He kept hold of her hands as he said, “Buffy told me about Riley. She’s helping me protect Connor.”

“She’s great. You’ll get to meet her later. I’ve told her all about you.”

Buffy nodded and smiled but inside some voice was screaming. Had every man she ever loved moved on? Riley was… married. Married to some super-soldier chick named Sam who she was really looking forward to meeting. Not. But in her defense, it had only been… what… a year, maybe? How had he done that so fast? Was she that easy to get over? Was she the brown lipstick of love interests - kind of nice for awhile, but then you realize that No Doubt is so over so you throw it in a drawer and forget about it until you’re cleaning stuff out and…? Okay, now was not the time to be Tangent Girl. Besides, Willow was way better at that.

And wouldn’t you know Riley had to ask about her again?

“So Sam suggested that we find a witch to help us track them and I remembered Willow. She must be pretty powerful by now, huh?”

You know, she thought she was at least going to get to tell Riley about the fact that she’d died before she had to explain this, and she’d been counting on having a chance to figure out just how much she should tell him, but she’d always been Think On Her Feet Girl, so… “She’s not doing magic anymore.”

That would be enough, right? No, of course it wasn’t. “She… kind of had a problem, so she gave it up.” Great, he looked crestfallen. Not her problem. “Sorry, but it’s got to be that way.” There was no chance she was going to tell him about Rack and the power drain and Jenny Calendar’s magic. Sure, she’d been in love with him, but he was back with the government now and she didn’t trust them as far as she could throw them. If they found out Willow had innate power, that she wasn’t just someone who did magic, who knew what they might want with her? It could be as bad or even worse than what Rack and that Kalderash bitch had done.

Luckily, Riley seemed to accept her explanation, but of course he had to ask, “How’s she doing?”

“Fine,” Buffy shrugged, trying to seem very casual. And no, she wasn’t going to offer up any further details. She’d learned the hard way that lies worked a lot better when you didn’t trip yourself up by saying too much.

Awkward silence followed and then Riley asked, “So, other than the fast food thing, what else is going on with you?”

Maybe it was the offhand tone and the afterthought-y feel of his question. Maybe it was the fact that he’d settled into an action-packed life of lucrative adventure with a shiny new wife while she was working a dead end job, scrounging to make mortgage payments, and taking care of her teenage sister, all while fulfilling a thankless role as unpaid guardian of the world. Or maybe she was simply letting her inner bitch not be quite so inner anymore. Whatever it was, she was doing it. “Oh. Gosh. Nothing much. I died saving the world from a hell god last year, but after three months in Heaven, I got ripped out and brought back to life and had to dig my way out of my own grave. Plus, I smell like grease and my skin is terrible. Thanks for asking.”
You know, right now Riley looked a lot like Giles had last night. It suited them both. Especially the part where their jaws went slack and they had nothing to say.

Cordelia had been onto something all those years ago, hadn’t she? Tact was so overrated. Because this had helped. It really had. It had at least given her the emotional push she needed to salvage her dignity.

Putting on her best ‘perky Buffy’ expression, she chirped, “So… when do I get to meet Mrs. Finn?”

The words had hit Willow like a punch, but it was Angel and she trusted him, so she managed to hold down her panic and they’d been sitting for a few moments while she tried to come to terms with what he’d told her.

Buffy was helping him.

He trusted Buffy.

She didn’t understand.

“Buffy?” she said, her voice quavering and uncertain.

Angel kept tight hold of her hands. “I know you think she betrayed you. I know that’s what Rack told you. But he was lying, Willow. He was lying because he knew it would hurt you and he wanted to cause you as much pain as he could. Buffy… none of your friends were responsible.”

Numb. All of a sudden she felt completely numb. At first she didn’t believe… but then it… it made sense. She felt stupid. So stupid. Why had she believed…?

But there were questions. ”How…?”

“How did Rack get to you?”

He always seemed to know how to finish her questions. She nodded.

“It’s… it’s complicated. There’s a lot about your magic you don’t know.”

Angel paused, waiting to see if Willow was ready to hear it. After his revelation about Buffy and the others, he wouldn’t blame her if she wanted to be alone to digest it, but she surprised him – nodding again and showing the steel that even torture couldn’t rob from her.

So he began. “Your magic is part of you. Maybe you already knew that.” She seemed a little puzzled so he split the difference and explained, “I know you’re not a hereditary witch the way Tara is, but you still received magic that’s become part of your nature.”

The question was forming on her tongue, so he continued. “When you restored my soul… do you remember?” Another nod. “Xander told me that you said it felt as though my soul passed through you. I’m sure you remember that. But he also said that Cordelia told him she could see something happen – that you were about to collapse in the middle of the spell when suddenly you were filled with strength and seemed to glow with power. That that’s what allowed you to finish the
Willow’s brow furrowed and it was easy to see she was lost in memories. He wished he could share them. He didn’t have them, though. They weren’t part of what he shared with her. Of course, it wasn’t as if he had every single one of her memories at his disposal; he already knew that. Still, he wished he could see what she’d gone through when she restored his soul. Why couldn’t he?

Now wasn’t the time for this however. He needed to finish telling Willow what they’d figured out about the source of her power. She was sitting beside him, hands in his, and he could feel the heat of her concern. How was she going to react? Holding her hands close to his chest, he revealed, “When you were there, in the hospital, you were weak and you were open and… Jenny Calendar. She gave you her magic.”

Willow’s eyes shot wide. “Ms. Calendar?”

For a moment, she couldn’t remember how to breathe. She had… oh god. Oh god, oh god, oh god.

She stared at her arms, at the hands Angel was holding in his, at her feet. Somehow nothing felt like part of her anymore.

Was this what… was this how Xander had felt when he was possessed? Probably not, huh. “It’s not mine,” she said softly. “None of it. I didn’t…”

She almost collapsed and dimly felt Angel’s arm around her. So many totally conflicted feelings were going through her mind. Did this mean that the bad things weren’t her fault? No, she didn’t think so. After all, she’d made the choices. But it meant that the good things, the big things…

Looking down at the ground, she gave voice to the truth. “This means I’m not really the one who restored your soul, am I?”

“The Doctor? This evil guy who’s selling Suvolte eggs calls himself The Doctor?” Maybe Buffy was being judgmental, but that wasn’t exactly the scariest nickname in the world. This was the Hellmouth. The guy needed to try a little harder.

“That’s what we’ve learned.” Sam Finn – doctor, former member of the Peace Corps, and all around goddess of commando-wifely perfection – was clearly immune to sarcasm. Good. At least it meant there was something she couldn’t do.

Yes, okay, she was nice. In fact, she was perfect. So perfect and nice she was giving Buffy cavities. Where was the justice in the world?

“Well, I guess we should check out Willy’s,” Buffy said after a moment. “It’s the most likely place to find anyone who’s heard of this guy.”

“It’s too bad your friend can’t help us.”

Sam’s tone was genial, but there was a something… and Buffy resented it. “She can’t.” Her own
tone was firm and hard as she locked eyes with Commando Barbie. “So we’re just going to have to do things the old-fashioned way.”

“Right then,” Riley interjected, breaking the tension. “Willy’s it is. Let’s go.”

The best laid plans of mice and witches…

Tara had meant to spend the afternoon with Dawn, but she’d made plans with her friend Janice and Tara told her to go. After all, the girl had been through so much lately. An afternoon of teenage normalcy was no more than she deserved. Tara wished she’d had friends when things had been rough after her mother died, but all she’d had was her family – the family who’d done everything they could to convince her that she was evil and tainted, that she was a demon no one could ever love.

But then there was Spike.

Spike.

Who had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt she was human… and who now ironically was the one who made her feel like something more. Something special. Someone special.

Was that why her feelings for him were a weird jumble of friendship and stuff lesbians weren’t supposed to feel for guys? Especially not guys who were in love with gorgeous, bad-ass Slayers?

Shaking her head, as if somehow that would make everything fall into place, she kept walking… heading back toward Spike’s crypt.

He’d been confined indoors during the day for more than a century now and yet Spike had never felt the closeness and the sensation of being imprisoned as keenly as he had today. It was like being in that cage back at the Initiative.

And why the devil was he thinking of those bastards now?

Thank hell he felt darkness descending. He was free at last.

Just then, the door to his crypt burst open.

“Well. Looks like the Doctor is in.”

Speak of the G.I. Joe. If it wasn’t Riley Finn.

Spike would have had a moment to be impressed with what, for the walking crew cut, was an above-average quip if the bastard weren’t standing before him heavily armed… and accompanied by Buffy and some Lara Croft-looking bint.

Plus, it seemed like the secret of his ability to pay for blood and smokes and alcohol had got out.

That could be hazardous to his health.
What did they say? Denial was the better part of valour? “What are you on about?”

“Where are the eggs, Doctor?” Riley again. Buffy just glared. As for Lara Croft… Spike gave her a once-over. Not bad, but she was a bit muscular for his taste. Still, he wouldn’t kick her out of bed.

“I have no idea what you mean.”

Maybe it was time to play the one card he had. He shot a meaningful glance at Buffy: Better defend me, girl, or all your secrets won’t be so secret any longer.

She got the message. “Are you sure the information we got was accurate?”

“You were with me. You really think Willy was gonna lie with your hand around his throat?”

Bugger! That bastard Willy sold him out! If Spike didn’t have this blasted chip in his head…

“Time’s running out. We’ve gotta find those eggs.” And Lara Croft was heard from.

With that, and over his frantic protests, those rotten do-gooders went barreling through his home, descending the ladder and finding…

Bloody hell! How in the name of everything unholy was he going to buy his daily Jack now?

“Damn it!” Riley was staring at the eggs. “You screwed up, Spike. Didn’t keep them frozen, did you?”

Frozen? What was he talking about?

Just then, he figured it out.

The eggs began to hatch.

Why the hell hadn’t someone warned him about this?

It wasn’t 20 seconds before there were baby demons everywhere. And apparently they had no respect for the fact that he was, in a manner of speaking, one of them.

“Pull out!” Riley bellowed, and Spike happily followed them all up the ladder. Not that they’d be safe for long unless…

Leave it to Buffy to have a plan. That one was nothing if not resourceful. She grabbed the belt off her ex, pulled the pin on a grenade, and threw the whole thing down into what had once been his bedroom.

“Down!”

With that, they all hit the dirt just as a fairly impressive explosion happened. Probably the only impressive thing that had ever occurred following the unfastening of Riley Finn’s belt.

Okay, guess it was a bit of a good thing the old gang had stopped by.

Wait a minute.

“‘Oi!’ he yelled, as something occurred to him. “All my records were in there!”

They all got to their feet and Spike began to feel very uneasy. Soldier Boy and Lara Croft were
staring at him in that cold, clinical way he recalled all too well from his days behind glass. His unlife flashed before his eyes.

Regrets? He had a few… and nowhere near too few to mention.

“I have my orders… Doctor. I was told to take you out.”

Pretty sure ‘take you out’ didn’t mean for a blooming onion and a pint of ale.

Lucky for him that Buffy decided to step between them, but then…

“Spike? Are you okay?”

Oh no. Please, whoever watched over the pure and the good… they needed to get her out of here. She shouldn’t see this, shouldn’t see any of it. “S’alright, Tara. You should go. Might be a bit of falling debris and such.”

Think she’d buy that excuse?

Guess not. She wasn’t looking at him now; she was staring daggers at the black clad pair standing to the side of Buffy.

“Leave him alone.”

“Tara, I know you think the best of people,” Riley was being more than a touch patronizing, “but you don’t know Spike, and you don’t know what…”

Bless her; she was having none of it. His girl - his girl? – didn’t put up with that nonsense anymore. “I don’t know Spike? What do you know about what I know? You barely ever spoke to me. Spike is my friend and whatever he did, he doesn’t deserve… whatever you wanted to do to him.” He watched almost awestruck as she turned to Buffy. “You need to take them and go.”

She looked like Joan of Arc standing there – and she hadn’t stuttered once.

Seemed like even Buffy was impressed, because she nodded. “Sounds like a plan.” Buffy took her companions by the arm. “Our work’s done.” With that, she led them out of the crypt.

‘Course, he should have known he wasn’t getting off scot free. Once the invading army was well away, Tara turned that same resolute gaze on him. “What did you do, Spike?”

To be continued…
Chapter 20

i will make you hurt (Chapter 20)

“What did you do, Spike?”

Even as she asked it, Tara wasn’t sure she wanted to know. It was probably something pretty bad.

He was looking everywhere but at her, which didn’t do much to make her doubt her instincts, and he didn’t say anything.

So she asked another question. Or, more to the point, she added to her initial one. “Did it have something to do with the explosion? The one I heard a couple of minutes ago?” Her eyes took in the debris littering the crypt. “The one that looks like it happened in here?”

“Just a misunderstanding,” he offered, still looking at a wall nowhere near her face.

She wasn’t buying it, but she didn’t think he expected her to so she wasn’t as insulted as she might have been, still… “What happened?” Her voice was stern and hard and she surprised herself.

Now his eyes met hers. He was going to answer. Again, and too late, she wondered if she wanted to know.

The girl was dead set, wasn’t she? Really wanted to know what he’d done to bring down the wrath of G.I Joe and the Josephines. What would she do when he told her? Leave again, wouldn’t she? And this time it would be for good.

Of all the things he’d lost tonight: his bed, his record collection… Tara would be the one that hurt. Nothing he could do, though, but to shove her out the door forever. “I had these demon eggs – Suvoltes – was gonna sell ’em to some bloke, but Riley Finn and his femme fatales got here before I could close the deal.” He sighed, remembering his own faux pas. “Guess it was for the best that they showed up, though. No one told me the little buggers needed to be refrigerated. Started hatching… what a mess that would have been if they’d gotten loose.”

Maybe if he were a witch he could read that face of hers, but he was just Spike and he had no idea what was going on in Tara’s head right now. Her expression was as blank as stone.

Demon eggs? He was going to sell… “These demons,” Tara asked, keeping her tone even and calm, “they were worth a lot I assume?” He nodded. “So that means they must be pretty dangerous.” She’d learned the hard way through her time in Sunnydale that evil carried more weight and had a lot more value than good. His second nod was practically unnecessary, but she was glad he was honest anyway, even if… “You were going to sell really dangerous demon eggs to a stranger, someone who probably wanted to do something horrible with them.” Again, he nodded. Her expression was calm, but Tara’s fingernails were digging into her own palms hard enough to hurt. How could… “Why?” she asked, unable to keep her disappointment and anger completely out of her voice, “Why would you do that?”
She really wanted to know. Because she was starting to think that Riley was right and that she didn’t know Spike at all. The Spike she thought she knew would never…

No, she was wrong, wasn’t she? Because he had a past and a pretty terrible one and she did know about it. Guess she just wanted to believe that something more than the chip in his head had changed him.

Their eyes met and she challenged him silently for an answer, for something that would either smash every last illusion to smithereens or show her that she’d been right and…

“Money,” he said softly. “I need… wanted the money.”

It was the first verb, the one he’d replaced, that caught her ear and gave her pause. “You needed the money?”

Damn it to hell. Why in the hell had she resurrected that discarded word? Was she trying to force him to open a vein for her amusement? She might seem all sweetness and light, but she was as bad as any vampire, wasn’t she?

Bugger it. He’d lost everything else tonight, why not throw his pride on the fire for good measure? “Yeah, I needed the money.”

“But why?” she asked again, and he almost hated her.

“Why?” He was pacing now, arms moving of their own volition to indicate the vista of his ruined lair. “Why do you need money?” Before she could answer, he continued, the words pouring out like acid. “Ya think I like living like this? In a filthy crypt? That I wouldn’t prefer a decent flat with proper electricity, a place I could keep clean, with new furniture and maybe a laundry and… cable? Some place I could be proud of? Could have…?” No, he wasn’t going to finish that sentence. He didn’t want to hear what he might say.

She was staring now… and damn her, there were tears. Like she cared or something. “I didn’t know. I never thought…”


Before he could finish his sentence, though, his arms were full of warm, soft Tara and she was holding him tight.

“I’m sorry.” Tara had no idea why she said that, except that there was meaning beneath his words and she realized, maybe more than he did, that he hadn’t thought for a moment about what he was really doing. All he’d wanted was… freedom? Humanity? A room of one’s own?

Hadn’t Tara felt frighteningly like that when she’d left her family, concealing what she believed was the truth of her nature, being willing to lie and even ultimately endangering all her friends just to hang onto what she thought was an illusory humanity?

Was she really that different from Spike?

But instead of saying any of that, her words stayed safely on the surface, barely dangling their toes
into the cold, murky depths. “I mean, what you did was wrong, and I’m glad they stopped you, but… I get it. Or sort of. I mean, it’s not like you can go out and get a job. I just… promise me you won’t do anything like that again, okay?”

She tilted her face up, looking for the truth in his eyes and waiting for that promise.

She didn’t get it.

Instead his lips met hers in the second kiss they’d ever shared.

This time she didn’t pull away.

“What was that all about?”

Riley was fuming and the wifey looked ready to back him up. Well, they might have weapons, but she was a frustrated and humiliated Slayer who reeked of veggie burger grease and she could take them both on without breaking a sweat, or even one of her desperately-in-need-of-a-manicure nails. “That was about me giving an old friend a second chance,” she said, “And about not letting you murder him in cold blood.”

“Cold blood? You’re calling me cold-blooded? Have you forgotten what he is?”

Oh god. It was that self-righteous tone she remembered from his Initiative days. The one she really hated. Was it wrong that she was glad to hear it because she suddenly had no regrets at all about the end of their relationship? “No, I haven’t forgotten what he is. But what’s with your attitude? You liked ‘em cold-blooded just fine when you were paying them to bite you.”

Ouch. He winced like she’d just punched him and Demon Fighter Barbie was glaring at her. Had she gone too far?

As much as a disturbingly strong part of her wanted to stand by her words, she sighed softly and, in a conciliatory tone said, “Look, I’m sorry. We’re all keyed up and stressed. But let’s see the big picture, okay? The eggs are destroyed, I promise Spike will never do anything like that again, and you guys can go back to saving the rest of the world. I’ve got Sunnydale covered.” She punctuated her words with a ‘gee whiz’ smile. For some reason the hairs on the back of her neck were doing the cha-cha again and she wanted Riley and Mrs. Riley gone.

G.I. Jane looked like she was going to protest, but, to Buffy’s shock and relief, Riley put his hand on a spousal arm and shook his head. “It’s okay. She’s right. He’s still chipped and now that Buffy knows what he’s been up to…” he turned and looked directly into Buffy’s eyes, “I trust her.”

It was all Buffy could to suppress her sigh of relief, but she did and even managed a credible smile. “Thanks for the firepower back there,” she offered. “You guys make a great team.” That last brought an answering smile, albeit a slightly tight one, from Riley’s ‘armed candy.’ Good. Because she meant it. The pin-up commando could have Riley Finn and welcome to him. The only ache Buffy was feeling that had anything to do with Riley was the pain of a battered ego – and that was nowhere near her heart.

Of course, there was other pain.
What was going on with Spike and Tara?

Buffy heard herself babble a few pleasantries as Mr. and Mrs. Finn said their goodbyes. This time she was glad to see him go.

But as the two figures disappeared into the darkness, she grew wistful again. One more lover who had moved on just fine without her.

Was she thinking about Riley or Spike?

She didn’t know, so she tried not to think at all as she headed home.

When were those lawyers going to come to town? Because she really, really needed some serious, unambiguous violence.

Angel hung up the phone and looked toward the heavens, even as he recognized the futility of it. As if help for a vampire would ever come from on high. But could the Powers That Be at least cut him a break? Because the latest call from Cordelia had added one more burden to an overloaded plate – and not just for him.

It appeared that Buffy had made some enemies. Three former schoolmates who carried a grudge… and who apparently had the power to do something about it. Cordelia remembered the names of two of them, though the other was vaguely familiar as well.

"I kind of wish I’d paid attention to the nerds more back then,” she’d said, clearly feeling frustrated that she couldn’t contribute more than the meager details of her vision. It spoke so clearly of how much she had grown since the days when Angel had to admit he’d dismissed her as a shallow teenage strumpet.

Again he realized that he could appreciate a woman so much more once the attraction had faded and the person was who he saw.

He supposed it was similar with Willow, wasn’t it? Because he could certainly see her intelligence, her surprising resilience, her complexity. She existed outside his realm of showy, voluptuous, strong-willed temptresses, so he could appreciate…

"Gosh. Look at those!"

And he had, hadn’t he?

Well, to be truthful, it wasn’t that she was ugly or even unappealing, but she wasn’t his type, so…

"But she’s so cute… and helpless. Really a turn-on."

Where were his thoughts even going? First he was jealous of Wesley and now…

He ran his hand through his hair, heedless of what it would look like once he was done.

As Buffy would say, this was so not the time for this. It seemed as if there were enemies in every corner. Wolfram and Hart, the Kalderash, and now Buffy’s old schoolmates. Oh, and he couldn’t forget…
The doorbell rang, startling him. It didn’t take him a moment to sense two heartbeats… and the scent of an old foe. What the hell was that guy doing here? Because Buffy wasn’t with him.

For a moment, he thought of not answering it, but then he decided against that course of action. Better the enemy you know… So he went to the door and opened it. “Riley Finn,” he said.

Okay, that was shock on the commando’s face… and a woman Angel didn’t know by his side. “What are you doing here?”

Clearly, Buffy hadn’t told Riley a thing about his being in town and that was both a relief and a confirmation of how trustworthy she was. It also gave Angel the edge, and he appreciated that. “I’m visiting an old friend. What are you doing here?” No, he wasn’t stepping back or inviting Riley inside.

But Riley and his companion barreled past him anyway. “Where’s Willow?” the man all but shouted.

“Upstairs. By the way, this is her house and I don’t seem to remember hearing her invite you in.”

Then there was the sound of an infant wail.

Oh no. Why did he have to wake up now?

Willow heard the commotion from downstairs and the blood chilled in her veins. Riley was here – and he wanted to see her. Why? What was he doing here? Had Angel been wrong? Did Buffy…?

Then there was a noise – a loud one.

Oh god! Connor was crying. No way Riley didn’t hear that.

Think, Willow. Think.

Okay. That was it. She could kill two birds with one stone, and maybe even protect herself a little – unless he knew… but he wouldn’t have knocked then, and he wouldn’t have asked for her.

Wow. Her thinking was getting pretty clear.

She’d celebrate that later. For now, she hurried to Angel’s room, where Wesley was holding Connor and trying in vain to calm him. Putting her finger to her lips in an admonition to keep quiet and motioning for Wesley to stay where he was, she took the baby and…

“Hey,” she said, cradling a now surprisingly quiet Connor in her arms as she emerged from the stairway. “Can you keep it down? You woke my son.”

For a split second she saw awe in Angel’s eyes, but he hid it quickly. Good, because even though Riley was doing a great impression of a large-mouthed bass, the woman with him was narrowing her eyes at her. “Who are you?” she demanded of the stranger, “And why are you in my house?”

“She’s uh… This is my wife, Sam. Did you say your son?”

Willow rolled her eyes. It felt strange, but she knew it was something she would have done before and she felt it imperative to keep up appearances. “Yes. My son.”
“But… how…”

At that, Angel laughed and Willow even had to chuckle. “It’s kind of a natural thing. You know: Girl goes to bar, girl has too much to drink, girl goes to motel with guy, nine months later…”

“Aren’t you a lesbian now? What about Tara?”

“I’m pretty much bisexual and Tara and I broke up. Kinda why I was out getting drunk.” Later, she’d marvel at how easily the lies came and how well they seemed to work. She’d never been this good at deception before. She was sure she’d have remembered if she had.

Amazing, that’s what Willow was. Amazing. Her glib explanation was covering everything and convincing the two commando-dressed intruders completely. Even Riley’s… wife?

How did Buffy feel about that? It had to have hit her pretty hard. She and Riley hadn’t been apart for that long, had they?

A quick onceover of the woman – hey, he was a guy – and he… well, she had a good enough figure and a pretty, if common, face, but there was nothing about her that made her special. Guess Riley had realized that girls like Buffy were way out of his league.

Riley’s next question was an unnerving splash of cold water. “What’s Angel doing here?”

To his shock, Willow had a ready answer. “I want to find Connor’s father. I could use the child support. My computer searches have been coming up empty and since Angel’s a private detective, I figured maybe he could help.”

The Willow he remembered had been as bad a liar as was ever born and he was stunned at her capable prevarication now… stunned and grateful.

She leaned down and placed a kiss on his son’s forehead, looking for all the world like a doting mother. “Such a good boy,” she said softly. “Mama’s precious angel.”

Those last words hit Angel and it was all he could do not to show his reaction. For a brief moment… it was as if they were Connor’s parents.

One more complication.

But at least another seemed to have been neutralized. Riley had moved next to Willow and was gazing at the baby. “He looks like you,” he told Willow, and she gave him a treacly smile.

“Yeah. Everyone says that.”

He almost laughed as Riley leaned in and said. “Are you sure it’s safe for Angel to be here? With the baby?”

“Don’t worry,” she responded, “he still has his soul.”

With that, Sam Finn’s eyes shot open wide. “His soul? Why wouldn’t he have…?” She raised her weapon and pointed it at him. “What are you?”
To be continued…
"What are you?"

Sam Finn was staring at him with a clinical, steely gaze and Angel was reminded of just whom she and that husband of hers worked for. He also realized that there was clearly a good deal Riley hadn’t shared with the missus.

He focused on the weapon she had pointed at him. It wasn’t a familiar style, but he had a hunch it might be a flamethrower, in which case, he wasn’t exactly safe. Everywhere he turned, there was danger. He cheated a quick glance at Willow – still holding Connor. At least there was hope that his child would be safe, even if these were his own last moments of unlife.

“He’s a vampire,” Riley finally said. “But he has a soul.”

“You believe that?” Well, well. It was clear from her cold and dismissive tone just who wore the trousers in the Finn family.

Did Riley do the dishes and the laundry?

Unfortunately, this wasn’t the time for amusement. Angel would be far better fixed to enjoy pondering Buffy’s ex-toy-soldier’s emasculation if he weren’t in imminent danger of immolation.

Just then, another voice broke in, and from the tone of it? Even Sam Finn would have to listen.

“It’s true.” Willow glared at Riley’s commando wife. “Now would you put that gun down? I don’t allow violence around my son.” She looked down fondly for a moment at the baby in her arms for good measure. He was so quiet through all of this. Guess he took after Angel. What would he be like, she wondered, if he were really her son?

Why did she even think that? Not like she’d ever even considered having kids.

Now was not the time to let her thoughts get distracted and disorganized. There was real danger. Her attention was all on Mrs. Finn and the weapon she was still pointing at Angel. “I asked you to put the gun down.”

“You let a vampire in your house?”

“Yes, I did. It’s my house. I can let anyone I want to in… and I don’t actually recall letting you in, but since you’re here, you could be a polite houseguest and abide by my rules. No violence, especially not in front of my son.” How many times did this woman have to be told? Because the gun had not been reholstered.

“I can’t just…”

The woman didn’t even finish her sentence. Before Willow even realized what she was doing, power began flowing out of her… and the gun was ripped out of Sam Finn’s hand and flung across the room by the sheer force of magic.
Oh god.

“I asked you nicely,” she said, struggling to sound calm. She hadn’t meant… but hey, at least it had worked. “Angel is my friend. That soul you don’t believe in? I gave it back to him. It’s there and it’s not going anywhere. Unlike you. Because you’re not welcome in my home anymore.”

Riley’s eyes were wide and he looked scared – he wasn’t alone - but he took his wife’s arm and said, “We’re leaving.”

They didn’t even pick up the gun before hurrying out of the house.

Maybe this was a sigh of relief moment, but Willow didn’t feel it.

Then she heard Wesley’s voice from the staircase. “We haven’t seen the last of them.”

Kissing Spike. Tara was kissing Spike. Well, he was kissing her… but she was kissing him back. And she liked it.

She really did.

Which didn’t make any sense at all.

She didn’t find men attractive. Not even a little. No curiosity about Boystown for this lesbian. Sure, she’d thought it was sort of cute when the guys had stared at her that day in the park with Willow when there’d been all that singing, but that was just the rush of anyone thinking she was pretty. She hadn’t thought anything back.

So how… Because Spike… he was as man as a man could be. Hard muscle and chiseled jaw and… oh yeah, that, which was pressed against her now. Oh god.

This was the moment where she should pull away and make some sort of apology and leave. She’d done that before, right? And it had been absolutely the right thing to do.

But somehow she wasn’t doing it now.

No, she was clinging to him and letting his tongue into her mouth and feeling… feeling things she had never, ever believed she could feel for a man.

Then, slowly, but definitely, the kiss ended and Spike let her go.

There was silence as they stood, awkwardly, looking at each other and then away and then back and…

Why wasn’t he saying something? Because someone should say something and he was much more conversational and clever than she was, but he wasn’t saying a word.

The silence was becoming thick and heavy and very unnerving. So she should say something. But there was a problem. What was she supposed to say? Something light, probably, and nothing that had anything to do with…

“What about Buffy?”
Okay, that was not what she had meant to say.

Spike stared at Tara – Tara, whose kiss of a moment ago had been heaven and whose words just now… well, they’d dragged him out of it as surely as Willow had yanked the reward out from under the Slayer, and that was a fact.

Not that she was wrong to ask that question. Girl never did anything wrong, now did she?

Especially not kissing.

He tried to bring Buffy to mind and all he could see was Tara, and his mind was full of fancies of what it would be like to take her to bed, to experience the passion he just knew was locked up inside her, waiting to be set free.

To go to sleep beside her and wake up with her still there – knowing that she was his…and he was hers.

Bloody, buggering hell. How had this happened? One minute he’d believed himself to be as in love with Buffy Summers as it was possible to be and the next…

“There is no Buffy. Not for me. Not anymore.” No, he hadn’t meant to blurt that out, but he had and there was no taking it back. Love’s bitch rolling over and exposing his soft, white belly.

But she didn’t go in for the kill. Instead, Tara just stared, those wide eyes reading him like a book of secrets. “You can’t really stay here, can you? I mean… the explosion kind of destroyed your bedroom and all.”

Huh?

What she said next though was what floored him. “I… You can stay with me. It’s a dorm room and I don’t have cable but…”

She was staring at the ground now, toe scuffing the dirty floor. Had no idea what she was letting herself in for, did she? He might have a chip, but he was still a demon and when a demon wanted…

“You know what’ll happen if I stay with you?”

This was the part where she suddenly remembered a study group or some such and Spike braced himself, though he wouldn’t blame her a bit.

Then she shocked him. “You’re coming to the dorms with me. Grab anything you need. We should leave soon.”

Even after a second hot shower, Buffy still smelled like Double-not-exactly-meat and her spider senses were ping-ponging like some old school pinball machine. Any minute now, there’d be that annoying ‘Tilt’ thing that meant that you lost your money and didn’t even get to finish your game because the machine was totally rigged by some arcade owner who was so greedy that he would stoop to stealing money from little kids and… Okay, stay off of memory lane, Buffy. It only leads to badness.
As if on cue, the doorbell rang.

Great. She was wearing her sushi pajamas and her hair was in a towel and no way was anyone she actually wanted to talk to behind the front door.

Unwrapping her hair, she tromped down the stairs and grabbed a weapon before she asked, “Who is it?”

She heard footsteps behind her. Oh goody. Dawn was awake. “Aren’t you supposed to be in bed? You have a test tomorrow,” she hissed. Dawn just shrugged and stayed put. This was what happened when they turned thirteen. Even a Slayer couldn’t get a teenager to follow orders.

Speaking of following orders… “It’s Riley, Buffy. And Sam. We need to talk to you.”

Damn it! She hadn’t filled Dawn in on anything that had happened. “Go upstairs now!” she hissed. “Please?” This time she was pleading. “I promise I will tell you everything when they leave.”

Maybe it was the emphasis on ‘everything’, but to Buffy’s shock, Dawn hurried back upstairs. A moment later, Buffy opened the door.

“I thought you guys had another mission to lead,” she said as they pushed past her and right into her living room. As Cordelia used to say, rude much?

“We stopped by Willow’s place first. Why didn’t you tell me she had a kid?”

Willow had a…? Oh! Wow. Nice cover story they’d managed. Buffy hoped that none of her emotions showed on her face as she shrugged and said, “It wasn’t my story to tell. Willow doesn’t want the whole world knowing her business.”

“She’s an old friend.”

“Who hates you for leaving town and breaking my heart, so yeah, pardon me for not betraying her just to satisfy your curiosity.” Buffy glared at him. As much as she didn’t want him back, she was startled to realize that she was still kind of bitter. What was it with guys and leaving town to get away from her? Angel, Riley… two made it an official pattern, right? Especially if you added Giles. Not a boyfriend, but…

Now she really hated Riley, because these were so thoughts she did not want to be having. “You said you needed to talk. I’m assuming it’s about something more than your hurt feelings about not being invited to the slumber party with the rest of the girls.”

This time it was Sam who spoke. “You lied to us.” Okay. She wasn’t wrong, but which lie had she figured out? Luckily, Buffy didn’t have to wait to find out. “She’s still practicing magic. In fact, she attacked me with it.”

Attacked…? For a moment, Buffy felt a frisson of the fear she’d felt of her best friend back when Dawn had nearly been killed but then… No, there was more to this. “What did you do?”

Bingo. She saw the look on Riley’s face. If he ever played poker, he’d lose to a two year old. Commando Barbie, of course, was all tightly-wound, righteous indignation. “I was questioning the vampire.”

Okay, Buffy’s memory was nowhere near impaired enough to forget what that meant in Initiative-speak. “So you were threatening Angel? In front of Willow and… her son?” Buffy rolled her eyes – and her head along with them for emphasis. “Here’s a tip for next time – never threaten the people
Willow cares about. It makes her cranky.” Then she looked Sam over. Not a scratch, which meant… “Also, if she’d attacked you, you wouldn’t be here right now. My guess is she just fired a warning shot.”

By the way and totally off-topic, but did this mean Willow was getting back to normal? Buffy suddenly found hope again and she wanted to rush over to Willow’s house with a pint of Ben and Jerry’s and see if maybe, just maybe, they could do the girl talk thing.

She missed Willow. So much.

Back to business. She stood, arms akimbo, facing Sam, who was mirroring her posture. God she hated psych majors.

Buffy decided that maybe ‘oh really?’ face would be her best weapon here.

What do you know? It worked. She needed to remember that for the future. In the meantime, she just stood back and enjoyed Sam’s discomfort and awkwardness. “What was your problem with Angel, anyway?”

“He’s a vampire.”

“And he has a soul. So there’s no problem.”

“We were concerned about Willow.” Riley decided to rejoin the conversation. “I told you we’ve been getting some weird intel. Something about…” His eyes narrowed as he locked eyes with Buffy. Now her spider senses were a mosh pit. This was not going to be good. “The baby. Who’s his father?”

“We’re here. It’s not much, but…” Tara swept her hand over the vista of her small, drab dorm room. She hadn’t gotten around to redecorating, except for the ‘Blessed Be’ poster on the wall. Guess she hadn’t really expected to be here long. Was it only a week ago that she’d still dreamed of a future with Willow? It seemed like a lifetime.

The click of the door closing knocked her right out of her thoughts. She was alone. With Spike. In a room that had a bed in it.

He started walking toward her, dropping the paper bag that contained the few things he’d been able to salvage from the crypt as he moved closer.

“I’ve never done this. With a guy, I mean,” she blurted out.

If she’d expected a smirk, there was none there. Just the hint of a smile. “Nothin’ to be afraid of.” His voice was soft and his touch was gentle as he reached out and stroked her cheek. “I won’t hurt you.”

That was what guys said, wasn’t it? At least on TV and in movies. They never meant it.

But this wasn’t some TV show and Tara? She believed Spike. “I know. I trust you.”

Spike was damned lucky he didn’t need to breathe, because he wouldn’t have been able to anyway.
‘I trust you.’

Tara had just said that… and she meant it.

Who had ever trusted him before?

Whatever god paid attention to vampires must have taken pity on him because this was a benediction from on high.

Of course, now he had to think, because it had been… oh hell. Truth was, he’d never, ever made love to a girl like Tara. Never needed to be gentle and kind and soothe a girl through something totally unfamiliar. Could he? Could he be the man she needed?

His eyes found hers and he felt like he was getting lost in them.

Yeah. He could. For this girl, he could be whatever she wanted, whatever she needed.

A second later, she was in his arms and he was kissing her again.

For a brief moment, their lips parted and as much as he didn’t want to, didn’t think a demon was capable… he knew he had to give her one last chance… “Are you sure?”

The silence that followed was the fires of Hell.

Then…

To be continued…
“Are you sure?”

Spike’s words roared in Tara’s ears.

No, she wasn’t sure at all. Except… Yes, she was, wasn’t she?

Because no, she still didn’t find men attractive. She’d never be here with any other man. But Spike… Spike was Spike and she wanted to be with him, even though he wasn’t…

“Yes, I’m sure,” she said softly. Then she kissed him.

He kissed her back.

It was as if they had picked up where they left off at the crypt.

His hands were moving over her now, lean and hard, just like he was. It didn’t feel familiar in any way. How was she supposed to…? She knew nothing about what men liked. The idea that she’d ever be with someone who wasn’t a woman had never occurred to her. Not once in her whole life.

“Spike?” she choked out, as his mouth left hers. “I don’t…”

“Shh. S’alright.” He put his finger to her lips. “I’ll be good to you. Don’t be afraid.”

She wanted to tell him that what she was afraid of was that she wouldn’t be very good for him, but she didn’t know how. Instead, she let her mind go back to the first time she’d been with a girl. How she’d been clumsy… what she’d done right. The way she’d learned by touching and exploring just what worked and what didn’t.

Her mouth was on Spike’s neck now. He was a vampire. It was all about the neck with them, right? She started to nibble lightly with blunt teeth when, to her surprise, he pulled back. “Just be you, love,” he said softly, kissing her gently on the forehead. “You’ll do just fine.”

Her eyes met his and she saw truth. It was both a relief and sort of not at the same time. But here she was and no she wasn’t changing her mind.

Maybe if she let go… that might help. So she closed her eyes and focused on Spike’s hands on her body, the way his lips were on her neck. Sweet and gentle and not even a hint of teeth.

It was… nice.

Really nice.

Spike felt Tara begin to relax in his arms and he smiled against her throat. He was as nervous as an untired schoolboy, though. In a way, wasn’t that what he was? This would be the most human experience he’d ever had in bed and he wasn’t at all sure he knew what the devil he was about.
Guess that made two of ‘em, eh? Tara’d clearly never even considered the idea of being with a man before and…

Why him? Why, out of all the men she could easily have had if she wanted to take the opposite sex for a test drive, had she decided to be with him?

Now wasn’t really the time to get all philosophical, now was it? Because the fact remained that here she was…and you know, for a girl whose only experience had been with other girls, she wasn’t half a quick study at what to do with a bloke. Her hands were moving over him now and she was distracting him nicely from all the thoughts clogging his brain.

He moaned against her neck, letting her know he approved of what she was doing, then let his own hands do some pretty pleasant wandering… under her shirt to caress those lovely tits of hers – the fullest he’d had his hands on in awhile. More than the Slayer had by half.

Now she was moaning and he felt… good. He was getting it right. A relief, that was what that was.

Time to move things along. Moving his hands down to the hem of her shirt, he started to pull it up and she… she obligingly raised her arms. More confirmation that she was where she wanted to be – and more proof that there was no luckier being on the face of the Earth than Spike.

A moment later, her shirt was off and her skin glowed pale in the dimly-lit room. She was a pretty thing, that was a fact, every bit as lovely in her own way as Dru or Buffy, even if hers wasn’t such a showy sort of beauty.

She stood there, giving him a quizzical look. It took him aback for a moment and then… oh. Yeah. Guess he’d better equalize things a bit. He shed his own shirt, tossing it to the corner to join hers and he watched as her eyes widened. Normally, he’d chalk that up to admiration, but in this case… no, he couldn’t be sure.

“You still want this?”

There was a nod and a blush and a shy smile in answer, but then something else occurred to him. He felt awkward asking, but with her there was his chip to consider – damn that wretched bit of technology in his head. “You… you still… a virgin and all, or did you use toys or something?”

Her blush turned pinker, but she nodded again and said, “I’ve… I’ve used toys.”

He reached out and caressed her cheek. “Just wanted to make sure I wasn’t gonna hurt you.” Or himself, for that matter.

Even though he hadn’t added that last bit out loud, she got it. “Your chip,” she said, in a voice suddenly wise and kind. She stroked his forehead with the lightest of touches. “It’ll be okay.” Then she kissed him.

Oh yeah. It was okay, all right.

For all the assurance in her words, there was a roaring in Tara’s ears. She was going to do this. She was really about to make love to a man.

Make love.

Was that how Spike saw it? She felt like it was. He was being so sweet and kind and she knew it
was nothing like what it must have been like with Buffy or Drusilla, so…

His hands were moving over her, skillful and assured, and she forgot what she’d been thinking about. Which was a good thing, a very good thing, especially if she could forget about being scared, which… she was almost there.

She allowed her own hands to do some exploring, moving away from the idea of ‘wrong’ to that of ‘new.’ His skin was like marble. Not cold, but definitely cool. And smooth. And hard.

Speaking of which…

Yes, she was touching it now. When had she unzipped his jeans? Or had he…? She didn’t know – couldn’t remember – but she was glad she was stroking him, getting the feel of what was about to be inside her, pleasing him. She felt… powerful. Wow. She hadn’t expected to feel that way at all. It was good. So good. Very good.

Things were happening and the how of them was getting lost in sensation. They were on the bed now and naked and… no, no thinking about how it happened. She was just going to let go and enjoy. He deserved that… and so did she.

How long had it been? A long time if you took out that last time with Willow.

For a brief moment, there was a flare of panic as he spread her legs, but then… “Oh!”

It didn’t hurt, but it was strange and foreign and nothing like using toys had ever been. This was someone, not something inside of her and her breath stopped as she got used to the sensation.

“You alright, love?”

There was real concern in his voice and she hastened to reassure him. “Yeah. It’s just… but I’m fine.” She pulled his head down to her for a kiss and he smiled against her mouth.

Then he started moving inside her.

That too was strange, but… good, really good. She was clumsy at first, trying to move with him, but he smiled at her and didn’t seem to mind and then… then she felt herself building toward something she hadn’t exactly been sure would happen and… “Oh god. Spike!” she cried out as her orgasm shook her.

A moment later – or something, she was too lost to think of time – and he followed her, calling out her name. She could feel something cool and liquid inside her. Another new and unusual experience, but it was part of something beautiful.

He lay beside her as she panted, coming down from her orgasm-high. “Thank you,” he said softly, placing a gentle kiss on her forehead. That was the last thing she remembered before she fell into an exhausted and sated sleep.

“The baby. Who’s his father?”

Oh great. A question Buffy had no idea how to answer. But then – then it occurred to her… “How is that any of your business?” she asked, hands on hips, looking as fierce and determined as it was
possible for a girl wearing pajamas with pictures of raw fish on them to look.

It wasn’t fierce enough. Sam had her hand on her holster – it was empty, so the gesture was pretty much laughable, but still. Oh god. This was serious. Her spider senses hadn’t turned into a mosh pit for nothing. Stall, Buffy. Do something – anything – to protect that kid… and Angel… and Willow. “What did she tell you?”

Riley relaxed, fractionally, though Camo Barbie didn’t seem to realize that Slayers weren’t supposed to be the enemy – or that she didn’t have a weapon. “She said it was some random guy she hooked up with right after she and Tara broke up.”

Buffy pretended to be surprised – and she was, only her real shock was at Willow coming up with that really pretty terrific cover story. “I didn’t think she’d be quite that big on sharing with you, but yeah, that’s what happened.”

Agreeing. That would solve the problem, right?

Or not, because it was clear that the couple who registered at army surplus for their wedding gifts wasn’t buying it. Was it her sushi pajamas? “It’s the truth,” she insisted.

Riley shook his head. “Willow going off with some stranger for a one-night stand? That’s not like her.” There was a something in his eyes that really offended Buffy, because she could tell he was comparing Willow to her… and remembering her mistake with Parker. He had some nerve. Guess he forgot paying sleazy vampire chicks to bite him. (And who knew what else had happened – huh?)

“You don’t know everything about her. Anyway, she was really broken up after she and Tara split. It didn’t surprise any of us that she kind of went off the deep end.”

“Or maybe you just believe that because you don’t want to admit the truth.”

Okay, Buffy’s spider senses were now tap dancing like they were on crack. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve been getting intel – about the child of a demon. Nothing specific but now? After tonight? Buffy, I know that that baby isn’t just Willow’s. It’s Angel’s.”

“It’s not your fault.” Wesley was trying to be reassuring, but Willow wasn’t buying it. She knew. It was using magic. That was why things weren’t back to normal, the way they should be.

“I shouldn’t have attacked her.”

“If you hadn’t…”

“She would have killed me and who knows what danger my son would be in.” Angel sat beside her and put his arm around her. “You saved us. Thank you.”

She stared into Angel’s eyes as they remained beside each other at the edge of bed, the baby once again sleeping peacefully – unaware of the drama of which he was the center. “They’re gonna be back though, aren’t they? Riley… he seems like some aw-shucks farm boy, but I remember… he’s smart, Angel. A lot smarter than he seems. I don’t think Professor Walsh would have had a dumb hick as her right hand man.” Willow shuddered as she remembered the hardened sociopath whose
admiration she’d once sought, disgusted with herself as she recalled being jealous that the woman thought more highly of Buffy than of her. Guess it was good to remember things, but some of them… no, they didn’t feel nice at all.

“We’ll be okay,” he replied, pulling her in close. “At least we know what we’re facing – and you’re more than a match for them.”

Angel wasn’t paying her an idle compliment either. He was still in awe of the raw power she’d unleashed… and he knew it was only a small taste of what she could do in the heat of battle.

It had been a long time, if ever, that he’d partnered with someone stronger and more dangerous than he was. Buffy had been his equal and that had been exciting, but this…? How did he feel about this slip of a girl now that he knew so clearly just what she was? The bond he shared with her hadn’t given him a clue. Why was that?

Then he looked in her eyes again and he knew. She really was nothing like Buffy, was she? For Buffy, being the Slayer was something that was as much a part of her awareness as her own name and as natural. She accepted it. And, for all her protestations, deep down she reveled in it. Those moments when she let go and just gloried in her nature were actually the moments when he’d loved her best and fighting side by side with her had been incredible.

Willow, though… she still saw herself as the awkward, unloved girl she’d been and not as the beautiful, powerful woman she was now. Was it because the power came from Jenny Calendar? Because Buffy’s power was bestowed on her as well, but she owned it, and she had every right. No matter where it came from – she was the one who wielded it. The same was true of Willow.

He would show her, he decided, help her to accept that it really was hers and that all the things she did with it, all the lives she saved, souls she restored, all the things she accomplished were hers. Yes, that would mean accepting the slips and the mistakes as well, but she already took the blame for those, anyway, though he didn’t quite understand how she could so thoroughly reject agency when it came to heroics but so readily claim the mantle of villainy.

Just then, there was a harsh ring. Willow nodded and he picked up the receiver on the bedside phone. “Angel? It’s Buffy. I don’t know how secure this phone is, but you need to know – Riley thinks you’re the father of Willow’s baby.”

Angel closed his eyes for a moment, though he wasn’t entirely surprised. He had figured that demon hunting crew was in town for something big. Bring it on, soldier boy.

But then he remembered… as much as he knew from the undertone of fatigue in her voice that Buffy needed rest, he also knew there was something he had to tell her, secure line or not. “That’s not the only problem we have to deal with,” he said. “Apparently three guys you used to go to school with - I think Cordelia said two of their names were Andrew and Jonathan – are out to take you down.”

To be continued…
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