Legions of True Hearts

by eurydice72

Summary

Post graduation, a restless Buffy goes to London to escape the memories of Angel, only to lose herself in unexpected dreams. But is William real, or is he a distraction? Is he, possibly...both?

Notes

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet V."

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Graduation Day. With the aid of her friends and schoolmates, Buffy killed the Mayor, destroying the high school at the same time, only to be “rewarded” by having Angel walk out of her life for good. This story starts two weeks later.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: I love Spuffy. I love Spike. Honest, I do. But I’m also incredibly sweet on William, and the idea of writing a romance for him has been gnawing at me ever since I read Elsa Frohman’s “A Cricket in California” (which is delightful, by the way, so if you haven’t read it, go do so now). So, to answer that particular call of mine, folks, here it is. I’m not going to tell you that Spike’s not going to make an appearance, but I will say, don’t hold your breath.
Pent in Walls of Glass

Her thighs throbbed.

Burning from the exertion of overstretching, sending tingles along the sinews that joined leg to hip to spine to neck so that her muscles vibrated against the body beneath her. Sweat dripped down the side of her neck to sidle between her breasts, the summer heat in spite of the midnight sky already sweltering and forcing the near-sheer fabric of her top to cling to her hardened nipples.

It was exhilarating, and yet not, and each pump of adrenaline through her veins made Buffy want to chisel and sharpen the angles of contact, twisting and writhing until exhaustion would claim her. Sleep was an absent friend currently, so she substituted the rush in its place, desperate for crumbs to which to cling while everything else that mattered tried to skitter away from her.

Or walk away, depending on who it was doing the leaving. Just like the others who’d once been in her life. Just like Angel.

It was the conscious acknowledgement of his name that made her fight the demon pinned beneath her all that much harder.


Its response was to lash out with its barbed tongue, aiming directly for her eyes.

She’d fallen for that trick once already, and had the jagged scrape across her bare shoulder to show for it. With a dodge to the left, she released her grip on its torso, rolling across the nearest grave to come to a stop at its newly-tended headstone. Her fingers wrapped around the small flag that was embedded in the earth, and yanked it out just as the demon lunged for her again.

“God bless America,” she muttered as she sank the sharpened end of the pole in its chest, using the force behind it to gut it as effectively as if she’d had a sword.

It fell on Buffy with a strangled gurgle, momentarily knocking the wind out of her, and she thrust it off with a disgusted grunt. Now her clothes were sticky with more than just sweat, and the sigh that escaped her throat as she rose to her feet was one of resignation.

“Bye bye, cute top,” she grumbled, and began ineffectively wiping off the worst of the goo as she headed for the gates of the cemetery. The thought of staying out to try and work through some of her frustrations just couldn’t compare to the benefits of a stinging shower at the moment.

“Buffy!”

She stopped at the sound of his voice, and turned with a frown to see Giles huffing and puffing through the graveyard to catch up to her. “What’s wrong?” she asked automatically, her body tensing as her gaze searched the empty expanse behind him. She had last seen him that morning, when he’d encouraged her to take the night off in order to attend Xander’s impromptu going away party, and though she had suspected he was going to patrol in her stead, she hadn’t really expected to run into him when she’d ducked out of the get-together early.

“You’re not…at…the Bronze,” he panted as he came to a stop at her side.

“And…that’s a problem?”
He shook his head, bending over at the waist to inhale deeply before speaking again. “I just…didn’t expect…to find you here.”

“And so I ask again.” Another glance around him revealed the silent night blinking back at her. “What’s wrong?”

He ignored her question, fidgeting with his collar as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “I know you may find this hard to believe, Buffy, but I’d rather hoped you’d take this opportunity of Xander’s leaving to take a break from your responsibilities. You’ve been…pushing yourself too hard since graduation. I worry---.”

“I’m fine.” She pivoted on her heel and resumed her march toward the gates. She didn’t even look up when he fell into step beside her. “The Bronze was dead, and as much as it looks like I’m into dead things, not so much when it comes to partying. That’s the only reason I left. So…no big.”

“That doesn’t explain why you felt the need to patrol. I thought I told you I had everything under control.”

“And who’s the Chosen One here?” she teased. “Kind of hard to ignore the call of destiny, Giles, remember? And I’m going home now anyway. I plan on getting intimately acquainted with a long shower so that I can get not so intimately acquainted with all this demon goop.”

“And sleep?” he shot back. “Or do you plan on spending another night dwelling on Angel’s departure?”

His words sucked the air from her lungs, immobilizing her step as she stopped to gape up at him. “What’re you talking about?” she managed to choke out.

The lines between his eyes eased, his demeanor softening in counter with the rigidity stiffening her shoulders. “Willow told me you haven’t been sleeping, Buffy,” he said softly. “And I spoke with your mother today. She confirmed you’ve been…out of sorts since graduation.” He held up his hand, cutting her words off before she could speak. “I know you believe this is none of my business, that I’m…biased when it comes to you and Angel, and you would be partially correct. But what happened, what he did…you can’t allow that to interfere with moving on with your life. That’s not what he’d want.”

“What about what I want, Giles?” she demanded. “Does anybody ever think to ask me about that? So I’m a little light on the sleep front. Considering we just averted major apocalypse number four less than a month ago, not to mention I graduated high school and watched someone I thought loved me walk out of my life as if I meant nothing to him, I think I’ve earned a little slack.”

“What you’ve earned is a vacation.” His voice was heavy as he rested his hand on her shoulder, but the small gesture leeched some of the tension from her muscles, commanding her to listen to him in only the way Giles could get away with. “That’s why I went and saw your mother today. I need to go to London for a month or so about some new texts. I thought it would be a good idea if you came with me. Take a holiday from the Hellmouth, so to speak.”

“But…” His offer was a bolt from the blue, slicing through her momentary anger to cut her at the knees and leave her stumbling to understand. “…I’m the Slayer. I don’t get vacations.”

Giles smiled. “You’ve been the exception to just about every other rule I’m aware of. I see no reason you can’t be the exception to that one as well. And if you’re uncomfortable taking a complete hiatus, I’m certain there’s a vampire or two in London you might be able to slay.”
For a moment, the promise of what he was suggesting made her want to throw her arms around him in a huge hug, but just as quickly the impulse dissipated, leaving her as empty as she’d been once the high from fighting the demon had vanished. “It’s a nice idea,” she said, “but you know I can’t. Mom would never say yes—.”

“She already has. Otherwise, I would never have brought it up with you.”

“Oh.” Didn’t expect that one. “But who’s going to keep an eye on things around here? Xander’s leaving tomorrow for his summer of self-discovery, and Willow can hardly patrol on her own.”

“You know as well as I do that demon activity lulls after a major battle. A few weeks in London will hardly mean the end of the world here in Sunnydale.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, that does it. I’m not going anywhere. You’ve just jinxed it.” She began walking again, this time much slower, his suggestion still whirling around inside her head. “Not that I’m not grateful or anything, because I am, but weren’t you one of the thousands last year telling me I can’t run away from my problems? So I’m facing them this time. Score one maturity point for Buffy.”

“Sometimes, the mature thing to do is to recognize when it’s time to step back. Your attempts to cope with Angel’s departure are admirable, but…” He stopped in the path, waiting for her to halt as well before continuing to speak. “…they’re not working. Everywhere you turn, everything you see here…it must all undoubtedly carry with it a memory—.”

“And it always will,” she countered, her voice ragged. “Going away isn’t going to change that.”

“No,” Giles agreed. “But it might afford you the opportunity to rest, to temporarily free yourself of ghosts so that you when you return, you’re strong enough to face them again.”

It was so tempting. She’d been fighting the urge to run ever since graduation. Part of her wanted to go off in search of Angel, to tell him that it didn’t matter what anyone else thought, that she needed him if only as a friend. Another part wanted to find him so that she could rail against him for presuming to decide what was best for her. And yet another, more delicate part, the part she kept hidden from all of them because there was no room for it in Slayerworld, wanted to curl up into a little ball and cry because it couldn’t figure out what was so wrong with her that everyone wanted to leave her behind.

“I didn’t know unemployment was so bad that you’d want to hang out with a depressed teenager,” she joked half-heartedly. “And no offense, Giles, but I really don’t want my first college essay on ‘What I Did on My Summer Vacation’ to read, ‘got lost in stacks of musty old books with ex-librarian and spent the next month discovering new and unexciting ways to identify demon breeds,’ because, you know, kind of pathetic.”

“Yes, quite, which is why I’ve asked Willow to come with us if you agree to the trip. This isn’t about spending time with me, Buffy, or about furthering your Slayer skills, although, it would certainly be an excellent opportunity to…” He trailed off at her raised brows, clearing his throat. “There is plenty to keep you and Willow occupied in London while I go about my work. Museums, the West End, walking tours, shopping—.”

“Shopping?” She perked automatically, but her brain was already ahead of her mouth. London with Willow. And her mom’s permission. And it would be kind of cool to see a different country. Maybe a change of scenery was exactly what she needed. It was running away with permission. Giles had gone to great lengths to work this out for her. Why was she arguing with him?
“You won’t make me eat anything gross like blood pudding or haggis or something?” she asked with a smile, the first genuine one she’d given all night.

“Haggis is Scottish,” he replied, “and no, London is quite cosmopolitan. You can gorge to your heart’s content on McDonald’s if you wish.”

Their pace recommenced, and though Buffy’s step was lighter, her mind occupied elsewhere as they chatted about the particulars of the trip, the wall between them remained, unseen and unrecognized as she held tight to the pain balled in the pit of her stomach. Giles might empathize with her situation--he might even believe that he understood it---but she knew she was alone in trying to deal with it.

That’s the way it always was. She was the cheese.

Because the cheese always stood alone.

* * *

The warm glow of the candle made a mockery of the blank page staring back at him, and William dropped his head into his hands, closing his eyes against the burlesque it burrowed into his soul, his fingers knotted in his unruly curls and tugging as if the sharp pains in his scalp would incite the words to come. They were there; he could feel them dancing just outside the circle of light, promising him rapture if only he could ensnare even one and yet refusing him partnership with an insidious taunt. He just didn’t understand how they could elude him so effectively.

By all rights, he should’ve been asleep. It had been a long day, hours of waiting in uncomfortable chairs, watching his mother make the arrangements for the dinner party she was going to throw, all the while insisting that he should take a greater interest since, after all, “this is entirely for your benefit.” Thrusting him into the social scene when he’d begged off repeatedly by bringing it into their home, inviting a myriad of acquaintances within their social circle who might be of interest to him. It could’ve been worse. She could’ve invited Cecily and her family, and while he would’ve adored the opportunity to see the lovely brunette again, William feared that he’d only blunder terribly in her actual presence. Just as he had done last time, knocking over that glass of wine onto his trousers and spending the rest of the evening with a napkin covering the unfortunate stain.

Instead, he sat at his writing desk, his bed empty behind him, his page just as empty before. Sleep was a fugitive beyond his grasp, perhaps hiding in the vicinity of the poetry he wished to claim, and after an hour of tossing between his sheets, he’d risen to divert himself elsewhere.

Venturing into the rest of the house was out of the question. Though his mother had long retired for the evening, there would still be one or two of the staff up and about, and they would assuredly report his rising on the morrow, forcing him to field questions regarding his health when he knew there was nothing physically wrong. He had no idea why he couldn’t sleep, except for the understanding that his mind seemed incapable of escaping thought long enough to embrace slumber, and the last thing he wished was to get into a discussion on his wellbeing with a mother who, though he loved her dearly, did not understand the way her only son’s heart worked.

So he tried reading. And when that failed, he picked up his inks and paper, intent on creating something that perhaps he could share in the morning. Maybe he could translate his discomfort regarding the dinner party, and tell her through his verse why the prospect of conversation with vulgarians who took too much pleasure in belittling his own romantic leanings left him feeling small and insignificant. Surely, she wouldn’t wish her son---.

No, she wouldn’t understand. She wore blinders where William was concerned, and he didn’t have the heart to rectify her vision, even if it meant bearing the brunt of his peers’ humiliation.
A clatter in the street captured his attention, and, grateful for the distraction, he set down his quill to rise from his seat and cross to the window. He pulled aside the edge of the curtain in time to see the carriage pull to a stop in front of the Howard estate further down the road, and pressed himself into the wall when he saw David Howard emerge from the coach. One of the worst when it came to the ridicule masked in badinage, and William felt the bile rise in his throat at his shame in fearing seeing the man, even at such a distance.

He hated feeling like such a coward.

Dropping the drape, William began to prowl around the room, fingers agitated as they played with the tie on his robe. He spent too many hours hiding behind closed doors, even within his own home, and more than anything else, he wished that could change. There was a huge, glorious world out there, just waiting to be explored. It didn’t have to be as dark and vicious as the stories traded between vainglorious gossips painted it. There had to be beauty, and light, and radiance just ready to be found, ready to be experienced, and William could practically taste its luster on the tip of his tongue.

He could even see peeks of it through the walls that bound him to his life.

He just yearned for the strength to break them down, once and for all.

* * *

The crystal shattered where it crashed against the stone wall, and his fingers were curled around a second figurine before the voice from the table spoke up again.

“Keep that up, and you just might end up smashing her in the process,” the crone cackled.

“And that matters now because…?” he said through gritted teeth. His eyes glowed in the dim illumination of the cave, twin amber pricks ablaze with fury. “According to your little leaves of grass there, it doesn’t make a difference anyway. Not with both of them out there.”

“Both? One’s dead. He can’t lead an army if he’s dead.”

The vampire snorted. “Try telling that to the damn Powers. They have this amazing disregard for the normal rules of things. Dimensions, times, places…none of it makes a difference to them.” Carefully, he loosened his hold on the second figure, turning it out to stand proudly with the other assortment on the altar, his fingers gracing over the carved sculpture of its flowing hair. “So much for setting her free,” he growled.

With a heavy sigh, the aged witch swept the remaining dust from the table. “You’re giving up before you’ve even begun,” she said. “Think outside the box. If the so-called Powers refuse to reside within its walls, why should you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because you’ve just told me that if April comes back, she’s got to worry about not one, but two armies hunting her down? Kind of puts a damper on the welcome home party, if you ask me.”

“They’re only walls, my boy, only walls. They may block your path, but they’re not insurmountable. Climb over them or smash through, but don’t hide behind them if you truly wish her free again.”

He regarded her through slitted eyes, cunning working behind the intense gaze. “So what is it you suggest then?”
Gnarled hands began twisting the ropes of herbs that still littered the worksurface. “Start with what you know. Start with the generals.”

Her proposal prompted his agitation to begin anew, his feet circling the perimeter of the cave in long strides, lanky limbs acting in coordination with his words. “Start with the generals, she says. Are you out of your frickin’ mind? One of them’s the Slayer. I’d have to be crazy to try taking her on my own.”

“You are crazy, but you don’t have to kill her in order to stop her. The leaves tell me there are other ways.”

“Oh, yeah? Those leaves seem to be full of whacked out ideas tonight, remember? I’ve also got to worry about trying to find a man who should’ve been dead a century ago.”

The crone shook her head. “Then you’ve lost before you’ve even begun,” she replied, her cadences heavy in resignation. “If you believe in the leaves to find your enemies, then you must believe in their power to help you impede their intervention. You can’t have it both ways.”

His foot smashed to the left of the altar, sending a shower of dust from the ceiling to rain in his dark hair. “Those leaves of yours better be right,” he snarled, and he dropped to straddle the chair opposite her. “Now tell me how I go about stopping the Slayer and Mr. Yesteryear.”
Tucking the leatherbound book under his arm, William crept down the stairs, ears alert for the sound of his mother’s voice in her sitting room. He’d seen the dreadful Mrs. Howard approach the house and knew she was in a calling mood by the set of her chin. David’s probably won some sort of recognition again, he’d thought bitterly, which would only mean that Mother would insist he come down and entertain by sharing some of his poetry. Not that he didn’t enjoy reading it for her, for at least she maintained the presence of pretending to like it, but Mrs. Howard would titter behind her hand, and look at him with those watery grey eyes that screamed disdain, and the entire charade would leave him feeling like some secondary Dickens character, tossed in for the amusement of the masses.

No, it was best to escape while he could, so as soon as he’d heard the sitting room door close, he’d grabbed his inks and journal and slipped out the servants’ entrance, making a dash for the park as quickly as his feet would allow.

It was uncharacteristically warm for the beginning of June, and William felt the first trickle of sweat begin down the back of his collar, itching and crawling in its aloof path down his spine. Perhaps a lighter jacket would’ve been in order, he mused as he reached the edge of the green. But that would’ve required more time spent at the house, more thought given to his escape, and he wasn’t convinced it would’ve been worth the trade. Better to just grab the chance and go. He’d just live with the consequences now that he was free.

When he saw his favorite bench along the bank unoccupied, a smile lit his face for the first time that morning, and he rushed forward to snag it before someone else beat him there. The sigh of relief that escaped his lips when he slid onto its seat relaxed a modicum of tension in his limbs, and he just sat there for a long moment, gazing across the water, its crystal water marred only by the occasional ripple caused by the slight breeze.

“Such a lovely time of year.”

He started at the voice that appeared from nowhere, and sat up straight as he turned to see the elderly woman grasping the back of the bench. He was on his feet before he could think otherwise, bending slightly at the waist as he stepped away. “Quite,” he agreed, and then frowned when her wrinkled face spread into a smile.

“No need for gallantry when I’m too old to care,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. William swore he could almost hear her joints creak as she came around the edge of the bench and settled on the far end. “There’s certainly more than enough room for both of us here.” Her gloved hand patted the seat he’d just vacated. “Unless, of course, you’re worried I’ll compromise your virtue. You wouldn’t be
the first young man I’ve sullied.”

His cheeks flamed at her words, both from her blatant tease and the bluntness of her manner. She was harmless, more frail than many women he’d seen her age, and wore the black dress of a widow, yet there was something in her flashing dark eyes that spoke of cunning, and a flicker of what he thought was respect.

That couldn’t be, however. He didn’t recognize her; she would have no idea who—–.

“Don’t be such a ninny,” the old woman chided. “You’re Anne Freston’s son, aren’t you?”

So maybe she did know who he was.

“My apologies,” he stammered. “I’m afraid I’m being quite rude—–.”

“Only if you continue to stand there and gawk.” She patted the seat again. “It’s far too glorious a day to waste it, William. Do sit down.”

He did as she commanded, his back stiff, his brow shiny with sweat. The bridge of his spectacles was threatening to slide down his nose, and he pushed them back up with an unsteady hand, furious with himself for allowing his discomfiture to show. So he’d failed to recognize one of his mother’s acquaintances; it was hardly the end of the world. He just hoped his ungracious manner didn’t get back to her ears.

“And how is your mother?”

This spot on way of hers of answering his thoughts was unnerving. “Very well, thank you,” he murmured.

“Oh. I’d heard she was unwell.”

His immediate reaction was to frown, but he quickly wiped it from his face. There had been some worrying incidents lately, but nothing that had been spoken of outside of the house. Surely, his mother wasn’t a part of the gossip mill already?

“No,” he reassured. “I’m afraid you’ve been misinformed. In fact, she’s in the process of planning a dinner party.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, William swallowed, pressing his lips together. Oh dear. Mentioning an engagement to which this woman might not be invited—–it would certainly help if he knew who exactly she was—–was quite the faux pas. One of these days, he really was going to have to start thinking before speaking.

“And so you’ve managed to escape the arrangements.” She nodded, ignoring his mistake as her gaze slid to his coat pocket and the journal that jutted out from it. “A little light reading to pass the time?” she asked, and before he could respond, the book was out of his jacket and in her wizened grasp, thin fingers tracing the delicate tooling on the spine.

Behind his glasses, William’s eyes widened, fear choking him as he prayed she wouldn’t deign to open it. No one had ever read his journal other than himself. It held the deepest fears of his heart, the greatest hopes of his soul, the strongest desires of his flesh. It was the only part of his life with which he was completely honest; he would be properly scandalized should its contents be disclosed, and if word should get back to his mother…

She wasn’t opening it. Instead, she was muttering under her breath—–Latin, from the few words he could catch, or a derivative thereof—–and her fingers never stopped their exploration of the soft leather. By the time he’d regained his wits enough to clear his throat, the old woman was already
looking up at him, her hand extended as she proffered the book.

“Lovely workmanship,” she commented. “I’m sure you must hold it dear.”

William had to refrain from snatching it back. “Yes, it’s…irreplaceable,” he said, and tucked it into his pocket. His fingers cradled the spine, the leather oddly warm to the touch.

Her eyes bored into his. “Odd how that applies to people as well,” she said, and the cadence of her voice chilled the beads of sweat that clung to his spine. “You know, you shouldn’t be so cavalier about your lack of sleep. So many restless nights can’t be good for your health.”

She knew. How, or why, or…how escaped his understanding, but there was no mistaking the knowledge glinting back at him from those obsidian depths. “Who are you?” William rasped. His body was torn between the rippled sensations of gooseflesh crawling along his skin and the fire that burned from his journal into his palm, but none of it was of consequence as his mind raced, desperate to try and make sense of the questions she raised. “What do you want?”

“Who was it that said, ‘Fortune favors the brave?’”


He frowned at the sad shake of her head. “And perhaps it’s better to understand the classics, rather than capable of spouting off mere facts about them,” she said, rising to her feet. “Words can be an effective shield, William, but they can also be a wall if you choose to hide behind them. Be careful how you use yours.”

As she began walking away, he was up and halfway to her side when he forced his step to stop. Regardless of what she said or how it made him feel, he had no idea who she was, what her interest in conveying such cryptic messages, or even whether or not she was just an escaped inmate from Bedlam. Better to just let her go.

Even if he couldn’t shake the feeling that doing so was tantamount to slitting his own throat.  

* * *

When Willow had suggested shopping, Buffy had jumped at the chance, her jet lag finally abated after three days to be awake enough for the excursion during normal daylight hours. Her expectations hadn’t been unreasonable, she’d thought. First, there’d be racks of designer tops and snooty sales clerks eager to take their American credit cards. Then, sitting in a café, sipping tea and watching the tourists go wandering by, laughing with her best friend about how ridiculous they all were while making sure to keep her own camera carefully hidden.

Finding herself in the musty basement of a used bookstore on Charing Cross didn’t even come close on the Buffy radar.

“Giles asked me to pick some books up,” Willow had apologized as she’d led her away from the tube station toward the long row of shops. “We won’t be very long. I promise.”

That had been half an hour earlier, and Buffy was starting to wonder just what Willow’s definition of not very long actually was.

Not that she was an expert, but it certainly didn’t look like any other book store she’d seen back in the US. Barely six feet wide, shelves from floor to ceiling took up most of the floor space, leaving a three-foot aisle that ran the length of the building. There didn’t seem to be any order to the books---not alphabetical, not categorized by type, not even stacked on end so that all the spines were visible---
and Buffy got a crick in her neck from the twisting and turning of trying to read some of the titles. To top it all off, she didn’t even have Willow around to complain about the cramped quarters. Once she’d dropped Giles’ name, her friend had disappeared with the elderly clerk to a back room, rife with promises of returning soon but severely lacking in the actual follow-through.

When an overweight tourist elbowed his way past her, Buffy pressed herself into the nearest bookcase to get out of his way, skittering along the edge until she felt the wall disappear from behind her. She glanced over her shoulder. There, almost buried between the tall stacks, was a narrow doorway, cramped stairs with a ceiling anyone taller than her would have to duck below, disappearing down into near darkness. A handwritten sign on the wall said simply, “More books,” with an arrow pointing downward.

“Like that’s a big surprise,” she muttered.

Mr. Too-Large-For-Such-A-Small-Store decided he’d forgotten something and turned to double-back, leaving Buffy’s eyes darting around for escape. Couldn’t go up, couldn’t really go in without getting even more cornered, which really only left…

Her foot felt for the top step just as he pushed by, and she grabbed the iron rail to guide her descent into the basement. Maybe it was roomier down there. Maybe there were fewer customers. At the very least, there would be different books for her to stare at while she waited for Willow.

It was slightly larger, but that was most likely due both to the lack of shelves along the walls and the dearth of customers, with the books stacked along the floor in piles that threatened to teeter over if she as much as breathed too hard. What it lacked in organization, though, it compensated with dust, and the first thing Buffy did when her feet left the stairwell was sneeze violently.

“Gesundheit,” she said to herself, and stepped to the center of the room, pirouetting in examination of the texts that surrounded her. So many colors, so many shapes, so many words she didn’t recognize.

“Oh goody,” she murmured, none too happy. “I’m in Watcher Paradise.”

She hated feeling ungrateful about the whole trip, but with three days now past, Buffy was beginning to wonder if coming to London was actually such a good idea. She was still not sleeping well, and now she had both Willow and Giles hovering over her every move, asking her how she was every other minute without giving anything in return but assurances that she’d feel better as soon as her jet lag went away. She didn’t even have the release of slaying to keep the demons at bay; until she could get around the block without getting lost---was anything in this country square?---Buffy didn’t trust herself to go out in the city alone.

Her fingers trailed over the nearest stack of books, a dust-free path echoing in their wake, and her gaze dropped over the exposed titles, the odd author ringing in her ears in the voice of English teachers she’d rather forget. Four books down, an empty spine blinked back at her, and she frowned as she stopped to focus on it.

It was worn leather, with intricate tooling spidering along its slim length. A bald patch in the middle announced the familiar grip of a single hand, the patterns fainter there where its previous owner had obviously held it for long amounts of time. Curious, Buffy lifted the books on top of it to slide it out. She had expected the cover to mirror the cool and gritty texture coating the other items in the shop she’d touched, but found instead a soothing radiance to the leather where it almost melted into her hand.

Closer inspection revealed yellowed, uneven pages that were loosely bound, and she knew instinctively that it wasn’t a published work. Old, yes, but there were older books in the store that showed more professional binding. That left private ownership, and as she traced the edge of the
binding with a slim fingertip, the desire to take a peek inside swelled within her.

Don’t know what I’m so gunshy about, she thought as she hesitated. It’s a store, wanting me to buy its books. Of course it’s OK for me to see what it’s about. So, she swallowed the niggle of uncertainty and flipped open to a random page.

The script was ornate and fluid, a testimony to the ceremony of days gone by. Bonus points for being in English, Buffy mused, and let her gaze drift across the words until a particular passage demanded she stop.

“The question of selfishness lends me pause,” it read. “On the one hand, I yearn for the freedom of making a choice based purely upon my own desires. Yet, on the other, do I not owe those who know me the constancy of my character? I will always strive to fulfill my responsibilities, but I can’t help but ponder the argument that I am only half a man if I ignore the leanings of my heart. Writing of them isn’t of sufficient consequence. It is too solitary, with little fruit for sustenance beyond that which I glean on the odd occasion I share them. But to act further would undoubtedly be detrimental to my duties.

“And so I wait, and I write, and I look outside my window and see the world passing me by, oblivious to the man standing behind the glass. They go along with their day, secure in the knowledge that I will satisfy the demands of my obligations, yet they do not know me, and most likely will never know. For that would require my selfish side to take voice, and as it is currently mute, I fear I shall continue unheard.”

Her throat was dry as Buffy let the pages fall closed again. Not a regular book at all, but someone’s journal, with all their private thoughts and fears spelled out for just anyone to read. For her to read. She wanted to put it back into the stack, to hide it from other prying eyes and pray for the man who’d written it that it never got sold. Or you can buy it, a little voice inside her said. Keep anyone else from reading it and give a dead man the privacy he wanted. That would work, too.

Tilting her head, Buffy lifted the cover to peek at the top of the first page. William Freston, 1879. “Well, William,” she said out loud. “What do you think? Put you back or take you home with me?”

It took less time than she thought to decide. Curling the leather against her chest, Buffy strode to the stairwell, wondering how much teasing she was going to get from Willow about her first London purchase being a musty old book.

* * *

Counting out the bills from the money Giles had given her, Willow watched as the elderly clerk finished wrapping up the books, her gnarled fingers nimble in spite of their age. “I can’t wait to come back and really explore this place,” she said. “I’ll bet you’ve got some nifty stuff buried in here, just waiting to be all unearthed.”

“You can always look now,” the woman said. “I can hold these for Mr. Giles while you---.”

Willow shook her head. “I’ve been here too long already. Buffy---.”

“Your friend.” She nodded in understanding. “Not exactly her milieu, is it?

“Not exactly’s an understatement. I promised her fun and frolicking on Oxford Street, but I think I might’ve blown my frolicking window if her jet lag starts to catch up with her again.”

There was a hint of hesitation in the clerk’s hands. “You should help her with that. It would be a shame for her to miss out on your vacation because she’s not sleeping well.”
“Oh, Giles had tons of tips on how to get over it, but none of them---.”

“I didn’t mean tips. I meant magic.” Dark eyes met Willow’s wide ones. “You’re buying magic books for Rupert Giles. Are you going to tell me you don’t know anything about it?”

“No, but…what are you saying?”

The elderly woman turned toward the bookshelf in the back of the office, fingers combing over the spines before extracting a slim volume. “There’s a spell in here,” she said when she turned back. “Quite simple with just a few ingredients that I’m sure Mr. Giles will have on hand. It should easily take care of your friend’s sleep problems.”

Holding up her hands in protest, Willow smiled in apology. “I couldn’t. Me and the magic isn’t always such a good combo. I mean, I try, but---.”

“It’s simple,” the clerk repeated, and slid the book into the stack she’d already packed. “Just look it over. Maybe your friend won’t even need it, and if she doesn’t, you can always use the book as a paperweight.”

The smile she flashed untied some of the knots that had formed in Willow’s stomach. It couldn’t hurt to just look it over, right? And what kind of friend would she be if she didn’t help out when she could?
“Buffy bought a book!”

Following Willow through the narrow door of the flat, Buffy rolled her eyes when the chirpy announcement immediately prompted Giles to poke his head out of the kitchen. “What’s that?”

“Buffy bought a book,” Willow repeated and flashed the other girl a brilliant smile.

Way to go to make me feel like I’ve just managed not to wet myself, Buffy thought in annoyance as she pushed past to go into the small living room. It had been a satisfying day once they’d managed to get out of the bookstore, filled with exactly the sort of shopping she’d had in mind when they’d set out, and her weary muscles were screaming out for respite. She collapsed onto the couch with a loud sigh, sprawling amid the bags that tumbled around her feet. “Buffy also bought an adorably killer skirt at TopShop,” she said. “On sale for ten pounds. That’s, like, five dollars, right?”

“Oh.” Her face darkened for a moment before she shrugged. “It was still a good deal.”

“Uh, more like fifteen,” Giles said.

“So…you had a good day?” He hovered in the entrance, watching as Willow dropped her purchases onto the coffee table. His eyes were intent on his Slayer for a long moment, darkened in concern, before darting to the redhead. “There weren’t any problems in picking up the texts I requested?”

Willow shook her head. “Signed, sealed, and delivered. Took a little longer than we thought, but that’s just because Esme couldn’t find the Whevra Codex straight away. Turns out someone was using it as a coaster in the back office.”

“Good, good,” he said, and almost immediately frowned. “Who’s Esme? Wasn’t Charles there?”

“No, she said it was his day off. Maybe you know her as Esmerelda. Except she said she hasn’t used it since the seventies and the whole Bewitched thing that made her life miserable.” She waited for a response, but was met only with a blank look. “Old? Huge into magic?”

“She doesn’t sound familiar, but I haven’t seen Charles in several years. He’s most likely hired some new people in the interim.”

“What about you?” asked Buffy. She didn’t want them talking about the bookstore any more. That could lead to questions about what she’d bought and she really didn’t want to be sharing William’s journal. It had been hard enough deflecting Willow’s inquisition; she wasn’t in the mood to be holding off Giles’. For now, it was hers and hers alone. “What’s the sitch in Watcher world?”
“Quite intriguing, actually,” Giles said. He settled into the leather chair near the fireplace, fitting into the traditional British décor as if he’d never left. “I had a lengthy visit with an old colleague today. According to Owen, there’s been a recent theft that’s caused quite the rumpus with the Council. They’re quite up in arms about it, I presume, because it presents a threat of some sort.”

Buffy perked up at the word “threat.” “Does this mean patrolling?” she asked, a little too eagerly. Finally, something to distract herself with. “Because you know, it’s probably not a good idea for me to just sit around the apartment all day, letting those Slayer muscles waste away. And you know me, all big with the conservation.”

“Oh, it’s much too early for that,” he was quick to say, shaking his head. “I’m not even aware of what exactly’s been stolen. Owen and I are planning on a day trip up to Cambridge early next week to see what we can discover.”

So much for that idea, she thought, visibly deflating at his negation for any need of a Slayer. But she knew she just couldn’t continue sitting around like she had been. Her malaise was getting worse rather than better, too many minutes left to think about everything that had happened in Sunnydale. Now that she’d spent some time in the city, getting more comfortable with the way traffic worked, and learning to look right instead of left when she wanted to cross the street, she was ready to start exploring the vicinity of the apartment some more. It was a nice neighborhood—the friend of Giles’ who was letting them stay there while he was on vacation obviously had money—but that didn’t mean there wouldn’t be vampires around.

And she could really use a good slay some time soon.

Rising to her feet, Buffy gathered up her bags. “I’m going to go put this stuff away before I change my mind about any of it,” she said.

“You’re not hungry?” Giles asked. “I rather thought we could go out for dinner.”

She shook her head. “We got a bite to eat before coming home. I think I’m just going to call it a night, if you don’t mind.”

“There’s always the television—.”

“With its mind-boggling five channels,” she finished. “Half of which look remarkably like PBS back home. No thanks. I think I’ll just curl up with my book.” She smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Better mark this day on your calendar, Giles. The Slayer choosing a book over mindless electronic entertainment? Something tells me you won’t get too many of these.” With a little wave good night, she headed for her bedroom.

* * *

Sitting on the floor by the coffee table, Willow’s pace was slow as she sorted through the books she’d picked up for Giles. Buffy’s quick disappearance was unfortunate. Up to that point, Willow had considered the day a huge success, outside of the having to wait at the bookstore part, but now, she wasn’t so sure. Broody Buffy was back. Worse yet, she looked like she was hibernating for the winter. Or summer, as the case may be.

The break from slaying didn’t seem to be doing the job, either. It would’ve been better if Giles’ little theft mystery had yielded some work for Buffy; at least then, she’d have something to distract her from her thoughts about Angel. More than once that day, Willow had tried to initiate a conversation about what had happened, only to be coolly rebuffed when the Slayer changed the subject each and every time. So, OK, she could take a hint. Angel talking bad. But what did that leave that was good?
Sleep. Sleep was good. Esme had been right about that. And that was something Willow might actually be able to do something about. It was tearing her up seeing her best friend suffer so.

Extracting the spell book Esme had given her, she stole a quick glance toward the kitchen, listening for a long moment to ensure Giles wouldn’t be coming out any time soon. He wouldn’t be pleased about her doing this. When it came to magic, the Watcher was reluctant to let her experiment on her own without his supervision. Oh sure, he was fine as long as it was something small and didn’t directly affect anyone, like her pencil twirling. But this would be about Buffy, and Willow was fairly certain that was no-witches-land in his book. Better he didn’t know.

She found the spell easily, and her face creased into a wide smile as she scanned it over. Another point for Esme. Not only were the ingredients incredibly basic, but the spell itself bordered on the simplistic. It was a little disappointing that it wasn’t more challenging, but if it worked to give Buffy some rest, then that was all that mattered.

* * *

She shoved the book under her pillow when the knock came. “Come in!” Buffy called out, sitting up in the narrow bed.

The door opened, revealing a smiling Willow carrying a steaming cup of tea. “I know you’re not hungry, but I thought you might want something to drink,” she said, venturing forward a hesitant step.

“Determined to keep me going on that whole English experience, huh?” She took the drink, its heat radiating through her fingers, and surprised herself by inhaling deeply. It didn’t smell like the tea Giles normally brewed. This was richer, tantalizing almost, and just the scent of it was making her mouth water.

“I thought it might help you relax,” Willow replied. She hovered near the edge of the bed, the smallness of the room making it impossible to pace like it was obvious her feet wanted. Back home, Buffy would’ve labeled the room a walk-in closet, but obviously on a tiny island where space was premium, if a bed and a dresser could be fit inside, that was enough to call it a bedroom.

“Thanks, Will.” The first sip made her tongue tingle, and before she realized what she was doing, Buffy was gulping down the tea, finishing half of it before she caught her friend’s raised eyebrows. “Good stuff,” she said with a slight blush. “Just call me Mojave.”

“I won’t keep you,” said Willow, backing up. “Besides, Giles should be back any minute with the fish and chips.”

A pang of guilt stabbed through her gut. “Guess I ruined his dinner out idea, huh?” she commented. “Somehow, I don’t think that’s what he had in mind when he suggested it earlier.”

“He’s worried about you, Buffy. Dinner was just something he thought might work to get your mind off of…stuff.”

The fact that Willow was afraid to even say Angel’s name around her any more only served to intensify Buffy’s guilt. Swinging her legs around the edge of the bed, she set the cup down on the nightstand. “Maybe I should be the brave little Slayer and go put in an appearance,” she said. “You guys are trying so hard---.”

“Aren’t you tired?” It came out like gunshot, startling both of them, and Willow flushed in embarrassment. “I mean, you look kind of tired, and you were dragging there toward the end. Even
Giles said it looked like you might finally get a good night’s sleep.”

“No, I’m…” But even as she spoke, the lethargy creeping through her limbs made Buffy feel like sinking into the mattress, and she shocked herself by yawning widely. “…more tired than I thought,” she finished, covering her mouth. “Excuse me.”

“No, no, excuse me,” Willow rushed, and for a second, the Slayer thought she saw what looked like a smile in her friend’s eyes. “You sleep. Finish your tea, get yourself all cozy, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I’ll be the bushy-tailed one.”

“And don’t worry about me and Giles. We’re just going to look over his books anyway. Good night.”

Once she was alone again, Buffy stretched back out on the mattress, the burn in her muscles only deepening the exhaustion she was fighting. Sleep is good, she thought, rolling onto her side. Her hand stole under the pillow, and she felt the warm leather of the journal, beckoning to her to be drawn out again. Maybe I’ll just read a little more, she decided when she pulled it out. Books have always worked as sedatives before.

It fell open to the page at which she’d left off.

“…that dreadful Mrs. Howard. I had hoped my morning’s escape would leave me free of her company, but unfortunately, my wishes were for naught as I encountered her on the step upon my return…”

* * *

“…upon my return. She did, of course, immediately launch into the most vulgar tale regarding David’s comport at a recent gathering, one to which, of course, I was not invited…”

William paused in his writing, looking up from the page to stare into the flickering candlelight. It had been an excruciating confrontation, Mrs. Howard prattling on with the details of her son’s behavior, sparing no triviality, all the while more than aware of his growing discomfort. Only the appearance of a carriage before her house was sufficient to divert her attention from her tale, and William had finally escaped to the sanctuary of his home as she scurried to see who was visiting.

At least he was spared a reading. That would have been the utmost humiliation, considering his current mood.

The words continued their refusal in cooperating. For hours, he’d sat in the study, scribbling out the verses that had seemed masterly upon the bank, but each syllable staring back at him from the paper threatened to obliterate the efficacy of the one next, leaving him frustrated and worn and wishing desperately that he’d stayed out where the imagery swelled in his mind’s eye, demanding a release through his inks. He would even have tolerated meeting the odd elderly widow again if it meant his poetry could live. She had been frightening, but relatively harmless, and at least he’d not lacked an internal voice when she’d left him.

So he’d begged off dinner, assuring his mother that he was merely tired from his morning out, and retired to his room, intent on having something to show for his efforts that day. But even there, where he was safest and free from recriminations, William had failed, gazing sadly at the crumpled pages that were scattered about his chair before picking up his journal. Better to record the events of the day than dwell on his deficiencies, though when he began, he automatically avoided chronicling his
eerie encounter. That would constitute dwelling, and further examination of what had transpired was beyond his grasp at the moment.

A quiet rap at his door was all that was necessary for him to set down his quill. “Yes?” he called out, and looked up to see one of the chambermaids standing in the entrance. In her hands was a silver tray, a steaming cup placed directly in its center. “I didn’t request anything,” William said, rising to his feet. He took a step forward. “What is that?”

“Just tea, sir,” she said shyly. “A special blend. To help you sleep.”

The reminder of his restless nights made him stiffen, and William lifted his chin as he stared at the young girl. “You can just take it away then,” he said, and though he’d deliberately opted for a haughty tone, inwardly he cringed when he saw her color at his rebuke. “I’m fine,” he added, softer this time as he sought to rectify the damage he’d already done.

She didn’t move. “Pardon, sir,” she stammered, “but I’m to be sure you take it. Your mum was ever so insistent.”

“My mother?”

She nodded. “She was saying to Cook about you looking peaked, wanting to know if you weren’t eating properly. Then Cook said as how you were just needing a bit of sleep and that she had the perfect remedy for that. A secret of her Auntie Esmerelda’s, she said. And so here it is.” Her glance down at the cup was accompanied by a faint rattle, and William realized that the poor girl was trembling in fear.

He’d done that. Of course, she was relatively new to the household, and spent most of her time waiting on his mother so her encounters with him were few and far between, but still, the knowledge that William had instilled this sense of trepidation in an unsuspecting girl made his stomach curdle.

Quickly, he stepped forward and took the tray from her grasp, inhaling the unfamiliar aroma of the tea as it passed underneath his nose. It wouldn’t do to have her drop it, after all.

“Thank you,” he said, and waved her toward the door. “You’ve done your duty now. There should be no need for worrying of reprimand.”

She seemed uncertain, her eyes darting from him to the tea on the desk, but she merely nodded her head and backed out of the room, closing the door shut behind her.

As he regarded the steaming tea before him, William sighed. And here I thought I was being careful, he mused. But not only have I alerted Mother to my restlessness, I’ve managed to get treated like a child in the process. Wonderful.

His slim fingers traced the gilt around the rim of the cup. Briefly, he considered dumping its contents into the chamberpot, but the questions that might raise were enough for him to dismiss the notion almost as immediately as he’d thought of it. Such a discovery would only prompt his mother to call for Dr. Gull, and that most certainly wouldn’t do. He had to admit, though, the tea did smell enticing, richer than his normal brew with a touch of nutmeg underlying its citrus-y tang. Would it be so bad to endure a bit of pampering and drink it?

He’d only meant to sip it, but as the first drops hit his tongue, the urge to swallow it down in a single gulp was overwhelming, prompting William to let it glide over his tongue in a continuous stream as he downed the drink. Within seconds, he felt a soothing lassitude seep into his muscles, and he’d barely replaced the cup back onto the tray when he felt his eyelids droop of their own accord.
Oh my. Perfect remedy, indeed.

His fingers scrabbled for his shirt collar as he stumbled for the bed, his head thick and unwieldy.

*Must remember… to thank Cook…in the morning.*

It was his last conscious thought before falling under the spell of slumber.

* * *

It was the sky dreams were made of, brilliant and blue and hurting his eyes when he squinted upward to scan the cloudless heavens. No variations in shade, not a speck of cirrus to mar the crystalline perfection of the expanse, and William inhaled with the tenor of a dying man desperate to savor his last few tastes of air.

He was in the middle of a park, but not one he recognized, rolling greens broken by trees he didn’t know, their oddly shaped leaves flowering in irregular clusters against the sky. The path on which he stood wound like a silver ribbon through the grass, the finely crushed stone almost like sand beneath his shoes, and the bed of daisies and deep-purple clematis that snaked alongside leant the air a redolent perfume that felt surprisingly like home.

A slight breeze tickled his neck, and William realized that he was in shirtsleeves, his collar undone, his cuffs rolled up nearly to his elbows. In his trousers pocket, an awkward weight bounced on his thigh, and he reached in and extracted the bottle of ink he found there. A sheaf of papers was rolled in his opposite pocket, and his face broke into a wide smile as he felt the first rush of words descend into his awareness.

* Ah, there they are, the devilish scamps. Back from whatever escapades they managed to frolic in after this morning. *

As his gaze followed the path, he saw a stone bench several yards ahead and strode forward, readying his work even before he’d reached its side. The utmost privacy pervaded the park, and though he knew he was dreaming, William thanked whatever gods were looking down upon him for the boon of solitude that would allow him to compose his verses. After all, certainly it was better to be prolific in the vagaries of slumber, than to never feel the written word within his pen at all.

Like a youth, he straddled the cold seat and set his tools before him, the inkpot weighing down the top edge of the paper while his right hand held down the bottom. In the nimble grasp of his left, the quill that had been bound with the papers danced across the page, and he felt the exhilaration of productivity begin to course through his veins. Nothing quite so acute as the surge of feeling the words flow, he thought. And though decorum should’ve commanded he sit more properly, or tidy his dress more becoming to being in public, William ignored the dictates, lost in his dreamland and uncaring of whatever rules the waking world might want to enforce. The words were what mattered. He was only there to serve the words.

He very well could’ve drifted on the clouds of his poetry until he awoke, if the soft crunch of the stone path hadn’t distracted him from the page. Lifting his eyes, he blinked rapidly to adjust to the shift in light, and then felt a warm flush steal across his skin as a young lady rounded the nearest curve.

She was blonde, long hair waving loose about her shoulders, and she was dressed in what could’ve been one of his mother’s shifts if it wasn’t for the shortened skirt exposing the ripe curve of her calf. While the white fabric billowed around her legs, it hugged her torso, cupping the swell of her breasts and accentuating her slim waist. Even her arms were bare, the bodice held up by the thinnest of
straps, and William colored as he jumped to his feet, wanting to lower his gaze out of propriety, but unable to look away from the vision that approached.

Breathtaking. That’s what she was.

And ever so invitingly vital.

She stopped as soon as she saw him, green eyes regarding him with a directness that was most off-putting, and the sound of his heart pounding inside his chest filled his ears. It lasted for mere seconds, though, only until it was replaced by another sound, but it was the latter that made the world fall away around him.

“Now why do I have a funny feeling that you’re William?” she asked, with a twinkle in her eye.
For My Name Is Will

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CXXXVI.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: William has fallen asleep and found himself in a dream park he doesn’t recognize, while Willow has slipped Buffy a magic potion to help her sleep…

She hadn’t expected to find anyone. The instant she’d found herself in the unknown park, Buffy had known she was dreaming, though it was far too vivid and far too realistic to be a Slayer dream. Those were always big with the cryptic, and this…this was just peace personified. Way to go, Willow, for tea that makes you go hmmm, she thought in amusement as she rounded the curve in the path.

Then, she’d seen him, and halted in her step as he bolted to his feet, the papers he’d been writing on rustling in his haste.

There was something oddly familiar about him, but what it was, she couldn’t quite put her finger on. He was slimly built, with lean hips housed in the old-fashioned brown trousers, and his crisp white shirt was unbuttoned at the neckline, exposing the sharp line of his clavicle. Bare forearms were muscled, but not defined, and she knew without having to ask that this was a man unused to physical labor. Of course, the glasses added to his bookish appearance, as well as the sandy hair that fell stubbornly in loose curls across his forehead, but it was surprisingly endearing, especially combined with the embarrassed flush creeping over his cheeks.

The quill dangling from his fingers made a connection spark somewhere deep inside her brain, and Buffy almost smiled as understanding dawned. “Now why do I have a funny feeling that you’re William?” she said. The widening of his eyes was the only confirmation she needed. At least my subconscious still works, she thought. Fall asleep reading William’s journal, dream about meeting him. Yay me for being logical.

“You…you…how do you know me?” he stammered.

Even though it was just a dream, somehow Buffy had a suspicion that admitting to reading the man’s journal was the surest way of scaring him off. He valued his privacy, and besides, how weird would she think it if she was suddenly stuck with someone who’d read her diary? “You look like a William,” she said instead, and saw the disbelief darken his gaze.

The silence stretched between them when he didn’t reply, each just standing there staring at the other. Every once in a while, she saw his eyes drop to her legs, but each glance only served to deepen his flush, until she finally sighed in exasperation and grabbed the hem of her dress.

“What’s the big deal?” she asked, pulling up the skirt to expose her knees. “Am I that horribly deformed or something?”

Immediately, he turned away, fussing with his papers as he scooped them up. “It’s…it’s…indecent,” he stammered. “You sh-sh-shouldn’t be dressed so.”
Oh great, I broke him already. “They’re only legs,” she said. “They don’t bite. That would be what those things called teeth are for.” She let the fabric drop and took a step toward him. “It’s not like you don’t have them, too. ‘Cause, you know, kind of hard to be standing there without them.”

For a moment, she thought she saw the corner of his mouth lift, but his motions didn’t cease, continuing to gather his papers and capping his inkpot. “I shan’t keep you,” he said. “It’s a lovely day and you likely wish to---.”

“Don’t go.” Buffy didn’t even sense rushing forward to lay her hand on his arm. It was just…he was leaving, and she knew she didn’t want him to go. Stopping him seemed paramount.

His muscles tensed beneath her grip, but he didn’t pull away, his head tilting first to look at her fingers before lifting to gaze into her face. Up close, she could see the thunderous blue behind his glasses, clear and intelligent and revealing, and felt her throat constrict as they searched hers. What he was looking for, she didn’t know, but Buffy suspected he saw more than he’d ever admit.

“Who are you?” William breathed.

This time, she couldn’t resist the smile. “I’m Buffy.”

A dark eyebrow quirked, and that sense of déjà vu flashed through her again. “That’s…unusual,” he murmured. “And not English.”

“Nope. As American as apple pie.”

This only served to heighten his amusement. “I wasn’t aware Americans had a monopoly on apple pie,” he said. “As a point of fact, Cook has a rather delightful recipe for these apple crumble tarts. I suppose that would make her American under your logic.”

Her mouth opened to protest, ready to retort about stuffy Englishmen who thought they knew everything, when she saw the glint in his eye. He was teasing her. OK. Unexpected. Especially since not two minutes earlier he’d been barely able to look her in the face without turning into a giant cherry tomato.

“I thought gentlemen were supposed to be all courteous and nice to ladies,” she said, loosening her grasp to fold her arms across her chest.

“As well they should,” he replied. “But as I’ve determined that you are not, in fact, real, then standard rules of etiquette can’t actually apply, now can they?”

“I think someone’s got their realities mixed up, bub. You’re the one who’s not real. This is my dream, therefore the reality of you equals not really there.”

Her certainty seemed to make him hesitate, his gaze sweeping over her face yet again. “Not that I don’t often question exactly that,” he said softly, “but you are far too fantastic to be anything but a figment of my imagination. Granted, I was unaware my imagination could prove so fertile as to create an American vision capable of completely stealing my very breath, but the fact that you are still standing here, speaking to me without condescension, and looking very much as if you desire my company, only affirms that you can’t truly exist.”

The annoyance that had been bubbling under her skin dissipated. “You…think I’m some dream Buffy just because I’m being nice to you?” There was a flicker of shame in the blue before he ducked his head, his bravado gone, and her fingers returned to rest gently on his arm. “Tell you what. Why don’t we agree to disagree on the who gets to be real question and start from scratch, OK?” She waited for him to look up again before stepping back and sticking out her hand with a
His indecision rippled across his face, his scrutiny intense before his manners resumed control and he composed his shoulders. “William Freston,” he said, and when he bowed at the waist, his hand turned hers just enough to allow his lips to brush over her knuckles. “It is my pleasure to meet you, Miss Summers.”

“Buffy,” she said when he straightened. “You call me Miss Summers, and I expect to be sent down to the principal’s office. Well, if I hadn’t blown up the school, that is.”

“Miss Buffy, then,” William corrected, though it was clear he didn’t completely understand her references.

“So whatcha writing?” Turning away, she began to reach for the papers that littered the bench, but was stopped when he leapt to the fore, grabbing at them to pull them away from her range.

“They’re just scribblings,” he said, too hastily, and the blush returned to his cheeks. “Nothing of importance.”

Buffy pulled her hand back, watching as he tucked the pages into his pockets. Odd how the man she’d read about manifested in such a real manner in her dreams. The Victorian dress and decorum was to be expected, she supposed, but the disparate timidity and forthrightness was confusing. “It’s OK,” she said in as reassuring a voice as she could manage. “They’re private. I get that.”

“Thank you.” He hung back, keeping his hands behind his back, but glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

“Can I sit with you?”

It was enough to garner his full attention again. “Pardon?”

“I interrupted you, but…if you’re not going to go back to what you were working on, I thought…I mean, I don’t have plans and you don’t have plans and since it looks like we’re both planless…” Buffy’s voice trailed off. God, she really sucked at this. Had it really been that long since she’d chatted up a guy? Not that she and Angel had ever been about the talking, but once upon a time, she’d been semi-literate, capable of stringing more than a few words together in the presence of a member of the opposite sex. Damn it. She could do this. Especially with a guy who was only part of a dream.

“You wish to…join me?”

“If that’s OK.”

She thought he was going to run. Like a feral cat, poised to flee at the slightest hint of danger, William almost quivered in agitation, like he didn’t dare believe what she was saying. “Why?” he asked. His voice was so low, she barely caught the single word query.

Not that she really knew what to say in response. “Why not? Doesn’t it sound like fun? A pretty park, good company. I don’t see where the bad is.”

A pause. Then…a sweep of his arm accompanied by a slight lean of his body as he gestured toward the bench. “It would be my honor.”

Once she was settled, Buffy watched as he perched himself on the edge of the seat as far from her as possible, his unease screaming at her with every tense muscle. “That can’t be comfortable,” she
commented, and pulled her knee up under her skirt to sit sideways on the bench. “How about we find some middle ground between Mr. Uptight and Mr. I Can Be Rude As Much As I Want Because You’re Not Real, OK?” She stretched and poked him in the arm, eliciting a small jump. “Relax. I’ve actually been known to be entertaining on the odd occasion. Sometimes, an even one, too.”

William rubbed at his arm, massaging the spot she’d touched with a small frown on his face. “For an illusion, you are remarkably forthright.”

“Actually, I’m pretty darn forthright in reality, too. I blame the education system. Breeds all that independent thinking.”

Her joke eased the lines in his brow, but his gaze remained steady. “Perhaps, it’s an attribute of being American as well,” he said. “My reading suggests that American culture is quite progressive. Would you consider that a valid assessment, Miss Buffy?”

“We’ve been called worse,” she started, and then grinned. “And look at us being all conversation-having. I told you we could do this.”

* * *

She was unlike anyone he had ever met before.

His initial trepidation had tied his tongue in knots, though once he’d convinced himself she was just a figment of his imagination, speaking to her had become incredibly easy. Entertaining, even. She had lit up under his gentle banter, and even when he’d been terrified of her response to his writings, her easy manner had quickly soothed his nerves, letting conversation happen as naturally as if he was talking to one of his university professors.

Certainly, though, she was infinitely more beautiful than anyone with whom he’d spent more than five minutes speaking. She glowed from within, drowning him in eyes of emerald that looked as if they’d witnessed the very end of the world. It had been difficult in the beginning to not gape in admiration, her non-traditional attire notwithstanding, but even that had receded behind the sheer pleasure of her company. In many ways, she was such a contradiction—intelligent, but playful; compassionate, but impatient with passivity; young, but with a spirit that felt centuries old—and it was those that made him lose the time so quickly.

They talked of nothing of consequence at first, their discourse adhering to topics of generality rather than personal, but when the subject at hand had steered toward health issues, he’d been unable to refrain from asking.

“How on earth did you get such a scar?” William queried, nodding slightly toward the mark on her neck.

Instantly, her hand reached up to touch it, and some of the color that had been in her cheeks was leached away. “Puppy bite,” she said absently, as her eyes fell to the ground. Thin fingers traced the odd ridges on her skin, and he could literally see her pulse pounding away in the hollow of her throat.

“I did not mean to upset you,” he said. Tentatively, he inched closer, reaching out to rest his hand on her forearm. The sun had warmed both of them, and where earlier he had been grateful for his lack of jacket, now it seemed as if even his shirt was too much as the heat jumped between them. “If you’d rather—.”

“No, no, I’m OK,” Buffy said. Her eyes told him otherwise. “Just…not so good memories kind of
go hand-in-hand with it.” She looked up then, and the pain she fought so valiantly to hide gleamed somewhere in the green depths. “Part of the whole why I’m not sleeping so good right now. Well, except for tonight. Tonight seems to be a different story.”

“Do you…wish to talk about it? I am not such a stranger to insomnia, myself. Although, like you, this evening appears to be the exception to my normal patterns.”

“Maybe some other time,” she said.

He was almost disappointed by her lack of interest in sharing. It had seemed that, for some inexplicable reason, she trusted him, and William was eager for the opportunity to learn more about Buffy. Yes, she was just a character he’d obviously created to distract himself from the banality of his real-life existence, but in many ways, she was so much more alive than any of the people who populated his waking world. He would be foolish not to explore as much as he could while he had the chance.

“I have a scar,” he said in an attempt to distract her from the gloom his question had created. He lifted the hand from her arm and turned it over, exposing the fleshy pad where his thumb met his palm. “I was six, and Mother and I were out for a walk when we encountered an acquaintance of hers.” William’s breath caught when Buffy leaned over and traced her index finger over the ragged series of lines barely discernible on his hand, and he swallowed before venturing on. “I grew restless with waiting and began pulling leaves from the vines that climbed the wall that lined the path. Well, in doing so, I apparently disturbed the mice that had taken up residence in the wall.”

She looked up at him, her eyes dancing, and he could see her fighting to contain the laughter. “You got attacked by Mickey Mouse?”

“Mice,” he insisted. “Plural. And they were quite vicious. And large. One latched on with such vigor that Mother had to beat it off with her bag.”

The giggles bubbled from Buffy’s throat, the shadows in her aspect now lifted. William’s lips quirked in response, and he ducked his head in mock embarrassment. Truth be told, the incident was not one he recollected fondly, though he could certainly see the humor in it from an aesthetic standpoint, and if he’d been sitting with anyone else, he would never have thought to use it as an anecdote. However, this was Buffy, and though she wasn’t even real except for him, he doubted she would use it as a way to look down on him. Not when he’d already given her ample opportunities elsewhere that she’d completely ignored.

“Poor little Willie,” she teased.

“William,” he corrected.

Her eyebrows shot up. “Even when you were six?”

“Especially when I was six. I had this dreadful aunt and uncle whom my mother detested, and every time they came to call, they insisted on calling me Willie. Mother was adamant that that name would never be used in our household again.”

There was silence while her amusement faded. Her eyes burned into his, her head tilted slightly so that her hair fell across her bare shoulder, and William had to fight the impulse to reach over and brush it away. And then…

“You only ever talk about your mother.” Soft. Reluctant. As if she feared treading on ground he’d rather she didn’t.
“It’s just her and I,” he replied. “My father passed a few years ago, though he wasn’t around much prior due to work commitments. You?”

He asked the last with a note of expectancy, hoping that she would accept his offering of personal information as permission to share her own. Small steps, he reminded himself. Even the longest of journeys had to start with them.

“Same,” Buffy said. “Except for the part where my dad’s not dead. Just…voluntarily missing in action.”

He was readying to respond about how they had yet something else in common when William felt an unfamiliar tingling in his skin, an itch that generated from the air around him. Frowning, he turned his head to see what might be the cause, but as he did, the periphery of his vision seemed to blur, as if he would have to chase it in order to achieve full clarity.

“William?” Her tone was concerned, and he felt rather than saw her lean forward. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t…”

And before he could finish the sentence, the park was gone.

* * *

The soft rasp of the sheet against his cheek was accompanied by the lingering scent of the tea, and William blinked against the dim light in his room.

_A dream. Of course I knew it was, but…_

Slowly, he raised himself up on his elbow, noting his rumpled attire, the abandoned teacup on the desk. The events of the previous evening returned with an alarming exactitude, and with it came the sting of disappointment, burning like bile in his throat as he sank back onto the bed. It was only reasonable to know that she was just an illusion---after all, he’d known that even in the course of the dream itself---but the reality of facing the day bereft of her accepting presence seemed daunting at best. Surely, the fading of the details would make it more tolerable, but for now, for that very moment, each curve of her smile and each peal of her laughter was etched in the memory of his skin, as if they were a garment he could wrap himself up in to ward away the unpleasant elements.

_Chin up, William. At least you slept. Certainly that’s enough in the grand scheme of things._

It would have to be. After all, Buffy Summers was only a dream.

* * *

Stretching beneath the duvet, Buffy smiled as she reminisced on the details of her dream, remembering William’s shy smile and the approving glances he cast her through his thick lashes when he thought she wasn’t looking. So, OK, maybe not the healthiest mode of relaxing, what with her subconscious turning her Victorian writer into illusionary flesh and blood for her to talk to while she slept, but hey, considering how many lemons her life had dished recently, she wasn’t going to knock whatever release she got.

Besides, after a quick glance at her bedside clock, she couldn’t really argue with the fact that for the first time in weeks, she’d slept for more than seven consecutive hours. “Thank you, William,” she murmured, as she slipped his journal beneath her pillow.

Time to face her day.
It only lasted three days.

By sunset on the third day after dreaming of William, Buffy’s listlessness had returned, her thoughts distracted from her surroundings and back on Angel and what was wrong with her. It didn’t stop her from going out on patrol, though. The hours she spent roaming the streets of London helped alleviate some of the tension mired around her muscles, and she was grateful to Giles for agreeing on its usefulness.

Her days were spent exploring. With Willow at her side, she’d found a park with a river bisecting it and the stone benches that lined its banks had reminded her of the time she’d spent talking to William—*just a dream, Buffy, get a grip*. Though she didn’t say a word of it to her friend, on the second day, the Slayer returned to the park alone, the aged journal in hand, and spent most of the afternoon reading and people-watching.

It seemed like something he would do.

***

“You’re going out again?”

William stiffened at the sound of his mother’s voice, and forced the smile to his lips before he turned to look at her standing in the doorway to her salon. “It’s such a lovely morning, it seemed a shame to waste it,” he said. “Perhaps you would care to join me? A stroll along the banks seems a pleasant distraction from your dinner planning.”

Though it was the last thing he currently wanted, the invitation was verbalized before he could consider not. His daily excursions had kept him away from the house for the better part of the last two days, and now, the third after his dream of the enigmatic Buffy, he had finally been caught out. Not that he was doing anything wrong. With his inks and journal in hand, William was merely wending his way to his favorite bench on the bank, attempting to write but more often than not, watching the park’s visitors. He would not consciously admit it, but every time he witnessed a flash of ebony dress or a glint of blonde hair, he stiffened, straining to see if it was either of the mysterious women who’d recently disordered his life. Of course, it never was, but it didn’t stay the impulse to look.

“That’s a lovely thought,” his mother said, “but I have far too much to do if I wish the party to be a success.” Her eyes softened, curiosity gleaming in the depths. “If I might be so bold to ask, what attraction do your walks hold for you, William? Are you…meeting someone?”
He knew what she wanted to hear. Anne Freston made no bones about her wish to see her son settled. But if he lied, he would be found out, and dealing with the consequences of that would be far worse than feeling momentarily foolish.

“Only my muse,” he teased gently, and pulled his journal from his pocket to show her. “I find I’ve been rather inspired by a dream I had the other night. The park is quite conducive to finding the proper words.” The latter was a lie, at least partially. William was having no better luck writing than he had prior to dreaming of Buffy, but sitting on the bench made the details he remembered of her all that more vivid. He wasn’t ready to give up on them…not just yet.

“Oh.” Her disappointment was visible, but she quickly hid it with a smile. “I trust you’re sleeping better then,” she went on. “From what I’ve seen, you seem more…lively the past few days.”

“Yes, I have been, thank you.” Another lie. After that glorious night, he’d returned to his tossing but there was no need for her know that. Pocketing the book again, he stepped forward to brush a kiss across his mother’s cheek. “I shall see you for tea,” William said. “And if you need me, I’m merely at the banks. Just send one of the staff to come and fetch me.”

He was gone before she could voice any disapproval, and William rushed along the path, his hands stuffed into his pockets as images of Buffy danced before his mind’s eye.

* * *

“Wow, I think this one might end up glowing in the dark.”

Buffy winced as Willow finished wrapping the cut on her arm, the bruise to which she was referring angry and sore and in the most annoying place ever to remind her of its presence. Gingerly, she bent her arm, watching the discoloration disappear in the crook of her elbow, and then straightened it again to relieve the pressure. “Stupid demon,” she grumbled. “There should be a size limit on how big they can get. It’s totally unfair its fingers were as big as my arm.”

“Didn’t stop you from killing it,” Willow said, too bright and too peppy for Buffy’s current mood. “That’s a good, right?”

“Right.” Slaying was about the only thing that was right, she thought. Slaying, and William’s journal, for some inexplicable reason.

“Is it weird I expect demons over here to have an English accent?” Willow was babbling. “I mean, that thing that jumped us sounded like he was from Texas, and that’s just not right.”

“My luck, I get the globetrotting demons to slay.”

“That’s because all the other ones are too busy kissing and killing their cousins in Hicksville.” Sitting back on her heels, she gave the wrapped wound a gentle pat. “There. All done. Think I’ve earned my Slayer first aid badge yet?”

“I think you’ve earned the whole darn hospital.” It was hard to meet the expectant gaze of her friend and know that the redhead thought she was actually helping. But how could she know? She had a boyfriend waiting for her back in Sunnydale, one who’d been willing to work through their issues because he cared enough about her to try and fight them. She didn’t know what it was like to be someone people needed to leave. But…Buffy had to try. Willow deserved that, at the very least.

“I should probably let you sleep,” Willow said, though it didn’t look like she was ready to go. “You know, to help you heal up. Plus, if we want to see Giles before he leaves for Cambridge in the morning, we’re going to have to get up pretty early.”
“Yeah.” Buffy bit her lip. Time to ask for what she’d been thinking about since sunset and the prospect of another restless night loomed in her not-so-distant future. “Hey, you know that tea you made for me the other day?” She waited until she got a hesitant nod. “I don’t suppose you’d…make me some more? It’s just, I slept so well that night, and wow, did I feel better in the morning, and---.”

“It’s OK, you don’t have to justify it.” Willow smiled, and Buffy could see the relief flooding her face. “I’d be more than happy to make you some. If it works, it works, right? And sleep is always good after a good night’s slay.”

“A motto I’ve always tried to live by,” she quipped. As she watched the redhead slip from the room, she was surprised by the easing of her muscles as she laid back onto the bed. It hadn’t occurred to her that she was really that nervous about asking for the tea; after all, it was only a drink, no big deal. It was just…admitting it helped her sleep meant admitting weakness, and that was one area Buffy pretty much sucked at. Especially in light of how much both Willow and Giles thought they were doing to make things better for her.

Without thinking, Buffy’s hand slid under her pillow where she’d stashed William’s journal. Somehow, she had a feeling the dead Victorian would get it. From what she’d read about him so far, he had his own front to put on all the time, too. Too busy doing for others, and not selfish enough to stand up and demand what he really wanted. Not that she usually had a problem about standing up for herself, but sometimes, it would be nice to be a little more selfish about it.

* * *

He cleared his throat when he entered the kitchen, unwilling to surprise Cook with his sudden appearance. That had been a lesson learned long ago, resulting in some rather nasty burns, and not one he wished to repeat.

“Do you be wanting something, Master William?” Cook asked, the familiar lilt in her voice stronger than usual, marking her annoyance at having her space invaded.

“Um…yes, actually.” Pushing his glasses up his nose, he flushed with embarrassment as he took a step closer. “The other night, Mother’s new maid brought me some tea. I was rather hoping I might be able to…get some more.”

Cook immediately turned away, returning to the pot that was bubbling before her. “I’ve just sent a fresh pot in to your mother,” she said. “Unless you’d be wanting some for your room?”

His fear that he would have to elaborate blossomed, and his gaze ducked, even though she wasn’t regarding him any longer. “I mean,” he tried again, “the girl said it was a…special brew. To help me sleep?”

Understanding made Cook nod. “Ah, you’re meaning Auntie Esmerelda’s remedy. Of course, Master William. I’ll have it sent up straight away.”

Smiling and nodding in kind, he backed out of the room, exhaling loudly as he made his way to the stairs. He hadn’t wanted to ask. But, after an unproductive day at the park and then an uncomfortable meal with his mother, the prospect of spending his night facing the prison walls of his bedroom had prompted William to admit that the tea had produced the best night’s rest he’d had in a long time. Would it really hurt to have some more?

* * *

OK, she’d admit it. She’d hoped. In a huge way. ‘Cause, really? William had been one of the best
dreams she’d had in a long time. But she hadn’t really expected anything to come from hoping. Unless it was a Slayer dream, reruns didn’t tend to happen in Buffy’s head.

So finding herself at the start of the stone path, the familiar white dress billowing around her legs, the sun beaming down to warm her shoulders…her stomach was all a-flutter, the possibility of what might be lying around the bend bringing a smile to her face. It only took a few steps for her to round the curve, and then she had to consciously slow her pace to make it look like she wasn’t running.

She loved her subconscious. There he was, just as before, head bent over the papers scattered before him. At least this time, she knew how the dream was going to play out. He’d look up, and get all embarrassed about seeing her, and…

“Miss Buffy.”

His voice was so soft, she almost didn’t hear it, and Buffy snapped out of her thoughts to see him standing next to the bench, eyes intent on her. Whoa. He knew who she was, which meant this wasn’t a repeat. Her smile widened. It also meant she could just go back to talking to him, then, no uncomfortableness to stand in their way.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes,” she teased as she approached.

Behind his glasses, his eyes widened for the briefest of moments. “That sounds remarkably like you considered me in our absence of each other,” William murmured.

“Translation. I missed you when I was gone, right?”

“I daren’t presume—.”

“Presume away, because I did.” Buffy paused, her smile fading slightly as she grew more serious. “I missed getting to talk to you. We were just getting to the good stuff.”

“Three days never seemed so long before.”

“You were counting?”

He blushed, averting his gaze. “You must find me foolish.”

“Then call me fool number two,” she replied. She was standing at his side now, and reached out to touch his bare forearm. The muscles there tensed at the first contact, rippling beneath his skin while he fought some silent battle, but the moment they relaxed, William lifted his eyes to hers again. “And I think you’re right,” she added. “Three days is way too long.”

His mouth opened to speak, but the words didn’t come. Instead, alarm widened his gaze and his hand shot forward to ghost over her bare arm.

“What’s happened?” he asked.

“Were you attacked?”

Buffy looked down. There, just as it had been in her room, were the bruise and cut she’d gotten from the demon earlier that evening, exposed to the warm air as if Willow had never dressed the wound. A thin trickle of blood she hadn’t even been aware of was starting to leak from the jagged edges of the injury. “Oh,” she said, surprised. “Yeah. I guess I was.”

Immediately, his hand disappeared into his trousers pocket, extracting a clean white handkerchief. “It looks quite vicious,” William said, and before she could stop him, he was pressing the cloth to the gash, his touch gentle but firm.

“I’m fine. Really. I didn’t even realize it was there until you pointed it out. And besides, if you think
I look bad, you should see the other guy.”

She was trying to lighten the mood, but the seriousness in his face when he looked at her told Buffy it hadn’t worked. “I didn’t mean to imply that you looked anything less than radiant,” he rushed. “If I’ve offended you—.”

“No, you haven’t, and you really have to relax, William. I’m not going to break, and I’m more interested in you being you rather than you being who you think I want you to be.” Taking the handkerchief from his grip, she smiled up at him. “I’m tired of people trying to second-guess what’s going through my head. I’m in the mood for some good old-fashioned honesty.” She held her arm out for inspection. “So. Honestly. How bad does it look?”

He winced as his gaze swept over the bruise. “Frightful,” he admitted. “As if you were a doll that had been toted around by some malicious child with a cast-iron grip.”

“And weirdly enough, not that far from the truth. If the child had scales and purple glowy eyes.” She laughed at the confusion in his face. “Don’t worry. Sometimes, it sounds crazy to me, too.”

“You’re certain it doesn’t hurt?”

Buffy shook her head. “Nope. I’m fit as a fiddle.” She paused. “Are fiddles actually fit? Because now that I think about it, that just sounds wrong. Maybe it should be the fiddler who’s fit. They’re the ones doing all the work.”

This time, he couldn’t help but chuckle at her joking. “As much as you’ve lived within my thoughts these last few days,” he said, “I fear that my memory has not done your charms justice.”

Maybe it was the soft tone of his voice. Maybe it was the shine in the blue behind his glasses. Or maybe it was the way his eyes were sliding over her, unable to stop from lingering on her curves in spite of the flush in his cheeks. Whatever it was, it made the breath in Buffy’s throat disappear, her bravado shattered in the face of his obvious admiration. “I’m not so special,” she said softly. “I’m just me. I mean, Chosen, sure, but still…just me.”

“Which makes you all that more extraordinary.” His hands were fidgeting, as if there was something they wished to do that he was forcibly preventing them from, and when he took a step back toward the bench, the space he emptied left Buffy desperate to fill it again. “In light of your injury, you should sit, I believe.”

“I was kind of hoping we could take a walk today. It’s not like I need fully functioning arms for that.” She was rewarded by the surprised tilt of his head, that sense of déjà vu that pervaded while she was around him flaring strongly for a moment before dissipating with his cautious nod.

“That would be lovely,” agreed William, and, after gathering his things from where they lay scattered on the bench, he fell into step beside her.

* * *

It was even better than it had been before, he decided. Where their first meeting had started awkward and casual, their second quickly fell into a warm familiarity he found enticing. Though her injuries still worried William—how could someone who looked so delicate be so steadfast in what was most assuredly painful?—they appeared to do nothing in deterring her high spirits, and he was willing to attempt and forget them in the face of her bravery. It did not mean he didn’t wish to magically make them disappear for her, but if Buffy Summers was not going to be stopped by them, then neither would he.
In considering where they’d left their previous conversation, William was careful as he gently steered the topic toward more personal matters. It took little time for her to start relating stories of her youth—a fantastic world he could never have imagined where half of what she described seemed impossibly complex, and yet frighteningly simple. Ease supplanting labor. Women being respected as equals. A place where laughter and tears coincided in the space of a single second, and nobody thought it peculiar to be expressing such emotions publicly.

None of it was recent, though, and as he listened to her speak, William wondered why she deliberately chose to ignore the obvious. “And what of now?” he asked, when she paused at the ending of another tale. “What world currently surrounds Buffy Summers?”

Her smile faded, her gaze dropping to the path stretched out before them. Absently, her toe caught some of the loose stone and kicked it, sending a small spray scattering to the grass. “I’m going to college in the fall,” she finally said. “I’ve got that to look forward to when I get back.”

“But that’s wonderful.” He could barely contain his excitement. “Surely, you find the opportunity to advance your education exciting? Just think of the doors it will open for you. In my world, you would not have such an option, I’m afraid, and in your case, that would most definitely be a travesty of justice.” When she maintained her silence, his fervor began to fade, and William stepped ahead to stop directly in her path.

“Is there some issue with you attending university?” he asked. “Perhaps your mother does not wish you to go?”

“No, no, she’s the head cheerleader on the Buffy Goes to College Pep Squad.” She wouldn’t meet his gaze, instead looking off to the side and the trees that dotted the park. For a moment, he had the urge to throw his arms around her, to root her to the present moment, because it looked very much as if she was willing herself someplace else. But he refrained, instead stuffing his hands into his trousers pockets and hoping she wouldn’t see the strain he was exerting over his muscles.

“Things are…harder back home,” Buffy said, and her voice made him ache. “People have this annoying tendency to leave, and I don’t…it’s not…nothing’s as simple as I want it to be.”

He knew then, without her having to say the words, what it was to which she was referring. “You have a young man,” William said softly. He was certain this was the source of her distress, and though the knowledge sliced his own heart in half, it was just as much because of the pain it was causing her as it was his own disappointment. “And he’s hurt you, in some way.”

“Yes. And no. And god, yes.” It was as if he’d pulled the stopper on some unseen well, her words halting at first, and then coming faster, and faster, until he was almost dizzy for the trying to keep up. Though there were no tears, her eyes shone with those unspilled, her control even in the telling of what was clearly difficult impressive.

He didn’t understand it all—many of her allusions still managed to elude him, and the metaphor of comparing this man to a demon seemed melodramatic at best—but there was no mistaking what it had done to her. The first few minutes listening, he spent crippled, knowing what he wanted to do but frozen in ineptitude, the social dictates that had been drummed into him for the past three decades dampening his control. But William fought it. She’s just a dream. She’s not real and she knows nothing about what should be proper or not. I can do this. A small step first, his arm stretching…reaching…ending with an awkward pat on her uninjured shoulder.

“This…Angel,” he started, inwardly cringing at the nickname, for surely it had to be an affectation for her to call him such, “if you will pardon my saying so…he rather strikes me as a fool.”
His words took her by surprise, and Buffy took a half-step back, looking up at him with wide green eyes that made him want to stand up straighter. “What?” she asked. “Why would you… you don’t even know him.”

“I daresay I don’t need to.” In the face of her shocked response, William felt a seed of courage take root somewhere inside, and he gazed down at her intently, the desire for her to appreciate why he was doing this shining bright. “You say he left?”

“…Yes.”

“And he gave you no opportunity for recourse?”

“Huh?”

“He left without discussing any options for his staying?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“But he said he loves you.”

Silence.

His hand was still on her shoulder, and William was too aware of the heat searing into his palm, but there was no way he was letting go now. Gently, his fingers began to knead the knotted muscles beneath his grip, wondering just how long he could do this before she voiced an objection, and watched as her eyes fluttered shut, giving herself over to the sensation.

“He’s a fool because he left,” William murmured. “Were I in his shoes, with a woman such as yourself wanting to be a part of my life, I would find whatever means possible to overcome the obstacles that separated us. He’s a fool because he didn’t even try.”

Buffy’s head fell, and before he could react, she stepped forward and pressed herself to him, her arms wrapping around his back in a tight hug. William froze, all the heat that had been concentrated in his hand now spread throughout his body as her curves molded to his in an appreciative embrace, and he looked down at the golden hair glimmering against his shirt.

“You’re such an optimist,” she said into his chest. “But thank you for listening anyway.”

“It will always be my pleasure,” William replied. Tentatively, his hand lifted, and before he could decide otherwise, it was caressing the back of her skull, entangling with the soft curls. He was convinced she could hear his heart pounding, but for the first time in what seemed like an eternity, he didn’t care.

* * *

He could still feel her cheek burning against his chest, a brand he was more than willing to bear for as long as the sensation lingered, and, if he concentrated, William swore even the silk of her hair slipping through his fingers was trapped in his body’s recall, demanding to be noticed. How could something so ephemeral as a dream burn with more life than the pale shadows that danced in his periphery during his waking hours? It shouldn’t be—she shouldn’t be—and yet it was, and he’d be blind to ignore the evidence to which his body clung.

Rolling to a seated position, William’s gaze fell on the empty teacup at his bedside. Cook’s aunt was swiftly becoming a favored personage in his estimation. And though he hardly considered himself a superstitious man, the fact that he’d dreamt of Buffy on both occasions he’d consumed the special
brew did not escape his notice.

Something would have to be done to ensure his future chances for repeat appearances.
The Benefit of Rest

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet XXVIII.”

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Both Buffy and William found it difficult to sleep without the aid of the special tea, and met again in their dreams after having some…

She didn’t want to open her eyes, but want was not really a concept Buffy was familiar with indulging. Her life wasn’t about want. It was about right. And the fact that it was after nine o’clock in the morning meant the right thing to do was get up.

Rolling on to her side, her hand stole automatically to the journal beneath her pillow, her fingertips brushing over its soft cover. It was still warm, and Buffy couldn’t help but wonder if she’d been touching it in her sleep again. No matter where or how long it sat without her attention, the book always seemed to pulse with its own life, drawing her to it as surely as it had that day in the bookshop.

It was hard to believe it had been a whole week since she’d bought the journal. For the past four nights, she’d dreamt of William, each encounter so fresh with vigorous new detail that she was beginning to wonder just how much of Giles’ Britishness was subconsciously rubbing off on her. How else could she be making up so much of what William described? Oh sure, some of it definitely came from the journal, but she’d barely made a dent in it, only having read about a third once she’d gone back to its beginning instead of picking random entries to read.

Yet, in spite of how true it felt while she slept, every morning when she woke up, Buffy lay in bed, deliberating over how surreal it was becoming. It was different when she was in the thick of it, walking with him through the park or sitting on the bench listening to him talk about his poetry. When she was there, it was impossible to doubt what it was obvious he believed. Awake, though, it was another story. The details should’ve faded with the coming of the day; that’s the way dreams were supposed to work.

But these didn’t. These remained as fresh and vibrant and breathing as if they’d happened for real.

Maybe it was the tea, she reasoned as she swung her legs over the side of the bed. Maybe it’s just a side effect of whatever brew it is Will’s using.

After waking from the second encounter with William, it hadn’t taken Buffy long to wonder if Willow’s nighttime remedy might have something to do with the content of her dream. After all, she’d dreamt of the Victorian poet only after consuming the drink, although she wasn’t sure if the second time hadn’t been as much her wanting to as anything else.

So she’d asked her friend to make it a nightly thing. “Just, you know, until I get Mr. Sandman back under control,” Buffy had said.

Willow had seemed eager to help, and had it waiting for her when Buffy got in from patrol. Neither girl had mentioned it, but both were grateful for Giles’ absence, instinctively knowing he’d disapprove of his Slayer’s methods for gaining sleep. And neither had said anything to him about it
the next day when he’d called to say he would be delayed in Cambridge for a little longer. After all, it wasn’t as if there weren’t more important things to be discussing than Buffy’s current beverage of choice.

The rumpus with the Council that had driven Giles to Cambridge had turned a day-trip into a four-day stayover, talking with some of his old cronies about what exactly had happened. He’d been frugal with the details during his daily phone calls, but instead had promised to fill them in on everything when he returned to London. That was today, and Buffy had to hurry and get dressed before she made both of them late.

Willow was knocking at the door before she’d finished pulling her top over her head, and Buffy’s voice was muffled when she called out in response. “Come in!”

“You about ready?” the redhead asked as she poked her head into the bedroom.

“Getting there. Sorry about sleeping in.”

“It’s no big. We’ve still got an hour before Giles’ train arrives. We’ll just grab something from the bakery on the way if you want something to eat.”

Buffy brightened. “One of those cream cakes?”

“You just know Xander would be jealous if he knew we were here,” Willow replied with a nod. “All these pastries that he doesn’t get to try? He’s going to be complaining for months about being deprived of new avenues for sugary goodness.” She grew pensive, her aspect softening, and Buffy caught the witch biting her lip before turning away to grab her shoes from beside the bed. “Sleep definitely becomes you, Buffy,” she said softly. “I’m glad you’re finally getting some good shuteye.”

There was no mistaking the concern in Willow’s tone, and inwardly, Buffy cringed. “You know me,” she said, too bright but escaping the notice of her friend. “You can’t keep a good Slayer down.”

* * *

He was humming under his breath when he strolled into the dining room, a distinctive bounce to his step. “Good morning, Mother,” William said, stooping to brush a kiss across her cheek before rounding the table to his own seat.

Anne watched him in obvious delight. “You are remarkably sprightly today,” she commented. “Did you have a good night’s sleep?”

“Heavenly.” Ducking his head, he concentrated on pouring out his tea, convinced his skin bore the telltale signs of his heightened state, and though his mother was certainly happy to see her only son in such good spirits, there was no need to embarrass either of them by dwelling on the details.

He’d dreamt of her again, and if there had been doubt before as to whether the tea was responsible or not, those were now banished. Every night for the past three nights, he’d gone to Cook and requested the special brew, and every night without fail, Miss Buffy came to him, always wearing the white frock that had shocked him so in the beginning and yet now seemed as natural as anything he might spy during the day, always smiling and eager to see him.

Though their conversations didn’t touch on the subject of her personal life again, there was a new intimacy to their encounters that hadn’t been there prior, as if something had opened within Buffy to allow him entrance. She unarmed him by asking him questions about his home life, and William’s eagerness to share had only been surpassed by her capacity to empathize. By their fourth meeting, he was reading his poetry to her, keeping his eyes averted as he did so lest she should find as much fault
with it as his peers.

She didn’t, though. She just looked at him, and smiled, and asked if he’d read her more of what he’d written.

Nobody ever asked for more.

“You are someplace else, I think.”

Anne’s voice floated to him through his retrospection, and William looked up to see her watching him from across the table. “Don’t be silly,” he chided. “I’m right here.”

“Perhaps in body. Your thoughts, though, are miles away.” Distractedly, she stirred another spoonful of sugar into her tea. “Will you be going out again today? I’d rather hoped you might accompany me into the city. There are a few last arrangements I need to see to before the party tomorrow.”

His good mood paled slightly at the mention of the get-together. “If you need me, of course, I’m completely at your disposal,” he said as brightly as he could manage.

“Wonderful!” She was oblivious to his hesitancy. “Everything is coming along exactly as planned, so far.”

“And your guest list? Will the attendance please you?” With her, he was good at this, the polite small talk where nothing really was said. It was when he stepped out into proper society, away from the comfort of familiarity, that William so often found himself bumbling like someone’s addled uncle. Surround himself with intellectuals as he’d been able to do on the odd occasion at university and he was fine; the hauteur of his peers and their families, however, made him yearn for the succor of a good book.

As he sat there and listened to Anne chatter on about the dinner party, it occurred to him that, beyond the first few minutes in her presence, his awkwardness around Buffy had been nonexistent. Of course, he knew it was merely because she was his own creation, just as any one of his poems, but at the same time, there remained an elusive mystery to her that excited him just to contemplate.

The injuries she seemed to exhibit with each new encounter, for instance. Why would his mind fashion a fantasy friend who came to him bearing the bruises of some unknown battle? Every night, it was different. At their second encounter, it had been the discoloring inside her elbow and the corresponding gash on her arm. On the third, both were mostly gone, but her knuckles sported abrasions that left the skin slightly rough. The fourth had Buffy tucking her skirt around her legs when she saw him notice the bruise on her calf.

The possibility that someone could be harming her outside of his sight had crossed his mind more than once, though he found it increasingly unbelievable that anyone could hurt Buffy Summers without getting hurt in return. Still, his unheralded anger at such an occurrence blistered William’s otherwise equable temper, and he fought to maintain his composure in her presence. It would not be right to expose her to his baser side, though the urge to enact his own retribution upon those who would dare hurt Buffy made him wonder if this was how other men felt regarding female companions. Under normal circumstances, he would scoff at such unrefined instincts.

These, however, were far from normal.

And the fact that he was considering Buffy as if she was real escaped his immediate notice. For a man who quartered with the transcendent word as easily as the breathing world surrounding him, finding a friend amongst his fantasies was matter-of-course.
“William? Did you hear what I said?”

His eyes focused to see Anne staring at him, the delicate brow etched in growing worry. “I’m sorry,” he said quickly. “I’m afraid I’m not quite as awake yet as I’d imagined.”

Her lips pursed in disapproval, but the lines eased. “I asked if your preparations were complete,” she said. “Have you managed to finish all that I asked of you?”

He blinked. For the life of him, he couldn’t think what she could be referring to. Perhaps she meant his aid in helping with her errands? He thought not, but there seemed no other possibility. “Of course,” he lied smoothly. Surely she was just confused regarding whatever preparations she’d requested; there was no way he could simply not know. William offered her a smile to better convince her of his veracity, and leaned forward to pat her hand. “Would I ever fail you, Mother?”

* * *

Buffy stared at the photographs spread out on the table, the bevelled edges of the crystal figures blinking back at her with an energy that belied the insentience of the thick paper. There were twelve of them, each so similar to the next that on first inspection, they appeared identical. Only close scrutiny revealed the minute details that made each unique. “Pretty,” she commented, and looked up at her Watcher. “But I’m not seeing what the big deal is.”

Giles sipped at his tea, leaning back in his chair. “They’ve been stolen from the Council’s control,” he began, but was cut off by Buffy’s exasperated sigh.

“Yes, I know that,” she said. “But what do they do? Other than wanting to give Swarovski a run for their money, why does a bunch of stuffy suits care about them?”

“Who?”

She rolled her eyes. “Do you ever go to a mall, Giles?” The familiarity of the exchange was soothing, even if the surroundings weren’t exactly home. The two girls had met the Watcher at the train station, but in spite of repeated pestering from them, he’d insisted on waiting until they’d returned to the flat before going into any detail regarding what had happened in Cambridge. The pictures were just the beginning, Buffy had a feeling.

“They don’t do anything,” he explained. “In fact, the Council isn’t completely clear as to their importance at all.”

“But you said they went all wiggy about them getting stolen,” Willow chimed.

“They are very concerned.” He cleared his throat. “Over a century ago, the collection was left in the charge of then-head Richard Rhodes-Fanshaw, but before he could relay the details of its importance to the rest of the Council, he was killed. All they knew was his final instruction that it be protected.”

“What about who gave it to him in the first place?” Buffy asked. “Wouldn’t he be able to tell why it was so major league?”

“They tried, but they were never able to locate the young man they believed delivered the collection. The name he’d given them proved to be false, and none of the attempts to find him via magic were successful. They did, however, determine that each of the figures was under a powerful protection spell, so a unilateral decision was made by the new head to follow his predecessor’s dying wish.”

Stacking the photos up, Buffy began flipping through them one at a time, creating a small slide show of the glass forms until they were dancing in front of her. “So, do we know anything about them?”
she asked. “Good? Bad? Switzerland?”

Giles shook his head. “The Council has never been able to confirm anything, though the fact that they were stolen by vampires leads us to suspect they can’t be entirely good.”

Two sets of eyes went wide. “Us?” Willow asked. “Giles, are you working for them again?”

“No,” he said, too quickly, and then ducked his gaze. “Well, not exactly.”

“And not exactly means what?” This came from Buffy. “We do their dirty work and you still don’t get paid?”

“No, I’ll be receiving a small stipend for my contribution—.”

“So, you are working for them.”

“Only on a consultant basis.” He sighed, leaning back in his seat. “As I’m the unofficial Watcher for the only active Slayer, it’s been deemed…appropriate for my services to be retained.”

“English, Giles.”

“They want your help,” he said bluntly, meeting her gaze. “And I wouldn’t agree to even consider approaching you about it without compensation.”

Her eyes were thoughtful as she squared the corners of the pictures, running her fingers along the edges so that each threatened to cut into the fleshy pads. This could be a good thing, she mused. A project to redirect her focus. A problem for her to solve. Between this and William’s journal, Buffy just might be able to get past Angel’s leaving, once and for all.

“So what do they want me to do?” she asked out loud, handing the photos over to Willow.

“They attempted a locator spell but the results were inconclusive,” Giles said, and picked up a manila folder. “The magic surrounding the figures looks as if it’s scattered all over the country.” He extracted a color map of Great Britain, with several regions circled, pointing to each as he mentioned it. “One of the largest concentrations is there, in Wales. It’s rural, somewhere in the mountains, and the Council dispatched a team yesterday to try and pinpoint the source. The second largest concentration is here in London, though again, using remote means, Council resources have been unable to specify where exactly.”

“And they want me to try and find it?” She looked at him in confusion. “I beat things up, Giles. I am not Sabrina the Teenaged Witch.”

“No, we have Willow the Teenaged Witch,” he replied, visibly pleased with his rejoinder. “She and I will manage the magic side. We’ll need you to handle the…physical side.”

“Oh. Well, that’s all right then.” And oddly enough, it was. Foreign location notwithstanding, the affinity to Sunnydale and the school library was enough to steal some of the tension from the Slayer’s body. “How are we going to start?” she asked. “Any brilliant plans to wow the crowd?”

“Well, no, not yet,” Giles admitted. “I’d rather thought you’d patrol as normal tonight, while Willow and I brainstormed on the issue. There are a number of possible routes we could take and between the two of us, we should have something definitive for tomorrow.”

“Business as usual. I like it.” She smiled brightly. “Now, who’s hungry?”
He tossed away the last of the bodies, not even watching when it slumped off the heap that was growing in the corner, and swiped at the blood that ran down his chin. In his current sated state, he couldn’t help but feel that he wouldn’t need to feed for a week, though he knew that was unrealistic. Still, it had been awhile since he’d glutted himself so thoroughly. “And they even delivered,” he chortled as he stood before the altar.

Candles illuminated the narrow cave, flickering from behind the array of crystal on the shrine to scatter shards against the walls. The radiance made the miniature figures seem to pulsate with life, and the vampire’s demon visage faded away as he gazed down upon them, yellow eyes darkening to a pale brown. “Not much longer, April,” he murmured, and his angular fingers skimmed across each glass face, caressing and worshipping with the gentlest of touches.

“Sooner than you think,” came the voice from the mouth of the cave.

He whirled, vamping out before he saw the small form outlined in the entrance. “Why do you insist on sneaking up on me like that?” he demanded.

The elderly woman shrugged. “Because it’s fun.”

His eyes followed her as she made her way inside, settling at the small table against the wall and pulling a small pouch from her skirt pocket. For a long moment, the only sound in the cave was the scratching of her fingers across the wooden surface as she arranged the stones and broken twigs she extracted from the felt. And then…

“Well?” He exploded, his lanky body lunging forward in menace. “Cut the mumbo jumpo crap, Esme. I haven’t seen you in over a week. What the hell have you been doing?”

She didn’t even flinch from his aborted attack. “Exactly what we agreed I would,” Esme said evenly. “So the Slayer’s gone?”

“No, she’s still in London.”

He hesitated, a frown beginning to darken his brow. “What about the other one? Tell me you at least took care of him.”

“Things are…underway.”

“Underway?” Without warning, his hand shot out, aimed directly for Esme’s throat. Before it could make contact, though, he saw her lips move, and one of the twigs rose above the table, driving forward of its own accord to imbed itself in the right side of his chest.

He lurched back at the contact, surprised more than hurt, and stared at her in yellow fury. “What was that?”

“A warning,” she replied, still calm, still sure. “I can kill you just as easily as you can kill me, Nathan. And I hate to remind you of this, but if either one of us dies, your April will be lost to you forever. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

Nathan’s lips curled into a snarl. “Bitch,” he muttered, but backed away, digging into his chest to pull out the bloody twig with an agonized wince. “So which part of getting them out of the way did you actually accomplish?” he asked.
“I’ve connected them. That’s the first step.” She looked up at him finally, satisfaction gleaming in the dark depths of her eyes. “The young man is really quite the innocent,” Esme said. “I find it fascinating to think he’s---.”

“You saw him?” Surprise made his demon face melt away, revealing the gaunt allure of his human persona. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

An eyebrow lifted. “How else did you think I’d do it?”

“I…I don’t know. I hadn’t given it much thought. But…if you can play around with time like that… and why is it you can even do that? That’s Powers’ territory.”

She resumed her attention to the tableau before her. “You ask too many questions. Do you want April back? Or do you feel like waiting around another century or two until the time is ripe again?”

Nathan blanched at the possibility she suggested, and squelched the desire to rip out the old woman’s throat. He couldn’t afford to piss Esme off any more than he already had; after years of searching, she was the only one he’d ever found who had the power to return April to her natural form. It wasn’t worth it to question the source of that same power upon which he was so reliant.

“Good,” she said, as if he’d spoken aloud. “And relax. Everything is going according to plan.”
A Willing Patient

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CXL.”

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Both Buffy and William seem to be benefiting from their dream trysts, while Giles’ return to London has given the Slayer a new project to sink her teeth into…

The vampire’s jaw snapped shut as her fist slammed into his face, his fangs splitting his lips as he stumbled against the brick wall of the nearby building. Before he could regain his balance, Buffy was on him, her stake already in her hand.

“Taken any trips lately?” she asked as she straddled the downed demon. “Maybe develop a latent interest in glassware?”

“Wha’?” His golden gaze was bewildered. “Ave you gone chicken oriental, Slayer?”

With a roll of her eyes, Buffy’s thrust of the stake into his chest was almost too casual, and she was up on her feet before the dust had finished settling in the alley. “I can’t wait to get back to California where the way people talk actually makes sense,” she muttered as she tucked the weapon back into her waistband.

Her strategy wasn’t working. OK, even she knew it wasn’t much in the way of intelligent plans, but with Giles and Willow back at the apartment going over magical options, it was really the only one she had. Every vamp she came across, Buffy asked if they’d left the city recently, hoping one of them might be somehow connected to the group who’d stolen the crystal in Cambridge. Sure, it was a longshot, but what in her life wasn’t? Of course, it would’ve been easier if she understood half of what they were saying. Sometimes, she wondered if English was really their first language.

Five vamps down. For a brief moment, she debated whether it was late enough to consider going back and calling it a night. Giles would certainly understand if she said she was tired, and it wasn’t as if she was really accomplishing anything out on the streets anyway.

A shrill scream pierced the close air, prompting Buffy’s feet to begin running in the sound’s direction.

OK, so maybe she was accomplishing something. Sleep could wait.

* * *

His foot jittered unseen against the leg of the chair, his gaze jumping from his mother’s fingers moving gracefully across her needlework, to the clock on the mantle and its impossibly slow hands, to the fine print of the book on his lap. In spite of his glasses, the words blurred into a spidery mishmash that made his eyes itch in irritation, and without even realizing he was doing it, he reached up to rub them behind his lenses.

“You can’t be tired, William?” Anne commented, her hands halting in their work. “I found our day
quite temperate.”

“As did I,” he replied. “I’m just having difficulty concentrating at the moment.”

Setting aside her hoop, she laced her fingers together, settling them in her lap. “Could I trouble you for a reading, then?” she asked with a small smile. “It’s been far too long since you shared any of your works with me, and with as much time as you’ve been spending on the banks, I’m certain you’ve created some lovely pieces for me to hear.”

He brightened at the suggestion. “There is…one composition I’m anxious to have your opinion on,” he said. He’d just finished it that afternoon. While William didn’t think it measured up to the standard he’d forged within his dreams, he was still rather pleased with it, tweaking the occasional phrase until he had it just so. If his mother approved, he wished to read it to Miss Buffy in his dreams that night. After all, it was about her.

“Wait right here,” he instructed, and practically leapt from his chair to make a dash for his room. Up the stairs two at a time, grabbing the piece of paper from his journal, and back in his mother’s salon, an expectant smile on his face as he cleared his throat in preparation.

He didn’t dare look at her as he recited, instead envisioning himself on the park bench with Buffy at his side, pouring his entire heart into the verse so that she would understand the depth of the emotion it contained---.

No, standing. Standing was better. Buffy would need to look up at him then.

Oh, but he didn’t want that, either. He wasn’t superior to Buffy, and to stand over her would only make her think that he believed so.

At her feet, then.

But that was just as bad. Not that there wasn’t anything William wouldn’t do for her if she asked, but how could she respect him in such a subservient role?

So…at her side. Seated next to her. Eye to eye.

He had a feeling she would like that.

His hands were shaking when he finished, and William swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. In awkward contrast, a line of sweat trickled down the back of his neck, under his collar, but he refused to pull at the offending garment, instead lifting his chin to see his mother beaming at him.

“That…was…extraordinary,” Anne murmured, and he huffed with an unexpected swell of pride. “Simply exquisite. You must read it tomorrow night. Our guests will be most impressed.”

Her subsequent words made him visibly deflate. The Howards would be in attendance, as would a whole host of families who saw him as less than someone. They would hardly understand the sentiment behind his poem, and would most likely find some backhanded way to impugn his skills, laughing at his mother behind her back. He couldn’t let that happen.

Before he could speak, though, she stood, crossing to take his hand in hers. “Please, William,” she said. “It would make me most proud.”

Blue eyes met blue, and in the space of that single second…he believed.

“Of course, Mother,” William said, and gently squeezed her hand.
It was the first time she hesitated to go to him upon entering the dream. Not for the lack of wanting. No, Buffy’s desire to see William was just as strong as it had ever been. It was just currently tempered by the excruciating pain in her ankle and the blood that was dripping into her shoe.

Sitting on the grass at the edge of the path, Buffy eased off her sandal, pulling her skirt up and away from her legs to inspect the injury. The bruise itself wasn’t so bad, tucked in the fleshy part of her foot near the arch, but the cuts were jagged and raw, the blood flowing freely as if she’d only just gotten the injury.

The Slayer frowned. It was the exact same wound from her last fight on patrol, minus the first aid that had been done to it when she’d returned to the apartment. A group of three vamps had jumped her on her way back, and while she was busy pummeling two of them, the third had lunged for her legs, sinking his teeth into her ankle and holding on like some deranged puppy. It had taken all Buffy’s strength to break free and finish them off, and she’d received the proper scolding from Giles as soon as she’d stepped through the door about pushing herself too hard.

Sleep had been a welcome friend, but now that she was here, Buffy was left feeling bewildered. It wasn’t the first time bandages had mysteriously disappeared once she’d entered the dream, but it was the first time most of the pain had accompanied her. Of course, her usual assortment of scrapes and bruises were hardly even worth noticing. Maybe it was just the relative severity of this one that had forced her subconscious to include it her otherwise idyllic surroundings.

First things first, though. She had to stop the bleeding.

As she searched the vicinity around her for some sort of bandage, Buffy heard the unmistakable crunch of stone as footsteps neared on the path. Her eyes lifted, and she had to squint against the sun when she saw William’s familiar shape round the farthest bend.

“Miss Buffy!” he called out, his step quickening. “I’d feared I wouldn’t be seeing you this evening---”

She knew from the widened eyes that he’d spotted the injury, and before she could say anything, he was kneeling at her side, his handkerchief pulled from his pants’ pocket and placed firmly over the bleeding.

“What’s happened?” he demanded, and she was surprised at the vehemence in his tone. Behind his spectacles, his eyes had darkened to a stormy blue, and the tension in his body was betrayed by the twitch of a muscle in his jaw. For an instant, Buffy’s Slayer sense flared in warning, as if he was a demon threat, but she quickly recognized it as a shadow of memory rather than the real thing and pushed it aside.

“What are you bleeding?” William asked again. “This looks like a bite. Have you been attacked?” He was refusing to tear his gaze from her face for more than a moment at a time, only occasionally glancing down to see his fingers at work. His lean grip held her heel, keeping her foot steady while he tended to the blood, and she felt the faint tickle along her arch where his thumb was unconsciously stroking her skin.

“Puppy,” she blurted out, and then realized that in all her years of using that as an excuse, this was probably the first time it was actually a good one. Certainly her ankles were a little more accessible than her neck.

His eyes hardened for a moment as they searched hers, his mouth tense. The sudden fear that he
wasn’t going to believe her made Buffy swallow in anticipation of expanding on her lie, but his stiffness quickly dissipated, his attention turning fully to her wound, and she exhaled in relief.

“One of these days,” William said, his voice almost a whisper in the slight breeze, “I fear some…puppy will prevent you from coming to see me at all. Tell me, Miss Buffy, if you were in some sort of…danger…would you allow me the courtesy of sharing the knowledge? Or would you persist in pretending that all is right with the world, when we are both aware that it is not?”

It was, perhaps, the most upfront question he’d asked of her since talking of Angel. She’d been so careful to maneuver conversations so that they more often focused on William instead of her, and though she was more than aware that he noticed the various marks she bore from her real-life battles, he had refrained from asking about them directly.

Until now.

“You know,” she said with a smile, “it kind of sucks that the first time my puppy excuse actually makes sense, it’s not going to fly.”

There was a fraction of hesitancy before he settled to tying the handkerchief around her foot, staunching the flow. “Are you saying that it wasn’t an animal that attacked you?” he asked, his voice neutral.

“No,” she replied. She waited for him to look back at her.

“But what if I told you it was a vampire instead?”

William said nothing, just stared at her in that intent way that made electric shocks run up and down her spine. He was thinking---that much was obvious---but what the specifics were, Buffy had no idea. When it came to his thought processes, he often left her in the dust. It was only the blatant way he wore his emotions that gave her any clue as to what was really going on inside his head.

“If this were our first meeting,” he started, “I would presume you were merely toying with me in making such a peculiar suggestion.”

“But it’s---.”

She cut herself off when he held up his hand.

“Please. Let me continue.”

Wordlessly, Buffy nodded, and watched as he turned back to her foot. It still rested in his hand, and carefully he set it back onto the grass, his eyes darting to the svelte curve of her calf exposed to the open air. She saw his Adam’s apple bob before he tore his gaze away, and inwardly marveled how something as innocent as her bare legs could provoke such a reaction in him.

“I have never lied to you,” he began again. “I’ve considered us…friends.” The last word came cautiously, as if there was another he would’ve preferred but feared the reaction to, and she had the irresistible urge to reach forward and touch him.

There was a momentary start at the contact of her palm on his shoulder blade, but the muscles in William’s back almost instantly eased, rippling beneath the white fabric of his shirt. “Why do you do that?” he whispered, his voice hoarse. The fingers of his left hand curled into the grass, rooting him to the earth.

“Do what?”
A ragged breath. A stolen glance at her out of the corner of his eye. “Touch me.”

Buffy frowned, pulling away. “Because…we’re friends, right?”

“It is…you shouldn’t. Back home—.”

“We’re not back home. Either of us. So what’s the point in following their rules?”

She waited for his response, her heart pounding inside her chest. She didn’t know why this was so important, but more than anything, she wanted to show William that he wasn’t the pariah he thought he was. That he was worthy. That she genuinely liked him.

“Is that what this is, then?” he queried. “I have always believed that it was my desire for someone who understood that drew you to my dreams. But your words make me wonder, as do your actions. Am I the escape for you instead of the converse? Is your other existence so dreadful that you seek me out, merely so that you may blot out the other?”

And there it was, the blunt instrument of truth that he had already so expertly wielded for her before. Buffy’s throat was closed, her eyes solemn, as she regarded his carved profile. Another flare of Slayer tinglies, and this time, she shoved it away with purpose, refusing to be distracted from his obvious need for honesty.

“It’s just...hard,” she admitted. “I have responsibilities there. Life-threatening responsibilities. People need me to be strong, even when I don’t feel like it. That doesn’t mean I hate it so much, though, because I don’t. I have friends---good ones---and a mother who loves me more than anything.”

“These…responsibilities. They involve vampires?”

Buffy nodded. “This is going to sound way out there for you, but believe me when I tell you, I’m telling you the truth.” She took a deep breath. “Where I come from, there are vampires and demons and evil politicians bent on destroying the world. And I...fight them. That’s my job.”

His eyes were on her foot again, and he reached out to trace the delicate bones that were exposed around his makeshift bandage. “And you expect me to believe you?” William said. “Not that you aren’t strong, or that I can’t believe you would do such a thing, but...you’re just a girl.”

“Funny, that’s what I keep telling everyone, too.” Buffy sighed. Swallowing her pain, she pulled away from his touch and rose to her feet, standing above him for a moment before looking at the park around her. When her eyes settled on a marble fountain in the distance, she strode over to it, willing herself not to limp from the discomfort in her ankle. “Watch,” she instructed, and waited until William’s gaze was on her.

In the center of the dais was a carved cherub, all fat tummy and long wings that stretched almost as long as Buffy’s arm. Wrapping her hand around its base---or nearly around it, as her fingers only made it halfway---she snapped it from its mooring and set it one-handed to the ground. She didn’t even look up at him when she broke off one of the feathers, positioning it in her grip before twisting in place to send it soaring through the air.

William audibly gasped when the makeshift marble dagger embedded itself in the middle of a tree trunk over thirty yards away, and he leapt to his feet to rush and inspect it more closely.

This was not how she’d envisioned this dream unfolding. William was probably going to freak out about her Slayer powers, and she was going to spend the rest of the dream bored out of her mind because she’d be stuck all alone in a park that didn’t even have a playground. Willow had once suggested she try lucid dreaming, where she controlled the events, but Buffy had never mastered the
technique. *Maybe now’s a good time to start giving it a go again.*

She was ready for his fear when he turned back to face her. Her brows shot up, though, when she saw the excited gleam in his eyes.

“That was remarkable!” William exploded, almost running up to meet her. His hands were like twin balls of energy, darting around in wild gestures, running furiously through his hair. “I’ve never seen such a display! And certainly not from a woman, although I shouldn’t really be surprised, should I, since after all, this is you…”

He was babbling, much like Willow on one of her caffeine benders, and Buffy shook her head as she just watched in disbelief. “You’re not wigged by this?” she asked.

He stopped in mid-stream, head tilting to look down at her as if she’d asked a ridiculous question. “Why should I be?”

“Because it must seem freaky to the power of a thousand to someone who’s used to everyone being Emily Post, and girls being eye candy until they get married and have kids, at which point you just think of them as moms until they wither away and die without any recognition or power.” It all came out in a rush, and a flood of indignation surged through her system when she saw his lips fight from forming a smile. “And now I amuse you. Great.”

William’s hand on her arm stopped her from turning away. “You enthrall me,” he corrected. “And if I’ve ever given you reason to believe that I view women in such a way, then the fault is completely mine.”

“But…you’re all…Victorian,” she finished lamely. “Isn’t that how normal, Victorian guys think?”

For a second, she thought he was going to pull away. Instead, he took a deep breath, letting his hand slide down her arm to entwine with hers. His thumb brushed along the length of hers as he spoke. “I do not now, nor have I truly ever,” he said, “considered myself as like my peers. And if you find such crude rationale as indicative of their thoughts, then I must admit, I’m quite proud to exempt myself from such a crowd.”

Her relief surprised her, though why she felt it in the first place, Buffy had no idea. This was her dream; of course, he would understand. That was what her subconscious created him for. “So,” she said lightly. “Does that mean you’re never…crude?”

His mouth opened to protest, but when he caught the teasing gleam in her eye, William smiled in kind, pulling his shoulders back in a stiff, exaggerated pose. “Gentlemen never tell,” he announced loudly, and was rewarded with Buffy’s giggle. “Now,” he went on, “you must get off your feet. Enhanced strength or not, that is a very real injury to your foot, and you will not do yourself any good by aggravating it.”

* * *

She told him about it all after that, and William laid back in the grass, listening to Buffy talk about the monsters she was forced to battle, the apocalypses she’d helped avert, each new story sparking questions he kept to himself. The detail and color she brought to her tales excited his poetic spirit, but the pain and suffering she purposely skimmed over stabbed into the man’s soul.

It explained so much, though the wonder that his mind could create such a fantasy world still lurked somewhere in the darkest recesses of his brain, and, while her confession brought him a sense of closure to the vague worries that had plagued him regarding her injuries, William sensed that it did
even more for her, releasing her from a bond of deception that he was sure had marred her enjoyment of his company. The understanding that that was a selfish gesture on his part did not escape unnoticed, but he specifically chose to ignore it. If indulging in a beautiful fantasy woman, who found him interesting, who trusted him with her deepest secrets, was not already incredibly selfish, then what did it matter if the other was?

Her voice had faded away, and William glanced over to see what could’ve distracted her from her stories. Lying on her side, her head was cradled in the crook of her arm, golden hair spilling over the tanned limb, her legs tucked up to disappear beneath the skirt of her dress. Her eyes were closed, and as he watched her chest slowly rise and fall, William realized that she had fallen asleep.

He chuckled. “Well, I’ve certainly been known to bore others, but this is the first time I’ve been witness to someone boring themselves into slumber,” he murmured. Rolling to face her, he propped his head up on his hand, his eyes sweeping over her curved form. Without thinking, he reached out and pushed back a stray lock from her cheek, allowing his fingers to ghost over her jaw before hesitating at the swell of her mouth.

“You are truly the most beautiful creature I have ever seen, Buffy,” he breathed. His heart was hammering inside his chest, the forbidden touch burning his fingertips, and he pulled back before giving in to the luxury of further exploration of her skin. Already, his body was reacting to her presence---really, as it did whenever he lost the modicum of control he forced himself to exercise around her---and if he wasn’t careful, it would spend itself and embarrass him at the same time.

No, for now, he would content himself with watching her, and letting her sleep. If this was what she needed---and surely her falling under its spell so easily was evidence enough for that---then that is what she would get. He would hardly stand in the way, even if it did mean his plans got redirected.

He’d wanted to share his poem with her. As soon as he’d found himself in the park, William had settled with his ink and paper to scribble out the words he’d memorized while he was awake, intent on reading it to her as soon as she arrived. His patience had failed him, though, and within minutes of completing the poem, he was off in search of her, his verse tucked safely away inside his pocket.

Reading it to her now, while she slept, was out of the question of course, but still, the desire for her to know it pulled at his gut, prompting his fingers to stray to his trousers and extract the folded piece of paper. A gift, he decided, from me to you, and carefully, he slipped the poem into her tiny hand.

* * *

Her hand was resting on the open journal when she woke up, and Buffy blinked against the morning light trying to steal its way through the curtains. Weird, she thought, as memories of her dream came flooding back. Most of it was so vivid---the pain in her foot, the demonstration for William, telling him about the Hellmouth---but it reached a point where everything just kind of stopped. She remembered feeling drowsy under the sun, and then…did she fall asleep in her own dream? Was that even possible?

Like she thought. Weird.

As she started to sit up, something fell from Buffy’s curled hand, and she stopped halfway to look down at the sheet. There, against the white cotton, was a yellowed piece of paper, carefully folded into quarters. Her eyes immediately jumped to the journal, and annoyance at herself burned along her skin.

*I’ve gotta stop sleeping with this thing*, she thought as she tuck the paper back into the book. *I’m pulling out pages of it in my sleep now.*
“So,” she said, in as bright a voice as she could muster, “what’s the big game plan?”

From the spread in middle of the living room, Giles and Willow looked up to see Buffy hovering at the entrance, her hair and make-up already immaculately done to face the day. A smile graced her lips, but in their exhausted states, she could tell that they didn’t notice the shadow lurking behind her eyes.

“To tread softly and carry a really big stick,” Willow replied with a ghost of a grin. When Buffy giggled at the joke, the witch turned back to Giles. “Told you she’d think I was kidding.”

The Slayer’s mirth faded as she stepped into the room, perching herself on the arm of the couch. “A big stick?” she repeated. “You guys stayed up all night and you came up with the Neanderthal theory? No offense, but I could’ve done that.”

“It’s not like that.” Twisting, Willow began looking through the books that surrounded her, picking one up and setting it back down again as she spoke. “See, what the Council did was have their coven try tracing the magic, and when that didn’t work, they tried connecting it with this really cool demon locator spell. Except all that told them was that whoever was messing with the magic was protecting themselves from being found.”

Buffy was confused. “But they were found. The Council knows that they were here in London, right?”

“Only because you can’t completely hide that kind of power. Whoever did this tried, but what they did was just kind of scatter the effects. But basically, that still means the Council got bupkiss. So, what I was thinking…” Her voice trailed off, brows drawn in an annoyed scowl. “Where’d that book go?”

“I believe you’re sitting on it,” Giles offered, gesturing with his glasses toward her bottom.

Her frown vanished. “Oh,” Willow said, tilting sideways to extract the worn text from beneath her. She flipped through its pages. “Where was I?”

“Bupkiss.”

“Right. So, what I was thinking, what we need to do is collect what got scattered. Then, we can turn it around and use the magic itself to track down who cast it.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”
Folding the book open, Willow passed it over to Buffy, pointing to a picture in the center of the page. “With that.”

She looked at it in confusion, turning the book sideways to examine it from that angle for a moment, before returning it right-side up. “It’s…a big stick.”

“Actually, it’s a divining rod,” Willow corrected. “Except instead of finding water, we’re going to be finding magic.”

“Why didn’t the Council do that?”

Buffy watched as Willow and Giles exchanged a quick glance, resulting in the Watcher dropping his glasses to his side and pinching the bridge of his nose. “It’s…unorthodox,” he said wearily. “What we’re considering doesn’t exactly fit Council protocols.”

“That doesn’t mean it won’t work,” Willow rushed. “All we’re doing is changing up the rod specs a little bit. You know…tweaking. To get it to do what we want.”

“And being tweaky isn’t going to backfire on us?”

Giles shook his head. “I’m fairly confident that the modifications we’ve made to the spell are mostly benign. It’s just…if the Council were to find out what we’re doing, they may attempt to stop us.”

“Why?”

Another look, and this time Buffy definitely felt like something else was going on that she wasn’t being let in on. They were trying to protect her yet again. Didn’t they get that she was sick and tired of being their damsel in distress?

“Some of our ingredients can only be obtained on the black market,” Giles explained. “Their collateral effect is completely salutary, but as you know, idiosyncratic methodology tends to be frowned upon by the Council.”

She couldn’t help her frown. “And you’re OK with this?” she asked her Watcher. “Since when is black anything good?”

“I wouldn’t be willing to do this if I wasn’t certain it was safe. Yes, individually, one or two of the requirements could be used for more diabolical purposes, but collectively, I honestly can’t foresee how anything but good can come from this. If it works, of course.”

“It’ll work,” Willow insisted.

“So let’s do it.” Buffy brightened. “Can I use it? I’ve been known to be pretty handy with long, pointy things.”

“Perhaps when the time comes.” Giles did his best to stifle a yawn, but failed as it overtook him. “There is a…drawback to the plan. It’s not exactly quick.”

“Define not quick.”

“A day to gather ingredients, two more to prepare. We won’t be able to actually use the rod until Monday at the earliest.”

Buffy crumpled at Giles’ announcement. Three days. Three days of wandering around the city without specific purpose. Three days of feeling useless while Giles and Willow did all the work. And
she couldn’t try and distract herself with vacation-y stuff because she’d have to do it all by herself while they worked.

“There is something you can do, though,” he said when he caught the look on her face. “Though, to be honest, I rather dread asking it of you.”

She rolled her eyes. “C’mon, Giles,” Buffy said. “Whatever it is, it can’t be nearly as bad as being stuck here all day watching BBC1.”

“I’d like you to meet with Quentin Travers.”

Beat. “OK. You win.”

“It would only be for today,” he hurried to add. “He’d requested to see you anyway, should you agree to help retrieving the collection.”

“What does he want?”

“I don’t know. I assume he wishes to discuss your role as the Slayer within the Council.”

She was almost quivering as the energy she’d been restraining vented through her frenetic pacing around the room. “I’m not going back to work for them!” Buffy said. “This is a one-time deal only. After the stunt they pulled, there is no way I trust them as far Willow could throw them. If he thinks--.”

“I’ve already told him this,” Giles interrupted. He rose to stand before her, forcing her to jerk to a halt and stare up at him with blazing eyes. “I understand your reluctance to speak with him directly, but I wouldn’t ask it of you if it wouldn’t be of value to us.”

“And it would only be today while we’re getting the ingredients to make the rod,” Willow chimed in. “You can go back to boring television tomorrow.”

At least now she understood why they’d been so reluctant to share any information, Buffy thought. They’d known all along that they were going to ask her to see Travers and considering the history, they were probably expecting an even more violent response from her.

“I’m not going back to work for them,” Buffy repeated. “And I’m reserving the right to call him an arrogant asshole for thinking I might.”

“He is kind of a goober for thinking that,” agreed Willow.

“Regardless of his…goober status,” Giles said, wincing slightly at the foreign word on his tongue, “I appreciate your help in this, Buffy. Thank you.”

She kept her retort to herself as she nodded and watched them begin picking up the books from the floor. Maybe it won’t be so bad, she thought. It’s just a meeting with one really annoying old man I could kick into next week if I had to. What could be so bad about that?

* * *

The sea of faces that greeted her when she stepped into the conference room made Buffy pause. She’d expected to be ushered immediately into Travers’ office when she’d announced her arrival at Council Headquarters. After all, she was the only currently active Slayer; surely, that afforded her a bit of celebrity here, if nowhere else. Instead, the wizened secretary had glared at her icily over her bifocals, and pointed to a straight-backed chair on the opposite wall.
“Sit,” she’d instructed. “I’ll let him know you’ve arrived.”

It had been a long forty-five minutes of fidgeting—and boy, what she wouldn’t have done for a seat cushion—before the secretary had given her another cold glance, this time after hanging up from a call that had come through. “Come with me,” she’d said, and Buffy had followed her through the narrow halls, getting lost after the third bend and second flight of stairs. By the time they’d stopped before the closed door, Buffy was well on the way to the land of regret about her decision to show up.

And now facing the wide, wide world of Watchers was enough to make her start actually missing the good old days of facing off with Snyder in his office. At least then, it had only been her against one stuffed shirt. This was a whole gaggle.

“Have a seat, Miss Summers,” Quentin said from his position at the head of the table. He gestured toward the lone empty chair directly opposite him, and waited until she’d perched herself on its edge before continuing. “I’m sure you’re curious as to why I’ve asked to see you.”

“Just call me George,” she said, her nervous smile already hurting her cheeks. It faded slightly as almost everyone at the table immediately began flipping through the manila files in front of them, and she caught her name on the outer tab of the one nearest her. Great. I really am the newest monkey in the cage.

“I’m surprised Rupert didn’t accompany you,” Quentin said, ignoring the confused reaction her quip had created among his colleagues. “His overprotection would seem to extend especially to us.”

“He’s busy,” she said. “With the books. And the…reading of the books. Because that’s what he does, you know. Read. Books. With all the…words.” Even as it was coming out, she could tell she was babbling but had no idea how to stop it. Giles had warned her about their potential inquiry, and she’d had this whole speech planned that would divert their attention from the shopping of all things magical that was actually happening. It figured that it would decide to am-scray just when she needed it.

“Yes.” Fingers steepled, he leaned back in his chair, gaze steady but inscrutable. “I suppose it’s better this way. I very much prefer discussing this without his presence.”

“This? Am I going to find out what ‘this’ is any time soon here?”

Quentin glanced at the woman who sat to his left, and nodded. As Buffy watched, the slim blonde straightened her glasses before rising to her feet.

“Historical precedence for the advent of a second Slayer during the current Slayer’s incumbency is erratic at best,” she started, reading from the index cards she held in her hand. “Thus, with the actualization of your renewed allegiance to the Council—.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Buffy stood up, pushing back her chair to allow her room to stand at the table. “OK. I’ll admit to not really being the brainiac on Watcher-speak, but I understood that last part just fine.” She leveled her gaze at Travers. “Let’s get this straight, Mr. Travers. There is no allegiance here. I’m still a free agent, and you’re still the asshole responsible for almost getting my mother killed and then firing Giles when he tried to do the right thing. So, if this little show you’ve staged here is just to intimidate me into making me a permanent fixture on the Council’s agenda, then you’re wasting both of our time, because it’s never going to happen. I’ve been on edge ever since graduation. Don’t push me over it, or I just might take you down with me.”

There was silence. By the range of shock on the Watchers’ faces, it was obvious that few people
talked back to Quentin Travers but it did nothing to shake Buffy’s resolve.

“Are you about finished, Miss Summers?” he finally queried, his tone unperturbed.

“It depends,” she countered. “Are you done with the Slayer recruitment scheme?”

“There is no scheme.” His eyes flickered to the blonde, and she resumed her seat without his saying a word. “Your presence here today is in conjunction with our search for the crystal. Lydia was merely trying to fill you in on some of the background before we set forth with our inquiry.”

“By bringing up Faith. Yeah, that makes perfect sense.”

“She was merely using Faith’s existence as an example of how unique you truly are.” His watery eyes darted to the blonde at his side, sending her shrinking into her seat. “In hindsight, perhaps it wasn’t the most adept example to utilize.”

“So I’m one of a kind,” Buffy said, folding her arms across her chest. “But something tells me I’m not here because you want my autograph.”

As she watched, Quentin nodded to the man nearest her. Does he actually verbalize any of his orders? she wondered when the man pushed a colored file across the table toward her. She flipped it open, and immediately saw copies of the same photos Giles had shown her at the apartment. “You’re showing reruns here,” she said. “I’ve seen all these before.”

“And did they mean anything to you?” Travers asked.

“Only that even vampires can surprise you by having good taste every once in a while.” She shuffled through the pictures, tossing them one by one to the side, until she’d gone through all twelve. Underneath the last was a closed envelope, bulging awkwardly from whatever it contained. “What’s this?” she asked, picking it up.

“Something Rupert didn’t see.”

The answer made her hesitate for a fraction of a second before sliding her nail beneath the seal. Turning the envelope over, Buffy felt it before she saw it, a swathe of fabric alternately gauzy soft and dusty hard. It took only a moment to see why.

“OK,” she said, and set the blood-stained handkerchief on the table. “Let’s try it again. What is this?”

“We were hoping you would tell us,” Travers said.

“And I thought you stodgy English types would be the first ones to recognize a hanky when you see it. Or do they just stay stuffed in your coat pocket for the way they look?” Nobody was answering her, frozen in their regard as she waited for a response. When none was forthcoming, she looked back at the item in question.

It was yellowed around the neatly trimmed edges, aged from years of disuse. Where the blood had saturated the fabric, it had dried to a crisp ruddy brown, tiny dried flakes already beginning to come away as exposure to the air was starting to take its toll. There were no decorations, no ornamental design to the handkerchief; only its large size told her anything at all.

That it had once belonged to a man.

“You have this because of the crystals,” she said, certainty driving her eyes back to Travers’. “Did this belong to whoever gave them to you guys?”
“We believe so, yes,” he replied. Though he wasn’t smiling, there was a glint of surprised respect in his gaze at her astute conclusion. “When Council Head Rhodes-Fanshaw was killed protecting the collection, that handkerchief was used to try and stop his bleeding. Attempts were made to link it back to whomever it was who left it in his care, but the results were inconclusive. We’ve had it in our possession since.”

“So this blood is his?”

There was a pause. “Some of it.”

“And why didn’t you tell Giles about it?”

“Because we felt it was vital to speak with you directly,” Travers replied. “If Rupert had told you out of our presence, we believed there was a possibility we would never learn the truth.”

“The truth about what?” All amusement was wiped from Buffy’s face, her mouth grim. “You wanted me, not the other way around. All I know about this is what you’ve told me.”

“Is that so, Miss Summers? Then tell me something.” For the first time since she’d arrived, Travers’ tone grew dangerous, razor-edged with cold suspicion. “As I’m sure you’re aware, the theft of the collection forced us to re-examine what little evidence we had. So, how is it that our resources indicate that a portion of the blood on that handkerchief…belongs to you?”

* * *

He stood, staring at his reflection, all color washed from his skin to leave him bone-pale and appearing like he more aptly belonged in a coffin. No matter how long he looked, or how hard he may wish to turn back the hands of time, William knew there was no escaping the disaster that taunted him from the nether regions of the glass.

He remembered now the instructions he’d been bade by his mother.

“You mustn’t forget to take your coat and waistcoat to Mrs. Shemfield’s,” she’d said to him across the dining table.

It had been the day after his first dream of Buffy, and in spite of the time that had already elapsed, William was still adrift on the elation from the encounter. “Of course,” he’d replied with a reassuring smile, and then promptly forgot, preferring instead to dwell on the mischievous laughter of his newfound fantasy and not the harsh reality of the incident with the maidservant bearing the tray of merlot at the last formal dinner party he’d attended.

The evidence of both the accident and his forgetfulness gaped at him from the mirror. If he didn’t look closely, William imagined the jacket might not be too noticeable, but there was no denying the condition of his waistcoat. All his attempts to hide the stains only served to accentuate them. Mother would surely be apoplectic should he arrive at the table in such a state, but what other choice did he have?

His gaze strayed to the wardrobe. His brown was more than presentable, even if not entirely of the fashion nor completely appropriate for the hour. Still, his other options were even less desirable. This would have to be his cross to bear for failing to remember his duty. As the man of the house, William owed it to his mother fulfill his role as host; to leave her to entertain on her own was unthinkable.

By the time he’d changed into his other suit, William could already hear the voices of arriving guests drifting up the stairs. He hastened with his shoes, grateful that they at least would pass scrutiny, but when he rushed into the hall, he bowled into Meg, the maid who’d first delivered the Cook’s special
tea, sending her squeaking to the floor.

“My apologies!” he said, stooping to help her back to her feet.

Meg’s eyes widened as her gaze flickered over him. “Your mum sent me to fetch you,” she stammered. “She was afraid something was…” Another glance, and this time, William’s cheeks reddened. “…wrong.” she finished.

He swallowed. If this was the reaction of a mere servant to his attire, what chance did he have with his peers? They would be far more brutal if infinitely more subtle in their deprecation. Perhaps it would be better after all if he found some excuse to explain his absence—.

“William!” The voice boomed as it approached from the stairwell, and William crumpled inside as he looked to see David Howard striding confidently toward them. “There you are, old chap. I overheard your mother musing to mine about what could be detaining you, and decided to see for myself what could possibly be more entertaining than a gaggle of old women blathering on about the weather.” His dark eyes danced between William and Meg, his lecherous suppositions causing both of them to flush.

“If you’ll excuse me, sirs,” Meg said, eyes down, her knees bending too rapidly for an awkward curtsey. “I’ll just be getting back to Mrs. Freston.”

David’s beady gaze followed her curvy bottom as she fled down the stairs, too-full lips pulled back in a grin. “She’s a ripe young thing, isn’t she?” he commented, and William grimaced when he saw the other man deliberately thrust his hands into his trouser pockets. “It’s really no wonder you’re dawdling if that’s your primary distraction.”

“It’s not like that,” he countered. He flushed when David lifted an eyebrow in disbelief. “I’m merely late in getting prepared. Meg was sent to fetch me.”

“Ah, yes. Forever at your mother’s beck and call. Really, William, one of these days, you’re going to have to realize you’re the man of the house and not the other way around. How else do you think you’ll ever gain the attention of a particular young lady?” He smiled, a disdainful sneer masked in mock concern. “You do wish that to happen, do you not?”

His throat burned from the acid that rose up from his stomach. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad if he didn’t feel so small next to him, if he wasn’t forced to look up into David’s face, but the other man had a good three stone and four inches on him. As it was, William took a step to the side, averting his eyes as he tried to swallow down the shame he knew he shouldn’t be feeling. “I really must be going,” he started to say, and then yelped when a strong hand clapped down onto his shoulder.

“I tell you these things for your own good, you know,” David said, forcing him to turn to him. Though his face was easy, the grip on William was like a steel trap, pinching the nerves in an excruciating tingle. “Do you have any idea the talk that occurs behind your back? The things people say about you?”

He knew. Of course he knew. He was far from blind or stupid, and yet it seemed as if everyone thought of him as such. “Why are you saying these things?” he managed in a hoarse whisper, though he already suspected the truth of his reply.

“Because someone must, as it’s clear you’re not willing to better yourself of your own accord. Be a man, William. You embarrass the rest of us when you’re not.”

“Just because my interests lie elsewhere—.”
David’s scoff was a gust of hot air in William’s face. “That bloody awful poetry of yours is a disgrace. Do us all a favor and move on from it.”

With a wrench that made his arm feel like it was being pulled from its socket, William freed himself from David’s grasp and fled for the stairs, desperate to be anywhere but in his old tormentor’s presence and doing everything he could to block out the derisive laughter that floated after him.

Age had not lessened his harassment; it had merely changed its shape from the beatings and taunts of their youth to this caustic appraisal that left William wanting. Though his head was shouting at him that it was all a pack of lies, that David Howard was a ruffian in gentleman’s clothing, William’s heart was not nearly so hardy, cracking and crumbling as his feet flew down the risers, fighting back the tears that were already starting to spill down his cheeks. His only thought was to flee the house, his mother’s party be damned.

It took only seconds before he found himself on the walk outside his house, his feet leading him automatically toward the park and away from the laughter he could still imagine hearing from David Howard. Twenty yards away, though, a small shadow flitted from around the corner, and William stopped short as the wizened widow he’d spoken to on the banks stepped into his view.

She smiled when she saw him, her teeth gleaming oddly white against the night. “Running away again, William?” she asked. “And what would your young lady have to say about that?”
The Likeness of a Man

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CXLI.”

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy has appeared before Quentin Travers and a host of Watchers and been asked why a handkerchief left with the crystal collection over a hundred years previous has her blood on it, while William has fled his mother’s dinner party in the face of David Howard’s taunting, only to run into the same odd woman he saw at the banks…

She was exactly as he remembered, if it was even possible to forget such a cryptic encounter as they had shared. Standing directly in front of her, William marveled at how tiny the widow actually was, so tall in his memory but barely reaching his elbow in the grand light of day. Or, rather, the dim dusk of evening.

Still, she held herself remarkably erect, straight and oddly powerful in spite of her advancing years, and he was left to wonder yet again at the otherworldliness to her, with those black eyes that seemed to see straight through to the heart of him. He automatically took a step back, squaring his shoulders as he bowed his head, not just from the demands of courtesy but also the intense desire to escape her scrutiny.

“My apologies,” William said, and then added in a low voice as he grimaced, “and it certainly appears that I’m making many of those this evening.”

“Your mother’s going to be wondering where you are,” she said, ignoring his contrition. “You don’t want to disappoint her, do you? She was so excited about your reading tonight.”

Mention of his poem made his blood freeze, and he lifted his gaze to stare at her. “How do you know…?” he started, and then stopped, remembering their first meeting…her odd comment upon first seeing him on the walk just minutes earlier. “Who are you?” William asked bluntly. The chill that was starting to nip the air sent shivers undulating across his skin, but he was oblivious to anything but the tiny woman before him. “How is it you know so much about me?”

“You can call me Miss Esme,” she replied, thoroughly unperturbed by his lack of manners. “And I know only what you wear on your face, William. Of course, you do have this tendency to display any and all emotions there, so I’m afraid you’ll have to pardon me for being horrifically obvious in my observations.”

“You can’t have known about the reading merely by looking at me.” He paused, unsure whether or not to continue, and then decided to throw caution to the wind. “And you specifically addressed the issue of my ‘young lady.’ I don’t have one, and your presumption that I would be failing her in some regard, should she exist, is insulting.”

The anger was prickling around the edges of his temper, surprising him with its vigor, but when she began to chuckle, instead of receding into the quiet of shameful solicitude, William’s ire sharpened, drawing forth his words as if they possessed a mind of their own.
“I don’t understand...”

“I don’t expect you to,” she interrupted. Her face softened, her mirth fading as effortlessly as the sun. “There is no reason for you to hide your feelings, William. Even when they’re unpleasant. And just because you’re frightened of the response, you shouldn’t allow them to discourage you from your poetry. It has its place, just as you do, and you shouldn’t shirk your responsibility in claiming it.”

Each collected observation deflated his rising fury, until he was left hollow and gaping at her in confusion. He didn’t understand, and it both frustrated and intrigued him. There was so much more behind that wrinkled face than was immediately apparent, each declaration from her lips spoken as if she had other knowledge, with a surety that made it difficult to question her believed honesty. “Miss Esme,” he murmured, but then stopped. What could he possibly say? She seemed to expect each utterance before its possibility even arose in his head, and yet, he didn’t know why, or how, or... why.

“You ought to be returning to your home,” she said. “Dinner will be late unless you do.”

“They will not miss me.”

“The only one of us who believes that is you, William.”

So certain. The word that sprang to his mind made him gulp as if swallowing it back down would make it disappear.

Foreordained.

“These things you say...” He shook his head, stepping further away from her. “It’s not possible for you to know what you...” And just as if he were back in his room, struggling to find the correct phrase, the proper rhyme, his words failed him, leaving him pale and shaken. Try again, he ordered himself. You must try again.

“I consider myself an intelligent man,” he started again. “But...your observations leave me with questions I can’t answer. Questions I didn’t realize existed. Why is it you make these assertions I know with my head I have to deny?”

Miss Esme shook her head sadly. “One of these days, you’ll learn that your mind is not your most valuable weapon. Your young lady knows this already.”

“As I’ve told you already, I don’t have a young lady.”

“Then who is your poem for? Your mother believes you wrote it for someone...special.”

William’s eyes scanned hers, searching for some sign of duplicity. It was very possible for his mother to think such a thing, but he was surprised she would so readily share her thoughts with someone he couldn’t place as ever having been around their home. “She’s not real,” he finally said, and was surprised at how much it hurt to admit that out loud. “I was inspired by a dream.”

“Dreams have a way of becoming real,” Miss Esme said. “Do you remember the Terence quote I asked you about that day you were writing on the banks?”

His eyes narrowed—*Fortune favors the brave*—and he slowly nodded.

“I shouldn’t be doing this. Telling you, I mean. But then again, maybe I was meant to. Who can know? Time isn’t stagnant. It’s a raging river, flowing and surging and coming back onto itself when you least expect it. But that’s a lesson for another day, I think.” Slowly, she advanced and rested a
wizened hand on his forearm as soon as she was within reach.

William started from the shock that leapt between them, his eyes like saucers behind his spectacles. In the confines of his chest, his heart threatened to burst through his ribcage, the beginning of a fine sweat causing his collar to stick to the back of his neck. “Who are you?” he whispered. The name she shared was no longer sufficient. Beyond his belief in the blue of the sky, in the power of the pen and such simple words as love and trust, he knew there was more to this woman than the casual acquaintance she claimed to share with his mother.

The thought then that she’d never actually stated as such, that her associations with his family had been made entirely in his head, did nothing to allay his certitude, and so he repeated, “Who are you?”

Esme smiled. “A friend.” Simple, quite nearly more direct than he’d expected. And truth, he realized as his gaze remained frozen on her. “And this friend thinks you should hurry along back to your mother’s party before she realizes you’ve gone. You may consider your…someone special as illusory, but the effect she has on you is real, is it not? And something tells me she would want to hear your work, should she be present.”

For a moment, he was no longer there. For a moment, the clutches of the cooling London dusk released their hold on his flesh, and William stood in the radiant ambience of his nocturnal park, Buffy sitting on the bench before him, leaning back against her hands as she looked up into his face. His heart lurched at what he imagined he saw there, that half-smile she often wore in his presence making her mouth delectably kissable, his own watering in response.

Buffy wouldn’t be afraid. Buffy would have the strength to go up to David Howard and tell him exactly where he could go, and then turn around and do whatever the hell she wanted, their reactions be damned.

If Buffy could do it, then so could he.

Buffy’s golden smile faded before him, to be replaced by the waiting visage of the elderly woman. Her hand still rested on his arm, but when she saw him blink against the setting sun, she stepped back, shattering the last illusion to which he clung.

“Thank you,” William said simply, though what he was grateful for, he wasn’t entirely sure. A small bow prefaced his departure, and he felt the air begin to cool the flush that had risen to his cheeks as he scurried back to the house.

Yes. If Buffy could do it…

* * *

She didn’t know what they expected her to do about it.

Buffy’s simple powwow with the Council had segued into a daylong series of nightmarish meetings, bounding with enough tweed and stiff upper lips to make her walk away itching uncontrollably, while they tried to fathom out the reason her blood was on a century-old hanky. Though she was just as eager for an explanation as they were, convincing Travers that she knew nothing about it was her first order of business. She’d argued. She’d threatened. She’d tried walking out. It had taken submitting to a truth spell that still had her feeling queasy before the Council Head was persuaded that she was being upfront with them about being just as in the dark as they were.

The story she had now was only slightly more detailed than the one Giles had shared. In 1879, an
alert had been sent out by Richard Rhodes-Fanshaw, then Head of the Council, demanding an immediate convening of the Council at an address outside of London none of them had recognized. However, by the time the first Watcher had arrived, Rhodes-Fanshaw was lying semi-conscious across the threshold of the house, as if he’d been trying to crawl back inside to safety. The handkerchief they now had in their possession had been pressed to the bleeding bites on his neck, and while copious amounts of vampire dust had been reported both on the site and on his clothing, no one else was found in the immediate vicinity. Neither were any weapons.

He’d died just after the second Watcher’s arrival, directing them to the contents of a padded crate they hadn’t noticed on the porch and ordering it to be kept secure. Both of the men who were at his side until his death reported his agitated ramblings, and while they didn’t completely mesh, enough overlapped so that they had somewhere to start their investigations.

The name of the man who’d delivered the crate. David Howard.

The contents of the crate. A dozen perfectly sculpted, crystal figurines, all female, radiating remnants of a spell so powerful it knocked out the witches they brought later to the scene.

The order that the figures be hidden and protected, no holds barred.

And a single word. One that he kept repeating but whose significance was lost when Rhodes-Fanshaw finally slipped away.

April.

The board had assumed it was a deadline of some sort, that the owner of the figures would come to collect them in April, or that something tremendous would happen to them in that particular month. But, as it was early July when the incident occurred, they could only wait until the following spring to see if their hypotheses were correct.

Nothing happened.

Just as nothing happened the following April. Or the April after that.

And so they’d given up on that thread, especially since all their other attempts to learn more about the collection failed, and it had been relegated to an archive in Cambridge where it had sat gathering metaphorical dust until being stolen two weeks earlier by a group of vampires.

Buffy shifted in her seat, staring out the window of the car as the details of the story tumbled around inside her head. Though they hadn’t said it out loud, she could tell that the Council was just as much at a loss as to what she should do as Giles was. Her blood on an aged artifact had thrown all of them for a loop, and at that moment in time, she was most definitely the loopiest. But such was her life. If things weren’t loopy, she wouldn’t be the Slayer.

“We’re here,” came the quiet voice beside her.

Buffy glanced at the woman the Council had had accompany her back to the flat. Actually, she’d been forced to stay at the Slayer’s side throughout the day, as if Travers thought having another female presence might make her more cooperative. On more than one occasion, the Watcher—Lydia, she kept reminding herself, that was what Travers had called her in the conference room—had tried to initiate a conversation, but Buffy had shot her down. She wasn’t there to be their friend; she just wanted to know what the hell was going on.

“Thanks for the lift,” Buffy said as the car eased to a stop at the curb. Her hand was already on the handle when she felt the light pressure on her shoulder, prompting her to look back.
“May I have just…a moment of your time?” Lydia asked.

“You’ve had all my moments, all day long,” she complained, but relaxed back into the seat.

“This isn’t regarding the collection. This is…more personal.” Squirming slightly, her hands fidgeted in her lap as she continued. “I’m hoping I can pick your brain, so to speak.”

“I think it’s all picked out. You want a piece, you’ll have to pick up one of the scraps I left lying on the floor back at Watcher Central. Right now, I just want to get upstairs and get some sleep. Talking with you guys is more backbreaking than stopping an apocalypse.”

This time, she was stopped from exiting the car by a shuffle of papers from the briefcase near her feet. “Here,” Lydia said, thrusting forward a small file. “Just look it over. If you could spare a few minutes before your next appearance with the Board, I’d appreciate your responses to the questionnaire I’ve prepared.”

Buffy frowned. “What is this?” Leaning toward the window, she tried angling the paperwork so that the streetlamp would illuminate it, and failed miserably. “Is this the part where I find out you’re sneaking around behind Travers’ back and you want to offer me a deal to help you out with some evil and dastardly plan?”

“Oh, no, nothing quite as sinister as that,” Lydia replied, chuckling. “It’s for my own research. You’ve had personal experience with one of the most notorious and fascinating vampires in modern history. I’m merely interested in gathering some firsthand knowledge to add to my studies. I’m writing a book on him, you see.”

The last was said with a modest smile, but it did nothing to warm the chill that had settled around Buffy’s heart. She closed the file and held it out. “I’m not talking about Angel,” she said stiffly. “Not to you, not to anyone.”

There was a moment of silence before Lydia’s eyes widened behind her glasses and she held up her hand to prevent taking back the file. “I wasn’t referring to Angelus,” she said. “My interest lies in William the Bloody. You knew him as Spike, I believe?”

“Spike?” It was the first time in months Buffy had given the bleached vampire any thought. “He’s your fascinating vampire?”

“Oh yes!” The floodgates opened, and for the first time that day, the Slayer watched the other woman become as animated as Willow on one of her caffeine jags. “He’s quite the anomaly. So charismatic, and yet he chooses to forge his own path oftentimes. And then there’s the whole romance between him and Drusilla---.”

“Hold it.” Buffy tossed the file onto the seat. “OK, first of all, Spike and Drusilla? Gross and evil and incredibly twisted. Not romantic in the slightest. And secondly, Spike’s just like any other vampire. Looking out for number one and interested only in how high his body count is.”

“But that’s not entirely true.” Picking up the file, Lydia opened it up and thrust it before Buffy’s eyes, pointing to various items as she spoke. “William has always deviated from the traditional path. On more than one occasion, he’s even contributed to the side of good, including your own battle last year, if I’m not mistaken.”

“He did that for purely selfish reasons. His trampy girlfriend couldn’t keep her hands to herself, so Spike came to me so that I’d help him get rid of Angelus.”

“But William---.”
“Stop calling him that!” Her vehemence surprised both of them, but Buffy was unwavering when Lydia pulled away. “Look. If you’ve got a jones for Spike, that’s your problem, not mine. But I’m not going to help fuel your little fantasies. He’s evil, remember? There was a reason they called him William the Bloody. I suggest you keep that in mind.”

She was out of the car before the Watcher could stop her, racing for the stairs and letting herself through the front door of the building with her borrowed keys. It took seconds for her to realize her heart was hammering inside her chest, but why she’d be so flustered talking about Spike, Buffy had no idea.

OK, that was a lie. She knew why she was upset. And it didn’t have much to do with the issue of a blind Watcher’s obsession with a demonic sociopath.

It was the correlation of that name with him. Her William. The gentle poet who thought she was the most amazing thing he’d ever seen. He was hers, damn it, and nobody else’s.

And she really needed to see him right about now.

* * *

Entering the dream was becoming easier and easier, and as she hurried down the stone path of the park, Buffy was grateful that for once, she was going to William without the awkward benefit of being hurt. Without patrolling that night, she’d gone to bed with only a minor twinge in her ankle from the bite the night before, and though it still ached within the realm of the dream, it was infinitely easier to manage than a fresh injury for her brain to assimilate.

Her smile was ready as she rounded the familiar bend in the trail, but as soon as she saw the empty bench, it faded away, leaving her eyes burning and searching the countryside for him. Had she beaten him here for a change? But that never happened. William was always the first to arrive, whether she came upon him or vice versa. Had she finally stepped into a dream where he wasn’t going to show up at all?

Panic seized her throat, and Buffy whirled around as she scanned the horizon. “William?” she called out. She followed with her feet, her skirt swirling around her legs. There was no sound but the distant gurgle of running water and the occasional birdsong drifting through the air, and it left her skin crawling in fear.

“William!” Buffy repeated, louder, more insistent.

Part of her felt ridiculous for coming apart at his non-appearance. Only a dream, she scolded herself. Not real, remember?

Except he felt real, and where everything else in her life was leaving her confused and wanting, William had provided an anchor she hadn’t expected. Accepting her without question. Admiring her without expectation. She needed that so badly right now.

She heard it then, the softest of humming, and began running in its direction before she could consider that it might not even be him. Legs pumping, her ankle protesting, Buffy raced across the grass toward the sound, her heart nearly exploding when she finally saw him clear a far knoll.

“William,” she said again, but this time only for her ears. Before he could even look up, she tackled him to the soft ground, rolling with him as her arms clung to his shoulders.

“Buffy?” he asked, and then groaned in pain as her elbow accidentally jabbed into his side. Keeping his fingers curled around whatever they held, his hands settled on her hips, forcing her to still as she
came to a stop directly on top of him. She could feel him tense beneath her, but didn’t loosen her grip, hugging him close as she pressed her ear to his chest.

“Where the hell were you?” she demanded. Her voice was slightly muffled by his shirt. “You weren’t on the bench. I was getting worried you weren’t going to show.”

“I was too excited to sit,” he said. “I went wandering and found these.” His hand vanished from her hip and a spray of half-crushed lilies of the valley suddenly appeared before her eyes. “I thought they’d look lovely in your hair.”

“Oh,” A smile began to soften her mouth as she reached to stroke the tiny bells. “That’s so sweet.”

William cleared his throat. “Not that…I’m not delighted you missed me,” he said, “but perhaps…”

He squirmed beneath her weight, and for the first time, Buffy felt the growing length of his erection pressing into her stomach.

“Sorry,” she said, scrambling away from his length. Sitting down on the grass next to him, she looked up to see William prop himself up, his excitement now hidden by the white fabric of his shirt. It still glowed on his face, though, his cheeks pink, his breath quick. Even his eyes seemed darker behind…

Buffy froze. “Can you do me a favor?” she breathed. His head tilted in expectation as he waited for her to ask it, and the knot in her stomach tightened. “Take off your glasses.”

He did as she asked, laying the broken buds along the green before doing so. As he folded them up, his gaze lifted to meet hers, and the curious glint in the dark blue only served to bother her further.

“You’re not squinting.”

“Because I can see. They’re merely reading glasses.” The amusement that had lingered on his face dissolved, to be replaced with a growing concern. “What’s wrong?”

Her response was to stretch out her hand and run a tremulous finger across his smooth brows. “You don’t have a scar,” she murmured, not really talking to him. “I wonder why I did that.”

“Did what?” The unease was in his voice now, and he reached up to take her hand in his, pulling it away from his face. “I don’t understand what’s going on. Are you all right?”

“Say ‘bloody hell.’”

“Pardon?”

“Say ‘bloody hell,’” she repeated, and looked up into the face that was growing more familiar by the second. How could I not have seen this, she wondered, but when she saw the hesitation lurking behind his eyes, she softened her request with a small smile and a soft, “Please?”

When it came, it lacked the conviction she’d heard so many times before, but the cadences were the same. A bubble of laughter rose in Buffy’s throat and she dropped her head to her bent knees, wrapping her arms around her legs as her shoulders began to shake from her hysterical amusement.

Way to go, Buffy. Put the face of the only William you’ve ever known on your favorite dream and don’t even realize it until you’re already hooked on him.

She could feel his eyes on her, and knew she must look like some kind of loon, just laughing for no apparent reason. But she couldn’t stop, not when the whole thing was so absurd. “Let me guess,” she
panted between giggles. “You know a David Howard, too, don’t you?”

His sharp intake of breath was followed immediately by the disappearance of his shadow, and when Buffy lifted her head to see what he’d done, she just caught the swipe William made at his eyes before slipping his glasses back onto his nose.

“Why are you doing this?” He couldn’t even meet her gaze, but there was no mistaking the pain in his tone.

It sliced through her agitation more effectively than having a bucket of cold water tossed over her head. He might look like Spike in a roundabout way, and he might sound like Spike, but this was a patented William response, through and through. So what if her subconscious was taking all the details of her day and slapping them together in some weird dream? That’s what dreams were supposed to be all about in the first place; she’d just forgotten that in the rush of falling for William---

Oh, god. I can’t be. He’s not even real.

But his distress seemed all too real, and it made Buffy ache to know that she was the source of it. Immediately, she was on her feet, her hand on his arm as she tried to get him to face her. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to laugh. It’s just…I’ve only just figured out who you remind me of, and…” Her words trailed away when she realized he wasn’t really listening to her. “It’s kind of funny, if you think about it,” she finished lamely. Except not. Not anymore.

“And so now I’m an object of ridicule. Thank you for clarifying that.” Pain was replaced by bitterness, but he still refused to look at her, choosing instead to start marching stiffly back toward the path.

“Stop it!” Jerking him to a halt, Buffy tugged him around so that he was forced to face her, exerting what strength was necessary to ensure he didn’t go away. “Look, turning into Chuckles the Clown back there was probably not the smartest thing I’ve ever done, but running away from me when I want to talk about it doesn’t exactly make you Mensa material, either, bub. Take it from me. These kind of opportunities, where I’m ready and willing to take my place on the shrink’s couch, come along once in a blue moon. Maybe even once in a purple moon. So, throwing it away? Kind of dumb.”

He regarded her in silence, his body wound like steel coils beneath her grip, and as the seconds stretched into a full minute, Buffy relaxed her hands, sliding them from his arms to press lightly against his chest. Beneath her palms, his pulse galloped in a syncopation that made her ears pound, and she felt herself swallow as her mouth suddenly went dry.

“How do you know David Howard?” William finally asked, his voice expressionless even when his eyes were not.

“How do you?” she shot back.

“He’s an…acquaintance of mine.” He stopped and waited for her response.

Of course he is. Pull the name associated with vampires from my subconscious and slap it up with the vampire face I’ve put on the William of my dreams. Makes perfect sense.

“Mine’s just a name that came up today with my slaying stuff,” she replied, and then shook her head. “It’s probably not even the same guy or anything. It’s kind of a common name, don’t you think?”

His eyebrow quirked, and the flash of déjà vu that flooded her senses suddenly made sense. It was
such a Spike-ism, but where on the vampire it would’ve seemed mocking, on William it was merely curious. *I missed this...how?*

“It seems rather coincidental,” he commented, but his tone was no longer flat, some of the life returning to his words.

“Well, yeah,” she conceded. “Mine killed a boatload of vampires protecting a mystical crystal collection, which probably did something like save the world. What did yours do?”

William snorted, relaxing even more. “Nothing quite so altruistic,” he said. His eyes dropped to her hands that still rested on his chest before slowly lifting his right to cover them. “May I ask what amused you so?” A whisper almost, like he was afraid to ask but couldn’t resist the question. “Have I...done something that would...provokw such a response?”

“It’s not you. God, William, it’s *never* you. Can’t you see that?”

“But you were...laughing. And the odd requests. I’m afraid...” He took a deep breath, and tried again. “When people ask things of me, I’ve found I don’t necessarily come out the other side completely unscathed.” His thumb caressed the back of her hand, though she didn’t think that he was even aware he was doing it. “It was such a trying night, but I got through it because I envisioned you believing in me. I’d hate to think I was merely a passing fancy for you. Just a...diversion to entertain.”

“If that was the case, why would I keep coming back here?” There was truth to his words---some, at least---but there was no way Buffy would vocalize them and hurt the gentle young man even more. He *was* a diversion, one she’d obviously made to distract herself from the yuck factor that was her real life, but that was her rationale when she was awake.

When she slept, when she was here, in the park, in his presence, talking and sharing and just being with him, William Freston the man was all that mattered. And if she had to repeat that in every single one of the dreams until he finally believed her, she would.

“You said you got through whatever ordeal you had tonight because of me?” She waited for him to nod. “Because you pretended I believe in you.” Another nod, this one slightly more hesitant. “You weren’t pretending, William.”

It was the first time she’d seen the light in his eyes since rolling off of him. With just those few words, a shutter lifted from whatever he’d been hiding behind, and the innocent delight she normally associated with him began to glimmer through. “You never cease to surprise me, Miss---.”

“Buffy.”

He was momentarily rattled by her interruption. “What was that?”

“No more ‘*Miss* Buffy.’ Can’t you just...call me Buffy? That wouldn’t break you, would it?”

“You don’t think it would be improper?”

She smiled. “You don’t see me calling you Mr. William, do you?”

His answering smile was sheepish. “Well, no. But...wouldn’t that be suggestive of a more...*intimate* relationship...Buffy?”

It was as if he was testing her, using her name without its more formal title, and she met the wary blue with an assurance that surprised her. “You’re a good man, William Freston,” she murmured.
Before the pleasure had registered in his eyes, she was on her tiptoes, her lips brushing across his jaw, her nostrils filled with the healthy scent of his skin. Buffy’s eyes fluttered closed as she settled her cheek against his, her mouth hovering just below his ear. “And I am honored to be in any relationship with you.”
Toward Thee I'll Run

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet LI.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy has finally seen the resemblance between William and Spike, though she still believes she’s created William in her unconscious using bits and pieces of her real life…

He’d had suspicions earlier; even in the unforgiving light of his waking hours, it had been impossible for William to completely delude himself to the contrary. Walking back to the dinner party, Miss Esme’s touch still a brand on his arm, Buffy had been an invigorative ghost hovering at his elbow, prompting him to stay tall when he strode back through the front door as if nothing was amiss, keeping his tone courteous as he addressed the guests in spite of seeing the knowing glances pass between David Howard and his cortege. She had been the reason he was able to find the strength to take the floor after the meal was served, before his mother could even ask, and recite the poem he’d written especially for the blonde beauty. And though there was no mistaking the sniggers that were not-so-cleverly disguised by the polite applause that followed, William thought that he saw one or two of the young ladies present look at him with a different eye afterwards, as if he’d done or said something that had quite taken them by surprise.

It was because of Buffy. Because he could practically feel her belief in him like a tender embrace.

That sensation had lingered even into his sleep, hence his inability to remain at the bench, and he went off in search of something that might bring a smile to her face as well. The lilies of the valley had seemed ideal, especially since he was far too excited to sit still long enough to compose another verse, and then feeling her throw herself into his arms, pinning him and demanding to know of his whereabouts…

Nobody had ever cared so much where he was before. So when she had the odd reversal of mood, William had been cut to the quick, ready to flee and steel himself against being such a fool as to believe that anyone—-even a dream—-could have such faith in him.

But she did. She’d said so. When he’d tried to run, she’d come after him, asserting that he hadn’t been pretending, then following it up with the kiss on his cheek and those words---honored to be in any relationship---that left him dizzy with giddy delight.

And as he stood there, feeling her slim form pressed against him, the divine scent of her hair filling his nostrils as she continued to nuzzle his cheek, William knew. Without a shadow of a doubt, with every fiber of his being, he understood now just what he felt.

He was in love with Buffy Summers.

The ramifications of such an understanding were not something he was willing to consider at the moment. She was only real to him, existing in the nether regions of his imagination like a hidden treasure he didn’t want to share with anyone else. That didn’t make the feelings any less genuine, not when her presumed disdain could wound as deeply as it had. He would just revel in the here and now, and luxuriate in the vivacity that was Buffy for as long as could hope to dare hold on to her.
Carefully, William released his hold on her hands to slide them around her body, settling at the small of her back in a tremulous caress. It wasn’t the first time he’d held her so, but somehow, in the flush of her declaration, he felt like he was treading on new ground, and fear that he would misstep made him overly cautious.

“Buffy…” he murmured, and felt her gentle sigh tickle his neck. When she pulled back, he fought the instinct to cling tighter, refusing to hold on if she wished otherwise. She didn’t leave the circle of his arms, though, and instead looked up at him, waiting in expectation.

William swallowed. What to say? Did he confess his own feelings? He didn’t think she would laugh, but he wasn’t certain that it wouldn’t drive her away, either. And he wasn’t prepared to lose her just yet.

“Buffy,” he began again, a little louder, a little more sure, “can I tell you how glad I am to not see you injured this visit? You don’t even appear to be limping from your unfortunate bite.”

“Super Slayer healing,” she replied. “Part and parcel of the whole Chosen package. And nothing fresh because I didn’t patrol tonight.”

When she extricated herself from his arms, the loss chilled him to the bone, but William remained steadfast. It was better this way. A return to the normal, the expected, albeit with a touch of intimacy that tied them together in a way that hadn’t been there moments earlier. “But you spoke of your… slaying,” he said. “Is there more to your duty than battling with vampires?”

She dismissed it with a casual wave of her hand. “Today was about the boring, researchy part of my job. Not anything worth talking about.” It was obvious the topic was not one she wished to pursue, so when she began ambling across the green, picking at the loose grass that clung to her skirt as she walked, he fell into pace beside her.

His mouth was open to speak again when she beat him to it.

“We’re good again, right?” Buffy asked, glancing up at him out of the corner of her eye. “You believe me, apology accepted, and all that jazz?”

“Of course.” He didn’t even hesitate in his response.

“Good. I’d hate to think I messed up the one thing in my life that was giving me any happies these days.”

It was no surprise he warmed at her words. He made her happy. If only she knew…

“---especially after the fiasco that was Angel,” she was saying.

That name was like a bucket of cold water splashed across his skin. “Angel,” he murmured, and found it impossible to keep his disgust out of his voice. “I detest that he haunts you even here. He isn’t worthy of such attention.”

He could feel her stiffen beside him, though she didn’t falter in her step. “Look, there’s a lot you don’t know, William---.”

“I know enough,” he interrupted. “He professed to love you and yet left. Any real man…” Her exact words came back to him then, how she’d called him a demon and he’d assumed she’d meant it metaphorically. Yet, knowing now what she was, what she hunted…

“He wasn’t, though, was he,” William stated, understanding clarifying the situation and making
asking redundant. “You meant it when you called him a monster.”

“It’s not what you think. Angel has a soul.”

“And still, you defend him, even after he’s hurt you so. Why? Does this soul exalt him so much that you can ignore what he’s done?” When she stayed mute, he stole a glance in her direction.

High on Buffy’s cheeks, twin spots of color highlighted her elevated emotions, her eyes locked on the grass at her feet. Her lips were pursed tight, like she was biting back whatever it was she wanted to say, and for a moment, William wondered why she wouldn’t open up to him any more than she had. Surely, he’d proven his good intentions to her by now. And hadn’t she been the one to profess her trust in him?

It took only seconds of silence for him to make up his mind. Reaching down, William grabbed her hand and pulled her to a halt, forcing her to change direction and follow him toward a bench that sat only a few feet away. He felt the muscles tighten in her grip, as if she meant to pull away, but it quickly relaxed, and they finished the minor trek in a comfortable ease.

As he guided her to sit on the stone seat, William watched the sun caress her bare arms, dancing in tiny flecks of gold and giving her flesh even more life than he thought possible. His mouth suddenly dry, his head lowered so that she wouldn’t see in his eyes the desire to take her in his embrace, at least not before he could more properly stifle the impulse, and William dropped to his knees to kneel before her.

“What’re you doing?” Buffy asked.

When he looked up, she was frowning, confusion clouding her normally translucent eyes. “I understand you don’t wish to speak of him,” he said softly, as if he were gentling a skittish colt. Slowly, he reached forward and took her hands in his, never letting his gaze leave hers. “I only ask that you listen to what I have to say now. After this, I swear to you that I will not bring him up again. Are we agreed?”

She searched his face, and he couldn’t help but wonder if she could see the truth of his feeling for her somewhere in it. “OK,” she finally said. “Except, you do know how kind of wiggy the bended knee routine is, right?”

He did the automatic translation in his head. Wiggy. That was Buffy-speak for peculiar or off-putting. Because she must think…

William flushed, but held his ground. “I merely want you to believe me in what I’m about to say,” he said. “Please.”

The corner of her mouth lifted. “I don’t think you have it in you to lie.”

“You would be surprised, I think.” He cleared his throat. “But that’s irrelevant to what I want you to hear,” Where to start? She needed to know. “I can’t pretend to understand the world you walk in,” he began. “I find it remarkable that you find the fortitude to fight these creatures and yet maintain some semblance of a normal life. I’ll admit, there is a part of me that’s envious of your strength. I have enough difficulty facing certain vulgarians who don’t even have the excuse of being demons---.”

“I guess jerks happen no matter what century you live in, huh?”

He answered her smile with his own. “Indeed,” William agreed. “And pardon me for saying so, but this Angel, demon or not, soul or not, warrants membership as one of those for hurting you as he has done.”
“He didn’t mean it—.”

“Let me finish.” His hands tightened on hers, his palms sweaty. “You still have strong emotions for him, which is understandable, and so you defend his actions, but the fact remains that he neglected your feelings in making his decision to leave. I can’t pretend to condone such selfish behavior. To me, a real man does everything in his power to make the woman he loves happy, regardless of the personal circumstances.” This was where the worry about her reaction threatened to yank him back from the abyss upon which he stood. Could he say the words? How would she react?

Buffy spoke before he could continue. “That’s a little unrealistic, don’t you think?” she asked gently. “I mean, it’s all good in theory, but there’s this thing called real life where sometimes you have to make the hard decisions, even when they tear you up inside.”

He recognized her reference from her earlier tale, though she didn’t mention it specifically. “You’re speaking of the time you had to kill him,” he commented. When she nodded, turning her head so that he wouldn’t see the shine in her eyes, William released his hold on her hands to reach up and tip her chin back in his direction. “And here, again, is where my admiration for you overwhelms me, Buffy,” he said. “Because you killed the thing you loved the most in order to save the world. Because you sacrificed yourself for the greater good.”

“Fat lotta good it did me,” she muttered, but didn’t fight his fingers or pull away. Louder, she added, “And it’s not like you wouldn’t do the exact same thing if you were in the same position.”

William shook his head. “You give me far too much credit, I’m afraid. Yes, I’d like to believe I could be such a person, but I also know that I’m rather a slave to my emotions. When I…love…” And he faltered here, anxiety a dagger in his gut. “…or care about someone, I find that I want to do everything in my power to make them happy. And if that would mean someone else might get hurt…”

He couldn’t do it. The look on her face, the tiny line between her brows as she tried to comprehend what he was saying…

“You’re way too hard on yourself,” Buffy said, surprising him with her voice. “I thought we’d gotten past all this?”

“I’m not…I’m just trying to say…” William took a deep breath. “I will never leave you, Buffy. Whatever you need, whenever you might need it, I swear to you that I will do everything in my power to make sure you get it. Because I want you to be happy, more than anything else.”

His throat was tight, air refusing to cooperate with his lungs, and he pulled his hands away from her face lest she become aware of the trembling that was impending within his fingers. It was as forward as he could brave at this time, but he feared it wasn’t forward enough; she couldn’t possibly extrapolate his true intention from such a roundabout avowal.

She softened at his words, and as William watched, Buffy slid from the bench to kneel beside him on the grass. “Why can’t we both be happy?” she asked. “You deserve it as much as I do.”

“I haven’t saved the world,” he joked. He was astonished that his voice betrayed none of his runaway nerves, calm and even as he bantered with her.

“No,” she agreed softly. “You’ve saved me.”

And then she was moving, so lithe and sure and quick because there she was, touching him—no, holding him—perched on the lap his bent knees made and pressing herself into his chest as if it was
the only place on earth she wanted to be. Her hands were at the back of his neck, tickling the skin beneath the curls, just as the breeze billowed her skirt across his legs, and all William could feel was the heat of her body, her small breasts burning into him, her heart pounding so violently that he could see her pulse running rampant in the small hollow of her throat.

“What…?” he croaked, because his mouth was desert dry. It didn’t stop his hands from falling to her hips, though, holding her in place, even pulling her closer, his arousal be damned. “Buffy…”

All he could see were her eyes, lucent and knowing and determined and vulnerable all in the most vibrant sea-green that demanded he drown—no need to command it, my darling Buffy, I do so willingly—and she was still moving, not her body but her mouth, whispering words that made his spine tingle and his heart want to burst.

“Too much talking,” she said, and her mouth was on his even as spoke, tracing each syllable like feathers against his lips, her breath hot and sweet as he swallowed it down. “Not enough kissing.”

The thought that perhaps she had understood his clumsy attempt to tell her his feelings was banished upon the first contact, and William held himself rigid as Buffy’s lips coaxed him to respond. So gentle, as if she knew without his ever having told her that this would be his first, and answering that clement call surprised him by being instinctive, a fragile rush as the caress remained as tender as her voice had been. Muscle by muscle, sinew by sinew, his body relaxed into hers, until by the time she pulled away from the kiss, he felt boneless, ready to be led wherever she may lead.

Her cheek nuzzled his. “I’ve been---,” she started to say, but before the sentence could be finished, William found himself pitching forward, the weight of her that he’d been using as leverage suddenly gone.

His forehead caught the edge of the bench, sending showers of stars flashing behind his eyes. His last thought before crumpling to the earth was, Buffy, don’t go…

* * *

“C’mon, Buffy, wake up!” Willow shook her friend’s shoulder, her anxiety a fevered pitch in her veins that made her grip just a little too tight. She’d been at this for a good five minutes, had walked in on a sleeping Buffy desperate to wake her, and been confronted with a Slayer who slept deeper than the dead she staked. Not even a whimper or a groan had escaped Buffy’s lips as Willow’s shaking grew more insistent, and the witch was starting to get more than a little frightened at the non-responsiveness.

“Buffy!” she said even louder. She didn’t have to worry about waking up anyone else in the apartment; after all, that was why she was in the room in the first place. Her shaking jarred the hand that Buffy had tucked beneath her pillow, exposing the edge of the book she’d bought on Charing Cross. Willow only glanced at it for a moment, her frown deepening as she shook harder. “You’re going to be late for school!” she shouted, in a last ditch effort to rouse the Slayer.

For the first time, Buffy moved of her own accord, her tongue darting out to lick her lips as she murmured, “Will…?”

“Yes!” She jumped at the recognition. “Yes! It’s me! Wake up, Buffy!”

Sleepy lashes lifted, her mouth pursed to speak again. “Will…ow?” she said, groaning as she sat up. “What time is it?”
“Almost six,” she said. “You have to get dressed. Now. We need to go out.”

There was no mistaking the urgency in Willow’s voice, cutting through Buffy’s sluggishness. “What’s wrong?” she asked, pushing back the blankets.

“Hopefully, nothing. But…it’s Giles. He ran out around midnight to get some more milk at that grocery around the corner. He wanted tea to help us stay up and work out some of the spell stuff, now that we’ve got all the ingredients. I must’ve fallen asleep or something, because the next thing I know, I’ve got a big ol’ carpet pattern on my cheek and it’s five-thirty and Giles still isn’t back.”

That was all it took. A potential threat to Giles, and Buffy was alert and ready to go.

* * *

William winced as he passed from the dim light of his bedroom into the brighter gleam of the hall. His head ached from where he must’ve hit it on his bedstead in his sleep, and the fact that the staff had drawn every curtain in the house on the sunniest day he could remember in recent history did nothing to alleviate his pain. It was a good thing he’d slept through breakfast; he didn’t think he could manage his mother’s post-party good mood. She’d wish to dissect the events of the evening when all he wanted was a cup of strong tea.

Revenants of his dream floated around him as he descended the stairs, the scent of Buffy’s skin still strong in his nostrils, the supple curve of her hip where he’d held her on his lap burned onto his palm. The fact that she’d taken the initiative and kissed him when he’d been desiring the same for days now didn’t shock him; when it came to Buffy Summers, there was little she could do or say that could ruffle his opinion of her. But the conclusions he’d reached during sleep, that he was in fact in love with the mysterious blonde, seemed hazier in the light of day. Could he delude himself so completely as to fancy himself enamored with a creation of his imagination? Was she merely playing Galatea to his Pygmalion?

He was lost in thought when he stepped into the dining room, going immediately to the sideboard and the pot of tea that sat there. One touch, and he knew it was empty, prompting a frown and a hurried gait to the kitchen.

“Is there no tea left over from breakfast?” he asked as soon as he stepped into the warm room.

Cook glanced up from the bread she was kneading. “There was no breakfast,” she said simply.

William’s frown deepened. “Is Mother not feeling well?”

Cook shrugged. “I wouldn’t know, sir,” she said. “Your mum’s been out since before dawn.”

“Where’d she go?”

Another shrug. “There wasn’t a note. It’s thought she must’ve had errands she forgot to tell us about.”

“Oh.” He’d turned away, lost in thought, before he added, “Thank you.”

“Will you be wanting breakfast, Master William?”

“Oh, yes. And a large pot of tea, please.”

All thoughts of Buffy were banished as William wandered back to the dining room. Mother had made no mention of tasks that needed to be completed today, and the party’s execution the night
previous should’ve brought a few days of peace to her schedule. Perhaps she just wished a breath of fresh air, he thought as he settled at the table. It’s certainly a lovely enough day for it.

* * *

“Aren’t you ready yet?” Nathan snarled from the shelter of the cave’s mouth.

Esme tilted her face toward the rising sun, feeling the radiance through her closed lids as it burned a golden corona around her retinas. “If I have to remind you to be patient one more time,” she said evenly, not even bothering to open her eyes, “I’m going to break each and every one of the figures myself, April be damned.”

Nathan bit back the retort that sprang to his lips and whirled to disappear back into the cave, furious that the witch insisted on sitting in the morning sunrise where he couldn’t reach her. She had been gone for most of the night—finishing the preparations for the ritual, she’d said—but returned empty-handed. Now, whatever New Age meditation crap she was doing outside was doing nothing to put to rest his growing doubts about her commitment to the plan.

Today was the day. She’d said it was. Time to release April from the prison she’d been trapped in for the last century, and go back to their wonderful, decadent, malevolent life ravaging the world. Esme assured him that the Slayer and the bastard from the past that the leaves swore would fight against the ritual were taken care of, and that his love would be returned without a hitch. As much as Nathan detested having to kowtow to the witch, he knew that all he could do right then was wait until she came back into the cave. April’s liberation was only hours, even minutes away, and there was nothing that could stop their reunion now.
Mistress of My Passion

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet XX.”

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Willow has woken Buffy from her first kiss with William to tell her that Giles is missing, while William has risen to discover his mother isn’t currently home, either…

The good news was that Buffy doubted she would ever get lost in London again. With as much walking around as she had done that day, and as many corners and alleys she had searched, she didn’t think there was a surprise this part of the city could throw at her at this point.

On the other hand, the bad news was that she was returning to the apartment empty-handed, minus a Watcher, any clue as to where he might be, and the left heel of her new sandal.

As she limped up the stairs, she pushed back the lank hair that fell across her face, wincing as a nail caught the ragged edges of the scrape that grazed her jaw. OK, so maybe storming into the demon pub around the corner demanding answers hadn’t exactly been her brightest move, but at least the ensuing fight had helped her vent some of the frustration not finding Giles had tendered throughout her muscles. It hadn’t been as kind to her shoes, since kicking at something with an exoskeleton equivalent to sheet metal was akin to Manolo Blahnik suicide, but still, the barroom brawl had served its purpose.

“Willow?” she called out when she pushed open the apartment door. The sound of rushing feet was followed by her friend’s pale face peeping into the hallway, but one look at the Slayer was all the other girl needed to answer the unspoken question that rose to her lips.

“The Council called,” she said instead. “They asked for you, and when I said you were out, they asked for Giles, and so I lied and said he was with you and that I didn’t know when you’d be back.” Willow watched as Buffy pushed her sandals off with her toes, kicking them against the wall and making half-moon impressions in the magnolia Artex. “I’m guessing you didn’t have any luck finding him either.”

Buffy’s shoulders slumped at her words. “Can I pretend you didn’t just say ‘either’?”

“None of my spells worked. Well, they might’ve worked, but they were all closed-lippy on the results. So, I tried doing the discreet calling around to hospitals and police stations to see if maybe I could find something out that way? Except, once they started asking certain questions, I started getting paranoid about the Council finding out what I was doing and I just hung up, because you know, that would be bad.” She chewed at her lip, hanging back as Buffy brushed past her into the kitchen. “Why is that bad again?”

She hadn’t told Willow about any of what had happened the previous day, not the bloody handkerchief nor Travers’ attempts to pry what he considered “certain truths” from her. Before she’d sent her friend home again that morning when it became apparent they needed to split up to cover more ground, all Buffy had said was that she still didn’t trust the Council’s involvement in the crystal theft. Willow had just left it at that.
“For all we know, they’re the ones behind it,” Buffy said, opening the refrigerator. “They may not have been happy with some of my answers to them yesterday and decided to play hardball by coming at me through Giles.” It was the only solution she was allowing herself to consider. There were other possibilities, ones that included various scenarios of torture and bloodplay, eventually ending in Giles’ death, but as she didn’t particularly like the outcome of those, Buffy was pretending they didn’t exist. Nope. Best case was to think it was just a bunch of stuffed shirts and leave it at that.

“Then why would they have called here for him?”

“Maybe they were just testing the waters. See if we’d come clean on our own.”

“And wouldn’t there be some sort of ransom note if he was just kidnapped?”

“They could be just waiting for me to crack.”

“But why would---?”

The cups in the cupboard rattled with a muffled clink when Buffy slammed the refrigerator door shut. “I don’t know!” she exploded, and then sagged against the edge of the counter. Squeezing her eyes shut, she held back the tears of helplessness that threatened to overtake her, and took in a deep breath while she waited for her muscles to fall back under her control.

“I don’t know,” she repeated after a moment, softer this time, accompanying it with a slow shake of her head. “I’m sorry I yelled, but…look, I’m tired, and the only thing I can be sure of right now is that my thinking’s about as crooked as it can get because of the sleep lackage, and that I really, really wish demons were a little more considerate about a girl’s footwear.”

“Maybe you should take a nap.” Willow offered. “Before we try giving it another go. Not that our go’s ever got started, but I’d really rather not call it giving it another stop, ‘cause that’s just a little too much Miss Negativity, don’t you think?”

She couldn’t fight the smile the babbling coaxed from her. “Yeah,” Buffy agreed. “A nap sounds like heaven right about now.” Her thoughts immediately drifted to William, and the sudden exit from her dream that morning. She figured it was because she’d been woken so abruptly from it, but the details of perching herself on William’s lap, of leaning in to kiss him because it had just seemed so much like the right thing to do, of the emptiness in her gut when she’d opened her eyes to see a frightened redhead instead of his understanding visage, were all still razor-sharp vivid in her head. Curling up with him would be incredible therapy for the rottenness of her day, and besides, wasn’t that why she’d made him up in the first place?

“Have you eaten anything today?” Turning to the cupboard, Willow pulled out a tube of digestives. “It’s not exactly an Oreo, but at least it’s chocolate.”

Buffy shook her head. “I’m not so large with the hunger. Although…some of your tea wouldn’t be turned down.”

She hesitated as her nails slit the wrapping on the biscuits. “You’ve been drinking a lot of that tea lately,” Willow commented slowly.

“It helps me sleep.”

“Which is good, I know, but…”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re not actually giving me a hard time about a little Lipton, are you?” Buffy asked, straightening. “Because on the scale of things that are just so wrong in my life right now, I
think worrying about my caffeine intake doesn’t rate quite as highly as wondering how we’re going
to get Giles back, let alone how we’re going to find him in the first place.”

“No, it’s not that, I just…” But it was obvious that she didn’t know what just, and gaped at Buffy
like one of the many fish she’d bought after replacing the ones Angel had killed, wide eyes made
even wider by the inability to voice what was going through her head.

And it was thinking of Angel, remembering those awful months when he’d been minus his soul, that
made Buffy deflate. What was happening to her? Had she degenerated so much that even Willow
got the brunt of Slayer bad moodiness? “Sorry,” she mumbled. “I didn’t mean---.”

“I know. You’re tired. It’s OK.”

“No, it’s not.” She lifted her eyes to face off with the torn hurt she’d ravaged with her choice words,
and silently apologized again as she tried to explain. “You and Giles have been trying so hard, you
don’t need me taking it out on you because I’ve flopped in such huge ways in fixing this. I just…I
can’t lose Giles, too. And I’m running out of ideas on how to find him. Good ideas, that is.”

“So maybe it’s time for us to start doing something with the bad ones, then.”

In spite of her mood, Buffy smiled. “Maybe,” she conceded.

“Do you really think it’s got something to do with the theft?”

“I don’t know. But it has to, right? I mean, it’s just too coincidental that he’d go missing right in the
middle of us trying to find them.”

Silence. Long, and loud, and pressing into Buffy’s eyeballs until they felt like they were going to
pop. She didn’t want to say it, but she could see the thoughts rolling around behind her best friend’s
eyes and didn’t have any good reason other than instinct to keep arguing with her.

“If he hasn’t shown up by tomorrow morning,” she finally said quietly, “we’ll let the Council know.
And if I find out they do have him, all bets are officially off.”

Willow nodded. “Is there anything you want me to do tonight?”

“Sleep. You said you’ve done all you can on the magic front?”

Another nod. “Even the divining rod won’t be ready until the morning. I finished up the prep work
on it today and now it just has to kind of…simmer.”

“Maybe that’ll help us some way. If whoever took Giles is connected to the crystals, the magic stick
will tell us, right?”

“Right.”

* * *

She didn’t have the heart to ask Willow again about the tea, and closed her bedroom door with a
weary sigh. The idea that it might’ve been better if she’d never come to London in the first place was
enough to make her collapse onto her mattress, her face getting buried in the thick duvet as she
replayed the past forty-eight hours in her head.

This was all her fault. If she had only told Giles about what the Council had confronted her with
yesterday, then maybe he wouldn’t have ventured out on his own. He might’ve been more wary
about something being amiss, and she wouldn’t be lying there now, blaming herself for thinking she
could handle the Council on her own.

She also had little doubt she’d be wide awake most of the night. Between guilt and her tea shortage,
Buffy was certain dreams were going to be the last thing on her agenda in the next few hours.

Rolling onto her back, she caught the sight of the tray on her nightstand out of the corner of her eye.
It was the remnants of her bedtime relaxant from the previous evening, and she bit her lip as she
leaned forward to peer into the cup. Pale milky dregs still rested inside, its pungent odor lingering in
such close proximity. She knew she was being silly, that it was just a drink and any effect it had was
purely psychosomatic, but the urge to drink it down refused to be argued with.

It was cold from sitting all day, and coated her tongue in a bitter potion as Buffy swallowed it in a
single gulp. Her face screwed into a grimace, her vocalization at its distaste escaping her throat
before she could stop it, and then glanced guiltily at the door to see if she’d been overheard. I didn’t
do anything wrong, she thought after a moment. It’s tea. It’s not like I’m some closet alcoholic or
something.

Somehow, the rationalization did nothing to soothe her as she proceeded to get ready for bed. All she
could wonder was whether or not she’d seen the last of William.

* * *

The moment she felt the sun dancing along the length of her bare arms, Buffy exhaled in relief, the
worry that had sizzled through her veins when she’d finally drifted into sleep disappearing with the
slight breeze that whispered her skirt around her calves. It had worked. Big yay to the power of
suggestion, she thought as her feet automatically went to the path.

Her heart jumped into her throat when she saw him hunched over his papers on the bench. As had
happened before, William was oblivious to her approach, lost in whatever world he was creating
with his words, leaving Buffy to wonder what had inspired him this time. It amazed her how deeply
he could bury himself in his work, and still be so unsure as to its validity. Granted, he’d grown in
confidence in the short time since she’d started dreaming of him, but how much of that was her
brain’s response to create someone who could keep up with her? Over-compensation for the cultural
differences, she decided. That had to be the reason.

“Hey,” she said softly, and was rewarded by his smile when he looked up, the lithe rise of his body
as he stood to greet her tugging gently somewhere in her midsection.

“You came,” William said, just as quietly. At her perplexed frown, he added, “It’s late. I’d assumed I
wouldn’t see you, that...” His gaze slid to her cheek, and his joy faded. “You’ve been fighting
again.”

Her hand was up, brushing over the scrape, as he dropped his quill to the bench and strode forward.
“It’s nothing,” Buffy said, but allowed him to tilt her head to peer at it more closely when he stopped
in front of her.

“It doesn’t appear to be nothing.” His fingers ghosted across the curve of her jaw, not daring to touch
the still healing graze. “But if it doesn’t bother you, I suppose I can hardly presume to let it bother
me.”

The smile that started to return to his face failed to appear when his eyes locked on hers. “There’s
something else,” William said. “What’s wrong?”
Buffy’s ease lessened. “How’d you know?” she asked. “Is it that obvious?”

“I only have to look at you,” he replied. “How could I not see?”

She debated for what felt like forever before shaking her head. “Doesn’t matter here,” she said. Grabbing his hand, she led him off the path to the grass. “Let’s just enjoy the sun while we’ve got it, OK?”

* * *

If she focused on the clouds, watched the wisps drift like chiffon against the blue, Buffy was convinced she could feel the earth spinning beneath her, leaving her slightly giddy from the dropping sensations originating somewhere in the pit of her stomach. Only the soft trail of his fingertips along her arm, up and down and up again in a breath more comforting than if she’d been hugged tight within his embrace, kept her from falling completely, and Buffy sighed in contentment as she wiggled her bare feet through the grass.

“How have you ever wished you could fly?” she asked.

William’s lips quirked. “I don’t suppose I’ve given it much thought,” he commented, never ceasing in his strokes along her skin. Stretched out beside her, his head was propped up in his hand as he watched her instead of the sky. He hadn’t pursued his questioning once she’d pulled him down to the grass, though Buffy knew he was probably dying from curiosity. She’d also studiously avoided any mention of their last encounter. She just didn’t want to shatter the relief being in his company brought to her when this was really her only respite from the nightmare of a missing Giles.

“Big fat liar,” she teased, and though she had to fight to keep the playful tone in her voice, she jabbed at him with her elbow, her eyes never leaving the expanse overhead. “I’m going to bet you’ve written at least a dozen poems about birds. Probably comparing them to a summer’s day or something.”

“Wrong William,” he said. “Though your estimation of my endeavours is perhaps more correct than you might imagine. I find myself inspired more often than not since our first foray.”

She looked at him then, the grass tickling her cheek as she turned her head and met his steady and soothing gaze. “I wish you were real,” Buffy murmured. It was getting harder and harder to accept the dreams as the non-vital part of her life, not when being with William banished the grey from her life, made her forget for a few stolen hours how hard it was to wake up and remember the loss. When being with William was so scarily easy.

His amusement faded, the blue behind the spectacles darkening. “And yet,” he said softly, “those are the very words I repeat to myself when I find myself bereft of your presence. Do you read my mind as well as my heart, Buffy?”

She had no answer to that, not one she could voice out loud without sounding like a crazy person. How could she admit, even to the fantasy itself, that she was falling in love with a dream? That she woke up from their rendezvous and counted the minutes until she could go back to bed and summon him back to her side? She’d risked that indulgence in her last dream, by kissing him when she knew he would never make that first move, losing herself in the possibility of them just so that she could pretend to be normal for a change.

His resemblance to anyone real didn’t matter, she’d decided. This was William. His own man, imaginary or not. And she loved being around him, loved his enthusiasm for her calling even if he
didn’t understand it, loved how prized he made her feel without treating her like she was glass. The others probably wouldn’t get it, she knew. How could they? They weren’t privy to her subconscious mind. They couldn’t see the look on his face when he made promises she knew he couldn’t keep.

But Buffy saw. And part of her was terrified of her desire for this fabrication of a man. Even as another part screamed at her to make it true.

Breaking away from the solemnity of his gaze, she looked back to the cirrus floating overhead, trying to block out the sensations his gentle fingers were stirring in her thighs. “I always wanted to be Mary Poppins when I was little,” she said brightly, forcing the levity she didn’t feel. “I ruined more than one of Mom’s umbrellas trying to get caught up in the wind.”

“What…”

If she tried, she could pretend that he hadn’t breathed her name, that it had just been the wind whispering in her ear. If she tried, she could pretend that he hadn’t stopped the stroking, that it wasn’t the wind that was now stirring the small hairs on her arm. If she tried…

She didn’t want to try. Trying was what she did when she was awake.

“Don’t.” Her eyes were luminous when she looked at him again, his serious countenance eclipsing the summer day surrounding them. “Can’t this just be about having fun? Ha ha, let’s have a laugh, William and Buffy sitting in a tree. We’re not supposed to be---.”

“I would very much like to kiss you again.”

The statement came out in a rush, his breath heated on her cheek even separated as they were by the many inches he insisted on maintaining. It was uncharacteristic of him, this courage to not ask but state his request, and she couldn’t help but wonder if it was her influence that made him so brave, remembering the diffident young man who’d been tongue-tied at the sight of her bare calves beneath her skirt at their very first meeting. Now, just as then, the slight breeze lifted a loose curl from his forehead, revealing the slight sheen of his brow, his nerves belying the smooth baritone.

“I didn’t know dreams could be so polite,” Buffy murmured. It wasn’t no. She wanted it more than he did, she believed. She just didn’t want to be hurt again, and yielding to the phantom who haunted her sleep seemed the surest way for that to happen.

His hand returned to cup her cheek, careful of the graze along her jaw. “And I didn’t know dreams could be so radiant,” he replied.

His lips were soft when they brushed across hers, that full bottom lip she’d so often stared at sending tiny shivers glissading down her spine, and Buffy could feel the corresponding tremors in his fingers. Don’t be frightened, William, she wanted to say. I’m scared enough for the both of us. But she didn’t. Instead, she brought her hand up to cover his, holding it there while they sustained the gentle kiss, so tentative, so necessary, and felt the world fall away around her.

William’s breathing was ragged when he finally pulled back, his glasses slipping down his nose. “You must find me terribly forward,” he said, and his voice was husky with more than the simple rasp of the caress. Self-consciously, he cleared his throat. “I’m afraid I’ve been wishing to do that since you disappeared from my arms last night.”

“What if I told you I’d been wishing for even more?” Buffy replied.

His eyes widened at that, and he pulled back, staring down at her in confused disbelief. “You’re not…mocking me…are you?” he stammered. “I thought…after your kiss, I assumed you…but I
didn’t…I’m sincerely sorry if I’ve offended---.”

“Stop.” She pressed her fingers to his lips, and rolled onto her side to stretch next to him. The hardness of his thighs was a promise against hers, the draping of their clothes providing little relief from the desire she could feel in him. “No mocking. This is strictly a mock-free zone. Have I ever lied to you, William?” After a moment, he gave a short shake of his head. “I know I’m not exactly the go-to girl when it comes to the hearts and flowers routine, not like you, but if I didn’t want you to kiss me, trust me. I would’ve let you know.”

His manner eased at that, though his distance remained the same. “My most grievous error,” he said, his eyes almost too innocent. “How could I neglect to remember your veracity? After all, it is not as if you ever fell asleep during one of our trysts or anything.”

She colored at his teasing reminder, and slapped at his chest. “You told me you understood about that.”

“And I do.” William’s faux precision dissolved into a wide smile. “Of course, you must understand how your rather fantastic tales of monsters roaming the streets of London may taint your vows of fatigue, though my every fiber wishes to believe.”

The reminder of what she would wake to dampened Buffy’s mood, and her eyes fell from his, the doubts returning on rapacious zephyrs that widened the gap between them. “And we’re back to wishing you were real,” she sighed. “That this was real.”

His fingers tugged at her chin, forcing her to look back up. “It is real,” William assured. Belief burned in his eyes. “You give me voice as no other does. I wake, and I face the dreary day, and when I’m confronted with a situation where I fear I’ll crumble, I find myself asking…what would Buffy do? And I find strength in the answers I get. If that’s not real, then…” He shook his head, his momentary fervor fading. “And yet again, I have forgotten myself. You hardly wish to listen to me prattle on about such nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense,” Buffy said. Without further consideration, she threw her arms around him, pressing her body to his as her mouth sought his yet again. Nothing tentative now, not even a trace of hesitancy on his part when William returned the embrace, as if he could feel the world slipping away and was as desperate as she to cling to it. It was clumsy, and when her tongue brushed against his lips, he seemed momentarily taken aback as to what to do, but it was hardly devoid of feeling, their bodies flush with desire as their hands roamed over the other’s back. He was quick to follow her lead, letting her taste the honeyed breath of the kiss while savoring in kind, and he moaned as his need threatened to overwhelm him.

She could feel the trembling in his hands, in spite of their firm hold in the small of her back, and pulled back to look up into his face. She wouldn’t normally have asked, but these weren’t normal circumstances, and William wasn’t a normal guy…

“Do you want to touch me?”

* * *

He wondered if she could sense the trembling in his hands, and gripped her tighter in an attempt to fend off the vibrations. As her words echoed inside his head, William found himself unable to tear his gaze away from her eyes, so startlingly solemn in light of her earlier levity. Even more than before, the certainty that something beyond the invisible walls of their haven was distressing her made his heart wrench, yet he knew that to press the issue would only serve to exacerbate Buffy’s reluctance to share. Better to let it go, lest he shatter the tenuous step forward he’d initiated.
“Yes,” he breathed in response to her question. Inwardly, he cringed. Did he sound as desperate to her as he did to himself? “But only if you want me to,” William rushed to add.

Buffy smiled. Her lips were swollen from the fervor of their last kiss, and he couldn’t help but muse on how delectable it made her appear. “Something tells me we could go back and forth like this all day,” she said, every syllable from her mouth entrancing him further. “But playing ping to your pong, while entertaining in theory, doesn’t sound nearly as appealing as maybe…doing this.”

He held his breath as her hand came up to his chest. Instead of touching him, though, her fingers began nimbly unfastening the buttons of his shirt, first one…then two…the tips of her nails where they brushed against his skin creating miniature wakes of fire that made it impossible to exhale. He was unbelievably hard, throbbing inside his trousers, and William wondered if she could tell. He imagined that she had to know; after all, their lower halves seemed almost to mold into one from being so firmly pressed together. But if she knew, surely she should be protesting in some fash---.

Except he realized the absurdity of such a supposition even before it could reach its natural conclusion. This was Buffy, and he most likely wasn’t in England during these sojourns, and she proved to him with her every word, and her every breath, and her every movement, that he couldn’t assume even the most simple of notions when it came to her. He was aroused, and he had to believe that she was more than aware of it.

And now his chest was bare, pink skin exposed to the invigorating rays of the sun, and he watched in fascination as Buffy placed her palm flat over his pounding heart. “So full of life,” she murmured, her voice so distant that he wondered where she disappeared in moments like this. There was silence, punctuated only by the distant flutter of leaves as a bird escaped from the top of a tree, and then her eyes lifted to search his. “How do you do it?”

“How do I do what?” he responded. He found his strength then, and reaching up to take her hand in his, William lifted it to his mouth, his lips dropping single kisses onto the tips of her fingers.

“Make me believe again.” It had returned---that grey ache behind her eyes that he’d tried so hard to dismiss—-but now it shone with something else, a light so tenuous and fragile that he imagined a mere puff could extinguish it. “Just when I start to think that maybe I’ve messed everything up royally again, I turn around, and there you are, and I get this sudden rush of…okay-ness.” She rolled her eyes. “And I’m not making any sense at all, am I?”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “Other than your…creative vocabulary,” William replied, “you’re making perfect sense. The belief you professed in me…those words that I cherish so deep to my heart…you can’t expect that they’re completely one-sided, can you?” Tucking her small hand between them, he leaned forward just enough to brush his lips across hers. “You are the most amazing woman I have ever had the privilege to meet, Buffy Summers. And if I must tell you so until the day the sun refuses to rise on me, I shall.”

His words broke the bindings she’d forced around her control. With a thick sob, Buffy wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her breasts into his bare chest as she devoured him in a kiss. It caught him off-guard, warnings of propriety tightening his muscles, but the ardor behind the embrace made it impossible for him to not respond, hands latching onto her hips with a power that surprised him.

She rolled him onto his back, following him with her body until she was sprawled across his length. Shivering from the full contact, William broke from the kiss, staring up at her flushed cheeks, feeling every little squirm of her pelvis as she ground minutely against him.

More than once, she ducked to try and re-initiate the caresses, but was stopped by his repeated return to her eyes. “What?” Buffy finally asked when he remained silent in his scrutiny. She almost seemed
to fade. “I thought…don’t you…want me?”

She was already tensing to flee, and he circled his arm around her waist to root her in place before she could act on the erroneous instinct. “Always,” William said softly. With his free hand, he pushed back the hair that had fallen over her cheek, his thumb skimming her bottom lip as his fingers tangled in the thick curls. “Just as you are always telling me to listen to you, at some point, you really must start listening to me, Buffy. I gave you my vow that I shall never leave, nor do I think I shall ever stop finding you the most extraordinary creature to grace me with her presence. But…while relations with you would bring me unending joy—.”

“Make love.”

He frowned, his hand halting. “Pardon?”

“Make love,” she repeated. “That’s what it’s called back in my world.”

His face softened, his feather caress of her cheek beginning again. “Of course,” William said. “Yet, I do not think this is what you need from me right now.”

Buffy’s brows arched in amusement. “Really?” She ground against him lightly, prompting a sharp intake of breath before he tightened his grip around her. “I think we both want it.”

“I said need.” Firmly, he rolled back onto his side, forcing her to slide off and lay back on the tamped grass. “I understand you don’t wish to discuss what troubles you, and I’ll honor your wishes. But using our desires to pretend is not what you need from me.”

“And you know what I need.” Not a question. Barely audible. And though it dripped in disappointment, there was no mistaking the want to trust in him in her voice.

Gently, William bowed his head and kissed her again, closing his eyes while he gathered the strength to stand by his conviction. “You’re not alone, Buffy,” he murmured, resting his forehead against hers, “though you may feel otherwise. Believing in me is all well and good, but…you’ve forgotten how to believe in yourself. Let me in so that I can show you. Just…let me love you.”

* * *

From her seat beyond the circle of flickering candles, Esme watched as Nathan bounced around its periphery, yellow eyes intent on the prostate form at its center. Its pale skin was marred by dozens of infinitesimal cuts, tiny slashes of crimson caused by the shards of crystal that lay scattered around and above it.

“Is she real?” he croaked as he continued to pace. “She’s not moving. Why isn’t she moving?”

“Give her time,” Esme replied.

The seconds stretched into minutes where the only sound came from Nathan’s boots crunching along the ground as he wandered around and around, waiting for the moment when the witch would grant him leave to break the magic of the circle. Finally, just when he thought maybe the spell had gone horribly wrong and he would be denied his reunion after all, the body began to move.

It unfurled with a lethargic grace only made possible from eons of immobility. Each bend of her body exposed more to the dancing moonlight—a curve here, a swell of breast there—until she stood erect, staring out into the shadows between the pair that waited.

Nathan rushed to stand in front of her, his demon face slipping away as his eyes searched her dead
ones. “April?”

The uttering of her name sparked something inside her, and a slow smile curled her too-full lips. “Hello, lover,” she whispered…
Fears to Hopes and Hopes to Fears

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CXIX.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: After not being able to find Giles, Buffy and Willow both retired for the night, where Buffy met up with William; elsewhere, April has been released from the crystal figures she was trapped in…

“It’s Giles.”

“Your…Watcher?”

“Yeah.”

Silence.

“Did he…say something that upset you?”

“No. He’s just…he’s gone.”

“He left you.” His arms tightened unconsciously around her, drawing her closer to his chest.

Buffy buried her cheek against the steady rhythm of his heart, so that when she spoke again, her voice was muffled. “Worse. He’s missing.” The fingers she had splayed along William’s side curled automatically into a fist, and he felt the rigidity of her shoulders as if she was bound within a jailor’s stocks. Soothingly, his hand began tracing the line of her spine, in an attempt to assuage the internal discord against which she was fighting.

“Was it a vampire?” he asked, deliberately ignoring the correlations of her predicament with his own reality. Anne Freston wasn’t missing; she was merely away visiting friends and the poor weather had prevented whatever message she’d sent explaining her absence from reaching William. At least, that was the excuse he was using for now.

“I don’t know.” Her voice was tiny, like it wanted to crawl into itself and hide forever, and he had to strain to hear what came next. “I’m hoping it’s more tweedy than fangy.”

Grateful he was out of her line of sight, he grimaced. Usually, he could ferret out her meaning based on the context of the conversation, but this particular sentence was baffling him. As much as he hated appearing the fool to her, he had no choice but to ask--.

“Stupid Council,” Buffy muttered.

Ah. She’d long ago referenced her ex-employers as suits, hence the tweed…William’s brow relaxed. Understanding was a good thing.

As she began to open up regarding the disappearance that was tearing her apart, he found himself getting lost in the pictures she painted with her words. Regaling her encounter with the Council of Watchers prompted a sense of familiarity that distracted him from her story momentarily, until he
realized he actually knew which building she was describing. He’d seen it often enough in his ventures into the city, though he’d never thought to give it a second look, and he had to fight the chuckle that rose to his lips lest she misunderstand. Curious inclusion of his every day into the ether of his dreams, he thought. Just like the David Howard reference from the other night.

“...don’t know what to do now.” she finished. Only then did she lift her head, resting her pointy little chin on his chest to gaze up at him.

“It seems fairly obvious,” William replied. At her curious frown, he added, “Your Council. Surely, they will have the answers for which you’re looking.”

Buffy shook her head.

“If this is their way of playing hardball, they’re not looking to be giving answers. They’re looking to be getting some.”

“But you told them you couldn’t help them.”

“Yes.”

“And they refuse to believe you?”

She sighed. “They’re kind of stubborn that way.”

“Still, I think they’re your prime source for aid currently. And you can’t rest assured one way or another until you confront them.” He smiled, what he hoped was reassuringly, and lifted his hand to push back the hair from her eyes. “It may not be obvious to you, but to me, it seems as if they are the ones in the weaker position here. They need you, Buffy. Wasn’t their inquisition proof enough of that for you?”

“But I couldn’t tell them anything about the hanky.”

* * *

Waking wasn’t nearly as hard as it had been previous mornings.

As she blinked against the dim light, the weight of Giles’ disappearance was measurably lighter than it had been, and Buffy smiled as she remembered the comfort of William’s words. He was right. She was the one with the power here, and if the Council wanted to mess around with faux kidnappings in order to get her attention, then they were just asking to get burned.

Having a plan put a bounce in her step as she bustled to get dressed. When she stepped into the living room, humming under her breath, a sleepy Willow poked her head up from the arm of the sofa.

“Someone took a happy pill today,” she said groggily. She looked past the Slayer as if in search of
something. “Is Giles back?”

“Not yet,” Buffy said. “But survey says that’s going to be changing ASAP.” She frowned, her pace faltering. “Did you sleep on the couch?”

Rubbing at her face, Willow nodded. “I was looking through the books to see if there was something I missed.”

“And?”

“And I didn’t.”

“That’s OK,” Buffy said, and resumed heading for the kitchen. “Today, I’m going with the theory that this will all be over in just a couple hours.”

As she pulled open the refrigerator, she heard the soft tread as the redhead joined her. “Are you going to see the Council again?” Willow asked.

“You’re not leaving until I’ve got our favorite Watcher in tow.” She held up a carton of eggs. “Omelette?”

“Uh…you don’t cook.”

“Then I guess it’s about time I learned.” She felt rather than saw her friend approach when she turned to the stove.

“Are you feeling all right?” came Willow’s tentative query. “You’re just so…good moody.”

“I’m Jim and Dandy and everything in between,” she said as she cracked an egg into the still-cold frying pan. Buffy flashed a brilliant smile. “Sleep does a body good.”

“If you want an omelette, you’re supposed to whip the eggs up in a bowl.”

“Oh.” The Slayer cocked her head, staring down at the white that was starting to shift from translucence. “Guess I’m having fried then.”

Neither girl said anything as Willow took the spatula from her and set to finishing the eggs. Buffy knew she was waiting for an explanation, that the prospect of an Iron Chef Slayer was more than a little freaky, but with her resolve freshly renewed from her dream conversation with William, she also knew that explanations would have to wait. The important thing now was to get Giles back.

“You’ll be waving your divining stick thingy this morning?” Buffy asked as she buttered their only slightly-burned toast.

“Yes,” Willow said. “If your showdown with the Council doesn’t work, maybe I’ll pick up some magical trail that’ll lead us to Giles. You know, if the two are actually connected.”

“They are.” Their eyes met, one set calm and resolute, the other slightly clouded and unsure. “They have to be.”

* * *

An insistent rapping jarred him into consciousness. Groggily, William reached for his glasses on the nightstand before pushing himself up into a sitting position. “Come in!” he called out.

The door opened, and Meg’s drawn face peered around its edge, her eyes downcast. “Master
William?” she said in a breath.

Grabbing his dressing gown, he had it around his shoulders before his feet touched the floor. “What is it?” he asked as he tied the knot about his waist. His gaze darted to the closed curtains before returning to her nervous form. “I haven’t slept through breakfast again, have I?”

“No, no, sir. It’s…I was sent to fetch you. Your presence is required downstairs.”

William automatically relaxed. “Tell Mother I’ll be right there.”

Her voice stopped him before he could take more than a single step toward his wardrobe. “It’s not your mum, sir,” Meg said, and when he turned back to look at her, he couldn’t help but see the anxious twisting of her fingers in her apron. “It’s a gentleman come calling. He says it’s rather important he speak with you.”

He resumed his pace and finished the cross to his clothing. “Did he leave his name?” he asked. “Or what this might be regarding?”

“Mr. Richard Rhodes-Fanshaw. And no, sir, he didn’t say. Just that it was important.”

Pulling a clean shirt from the wardrobe, William mulled over the unfamiliar name, wondering abstractly why it was he was having so much difficulty recently remembering identities of people who obviously knew him. “Tell Mother I’ll see to Mr. Rhodes-Fanshaw,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand to Meg. “I’ll join her for breakfast when whatever business he has is concluded.”

“Pardon, sir, but…”

He glanced back, his tie dangling from his fingers. “Yes?”

“Your mum. She’s…not back yet. And there hasn’t been word sent or anything.”

A chill settled in his limbs. “Oh,” he said quietly, and turned away so that she couldn’t see the anxiety in his eyes. “Then…thank you. That will be all.”

As he mechanically stripped from his nightwear, the possibilities regarding his mother’s whereabouts returned to plague William with a vengeance, stewing in the pit of his stomach with a riling churn that made the prospect of breakfast suddenly not that appealing. Not of the good, he thought, and then froze before the phrase echoing inside his head made the corner of his mouth lift.

*I’m even thinking like Buffy now. I wonder what would she do if she were in these circumstances?*  

He already knew the answer to that. Just as Buffy was searching for Giles, he had no choice but to begin his own search for Anne Freston. Just as soon as he found out what this Rhodes-Fanshaw wanted.

* * *

Her smile was bright as she stood in front of the secretary’s desk. “I’d like to see Mr. Travers, please,” Buffy chirped, having already decided that the California Homecoming Queen approach might be a tad more effective than the Psycho Slayer. However, just for the effect, she added, “Now.”

The elderly secretary stared at the young woman over her bifocals. “You don’t have an appointment, Miss Summers. I’ll have to see if he’s available.”
Though her smile never faded, Buffy’s hand was over the secretary’s in an iron grip the moment it came to rest on the phone. “I’m sorry,” she said perkily, “but I think your hearing aid might be broken. I said, I need to see him now.”

To the woman’s credit, she didn’t even wince at the pressure on her fingers, instead staring up at the Slayer with an icy gaze. “We have procedures---.”

“It’s all right, Beryl. I’ll take it from here.” Only Buffy’s head swiveled to see Quentin Travers striding toward the desk, his eyes unreadable as he slowed to a stop before her. “You should’ve called, Miss Summers. I would’ve had Lydia come around to pick you up.”

“And miss the chance to spend an hour on the Underground?” She stepped back and shook her head. “Not on your life.”

The pair faced off, both sets of eyes unwavering, each waiting for the other to speak. A trickle of sweat began dripping between Buffy’s shoulder blades, the question of how so many people could come to work in an un-airconditioned office wearing such heavy suits flitting unexpectedly through her head. And does this man never blink? she wondered. Wasn’t one creepy snake guy enough in my life?

“Perhaps we should move this to my office,” Travers said, pivoting on his heel to begin walking back in the direction from which he’d come.

“And again, just let me say…not on your life.” Her smile vanished when he turned back. “You wanted my attention. Well, now, you’ve got it. Though, gotta tell you, the kind of attention I’m in the mood to give right now is probably just a little more destructive than you were expecting.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then let me make this easy for you. You let Giles go, and I don’t torch the place.” She glanced around. “It’s a little bigger than Hemery’s gym, but I’m sure I can handle it.”

“Idle threats do not become you, Miss Summers.”

“They’re only idle if I don’t act on them,” she shot back. She didn’t mean any of it, of course. But Travers wasn’t a stupid man and as far as the Council was concerned, she was still a wildcard. She was playing the odds that they would be afraid of what she might do and give in before she actually had to act on anything.

He didn’t respond to her, instead directing his attention over her shoulder to the secretary. “Beryl, could you please have tea set up in the library? We’ll be conducting our business in there, it appears.”

“Only if Giles is in there,” Buffy said. “Otherwise, I’m staying right here.”

Her declaration did nothing to stop Beryl from casting a disdainful glance at her before disappearing in the opposite direction, presumably to follow through on Travers’ order. He, in turn, returned his gaze to the Slayer.

“I’m curious,” he said, deep furrows in his brow her only indication to his mood, “as to why you keep inferring Rupert is being held here. Is there something you’d like to tell me?”

His tone was blank, but Buffy caught the confused glint in his eyes as she searched his face for any sign of duplicity. Not that she was convinced she’d be able to recognize it in him if she saw it, but something about his attentiveness, like he really meant it when he’d said he was curious, set her
instincts abuzz.

“You don’t honestly expect me to believe you don’t know anything about it?” she asked.

“Anything about what?”
She took a deep breath. In for a penny… “Giles being missing. I know you’ve got him.”

That provoked a reaction when Travers visibly paled. “Rupert is missing?” He cleared his throat when he realized his voice was somewhat scratchy. “For how long? Were you with him? Did you see who took him?”

OK, these weren’t the kinds of questions she’d been expecting. Nor had she expected the---what seemed to be---genuine concern on his normally unflappable countenance. Hesitantly, she said, “Just over a day. And no, and no.”

Her denials managed to divert his thoughts inward. “A day…” he murmured, and brushed past her in the direction Beryl had left just moments earlier, seemingly no longer concerned with the Slayer’s presence.

She only let him get a few steps before rushing to meet his pace at his side. “What’s going on?” she demanded. “You’re not telling me you didn’t know about any of this…are you?”

He stopped abruptly before a closed door. “That’s exactly what I’m telling you, Miss Summers.” He looked past her and caught the attention of a young man about to pass by. “Go get Lydia,” he ordered him. “Tell her to bring me the Rhodes-Fanshaw file and not to delay.”

Buffy followed him into the library when he entered it. “You think this has something to do with those glass figures that were stolen?” she asked.

The look he tossed her was condescending; he was already back in control of his reactions. “Of course,” Travers replied. “What else could it possibly be about?”

* * *

Willow stood in the middle of the living room, the divining rod held tightly in her right hand as her left finished sprinkling the ash across its tip. Though her lips moved, the words she uttered were barely intelligible in the close space, lost in a sudden thickness that seemed to absorb even the minimal light the candles she’d lit in a circle around her provided. The lack of illumination was inconsequential, however, as the last syllable wafted from her breath, swallowed by the magic that hung heavy in the air, for in her hand, the carefully carved stick began to glow a faint red where the ash had settled.

“Whoa…” she breathed as it started to vibrate within her grip. She couldn’t help the smile that made her face beam. “It worked. Yay me.” She paused, her grin faltering. “Except…”

Willow’s eyes glanced around the small space. The vibrations were supposed to be the precursor to actually finding the magic, so that wasn’t too unexpected. The glowy tip, on the other hand, was only set to occur when the magical residue was near. The brighter it got, the more concentrated the magic. And if it was glowing here…

Slowly, she stepped from the confines of her circle, making a careful sweep of the perimeter with the rod. Its tremors never eased, and as she rounded the curve by the inner hallway of the apartment, the scarlet tip began to lighten, heating to a bloody orange as she hesitated in that direction. One step forward, and then another, and the vibrations grew stronger, forcing Willow to tighten her grip in
case it decided to make a jump to freedom.

“What’re you trying to tell me?” she mused as she moved down the corridor. Past her room…past Buffy’s and toward Giles’…and all of a sudden, the glow that had shifted to a pale orange-yellow began to darken back to red, the shaking lessening.

She stopped. Her first instinct had been that it was leading her to the Watcher’s room because he’d been snatched by the same powers that had stolen the crystal figurines. But if that was true, the power within the stick should’ve grown instead of faded as she approached.

Her head turned, her gaze settling on Buffy’s closed door. Curious, Willow shifted the aim of the rod toward it and immediately felt the effects return, prompting her to step forward and reach for the knob. It felt weird to be going into her friend’s room without her knowledge, but if this was what it took to get Giles back, Willow was sure she would understand.

The carefully made bed took her by surprise. *Buffy must’ve been in a really good mood this morning if she went to these kind of lengths*, she thought as she approached it. There was no mistaking the effect her closing proximity with the piece of furniture was having on the divining rod, though. With each step, the intensity of the vibrations grew, causing her whole arm to begin reverberating in a sympathetic rhythm as she fought to keep her hold on it, and its tip was now almost a pure white. It took no time at all to determine it was strongest at the head of the bed, and Willow stared down at it in confusion.

*Buffy’s pillow is possessed? OK, now I’ve seen it all…*

It was almost a second thought when she reached out and lifted the cushion, exposing the worn leather of the book beneath it. The moment it was uncovered, an electric shock leapt from the rod to Willow’s palm.

“Oh!” she cried out, finally releasing her grip.

The stick fell to the floor, still and dark as if the magic it had been channeling had been shorted. As she rubbed the tingling ache in her hand, Willow looked from it, to the rod, and back up to the bed where the book still sat. She recognized it immediately as Buffy’s purchase at the bookstore and, curious, reached forward to look at it closer.

A folded piece of paper fluttered from its pages, landing silently on the mattress before she could catch it. Without thinking, she picked it up, opening it to scan its contents. Green eyes went wide, and her breath was audible as it caught in her throat. “Oh, my…” she whispered as her gaze returned to the top of the page, reading it through a second, much slower, time.

*What in sweet heaven have you been hiding from us, Buffy?*
That Which Is Hath Been Before

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet LIX.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy has gone to the Council to confront them about Giles’ disappearance, Willow has used the divining rod to follow a trail straight to William’s journal in Buffy’s bedroom, and William has received a surprise visitor…

William hesitated before the closed door to the drawing room, throwing back his shoulders and tugging at his jacket’s hem. It wouldn’t do to appear less than his best, regardless of his ignorance of the visitor’s business. He just would’ve preferred being a tad more informed before walking into the situation blind.

“My sincerest apologies in keeping you waiting,” he said automatically as he entered the room. “I’m afraid I’ve had a bit of a late start this morning.”

The man at the fireplace turned around from his inspection of the figures on the mantle. “There’s certainly no need to apologize, my young man. If anything, apologies should be mine for arriving unannounced. Unfortunately, circumstances prevented me from doing so.” He strode forth, his hand outstretched. “Richard Rhodes-Fanshaw.”

“William Freston.” As they shook hands, William’s gaze swept over his visitor, taking in the expensive cut of his suit, the careful polish to his shoes. He was an older gentleman, most likely nearing sixty, with a shock of brilliant-white hair that appeared to be as ungovernable as William’s own, and skin leathered from long-time exposure to the sun. Though the combination of the spectacles he wore and the plethora of lines around his eyes betrayed a long-time familiarity with reading, his trim form belied an easy existence. This was a man as accustomed to labor as he was to leisure.

“Would you like some tea?” William offered, gesturing toward one of the settees.

“Thank you, but no.” Richard settled himself in the furniture’s corner, long limbs tense as he waited for the younger man to sit as well. “I’m afraid it’s a little early for me to have what I’d prefer to be drinking.”

This last was said with a half-smile, shocking William into sitting straighter as he perched himself on the cushion’s edge. It was one thing to know that such tippling was done behind closed doors; it was another entirely to joke about it in such a cavalier fashion in the presence of a stranger.

“So…” he started, only to hear his voice come out as a harsh squeak. Hastily, he cleared his throat, desperate to maintain some semblance of propriety and control. Though there was nothing overtly threatening about his guest, there was no denying the tightly reined power emanating from both his body and mind, and it instantly returned William to a place of trepidation he hadn’t occupied in several days.

“Let us dispense with the niceties, shall we?” Though his tone remained affable, there was no ignoring the authority in Richard’s voice. “We’re both grown men. And as you’re the head of the
house, I see no reason to prevaricate regarding my business here.”

“Oh. Of…course.” Except it wasn’t of course. Rhodes-Fanshaw spoke as if William should understand what he was referencing when in actuality, he didn’t. It was unnerving, at best. Think, he scolded himself, his mind racing to try and fathom what the other man could possibly be alluding to. The similarity to the thought process he’d had regarding his bankside visitor---Esme, she’d said her name was---flitted across his consciousness, but barely a wisp and impossible to hold onto, not when a much more imposing personage was sitting just several feet away from him.

“Your activities haven’t gone unnoticed, William.” He wasn’t bothering to maintain social dictates, addressing William by his first name without even deigning to ask permission, and the cool control of his voice sent an array of shivers down the younger man’s spine.

“My activities?”

Richard’s smile was condescending. “The role of the innocent works well for you, I must say. Is that how you escape detection?”

He was on his feet in a second, his anger flaring from nowhere. “Your comportment is completely uncalled for, sir. I suggest---.”

“Sit. Down.”

Though he never moved, the tension in Richard’s body wound tighter, forcing William to comply without thought or hesitation. It didn’t lessen his irritation, though, and his jaw twitched as he struggled not to embarrass himself further with another outburst.

After a moment, Richard continued. “Do you know who I am, William? Other than my name, of course.”

“No, sir.”

He nodded, as if it was the only response he expected. “I work for an organization that specializes in…unusual matters. It’s my responsibility to ensure that the streets you walk are safe. That the…unacceptable are handled swiftly and with appropriate prejudice.”

His words chilled William’s anger, his face blanching. “You…you didn’t introduce yourself…as an officer of the law, sir,” he said, stammering. “My apologies. If I’d known---.”

“It’s not as you’re thinking,” Richard interrupted. “My organization works outside the parameters of local government. We’re more interested in…global sanctity. Tell me, William. Have you ever heard of Watchers?”

* * *

If it wasn’t for the fact that it was the only way she would’ve gotten Giles in her life, Buffy was thisclose to wishing she’d never heard of Watchers in the first place. Once she’d told everything she knew about Giles’ disappearance, the Slayer had been relegated to pacing in the background while Travers and the Spike-fixated Lydia spoke in conspiratorial whispers at the front of the library, busying themselves with a jumble of files every time she approached. It was enough to make a girl feel unwelcome.

She stopped when the door opened again, but this time it was only the aged Beryl with a fresh pot of tea. It was her second trip in since Buffy had been unwillingly sequestered, which in the Slayer’s head, meant that even more time was being wasted. Time she should be using to find Giles.
“Enough,” she said as soon as it was just the three of them again. She marched over to where Travers sat, glaring down at him. “Either you give me a really good reason for staying, or I’m on the next train out of here. There’s no way this is more productive than me and Willow doing a footsearch, so unless you can tell me something I don’t already know—.”

“The reason our coven couldn’t trace the magic, Miss Summers, is that it was one of their own who’d cast it.” He ignored Lydia’s surprise as he gazed up at the Slayer with watery eyes. “Now, if you’d please take a seat, I’ll be with you just as soon as I finish going over these instructions.”

He didn’t bother to wait for a response, turning back to the files before him and scribbling some notes in the margins. Buffy gaped at him in shock for a long moment as what he’d said sank in, and then did the only thing she could right then.

She sat down.

* * *

From her seat on the floor, Willow leaned against the side of the bed, the journal resting open in her lap. Her heart was pounding, the sweat drying in her palms, but there was no way she could move any time soon; all control of her muscles seemed to disappear the moment she started reading through Buffy’s recent purchase.

Finding the poem addressed to “My Darling Miss Buffy” had been freaky enough; finding inescapable references to her friend in the diary of a man who’d lived more than a century earlier was just off the scale of weirdness. If she’d been on the Hellmouth, Willow thought she might’ve found the whole thing a little easier to accept. But they weren’t. They were in jolly old England, a country neither of them had ever visited before, on a vacation that, OK, was turning into their usual crisis-averting mission, but hey, points for intent.

So, the fact that she was now holding what should be impossible? Enormously bizarre with a side order of absurd.

Skimming the entries told Willow the story of a lonely young man, trying to find his place in a world that didn’t seem to accept him for who he wished to be. It had seemed frightfully sad, until halfway through, the tone started to shift to one more positive, his tales ending more often in success than failure. That was when he first mentioned the dreams, but it wasn’t until she caught the word “slayer” that she’d given any more attention to the details.

Somehow, some way, William Freston was conducting some nocturnal relationship with a woman who sounded exactly like Buffy, and writing poetry for her favor.

When the details started to become more intimate, Willow had had to stop reading, her mind trying to process what she’d discovered. Did Buffy know? Is that why she bought the book? It had seemed like an odd purchase at the time, but she’d been so excited for her friend that Willow hadn’t bothered to question it closely. More importantly than those questions, though…

Was Buffy dreaming about William, too?

She didn’t want to, but Willow knew she was going to have to ask Buffy about it. The journal was tied into the magic that surrounded the crystal theft, and if that had something to do with Giles’ disappearance, they needed all the facts they could possibly get to get him back.

Or maybe she’d wait and see if Buffy brought it up first. Hinting at what she could know might be enough to draw the truth out of the Slayer without having her feel attacked, because if there was one
thing Willow knew about her best friend, it was that direct confrontation on non-favorite Buffy topics usually ended up badly.

* * *

The directness of the question took William by surprise, prompting him to splutter out some insensate reply that only earned him a curious quirk of his guest’s brows.

“I must admit,” Richard said slowly, “you are not what I was expecting. In my position, having a sense of person is practically a requirement for survival, but if I didn’t have the facts already, I would assume you are exactly as you appear.”

“Would it be presumptuous for me to inquire what those facts would be?” he managed to ask. The casual bandying of a term he’d only ever heard in his dreams made him desperate for answers, and he plunged forward on the tide of fear before he could think otherwise. “Because, frankly, I’m finding myself at a loss as to why you’re here. I’m not aware of anything untoward happening within the household, and outside of my mother’s current absence, I can’t think of a single event that would warrant such attention from you.”

For the first time since his arrival, Rhodes-Fanshaw seemed unsure, his light eyes narrowing in close scrutiny of William’s demeanor. “Your mother is missing?” he questioned, and though his voice was low, its gravity was more than enough to return the chill to William’s bones. “Would this have occurred the evening before last?”

“No, no,” William rushed, and tried to pull himself away to no avail. “But I don’t understand. Buffy’s not…she’s just…” Though he could think the word, verbalizing it was another matter, not when the proof of so much of what she professed was staring at him as if he’d just grown a second head. Claiming her as fantasy had been much easier when the order of his world excluded Watchers and Vampire Slayers. To do so now seemed impossible.

Who is Buffy?” Richard asked carefully. His fingers loosened, allowing William to slip away and rub at the sore joint.

“She’s not…to whom you’re referring?” He wasn’t sure if he was relieved or not.

“No.” A long heavy sigh accompanied Richard’s sinking back into the settee. “Perhaps that tea wouldn’t be out of order, right about now.”
She turned down the tea Travers offered her, her arms folded across her chest as she waited for him to begin. At least an hour had passed since his cryptic remark regarding the coven, and Buffy had watched in increasing annoyance as he spoke with Lydia and not to her, ignoring her very presence until the other Watcher had left the library.

“You realize you should prepare yourself for the possibility that Rupert is dead, don’t you?” he commented without preamble, carrying his tea to the head of the table and his scattered files.

“He’s not dead,” she replied grimly. “And what does that have to do with the coven?”

“Are you aware that we sent a team to Wales to investigate the other source of magic?” At her nod, he slid forward a slim folder, and sat back as he waited for her to pick it up.

Her face was impassive as her eyes fell to the file. It wasn’t like she’d never seen vampire attacks before, even one as vicious as this. The surroundings were impossible to tell for certain---someplace outside, with mountains in the background---and the photography left a lot to be desired, with more than half of the pictures either blurry or underexposed. But the gruesome display of the bodies…the callous tearing of their necks that left jagged wounds still obvious even in death…it was enough to raise the Slayer’s internal anger barometer, determination that the same fate would not befall Giles steeling her spine.

“He’s not dead,” she repeated, and pushed the folder away from her.

“I pray not,” Travers said quietly. He steepled his fingers together as he continued to speak. “It’s regretful it’s reached this stage. I’d rather hoped your involvement would be sufficient in getting to the root of the theft.”

“Are you trying to tell me it wasn’t vamps who did this?”

“No, they most certainly were vampires. But they didn’t act alone.” He sighed. “Magic is a very complicated thing, Miss Summers. It’s very difficult to mask its effects from skilled practitioners. To blind an entire coven requires intimate knowledge of its weaknesses, which, I’m afraid, Esme has.”

“And she was---wait.” She frowned. “What did you say her name was again?”

When he repeated it, its familiarity made the memory bells begin pealing inside her head, but where she knew the name from, Buffy couldn’t quite put her finger on. Something from recently, she knew, and for some reason, Bewitched had something to do with it. Any more than that, though, and she was at a loss.

“Why didn’t you spill about any of this before now?” she demanded. “Why keep this kind of important information so secret? Don’t you think it would’ve been easier for us to find her if we knew what was really going on?”

“You weren’t meant to find her,” he said evenly. “Your involvement was meant to draw her out.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “We were bait?”

“You were bait. Esme has always had a fixation on Slayers. We were hoping to capitalize on your presence here.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Big frickin’ surprise there,” she muttered. “She works for the Council.”
“Yes, well, her interest was extreme even considering that.”

They regarded each other in silence for several minutes before she finally pushed back her chair and stood up. “Unless the next thing to come out of your mouth is a plan to get Giles back that doesn’t involve someone I care about doing their best worm impersonation, I’m out of here.”

He made no move to stop her, but instead followed her with his gaze when she swept past him. “What do you propose to do next, Miss Summers?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted as she pulled open the library doors. “But I’ll think of something.”

* * *

He was finding it difficult to keep his thoughts straight. Across from him, Richard finished off his tea, the whisky he’d laced it with from the flask he kept in his pocket obviously making it more palatable than William’s. The details he’d shared were worthy of even the most unbelievable serial, but William still couldn’t let go of the most shocking development of them all—the actualization of so much of Buffy’s world in his own.

“I understand your confusion,” Richard said, replacing his cup onto the tray between them. “To a layman, it must seem quite ridiculous.”

“Not exactly the word I would choose,” William murmured. Lifting his head, his eyes were steady if not clear as he regarded the Watcher. “Why trust me with this information?” he asked.

“You arrived believing I was the wrongful party here.”

“I arrived here armed only with sterile facts,” came the reply. His manner was much more relaxed, but whether that was due to a shift in his feelings or the alcohol in his drink, William had no idea. “I knew just what my seer told me. That the temporal ripples she detected all centered on this address, and that there were no traces of magic with any of your staff when they left the house.”

“Yet you believe me when I tell you I know nothing of any of that.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Richard shrugged. “This is a dangerous world we walk in, William, and you don’t live for as long as I have by ignoring your instincts. It’s my responsibility to recognize a good man when I see one. My instincts tell me to believe in you.” He rose to his feet. “That, and I plan on having my seer try a little truth spell on you back at my offices. Just to be safe.”

Following him to a standing position, William lifted his chin in a defiance he didn’t really feel. “You seem confident that I will just go with you. How do I know this isn’t some artifice on your behalf to lure me into captivity?”

“You don’t. You have to trust me. Just as I’m trusting you.” Gathering the coat he’d removed during the tea, Richard strode with a determined step to the doorway. “If it’s an issue of privacy, I’ll allow you to select a pseudonym. There’s no reason for any of your peers to be aware of your connection to my organization, nor for my colleagues to know of your true identity.” He paused at the doorway, finally glancing back at William. “Unless, of course, you’re lying to me and my intuition is faulty. Then…”

He left the threat unsaid, but from Buffy’s descriptions of her own interactions with the Council, William knew instinctively that what followed would not be pleasant. Not that he wished to go with
this Rhodes-Fanshaw; frankly, the possibility of what might occur terrified him and he wanted nothing more than to return to his room, lock the door, and bury himself in books for the next decade.

But…the oddities that he claimed to have occurred…Anne Freston’s unexplained disappearance… and the unmistakable correlation with the tales of a woman who should not have logically existed… William was not a stupid man. Nor was he a dishonorable one. If something sinister had truly happened to his mother, then it was his responsibility to seek out every means to go to her aid, even if it meant combating his own fears to do so.

Besides, there was nothing to fear because he had nothing to hide. He knew nothing of the events Richard described. The only unusual occurrence he was aware of was…

Buffy.

Would he ask about her?

Most likely. William had mentioned her specifically by name.

And what will I reply?

She was a dream; that much was true. But if specifics were asked, how could he avoid the issue that she was why he knew about the Council of Watchers in the first place?

He would have to find a way. She would feel betrayed if the truth was found out, and there was no way William was going to be the one to cause those feelings.

As he followed Richard into the foyer and gathered his jacket for travelling, only the image of Buffy as she had appeared at their last meeting stayed before him…so strong and yet so fragile…radiant with what he hoped was understanding for the depth of his feelings for her. And the sudden shock of comprehension made him hesitate before venturing outside.

She was real.

Which meant…he hadn’t created her, after all. That everything she said to him, everything she said about him, came from her.

That he mattered.

So lost in this newfound revelation, William heard nothing while they climbed into the carriage, and it wasn’t until they’d started moving before Richard was able to regain his attention.

“Well?” the Watcher asked. “What shall I call you?”

His gaze returned to the window, the house he watched so often from his bedroom passing by. Before he could think otherwise, William uttered the first name that came to his head.

“David,” he said softly. “David Howard.”
He That Writes of You

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet LXXXIV.”

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy has learned from Travers that Esme works for the Council, but in light of not getting any new plans to rescue Giles, has left the Council building; meanwhile, a visit from Richard Rhodes-Fanshaw has William about to visit the Council of his time…

Each clack of the horses’ hooves on the cobblestones pounded with growing ferocity in William’s skull, every pace nearing and fearing until the anticipated building appeared outside his window. Exactly as Buffy had professed, just as she’d been correct about so much else. You expected less? a little voice niggled at the back of his mind.

Bowing his head, he clenched his jaw in a desperate attempt to brace his weakening resolve. It was one thing to face down the persecutors of his youth; it was another to endure the potential ire of a man who had the power of one of the most cogent organizations he’d ever heard of behind him. In his lap, his palms were clammy where he clenched them in white-knuckled apprehension, and William suspected his brow must be shiny with sweat beneath the curls that refused to obey his brush’s order. I am the exemplification of guilt, he thought with more than a little disgust. How can I hope to be strong for Buffy if I can’t even be strong for myself?

As the carriage drew to a stop, Richard said, “Relax, William. The spell is completely harmless. You have nothing to fear, unless, of course, you’re lying to me.”

He lifted his head to gaze at his companion, managing a feeble smile at the same time. “Of course,” William replied. The calmness of his voice surprised him. “You must understand, though, that this is all still a bit…overwhelming for me.”

“As it should be.” The elder man disembarked first, waiting until the younger was halfway out before asking, “If I may be so pre-emptive…how is it you know of the Slayer?”

Its effect was exactly as planned, visibly startling William to the point of stumbling over the last step. His left knee cracked against the walk when he fell, his glasses slipping from his nose, and he cried out in pain as he grabbed onto the coach.

“You should really be more careful,” Richard said calmly, extending his hand in assistance.

For a moment, he hesitated at the offer, and then took it with a heavy sigh. “You must be very good in your position,” William said, pulling his handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his hands. “I hadn’t anticipated any more inquiries until after we’d gone inside.”

“Unfortunately, sometimes I fear I’m not quite good enough.” He paused, eyes wary. “And you’re avoiding my question.”

He’d spent the entire carriage ride wondering how he could circumvent direct responses regarding Buffy, and though the query itself had taken him by surprise, William was actually prepared with an
“You mentioned Watchers. They go hand in hand with Slayers, do they not?”

“The short answer to that is yes.” With a tilt of his head, he motioned for William to follow him into the building. “But it doesn’t tell me how you know of Watchers.”

“Someone I care about is quite close to one. She spoke vaguely of his duties when I asked her.”

Richard paused at the entrance. “Would this be that…Buffy you mentioned?”

“Yes.” No reason to prevaricate. If he so chose, the Watcher would be more than aware of the truth in just a few minutes. William cleared his throat, ready to attempt to change the subject. “Does my need for an alias mean the spell will be done in the presence of your entire staff?”

He shook his head. “No,” Richard replied. “It’s merely a safety measure. My seer will be doing the spell. She and I will be the only two people you should be in contact with here.”

“You can do that?” he asked as he followed him inside. “In an organization such as yours, how do you keep such business private?”

“This is my Council. They know only what I want them to know.”

* * *

He ignored her until she spoke up, concentrating instead on the file before him and remembering his encounter with the Slayer. It hadn’t ended as he’d anticipated; of course, her arrival with news of Rupert’s disappearance was yet another anomaly in their quest to discover what Esme knew of the crystal collection. The entire affair had the sticky feeling of moving beyond his control, but Quentin Travers was determined not to loosen his grip. It was his responsibility to stay on top of things; this was just another bend in the road for him.

“Do you have any further instructions, sir?” Lydia queried from where she hovered in the library doors.

“Has Miss Summers left?”

“Yes, sir.”

He nodded. “Have the men been dispatched to follow her?”

“Four, just as you requested.”

There was no need to respond to that, and he turned back to his reading, listening to her heels brush against the floor as she fidgeted in her place. He let her stew for several minutes before saying, “You may say what’s on your mind, Lydia.”

It came out in a rush. “You told the Slayer about the coven, about Esme, didn’t you?” She didn’t wait for an answer as they both knew it already. “Do you really think that’s wise? It will only serve to make her angrier than she already is.”

Travers swiveled clear eyes toward his employee, regarding her with an even stare without speaking. When he didn’t reply, she frowned in frustration, only to have it melt away as slow understanding dawned on her face.

“But…but…aren’t you afraid of what she might do?” she asked, finally comprehending his tactics. “She’s a wild card. She could…she might hurt someone. Aren’t your frightened of the potential
repercussions?"

“Neither one of us believe that will happen,” he said smoothly. “Yes, she is dangerous, and yes, she
wields her anger as a weapon more effectively than any other Slayer I’ve seen in recent years. But if
there’s one thing I’ve learned about Buffy Summers over the course of her tenure, it’s this. She will
fight to protect those she loves to her dying breath. With Rupert in danger, the only one to be
threatened by the Slayer at this juncture is Esme. As it should be.”

He caught her frown as he turned away. “What about the men you’ve sent to track her?” she asked.
“You know how she feels---.”

“They’ve been apprised of her skills,” Quentin said. “If they get caught, it’s their own fault, now
isn’t it?” Her dissatisfaction was clear in the shuffling of her feet, but she remained silent as he
listened to her prepare to leave. “Lydia?” he asked, turning once again to look at the blonde.

“Yes, sir?” She hesitated on the library side of the door, a finely manicured hand poised on the knob.

“Your permission to question my authority on this matter is revoked the moment you step foot
outside this room. Is that understood?”

A long silence, ending with her perfunctory nod. “Yes, sir.”

* * *

Under other circumstances, William would’ve been drowning in pleasure at the sight of the library to
which he was led. Books, upon books, upon wonderful books, lined the dark walls, with the long
table down the center of the room perfect for reading. Plush leather chairs surrounding it only
beckoned with more promises of decadent hours spent in the luxury of words. There were no
windows, as if sunlight would distract the reader with its beauty, but the shadows only made the
room seem even more cozy. It almost set him completely at ease.

Almost.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, William quickly realized they weren’t alone in the room. At the
far end of the table, a white head was bent over a text, but it tilted upward to reveal the kindest face
he’d ever envisioned, a hesitant smile broadening at the sight of Richard.

“I was beginning to think you were never going to return,” she said lightly. When she rose to her
feet, William saw with a start that the woman easily matched his height, her stride strong and
confident in spite of her advancing years. Time had filled out already ample curves, but her size did
nothing to detract from the supple grace as she moved, and were it not for his breeding and close
attention to such matters, he was certain he would’ve stared with dropped jaw at her appearance as
she approached.

Instead of a skirt, she wore trousers, much like a man, much like Buffy had said was done by women
in her time. Her white hair, thick and lush, was pulled into a single plait that hung down her back,
and her opaque eyes, such a dark brown that they seemed almost black, twinkled as they met his.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure,” she said curiously.

He bowed at the waist. Now was the time to practice his assumed identity, much as he may hate it.
“David Howard, ma’am.”

“Are you a new associate of Richard’s?” the woman asked.
The Watcher shook his head, though it seemed to be directed at both of them. “His name is actually William Freston,” he said, and then turned to the young man. “There’ll be no need for your alias with Rose. She is---.”

“Is he in danger? Is that why you’ve brought him here?”

Her questions were rapid, the softness of her voice lost in what appeared to be genuine confusion. As William watched, the pair faced off, the comfortable air wrapped around them electrifying in the sudden tension. “I brought him to you to be questioned,” Richard said, seemingly perplexed at her forceful response to the truth.

“But why? He’s an innocent.”

“Don’t be taken in by his appearance.”

“I’m not referring to his appearance.”

“He knows of the Council.”

She fell silent, black eyes sliding to William in an appraising sweep. It was more probing than any scrutiny he’d ever encountered before, not in uni, not from his mother. Truth be told, the only other person who’d regarded him so intently before was Buffy. And Miss Esme. And it made him want to squirm.

“He’s an innocent,” she finally repeated, and looked back to Richard. “There is no reason for us not to trust his word. Don’t tell me you don’t see it.”

“I did. I just…” The Watcher sighed, suddenly appearing his age as his shoulders sagged.

She responded instantly, stepping up to him and pulling him into a warm embrace, her hands stroking his back with a soothing coo that set both men at ease. “You wanted him to be the answer,” she murmured. “It’s all right. Everything will be all right.”

The intimacy was beginning to make William feel uncomfortable, and he averted his eyes at the obvious display of affection. In many ways, her direct attitude reminded him remarkably of Buffy, but if this was Rhodes-Fanshaw’s seer, it left questions as to the exact nature of their relationship.

“My husband didn’t scare you too badly, did he?” Her voice made his head jerk up to see her gazing at him, her arms still around Richard though he know seemed embarrassed at the spectacle they were presenting.

“Your…husband?” William stammered. “I thought…you said only you and your seer---.”

“That’s me,” Rose said. “It makes him trusting what I have to say much easier, believe me.”

“And you…I don’t understand…not that I’m not grateful to be…” He trailed off, unable to vocalize the clamor of questions her statements brought forth. “Does this mean you’re not doing the truth spell?” he finally managed.

Rose turned to look at Richard in shock. “You wanted me to do a truth spell on the boy?” she demanded. “Why on earth would you want to go to such extremes?”

“He knows of the Council,” the Watcher reiterated, though this time much less emphatically. He finally extracted himself from her arms. “He has information, I’m sure of it. He may be able to tell me something that could help.”
She rested a calming hand on his forearm. “And so you ask, like a civilized person. I promise you, Richard, as sure as I was of the temporal folds around his home, this young man is of no threat to us.” The smile she shot William was warm. “I’m afraid that this April business is my husband’s Holy Grail. Or Sword of Damocles, depending upon your perspective. He tends to be rather single-minded in his pursuit of her.”

William merely nodded, confused by the reference to a woman Rhodes-Fanshaw had never mentioned. His head was a mishmash, relief at his release from the fetters of the truth spell combining with the queries his changing situation kept throwing at him. He didn’t dare ask, though. Answers would be coming soon enough.

“You look as if you could use a drink.” Rose was moving away as she spoke, and with her back to both men, William found it impossible to determine whom she was addressing. “Whisky, I know, for Richard, but for William…?” She paused at the doorway, a searching glance at him over her shoulder ending with the upturn of her mouth.

“Tea will be fine, ma’am,” he offered.

“Pish.” She dismissed his suggestion with a wrinkling of her nose. “Not nearly hearty enough. Something with more substance, I think.” She brightened as if suddenly surprised with the most brilliant idea. “I know the weather may predicate otherwise, but I believe hot cocoa is in order. For both of us.” And with that, she was gone.

* * *

She had all the best friend accoutrements ready when she heard Buffy at the door. Fresh pastries from the bakery, ice cream in the freezer, diet sodas chilling in the fridge. Now all Willow needed to find was the nerve to actually confront the Slayer about the journal. For some reason, that was proving hardest to locate.

Her hopes plummeted when she saw Buffy appear at the entrance of the living room. Gone was the unadulterated good mood from breakfast. Now, she wore the all-too familiar grim reaper face the Slayer wore every time she had to deal with the Council.

“Not so good, huh?” she said as Buffy flopped onto the couch.

“Would it surprise you to hear they were holding back on us?” She waggled her fingers in greeting. “Say hello to Buffy, the Witch Baiter.”

The mention of magic made Willow pale. “What did you find out?” she asked, her voice thin. “Does the Council know who’s behind everything?”

“Kind of. In a way.” Briefly, she relayed what she’d learned about Esme’s involvement in the Council’s coven, and how they’d only been interested in having Buffy search for her because they felt the witch’s obsession with the Slayer line would prove her downfall. “And to top it all off,” she finished, “they have absolutely no ideas on how we can get Giles back.”

“But they think she took him.”

“Either her or the vamps she’s working with.” Her nose scrunched up in thought. “He told me her name, and for some reason, it’s tiptoeing right on that line in my brain where I wanna remember where I heard it before, but I just can’t, you know? It’s bugging the heck out of me.”

“What was it?”
Willow was positive her heart literally stopped for a beat. Esme. That was the name of the clerk at the book store. The store where Buffy bought the journal. The woman who told Willow about the sleeping spell to help her friend. The woman Giles had never heard of when the redhead brought her up later.

Oops.

Treading on the safer side of caution about the topic of William was no longer an option, she realized. “I think we might have a problem,” she said, and waited for Buffy’s weary gaze to turn away from the pastry she was flaking pieces off of. “I used the rod this morning.”

It was as if a light was turned on inside her friend. “Did it work? Tell me it worked.” Buffy sat forward on the edge of her seat. “I so need good news right now.”

Willow nodded. “I’m going to say yes,” she replied. Reaching under the coffee table, she extracted the stick and handed it over, watching as the Slayer tested its weight, waving it around like a small child playing witch. “It’s probably not going to work again, though. I think it got burned out or something.”

“But that means you’ve got enough of the magic to break through whatever barrier spell Esme put up, right? We can use it to find Giles?”

She hated that Buffy sounded so hopeful all of a sudden. She hated even more that she was going to have to be the one to burst her bubble. “Not really,” Willow admitted, and ducked out of the way when one of the Slayer’s swipes of the stick moved a little too close to her face. “I never actually left the apartment.”

Buffy froze. “The magic was here? But that proves she took Giles, doesn’t it?”

“I didn’t find it near any of Giles’ things.” She swallowed, her mouth too dry to work properly. “I found it near yours. Well, kind of yours.” At Buffy’s confusion, she added, “The rod shorted out on William’s journal.”

She didn’t move. She didn’t even blink. “Huh?”

It was Willow’s turn to play storyteller, though she wished that sometimes Buffy wouldn’t blank so completely when confronted with such a blatant statement of fact. When she was done, she bit her lip, dreading her next question. “Have you been…dreaming about this guy?” she asked, green eyes searching her best friend’s for any sign of cover-up. “Because there’s all this talk about his dreamgirl having the same type of dreams he was.”

“One every night,” Buffy said, but under Willow’s direct gaze, she faltered. “Well, most of the nights, yeah, but…” She collapsed back into the cushions, all adrenaline sapped from her limbs with this new information. “He’s real,” she murmured to herself. “I can’t believe he’s actually real.”

“I’m not so sure he is,” Willow rushed to say. “I’ve been thinking about it all day, and now that you tell me this about Esme and the Council, I’m thinking there’s another explanation for this.”

“Like what? There’s a book in there as old as Methusaleh talking about me. That sounds about as real as you can get.”

“But if the book’s not real.” She was getting excited now, some of the fear about the situation dissipating as she began to put the pieces together. “You said the Council used you for bait, right?
Because Esme has a Slayer fixation?"

“Right.”

“So, what if she decided when she found out you were in town, instead of trying to take you on directly, she’d just distract you until she was done with whatever she’s planning on doing with the crystals?”

Pause. “Go on.”

“So she makes a book, a journal, about a guy who you’d respond to, who you’d feel all…sympathetic with, because it sounds like he’s going through some of the same things you are. Not that I know what that is,” she hastened to add at Buffy’s sudden alarm. “But the way some of his entries were worded…” How do I say this without getting into some of the more private issues? “…it sounded like you two…bonded over certain things. Like he understood you and you understood him. Simpatico.”

“…OK.”

She wasn’t completely buying the theory, but Willow could see that the idea of William being real freaked Buffy out even more than the possibility of being the target of a carefully crafted spell. She went on. “So, Esme plants the book where you’ll find it, and then sits back and hopes that’s enough to keep you from digging into the crystal sitch.”

“But…I don’t get how it’s distracting me. I’m still on the clock in trying to figure out what’s going on.”

OK, back on thin ice again. Willow took a deep breath. “You’re a little distracted,” she said carefully. “Like…last night? With the wanting me to make you tea? Don’t you think that shows---just a little!---that maybe you’re thinking more about this William and less about Giles? I mean, look at what a good mood you were in this morning, and you didn’t dream about him last night, right? So…see? Her plan is working…kind of.”

A shadow passed over Buffy’s face. “But I did dream about William,” she said softly. “And it was because of things he said to me in the dream that I woke up so good moody.”

“But…you couldn’t. You didn’t have any…”

Both girls reached the conclusion at the same time, but it was Buffy who spoke first. “It’s the tea, isn’t it?” she said. Her tone was even and deceptively calm, but it still managed to send shivers down Willow’s spine. “You did something to the tea.”

“I didn’t know,” she whispered. “I thought it was just to help you sleep. And you were getting so rested! I honestly thought I was…helping.” She paused. “You had some left over, didn’t you? And the reason you’re not dreaming of him every night is because I haven’t made the tea for you every night. Oh my god. What have I done?”

They both sat in silence, mulling over the ramifications of what each had learned. She wouldn’t every say it out loud, but a place deep inside Willow was hurt from the understanding that Buffy was getting comfort, being helped through this difficult period in her life, by someone who wasn’t her. By a stranger. That someone constructed completely of magic and the Slayer’s imagination was capable of soothing her in a way that Willow wasn’t. It was kind of a blow to the best friend ego. Wasn’t that her primary purpose? And why was it that Buffy felt she couldn’t share it with her?

Buffy broke the quiet first. “It’s almost a relief, in a way,” she said softly. “That he’s definitely not…
real. Not that I thought he was, except...the way I always felt when I woke up...like everything was OK. That was real. He just makes it so easy to lo...like him."

Willow caught the almost slip, and frowned, hearing the words come from her friend’s mouth, but not really believing them. There was an ache that echoed in every syllable, more than a shadow of the pain that had been so prevalent before they’d left Sunnydale lurking in and around each letter as she spoke. “How is it a relief?” she asked, just as softly. Because it didn’t sound like it was.

“Because if he’s real, then I have to start considering why he looks like he does, and that’s just a bad, bad place for Buffy.”

“Why? What does he look like?”

Now, she looked uncomfortable. “Spike.”

“Spike?” A split second later the name sank in, and Willow’s eyes went wide. “Spike?!?” she repeated, shaken out of her mood by the shock.

“Yeah. Talk about being weird when I realized. Not with the bleach job and leather, of course,” Buffy added at the obvious confusion I her friend’s face. “Much, much, much more Victorian, with this...curly hair, and glasses. And his accent is different, too. More...smooth.”

“I guess that’s just more proof then that Esme made him up,” Willow said.

“Why’s that?”

“Because all the Council records said that Spike was some kind of psycho or criminal or something when he was alive,” she explained. “Remember? We found that out in the research we did when he showed up in town. And this...William is a gentleman, by the sounds of it. Very non-Spike-like.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Willow saw the thoughts ticking in Buffy’s eyes, so when the next came, she wasn’t really all that surprised.

“So...since he’s not really real, and I think it’s pretty obvious the Big Plan of Distraction isn’t working,” Buffy said, though she wasn’t meeting her friend’s gaze as she played with the nap of the couch, “William’s not actually a threat...is he?”

She didn’t know what to say, and it broke her heart to see the Slayer seem so small. “Don’t,” Willow finally managed. “You shouldn’t. I shouldn’t. Haven’t I screwed things up enough already?”

“But it’s not, not really. I know what’s going on now, and aren’t you and Giles the ones always saying that knowledge is power?” The tiny smile she’d been forcing faded. “He makes me feel good about things again, Willow. Being with him is so...easy. Because he doesn’t expect anything. I don’t have to be strong if I don’t want to, but he doesn’t treat me like I’m going to break every second, either. He just...he makes me remember why it’s all worth it in the first place.”

“But he’s not real.”

“But the way he makes me feel is. Please, Willow. It’s not doing any harm, and I’m getting more and more capable of dealing with everything on my own every day. What’s it going to hurt?”

* * *
The world seemed washed in honey, the sun lower on the horizon than usual. In the treetops, the faint rustling of leaves was broken by the sporadic call of birdsong, cleaving the blue skies with its delicate music before settling back into serenity again, while the almost indistinguishable whistle of the wind spoke of secrets long forgotten.

On the bench, the paper lay forgotten, the edges curling to wave into the breeze, as if they were attempting to escape the prison created by the inks resting on their centers. The footsteps when they came seemed to excite them further, when the young man sitting at their side rose to his feet.

“Hello, Buffy,” he said softly.

She smiled. “Hello, William.”
The Fairest and Most Precious Jewel

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CXXXI.”

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: William has eluded the truth spell due to the intervention of Richard’s seer and wife, Rose; Buffy and Willow have swapped stories and come to the conclusion that William is an imaginary construct to distract the Slayer from investigating the crystal theft...

He would’ve sworn it couldn’t be possible. In light of every other whimsy opting to declare its authenticity during the course of his day, William would’ve laid his hand on his mother’s Bible and vowed that he’d reached the extent of what he could envisage. There were only so many surprises the world could produce in such a short timespan.

Apparently, the world wasn’t done with him yet.

He’d never denied he thought her beautiful. In fact, more often than not, William had allowed himself to be swept along the tide of verse watching and imagining Buffy created inside his head, all thoughts as to its excellence ignored in preference for simply enjoying the swell. The words never did her justice, of course; he could hardly presume to imagine himself Botticelli to her Venus. But he savored them anyway, and drowned in the reality of her when she came to him, and never once believed it could get any better.

He was wrong.

“You look…radiant,” he finished, striding forward to take her hands in his. Hardly sufficient to explain the sense of peace that had settled around Buffy in a diffuse glow, but in his breathless state, thunderstruck at how she could appear so vibrant and so serene at the same time, it would have to suffice. He cocked his head in confusion as his eyes searched hers. “Did you find Giles? Is that the explanation for…?” William couldn’t find the right words to explain it, and instead waved his hand abstractly around her in hopes she would understand.

Buffy smiled, and shook her head. “I wish,” she said. “But no. Did get some answers, though. That could be it. Or the new moisturizer I got.”

He chuckled. “Could be,” he murmured. Before she could step away, his head was bent, his lips on hers in the kiss he could no longer restrain. Just a taste, he’d decided, one drop of Buffy to temporarily sate the crescendo seeing her had conceived inside him.

It took her by surprise, not in the force of it, but in his certainty that he could take what she was more than willing to give, and he felt her smile against his lips as her arms came up around his neck. All too quickly, it ended, and she pulled away, eyes shining but curious.

“What was that for?”

“Must I have purpose for wishing to kiss my lady?” he said lightly.
She softened at that, and turned her head to rest her cheek against his chest. “You say that like you
don’t think it can be any other way. Like…it’s just you for me.”

Where had the melancholy come from? he wondered as he stroked her hair. If he didn’t know any
better, he’d think she was testing him in some fashion. But what she could wish to discover in such
roundabout means, he had no idea.

“And you for me, don’t forget,” he said. “Isn’t that what we decided it would be here? Not once has
someone joined us. If that doesn’t make this all about us, I’m afraid I won’t ever understand what it is
all about.”

His reply seemed to satisfy her, and she sighed in satisfaction. “You were right, by the way,” she
said after the longest moment. Pulling away from his embrace, she began wandering along the grass,
with William directly beside her. “Mr. Travers could’ve been Pinocchio for as many lies as he told
me.”

“Did you find out what you need to return Giles to safety?”

She shrugged. “It’s too early to tell. The information we got…it made some things a lot clearer, so…
we’ll see.”

“I’m sure it will work itself out in the end. After all, information is power.” He frowned at her giggle.
“Something strikes you as amusing?”

“It’s just…you sound like Giles. And Willow. They’re all big with the brain trust.” She stopped in
her tracks and cocked her head to look at him. “I guess it’s no wonder I found you. I have this weird
knack for surrounding myself with smartypants.”

He wondered if this was his opening. All day at the Watcher’s offices, William had debated how he
would broach the subject of their shared dreams to Buffy. He didn’t understand how, and he had no
cue as to why, but he didn’t doubt for a moment that she wasn’t from an actual future. After
speaking more with Rose and Richard, the pair had accompanied him back to his home, during
which time the seer had offered insights into his life that no one else could know. She’d even hinted
at some knowledge of Buffy, but her references had been vague, and she’d graciously allowed him
to change the subject whenever it seemed to veer too closely to the topic of Slayers.

It was their presence in his home that had confirmed for him their belief in the temporal folds. With
only a moment’s hesitation on the threshold, Rose had gone directly to his mother’s room, not
speaking to anyone, and had correctly pointed out several details from the night she’d disappeared.
She’d then proceeded to William’s room, but rather than venture inside, she stopped on the threshold.

“You write of her,” she’d murmured.

She had left it at that, but as they’d moved downstairs, Rose had waited until Richard was beyond
earshot to add, “I shan’t tell my husband because the issue of Slayers is a delicate one for him, but
please…be careful in the words you choose with your young lady. The load she bears is a heavy
one. Don’t burden her further with unnecessary details.”

As he looked at her now, William wondered if this meant he shouldn’t tell Buffy the truth of it at all.
She seemed so satisfied, more at peace than she’d been since they’d first started meeting; what would
learning that everything they’d imagined as fancy was in actuality truth do to her? Would she even
believe him?

Part of him doubted it. If there was one thing William had learned of the Slayer, it was that she
despised what she didn’t understand. It frustrated her, and he didn’t wish to be on the receiving end of that frustration should she not be amenable to what he’d learned.

But he so wanted her to know. How many times had she expressed the desire for it all to be real? He could give that to her. He could tell her that…

But what could he tell her? “You’re real, and I’m real, but we can only be real together while we’re sleeping.” That was no way to treat the woman he loved. Offer her only a fraction of his time because the years conspired to keep them apart? He didn’t have the strength to do that.

So he kept silent, only smiling as he took her hand and began leading her away from the familiar vista of their park bench. She seemed to sense his mood, and joined him in their mute exploration, forbearing after a few minutes from the handhold he’d initiated for a more intimate press into his side.

Quickly, William lost any sight for the flora around them, overwhelmed by the sensations of her curves molded to his hip, the heat in his forearm from where it was curled around her waist. He had no idea where they were heading; he’d merely wished to be moving for some reason. And yet, his body still throbbed in accordance with his desire for this woman, her easy fit into his body only boosting it with every step.

“I read your poem.”

Her voice was subdued, her eyes on the grass before them, and he knew without having to ask to which poem she was referring. Allowing himself a quick glance, William hurriedly averted his eyes back to the lawn, aware of the heat suffusing his cheeks. The fact that she merely mentioned it without offering any form of gratitude or praise could only mean she didn’t like it, and was attempting to be as delicate with him as possible. In light of how he was certain she felt for him, it surprisingly hurt.

“Did you mean what you said?”

Her question was unexpected, and William frowned as he struggled to remember the poem’s exact words. “I wouldn’t have written it if I didn’t believe it,” he said. That was true, even if he wasn’t entirely sure to what specifically she was alluding.

He almost squeaked out loud when she stopped and threw her arms around him in an exuberant hug. Though an ache was quickly beginning to form in his shoulders from the force she exerted, he couldn’t hold back the smile at the words she whispered in his ear.

“She loves me. She said it. She loves me.

Said organ was pounding inside his ribcage as her declaration accelerated the ferment of his emotions. She loves me. She said it. She loves me.

She loves me! She loves me! She loves me!

Like the bird he’d characterized Buffy as in his poem, in that moment, William was convinced he could fly, lack of wings be damned. Burying his face in her neck, he swept her up and around, listening to her squeal in delight at the surprise spin and wondering if there was ever a more joyous sound than the happy laugh of a woman in love.

She was still laughing when he stopped, but didn’t let go, hanging from his neck as he held her firmly about the waist. “My own tilt-a-whirl,” she teased.

“Yours,” he affirmed. “Only yours. For always.”
Before she could escape, he was kissing her again, inhibitions freed by his certitude that she wished it as much as he did. Clumsy, passionate, hungry kisses, punctuated by his own breathlessness and Buffy's occasional chuckle as they slid to the ground. He was panting when he finally pulled back, and looked down at the glow of her cheeks.

"Do I make you happy?" William asked, the sudden desire to hear it from her lips more important than anything else in that moment.

Tenderly, she cupped his cheek, a small smile curving her mouth. "How could you not?" she replied.

"But only here." He ducked his gaze at her tiny frown. "All the troubles you have when you leave my company...I know those vex you beyond my means of aid. You have no concept of how strongly I wish I could extend my support beyond the walls of our dreams, Buffy." Back to the clear green of her aspect, this spate of words taking him just as much in surprise as she. "If there were a way...if it was possible for me to help you, to...assist you, should you need it---."

"But you already do, don't you get it?" Rolling on to her side, Buffy propped her head up in her hand as her other fingers hovered above the vibrations in his throat where his pulse pounded. "I know you don't see it, and maybe I haven't been super clear, but every time we're together, I wake up just a little bit stronger. I don't know how my subconscious does it, and you know, not really in the mood to be questioning the magic that gets us here in the first place, but that doesn't mean it's not working."

He stopped breathing at her mention of the word "magic." Could she know? Was he cheating himself of even greater satisfaction by not sharing his own knowledge with her?

Her lips on his forced his lungs to start working again, startling him with the tenderest of caresses. "Besides," she teased, "you don't know how good you've got it. Dream Buffy is a lot happier than Real Buffy, mainly because of the lack of slayage and manipulative tweedy bastards. You should be over the moon and around the sun you got the good one."

William's hand came up to catch hers, pulling it against his chest where both of them could feel his heart beating. "There is no good one," he said quietly. "There is the strong one, and the frightened one, and the happy one, and the angry one, but in the end, they're all one and the same, because they're all you, Buffy. I would not presume to trade any of them because that might mean I lose something of..." He hesitated then, the fact that he was going to say it verbally this time, in such a way, drying his mouth. He swallowed. "...the woman I love," he finished.

She sighed at that, and pulled her hand from his grasp to rest it flat against his exposed skin. All thoughts of questioning her regarding what she may or may not know fled as she leaned toward him, her warm breath fanning across his neck just before she pressed her lips to his throat. As the shudder pulsed through him, William's eyes fluttered shut, his last image of Buffy burned onto his retinas as he inhaled her scent.

Gently, she pressed into him, using her weight and gravity rather than force to push him back onto the grass. When the cool blades were tickling his ears, he felt her fingers alight on his face, removing his glasses in a delicate sweep. The extra brilliance on his closed lids made his eyes burn, and it was only when the shadow passed behind them that he dared to open them again.

She was hovering above him, their torsos melding together, and her hair whispered across his cheek where it fell over her shoulder. "Do you trust me?" Buffy asked.

He couldn't help but smile. "What a foolish question."
“So was asking me if you make me happy,” she teased.

Pressing his lips together in lieu of a response, William just watched her as she bent her head again, dipping in to nip at his chin. An electric shock shot through his body, the unexpected pleasure from the tiny bite startling him into distraction. His eyes drifted closed again. “Buff---,” he started, only to have it cut off in a gurgle when he felt her tiny hand slip down the front of his trousers.

“Sshhh,” she said before silencing his surprise with a kiss.

The explosion of physical sensation inside his head was nothing compared to the sudden rise of fear in William’s throat. It had been one thing to consider making love to Buffy when he’d merely believed her to be a figment of his imagination. Now, knowing that she was real, knowing that these were actual memories she would be taking back with her when she awoke, he couldn’t help but hesitate. What would she think of him? Would she find him wanting? And was it entirely fair of him to play his role in this mutual seduction when a true gentleman wouldn’t use a lady such as she in this way?

“Buffy…love…please…” His attempts to gain her attention were misinterpreted, he realized, when her grip tightened around his shaft, squeezing and stroking in an eruption of pleasure that drove the air from his lungs. Though he’d pleasured himself in the past, each time with a sense of guilt even as he spent, those were shadows compared to the exquisite bliss her touch created in him. Several more seconds of this, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to contain himself.

Must...concentrate...on something...else.

A...b...c...d...

Not enough.

Oh god. What is she doing to me?

Greek, then. I’ll try Greek.

Alpha...beta...gamma...delta...eps—ahhhhhh, Buffy my love, god...epsilon...zeta...

And then it was gone, and Buffy had pulled back from kissing him, and as much as he was relieved that it wouldn’t be over yet quite so quickly, William felt a strange sense of dissatisfaction and emptiness at the absence of her touch. His eyes flew open to see her staring at him, a small line between her fine brows.

“Are you OK?” she asked, her voice slightly tremulous. “Is it…I’m not hurting you, am I?”

“Oh, love, no.” Suddenly self-conscious of his erection’s exposure where she’d undone his trousers, he fumbled to cover himself as he pushed himself up. “It’s just...overwhelming. No one has ever…I mean, you’re the first…” The heat in his face betrayed his embarrassment in his confession, and he ducked his gaze before seeing the understanding dawn in hers.

“Oh,” Buffy said softly. Her hand came out to cup his cheek, forcing him to lift his head again. “It’s OK if you want us to stop. I just thought...you know I wanted to do that, right?”

“Oh,” Buffy said softly. Her hand came out to cup his cheek, forcing him to lift his head again. “It’s OK if you want us to stop. I just thought...you know I wanted to do that, right?”

“I do. But, perhaps, if you would allow me to...touch you instead, just for a bit...”

“You expect me to say no?” she teased. “Do you think I’m crazy or something?”

He smiled as he bent in for a kiss. “I do love you, Buffy Summers.”
She could still feel his trembling as she laid back on the grass. Making love to him had been her intention ever since convincing Willow to let her have the dreams, at least for now, but each time he had said something obviously constructed by the magic to fill the need in her, or repeated something that had just been said to her that day only to reinforce the theory of his existence, her certainty had faded. But she’d acted anyway, and had been rewarded with the quivering response of his body, hard and ready and needy all for her. So losing herself now to his touch was simple. This was about William and Buffy. This was what the dreams had always been about.

Their eyes were locked as his fingers stroked her cheek, pushing back her hair to let it splay across the grass before skating down to the soft rise of her breasts over the sundress’ bodice. There, they hesitated, and his eyebrow cocked in silent query for permission to proceed.

Wordlessly, Buffy lifted her hands to join his, guiding him into undoing the tiny white buttons. As each fell free, neither was able to tear their gazes away from the other, not even when her dress parted completely to fall into soft folds at her sides. She had had to sit up slightly for the last few buttons, but with the last undone, Buffy sank back into the lawn. And waited.

William looked away then, and she saw his breathing quicken as he drank in the sight of her, golden flesh exposed to the hot sun. The hand he’d used on the fastenings lifted to the rosy peak of her breast, floating about the curve with reverence. When he spoke, his voice was a whisper on the breeze, so soft she had to strain to hear him.

“I am lost in a place ‘tween the sun and moon, Where firm and figment merge this June, And in that place ‘tween moon and sun, My love that burns for her is legion.”

“I don’t remember hearing you tell me that one before,” she said quietly, desperate not to shatter the mood he’d created. “When did you write it?”

“Just now.” He blushed and swallowed, his hand sculpting the air in her shape as it descended down over her stomach. “It’s not very good, I’m sure.”

“Don’t be silly.” Reaching up, she fisted the front of his shirt to pull on top of her length. “It was wonderful.”

The direct contact of their bodies made William gasp, and he quickly dropped his hands to the grass to prop his torso up over hers. His mouth opened to protest, but when he saw the tease in her eyes, his own relaxed. “Someone is failing to uphold her end of this arrangement,” he pretend-scolded.

“I thought you didn’t want me to hold it,” Buffy replied in wide-eyed innocence.

He chuckled. “My saucy, little minx.”

Then, his mouth was back on her, sucking at her neck before following its delicate line to the hollow of her throat. Her eyes rolled back as she felt him nip there with his teeth, just as she had done to him, and reached up to tangle her fingers in his hair. “Yes…” she murmured, only to lose in it a hiss when his tongue began circling the hard bud of her nipple.

“Tell me,” he whispered into her skin.

“Tell you…” She gasped when his lips closed around the tip of her breast, sucking the nipple against the roof of his mouth. “…what?” she managed to finish.
“How to please you.” His fingers were tentative where they danced down her sides, and he shifted his weight in order to lavish attention on the other breast.

“But you are,” Buffy said. She shuddered when he inadvertently brushed his arm over the tops of her thighs, in spite of the underwear that still separated her from his touch. “Just…follow your instincts. You’ll do…” Another shudder. “…more than fine.”

It seemed forever as his tongue and teeth teased her breasts, leaving her squirming against the grass as the desire slowly swelled inside her. When the heat of his body suddenly abandoned hers, Buffy’s eyes flew open to see him kneeling at her side, hands working determinedly at his shirt as he peeled it from his shoulders. He was pale, touched by too little sun, his shoulders broad but lean where he towered over her, and her eyes dropped to the slim line of his hips when he hesitated at his trousers.

“Are you certain?” William asked, and her gaze flew back to his face.

“Never been more,” she replied.

His fingers flew at the fastenings and he quickly stripped from the rest of his clothing, his bashfulness tinting his cheeks in pink as he avoided meeting her eyes again. Too soon, he was stretched at her side, and Buffy could feel the long length of his arousal pressing into her hip. She wanted him inside her, but his earlier statement about her being his first explained more than his constant questions. Enough listening to Xander talk about male hormones and performance anxiety, even if it was all jokes and insincere banter, told her that he probably feared it ending too quickly. He was just trying to see to her needs before expending his own.

“Touch me,” she encouraged, and took his hand in hers, guiding it down her stomach to the waistband of her panties. Gently, she pushed his fingers beneath the elastic, noting the wonder in his eyes as he brushed over the wiry curls.

“So warm,” William murmured. “I never imagined…” The thought remained unfinished as he took the initiative and broke from her grasp, his entire hand disappearing inside the cotton to cup her mound.

Her legs parted, the invitation for him to explore further passing silently between them. When he slipped the first finger between her folds, sliding along the wetness it found there, Buffy’s hands flew to her sides, digging into the earth as if to root herself from flying away. One gentle stroke…another tracing the lower curve of her opening…another glide up the other side…and then he lightly brushed over her clit, sending an electrical shock up her pelvis.

Her sharp intake of breath at the contact made him jerk away, but Buffy’s hand shot up to grab his wrist. “No,” she said huskily, opening her eyes to look into his startled face. “That wasn’t bad.”

“But…you…that’s pleasurable?”

“Very much so.” Releasing her grip on him, Buffy hooked her fingers through the waistband of her underwear and pushed them down her legs, kicking them away to bare herself to him again. Though it felt weird being the more knowledgeable of the pair, she shoved the awkwardness aside. “You can…do it again,” she said at his hesitation. “Please?”

The entreaty was all it took to ease William’s discomfort, and he returned to his careful exploration with an intent that was almost frightening in its earnestness. With each caress, he grew bolder, and when she felt his breath blow warm and ragged across her outer lips, her flesh broke out in goosebumps.
“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured. He’d parted the curls and exposed her to the hot sun, and she heard the soft hitch in his throat as he swallowed. When she felt his cheek settle on her lower tummy, she glanced down to see him gazing up at her.

“What?” she asked, suddenly self-conscious.

“It’s nothing,” he murmured. His hand in her heat never stopped moving, each stroke a frisson of fire through her thighs.

She didn’t believe him, but it was obvious he wasn’t going to say anything further, content in watching her react to his touch. When he slid a finger inside, it startled Buffy, causing her to clench around him, and the groan that escaped her parted lips was unavoidable.

“Does my lady enjoy that?” William whispered. No more diffidence in his voice. The trembling in her body was the only confirmation he needed.

She responded by squeaking when he added a second finger, eyes dark with desire as they bored into hers. In and out he pumped, never breaking his gaze, and as the flames inside her escalated, he boldly brushed the pad of his thumb across her clit.

“William!” she cried out, bucking beneath his weight. For a moment, he disappeared, but his hand remained, and she twisted as he quickened the pace of his fingers. It was quickly becoming too much, and she groped to reach him through the haze he was creating in her head.

“Stop…please…” Buffy gasped. “Want you…” As he began to climb up her length, she grew impatient, yanking him the rest of the way to slam her mouth to his. Hunger replaced caution, and almost immediately, his ardor matched hers, kissing her as if the world were about to end. Her legs spread, wrapping around his waist, and she felt the tip of his erection nudging at her slick opening.

“Now…” she breathed when they parted for necessary air.

For the first time since she’d finished stripping, William looked wary. “I can’t…I’m not certain how long…” he stumbled.

“You were fine when I was touching you,” she said.

He blushed. “I was…distracting myself,” he admitted with a stammer.

“So do whatever you did again.” She didn’t give him time to reply, just pulled him back to her lips before tightening her legs around his hips. “And if that’s not enough, then…do it backwards.”

There was resistance at first, his girth stretching her almost painfully as William pressed into her. His eyes were squeezed shut, most likely concentrating on whatever it was that had helped him endure her earlier teasing, but the pleasure on his face was unmistakable as he sank into her heat. Buffy eased her guidance, allowing his instincts to take over, and let herself fall into the whirlwind his penetration created, drowning and swirling and floating as each agonizing inch filled the desire inside that had been screaming for him for days now.

It seemed forever before he was completely sheathed, and when he was, his forehead fell to hers, his breathless panting fanning across her cheeks. “Legion,” William murmured. Re-capturing her lips, he began to move before coherent thought could manifest itself in Buffy’s brain, groaning when she started to move with him. “Love you,” he managed to articulate before burying his face in the crook of her neck.

“I love you, too,” she whispered. Already so close to an orgasm before he’d entered her, each thrust
only added to the crescendo, cascading in a riot of shivers and shocks before tossing her screaming over the precipice. Her back arched away from the ground as her inner muscles squeezed his shaft, her guttural cry being simultaneously torn from her throat.

Through the tremors wracking her body, Buffy felt William speed his thrusts, his control gone in the wake of her pleasure. Once…twice…and it was on the third stroke that he stiffened, the muscles in his back straining with the force of his orgasm, each release deep inside her causing him to jerk in unison. Her hands pulled him down, her mouth sought his, and before the quivering had stopped, they were kissing, promising without words the steadfastness each was afraid to fully voice.

When he murmured the “I love you” again into her ear, Buffy smiled unseen as she stroked his sweat-slick curls. It didn’t matter what Willow said. And it didn’t matter that none of this was real. What he did for her was.

And she could let herself love that. Because he couldn’t hurt her.

Wouldn’t hurt her.

He promised.

* * *

Esme watched them at the other end of the cave, her gnarled fingers manipulating the stones laid out on the table before her in a mindless pattern. Nathan’s voice was beginning to grate on her final nerve, the coaxing he’d been giving the prostate form on the moth-eaten bed escalating into a petulant wheedling that made her want to just stake him and be done with the whole mess.

“C’mon, babe,” he whined. “Don’t do this to me.”

Esme’s scoff was audible, and she rolled her eyes when he scowled back in her direction. “Maybe she just wants to sleep,” the witch commented with more than a taste of sarcasm. “Maybe being contained in a magical crystal collection takes a little more getting over than some sheep’s blood and a touchy-feely boyfriend.”

“Shut up,” Nathan barked. He turned back to April, pushing back the dark hair from her ridged brow. Releasing her from the spell that had contained her for over a century had seemed like the penultimate moment of his existence; they should’ve fallen into each other’s arms and then set off to ravage their way back to London before the sun had risen to confine them to darker quarters.

Instead, April had woken at the sound of her name on his lips, only to collapse moments later. So close to morning, he’d only been able to kill a few sheep to feed her, but that hadn’t been enough. What she needed was human, something with stronger healing properties than the local ovine population. Esme had tried more than once to tell the stupid vamp that, but Nathan was refusing to leave his lover’s side.

How did I get involved with such a simpleton?

“Can you do something for her?”

He surprised her with the question, more from the fact that she’d been expecting it earlier that day than the fact that he’d uttered it at all. “You mean other than breaking the enchantment that held her?” she replied.

“You have just as much interest in seeing April strong as I do.”
“I also understand that these things require patience.”

Snarling, Nathan glared at her with yellow eyes as his hands clenched and unclenched in his lap. She knew he desperately wanted to tear her head off, but her power frightened him. She would be safe from any of his attacks until he had April fully recovered at his side. “Don’t piss me off,” he warned instead, turning away. “You might not get your precious payment if you do.”

Esme’s lips thinned. If she didn’t need the female vampire so badly, she would just walk away from the entire debacle, consequences be damned. But she’d walked too far along the road to stop now, playing with time against all the rules she’d ever learned, dancing around the current Slayer in an attempt to deter her from meddling with the outcome. She didn’t care if Buffy Summers killed April or not; all she cared about was when. As long as Esme got what she wanted from the vamp, the California girl could do whatever took her fancy.

For a moment, her thoughts drifted to the liaisons she’d instigated between the Slayer and the Victorian poet. As much as she was fascinated by the young woman, it was William that occupied most of her conscious thoughts of the pair. He had not been what she’d been expecting. There was no doubt as to his involvement in April’s downfall—or potential involvement at this point—but the diffident poet was as far from a warrior as anyone could expect. What could he possibly contribute to the battle?

Driving him to distraction and Buffy’s arms had been simple—a few choice words, an addictive tea—but the faintest niggle in the back of Esme’s mind worried her. He had seemed stronger in her last encounter with him—well, stronger after she’d spoken to him. She knew he’d fled the party, but once he’d decided to return, with thoughts of his love first and foremost in his mind, the witch had been taken aback by the determination she’d sensed in him. A…power, almost. It hadn’t been there before, and she was beginning to fear that maybe she’d done the wrong thing in putting the two together.

She couldn’t even travel back to his time again to discover more of the answers for herself. Over the course of the past two weeks, especially with her latest foray to the Freston home, she’d depleted her strength, making anything as powerful as time manipulation impossible. She didn’t dare let Nathan know that, though. With his temper as short as it was, Esme needed him to fear her until her strength returned sufficiently so that she could defend herself.

Right now, she knew that if an attack came, she would end up dead. And she couldn’t let that happen. Not when she was so close to getting what she’d been working toward.

“You should go down to the village and bring her back a human,” she said, rising to her feet. “A live feed is what she needs. If you go now, you’ll be back before sunrise.”

“I can’t leave her. What if she wakes up and I’m not here?”

“And what if you don’t go and she never wakes up?” Esme countered. Against her better judgment, she rested a hand on the vampire’s shoulder in a conciliatory attempt to get him to understand. “You’re right when you say I need her strong, too. Why would I lie to you at this point in our little arrangement?”

The frustration was pouring off him in waves, and it took all her control not to flinch when he jumped to his feet. With one last look at the sleeping April, he lifted a warning finger to the witch. “I’ll be less than an hour,” Nathan said. “If anything’s wrong when I get back, I’ll kill you.”

As she watched him stomp from the cave, Esme sighed. Demons were such a nightmare to deal with. It almost made her glad that it was the Slayer and William on the other side. At least they would be
reasonable if the time came for her to play her wildcards.

After all, there wasn’t anything as strong as a child’s love for a parent…now was there?
So Far from Home

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet LXI.”

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: William and Buffy made love in their most frequent encounter, while Nathan and Esme wait for April to wake up…

He knew he ought not to be so light of heart. Circumstances were no different than prior to his night’s slumber—his mother remained missing, the conundrum of just what Richard and his Council intended to do with the information William had still to provide nagged beneath his every movement—and yet, William went about his morning ablutions with a seemingly blithe disregard for the issues at hand. Not that he didn’t care; oh, no, nothing could be farther from the truth. But the respite he’d been granted from the night spent with Buffy fortified him against dwelling, a development in his character of which he was more than aware.

It had been magical. He had no other words to describe it. More, and more, and infinitely more than he’d ever imagined, like he’d been entombed in some dark sepulcher and then liberated at the hour of noon in the height of brilliant summer. Blinding at first, but as his confidence grew, and as Buffy encouraged him to continue and explore at his leisure—just as she did the same, his playful siren—the radiance had abated to more tolerable levels, still fiery and explosive beneath his skin but manageable, so that he could endure more than the fifteen or thirty seconds of pleasure loving her gave him at a time.

He smiled as he fastened his shirt cuffs. So perhaps he did have the words after all.

His only surprise from the experience came upon waking. It was William’s experience that such dreams—and though these were not the first to occur for him, they were certainly the most intense—should’ve been accompanied by his unconscious spending while he slept. Yet, both his sheets and his nightwear were clean and dry when he awoke. He was aroused, yes, but any physical evidence of his nocturnal adventures was missing. A curious observation, but one for which he was surprisingly grateful. It was always dreadfully uncomfortable for him to try and cover the effects of such doings when they’d happened before, and to be saved the responsibility of hiding such a frenzy from the staff or his mother was a welcome boon.

Of course, it wouldn’t have been difficult to hide such a thing from his mother considering she was still missing. His mood dropped ever so slightly.

He was fully dressed and prepared when the announcement came that he had company. Head held high, William pushed open the door to the front lounge and smiled as Richard rose from his seat. “Good morning,” he said, extending his hand. “Have you been offered tea yet?”

Richard shook his head. “I don’t imagine we’ll be staying that long today,” he replied. He stepped back to allow William to bow over Rose’s proffered fingers. “Once we’ve finished what we need to here, it’s most likely best for all of us to return to the Council to analyze our results.”

Rose was dressed differently today. The trousers and plait were gone, replaced with the subdued dark dress more befitting the era and her age. She was smiling as William brushed his lips over her
knuckles, but when their eyes met, she saw her hesitate, a small line forming between her brows as she gazed at him closer.

“You seem…rested,” she said, and cast a surreptitious glance at her husband to see if he was paying her any mind. Unseen by Richard, the backs of her fingers tilted upwards to brush against William’s palm, and he felt a sharp tingle at the brief contact. It was gone just as quickly as it had appeared, though, and she pulled her hand away from his with a thoughtful tilt of her head.

Mildly shaken, William turned from Rose to face the Watcher. “What is the plan for today then? Do you need for me to do anything, or should I remain out of your way?”

“I will need some time in your mother’s room,” Rose interjected. She rose to her feet, a small leather bag dangling from her left wrist. “Most of that will be spent trying to determine the source of the magic that was used on her, which will require my utmost concentration.”

“Oh.” For some reason, he was relieved that she was going to need to be separate from them while she worked. Perhaps it was the knowing look in her eye when she gazed at him. William turned to Richard again. “And you, sir? Will you---?”

“I’ll need you for a few moments while I get acquainted with her room,” Rose cut in. “You don’t mind if I steal William away from your questions, do you, Richard? I promise to return him in one piece.”

More of his exhilaration faded at the Watcher’s agreement, but William maintained his smile for as long as it took to lead Rose to his mother’s bedroom. Only when she closed the door behind them and he turned to see her solemn countenance did it disappear completely.

“I like you, William,” she said, ignoring any more of the pleasantries. “As does Richard. Now. And I still believe that my assertions about your innocence are true. But neither of us are fools, and I refuse to let you play us as such.”

Her direct tone and level gaze immediately reverted him to his early school days, and the disappointed lectures he received from teachers who felt his predisposition for woolgathering was detrimental to his studies. Not that he’d been a bad student, quite the contrary, especially on those topics he adored. They merely felt that he could be truly excellent if he only applied himself. He would cower in shame at not meeting their expectations, curls falling against his brow, his glasses slipping down his nose as he stared at the floor, and it was that same sense of reproach that reared its ugly head now.

“I…don’t understand,” he managed to say.

“I don’t know how it’s possible, and I’m not entirely certain who she could be,” she said, “but your interactions with your Slayer friend will need to be brought to light very soon here. Richard may not have noticed it immediately, but that’s only due to his attention elsewhere. When you return for his inquiries, I’m sure he’ll sense the difference in you fairly quickly. And what will you tell him?”

She knew. She knew more than could be merely guessed at, and though he’d known of this yesterday during her first inspection, William found her candid queries now more than a little disconcerting.

“How?” he asked, his voice hoarse. He could feel the beads of sweat beginning to trickle beneath his collar, and fought not to wipe them away.

Rose softened at his obvious discomfort. “I’m a seer, remember? I see things others don’t, or choose
The lie made her shake her head. “We both know that’s not true, William. You wear her essence as closely as if she was on your arm at this very moment. That wouldn’t be possible if she weren’t real.” She became contemplative. “I’d thought yesterday that she was merely a Potential that you had crossed paths with, but now…there’s no mistaking her calling. How is it you’ve managed to interact so intimately with her?”

Pointless to continue with the pretense. “I don’t know,” he admitted, and while he hated being forced to divulge his secrets, part of him bounded from the freedom he would gain from its tether. If anyone could understand, surely it would be Miss Rose… “I’ve never understood why she came to me, though until yesterday, I was certain she was merely a dream---.”

“She comes to you in dreams?” This sparked her renewed attention, and her eyes became even more inquisitive, sweeping up and over him as she rounded his form. “But there’s nothing mystical about you. You don’t have the power to do more than the most rudimentary of magics.” Rose came to a halt before him again. “Are they prophetic dreams you’re having? Are you seeing future events?”

“Not…exactly.”

“But you know things.”

“Only what she tells me.”

“She? The Slayer? She talks to you?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what she looks like.”

The request bewildered him, and for the first time since her approach, William looked into those black eyes, wondering why she would ask such a thing. “Petite,” he said. “Blonde hair, almost honeyed in the sun. With green---.”

“Enough.” Rose cut him off with a wave of her hand, his response returning her to her earlier contemplation. “Does your young lady have a name?”

“Miss Buffy Summers.”

“Buffy. That’s the name you mentioned to Richard. But that’s not the name of any Slayer we’ve had on record. How is it you come to meet with her? Has someone given you a spell in order to initiate contact?”

William’s mind automatically drifted to the tea he consumed before going to sleep every night. He’d long ago accepted the correlation between drinking it and dreaming of Buffy, but in light of the reality of her, was it time to re-evaluate just how some sort of thing could come to pass? The plan to circumvent the issue of his love was completely moot now, anyway. He very well could’ve fooled Richard in a one-on-one interrogation, but Rose saw far too much, was far too direct in her questioning to continue such a charade.

“Come with me,” he said and exited his mother’s chambers.

The tray from the previous evening still sat at his bedside, and William led the seer straight to it. “It’s
most likely nothing,” he said as he gestured to the dregs within the cup. “But it’s the only link I can find with my encounters with Buffy.”

Carefully, Rose lifted the cup to her nose, sniffing delicately at the remains of its contents before taking a much longer draught. “Who gave you this?” she asked.

“It’s a remedy of our cook’s aunt,” he explained. “I was having difficulty sleeping and---.”

“It’s akin to the temporal displacements that occurred here.” She gave it another inhale. “Not exactly the same, but the similarities are too strong to ignore.”

William’s blood ran cold. “So it is magic,” he stated, though he knew somewhere in the back of his mind that that had to be the case. “And I was deliberately meant to see Buffy. But why? And what could it possibly have to do with my mother?”

She set the cup back down onto the tray. “You say it was your cook’s aunt’s recipe? I don’t suppose you know her name, do you? It’s likely she’s a known practitioner and we can find her with the Council’s resources.”

He shook his head, his brain spinning as he attempted to recall the brief conversation he’d had with Cook regarding the tea in the first place. He could almost envision how they’d been standing, but the words…auntie, she’d called her. But auntie what?

“Esmerelda!” William announced triumphantly as it came to him in a flash. “She said her name was Esme---.”

He cut himself off.

Could it be coincidence?

There was no reason to think it was.

And yet…the similar names…the concurrence of such odd events…and she knew. Miss Esme knew. She could see. She saw Buffy, she saw it all. Just like…

Just like Miss Rose.

When he felt her slim hand come to rest on his forearm, he jumped back as if scalded, eyes wide behind his glasses as he swallowed convulsively. “What is it, William?” Rose asked quietly. Her voice was so gentle, coaxing him as if he was a wild foal, but though he wished desperately that he could believe her, it was just too much.

* * *

Richard emerged from the lounge to see the back of William’s head as he dashed out the front door, the heavy wood reverberating in its frame as it slammed closed. Automatically, he rushed forward but was stopped before exiting when he heard Rose’s voice on the stair behind him.

“Don’t,” she said. “He needs some time to himself, I believe. But he’ll be back.”

He turned to see her descend, her hand skimming along the rail. “Did it work?” he asked. “Did he tell you?”

Rose nodded. “I confronted him, just as you requested. It took him a few minutes to realize he couldn’t lie to me about it, but once he did, he was quite open with his answers.”
“And?”

“The Buffy he mentioned is a Slayer. Though he didn’t say outright, I’m assuming she’s the one who told him of the Council’s existence.”

“You mean she’s a Potential.”

“No, I don’t.”

“But that’s not possible. The Slayer’s not even in this country, and if another had been called, I would know about it…” He froze, stiffening. “Unless…you don’t think it’s---?”

“It’s not.” Her voice was firm, and she finished coming down the stairs to stand before him. “He described Buffy, and, trust me, he wasn’t lying about her. But there’s no mistaking that he’s encountering some Slayer. His entire aura weeps with it.”

Richard’s knuckles were bone-white around the end post of the balustrade. “And you just let him walk away?” he demanded. “I asked you to question him because I wanted to ensure his cooperation without the use of magic, because you said it wasn’t necessary, and yet when it appears that he is privy to information that threatens us, you allow him to slip through our fingers.”

“He isn’t ours to hold. He’s a man in love---.”

“With a Slayer! That shouldn’t even be possible!”

“But it is. It’s all part of the temporal folds we detected. I suspect there’s a greater picture here we’re not seeing. He mentioned the first name of the woman he believes might be behind his contact with this Buffy. An Esmerelda. I will lay odds that we’re able to find something on her at the Council archives. The magic she used is too powerful to have gone unnoticed.”

He shook his head. “Sometimes, woman, I do believe you’re completely mad,” he said affectionately, his earlier ire deflating with her calm presentation. Richard sighed, resigned. “Now tell me…why is it you think he’ll come back?”

Rose’s eyes drifted to the closed door. “Because he has nowhere else to go for answers,” she replied softly. “And he’s a young man desperately in search of them.”

* * *

It was the first morning he’d felt strong enough to rise from the bed.

Groggy, Giles’ fingers clawed into the mortar of the brick wall, desperate for purchase to help him stand. His head was awhirl, the room still pitching about him as it had for the days he’d spent coming in and out of consciousness on the too-short cot. But as he remained still, focusing his eyes on a fixed point in the floor, it gradually began to lessen, the rocking and swaying he associated with being awake easing to a more manageable state.

Right. Well, that’s one thing accomplished.

He had no idea where he was. The room itself could’ve been anywhere—rough brick walls, unpainted and barely finished, measuring eight by eight…the cot with the itchy gray blankets that had made him sweat through his clothes until the desire to wash had driven him to his feet…a sink and toilet in the far corner…a single light bulb dangling from the ceiling. A prison cell, really, he realized, now that his head was clearer. But what kind of jail it was, and who exactly was incarcerating him, Giles had no idea.
He had been blindsided on the way to the market. One minute he was stepping from the curb to cross the street. The next, he was waking up to lean over and vomit in the pan next to his cot because his stomach was refusing to behave. A quick glance down at the floor confirmed for him that the pan had long since been removed, which in the tiny, windowless room, was a welcome relief. And he did remember eating at some point in his bedrest. He just couldn’t remember any of the specific details.

No matter. Now that he was up, Giles was determined to learn as much as he could about his surroundings. Starting with the status of the door.

Encouraging his feet to move took more effort than he’d imagined, so by the time Giles had crossed the room, nearly half an hour had passed. Yet again, sweat soaked his shirt, though this time from exertion, and he had to stop and lean against the jamb to catch his breath before testing the doorknob. Whatever had been done to him had been powerful, he decided. Poison perhaps, or maybe magic. Though his body was tired and difficult to control, he didn’t seem to be physically hurt enough to merit a more tangible attack.

With shaking fingers, he reached for the door, resting his weight at its side as he attempted to turn the handle. Much to his surprise, it moved on the first attempt, silent even when the door swung out into a blackened hall, and Giles peered into the darkness in an attempt to discern more of his surroundings. No illumination marked the narrow passage, but the light from his room revealed a matching door across the way. No sounds emanated from it. *Am I alone here?*

There was only one way to find out. Gritting his teeth against the exhaustion, Giles took the last few steps to the opposite door, dropping his hand when he reached it to see if it opened as easily as his. It did. Carefully, he pulled it ajar, and peered through the breach.

As far as he could tell, it was a literal copy of his room, though instead of a toilet, a large pot sat next to the bed. It wasn’t unoccupied, either. Asleep beneath the gray blanket was a woman only a few years older than himself, ashy blonde hair in a long plait over her shoulder, with a sculptured profile softened by age. There was something vaguely familiar about her features, though Giles was certain he’d never seen her before. Still, her presence meant that he wasn’t alone here. Add that to the fact that both their doors were unlocked and he was beginning to wonder if in fact they were being held hostage after all.

*Or whoever brought me here doesn’t expect us to just get up out of bed and walk around,* he suddenly thought.

It was impossible to tell if these were the only two doors, but in his increasingly weakened state, Giles knew that further exploration would be impossible at the moment. Easing the door closed, he almost fell across the distance of the hall to his own room, wincing when the heavy wood echoed hollowly as it shut behind him. Just a bit more rest, he decided. Then I can search more extensively. Or speak to the woman across the way. Perhaps she knows more of what is going on here than I do.

---

She watched its entrance from her vantage point across the road, careful to stay hidden behind the heavy curtains she’d commissioned prior to her arrival in London. The distant clacking of hooves down the street was ignored as she focused her attention on the young boy she’d hired to deliver her message dart between the wheels of rolling coaches, hesitating only once when he reached the Council’s door. Hungry eyes swiveled to look up at her, and though she knew he couldn’t actually see her behind the drape, she nodded anyway, sending him silent confirmation that that was the correct destination.
Cool arms slid around her naked waist, and equally cool lips pressed into the bend of her shoulder. “Come back to bed,” Nathan singsonged. “We’ve only just arrived, and if the boy fails to get what you need, you can just have him for supper and find another one to try.”

She leaned back into his chest, letting the curtains fall closed to leave them in gloom. “I hate this place,” she complained. “Why did he have to come back to the Council? Why couldn’t he have stayed in St. Petersburg?”

“Because you had already left,” he said, chuckling. “Why should he stay when you’re his entire reason for existing?”

Her eyes fluttered shut when his expert fingers began kneading the lower swell of her full breast. “Richard always has to make everything so difficult,” she murmured.

A series of kisses, growing in intensity, left a trail around the back of her shoulders until he met the delicate line of the opposite side of her neck. “You could just let him go,” Nathan whispered into her ear as he caught the lobe between his teeth. “Forget this silly vendetta once and for---.”

She whirled in his arms, fangs already to the fore as her nails came up and raked across his cheek. “I told you to stop doing that!” she hissed. “I will see Richard drawn and bleeding, and your petty jealousies are doing nothing but making me wonder if I shouldn’t be including you in the bonfire I have planned for him.”

Nathan took a step backward, a thumb reaching up to his gaunt cheek to swipe at the blood she drew. His eyes were glittering as he said, “I am not jealous. Of a human? When I know that in the end, I’ll be the one who’s there for you, I’ll be the one who helps you clear away the debris when he crumbles before you? Don’t presume to know what I’m feeling. The only thing I’ve ever wanted since you turned me was to see you happy, and you’re obviously not happy here. It was merely a suggestion. One that I won’t make the mistake of making again, apparently.”

She caught his arm before he could turn away, yellow eyes gone and replaced with the dark amber of her human gaze. “I’m just tired,” she said in lieu of an apology. “Perhaps you’re right and bed is where I need to be.” A coy smile curled her too-full lips, and she pressed her curves into his lean frame. “Maybe I’ll let you punish me for not believing in you, lover.”

His mouth was back on her in an instant, biting with blunt teeth at her neck with a savagery that made her gasp. “I’ll always believe in you, April,” he rasped. “Until the day I dust.”


Some Say Thy Fault Is Youth

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet XCVI.”

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: William has been questioned by Rose, leading him to question what he knows of Esme and the seer and subsequently flee, Giles has come to in some unknown whereabouts, and April and Nathan have shown up in 1879 London…

It wasn’t giddy, take-on-the-world Buffy from only twenty-four hours earlier that sat next to Willow on the swaying Underground, but it was pretty darn close. Ever since the Slayer had emerged from the shower so freshly scrubbed she seemed to glow, she had been Little Miss Chatterbox, bantering lightly over breakfast and then shifting into problem-solving mode with a verbal ease Willow hadn’t witnessed in months. She even spoke of William, briefly and with obvious affection, as if nothing was amiss in her doing so. Though she revealed no details of her most recent encounter, there was no mistaking the positive effects it had had on Buffy, and Willow couldn’t help but wonder just what had happened within the dream.

“Are you sure I can’t use your magic rod doohickey on the bookstore guy?” Buffy pleaded, not for the first time since they’d left the flat. They were on the way to the bookstore where Willow had encountered Esme. Since that was the only place she’d been seen, and since Buffy wasn’t willing to try the Council again just yet, she had hit upon the plan to go pay Charles, Giles’ friend who owned the bookshop, a little visit to see what he knew about the elderly witch. The way Buffy figured it, he had to have something on Esme in order to leave his business in her hands, and it was logic with which Willow just couldn’t argue.

She could, however, argue the point of beating any information out of him. “You wanna leave me with itty bitty magic matchsticks?” Willow said, slapping at the hand Buffy kept stealing in the direction of the bag that sat between them. “I told you, I’m not sure what’ll happen to the magic it soaked up if it gets broken.”

“What if I promise not to break it? I’ll give you my extra-special Slayer warranty of carefulness that I always give Giles. My personal guarantee to return weapons in A-one condition. It even comes with an optional post-slay polish if you want, free of charge.”

She couldn’t help but grin at the joke. “You forget, I’ve seen the state of the weapons locker after just one of your training sessions. You can’t fool me with your pretty promises, missy. I’m not as gullible as Giles.” At Buffy’s arched eyebrows, she protested, “I’m not!”

“I just hope Charles gives us something we can use,” the Slayer said. “The longer Giles is missing, the more unhappy it makes me.”

“Well, we can’t have that. I’m just getting used to having Happy Buffy around again.” As soon as it came out of her mouth, Willow realized her mistake, and saw the shutters come down behind Buffy’s eyes. She silently chastised herself, but held her tongue as she waited for whatever response her friend would have.
“You’re probably right about the stick,” Buffy said, changing the subject. Her tone was quieter, more introspective, and Willow knew her window for normalcy had just officially been closed. It was back to business now, and she would just have to wait it out until the next mood swing came around in her direction again. “You should talk to him first since you were the one who dealt with Esme the first time. Maybe he’ll tell us what we want without having to resort to force.”

“Maybe.” The train began to ease to a squeaky stop, and Willow glanced through the window behind them to see the station sign. “This is us,” she said, rising.

Waiting for the doors to open, she almost didn’t hear Buffy when the Slayer spoke up behind her. “I’m sorry,” Buffy said quietly. “About the mood thing. But it’s getting better. Honest.”

“I didn’t mean---,” she started as they exited the train.

“I know. And I know you want only the best for me.” A single slide of the Slayer’s eyes to catch her friend’s was all she allowed herself. “Just…don’t try so hard, OK? It’s easier if…it’s just easier if you don’t.”

Willow nodded in accordance as they pressed their way through the crowds towards the stairs. She hated being left out of what was going on inside Buffy’s head. She just hoped that the dream-friend William could get into the corners where Willow couldn’t reach.

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He punched the number into his mobile phone as he watched the two girls disappear into the bookstore, no longer bothering to hide behind the newspaper he’d held on the train. “They just went into the Little Dickens bookstore on Charing Cross,” he said as soon as the other end was picked up.

“Hang on,” came Lydia’s voice. As he listened to her tap away at her computer, his eyes darted over the crowds milling around the Underground exit, noting the other members of his team situated strategically along the street. Each was dressed as innocuously as possible, per Mr. Travers’ instructions, and Stuart was more than a little chuffed that they’d managed to elude the Slayer’s detection so far. He’d been warned about her disregard for the Council and her disdain for anything resembling authority, so avoiding direct contact with her this long already was a worthwhile achievement, he believed.

“Oh,” he heard Lydia say.

“What is it?”

“You said…the Little Dickens bookstore?”

“Yes. Something significant about that?”

“It’s owned and operated by Charles Armistead. He and Rupert Giles have quite an extensive history.”

“That’s the Slayer’s Watcher, right? The one that’s missing?”

“Yes.” There was a pause, and the distinct sound of a door opening and closing. “Hold on for a moment, Stuart, will you, please?”

There was no mistaking the fact that she was talking to someone who had just entered the room, though both voices were muffled as if Lydia had her hand over the receiver. After a long moment, there was an electronic click and Stuart realized she’d placed him on speakerphone.
“I have new instructions for you, Stuart.”

“Are we giving up on the Slayer?”

“Not exactly. Mr. Travers is of the opinion that if Miss Summers considers Mr. Armistead worthy of a visit, perhaps we should question him before she can. You and your team are to prevent her from speaking to Mr. Armistead and instead bring him into Headquarters for interrogation.”

Stuart’s stomach fell. “She’s already inside,” he said in a fervent attempt to get out of the new plan. “I go in, and she’s going to know she’s being followed. I thought Mr. Travers wanted this to be a covert operation.” She’ll probably boot me into the New Year at the same time, he added silently. Just wonderful.

“I’ve changed my mind.” Stuart silently winced at the Council Head’s voice. “It’s more important we learn what is so valuable about Mr. Armistead. My suggestion is that you distract the Slayer and her friend while the rest of your team apprehends him.”

“No offense, sir, but how exactly do you think I should do that?”

He could almost see Quentin Travers smiling. “They’re eighteen-year-old girls, and you’re a reasonably attractive young fellow, Stuart. I imagine you can figure out the rest.” And with that, the line went dead.

* * *

It felt weird being back, knowing what she did about the book she’d bought there on her first visit. As she and Willow lingered near a display at the front of the store, watching the burly back of the clerk on duty as he helped out with a customer, Buffy had to fight the urge to descend into the bowels of the shop once again, to return to the dusty home of William’s journal. It was hard to think of it as all make-believe, that someone who didn’t know her from Adam could create a man who seemed to understand instinctively the way her mind worked, but of course, it was the make-believe that made her bravado during their last encounter completely possible.

He’d been so delightful, insecure and stumbling when they’d first started, and then growing in confidence and pluck as the dream progressed. Every time he touched her, something else seemed to open up inside, passion she’d long thought dead reawakening from its enforced hibernation, and the thought that maybe she wasn’t a curse after all, that maybe she had something to offer to the right man that was more than some ill-fated romantic interlude destined to drive him from her, had given Buffy the courage to persuade William’s attentions even further.

The traditional lovemaking had progressed into more adventurous territory when she’d forced him to lie back on the grass without touching her. His eyes had grown ever wider as she set out to taste every inch of his skin, and the moment her tongue had darted over the tip of his straining erection, he’d exploded with a wrenching shout. Afterwards, he hadn’t even been able to meet her eyes as he started to mumble an apology.

She’d silenced him with her mouth, kissing him deeply as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Stop saying you’re sorry,” Buffy had breathed when she broke away.

“But…you must find me quite ignoble in succumbing to such a base instinct,” William had stammered.

“I was the one using you as my own personal lollipop,” she’d countered. “Shouldn’t your logic make me the whatchamacallit one here?”
“But you’re not. You’re the most lovely—.”

She’d laughed and stopped his poetic speech with another kiss. “Did you at least like it?” she asked, suddenly shy.

His hand came up to stroke the soft curve of her cheek. “Every time you touch me, I wonder how it is possible that I have gone so long without knowing such pleasure,” William said. “And then I realize, it must be because I was waiting for you to be the one with whom I could share it.”

She’d wanted to tease him about such a romantic notion, but quelled the instinct, knowing that any slight of his nature would only bruise his still-fragile ego. Instead, Buffy nestled onto his chest, pressing her ear against the smooth skin to listen to his heartbeat, and said, “If there was anything you wanted to do, all you’d have to do is ask, you know that, right?”

The slight hesitation before he spoke made her smile. “We have all the time in the world for that, my love. For now, I think I’d just like to hold you for a bit.”

When she’d woken, sticky and sweaty from having orgasmed in her sleep, the initial embarrassment Buffy had felt had dissipated in the soothing balm of the shower, her head clear for what felt like the first time in weeks. It was then that the plan of going back to the bookstore had hit her; after all, that was where they had encountered Esme in the first place.

She was jolted from her reverie by an awkward knock against her elbow, and turned in the small space to see a dark-haired young man smiling at her in apology.

“Excuse me,” he said, in a clipped English accent. He wore jeans and a t-shirt, with a light jacket that seemed to belie the heat outside. “I don’t suppose I could get either of you to fetch that book for me?”

Both Buffy and Willow swiveled to see the text to which he pointed, perched precariously on a shelf high over their heads. Willow turned an amused gaze back to him.

“Not unless you expect one of us to sprout wings to get up there,” she said.

His eyes darted up and then back to the two young women who were so much shorter than his six-plus feet. “Right,” he said, with an abashed grin. “I guess in the way of brilliant ways to approach pretty girls, that rather failed to take the prize, didn’t it?” He held out his hand. “I’m Stuart, by the way.”

“Willow.” Tilting her head, she added, “This is Buffy.”

“You two seem to be a long way from home. Are you here for school or for pleasure?”

“Both,” Buffy said before Willow could reply. She ignored her friend’s raised eyebrows. As normal as this guy seemed, something about him was ping on her Slayer radar and with everything so wonky on her at the moment, the last thing she needed was to be ignoring her intuition. “We’re on break,” she went on to clarify.

It dawned on her as he started chatting with Willow about what there was to do in London that Stuart effectively blocked her view of Charles and the back of the store, and Buffy inched herself sideways to try and see past him. The moment she did so, though, his attention shifted to her, and he turned his torso enough to obstruct her line of sight again.

“So what is it you’re studying, Buffy?” he asked.
“Just stuff. Nothing earth-shattering.”

Willow frowned at her almost rude response but he wasn’t thrown off by her noncommittal answer. “Too busy having fun, is that it?” he teased.

“Not exactly---.” She froze when she caught the flash of metal inside the gap of his jacket, quickly covering it with a fake, bright smile when she turned to Willow. “We should be going now, don’t you think?” she asked her friend.

“What? I thought---.”

“Don’t rush off on my account,” Stuart cut in. When he took a small step backwards, his jacket swung far enough to the side for Buffy to see the unmistakable hilt of a gun strapped beneath his arm. Time stopped as he caught her eyes locked on the weapon, and the smile he’d been sporting faded.

“I think you need to back off,” Buffy said, her voice low, her eyes flashing. “Very slowly.”

“I’m not here to hurt you, Miss Summers.”

“Wait. How does he know your name?”

Her eyes never left his, not even to reassure Willow that she knew what she was doing. “My guess is that he’s one of the Council’s lackeys,” Buffy said. “Sent to either keep an eye on me, or take me in for another round of Twenty Questions. Word of advice, Stu. I’m a lot less punch-happy with people who tell me the truth from the get-go.”

Though he visibly paled, Stuart held his ground in the face of her warning. “Might I suggest we take this outside?”

“Why? You got a thing against books?” The Slayer laughed. “I thought that was the biggest requirement for a job with the Council.”

“I’m merely interested in assuring you I’m not a threat to you.”

“Giving me your gun might be a good start.”

“Buffy?” Willow’s voice was anxious, her face pinched. She had backed away from the confrontation, pressing herself into the shelves behind them, and now was staring past Stuart at the back of the store. “Where did Charles go?”

She didn’t wait for him to react. Grabbing Stuart by the lapels of his jacket, Buffy hurled him sideways into a dusty display of Victorian classics before bolting for the door to the store’s back office. Willow was right on her heels, and the two girls skidded through the exit, noting with increasing alarm the still-ajar door that led into the side alley.

“Damn it,” Buffy muttered, and dashed outside. She was met only with the distant honks from the street as the empty alley stared back at her. “Go back inside,” she ordered Willow. “I’m going to go around the front and see what’s the sitch up there.”

Her feet pounded against the uneven concrete, but when she emerged from the alley, Buffy saw only the brightly colored tourists strolling up and down the walks. The front door of the store was wide open and she raced for it, only to greet a disconsolate Willow.

“It’s empty,” the redhead said. “No Charles, no Stuart, no nothing.”
Buffy sighed. There was no chance of finding them now, she knew. The crowds and their familiarity with the city prevented her from being able to track them effectively. Not that she didn’t already know that they were headed back to the Council, but there was little hope of stopping them from getting there at this point.

“I guess that means we go ahead with Plan B,” she said.

“Yay for Plan B.” Willow paused. “What is it again?”

She began heading back to the Underground entrance. “I’ll let you know when I think of it.”

* * *

He felt like a fool.

As William walked along the path, his hands thrust deep inside his pockets, the fears and thoughts that had been battling for concourse inside his skull made his eyes ache. He’d always envisioned love as one of the simplest things in the world, a delicate bird eager to take roost, to be cosseted and cherished with every promise of his soul. That was the way it was with his mother, and certainly that was how it had been for every other important figure in his life, even those who did not necessarily know of his affections. It was not their fault that his own fears often restrained him from acting on his emotions publicly.

But falling in love with Buffy, while glorious and strengthening beyond anything he had ever imagined, was more problematical than simply uttering the words. This world of hers to which she’d introduced him---fantastic, and magical, and inspiring, and terrifying, all at the same time---created dangers at every bend in his path, forced him to stand up and fight, or coerced him into fleeing like a frightened child, and he was beginning to wonder if he held the fortitude to embrace it as openly as she. He wanted to, or at least, part of him wanted to, and yet at the first sign of conflict, William had abandoned the fight, running from his own home simply because he feared the similarities between a woman who had only been kind and supportive to him---in spite of her morning interrogation---and the woman, or witch, who was responsible for putting him into this state of affairs in the first place. He didn’t even know for certain that Miss Esme was his enemy; how could someone who had given him the most prized gift in all the world be entirely bad?

So, he was returning home, and he would brave Richard and his wife again, and he would help them in any way they asked. There was so much at stake here, and William could not endanger those he loved any further by allowing himself to buckle under the weight of his own uncertainties. He had faced the derision of his peers at his mother’s dinner party; surely, he could contend with some uncomfortable queries from the people he knew held vows to protect the world.

His musings distracted him from his path, and as he rounded the corner onto his street, William collided with a broad chest. “So sorry,” he mumbled as he lifted his eyes. His heart fell at the condescending gaze of David Howard staring back at him.

“Head in the clouds again, William?” David asked lightly.

“I was just…I mean, Mother is…I’m late,” he managed to finish. When he attempted to step around his neighbor, however, he found his path blocked when David did the same.

“I’ve been meaning to speak to you since the night of your mother’s dinner party,” he said. “I was just going to step out for a drink, but perhaps we should take one here at home instead.”

It was the last thing in the world he wanted, but William was frozen in his tracks, his heart pounding
inside the prison of his chest as the symbol of everything he hated stood before him waiting for an answer. Quickly, his eyes darted around to the neighbors’, noting the gardener at the hedge in one, Mrs. Stratton playing with her new baby in another. Any scene he made would be noticed and commented upon, of that he was certain, and though it hardly mattered to him what more they could possibly say, it would most definitely hurt his mother when she heard.

William swallowed down the lump in his throat. “I have guests waiting,” he said, tossing out his final attempt to abstain from accepting the invitation.

“They’ve already left,” David replied, and waved toward the empty street in front of the Freston home. “Tell you what,” he said, clapping a heavy hand onto William’s shoulder. “We’ll make a meal of it. I’ll have one of our girls send over word to your mother that you’ll be dining with me tonight. Mother and Father are away to the country for a fortnight, so I could use a little company.” His smile was smug. “I’m sure your own mother would more than approve.”

As he found himself being led up the path to the Howard house, William stiffened his shoulders in anticipation of the long night that would soon to follow. Think of Buffy, he silently instructed. If she considers you worthy of her affections, then nothing David can say should influence that. Just listen, and nod, and hold your tongue, and get out as soon as you possibly can.

He sighed as he crossed the threshold. It was much easier said than done.

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Though she was ravenous and her stomach growled in its demand for sustenance, April forced the smile to her lips as the young boy she’d hired for the errand hung back in the doorway. “It’s all right,” she said when she saw his eyes dart to Nathan looming behind her. “He won’t hurt you.”

The boy was still unsure, but when April reached into her purse to extract the payment she’d promised him, his eyes lit up. “I got wha’ you wanted, miss,” he rushed and held out his hand. “Jus’ like I swore to you.”

“Did you see Mr. Rhodes-Fanshaw?” she asked. Delicately, she played with the coin, letting it roll between her fingers while she watched the child’s reaction.

“No, miss. ‘E was out. They say ‘e was visitin’ with some man who’d come in the other day. Someone ‘e’s all excited ‘bout workin’ with ‘parently.”

“And who is this man? Did you find out his name?”

“Better than that, miss.” He puffed himself up with pride. “I know where ‘e lives. ‘Is family’s one of the better-known in the city. I can take you straight to ‘im if you want.”

With a sigh, April pressed the coin into the boy’s greedy palm. She hadn’t planned on paying him; the original intention had been to find out what Richard was up to and then have the boy for dinner. She’d just have to make him a late-night snack instead and retrieve her money from his pockets then.

“Get our things,” she instructed Nathan over her shoulder. To the child, she said, “So tell me then. Who is my darling Richard visiting with this evening?”

“‘Is name’s David, miss. Mr. David ‘Oward.”
She was wary the entire trip back to the apartment, looking over her shoulder at every turn, watching every face for someone else who might be reporting back to the Council. At Buffy’s side, Willow remained silent, pale and vigilant as she kept just as tight a watch, and it was with a breath of relief when both girls firmly locked the apartment door behind them.

“I can’t---,” Willow started, only to be cut off by the Slayer’s upheld hand.

Carefully, Buffy pressed forward into the hall, ears cocked for any telltale sounds of intruders. Her head tilted around the corner to survey the living room, before she disappeared to check out the bedrooms.

“All clear,” she said when she returned. “Not that that doesn’t mean they haven’t been here, but checking for bodies to pummel is about as far as I can go.”

“You don’t---.” Willow stopped and leaned forward conspiratorially, lowering her voice to a sotto voce whisper. “You don’t think they bugged us, do you?”

“I don’t know what to think any more,” she said. “But we don’t have any place else to go, so we’re just going to have to take our chances and hope Travers thinks he’s done enough. Because, you know, the guy’s a pompous ass who’s used to thinking he can win, and he did get Charles, so I’m going to lay odds he’s sitting in his overstuffed chair, with his overstuffed shirt, and an overstuffed pipe stuck out the side of his mouth, just gloating about how they beat us.”

“Mr. Travers smokes a pipe?”

Buffy shrugged. “I dunno. It just kind of fit the image.”

When the Slayer began heading for the kitchen, Willow followed right on her heels. “Maybe we can go talk to Charles when the Council is done with him,” she offered brightly.

Shaking her head, Buffy pulled open the freezer and took out a small pint of ice cream. “ Somehow, I don’t think he’s going to be very accessible when they let him go.”

“But obviously, they think he’s important or something.”

“That’s what it looks like.” Pulling out two spoons, she handed one to Willow before perching herself up on the counter. “That means we need to find out what he knows.”

“How?”
“I was hoping you could tell me.”

The room was silent as the two girls ate the ice cream from the container, the only sound the occasional clink of their spoons when they’d meet at the pint at the same time. It wasn’t until the treat was almost gone before one of them spoke up again.

“Didn’t you say Mr. Travers kept looking over files and stuff when you went to see him the second time?” Willow asked thoughtfully.

“Yeah.”

“And he didn’t let you see any of it.”

“No. And that Lydia person kept bringing him more, tons more than what they gave me at the first meeting I had with them.”

Willow grew silent again, digging into the corners of the ice cream container for another spoonful. When she’d swallowed it down, she mused, “It’s probably a safe bet to say the Council’s just a little anal about keeping records on everything, huh? I mean, Giles had to get it from somewhere, right?”

She began to see where the redhead might be going with her line of questioning. “There’s no way they’re not going to have some sort of record of Charles’ interrogation when they’re done with him,” Buffy said. Already, she was feeling a little lighter about the situation. “They might even videotape him just to make sure they’re being thorough enough.”

“Or at least an audio transcript. Not to mention all the other records they kept from you. You said they’re interested in Esme, so she’s probably got her own file and everything, too.”

Buffy scraped up the remaining ice cream before setting the container down on the counter. “The trick is to get a look at them,” she said.

“They probably never leave the building.”

“Under lock and key.”

“And magic. Don’t forget how big the Council is on using magic.”

“It’s probably some heavy duty mojo, too. Not exactly a Slayer specialty.”

Willow shook her head. “Maybe not. These are just ordinary files they’d be protecting. Not anything end of the worldish, I don’t think. They could just have the standard set of wards up.”

“That means you could probably get around them,” Buffy said, brightening.

“Oh, no. Even the Council’s basic stuff is beyond my reach right now. They’ve been going at it for centuries, which kind of puts my two years to shame.”

“But you made your magical stick thingy. That’s pretty serious, isn’t it?”

“With Giles’ help. He’s the one who got me on the right track with it.”

“Oh.” She deflated slightly as she lapsed back into thought.

“I could probably handle anything technical they had in place, though,” Willow suggested. “When Giles and I were doing the research on how to track the magic, he gave me what I needed to access some of the Council’s information online. It’s just front door kind of stuff, but once I’m in, I should
be able to dig around to get in deeper and see what kind of security measures they have in place.”

Buffy frowned. “*Giles* gave you computer help? And his head didn’t explode?”

“It was information he got from his friend in Cambridge. Just passwords. Nothing he really paid much attention to.”

It wasn’t a plan she would’ve thought Willow would endorse. Breaking and entering back in Sunnydale was one thing; doing it on foreign soil, with a powerful organization just waiting for such a trick, was entirely different. Still, for lack of anything better, Buffy didn’t really have much of a choice. And if she got caught by the Council, she highly doubted she’d get turned in. She may not be on the proverbial payroll any more, but she was the only active Slayer they had. They couldn’t afford to have her behind bars.

“I guess that’s it then,” Buffy announced, hopping down from the counter. “Into the lion’s den for me.”

“Only after I check out their security,” Willow said.

“Right. We’ll hit them where it hurts Watchers the most. We’ll take away their information at the source.”

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Their carriage came to a stop before the Council building, but rather than opening the door to get out, Richard sighed and just stared at the edifice before him. The evening shadows veiled any of the welcome he normally experienced when he approached, turning small windows into gaping dead eyesockets mocking him in his ineptitude. “I cannot shake the feeling that we’re failing somehow,” he said quietly. “There is something we’re missing, some piece of the puzzle that’s managed to escape our attention.”

Rose’s hand was a soothing balm on his arm. “You just need some rest,” she said. “You’ve been without much sleep ever since I discovered the displacements around the Freston house.”

“Yes.” He rubbed wearily at his eyes. “I suppose I should be grateful that I didn’t fob off the inquiry onto one of the others. I’m not certain how they would react to hearing about this illusive Slayer young William has somehow associated himself with. I just wish---.”

“Don’t. You mustn’t keep doing this to yourself, Richard. You’ve traveled to so many places, searched so many cities for her. You can’t be seeing her in every dilemma that faces the Council. Even April’s not that omnipotent.” She forced him to look at her. “For all we know, she’s dead, and all your searching is for naught.”

The shake of Richard’s head was firm. “No. She’s still out there. I would know if something had managed to kill her once and for all.”

“Perhaps…” Rose sighed. “No, I suppose asking you to give up this hunt is too much. You’ve spent the last thirty years trying to find her. I can hardly expect you to stop now, not when you’ve covered up so much, killed so many in this madness.”

“It has to be done. There’s no one else to do it.”

Curling into her husband’s side, she set her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes. “I know,” she said softly. “But it *will* kill you, Richard. Of that, I have no doubt.” She stiffened when he leaned out the window to address the driver. “What are you doing?”
“We’re going back to young William’s,” he replied. “If I can’t solve my own problems, the least I can do is help young Freston with his.”

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It was the most excruciating meal he’d ever endured, worse even than the Sunday dinner at his cousins’ when William was eight, where his Uncle Franklyn had found him scribbling away under the stairwell prior to sitting and proceeded to abuse his poems as napkins and amusement for the duration of the meal. At least then, he could disappear inside his head, pretend that he wasn’t in the presence of such heartlessness and instead lose himself in his own thoughts.

Now, he was forced to remain alert to David’s constant questioning, tense and agitated and fearful that he would somehow say something to exacerbate his situation.

The current topic under discussion was William’s choice of dress. For some reason William couldn’t fathom, David found it personally offensive that someone couldn’t care as much about the current fashions as he did, and was suitably chiding him for his lack of respect for his peers.

“It’s not just about you, you see,” David was saying. He played with the stem of his wine glass, watching the red fluid swirl around inside the crystal. “Everything you do, everything you are, is a reflection on those around you. To hold such disdain for how you present yourself is to show disrespect to me and to everyone else you associate with.”

He had arguments upon arguments to shoot down David’s pompous rhetoric, but they stuck in William’s throat with gangrenous claws that refused to relinquish their purchase upon their hold. His muscles crawled with the active panic so familiar from his youth, and his stomach rebelled against the rich food he’d barely managed to consume. Though he may have gathered some of Buffy’s strength unto his own, enough certainly to handle reading his poetry in semi-public, it would seem that it wasn’t nearly enough to overcome the years of staunch shame David and his peers had been able to instill. He doubted whether all of her Slayer strength would satisfy such a requirement.

“I’m sure you mean to marry some day,” David continued. “Not that I know of anyone who would consent to such an arrangement, given your current presentation, but I’m certain that is your intent, is it not?”

“Of course,” William stammered. Buffy’s face flashed before his inner eye, and he colored at the memory of the wicked smile she’d bestowed upon him during their last encounter, the way her flushed cheeks had glowed, the scent of her slick skin as it moved against his own…

His reaction did not go unnoticed. “Why, William!” David exclaimed, setting down his wine glass. “You sly dog, you! I would never have guessed! Oh, but you must tell me. Who is it that’s captivated you so?”

For the first time since running into the other man, William smiled shyly, his eyes falling to his plate as he played with his fork. “Just a girl,” he said. But the words refused to be held back, and he rushed forward with the need to tell someone—anyone—of the magic that was Buffy. “Though she is the most exquisite creature I’ve ever been privileged to know. She makes me feel as if I can do anything and yet, she does so without any necessity for reciprocity, without asking what I might do for her in return.”

“And do I know this supposed angel?”

Abashed, he shook his head. “I’m afraid her…path would not normally cross your own.”
David’s good humor faded. “Oh, please don’t tell me you’ve done something as ridiculous as become enamored with one of your staff,” he commented. “Even if it’s that ripe young thing I caught you with the other night, long-term dalliances with inferiors will only create problems for you in the long run.”

“Oh, no, it’s not--.”

“There’s the issue of inheritance down the road,” he went on, as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “And the risk of public disclosure, not to mention the fact that these girls, while amusing in the short-term, will become increasingly demanding the longer you carry on with them. You’d best to nip this one in the bud, William. Enjoy your little pleasures, and then move on. Life is much simpler that way.”

He was saved from rebuttal by the butler’s appearance at the dining room door.

“Excuse me, sir, but there’s a young lady who says she’s hear to see you. She says it’s a matter of life and death.”

David’s mouth quirked in amusement. “Did she give you her card?”

“No, sir. She is of the opinion that you will wish to speak with her. She is an associate of Mr. Richard Rhodes-Fanshaw.”

William paled at the Watcher’s name, his fork clattering clumsily to the table. Had something averse happened to Richard? A quick glance at David told him that his dining companion didn’t recognize the name, so surely, it must be someone looking for himself. If that was the case, it had to be someone from the Council, and yet, none of them were supposed to know of the particulars of his predicament.

“Is she alone?” David asked the butler.

“Yes, sir.”

“And her dress? Is she indigent?”

“Oh, no, sir. Quite elegantly presented.”

David nodded. Tossing his napkin onto the table, he started to rise, only to be stopped when William’s hand shot out to grab his arm.

“What are you doing?” William asked.

“I’m going to meet her, of course,” came the reply. He pulled himself easily away from the smaller man’s grip.

“I…I…I don’t think that’s wise. You don’t know her. She could be dangerous.”

The latter made David laugh out loud. “Really, William, you have the most ludicrous notions sometimes. I’m sure it’s just a prank of some sort. Or a simple misunderstanding of residence.” He laughed again. “She’s a woman traveling alone. How dangerous could she be?”

How dangerous indeed, William thought as he rushed to follow David to the front door. He would never have presumed Buffy Summers to be dangerous until she’d demonstrated it for him; unfortunately, his neighbor had no such experience to temper his actions.

The butler stood behind the open door as they approached, and both approaching men frowned.
“You could at least have shown her to the drawing room,” David chastised.

“She declined, sir,” the butler answered. “She said---.”

“She is right here and can speak for herself.” The owner of the slightly accented voice stood on the doorstep, and all eyes turned to greet her. Though her voice was deep and confident, it was in stark contrast with her age. The young woman could not have been much more than eighteen, with porcelain skin and raven-black hair drawn up in curls that still managed to appear seductive where the stray tendril escaped to trail her long neck. The arch of her high cheekbones and slight tilt of her light brown eyes betrayed her Slavic heritage, while the corpulent curve of her lips offered secrets of its own, and she held herself with a definitive power that seemed oddly familiar to William.

“Which one of you is David Howard?” she asked, her gaze darting between them.

“I am.” David stepped forward with a confused smile. “My apologies, but I’m unsure as to your presence here. Do we know each other?”

“No. We have a mutual friend who is rather in trouble at the moment.” A gloved hand came up to her forehead, and her eyes fluttered closed. For a moment, William was convinced she was going to faint, but then she spoke again. “I don’t suppose I could trouble you for a glass of water, Mr. Howard? I’m afraid it’s been a long journey for me, and I’m…” She began to sway, only to catch herself before she fell. “I’m not exactly…feeling well.”

He was the very model of solicitude. “Oh, yes, of course, do come in.” Holding his arm out, David stepped forward to aid her, only to be met halfway when she crossed the threshold on her own.

“Bring in some tea,” he instructed the butler as he led the young woman away from the front door. “We shall take our afters in the drawing room.”

William hung back when the doors closed behind him, and watched in growing trepidation as David escorted the mysterious girl to the chaise. His nerves were skittering to and fro, as if an instinct deep inside him sensed something amiss, but he could see nothing foreboding about their guest, other than her unfortunate dropping of Richard’s name. Her attire told him she was moneyed, and her manner fitted that of any other female in her station. And yet, there was a sensation of something more about her, of control being held in tight restraint, as if the wrong word or incorrect gesture could unleash a dervish of frightening proportions. And it was that which kept him as far from her as he could manage.

“What is your name?” David queried.

She smiled. “You may call me April.”

His brows drew together. “And yet, you’re not English.”

“No,” she agreed. “But…my father was, and being the sentimental sort, gave me the name for the month in which I was born.”

They grew quiet when the door opened again, forcing William to scuttle sideways out of its path, and the butler entered with a silver tray laden with tea and sweets. As he served, William found a seat at the window, settling himself equidistant from the door and the pair who were now diverted with their drinks. Though he was grateful to no longer be the target of David’s attention, neither was he happy with the awkwardness of the present situation, and he kept his silence even after the butler had adjourned.

They were making small talk, an effort at which William was an abysmal failure, and, out of the
corner of his eye, he caught David taking a seat on the chaise directly next to his guest. It was a bold move, but then so was David and thus, to be expected. With a small sigh, William turned his gaze out through the wispy curtains.

April’s carriage sat in front of the house, a dark shadow made even darker by the lack of a moon that night. Leaning against its side was a tall, thin man, his features indistinguishable, while a boy of eight or nine scampered about the wheels. When the boy’s amusement caused him to stumble into the man’s legs, his reaction was swift, a hand around the boy’s neck and a powerful shove that sent the child in an extraordinary arc across the garden.

William leapt from his seat and swiveled to see where the boy had landed. Through the hazy reflection of the room behind him, he could barely make out the unmoving mass, and turned worried eyes back to a waiting April.

“Your boy,” he said. “I believe he might be hurt.”

She shook her head with a husky laugh. “He and Nathan are just playing, I’m sure,” she said. “They do that.”

“But---.”

“Stop worrying Miss April,” David commanded. He rose to his feet. “Really, William, if you continue to behave in such a manner, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Oh, but he can’t go yet,” April said, standing as well. “I haven’t conducted my business yet.”

“You don’t need William for that---,” David started. He was cut off with a gurgle when her hand shot out and wrapped around his throat, cutting off his air.

“But I do, Mr. Howard,” she said with a smile. “I need someone to convey my message as it’s obvious Richard is no longer here.”

As a frozen William watched, her face shifted into a monstrous visage, ridges erupting from her brow as her brown eyes lightened to gold. The fangs she now sported were quickly embedded in David’s neck before he could scream, and she held his struggling body tightly against hers as she drank from his veins.

The sight of the blood dripping down her lips was enough to rock William from his daze, and he bolted for the drawing room door. He skidded to a halt, however, when she beat him there, his eyes jumping back to where she’d dropped David’s lifeless body to the carpet before lifting again to gaze at April’s.

“Like a scared little mouse,” she commented, and licked at the blood that still clung to her mouth. “I can smell your fear, you know. It’s quite the aphrodisiac.”

She wasn’t making a move to hurt him, he realized, just barring him from running from the room. What was it she’d said to David? *I need someone to convey my message.* She wanted him to be that someone.

As bravely as he could muster, William lifted his chin. “What is it you need of Richard?” he asked. Though he did everything he could to prevent it, there was no mistaking the quaver in his voice when he spoke, and his lack of control made him inwardly cringe.

Her demon mask slipped away, revealing April’s otherwise warm smile. “So you know him, too,” she said. Her gaze raked over his rumpled suit, his disheveled curls, before alighting onto his
spectacles. “I should’ve known you were a Watcher. Rather foolish of David, though, to invite me into his house, don’t you think?”

He ignored her question. “You said…you said you had a message?”

“Yes.” She was back to business now, straightening her dress before holding out her arm to him. “Walk with me, William.”

He had no choice but to obey, and followed her lead as they stepped from the drawing room and out the front door. Such close proximity revealed both the tepid temperature of her skin and the power within her grasp, and the goosebumps that erupted along his flesh startled William into an involuntary shudder. As their feet measured the distance of the front path toward the carriage, he allowed his eyes to jump to the still unmoving form of the boy in the garden. He doubted there was anything he could do now to help the lad, though the wish to do so overwhelmed him.

“Richard and I have the most unfortunate timing,” she said casually as they strolled. “We keep missing each other in our travels, which is really quite the shame considering how far we go back.”

They came to a stop at the road and she released her grip on him to glide effortlessly into her waiting companion’s arms. “I’m prepared to change all that, William. If you would be so kind as to tell Richard that I’m in London, and that he doesn’t have his new minion to toy with any longer, I’d be forever in your debt.”

There was no obligation in her tone, and he knew that the vampire affected the graciousness as just another part of her game. Hadn’t Buffy prepared him for such an eventuality by telling him of some of the more cunning of her prey? He just had never imagined ever experiencing it firsthand.

William nodded, though the question that had lingered in the back of his mind refused to quit his thoughts. “Why haven’t you killed me as well?” he blurted, the adrenaline, and the fear, and the sickening sense of vertigo overwhelming his better sense.

“Because I need you,” she said simply. He stiffened when she suddenly leaned into him, pressing her cheek to his and inhaling deeply. “I know your scent now,” April whispered. “I can find you, no matter where you hide. And I’ve decided that you shall be my daytime liaison to Richard.” Cool lips caressed the hollow beneath his ear, causing a ripple of tremors to undulate throughout William’s body. “Congratulations.”

She was laughing when he stumbled backwards. “Run along, little Watcher,” she singsonged, and his stomach lurched when her vampire face emerged again. “I do believe I’m going to partake of Mr. Howard’s hospitality for a little longer. You’re welcome to stay, of course…”

Her words dissolved into wicked mirth as his feet finally listened to his head’s instruction, and William fled into the murky night.
They stared up at the stone edifice, the tiny windows black and foreboding, darker even than the night sky that pressed down from above. Behind them, the early morning hour made the London street sound hollow in its vacancy, and the lack of life made Buffy all too aware of her heart beating evenly inside her chest.

“And we’re sure this is going to work?” Willow whispered at her side.

“You tell me,” Buffy whispered back. “It was your brilliant idea.”

“Don’t say brilliant! What if it goes kaplooie? I’m not sure I really want that kind of pressure.”

“It’s no big. It’ll just be the end of the free world as we know it.” At Willow’s horror-struck eyes, Buffy poked her playfully in the ribs. “I’m kidding. Everything will be fine. And why exactly are we whispering?”

Uncomfortable, the redhead shifted the bag on her shoulder, wincing under the weight. “Can we go over the plan one more time?” she asked.

There was a creak from the alley that ran alongside the Council building, and both girls turned their head to see the sliver of light that was exposed by the side door opening from it. Around the door’s edge appeared a slim pale hand, followed immediately by Lydia’s ramrod figure. Her unsmiling gaze met Buffy’s and she lifted a condescending brow as she stepped further out to allow the two girls to enter past her.

“Too late,” the Slayer murmured, and began striding forward, her pace more confident than she felt.

* * *

He wasn’t intoxicated, not yet at least. But, to William, the flicker of firelight through the amber in his glass was almost as hypnotic as the alcohol, dancing and swirling and churning in time with the rhythms inside his head, and the room began to dip and sway unbidden around him as he visually drowned in the ambient gold. He’d toyed with the intention of calling on Richard directly upon fleeing the Howard estate, but etiquette and his shaky nerves had quickly dispelled that notion, sending him instead to his home and the whisky that was kept for special guests. William wasn’t a drinker. Tonight, however, he was prepared to amend that.

Only luck and David’s over-confidence had saved William’s life, of that he was certain. Though he had contemplated the issue of his own mortality prior to the evening’s events, it had only ever been
in the abstract. Even hearing of Buffy’s daily life and death confrontations hadn’t prepared him for the inevitability of facing it himself. Why should he? Her existence, while bestowing such vitality to his, was still so very much separate to anything he’d known, could ever know...or that had been his assumption, even after he’d encountered Richard and the Council on his own.

But he’d walked away from death tonight, and she had laughed as he fled, and William wasn’t entirely convinced that what he’d done was the right thing. A coward to the end, he thought bitterly as he took another sip of the whisky. Or even to the not-such-an-end.

He almost didn’t hear the distant neigh of the horses as a carriage rolled to a stop out on the street. Briefly, his eyes flickered to the closed curtains, but his curiosity stopped there, too weary to rise unnecessarily from his seat, too disconnected to care beyond the immediacy of his own situation. Not even the knock at his front door was enough to rend his attention from the whisky, the atypical thought that’s what the staff is for keeping him in his seat.

After a timid knock that went unanswered, the drawing room door opened to reveal a nervous Meg. “Pardon, sir,” she said, “but there’s callers.”

William waved his hand in vague dismissal. “It’s late,” he said abruptly. “Tell whoever it is to go home to their beds and praise their God that they’re able to do so.”

“Oh.” She didn’t seem to know what to do with his response, and frowned as her gaze darted back over her shoulder. “But it’s that Mr. Rhodes-Fanshaw again,” she started, and then jumped back in surprise when William leapt to his feet.

“Send him in.” Mere mention of the Watcher was seemingly enough to resuscitate William, and his eyes blazed as they remained fixed on the door.

With a curtsey, Meg backed out of the room, the muffled sound of her voice emanating from the hall before Richard took her place in the doorway. Directly behind him stood Rose, but it was only the Watcher that William could see at the moment.

“I’m glad to see you’ve come to your senses,” Richard began. He was cut off by William’s sharp bark of laughter, completely bereft of mirth.

“And yet I wonder if it might not be better to be rid of them,” he said.

Rose pushed her way past her husband, a worried frown on her face as she approached the fireplace. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

He skittered away before she could get close enough to touch him, his head ducking as he ran a shaky hand through his already disheveled curls. “Can you not see?” he asked, and his voice dripped with a sarcasm that shocked even him. He began to pace in front of the window. “I can. I have. Too, too much. And it makes me wish to hide behind walls that know nothing of Watchers, and monsters, and cowardice. Where I can return to my words with innocence I fear I will never know again.”

Richard’s eyes flitted to the tumbler sitting on the table by the hearth, his gaze hardening when it returned to William’s. “You’re drunk.”

“No,” the younger man shot back. “But oh, how I wish I were.”

“You have to calm down,” Rose said gently. “Something’s obviously agitated you...”

“Not something. Someone.” William came to a halt. “Did you know that I witnessed a man’s murder tonight? In his own home, yet.” He gestured toward Rose. “He was standing no farther away than
you are from me now, and still, I was powerless to do anything but stand and gawp like a terrified child. I finally ran, of course, but it was too late for him. Too late for either of us, really. He was already dead, and I was already bearing the brand of my weakness.”

“Were you hurt?” asked Rose.

“That’s not exactly a sturdy beast, now is it?”

Richard sighed. “It’s late, William, and we are all tired. Why don’t you come with us and get a good night’s rest in our home instead of here tonight? We can discuss what exactly happened in the morning.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m safe here. As long as I don’t invite her in, this house should be impermeable to her attacks, should it not? That’s the lore of the vampire, if I’m not mistaken.”

The look shot between Richard and Rose was unmistakable. “You saw a vampire attack?” he queried. “And you walked away from it unharmed?”

“She let me go. With a message. By the grace of hell itself, I was rescued from a similar fate as David’s, though I’m beginning to wonder if perhaps he did not receive the better bargain.”

“A message?” asked Rose. “What kind of message?”

But William’s attention was trained on Richard, both sets of eyes riveted to the other as silent understanding passed between them. “I think the time for asking me questions has passed,” William said. “You had your turn, and now it’s mine.” His head tilted in furious interest. “Tell me, Richard. Just who exactly is April?”

* * *

“In the dark corridor deep within the bowels of the Council building, to Willow, Buffy still somehow seemed to be larger than life as she stared down the female Watcher who’d accompanied them downstairs. “I’m tired of playing games with you guys, but if you’re straight with me, I’ll be straight with you.”

“I would expect nothing less from the Slayer,” the Watcher said, just as evenly.

It failed to get a rise from Buffy. “You want what I know about Spike, I want what you know about Esme. Fair exchange of information, right?”

“Correct.”

“But here’s the part I don’t get, Lydia. How do I know you’re not going to run off and tell Travers that I’m here?” Buffy’s eyes were cold. “Why go behind your boss’ back at all?”

“Because you have information I can’t get anywhere else,” came the curt reply. “People who encounter William the Bloody don’t usually survive to tell the tale. Getting your input is an opportunity I can’t afford to miss.”

“Even if it means showing me the files on the sly?”

“Like I told you when you rang, there is very little in those files that Mr. Travers himself hasn’t already shown or told you about. If he were to find out about your presence here---which he won’t, as I promised---it’s unlikely to cause any real damage to his investigation.”
“There’s risk to you, though. You could get fired or something.”

“Highly doubtful. Mr. Travers doesn’t operate that way.” For the first time since greeting them at the door, Lydia smiled. “I may not understand some of his decisions regarding you, but when it comes to how he manages the Council, there are protocols that even Mr. Travers cannot bend.”

Buffy nodded. Lydia’s explanation was essentially the same as she’d explained to the two girls on the phone when they’d called, but hearing it live and in Technicolor seemed to be all the Slayer needed to confirm the truth in it. Not that Willow was sure of anything in this little scenario. It might’ve been her initial idea, but she hadn’t really expected Buffy to run with it the way she had. And she especially hadn’t expected to be standing in a dank English building in the wee hours of the morning carrying a bag she desperately hoped wouldn’t get searched.

“So how’s this going to work?” Buffy asked. “You sit me down and ask me some questions while Willow copies the files?”

Lydia’s eyes widened behind her glasses. “There will be no copying,” she said. Reaching between the two girls, she pushed open the door that they were standing in front of. “Miss Rosenberg may read over the files and take notes, but that is the extent of what I can allow.”

“But that’s not good enough.”

Doing her best to disappear into the wall, Willow listened to the argument between the two women, knowing full well that Buffy was doing it all for show. It didn’t matter whether or not they were allowed to copy the files. They were walking out with them in hand, whether Lydia approved of it or not. Buffy just wanted to make it look believable by being as difficult as possible up front.

The redhead glanced into the room behind her. It was tiny, barely eight feet by eight feet, with a table and two chairs against one wall. A small stack of file folders was on one corner of the table, while on the opposite corner, a pen rested on a stapled bundle. In between was a phone, and her eyes followed the cord from its back to where it disappeared into the wall. Bingo, she thought.

“That should be OK, Buffy,” she interrupted with a bright smile. “You know me and my notes. That’s as good a copy any day.”

Buffy’s eyes followed where Willow had just turned from, and after only a short moment, she swiveled again to Lydia and said, “OK, so what about our little interview?”

“I’ve prepared a written questionnaire, if you remember, Miss Summers. You should find the half hour I’ve managed to secure for you to look over the files sufficient time to complete at least a portion of it.” Stepping past them into the room, she pulled out the two chairs, and waited for the girls to take the seats. “As you can see from its rather austere furnishings, the Council doesn’t use this room very often.” She pointed into the bare corners. “It’s one of only three that aren’t even on our internal surveillance system, so you should feel completely secure.”

Buffy’s voice stopped her before Lydia had left the room. “You know this obsession you have with Spike borders on the incredibly sick, don’t you?” she said to the Watcher when she looked back at the girls. “Not that it doesn’t work to my advantage right now, but I would’ve thought someone as smart as you wouldn’t be taken in by a little bit of bleach and leather.”

Lydia smiled. “You underestimate William,” she said. “As I told you before, he’s not your typical vampire. Perhaps you’ve failed to best him because you don’t truly understand what a complex creature he truly is. Now. You have thirty minutes.”
When the door was closed, Buffy turned back to Willow, shaking her head. “You try to help a girl,” she complained, “and she runs upstairs into the arms of the boogeyman anyway. Go figure.”

“Some people just can’t be helped,” Willow agreed. Rising from her chair, she reached behind the phone and pulled out the cable, letting it fall to the floor as she knelt to where she’d placed her bag. Under Buffy’s watchful eye, she pulled out her laptop and a second cable, and proceeded to hook herself into the outlet on the wall, settling down Indian-style under the table.

“You OK down there?” Buffy asked.

“Just peachy.”

“We’ve got twenty-nine minutes. I got us inside the building. Now you’re sure you can get us inside their system?”

Willow sighed, eyes intent on the screen in front of her as her fingers flew over the keyboard. Her exploration at the apartment of the Council’s computer systems had showed her that once a certain point was reached within their files, a magical barrier prevented further breach. She’d posited a theory to Buffy about how to get past it, mostly as a launching point for brainstorming on what to do, only to be shocked when the Slayer thought it was doable. Now, she could only keep her fingers crossed that her hypothesis wasn’t a load of hooey.

“I’ll do everything I can,” she said out loud. And meant it.

* * *

His guests were silent in the aftermath of his query, and as the seconds lapsed into minutes, with the twist of Rose’s head to stare at her husband and the falling of the logs in the fireplace the only movements in that time, William felt the wrenching in his stomach begin to worsen, his hands start to shake as the wait grew interminable.

“You saw her,” Richard finally said. His normally healthy complexion had taken on an ashen cast, but his eyes glittered in unexpected fervor. “How…did she…was she…?”

Each aborted question drew Rose closer to her husband, her worry rightly transposed with an alacrity William didn’t fully comprehend. Richard shrugged her off when she reached out to him, though, opting instead to move closer to the younger man.

“Tell me everything she did,” he demanded. “What she said, what she looked like. Everything.”

William shook his head. “I escape death, and you expect a narrative of the ordeal only minutes after? I’m not one of your Slayers you can bend to your every whim, sir. And might I add, you came to me. It is your fault I was meant to die tonight.” He lifted his chin, the small amount of alcohol he’d consumed fortifying his courage. “Don’t think that because I may not be as…assertive as yourself that I’m so willing to just lie down and accept such a fate. If that’s your purpose, we quit this alliance tonight. I shall find my mother on my own.”

His proclamation shamed Richard’s tirade, causing him to hesitate. “But…you said she killed another. That she deliberately chose you to live.”

“Only because she arrived with specific intent. I was dining at David Howard’s residence.” He didn’t wait to process the shock of his guests before repeating his question. “Now. Who exactly is she?”

Heavily, Richard sank into the settee at his side. “April’s the vampire who killed my wife.” At
William’s startled glance to Rose, the Watcher sighed. “My first wife.”

* * *

Twelve minutes. And Willow hadn’t said a word since she’d started, her fingers never stopping on her laptop’s keyboard.

Buffy was dying to ask her how it was going.

Lydia’s questionnaire sat in front of her, taunting her with the derivative queries that so fascinated the Watcher. While she waited for Willow to give her the word, Buffy scribbled half-hearted responses, feeling very much like she was scamming her way through a history test she hadn’t studied for, knowing that if their plan didn’t work, she would need something to be able to show Lydia. After all, the arrangement had been made in good faith. If it failed---.

“Buffy.”

She jumped at Willow’s voice, though the faintness of it did not bode well. “Do you have them?” she asked.

“Ummm…no.” There was no mistaking her apologetic tone. “I got more than I did back at the apartment, and I can see some stuff I couldn’t before, like…did you know there’s this whole huge file on the Watcher who had the figures? That Richard Rhodes-Fanshaw? All the stuff about how his Slayer and first wife got killed, and how his second wife went missing. I don’t remember seeing any of this when Giles and I were going over the records---.”

“Did I mention we’ve only got fifteen minutes left?”

“Oh. Right.” The sound of scrabbling preceded the redhead from popping out from beneath the table. “Well, remember that security wall I hit back at the apartment?” she said. “I found it again.”

“The magic one?”

“That would be it.”

“Is it really that bad? Now that you can see it up close and personal, I mean.”

“In the mystical world, we’re talking the Great Wall of China.”

“Damn it,” Buffy muttered. Her face was solemn, her mind racing. “I guess it’s time then,” she said with a sigh, and began to reach for the bag the redhead had carried in.

Willow clapped her hand over the bag’s top, blocking her friend from getting into it. “I still think this is a bad idea,” she said.

“Do you think it’s not going to work?”

“I told you. I’m just afraid that it might work too well.”

She’d been pacing around the apartment, twirling the divining rod Willow had made like a baton as they brainstormed for ideas on how to get into the Council, when the end of the stick had caught on the drape and nearly knocked over a lamp in Buffy’s haste to steady it.

“You have to be careful with it,” Willow admonished as she’d taken it away.

“It’s just a stick,” she’d countered.
“A stick holding about a thousand watts of magic inside it. Just what it sucked up from your journal was enough to knock me on my caboose.”

Buffy grew thoughtful. “Pretty powerful stuff.”

“Esme is a pretty powerful witch.”

“Powerful enough to fool the Council.”

“And then some.”

“Have you thought any more about what would happen if it got out?”

Willow shrugged. “Probably overload everything remotely magical within spelling distance. That makes the most sense.”

“Like a power surge.”

“Yep. The mother of all power surges.”

“Enough to wipe out the Council’s security blocks?”

For the first time, the redhead hesitated. “You’re not serious.”

But she had been. And she still was, in spite of Willow’s protestations to the contrary.

“Tell me there’s another way to break through in the next ten minutes and I won’t do it,” Buffy said.

They both knew the answer to that, and slowly, Willow pulled her hand away, allowing the Slayer access to the stick inside. When the redhead curled her knees into her chest, ducking her head down to avoid Buffy’s gaze, she muttered, “Time to assume crash positions.”

* * *

“It was 1848,” Richard said, and his eyes were fogged from the memory replaying inside his head. “I was living in Warsaw with my first wife when my Slayer was Chosen. We’d been in Poland for almost a decade training Masia. Her parents had been killed during an insurrection against the Russians, and so she’d come to live with us when she was nine years old. She had just turned eighteen when she was called. To be honest, I had begun to hope she wouldn’t be called at all.”

The Watcher seemed to have aged years just in the time since he’d first entered the drawing room. Though William watched him with more than a little anger and frustration at his cavalier attitude toward the events at the Howard home, he couldn’t help but feel the rising pity for the older man begin to swell inside him. The events of the past still plagued him, and William suspected relating the story aloud was but a shadow of the tale that must relive within him every single waking moment.

“It wasn’t as if she wasn’t prepared,” Richard continued. “She was an excellent student. Cunning. Resourceful. Strong-willed. Oftentimes, I just sat back and allowed her free rein as she approached an enemy. She frequently surprised me in her methodology for dispatching the demons. What she lacked in strength and speed prior to being Chosen, she made up for in craftiness. Then afterwards, she seemed unstoppable. Warsaw’s demon population took a dramatic downturn once Masia was the Slayer.” His face softened, his eyes shone. “I was so proud of her.”

“You loved her.”

“As my own,” Richard confirmed. He chuckled, shaking his head. “I was reprimanded on more than
one occasion for what the Council referred to as an unhealthy attachment to my Slayer. ‘She is destined to die,’ they were fond of telling me. ‘You’ll only make it worse for yourself by strengthening the ties.’ But I didn’t care. I ignored their requests to move back to England and silently prayed that I would never be forced to watch this beautiful, brave young woman die.”

When he lapsed into silence, William took the seat opposite him, leaning forward with his forearms on his knees to intently study the Watcher’s face. “Did this April kill her?” he asked, and the resurgence of his ire began to flow away from his guests and back toward the demon who’d mocked his weakness. “Is this why she hunts you down even today?”

“In a manner of speaking,” came the eventual reply. Richard’s heavy sigh was accompanied by the passing of his hand over his eyes, and it was only when Rose stepped forward to rest her hand on her husband’s shoulder that the Watcher was able to look up again.

“It was spring, and Masia and I had averted a minor disaster by destroying a sect of Iphrogia demons who were attempting to locate some mystical Key they were convinced would give them the power to open transdimensional portals. The Council had concerns about a Hellmouth forming in the New World, and they were attempting to convince me to take Masia there to fight it. None of us wanted to go. Warsaw had become our home, and we were tired, and traveling was the last thing any of us wished to do at that time. I begged off on replying, and instead chose to schedule a brief holiday for us. A…reprieve from the stresses slaying was creating. I didn’t bother to inform the Council where we were going. I was young, and arrogant, and convinced nothing consequential would occur.” His eyes fluttered closed again as he sank further into his seat. “I was so very wrong.”

“What happened?” William prompted when the Watcher remained quiet.

“We were attacked.” Richard’s tone was muted, dripping from the pain of remembering, and the lines around his eyes deepened with each passing syllable. “Our coach was delayed, so our arrival at the country house I’d leased for the week was postponed until the small hours of the morning. I’ll admit, I dozed as we traveled. As did my wife. I was wakened by the horses’ screams, and the next thing I knew, the coach’s doors were torn from their hinges and we were dragged from within.

“They were vampires, a group of them. I was never able to determine exactly how many, though it wouldn’t surprise me to find that there were at least half a dozen. The fact that we were ill-prepared for such an attack was entirely my fault. I hadn’t accounted for traveling at night, and our late departure meant that more than half our journey was spent under the cover of dark. So when Masia began to fight, I had little to offer her in the way of weapons.”

“But she was the Slayer,” William said. “And you said she was resourceful.”

Richard nodded. “True. But she was also tired, and I failed to take that into consideration. She’d only killed one of them before they gained the upper hand. I was attempting to defend myself when I heard her scream for help, and after I’d managed to stake the vampire I was fighting, I looked up…” His voice broke, and it took several long breaths before Richard was able to resume. “Two of them were holding Masia, but two others had my wife in their clutches as well. The shadows seemed to pulse with all that evil, but all I could see was my wife’s eyes. She was so terrified. Though she knew of what we did, she never came into contact with it, not directly, and she was virtually helpless against their attacks.”

“Richard…” Rose murmured, but he didn’t respond to the consolation she was offering. Instead, he rose from his seat and turned to the fireplace, staring down into the flames.

“Not a day goes by where I don’t wonder if I would’ve done it differently,” he said. “But regardless of how many times I pose the question, and how many ways I present the situation, the facts remain
the same. Masia could defend herself. My wife could not. There was no other way.”

“You attempted to rescue the woman you love,” William said.

“No,” Richard replied. “I did rescue one of the women I loved.” His hand gripped the mantle, his knuckles white. “When Masia saw me help not her but my wife instead, she began to fight again, so desperate was she to live. It distracted the vampires sufficiently for me to free my wife and get her to the horses, but by the time I’d turned back to aid my Slayer…they were already feeding from her, like a living trough, and I could only watch as they drained her very essence.”

William frowned. “But…I thought you said your wife was killed by this April,” he commented. “What does any of this have to do with that particular event?”

“So impatient,” Richard murmured. He glanced back at the younger man, sadness hiding his eyes from scrutiny. “You remind me so much of myself when I was your age.”

“April assumed I was a Watcher.”

A smile. “Yes. She would.”

“Was she part of the group that attacked your coach? Were you not able to get away?”

“We made it all the way back to Warsaw. My wife was shaken, but unharmed, and I put her to rest immediately before setting off to communicate with the Council. They knew of Masia’s death before I told them, of course. Another had already been Chosen, and I was instructed to return to England as soon as possible for interrogation. They weren’t interested in my mourning. Only in what I could provide for them for their precious annals.”

This time, when Richard stopped speaking, William held his tongue, reluctant to prod his elder even deeper into the anguish relaying the tale was causing. As heated as he’d become at being used as a pawn in the Watcher’s odd relationship with the female vampire, and as bothered as he was at his own cowardice in dealing with his situation, he couldn’t just ignore the distress that was visibly tearing Richard apart. Thirty years of grief poured out in his every word, and not even Rose’s comforting hand could act as a balm against it. It was inconceivable that William could allow himself to add to an already appalling state of affairs by reverting the attention back to his own attack.

“We took our time packing,” Richard said. “Neither my wife nor I were in a hurry to return to London. Warsaw had become our home, and it was only the prospect of continuing without Masia that convinced us to go in the first place. I remember the weather turned, as it does in the spring, and we became housebound while it rained for days on end. So when she showed up on our doorstep, soaked to the skin and begging for our aid, my wife did the only thing she would even consider. She invited Masia inside.”

“But she was dead. You said…you watched her die. And the Council…”

“I know. And my wife knew. But in that moment, facing those eyes, hearing her tears and the story of how she’d fought to get away…I doubt even I would’ve been able to think rationally.”

Memories of the vampire’s words when she’d been speaking to David all of a sudden clamored for space inside William’s head.

“You may call me April.”

“And yet, you’re not English.”
“No. But…my father was, and being the sentimental sort, gave me the name for the month in which I was born.”

“They turned her,” William said unnecessarily. When Richard turned his back on him again to stare into the fire, the younger man rose from his seat to stand at his side. “But why would she come to you? Surely, she knew you would try to kill her. That’s what you do.”

“No, that’s what Masia did. I merely created the killer. Molded her into the perfect hunter. And then when she needed me the most, I betrayed her. I chose someone else, and the demon couldn’t forgive me for that. So she took from me the only love I had left at the time.”

“Masia did.”

The look Richard shot William was fierce. “Masia is dead. April is the one who walks this earth wearing my Slayer’s face. I refuse to allow that creature desecrate everything Masia accomplished during her lifetime by honoring her with her name.”

“And yet…she’s still alive. In all this time, all these years…you haven’t killed her.”

He wasn’t expecting the slump of utter defeat in the Watcher’s shoulders. “No,” Richard conceded. “Not for lack of trying, but every time the opportunity would arise…” A dry rasp took on the mantle of humor as the laughter erupted from Richard’s chest. “And now she’s here,” he gasped. “And all my years of trying to undo what she has done mean nothing because it isn’t about that any more. She wishes the battle to finally be over.” Bright eyes returned to William’s face. “I am sincerely sorry, my boy. It was never my intent to subject you to my own melodrama. You’d be best to leave London for the time being. My company is hardly safe any longer.”

“But you need me,” William blurted before he could stop himself. “She claims to want me as her liaison to you, and should I run…she can find me, she says. Is that a lie?”

“No.”

“So I have no choice but to stay.”

“There is always a choice. It’s just that, often, one of the alternatives is unacceptable.”

As they lapsed into silence, William knew that his mind was already made up. He had run once that evening, confronted the face of evil and fled from its threat, heedless of the repercussions of how his actions might be perceived by others. Buffy would never learn of his cowardice except from his own tongue, but he would know, and he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he wouldn’t be able to meet the valor of her gaze without feeling like a failure should he let it rest at that.

“You need me,” he repeated. “Just as I need your aid in finding my mother. You promised me that you would do everything in your power to help me, so the very least I can do is offer you the same.”

“You would do that?” Richard asked, incredulous. “After everything April did to you this evening? Why?”

Because it’s what Buffy would do, he thought to himself. Because I owe it to her to try. But out loud, William merely said, “Because I grow weary of being frightened. Because I’d rather die a right death than live a coward’s life.”

* * *

Even Buffy felt the reverberations of the magic as she broke the stick over her knee. Like a resonant
call from deep within her bones, the power erupted from its prison with the full force of a hurricane gale, rocking the Slayer in her place and slamming Willow into the far wall with a distinctive crack.

The witch crumpled to the floor, a cry of pain escaping her lips as her ankle twisted beneath her.

“Willow!” Buffy cried out, rushing to her side.

“Whoa,” Willow breathed, and brought a trembling hand up to her forehead. “I’m going to say that kind of worked.”

“Are you OK?”

The Slayer’s arm slipped around her friend’s shoulders, guiding to her feet. “I’ll live,” Willow replied. “Which is always a good thing, right?” Her worried eyes went to the door. “I’ve got a sneaky feeling that someone out there’s going to know what we just did, though.”

“Me, too.” Leaving Willow propped against the wall, Buffy crossed to the door and slyly pulled it open. The hall was deserted, all lights still out, and she hastily closed it again. “The coast is clear for now, but that fifteen minutes we had before is probably more like five now. Can you get what we need off the computer in that amount of time?”

Wincing, the witch stepped back to her laptop, crouching to work hurriedly on its keyboard. Almost immediately, the lines between her brows disappeared. “It’s already done,” she said in awe. “The overload must’ve acted as a propellant or something on the system. All the files I was trying to get are on here.” Her fingers flew across the keys. “I wonder why that is,” she mused thoughtfully.

“Wonder later,” Buffy prompted. “Run away now.”

“Right.”

* * *

Lydia’s computer froze at the same moment the alarms began to peal inside the library. Frowning, she glanced away from the security cameras she’d been monitoring to see the books that were usually held in stasis behind the magical shielding fall from their position, toppling to the shelf below and creating a cascade effect that turned the otherwise normally quiet room into a madhouse.

As she leapt to her feet, there was no doubt in the Watcher’s mind about what exactly could’ve caused this.

She only hoped that Buffy Summers had at least filled out part of the questionnaire, since it was going to be her fault when Lydia got fired.

* * *

She was watching April rising from her bed, fed and strong enough to stand on her own two feet, when Esme collapsed against the wall of the cave. It was as if a vacuum had suddenly appeared inside her chest, sucking at her strength with the ferocity of a starving beast, leaving the elderly witch dizzy and confused as the earthen walls spun around her.

“I think your witch is broken,” April commented to Nathan. She sniffed at the air as she approached where Esme had fallen, the lanky male vampire at her heels, and grimaced in distaste. “She reeks of Watchers.” Her head swiveled to stare at him. “Is this the best you could do?”

“She brought you back, darling,” he rushed in explanation. “She was the one who was able to break
the enchantment."

Light brown eyes fell back to the floor. “And she’s still alive…why?”

Esme watched Nathan hesitate. Fear still lingered deep within his aspect, but twisted with it was the desire to please the woman he’d fought so hard to bring back. In her weakened state, she knew she wouldn’t be able to stop both of them, not with her body still reeling from the effects of whatever it was that had just sapped her strength. So, she spoke up before he could.

“Because you need me,” Esme said. “Because I can offer you power you’ve only dreamed of.”

The corner of April’s mouth lifted. “I’m already powerful, old woman. So unless you’re suggesting I make you dinner, I don’t think there’s anything I need from you.”

Gathering together her last remaining power, Esme muttered under her breath, her fingers swirling before her. A glowing orb appeared in front of the two vampires, the faint outline of a sleeping William barely visible within it, and April hissed as her clawed hand swiped it into swirling motes that dissipated in the close air.

“I know your enemy, Slayer,” Esme said quietly. “It would be wise to keep me as an ally.”

April didn’t say a word as she backed toward the entrance to the cave, her eyes unwavering as they regarded the witch. It wasn’t until she was outlined against the moonlight that the vampire spoke again.

“My enemy is the Council and everything associated with it,” she said. “That includes you. Now, you may be able to conjure pictures of dead men, and you may be responsible for whatever magic got me free of Richard’s little glass fetish, but I’m not interested in parlor tricks. Right now, I’m interested in dinner. If you don’t want to be dessert, I suggest you be gone before I return.”

As the two vampires disappeared into the night, Esme knew the threats that had been uttered weren’t idle. She’d been given a temporary bye due to her small show of power, but once April had fed, once her strength was rejuvenated even further, there would be no mercy. Esme would be dead if she stayed. Without her power—and the question of just what could have drained her so was not forgotten, even in light of her current predicament—she was no match for the demons. And she couldn’t be sure when her magic would return.

She had no choice. Well, she did have a choice, but the option of becoming April’s nightcap was hardly an acceptable one. She would have to leave the caves and wait until she’d regained a sufficient portion of her powers again before approaching the Slayer about the compensation she was owed.

At least she still had the Watcher and William’s mother in her keeping. If all else failed, she always had them as bargaining chips. If April refused to cooperate, perhaps the current Slayer would.
Hush the Night

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CII.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy and Willow have stolen the Council’s files, April in the present time has ordered Esme to leave, and William has learned that April is Richard’s turned Slayer…

His hands shook. Without the immediacy of his distress, or the stalwart presence of Richard and Rose, William found it impossible to restrain the panic that suffused his muscles, wresting their control from him and causing them to tremble violently of their own accord. Even tightening his grip around his quill as he attempted to write down the events of the day did nothing to diminish the shaking, and he was forced to throw it down to his desk in disgust as his feet pushed him from his seat.

All his proclamations to the contrary, the last thing William felt right now was strong enough to face the devil that was April. Reason dictated that he should run, and Lord knew his body was of the same accord, but somehow, every time he would just about talk himself into it, to take Richard up on his suggestion that he leave the city until the vampire was properly taken care of, the specter of Buffy’s face rose before him. She wouldn’t say a word. She’d merely watch him with those ancient eyes and then sadly reach out to touch his face.

And his resolve would disappear. As terrified as he might be, it was not in him to disappoint her. Even though she had no way of knowing just what was happening to him unless he told her.

Exhausted, William perched himself on the edge of his bed, his eyes straying to the tray that rested on the stand. His nightly ritual of Esmerelda’s tea---Esme’s tea, he was quick to remind himself---sat there, waiting for consumption, and though the desire to see Buffy again was overwhelming, the fear that she would see through him was just as strong, stopping him from automatically drinking it and driving him yet again to pace around the room.

He should properly sleep as well, he rationalized. It had been a draining day, and there was much information to process. If he wished to survive whatever ordeals facing April and finding his mother, he needed to be as strong as possible. Surely, a good night’s rest was the first, best step for that.

Except you sleep best when you visit with Buffy, a small voice chimed in. Using your fear as a means to avoid telling her what happened will only prove detrimental to your well-being in the long run.

William sighed. Somehow, he had a feeling…this was an argument he was going to lose.

* * *

She heard his footsteps before he entered the room, and automatically, Lydia straightened in the library chair, her hands knotting together in her lap to quell their nervous trembling. With a soft swish, the door opened, and Mr. Travers entered, looking fatigued but no less alert than he did during the day, with Stuart close at his heels. Her mouth opened to speak, but the swift lift of his hand to cut her off was all it took for her to close it again.
A curt nod to the young man behind him made Stuart scurry forward and drop the black bag he carried onto the table. Lydia frowned as she glanced at the contents the gaping top displayed, and was still caught by its significance when she was left alone with her employer yet again.

“Our plans did not go exactly as we’d intended,” Travers said.

Ever the understatement with him, Lydia thought before she spoke up. “Sir, I have no idea how—.”

He silenced her with a shake of his head. “I’m not interested in protestations of ignorance. It would be best for you not to say anything right now, I believe. Between your ineptitude and Miss Summers’ surprising facility, my patience has been sufficiently tried for the evening.” He gestured toward the bag. “Be grateful that Stuart was able to find some interesting artifacts at their flat while you had them occupied here. If he’d come back empty-handed, you would not be sitting there merely on probation. Is that understood?”

Her mouth opened to confirm his statement, but at the last moment, she remembered his instruction and nodded instead.

“To say I’m displeased with the fact that all our security measures were subverted is minor compared to my feelings regarding how you handled this, Lydia. You placed the Slayer in an unmonitored room, and by your own admission, you failed to search either her or her friend for weapons when they arrived. Now I understand you were attempting to create a sense of trust with Miss Summers, but as you can see, that negligence has cost us a wealth of information I’d prefer to have not fallen into the wrong hands.”

The lecture was the least she’d expected. Mr. Travers would’ve excused just about any misdoing on her part, but the fact that the computer’s security had been breeched, and that both girls had managed to disappear from the Council building without being stopped, was more than enough to gain his wrath on the matter. She should be lucky that she was merely on probation. Lydia knew that it was well within his rights to fire her for such carelessness. Or worse.

She was grateful she wasn’t facing the worse.

“I’ve decided that you will remain here at the Council until this matter is resolved,” he went on to say. “Stuart is waiting outside to accompany you to your flat so that you can pack a small bag for the interim. You’ll be staying in one of the basement rooms under surveillance until I tell you otherwise.”

Oh. Probation was the current politically correct term for jailing. She should’ve known.

Remaining silent, Lydia rose to her feet and followed him to the library door he held open for her. On its threshold, however, she hesitated, glancing at him over the rims of her glasses.

“Did the Slayer’s belongings at least give you some of the answers you’d been looking for?” she asked, and then pressed her lips together to stop herself from saying anything further.

Travers’ look was long and measured. “They were…interesting,” he finally said.

Nothing more was going to be said on the matter. Quietly, Lydia nodded and stepped into the hall, following Stuart into the darkness.

* * *

When Willow appeared in the doorway, Buffy lifted her head from the disarray of her bedroom, mouth grim. “Tell me it’s better out there,” she said.
“It’s better out there,” Willow replied automatically, and then shook her head. “Except not.”

“What did they get?”

The witch ticked them off on her fingers. “A lot of Giles’ books, all my notes on how to make the divining rod, some of the ingredients we bought.” Her eyes swept the room. “What about in here?”

“Some of my weapons, some of my clothes for some strange reason.” Buffy looked away, staring at the disheveled bed, the sheets that had been ripped from the mattress and left to lie. “And William’s journal.”

Willow’s sharp exhalation was her only acknowledgment on the enormity of what they’d done, but it was enough to twist the knife the Slayer felt in her gut just a little bit tighter.

“I should’ve known better,” Buffy said under her breath. “I should’ve realized she was just setting us up.”

“But we got what we wanted,” Willow argued. “We got all the Council’s files so they can’t play hide-and-seek with the information anymore. There’s no way they could’ve guessed we’d get past through their magical roadblocks. Heck, we weren’t even sure we were going to do it. Mr. Travers has got to be pretty steamed about that, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” she agreed. It didn’t make losing the journal any easier, though. Especially since it would be her only memento when she finally stopped drinking the tea to dream of him.

“What are we going to do?” asked Willow.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Buffy said. “It isn’t safe for us anymore to stick around here, not when they think they can just come waltzing in and Matilda us out of our comfort zone.” Marching over to the wardrobe, she pulled out her suitcase and began tossing the clothes that the Council had left scattered across the bed inside it. “Pack up as much as you can. We’ll use Giles’ credit card to get into a hotel for the night.”

Willow was half-turned to do as she was told when she stopped. “What about…the tea stuff?” she asked hesitantly.

She didn’t stop in her packing, but she kept her eyes averted from her friend’s so that the pain that shone there couldn’t be seen. “Please,” she whispered. “Without his journal…I don’t have anything left of him here except for the dreams.” Only then did she brave a glance toward the doorway. “Just until I get the book back.”

* * *

Giles woke with more energy than he had earlier, though his strength was still far from normal. Gone, too, was the nausea that had so crippled him on his first foray from his cell, replaced instead with a gnawing hunger that made him question just how long it was since he’d had a proper meal. The scraps he vaguely remembered eating during his bedrest would hardly do to get him back up to par; he only hoped that whoever was jailing him would see that he needed further sustenance and supply what was needed.

The most pressing thing in his mind, however, was that of the mysterious woman across the hall. Clearly, she had befallen the same fate as he. The similarities between their present circumstances were just too blatant to ignore. But for what purpose were they being held? Was Buffy here as well? Could all this possibly be the Council’s doing?
Convinced that the woman would have more answers than he—or at least, different pieces to the puzzle so that he might get a better understanding of what was going on—Giles pushed himself upright, ignoring the vertigo and queasiness that suddenly overcame him. Crossing the distance of the room was easier, and he breathed a sigh of relief when the handle turned easily in his grip. He’d been momentarily frightened that someone would’ve discovered his earlier escape and proceeded to lock him in.

Everything was just as it had been the first time—the occupied cot, the chamberpot. When the door squeaked open, the woman on the bed started, her eyes fluttering open, and it took a moment of attempting to focus before she seemed aware of him standing in the doorway.

“What hap…?” she started to say, but the faintness of her voice, and the sudden rush of color from her cheeks was all it took to drive Giles to her side.

“Hush,” he soothed, crouching to the floor. Gently, his hands came up to press her back onto the mattress, smoothing the blanket over the old-fashioned nightdress she wore. “You need your rest.”

“Where…where am I?” she asked.

She had to ask a difficult question first, he thought in mild annoyance. “Sshhh,” he said instead of answering, hoping it would distract her from her queries.

But she was bound and determined to ignore his instruction. “Are you a doctor?”

It seemed as good an explanation as any, but somehow, Giles couldn’t bring himself to lie to her. Up close, she seemed even more familiar, an intelligence in her blue eyes that made him feel as if he should recognize her. The gentility of her accent reminded him of London, though there was a softness to it that he inexplicably associated with his grandmother.

“My name is Rupert Giles,” he said quietly. “Do you know who you are?”

“Anne Freston,” she replied automatically. Her eyes widened. “Where’s William? He’s not hurt, is he?”

“William?”

“My son.”

“He’s not here,” Giles replied truthfully. “I’m afraid it’s just you and I.”

For the first time, Anne’s eyes darted around the room, her brows drawing closer and closer together as the stone walls and sparse furnishings sank in. “I…I don’t…” Speaking was becoming a chore for her, and though he desperately wanted to hear her version of events, Giles also knew that pushing her further would only worsen her condition.

“You need to rest,” he reiterated. “My room is just across the hall. Should you wake and wish to speak—.”

He’d been rising as he spoke to her, but when it became apparent that he was going to leave her side, Anne’s hand shot out with surprising agility and grasped his forearm.

“Please don’t go,” she said.

The entreaty in her gaze cut through his determination, and Giles found himself sinking back down to sit on the floor at her side. “Of course,” he murmured, and leaned back against the stone.
For some reason, the pebbles in the path that led to their bench seemed larger than usual to Buffy, and she found her step wobbling slightly as she made her way around the curves. Willow had been extra-nice once they got settled in the tiny hotel Buffy had found, making the tea before the blonde even had to ask for it, and then leaving her in privacy by disappearing into the bathroom while Buffy drank it. It was just as well. She needed alone time with her thoughts anyway, fury with herself about falling prey to Travers’ tricks yet again fuelling her desire to march out and pull a Faith. It was only the thought of William, and his unwavering belief in her, that kept her from completely exploding.

She heard him before she saw him, his voice carrying through the crystalline air of the park as clearly as if he stood before her.

“…quite remarkable,” William said. She froze in place to better hear what he had to say, not wanting the interruption to fluster him unnecessarily. “But when I saw her---.” He broke off, and Buffy could’ve sworn she heard him swear under his breath before continuing. “No, she’ll never believe me if I tell it like that,” he said. “I sound like a pompous fool.”

Buffy’s brows shot up. He’s rehearsing what he’s going to say to me? She smiled. That’s so cute.

In the distance, William cleared his throat. “It was like nothing I’d ever seen before,” he said, and this time, it was obvious he was practicing some sort of speech. “One moment, she seemed perfectly normal, and the next…monstrous. I wasn’t sure what to expect, though your descriptions of what a vampire looked like should most likely have warned me---.”

“What?” She burst around the corner of the path, unable to contain herself when she heard his words regarding the vampire. “You saw a vampire?”

Her sudden approach took William by surprise, causing him to whirl on his heel before stumbling back away from her vehemence. “Buffy…” he breathed, and then tripped over the bench, limbs flailing in every which direction as he went down in a heap on its other side.

“What’re you doing?” she said as she hurried to his side. Carefully, she slid her arm beneath his shoulders, helping him to rise to a sitting position, and noticed immediately how he flushed in her presence. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he said, but there was a shortness to his tone that made her hesitate. When he followed his reply with a hasty but awkward leap to his feet, away from her embrace, the warning that had already started to peal inside her head turned into a five-alarm fire.

This is exactly how it was with Angel, she couldn’t help but think. A different person. How could I have been so wrong about William?

His back was to her, and he was brushing off his clothes when she spoke up again. “Are you going to talk to me?” Buffy whispered. The threat of tears stung her eyes, but she refused to let them win, blinking to dispel the current burn. “Or do I at least get to pretend for a few more minutes that everything is just spiffy before you give me the speech?”

He turned to look at her, his brows drawn in confusion. “What speech?” William started to ask, and then saw the stiff set of her shoulders, the drained color in her cheeks. Immediately, he was back before her, nimble hands cupping her face to tilt it upward. “Don’t cry,” he said. His thumb stretched to sweep across her cheekbone, just below her eye, and Buffy was surprised to feel the wetness it trailed behind it. “Why are you crying?”
“Because I know this part of the movie,” she replied. “I practically wrote the script. This is where you tell me we had our laughs but now that we’ve…you know…you’ve had a revelation. That…I’m not worth a second go, and that…that…yadda yadda…”

He silenced her with a kiss, his mouth hungry and demanding. “Hush,” he murmured when he broke for air. Blue eyes searched her own. “I’ve handled this badly, just as I thought I would, but you must know…nothing could be further from the truth. I made you a promise, Buffy, and there is nothing, neither here nor in either of our worlds, that could make me break it. Please, don’t cry. Something inside me breaks when I think I might have caused you to cry.”

Her arms were around his neck at that, squeezing and holding him close, as if by letting him go, he’d disappear just as she’d thought he’d been planning. “I’m sorry,” she blurted. “I just thought…and you were all…and you wouldn’t let me…it’s been a really, really long, bad day.”

She felt him nod against her cheek. “On that, I must agree,” William said. His hands were in her hair, pulling it free from its holdings to let it tumble about her shoulders in soft waves. “Let’s not speak of it, shall we?” He almost seemed to be begging her. “Right now, I just wish to…”

It was her turn to cut him off, her lips sliding back to his to devour him in another kiss. Along the length of her body, she could feel him responding, hardening and lengthening inside his trousers until it pressed achingly against her hip, his hands falling from her face to curl with need into her waist. He did want her, that much was obvious, and the fear that she was going to have a repeat of what happened with Angel quickly dissipated.

With more force than he’d shown in their last meeting, William guided Buffy to the ground, ignoring the way her skirt twisted up around her hips as he sprawled along her side. His hands seemed to be everywhere at once, not willing to settle in any one spot, while his mouth was determined to feed from hers, their tongues hot and searching as their desire mounted. His boldness was surprising, but not unwelcome, almost a natural postscript to the lovemaking of their last encounter, and her body thrummed in response to the sweep of his fingers across her skin.

His lips left hers to trail down the side of her cheek, one hand cupping the opposite to keep Buffy from turning her head away. She shivered when his teeth caught the edge of her earlobe, his breath hot and heavy, and then groaned out loud when his mouth found the bend of her neck and made its home there.

“Hush,” she heard him whisper against her skin, the single word floating up to break through the clouds that were forming inside her head.

“William…,” she breathed, but the firm pressure of his lips to hers silenced Buffy again, driving rational thought away and replacing it with sheer desire.

“Hush,” he repeated when he broke away to catch his breath. Pulling back far enough to look down at her, William’s eyes were black and glittering as he spoke. “No words tonight,” he said. “Please? There has been far too much talk today, and right now, I need…I want to just forget everything else.” His hand brushed back the hair from her brow, his gaze sweeping over her face as if he was trying to memorize every angle and curve. “I know I’m not equal to those who fight along your side, but—-.”

“What?” Buffy stiffened, ignoring his request to stay quiet. “Why would you say something like that?”

William’s eyes fell. “Because we both know it’s truth,” he murmured.
“I know no such thing.” Rolling from underneath him, she sat up on the grass and dragged him with her, forcing him to look directly at her. “There are so many ways to fight the fight, William,” Buffy said. “My way just happens to be beating things up, and trust me, that doesn’t always work out for the best.” She paused. “What happened today that you don’t want to talk about?”

He looked broken by her words, his shoulders slumping. “I’ve already said—–.”

“—-that you don’t want to talk about it. Yeah, I got that part already.” It was her turn to touch him, to pull him back toward her when it looked like he was ready to flee. “Can we fast forward to the part where you tell me what’s got you so skittish tonight? One minute, you can’t stand my touching you, and the next, you don’t want me to stop. And now you’re back to thinking you’re not good enough? If that doesn’t scream something went seriously wrong today, then I’m Mary Poppins. So, please, just tell me what it was so we can put us both out of your misery.”

Her bluntness made him shrink inside himself, and he kept his eyes away from hers when he finally began to talk. But as William stumbled over the tale of how he’d come to witness a vampire attack in the very home of one of his neighbors, Buffy began to understand where exactly his fear was coming from.

She stopped him at the point in the story where he tried to run from the parlor. “You were scared,” she said simply. “You ran away because you were scared and now you think I’m going to think you’re a coward.”

“Don’t you?” The flush from his arousal was gone, his body limp and tremulous at her side. William’s eyes were fixed on the grass he’d been plucking out of the ground as he spoke, his fingers toying with the fine strands of green as he did everything but look at her. “I was no better than a child hiding behind my mother’s skirts.” He laughed, a dry, harsh sound. “Of course, that’s hardly possible now, but the intent is still the same.”

“I think you were smart.” She waited for his startled eyes to meet hers, and nodded. “You heard me, buster. Smart with a capital S. In that situation, the best thing you could’ve done was run. It’s called survival, William. And if it’s a fight you know you can’t win, there’s no shame in retreating until you can.”

“You wouldn’t have fled.”

Buffy shrugged. “No. But then again, I’ve been fighting vamps for the past three years of my life. I’m a little better prepared than you are.”

“But she….” He stopped, and she could see him debate internally about how he was going to continue. The words were right there, battling with him to come out, but Buffy knew how badly it was eating at him.

“You were right,” she said, and tugged him forward. “Not about the bad stuff, because you are most definitely someone I’d be honored to have fight with me. You can’t get knocked out as much as Giles, that’s for sure.” She was rewarded with a small smile, and pulled him even closer so that their chests were touching, her bottom resting in his lap. “Let’s just say we’ve both had bummers of a day and let it go at that. No more words. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

When his lips parted to speak, Buffy lifted her fingers and lightly covered his mouth. “No more words,” she murmured, and leaned forward to kiss him softly.

His hesitancy to believe her translated into hesitancy in his response, but Buffy was patient, keeping the caress gentle as she let her hands return to the back of his neck. There, her fingers entwined with
the loose curls they found, scratching lightly at his skull in the manner she’d learned he liked, and she almost giggled when it elicited an uncharacteristic growl from his throat.

William’s hold tightened, and before she could stop him, he had turned her back to the grass, pushing her voluminous skirt up and out of his way as his hand sought the cleft between her legs. Buffy gasped as he pushed past her underwear to graze a single fingertip across her clit, and then exhaled when that same finger coated itself in her wetness before slipping inside.

The urge to say his name was stifled by the return of his mouth to hers, and she joined him in deepening the kiss. Their tongues curled and explored around the other, the impulse for more, and more, and more, fending off any more doubts about what either wanted at that particular moment, and she slipped her hands up beneath the hem of his shirt in order to better appreciate his strength.

Beneath her touch, William’s muscles quivered with anticipation, his skin both slick and hot as she pulled at the fabric that still covered his back. Her only thought was to rid themselves of the barriers that kept their bodies apart, and when he finally broke free of her mouth, Buffy pushed him upright so that he knelt on the grass in front of her.

He didn’t say a word, only watched as she set to undoing the buttons. When her fingernails caught on his nipple, his eyes fluttered shut, his head dropping back as the sensations washed over him. She could see William’s pulse pounding in the delicate hollow of his throat, and impulsively, leaned forward to press her lips to it, sucking at it gently as it throbbed beneath her tongue.

His reaction was electric. With a jolt that jarred both of them from their comfortable positions, William latched onto Buffy’s waist and pulled her down on top of him, his free hand releasing his erection from his trousers as her skirt ballooned out around them.

She felt the slick tip of his cock nudge against her underwear, hard and hungry. When she broke from the kiss he’d once again initiated, she just stared down into his eyes as she sat up, hands disappearing beneath her clothes as they worked to strip the last obstacle between them. William’s eyes followed the path of her hands, flickering with the flash of white when she tossed her panties aside, and then returning to meet Buffy’s.

“I love you,” he said softly.

Falling forward, Buffy smiled as her hair fell across his cheek. “I thought I said no more words,” she teased.

“Nothing will ever stop me from telling you that,” he replied. His breath caught when she lifted her hips, catching the head of his cock with her folds before lowering herself back down again so that every inch of him was quickly sheathed.

Buffy controlled every movement, taking him in shallow thrusts, never letting more than a few inches out at a time. “Is this all right?” she whispered. She stopped for a moment, the hairs from his groin and legs tickling at the soft flesh of her inner thighs, and just savored the feeling of him inside her.

“Is it pleasurable for you?” William asked.

She nodded, accompanying it with a small grind of her hips that caused her clit to rub against his coarse hair, and shuddered slightly at the shocks of pleasure that sent through her.

“Then it’s more than all right for me,” he said. A look of curiosity passed behind his eyes. “Is it the penetration or the stimulus you find so exciting?”
The scholar in him just wouldn’t give up, she thought in amusement. “Both,” she replied. “I think.”

“Let’s test it.”

Before she could stop him, William’s hand had slipped between their bodies, tickling down her tummy to tug at the skirts that barred his way. When she felt his fingers alight on her clit, she jumped, her inner muscles automatically squeezing in response.

He chuckled. “I would think it’s the stimulus,” he taunted.

Buffy slapped at his bare chest. “You don’t play fair,” she complained.

“What was that about no more words?”

She just smiled at his lighter mood, and fell back down against his chest, losing herself in each stroke she made with their hips. Longer, and deeper, and longer still…each thrust made it simpler to forget the disaster that had been her day. Without his journal to help her be strong, this time they spent together was all she had left. She wanted to savor it for as long as she could.

William was of the same mind, but the regular pacing of her strokes only heightened his excitement and soon, his knuckles were white where they gripped her flesh in an attempt to slow her down.

“Don’t,” he whispered, barely even audible as the veins stood out in his neck. “I’ll…”

“Sshhh,” Buffy replied. “Go ahead. We’ve got all night, remember?”

As if to spur him on, she squeezed around his length, drawing out another groan of pleasure. She hated using her greater power on him, but this was what she wanted and for some reason, he seemed to want to fight her on it. It only took a few more downward thrusts, her pace quickening, before his control collapsed, and Buffy felt William come inside her.

She waited until he’d relaxed beneath her, his eyes opening again to stare up in wonder, before she snuggled down against his chest. “That wasn’t so bad, now was it?”

William’s hand came up to caress the back of her neck. “But…you didn’t…”

“So?”

“I would want you to enjoy our lovemaking as much as I do.”

She propped herself up on those words, green eyes dancing. “You think I didn’t enjoy that?” she asked.

William flushed. “But you didn’t…you were…quieter…I thought…”

“For one thing, stop thinking so much. I got exactly what I wanted. And another thing…” She smiled. “…how come you always get to be the pleaser around here? Can’t I do something just for you once in a while?”

“I would think you were of my time, with words like that,” William said. “What happened to your modern notions?”

“I don’t think wanting to make somebody happy is a notion that goes out of style.” With a contented sigh, she curled back against his warm body, listening to his heart beat beneath her cheek. “And besides, we’ve still got all night. I’m pretty sure I’m going to be getting my turn here.”
William’s soft laugh warmed her skin more than the sun that beat down overhead. “That you will, love,” he whispered. “That you will.”

* * *

Willow couldn’t sleep. It wasn’t that the tiny twin bed was just completely foreign to her—though what she wouldn’t give to be back in the tiny closet of a bedroom at the flat—but that her mind wouldn’t shut itself off long enough for her to get more than five or ten minutes of rest at a time. The enormity of what they had done, and what the Council had done in return, gnawed at her, and all she could do was debate what could possibly happen next.

When the clock next to the bed finally slipped past six-thirty, Willow sat up and looked over at her best friend. Out like a light, and had been since before Willow had come back out of the bathroom. Not that the witch was thrilled to be aiding with the tea thing, but in light of what the Council had done with William’s journal, it seemed like the least she could do for Buffy.

Tentatively, she reached across and shook the Slayer’s shoulder. “Hey,” she said softly. No response. Not like she expected one, not with as tired as both of them had been, but Buffy had been adamant about not sleeping late so they could get a headstart on the Council’s files. She would have to try a little harder.

“Hey,” Willow repeated, shaking her again. When nothing happened, she hesitated, her heart starting to pound inside her chest. The Slayer’s non-responsiveness was eerily familiar, and it took her a long moment to remember where it sprang from.

This was exactly how Buffy had been that morning Willow had woken her to tell her about Giles being missing. It had taken all of the redhead’s power to stir her from sleep then.

“Buffy!” she cried out, fully awake now and standing at the bed’s side. Vigorously, she continued the shaking, desperation creeping into her voice as the minutes passed and not a single sound came from Buffy’s mouth. There wasn’t even a flicker behind her closed lids that she was hearing or feeling any of it.

It was as if Buffy wasn’t even there.

* * *

It was the warmth he was aware of first. Soft, and radiant, pliant against him as it molded to his skin.

He would’ve said he was still dreaming, but the lifting of his lids revealed his waiting bedroom, the tea cup from his nightly taste still sitting on the stand. And yet…the warmth remained, only now it seemed to pulse with its own life, sidling along his back as a thin arm snaked around his waist.

“Did we fall asleep again?” he heard from behind him, a feminine voice so faint and muzzled by exhaustion. “I hate it when we lose our time together.”

William went rigid, all vestiges of his slumber vanishing. Slowly, his eyes crept downward to see the familiar hand resting against his stomach, her tanned arm golden against the white of his sheets.

“Buffy?” he croaked, and was answered with a feather caress—her lips, most likely—between his shoulder blades.

“When did you put your shirt back on?” she started to say, but almost as soon as the words were out there, William felt the tension return to her muscles, the arm that had been holding him sliding back to disappear from his view.
Slowly, William rolled onto his back to see Buffy sitting up in his bed, her eyes wide as they darted around the unfamiliar surroundings of his bedchamber. She was naked, just as she’d been in the dreams, but oblivious to her bared breasts as she finally turned a startled gaze to him.

“Where are we?” she asked slowly. “Where’d the park go?”

“My bedroom,” he replied. “My…home.”

“But we’ve…all our dreams take place at the park. That’s the way they’re supposed to go. Since when do we hang out at your house?”

Slowly, William shook his head. From outside his window, he could hear the familiar clatter of coaches moving down the lane, the distant neighing of horses undercoating them in intimacy. “I don’t think we’re dreaming any more, Buffy,” he said.
DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CXXVI.”

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy and Willow returned to the flat to find out the Council has ransacked it, taking their notes on the divining rod and William’s journal, but when Buffy went into the dreamworld to see William, she ended up waking up in his time, not hers…

“But she made you up,” Buffy said. “You’re not real. You can’t be. None of this can be.”

From the far side of the room, William watched her twist and play with the sheet she now hugged tightly to her slim body. The truth of their situation seemed to have sparked some sort of current through her veins, driving each of her limbs to agitate, as if the extraneous energy would somehow spontaneously produce the answers for which she was searching. He had felt the walls come up between them, solid even while lacking true form, and given her the proper distance in accordance with her newfound fear, but inside, his heart was breaking.

Faced with the reality of William, rather than the dream of William, Buffy had retreated into the defensive shell she’d possessed at their first meeting. It had taken him so long to crack through her trust, to show to her that he wasn’t like the others who had hurt her so, and she’d finally made him believe that she would hold fast to that knowledge, regardless of whether she regarded him as fantasy or not. But now, confronted with the truth, Buffy saw him as something alien, viewing him through dubious eyes as she waited for her own reality to return. It was not a look he’d ever thought to see on her face, though, in retrospect, considering his history, perhaps he’d just been naïve in assuming that.

And that understanding was devouring his soul.

“Why do you say that?” he asked softly. He must tread lightly, he knew, but at least he had the advantage in knowing how her mind worked this time. Perhaps he could save the situation after all. “Did we not prove to each other that what’s real, what’s important, is what transpires between us? What matter is it where it happens?”

“Because the where is supposed to be in our heads, not in jolly old England. Emphasis on old.”

He couldn’t help the question that followed. “Was that all it meant to you then?” William whispered. He had to swallow hard to rid himself of the lump that had formed in his throat. “I was just…a distraction for you?”

She visibly started at his choice of words, and for a moment, he thought she was going to bolt from the room. “She made you up,” Buffy repeated desperately. She seemed incapable of forming any other sentences, clinging to her rationalization with the tenacity she’d displayed during their many talks. Only this time, it was the shattering world around her that she was trying to keep together.

“That’s the second time you’ve referred to this she,” he said. The puzzle pieces were starting to fall into place, and he took a step forward, suddenly eager to share the information he thought could help explain the situation. Maybe that was all it would take for him to get his Buffy back. “You’re
speaking of Esme, aren’t you?”

He hadn’t seen her move that fast since her demonstration with the tree. As her forearm pressed against his neck, holding him in place against the wall, her small body quivered in barely constrained fury. “What do you know about her?” she demanded. “Tell me what you know.”

The force of her hold was causing the world to sparkle at the periphery of his vision, and he gasped for the air she was blocking with her arm. Something in his eyes must’ve cut through her anger, and William was rewarded with a lessening on his windpipe. There was still no way for him to move, however; Buffy was making sure of that.

“She’s been here,” he croaked. “When I couldn’t sleep…”

“She gave you the tea.” Without breaking her grip, Buffy’s head swiveled in search and quickly saw the tray resting on his nightstand. “You’ve been drinking the tea, too.”

“I didn’t believe you were entirely real at first, either,” he managed to say. “I only knew the tea brought us together. That was all that mattered to me.”

Slowly, she pulled away, her eyes now jumping between the empty teacup and William’s face.

“I thought she made you up,” she said in a small voice. All of a sudden, she was no longer the Slayer standing before him, righteous and beautiful in her deadly glory. Now, it was merely Buffy, frightened and unsure but still somehow radiant.

And also naked.

Moving past her to the bed, William pulled the sheet from its moorings and passed it back to her in silence, waiting as she wrapped it tightly around her nude form. “Nothing’s changed for me,” he said. At the swift rising of her brows, he hastened to add, “I mean, except for the obvious, of course. Having you here is more than I ever dared—.”

“You said…at first.” She was careful with her words, still skittish but already wary in the face of his admission, and William tensed at his error.

“Thank God,” he muttered quietly. He’d never been so grateful for a servant’s entrance than at that very moment, any respite—brief or otherwise—a desperate boon for him to collect himself for Buffy’s inevitable queries.

He was halfway to the door when her astonished hiss made him stop.

“You’re just going to let me flash any Tom, Dick, or Nigel who might come knocking?” Buffy asked in disbelief.

His gaze swept over her near-naked body, her improper presence in his rooms made even worse by the clear dishevelment of her person. “Good point,” he said, and gesticulated toward the far side of the large bed. “Hide yourself. I’ll dismiss Meg as quickly as possible.”

He waited until Buffy was secreted from view, and then opened the door, mindful to block the young maid’s perspective on the room. There was no mistaking the way her eyes jumped over his shoulder, or the queer tilt of her head as if she was listening for something. But William ignored both, gripping the doorknob in an anxious bid to maintain normalcy.
“Yes?” His voice crackled and he cleared his throat as discreetly as possible, hoping Meg wouldn’t notice.

“There’s company, sir,” she said. “Mr. Rhodes-Fanshaw and his wife have returned.”

Though he’d retired not entirely at peace with the Watcher, in spite of his sympathy for his elder’s pain, the mere mention of Richard’s name now was all that was necessary to spark the tinder of renewed hope in William’s breast. “I shall be down forthwith,” he rushed, and pushed the door closed on the maid before she could say anything further.

His eyes were bright when William turned back to face a rising Buffy. “There may be something to alleviate some of your distress,” he said quickly. “Some of the events around my waking life have been…unusual, to say the least. The man who is downstairs now—.”

“He’s a Watcher.”

Her foreknowledge took him aback. “How do you know that?” he asked. “I didn’t tell you about…I mean, I was so careful not to…” Each additional word that fell from his lips only caused the line of Buffy’s mouth to thin even further, her eyes growing colder as the depths to which he deliberately withheld information from her sank in. “Yes, he is,” he finally conceded, and had to physically stop himself from shying away when she stepped up to him.

“Why?” she demanded. It wasn’t loud, and it wasn’t livid, but the utterance of that single word ripped into William’s flesh as effectively as if she’d assaulted him with razor-sharp nails. “You heard me explain it all away. Like it was all just a big nothing when you knew all along that it was something. A huge something.”

“Not all along. It’s only been a day or two—.”

“But you still knew. And you didn’t tell me. I thought…you said…you’re the one who’s supposed to…” She stopped as her voice began to betray her inner turmoil with the slightest of quavering, waiting only long enough for her to regain control. “What are you going to do now?” Buffy asked, and William’s stomach plummeted at the coolness of her tone, witnessing the professional Slayer come back to the fore as she noticeably chose not to dwell on the more painful topic of his seeming betrayal of her trust.

“I was going to ask Richard for his aid,” he said softly. “His resources…he could very well have answers to why exactly you’re here.”

Silently, he wished that she’d just acquiesce, that even a modicum of the trust she’d shared with him would return so that he could do this for her. And when she turned away from him, the sheet trailing behind her like a train, a resurgence of hope made him shiver.

“I don’t know what else you might expect me to do,” Buffy said. “Sunnydale might be more enlightened, but streaking down the city streets of London still doesn’t rank very highly in the Things to Do Before I Die list.”

He waited for her to turn back to him, but as the seconds passed, William realized that she was done.
speaking, and that he was only going to be blessed with the view of the back of her head for the time being. Still, he nodded as if she could see him, and backed toward the door.

“I’ll be as quick as I can,” he said, but as he stepped into the hallway, he hesitated, watching her curved shoulders with more than a mournful look. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, not really knowing if Buffy heard him but not needing for it to be. Quietly, he closed the door behind him.

* * *

She felt like someone had reached inside her chest and scooped out its contents with a dull spoon, leaving Buffy hollow and aching as she dropped heavily to the chair by the window. It was hard enough to wake up in the one place she last expected; it was another entirely to realize that the person she’d trusted the most—even if up to just a few minutes earlier she hadn’t believed him completely real—had lied to her about what he knew.

And now he was dragging in the English Inquisition to try and make things better when he knew that everything the Council touched turned to ash.

What was perhaps the most frightening was how relieved she’d been in that fraction of a second between realizing where she was and realizing where she wasn’t. Waking in William’s arms had been both wonderfully liberating and protective at the same time, and Buffy hated that it had been ripped from her all in the space of a single heartbeat.

Her mind was still tripping over the ramifications of her present location when a knock came at the door. She stiffened, and glanced back, her lips tightening as she debated answering the maid on the other side or risking the servant just coming in unannounced to find a half-naked girl on the head of the household’s bed. She didn’t really like either option at the moment.

“Miss Summers?”

It was a different voice than earlier, still female but more ragged with age. It couldn’t be the same maid, she realized, as any member of the staff—and he has a staff, how weird is that?—would know that William was downstairs with his guests instead of in his room. And this one knew her name. How could that be?

Before she could talk herself out of it, Buffy called back, “Yeah?”

The door opened, and in stepped a tall, middle-aged woman, thick white hair pulled into a knot at the back of her head. Dark brown eyes gazed levelly at Buffy, and the corner of her mouth lifted in amused appraisal as she seemed to drink in the Slayer’s appearance.

“You’ve managed to put young William in quite a dither,” the woman said finally.

“Well, I’m not exactly light on the dither scale either, you know,” Buffy shot back.

A smile of amusement. “No, I’d imagine not.”

Her even temper surprised Buffy. There was a calming influence that seemed to surround the older woman, and surety about who she had to be spurred the Slayer to speak again. There wasn’t any physical resemblance, but who else of that age would enter a room so purposefully if the house wasn’t hers?

“This wasn’t exactly how I imagined meeting you,” she said, pulling the sheet more tightly around her. She was suddenly nervous, her stomach a bundle of surprised butterflies simultaneously taking flight. Even though she was currently not a hundred percent with William, she was still anxious
about presenting as best an image as possible to the other important woman in his life. “OK, so I
didn’t actually think I would ever meet you, since you’re not real, and the whole standing in front of
me blows that theory out of the water, doesn’t it?” She was babbling, but there was nothing she
could do stop it now that she’d started. “It’s either that, or Willow slipped some funny mushroom in
my tea last night, which is majorly gross now that I think about it, but still, possible. Well, as possible
as it might be that I can be here in the first place. Talking to you. Or trying to talk, at least. Because
something tells me I’m failing and there’s no hope for extra credit to drag me up to a passing grade.”

The smile widened. “Who do you think I am?”

Buffy faltered. “Aren’t you…William’s mom?”

“Oh, no.” She stepped closer, holding out her hand. “I’m Rose Rhodes-Fanshaw.”

The momentary comfort she’d felt in the woman’s presence dissipated. That name again. “The
Council,” she commented coolly.

A thin brow arched in surprise. “You know me?”

Unsolicited memories of everything she’d learned about the Watcher flickered through Buffy’s mind--Giles’ notes, Willow’s offhand comments while they’d been stealing the Council’s files. She
desperately wished that she’d had the chance to find out more specifics; what was it Willow had
said? Something about the first wife getting killed and the second going missing? Which one did that
make Rose?

And if she really was in the past, was spilling what she knew going to screw everything up? What if
she changed history? She’d seen Back to the Future too many times not to know that a single
decision could change the course of a lifetime, and in spite of the load of responsibility she already
carried, she wasn’t ready to take that one on, too.

“I’ve heard of your husband,” she said instead. So what if it was Hollywood logic? It was the only
logic she had right now. “He’s Richard, right?”

Rose grew thoughtful as she nodded. “Slayers doing Council history as part of their training.
Interesting.”

Obviously, William had told of more than her name. “How do you know I’m the Slayer?”

“Because you’re Buffy Summers. You’re the one William is so in love with.”

She said it so matter-of-factly, as if it was a statement of incontrovertible truth, that some of the ache
at William’s betrayal lessened for a split second. He’d spoken of her. Only after the initial rush of
pleasure had vanished, though, did she wonder, what exactly did he say?

Time to change the subject. “If you’re Council, you should be able to tell me what’s going on,”

Rose nodded. “We can certainly try.” There was a careful slide of her gaze over Buffy’s body. “Isn’t
there something else you’d like as much as answers, though?”

“Clothes,” she replied automatically. “Clothes would most definitely be of the good.”

“Somehow, I thought that might be so.”

The questioning wasn’t going away. She had to ask. She had to know. “William…told you about
us? About…how he felt?"

“Only parts. Until very recently, he’s been a bit possessive of your relationship.” Her confidence faltered. “Your query…it wasn’t we felt you said. Do you not…feel the same?”

“I don’t know,” Buffy admitted. It was pretty much pointless to try and feign ignorance. Besides, there was something about the older woman that made her want to trust her. “Don’t you get it? William is supposed to live in my head, not in some Upstairs Downstairs real world set-up. I was just starting to wrap my brain around how it could be possible someone I’ve only just met could know me so well, when I Rip Van Winkle, except backwards, and everything I thought I knew gets a good snowglobe shake. My world is more Tarantino than Dickens, so if this is real, then that means…that means…”

All the resolve and all the regained strength she’d found since first meeting William dissolved in her mounting confusion. Rose saw it, and with the instinct of a mother hen, took the Slayer into her arms, forcing her to nestle her cheek against her chest before the heaving got out of control.

“Ssshhh,” she said quietly, a strong hand rubbing Buffy’s back in a manner so reminiscent of her Mom. Instantly, the sobbing stopped, leaving her with a pervasive sense of peace, an odd knowing that everything was going to be all right in spite of wondering otherwise. “All that means,” Rose continued, “is that you’ve had a very unsettling morning. We’ll get you sorted for clothes, get some breakfast in you, and then address the issue of your presence here. But, Buffy…” She pushed the Slayer back, forcing Buffy to look up and meet her gaze. “There is no reason for you to start doubting your instincts regarding young William. His is a true heart. When he loves, it’s with everything he has. The loyalty he offers is no less than your own. That’s why you recognize it so.”

It was Mom advice, through and through. Straight to the heart of the matter, with a short detour through the realm of practicality. Buffy chuckled as she extricated herself from the comforting hug. “For being married to a Watcher, you’re not nearly as large with the cryptic as I’d expect.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Good.” She tugged the sheet tighter around her, feeling much more ready to face the reality of being in Victorian England than she had been prior to Rose’s arrival. “Now, what was that about clothes?”

* * *

The only good thing about Buffy still being completely dead to the world—oh, not dead, just asleep, focus on the non-fatal adjectives, Rosenberg!—was that Willow had plenty of time to go through the files they’d filched from the Council, without any constant interruptions of, “I’m hungry,” and “I think there’s a lipstick sale going on at the mall,” and her personal favorite, “I’m positive, Willow. They’ve one-hundred percent proven that reading too much can make your hair fall out.”

It didn’t mean that she wasn’t glancing over at the bed every minute or two, hoping to see some sign that Buffy might’ve moved since the last time she looked. But each time, it was the same old scene, and the longer it stretched on, the more erratic Willow’s thought processes became.

* Maybe it’s a magical sleep, was immediately scolded with the of course, it’s a magical spell, don’t be completely stupid. From there, the witch’s mind hopped from every magical sleeping spell she’d ever heard of, until she’d managed to convince herself that the only way for Buffy to wake was to be kissed by her own Prince Charming.

OK, really need to lay off the caffeine while I’m reading, she thought as she glanced at the empty pot of tea nearby.
In between the irrational means of saving Buffy, she was gleaning some excellent information from the Council’s records. The first thing she’d done was look at the video file, only to discover they’d recorded their interrogation of the book shop owner, just as she thought they might. They’d cast a truth spell on him, to guarantee his honesty in answering their questions, and proceeded to ask everything he knew about Esme.

As it turned out, he had known the elderly witch. In fact, he’d been completely aware of her desire to hook up with Buffy. Willow waited for one of the trio who was quizzing him to ask him why, but they completely avoided the issue, focusing instead on digging around to try and find out where Esme was currently. There, they drew a blank, and no rewording of the question could make Charles budge on knowing nothing about that particular topic.

The files they had on the Council Head who’d been killed were fascinating as well. After the vampire attack that had killed his first wife and the Polish Slayer he’d watched, Richard Rhodes-Fanshaw had turned into quite the caped crusader, taking on the riskiest of missions as he traveled throughout the world, averting nearly a half-dozen apocalypses over a twenty-year period as well as personally avenging the deaths of his loved ones by ravaging the vampire community. It was during those years that he met his second wife, an anomaly who avoided any detailed inquiries by the Council, in spite of her obvious talents for prognostication and sensing magic. The opportunity to run the organization was presented four times before Rhodes-Fanshaw finally accepted, and then, only on the requisite that his wife be his personal assistant.

He’d been in London for just a few years when the incident with the crystal figurines had occurred. The wife was never told about his death; by the time the Council reached the Rhodes-Fanshaw home to tell her, she was gone, never to be heard from again.

All Travers’ notes that she’d read to that point, while rounding out the picture of what had occurred a century previously, managed to definitely confirm one thing for Willow. His focus on this matter was on Esme, not the figures. It was clear he viewed them as harmless, a legacy he’d inherited that he was surprisingly glad to be rid of. Most of his inquiries were into her whereabouts, and the fact that he kept making comments about a missing Giles could only mean that that was just as much of a mystery to him as it was to Willow and Buffy.

She still had over half the files to go through, and the more she read, the more Willow hoped that one of them was an in-depth analysis of who exactly Esme was. What did the Council know about her that they weren’t sharing? How was it she was so powerful? Why were they so interested in the first place?

And most importantly, how could Willow find out how to break the magical hold the dreams seemed to be having over her best friend?

* * *

Esme would kill for even a fraction of her power to return.

As she limped down the hallway to the small room she’d rented in the local pub, she winced against the pain that shot through every muscle, the blood that trickled down the front of her blouse making her want to squirm even more. There were any number of healing spells that would alleviate her injuries, but not even the easiest was within her grasp at the moment. Whatever had drained her powers the previous night had done too good of a job; she was nowhere near being strong enough to try anything again.

It was her own fault. She’d disregarded April’s warning and lingered in the vicinity of the caves, waiting for them to return, hoping that either her magic would come back or that the vampires would
somehow honor the original agreement. So when the pair had turned on her, attacking without warning and sending the witch rushing toward the nearby town, the only thing to save her life was the approach of the rising sun, the distinct sizzle of demon skin being fried accompanied by the stench of scorched flesh. It was little satisfaction in light of her forced flight, and there was nothing Esme wanted more at the moment than vengeance. Or complete cooperation to fulfill her goals. Either one would do.

Unfortunately, both required outside assistance at the moment. It was time for her to ask for help again.

She’d deliberately asked for a room with its own phone, and punched in the mobile number she knew from memory. When the voice mail responded, she wilted, eyes drifting closed as she plucked at the blouse that clung to her front. She should’ve expected not to reach him; after all, things were most likely heating up in London.

“It’s just me,” she said when the message was over. “We need to talk, but you can’t reach---.” Esme jerked when the other end of the line suddenly went live.

“You’ve got some cheeky nerve calling me after you’ve done,” Charles barked. “Did you honestly think I wouldn’t find out about what you did to Ripper?”

She was too weary to deal with the shop owner’s attitude, but the fact that he brought up the Watcher could only mean one thing. “You’ve talked to Quentin.”

“Bloody right I have. He came after me just like you said he would. Not too kindly about it, neither.”

“Ever the predictable one, he is.” Unfortunately for her.

“Not like you, though.” Charles wasn’t ready to give up on the topic just yet. “If I’d known you planned on snatching Ripper, you can bet I’d never have agreed to help. Me and him got too much history for me to be stabbing him in the back like that.”

“Which is why I didn’t tell you. Don’t worry. He’s perfectly safe. I just needed him for insurance in case everything went belly up. Which it has, by the way.”

The silence on his end was deafening, but the fact that he hadn’t hung up yet left a small flame of hope burning inside Esme’s chest. “I did my part,” Charles finally said. “You just count me out of whatever it is you’ve got concocted this---.”

“Quentin interrogated you?”

“Yes, complete with the truth spell you suspected he’d use.”

“So he knows about it?”

“It? You mean, the journal? ‘Course, he does.” His exasperation bled through the phone. “That was the whole point of keeping me in the loop, wasn’t it? So he’d go after it?”

Sighing, she leaned against the headboard. “Damn it,” Esme muttered. Sometimes, she hated being right all the time.

“Oh, now, don’t be sounding like that.” His dander was back up. “I thought you wanted Travers to get hold of the book so that it would take the Slayer out of the picture. Isn’t that what you told me? Without the journal to give her an anchor in this time, she’d be lost in the past.”
“Yes, that was supposed to be how it worked. Except I need her now.”

“And you’re bothering with me…why? You’ve got your Slayer vampire to help you now.”

“Not exactly.”

“I don’t even want to know.”

The unmistakable noise of him moving to hang up the phone made Esme startle to attention.

“Something stole most of my power last night, Charles,” she blurted. under normal circumstances, she would never have admitted to the weakness, but these were hardly normal, and she desperately needed his help. “Without my power, I can’t control April.”

“But you said you couldn’t control the active Slayer, either,” he argued. “That all of Travers’ reports made Buffy Summers too hard to predict. That’s why you opted for the vamp.”

“And now that vamp is out for my blood, and by the time enough of my power comes back for me to defend myself, I’ll be Christmas pudding for the two of them.”

“So you’re looking for a champion of the people to come to your rescue?” Charles mocked. “Guess you should’ve thought of that before you took the Slayer out of the picture.”

“I was rather hoping it hadn’t come to that yet.”

“A day late and a quid short, Esme. Best luck to you.”

More noise to hang up. “Wait!”

Charles sighed. “This is getting old,” he said. “I already told you no. Not after your stunt with Ripper. I don’t care what you promise me this time.”

“All I’m asking for is a little help. I can’t just let April come after me—and you read the transcripts, you know she will.”

“Buffy Summers most likely can’t help you now.”

“No, you’re right there.” Esme took a deep breath. This was where she had to swallow her pride. “That little friend of hers can, though.”

“Who?”

“Willow Rosenberg.”
Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet XXI.”

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Discovering William knew some of the truth about the spell, Buffy has distanced herself from him slightly, only responding to Rose when she came up to see to her; Willow is continuing the research to try and figure out what’s going on, while Esme has contacted Charles to get his help in reaching Willow; and Giles has woken and gone to Anne’s side, though neither has had an opportunity to speak together yet…

As she twisted and turned in front of the mirror inspecting her reflection, Buffy knew she’d gotten lucky. She’d seen too many sepia-toned pictures, and watched the lacing-up scene in “Gone With the Wind” too many times, not to know the horrors women used to have to endure for the sake of fashion. Not that platform heels didn’t have their own dangers, but at least they didn’t cut off one’s circulation like corsets did.

But Rose had forsaken sending for anything like that, opting instead for simple bloomers and a camisole to go with the outfit Buffy currently wore. “This is already difficult enough for you,” the older woman had explained when she’d laid them out on the bed. “No reason to add unnecessary discomfort to your list of ailments at the moment.”

“Giles would be proud,” Buffy now said quietly as her fingers worried the tweed fabric of her skirt. Between that, the plain white blouse with the high collar, and the braid in which she’d done her hair, the young woman looked more scholarly than Slayer-y. “Will wonders never cease…”

She was just slipping on the slightly too-big slippers that completed the ensemble, when a gentle knock came at the door. “Come in,” Buffy said. There was no point in denying her presence in the house any longer. She’d had to practically peel the young maid---Meg---off her with the assertion that she was more than capable of dressing herself.

It opened slowly, and Buffy looked up to see William hovering in the narrow space of the open door. Though he was immaculately dressed in the brown suit Meg had fetched for him, his hair was a tangle of curls, wild and disheveled as if his fingers had been powerless to stay out of them. Behind his glasses, his eyes seemed too large for his face, and the hollows of his cheekbones were even more gaunt, as if he’d been without sleep for days.

Rose’s characterization of Buffy’s effect on him haunted the Slayer as she rose to her feet. …quite a dither…so in love with…a true heart… Guilt for the way she’d treated him at their last encounter stabbed at her gut, and she debated how she could go about apologizing for her behavior.

“Since the hour is advancing,” William said, before she had the opportunity to speak, “I’ve asked Cook to set out a light meal. I’d thought…if you want, or if you’re hungry…meeting with Richard and explaining what’s happened might be easier over food. Or, if you’d rather keep it social, that’s possible, too.”

“It’s not blood pudding, is it?” she joked, hoping that might be enough in lieu of directly expressing
her regret. Surely he’d be able to pick up that she was in a better mood now, right?

He immediately appeared distressed. “I don’t know,” he said in a flurry. “Do you like blood pudding? If it’s not, I’m certain I can get Cook to---.”

She stopped him from fleeing to check in the kitchen by stepping up to him and resting her hand on his forearm. “Stop it,” Buffy said. She had to tighten her grip to prevent him from pulling away. “I was kidding. Whatever it is, I’m sure it’s fine.” She smiled. “Unless it is blood pudding, because you know, I really see enough of people thinking blood is a sixth food group with the whole Chosen thing.”

His eyes searched hers, keen to ferret any sign of mocking or sarcasm. “Are you…were you…I didn’t mean…” Flushing at his inability to articulate, his head bowed to eye her thin fingers on his arm. “The last thing I ever wished was for you to hate me, Miss Buffy,” he murmured. “Please accept my humblest apologies for…for…it all.”

It was hearing him revert to the more formal address that made Buffy finally pull away, the shame at having driven him to such measures overwhelming her better senses. Sure, everything since opening her eyes was pretty much wig-worthy, but at least, being wigged out was a state she was accustomed to. She’d weathered things like this and more, ever since she’d been called.

On the other hand, William was an innocent, in more ways than one. Offering her his heart had been tantamount to entrusting her with his life, for it wasn’t in him to consider any other alternative. Having the unusual thrust upon him so had to have been disconcerting at best, and he’d managed with the conflict as best he could. She only wished she’d been able to see it a few hours earlier.

“I don’t hate you,” Buffy said softly. “I could never hate you. Don’t you know what you’ve done for me?”

In spite of the earnestness of her tone, the corners of his mouth drooped as he kept his gaze locked on the carpet. “I’ve somehow stranded you away from your home, from your loved ones, and then lied to you about the possibility that it could’ve happened in the first place,” William replied. “Trust me. I’m well aware of what I’ve done.”

“Were you the one who made me drink the tea?” she asked. “No. And were you the one who made me find the journal in the first place? No. I could’ve just walked on by and not read it, so you can just stop with the---.”

“Journal?” He looked up at that, not caring now if he interrupted her. “What journal?”

Only then did Buffy remember that she’d deliberately chosen not to divulge how she knew so much about him in the beginning, because she didn’t want to freak William out even further than he had been. Seeing his face now, the color deepening as he waited for her to answer, was exactly the sort of thing she’d thought might happen, prompting her to clamp her lips shut and refrain from making the situation worse by admitting to what she knew he feared.

When she didn’t speak, William brushed past her to cross to his desk, opening the top drawer to extract a familiar leather-bound text. “This journal?” he asked, holding it up for her to see.

She had no choice but to nod, but hurriedly added, “I didn’t read the whole thing. Just bits and pieces. And I thought you weren’t real, remember?”

Long fingers absently caressed the edges of the pages as he studied her. “That’s how you knew who I was that first day,” he mused. His voice was distant, but not as faraway as his eyes, a cool blue that
had softened as he lost himself in ruminations. “That’s why you responded so appropriately all the time. Because you knew exactly how to force me to respond to you.”

“I wasn’t playing you! Do you honestly think that I would do something like that?” The edges of his accusations scissored her softer mood, grating and sharpening until angry glints flashed in the green of her gaze.

“How else is it possible?” William queried. Finally, he looked back up, and the resigned melancholy that resided there was unambiguous. “Don’t be cross about it, Miss Buffy. You would not be the first—–.”

“Stop it with the Miss Buffy crap again!” she raged. She felt like stamping her foot; his continued obstinacy in seeing only the worst in himself was infuriating at best. “Look, I realize this morning kind of threw both of us for a loop, and yeah, maybe I haven’t exactly been Pollyanna in trying to get my head around showing up in Wonderland, but don’t for a second think that I’m anything like the backstabbers who walk around here not seeing how great you are. I don’t play games when it comes to my friends, and if nothing else, you’ve always been my friend, William. OK, so I’m not too thrilled about having the Council dragged in. And lying to me about what you knew? Never cool. But I’m here now, and, like it or not, we’re all we’ve got, no matter how much you may trust Rose and Richard. So, let’s say we just turn today around and move on, OK? Because I hate thinking I’ve hurt you. I don’t want to be one of those people.” She stopped, her anger evaporating, shifting into a sorrow oddly reminiscent of her depression prior to coming to England. “Don’t you get it? I can’t be. And you were showing me again that I was better than that.”

“You are,” he said softly, and then added, “Buffy.”

Such a small step, for both of them, tremulous and demure like a hothouse flower desperate to bloom, and yet the gulf that had separated them at his arrival seemed less chasmal, as if they needed only a short bridge to find each other again rather than the massive span that would’ve been required at the start. She ached to reach out to him, and wondered if he felt the same, but without confirmation, there was no way she was going to initiate it this time. She wasn’t quite ready for that just yet.

“So,” Buffy said instead, “you’re not mad at me for reading your diary?”

He frowned at her query. “Why would I be?”

“Because of the fact that it’s yours, and it’s private? It’s kind of a big no-no to be such a snoop, don’t you think?”

That elicited the first smile she’d seen on William’s face since her eruption earlier. “But don’t you see?” he said. “If I have any words worth sharing, I have them because of you. You’re the one who made it possible for me to capture the words that always proved so elusive, and you’re the one who heard them without contempt. You’re the one who helped me find my voice, Buffy. What are a few more scribblings compared to that?”

The candor of his response bandaged the last of the wounds their arguments had incited within her. It wasn’t enough to forget the misdemeanors of their morning, but it was enough of a balm to allow her to move beyond them with a decorum that William deserved. In the face of the understanding, an overpowering sense of shyness rendered her mute, and she was only able to smile at him before turning back to the mirror one last time.

She pretended not to take notice when he set the book down on the desk, nor when he stepped up behind her, opting instead to absorb herself in the smoothing of her skirt. She felt him, though, the
heat of his body seeping through the thin cotton of her blouse, and silenced the prayer of gratitude that came unbidden at his nearness.

“I must confess…it’s very…extraordinary seeing you like this,” William murmured. His hand ghosted above her arm, carving the shape out of the air as it came up to the plait. She knew his fingers itched to touch it, but their tenuous concord held him back, and it fell again, lonely, to his side.

“I look like I should be teaching in a one-room schoolhouse,” Buffy complained with a wrinkling of her nose.

“They’re only clothes. You’d be beautiful regardless what you wore. But…that’s not what I meant.” His eyes were intent on her reflection when she looked up. “I cannot apologize enough for our…troubles this morning,” he said. “But I can’t say that I’m sorry for the gift of having you here. Even if Richard finds a means for you to return to your time before our meal is finished, I’ll thank every god ever created for giving me these few extra hours. I don’t know what I’ve done to possibly deserve it, but I swear to you, I won’t disappoint you again, Buffy.”

The sincerity radiated from him in sultry waves, so strong that the Slayer wondered how it was she could’ve been so harsh with him upon waking. There was no denying that she wanted to surrender to the simplicity of it by touching William in some way, but while it was that simplicity that had called to her all along, it also scared her. Stepping away from their waiting reflections to break the spell, she couldn’t help but wonder if mirror-Buffy would somehow find the strength to beat the fear and kiss mirror-William until there were no more tomorrows left.

She hoped so.

“Let’s go eat,” she said with more chirpiness than she felt. “Rose and her husband are probably eating the plates by now.”

* * *

Giles held the plate steady for Anne, well within her reach, and watched as she picked at the fruit that had been left for them. He’d woken from a brief nap, stiff and sore from sleeping propped against the wall, to find the food waiting, a covered tray laden with an assortment of cold meats, bread, and fruit, right at his side. As if they’d known, and not cared that their captors were currently sharing quarters.

Or not sharing, Giles corrected. As Buffy would say, just…hanging out.

“You’re being very quiet,” Anne said, wiping her mouth. More color had returned to her cheeks, and her voice no longer shook from the nausea that had incapacitated them for so long. She gestured toward his untouched food. “Are you not hungry?”

“Not particularly,” he responded.

“You’re thinking about our circumstances, aren’t you?” When he looked up at her in surprise, Anne’s mouth curved into a soft smile. “I may not be completely well, but I’m not blind, Mr. Giles. I’m aware that I’m not in my home, and though you’ve made the most valiant efforts to not distress me, I’m also aware that you’re not entirely comfortable with whatever has happened.”

Setting down the plate, Giles removed his glasses, using the edge of his shirt to wipe the lenses. “You’re a very astute woman, Mrs. Freston.”

Those oddly-familiar blue eyes regarded him, slightly blurry without his spectacles, the lines of her
face softened by the same. “You weren’t the one who brought me here, were you?” she asked. “I’m afraid I don’t remember what exactly has happened.”

His hope plummeted at her question. “No,” he replied. “I was rather hoping you would be able to tell me. I have my…suspicions, but that’s all they are.” He returned his glasses to his nose. “You mentioned your son. He couldn’t have something to do with this, could he?”

Anne’s laughter was light and airy, in direct contrast with their predicament. “William? Oh, no. All he’s concerned with are his books and his poetry. He uses more ink in a day than we do tea.”

A scholar. Perhaps he was affiliated with the Council in some way. That would certainly support Giles’ theory that their abductions were related to the crystal theft.

“What about his employer?” he asked. “Perhaps this could be work-related.”

She seemed appalled at such a suggestion. “William’s a gentleman, sir,” Anne said. “He doesn’t work.”

Her curious terminology made Giles pause. It was an antiquated word, one his great-grandmother would’ve bandied about with little hesitation. “How does he support himself then?” he quizzed cautiously.

“The family money is more than sufficient to meet our household needs. And William has simple tastes. He’s not partial to horses, or fancy coaches, or holidays abroad. Just his poetry.”

His first thought was that Anne Freston and her son were members of the gentry. It would more than explain the horse reference. But the second, combined with the slight stilt in her accent and her old-fashioned speech, set off warning bells inside his head.

“Madame,” Giles said, clearing his throat and affecting his most proper manner, “if I might be so impertinent as to ask…what was the last full date you remember being in your home?”

Her reply was automatic, but it wasn’t the month that caught his attention. It was the year. 1879.

“Are you unwell, Mr. Giles?” Anne asked when he fell back against the wall, the lines deep in his forehead as he contemplated this newest information. “Have you been here longer than I?”

He snorted at that. By her calculations, he shouldn’t even be born yet. Or she should be long dead.

There were only three options as he saw it.

One. That Anne Freston had actually been abducted on that date and somehow managed to survive more than a century without aging. Highly unlikely.

Two. That Anne Freston was delusional or impaired in some capacity, confusing the years in her mind. A possibility, but still one he considered unlikely. He’d dealt with the unstable before, and she seemed more than in control of her thought processes.

And three. That Anne Freston had somehow been snatched through time, or he’d been brought back to join her.

It was the last to which he kept coming back. The year she’d left was the same year the figurine
collection had first fallen into the hands of the Council, and since its theft was the only matter that he’d been involved in prior to being taken from London, it seemed far too circumstantial not to be connected.

“Do you have any other children?” he asked.

“No. It’s just William and I.”

“And your husband?”

“He’s been dead since William was young.”

“He didn’t happen to work for the Council of Watchers, did he?”

“The Council of…what?”

It had to be the son, then. Somehow, Anne’s William was associated with the events Giles had been investigating. Perhaps he was the one who stole it, Giles thought.

As she waited for whatever query he would pose next, the Watcher eased into a more comfortable position, offering her a conciliatory smile. “My apologies,” he said. “I’m afraid I’m rather stuck on trying to sort out what’s happened to us.”

“And?”

“And I haven’t the foggiest,” he lied. “Let’s move on to a more pleasant topic, shall we? Tell me about your son.”

She spoke easily of William, telling tales of a gentle boy in love with words, more comfortable in the company of books than of people. More than one story illustrated an intelligent mind, capable of formulating the most elaborate plans---even Giles couldn’t help but chuckle at how a young William decided the best way to sit through church services without getting scolded for fidgeting was to paste himself to the pew using honey, as it was the stickiest thing he knew---only to abandon most of them when impatience got the better of him. The lack of true companions for her adored son was an obviously tender subject with Anne, and Giles was just beginning to suspect that perhaps he’d overanalyzed the affiliation, when…

“…the most dreadful nickname,” Anne was saying. “I don’t believe he heard them discussing his poetry, for I’m sure he would never have agreed to read at my dinner party the other evening if he had.”

“What was it?” he asked, more out of politeness than genuine curiosity by that point.

She hesitated, coloring slightly as her head tilted slightly to regard him. “It’s hardly worth repeating,” she said. “But…behind his back, they call him William the Bloody. For his bloody awful poetry.”

He didn’t hear her protestations that William’s work was hardly awful, and in fact, had improved greatly as of late. The only thing Giles heard was the resounding peal of the sobriquet inside his skull.

William the Bloody.

Spike.

Now he knew who Anne Freston reminded him of. It was the eyes. Spike’s eyes, albeit kinder and
gentler. The cheekbones, too, if he was being honest. The bone structure that made the vampire’s looks so striking obviously came from his mother; he didn’t know how he could’ve missed it before.

“Your son,” he said gently, interrupting her most recent tale of the love poem he’d recited at her dinner party. “Is he a…nocturnal sort?”

For some reason, she found this funny. “Heavens, no. Provided the weather is suitable, he’s often out to sit on the banks with his inks, composing his verses. He very much adores the sun.”

So, not Spike, Giles thought. Or at least…not yet.

It had been vampires who had stolen the collection from the Council. And there had been evidence of vampires when the collection had initially been left in its care. Even though it appeared that Spike—or William—was not yet created, surely the coincidence was just too much to disregard. Perhaps that was why Quentin had wanted Buffy’s input. Perhaps they knew all along that Spike was involved, and since she was the Slayer who had last encountered him, she would be best prepared to beat him in this.

The only difficult part in his theory was reconciling the gentle man Anne described with the brutal killer he knew Spike to be. It went against every hypothesis about the vampire’s origins that had ever been made, and frankly, Giles would’ve dismissed it as complete rubbish if he wasn’t at that moment sitting next to the woman who gave him life. Because Giles couldn’t ignore the physical similarities, as much as he may wish to.

He realized then that Anne had fallen silent, watching him quizzically as he just sat there. “I’m sorry,” Giles said. “Did you say something?”

“I’m merely wondering what it is that’s distracting you so,” she replied. “Have you come up with an idea about why we’re here? Or even what here really is?”

“I’m working on it.” He rose to his feet, swaying only slightly from the leftover effects of the magic. “Will you be all right if I leave for awhile? I want to see what else I might find.”

Anne nodded, stifling a delicate yawn. “I rather feel like a nap,” she admitted. “You will…come back and tell me what you discover?”

“Of course,” came his automatic response.

He just hoped that what he found wasn’t a vampire for a son. He feared that would shatter too many of her illusions.
Richard wasn’t anything like she’d been expecting.

First of all, he bowed when William introduced her, taking her hand in his leathery grip and brushing a courtly kiss across her knuckles. She knew it was the polite thing to do in this time period, but still…*since when does a Council Head care about making Slayers feel like people?*

Secondly, it was the feel of his fingers against hers, the skin worn and rasped, as broken and rough as his clothing was smooth and polished. Watchers read books, and got paper cuts, and had downy-soft palms that knew how to handle a weapon but didn’t bear the callouses of doing so for very long at any one time. They didn’t have fingers that looked to have been broken and reset—more than once—and they sure didn’t have splinters from living with a stake in their grip. But this one did.

Thirdly, when he straightened from his bow to meet her eyes, the corner of his mouth lifted into a sad half-smile that made Buffy feel like Richard was opening a door for her to pass through, welcoming her through an entrance that housed secrets he wished to share, because he knew he could trust her. Maybe it’s a Slayer/Watcher thing, she wondered when her hand fell back to her side. Something innate in order to help harbor hope for a scared young girl newly called.

But she knew that was a rationalization. There was just something about Richard. Kind of like there was just something about Rose. They were most certainly a couple…although a couple of what, she hadn’t quite decided yet.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Miss Summers,” Richard said smoothly.

Her eyebrows quirked at the “finally” and she turned her head to the side to look inquisitively at William. “*How* many people did you tell about me?***”

He colored at her inquiry, but Rose saved him from an explanation by stepping to her husband’s side.

“William’s been quite the gentleman in preserving your privacy, Miss Summers,” she said. “Richard’s only heard the sparsest of details regarding your identity. And those were completely by accident, I’m sure.”

Buffy returned her narrowed gaze to the Watcher. “But you know I’m the Slayer,” she said carefully.

“I know you’re a Slayer.”

“Right. Because there’s already one in this time period.”
“I’m sure you’re hungry,” she said. She gestured toward one of the seats, taking her own without regard to the two men who hovered behind them in wait. After only a moment’s hesitation, Buffy joined her, waiting to start until the others had taken their places.

It was muted, so-polite-it-made-her-face-hurt conversation that carried the quartet through the soup first course. Out of the corner of her eye, the Slayer caught the curious glances cast in her direction by the young maid as she cleared for the next dish, but as soon as their gazes met, Meg bustled back to her duties, carefully avoiding any more contact. She scurried from the room as if she couldn’t leave fast enough, but just before leaving, Buffy saw the maid steal one more glance at the young blonde, curiosity and a little bit of something she couldn’t put her finger on lurking behind her eyes.

It didn’t make returning to the meal any easier. Everything about the arrangement was eggshells, and the longer it went on, the more she could feel it cracking.

Until she did.

“So,” she said, so chirpy it made Willow sound like Oz, “show of hands of everyone who doesn’t belong in this century.” Buffy’s smile was bright as she patiently waited for a response from the startled ensemble, her arm the sole limb to rise. “Just me then? Guess we should probably do something about that, huh?”

William grinned, and then coughed to cover it up when Richard frowned at him, hiding his mouth behind his napkin as his twinkling eyes shyly met hers.

“Before we begin,” Richard said, “we should lay some ground rules.”

Buffy sighed, her smile fading. “Yep. You’re a Watcher.”

He ignored her comment. “Assuming you’re on the same timeline as we---.”

“I am. William’s journal in my time talks about me.”

“Then, we need to take extra care to minimize both your exposure to our time and ours to yours, in order to preserve the timeline as much as possible. Only spare those details that are actually relevant to your presence here, as you see it, and we shall do the same.”

“Agreed.” Frankly, she’d already reached that decision. Even though she only knew generalities, Buffy wasn’t comfortable carrying the information that she did about the fate about the man opposite her. Sometime this summer, he would die after receiving the mysterious crystal collection; even if she remembered the specifics---and boy, would Giles have a field day extolling the virtues of memorizing boring, historical dates with this one---she knew she couldn’t save him for fear of changing the past, and then changing the future. If she wanted a home to go back to, she needed to keep things as close to how she knew they happened as possible.

“Buffy can stay here,” William offered. “I’ll be responsible for anything she might need.”

“What about your mom?” Buffy asked. “I think she might have something to say about a strange woman living in your house.” She seemed to notice for the first time Mrs. Freston’s absence. “Where is she, anyway? Doesn’t she need to eat, too?”

“You haven’t told her?” Richard posed to William.
“Told me what?”

William’s eyes were downcast as his fork suddenly seemed the most interesting thing in the world. “I didn’t want you to worry,” he said softly. “You had enough—.”

“And how many times have I told you I’m a big Slayer and can take care of myself?” she interrupted, back to all-business. “What happened?”

“Mother’s been…missing for several days now. She disappeared the same time your Mr. Giles did.” He looked up at that, his hand coming out to cover hers. “That’s why I didn’t mention it. You were so focused on trying to learn what you could to find your Watcher, that I didn’t wish to burden you further with my own troubles.”

The reference to Giles served to drag Richard deeper into the conversation. “Your Watcher disappeared? Was it temporally-related as well?”

“We don’t know what-related it is. The only thing we’ve learned is that it’s probably something to do with one of the Council’s witches.”

“This has to all be connected,” Rose said. “There are too many coincidences for it not to be.”

Buffy’s lips thinned. There was only one connection between Giles getting snatched and her encounters with William. And with another temporal disturbance surrounding a missing Anne Freston…

“Esme,” she said out loud.

William was nodding, having reached the same conclusion as well. “If she’s the reason we were brought together, it would be logical that she’d be involved with these other temporal folds as well.”

Richard’s gaze darted between the two younger people, brows drawn in concentration, eyes dark. “I believe you two have some explaining to do,” he said sternly.

Avoiding the obvious Ricky Ricardo joke that he wouldn’t understand anyway, Buffy tentatively launched into the story about the tea, relating how she’d found the journal…how Esme had given Willow the spell to induce the dreams…how Travers had told her of Esme’s connection to the Council. It was all done without specifics regarding the theft; she merely characterized her current problems as “Slayer-related vampire crap,” and left out all reference to the history and the crystal figures. The fewer details, the better, Richard had said. Well, she planned on sticking to that.

“What about you?” the Council Head asked, turning to William. “What interactions have you had with this Esme?”

He was uncomfortable beneath the direct questioning, squirming and shifting in his seat. “I met her first at the banks,” he stammered. “She…seemed to know my mother, and I…I…I just talked to her.”

Under the table, Buffy stretched her leg out to reach William’s shin, rubbing her toe along the calf reassuringly. “I thought she looked normal, too,” she said when his surprised gaze jumped to hers. Some of his tension eased at the physical contact, and she let her foot hook around his ankle in a semblance of hand-holding. “And she completely fooled Willow, as well as the head of the Council in my time. I don’t think we need to feel bad about falling for her tricks.”

William nodded, and then his eyes widened behind his glasses. “She had my journal,” he blurted. “During that first meeting, She took it from me…and…said something…” He struggled to remember. “Latin, I thought, or a derivative thereof.”
“An incantation on the journal,” Rose murmured, the first thing she’d said since Buffy had started speaking. She seemed lost in thought. “To provide a conduit through time for you to travel. Ingenious.”

“Yeah, she’s a regular Albert Einstein,” Buffy said. “Does that mean you know how to send me back?”

“Not yet,” Rose said. “Though I fail to understand why you would suddenly be trapped in our time instead of your own all of a sudden. What changed for you, Buffy? Did you drink more of the tea, perhaps?”

“No,” she argued. “Everything was exactly the same—.”

And then she stopped.

It hadn’t been the same. Not exactly.

“They took it,” she said. “Last night was the first time I didn’t have William’s journal.”

“They?”

Her voice was bitter. “The Council.”

Confusion darkened both Richard’s and Rose’s faces. “But that doesn’t seem right,” he said. “Why on earth would they do that?”

“Because it’s physically impossible for a Council guy not to have a secret agenda,” came the derisive response. “No offense.”

When Meg entered the room to clear the half-empty plates, the table fell back into silence, this time mostly uncomfortable from the new information that had been bandied about. For Buffy, guilt about William churned what little food she’d managed to eat, distracting her from the cake that was placed before her for dessert. He’d been coping with his mother’s disappearance without her support, and she’d been too wrapped up in her own world to notice. It didn’t exactly score high points for being an attentive friend, and if she was even going to admit to being a girlfriend, it would probably score negative points there.

“Is that how you got involved with William?” she asked Richard once Meg was gone again. “You’re helping him find his mom?”

“That’s how it began,” the Watcher said cautiously. “But you mustn’t worry about his exposure to the Council. They don’t know of his true identity.”

“They gave you an alias?” she teased William with a small grin.

He nodded, though his eyes remained immune to her kidding. “To them, I’m David Howard,” he said simply, and then stared at Richard with what Buffy would’ve sworn was anger. “Not a very fortunate choice, as it would appear.”

The two men began to argue on what seemed like quite a heated topic, but Buffy was oblivious to the details. She may not have Willow’s smarts, or Giles’ intuition in deciphering the smaller pieces of Scooby puzzles, but this was one mystery that even Daphne could’ve solved, she realized.

William Freston and David Howard were one and the same as far as the Council was concerned. And their records dictated that the latter, and the former if she wanted to be particular about it, had
been the man Richard had named on his deathbed as the deliverer of the collection.

Which meant William was at risk from whatever vampires had been present when the crystal figures had been left in the first place.

And William had mentioned another vampire attack during their dream.

Whatever it was…it had already started.

Fast and furious, the thoughts tumbled inside Buffy’s head, images of a bleeding William lying twisted in their dream park blurring with his desire-darkened aspect when he’d gaze at her after lovemaking. He was going to be hurt somehow in all this, of that she was suddenly certain, and there was no way she could trust that this uneasy friendship he had formed with Richard would be nearly enough to protect him from harm. If she wanted him to remain safe, she would just have to see to it herself, for as long as she was with him.

“Buffy? Did you hear me?” William said gently, interrupting her reverie with a jolt.

“Huh?”

“I asked if there was anything else you wished to ease your stay here. More clothes, perhaps? Rose has offered to send over anything you may want while she investigates the spell.”

“Oh, more clothes would be good.” She smiled at him in assurance, and received one back, but inside, Buffy was already plotting what she was going to need in case William did fall into trouble.

There was no way he was going to get hurt. Not on her watch. Not if Buffy had anything to say about the matter.

She cared about him too much to let that happen.

* * *

No change in a sleeping Buffy meant the hour had officially arrived for Willow to take drastic measures in breaking the spell.

Well, the hour had arrived and gone already, considering she’d had her epiphany just before lunchtime and it was currently mid-afternoon, but it didn’t change the fact that she knew what she needed to do if she wanted to get Buffy back.

She had to find Esme.

And the only way she could think of to do that, without having a Slayer to use as bait, was through Charles.

Finding the shop owner had been ridiculously simple once Willow found his profile in the Council’s notes. Though there had been no response at his home phone number—not that she really expected there to be, but she had to be thorough about finding him, didn’t she?—using his utility bills, she’d been able to hack into the BT corporate database and find another number, this one for a mobile phone issued under a different name but the same billing address, and on a lark, called it.

When he’d answered, she swore her heart had skipped a beat.

He’d almost hung up on her, but after some frantic pleading, Willow had convinced him to hear her out, spilling the story of Buffy not waking and Giles going missing. She thought it was the latter that
had him most interested, and when he’d suggested meeting up so that they could figure out how to
best help his old friend, she’d jumped at the chance, even though she had yet to bring up the issue of
Esme.

She wasn’t so foolish to suggest someplace where she wouldn’t be safe, so had arranged to meet
Charles at one of the many McDonald’s in Leicester Square. And there she sat, perched on one of
the stools in the window as she watched the tourists go wandering by, her eyes straying to the long,
winding line for the half-price theatre tickets booth and then back to the people who passed, and
wondering if maybe she’d gotten confused and was sitting in the wrong fast-food restaurant after all.

“It’s fascinating, isn’t it?” came a voice from behind her.

Willow jumped in her seat, the straw that had been lodged in her mouth scraping roughly along the
inside of her gum as she turned to stare into Esme’s dark eyes. When Willow’s gaze jumped over the
room, searching the crowd for any sign of Charles, the older witch just smiled.

“He’s not here,” she said. “But then again, it wasn’t really him you wanted to see, was it?” She
gestured toward one of the tables away from the window. “Do you mind if we sit over there?” she
asked. “A young thing like you might not have problems with these tall stools, but I’m afraid these
old bones aren’t quite up to the challenge right now.”

She didn’t wait for a response, but went over with full expectation that Willow would follow, sitting
down tiredly in the farthest chair.

Esme really didn’t look good, Willow decided as she moved her fries and vanilla shake to the new
table. Dark shadows made her wrinkled face seem even older, and beneath the high collar of her
coat---and wearing a coat in this summer weather? How much sense did that make?---she could’ve
sworn she saw the edges of a white bandage poking through.

“What happened to you?” she asked before she could stop herself.

“I’d tell you it’s nothing, but that would be a lie,” Esme joked, only to immediately sober again.
“Aren’t you surprised to see me?”

“After everything that’s already happened since we came to London? Not so much.”

“Tell me you’re at least a little nervous. I think my ego would be bruised if you weren’t at least
marginally frightened by my presence.”

“No offense, but after being threatened by a psycho Slayer and then killing a giant snake demon
before he can eat my graduating class, everything else pretty much feels like small potatoes.
Although, if it’ll make you feel better, you’re probably more of a hash brown than a tater tot, you
know, because of the whole magic thing.”

“Well, considering beggars can’t be choosers, I guess I’ll just have to be satisfied with that.” When
Esme shifted in her seat, Willow couldn’t help but notice the wince of pain that crossed the woman’s
face. “You saved me a lot of trouble, you know,” she went on, ignoring her pain. “And considering
time isn’t exactly on my side at the moment, that’s a very good thing.”

“What are you talking about? You’re not dying, are you?” The abruptness of her inquiry shocked
Willow, even as it came out of her mouth, and her eyes widened as she hastened to cover her
clumsiness. “Not that you’d naturally be dying, of course, just because you’re so much older than
me, because we’re all dying if you think about it, and to ask if you’re dying is pretty moronic since I
won the science award the past three years and everything, and…I’ll just be shutting up now.”
Esme smiled at the babble. “You’re a very smart girl, Willow. That’s good. It’ll get both of us very far.”

“Both of us?”

“I need your help. That’s why I’m here.”

A chill went down Willow’s spine. “Oh, no. You’re kidding, right? I can’t help you. You kidnapped Giles!”

“Well, yes—.”

“And the Council thinks you’re public enemy number one because you stole that crystal collection.”

“Actually, technically, I just helped orchestrate the theft—.”

“And that stupid tea you told me about put my best friend in some magic-induced coma. These are not things that are conducive to me helping you in any way.”

But Esme was no longer listening to her, the elder woman’s brows pulled into a frown as Willow’s last statements sank in. “Damn it, damn it, damn it,” she muttered as she began pulling her coat tight around her again to stand up.

“What is it?” Willow asked. Her eyes followed Esme when the witch stood up, although considering how short the woman was, it wasn’t that long of a path. “Where are you going?”

It was as if she was reading her mind. “You want to save the Slayer, right?”

“Well, yeah. Can’t you just…unzap whatever it is you did?”

A tired sigh. “You should know it doesn’t always work like that, young lady. Now, if you’d managed to hold on to the journal for a little longer, we wouldn’t be in this predicament right now, but since you’re worried for your friend, I’m guessing that means Quentin already took it away from you.”

“How did you know that?”

She was walking away, albeit slowly, and Willow had no choice but to hop up and follow her if she wanted any chance of getting Buffy back.

“Because that’s what I wanted,” Esme admitted as she headed for the exit. “Because I needed the Slayer out of the way.”

“And now you don’t?”

“Exactly.”

“So…what is it you’re going to do?”

Esme paused in the entrance, her gnarled hand trembling slightly as she held the glass door open. “We,” she emphasized, “are going to get the journal back. Now hurry it up. We need to purchase a few supplies before we head to the Council building.”

She stood there in shock for a long moment after Esme stepped out into the busy square. “Wait a minute!” Willow called after the witch when she finally came to her senses. She scurried to catch up.
“You want me to break into that place again?”

There was no reply at her side, just Esme’s amused chuckle, and the odd pair of women disappeared into the crowd.
DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CXXXIX.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Esme has approached Willow about helping each other with their problems, while it’s been decided that Buffy will stay with William until Rose and Richard can figure out how to send her back to her own time…

It felt like fantasy, a world derived from castles concocted in Sunday heavens where William spent more time imagining futures of peace and beauty than listening to the vicar’s endless sermons. He knew it wasn’t real, of course, but from where he hovered at the side of the shop, William was just as involved in Buffy’s shoe-shopping adventure as she was, and the idyllic domesticity they presented—albeit false in nature—was addictive in its call for confidence. When she asked for his advice, he gave it, even though his experience with woman’s footwear was minimal. When she made a small joke that would inevitably embarrass the young salesclerk, William chuckled along with her, bolstering her impudence to do it again. And when she deliberately chose the fawn-colored slippers he liked the most, he unconsciously puffed in self-importance. After all, the woman he loved selected what would please him as well; how could he not take pleasure in that?

It was not a trip that had been condoned by either Richard or Rose. Both had expressed their concerns about Buffy experiencing the outside world unnecessarily, but when she’d turned her green gaze to William for support, he knew from the first blink of those long eyelashes that there was no way he could turn down Buffy’s request to purchase her own clothing. They had left the house on promises to return swiftly and to maintain the utmost discretion in their acquisitions, but the latter had only lasted until the first shop, where Buffy had launched into a long and convoluted story as to why an American was staying at the Freston home. William caught the raised eyebrows shared amongst the older salesladies, but Buffy’s surprising good humor was infectious even with them and soon all aspersions were forgotten.

He was still unsure of how things rested between them. In accordance with the tale she’d contrived, they’d maintained a gracious decorum both in the shops and in the coach, never bringing up the topic of her true presence in London or their conversations in his bedchamber. She smiled, and he smiled, and they chatted as amiably as they had always done in each of the dream encounters, and yet… William feared to initiate any physical contact, even if it had been appropriate.

And Buffy didn’t solicit any such involvement, not when she turned to smile at him as he paid for her purchases, nor even when he offered her his hand to assist her into the carriage. She just lifted her skirt and climbed onto its seat on her own, looking back at him in expectation as she waited inside.

Now, they sat opposite each other on the soft seats, the gentle rocking as the horses led the way back to the house lulling William into a slight doze. They had been out much later than he’d anticipated; even now, dusk glistened on the horizon in a rose-colored dalliance with the city, promising a cloudless night and a calmer tomorrow. Richard and Rose would long be gone; William was under instruction to contact them in the morning to find out what they may have learned. Buffy hadn’t spoken of them all day, but more than once, he imagined he saw a sad confusion cloud her aspect, and he knew without having to ask that she was contemplating her circumstances.
The same such look shadowed her eyes now.

“Are you happy with your purchases?” William asked softly.

Buffy nodded. “I guess shopping is one of the transcending time things, huh?” She grinned. “At least I got out of buying one of those corsets. A man invented that, right? Because no woman in her right mind would come up with that kind of torture device. Unless it was to get a guy to wear it.”

He said nothing, but smiled anyway. To be honest, he’d thought Buffy looked divine in the lemon-colored creation the first salesclerk had insisted she try, but her obvious discomfort had kept William from voicing his opinion aloud. It would’ve been…interesting to see her in more traditional wear, but then again, it wouldn’t have been the Buffy he knew and loved.

“I haven’t said thank you yet.” She was watching him, hesitant, her fingers tapping nervously against the window’s edge. “You really didn’t have to buy all those things for me. I mean, I probably won’t be around long enough to wear most of it.”

“It was my pleasure,” he replied. “Tell me when else I’ll have such an opportunity to spoil you so?”

William’s mention of his happiness to have her there guided her gaze outside, away from his face and away from direct contemplation of his emotions. “It’ll be good to get your life back in order, don’t you think?” she said instead. “Get your mom back, work on your poetry, forget all about the Council.”

“Buffy---.”

“I mean, it’s one thing to talk about in our dreams, but the reality? Not so pretty. And I’m sure your mom’s going to be grateful in a huge way not to be mixed up with psycho witches any more.”

He cut off what was quickly turning into babble by leaning forward and taking her hand in his. “Buffy,” William said again, but she didn’t turn to him, only pressed her lips together. “I told you earlier. I don’t regret having you here with me. My life without you? Dull beyond belief. My poetry…before you, every word that came from my pen was hollow, and now…” He faltered. “I’m…sorry you don’t feel the same. I know…this must seem rather…pedantic in comparison to your slaying, but…”

“It’s not that.” Her voice was so quiet, he had to strain to hear her. “It’s just…you deserve to have your whole life to look forward to, and getting mixed up with the Council isn’t exactly a primo first step in ensuring that’s going to happen.”

Her words sent a chill through his veins that was in direct contrast with the warm air outside. “Do you know something about my life to come?” he asked quietly. “Until today, you didn’t believe me real. How many times did we have those discussions while we slept? But now…knowing what you do…I can’t help but feel as if you know something about my future, and that it, it…frightens you.”

When she looked at him then, his first inclination was that it was guilt he detected deep within the green of her eyes. Quickly, though, it shifted, and her brows lifted, her small mouth forming a silent “o” as if a realization had only just dawned. “No…” Buffy breathed, but William knew without having to ask that it wasn’t a response to his queries. Her hand jerked away from his, leaving him desolate in its wake, and she pressed back into the seat cushion as if to distance herself even further from him.

“You do,” he said sadly. “You know something. From my journal perhaps? Or maybe…through your dealings with the Council?”
She was shaking her head, but whether it was in denial of his questions or something else, William was unsure. “This can’t be happening,” Buffy said. “I didn’t…you were supposed to be…oh god, you’re really real, and that means…”

“That means what?” he pushed.

“William the Bloody…”

It was a name he’d never imagined hearing from her lips. “How…did you read that in my journal?”

“It’s true, then?”

She wanted him to lie to her, that was more than apparent. Her eyes gleamed with that hope, her bottom lip trapped by her teeth. But his shock at her foreknowledge of the epithet that he so detested only loosened William’s tongue.

“David Howard was the one who started it.” His voice was hoarse with pain. “I don’t believe they meant for me to know of it. It was...invective of the worst order, in reference to a verse of mine that Mother requested I read at one of her gatherings. ‘William’s bloody awful poetry,’ I heard David say afterward. I refused for quite some time not to do any more readings, but of course, Mother always insisted they were too lovely not to share…”

The tale made her soften, sympathy returning to her face. “I’m sorry,” Buffy said. Something about her tone made it sound like she was apologetic for more than what had happened to him so long ago, but he didn’t press the issue.

“I suppose that explains some of your prior questions,” William mused sadly. “There are details that you know that disturb you.” At the guilty duck of her eyes, he shook his head. “I don’t expect you to tell me,” he went on. “Richard was right about that aspect of your presence here. Any more information than is beneficial to returning you to your proper place will only hurt us in the long term. You shouldn’t feel regretful for not sharing what you know.”

Nodding, Buffy turned back away from William, lost in thoughts he had no privy to. How much of what troubled her was about his future, and how much was about her present, he had no idea, but as the carriage rumbled toward home, he understood that she’d said all she was going to that night. She needed time to think, and though he desperately wished he could help Buffy order her thoughts, he also knew that pressing onward at this point would only serve to drive her even further away from him.

A startled neigh from the horses preceded a sharp jolt of the carriage, rocking both its occupants. It was too soon to be home yet, William knew as he glanced out the window to confirm his suspicion of their whereabouts, but before he could call out to the driver, a familiar voice slithered through the opposite opening.

“I’m so glad our meeting last night didn’t put you off keeping late hours,” April said.

Simultaneously, Buffy and William turned to see the smiling visage of the vampire framed in the window. Though she didn’t wear the demon face she’d shown the previous night, even he could see the predatory glint in her eyes.

“Hi,” the Slayer said before he could speak up, much perkier than she’d been during the latter part of their conversation. “You’re not one of those highwaypeople who rob stagecoaches or something, are you? Because no way am I losing any of my new clothes before I have to. Not when I’ve been out all day shopping for them.”
“Does she not know?” he wondered, assessing the two women even as they regarded each other. Can she not tell April is a vampire?

“That was a swift promotion, William,” April finally said evenly. “Was she only Chosen today?”

“You know I’m a Slayer?” Buffy asked. “Impressive. Was it the attitude that gave me away? Not doom and gloom enough?”

“Let’s just say, it takes one to know one.”

William felt Buffy tense at the admission, and realized then that she’d known all along, toying with the demon just as she’d described to him before. “Do you have a purpose to this meeting?” he asked April before either could further their exchange. It was bolder than he’d been the previous night, but with Buffy so close, he felt surprisingly secure. “I assume you must have a message or something you’d like me to relay.”

She was reluctant to divert her attention from the Slayer, but gradually turned to face him. “Did you speak to Richard?” she asked, and then answered herself. “Of course you did. That’s why you’re choosing to be guarded by a Slayer now.”

“I’m not his bodyguard,” Buffy protested.

“Oh?” This sparked April’s interest. “What are you then?”

Buffy’s mouth opened, then closed as the answer he was hoping to hear failed to come. Instead, she bent over and began sliding off her slippers, an action that drew curious stares from both William and April.

“What?” she said when she straightened back up. “I don’t want to get blood on my new shoes.”

The force with which she hit the door rattled the carriage’s frame, as well as sent both it and April flying back into the night. As William watched, Buffy slipped through the now-empty space to land silently on the ground, reaching around to break off a spoke of one of the wheels to use as a weapon.

She’d demonstrated some of her prowess during their dreams, but the sinuous display he now witnessed cast a pallor over the grace she’d exhibited earlier. The moment April charged Buffy, the Slayer skidded sideways to avoid the collision, whirling with a flurry of fabric from the skirt she wasn’t entirely comfortable in to land a broad kick in the small of the vampire’s back. It knocked April to the road again, but she recovered again almost instantly.

“The moment April charged Buffy, the Slayer skidded sideways to avoid the collision, whirling with a flurry of fabric from the skirt she wasn’t entirely comfortable in to land a broad kick in the small of the vampire’s back. It knocked April to the road again, but she recovered again almost instantly.”

“Someone’s trained you well,” April said with a wicked smile. There was blood staining her lips from where she’d split it on the cobblestone, but she was oblivious to its drip onto her dress as she began to circle the Slayer. “It couldn’t have been William, though. Did he tell you that he tried to run from me last night like a scared little puppy? It was almost funny, except, well, not.”

“Sounds smart to me,” Buffy replied coolly. William was riveted to the determination that made her eyes glow, his heart pounding in his chest as he watched her defend him. “Knowing when to walk away from a fight can mean he lives to fight another day. Didn’t your Watcher ever tell you that?”

“That’s not exactly the lesson I walked away from Richard with.”

The casual dropping of the Council Head’s name startled Buffy for a moment, diverting her attention just long enough for April to surprise her with an uppercut. Shaking it off, Buffy countered the onslaught with her own attack, blocking each hit while letting her bare feet lash out instead.
They were fairly evenly matched, William decided as he watched the two women fight. Where Buffy faltered from the strangeness of her clothing, she more than made up in moves that clearly took April by surprise. The demon was more adept to fighting in the constriction that was the current fashion, but she lacked the resourcefulness of the Slayer’s fighting style, relying more upon strength and speed than ingenuity.

On the other hand, Buffy was sheer magic to behold. At one point, she grabbed the handgrip near the carriage door, leaving William to wonder just what she was going to do next. Before he could blink, she’d swung up and over April’s head, her skirt floating like a cloud behind her, and landed softly on the vampire’s opposite side, her leg shooting out before she’d even stopped moving to deliver a strong kick to April’s back.

A part of him felt like clapping at the spectacle, but even William knew that not only would that be extremely childish, it would also only serve to distract Buffy from what she’d set out to do. The stake had fallen to the wayside during one of their bouts, but when the Slayer pressed her advantage on a downed April, William saw that it had somehow appeared in her hand again, ready and poised to slam down into the vampire’s chest as she straddled her.

So intent on the fight, William never heard the door behind him open. Before he could move out of the way, two lean hands grabbed him by the shoulders and yanked him roughly from the carriage, dragging him unceremoniously around its rear to face the pair of women in the shadows.

“Let her go!” came the voice from behind him. Though he’d never heard the speaker before, the combination of the possessive masculine tone and the demon-cool hands that felt like they were trying to turn his two shoulders into one convinced William that it had to be April’s male companion from the night before. He tried to squirm from the taller man’s grasp, but it only served to make the vampire growl into his ear, the distinct sting of a sharp fang nicking the outer curve.

“One more move and I’ll snap your neck,” the demon said irritably.

At that, William fell limp against the vampire, no doubt in his mind that Nathan would follow through on his threat. After all, he’d witnessed the callous destruction of the small child; a grown man with less sympathetic qualities could hardly be expected to survive.

Buffy was watching the pair of them, her eyes darting from William, to the vampire, and then back to William again. “Don’t tell me you’re this ho’s cavalry?” she asked wryly. “’Cause I’ve gotta say, that lean and hungry look is way overdone.”

“I’ll kill him if you don’t let April go,” Nathan repeated.

William saw the instant Buffy’s grip relaxed on the stake. Confused, her gaze dropped to the grinning mask of the vamp beneath her. “Your name is April?” she asked.

“ Heard of me? I’m touched.”

“Do I have to say it again?” Nathan was growing exasperated with the wait, and William winced as he was yanked even further off the ground. “Your Watcher for April. Last chance.”

The moment of silence was quickly filled by April’s casual tones. “I can see what you’re thinking, Slayer, and yes, you probably could kill one of us.” The menacing smile widened. “But then, you’d lose your precious William, and well, would that sort of fuss really be worth it?”

He wasn’t sure if that was what convinced her or not, but as Buffy pulled back her stake, William was tossed violently aside, falling to his knees as Nathan grabbed April’s hand and pulled her into
the murky night. He knew only the sting of his skin being shredded by the rough stone before shadows began to dance at the periphery of his vision, threatening to overwhelm his wakeful senses.

“Breathe.”

She was right there, guiding him away from the ground to help him lean against the side of the coach. For the first time, William saw the dead body of the driver drooping over the front seat, the stench of the blood that saturated his waistcoat now palpable in the air, and felt the bile rise up in his throat when he tried to do as she instructed.

Shame burned even higher than the churning of his stomach as he vomited in the street. It hadn’t been this bad when he’d watched April kill David, but then again, he hadn’t been held like a helpless kitten by the scruff of its neck and forced to watch the woman he loved back down from a fight merely for the sake of his life. While part of William was thrilled that Buffy valued him so, another part anguished over appearing so weak before her, and he kept his face averted while he pulled his handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his mouth.

“I guess the breathing thing might’ve been asking too much, huh?” Buffy said gently. Her hand was rubbing small circles in his back, easing some of the tension it found, and in spite of his self-disgust at his behavior, William reveled in the gentle touch she was affording him. “You should probably wipe your neck before you lose much more blood,” she added. “I think April’s boytoy got a little too fang-friendly around your ear.”

“Thank you,” William murmured. His skin was clammy in the cooling night air, and his collar stuck uncomfortably to his neck when he tried to pull it away and clean the area with his handkerchief. “Are you all right?” he asked, desperate to deflect some of her scrutiny from his personage.

“Glad I took off my shoes,” Buffy said with a small smile. “But basically, yeah, I’m fine.” Hesitating, she gnawed slightly at her lip before continuing with the question he could clearly see she wanted to ask. “That’s the vamp who killed David Howard last night, right?”

William nodded. “My apologies that you’ve been dragged into this,” he said. “There is a matter of… friction between April and Richard, that, unfortunately, my poor choice of an alias has led me to join.”

“I don’t think you were the one to suck me in,” she said, though it was so low that he doubted it was meant for his ears. Louder, she said, “We need to talk, William.”

* * *

The edges of the pages were softened with age, almost like silk to the touch, but the beauty of the aged journal before him escaped Quentin’s notice as he slowly closed its leather cover. Reading it had not done what he had hoped. Though he now had little doubt that Buffy Summers was somehow dabbling in time travel, the connection between the man within the journal and the events surrounding Esme still escaped the Council Head.

The only correlation he could find was the coincidence of the dates. The young poet who so eloquently scribbled out his feelings on the ancient pages described Buffy’s arrival just prior to the incident with the collection of crystal figurines as quite mundane. There was no mention made of her skills; he spoke of the Slayer as just another woman, though one he was very obviously smitten with. No feats of unusual strength, no tales of monsters bested within his presence. Every word merely chronicled their many, many conversations, what she wore, how she looked…and then everything stopped, just two days after Rhodes-Fanshaw died handing over the collection.
It was almost as if the man had ceased to exist.

He was in the process of having any records of this William Freston exhumed, but that would be a time-consuming process since the comings and goings of an unremarkable young poet over a century before would leave few trails to follow. In the meantime, Quentin was ready to pursue the time-traveling aspect that Buffy Summers had somehow lied about during her interrogation. It meant bringing her back into custody, but considering how easily she fell for Lydia’s dupe, he didn’t presume that it would be a difficult task in the end.

Picking up the book, he casually tossed it into the fireplace, watching as the flames began to blacken and curl the edges. Sparks flew up the chimney, threatening to scatter to the Oriental rug that lay heavy on his study floor, but Quentin was blind to any potential threat. His mind was elsewhere.

The journal wasn’t of any use for him now; lacking details of anything Slayer- or Council-related, it was merely whimsy in light of the tangible proof of Buffy’s blood on the handkerchief he possessed. When the time came to confront her again about her doings in the past, Quentin would much rather be armed with something useful than a collection of anecdotes on the Slayer’s charms.

He just knew that he had to act quickly if he had any hope of discovering the depths of Esme’s schemes.

* * *

They had nearly reached the Council building when Esme collapsed against her. Though the witch’s weight was insignificant under normal circumstances, the sudden burden against her shoulder caused Willow to stumble, almost dropping the small bag she was toting. “Whoa there,” the redhead said, snaking her arm beneath Esme’s in order to steady her. “Is there a crack in the sidewalk or something?”

A gnarled hand clenched at Esme’s stomach, and she groaned against some inner pain. “We’re too late,” she said through gritted teeth.

“What?” Willow glanced up to see the Council building in the near distance. “We’re not even there yet.”

“No. The journal. It’s gone.”

“How do you know that?”

The look she shot Willow was withering. “We’ll have to switch to Plan B,” she said, ignoring the redhead’s direct question. She nodded toward a nearby alley. “Go in there.”

A quick glance at the impenetrable darkness was all it took for Willow to dig in her heels. “You weren’t even that clear on what Plan A was,” she argued. “I’m not going skulking about creepy alleys when I don’t know for sure what I’m doing on a Plan B you’re only now mentioning. I haven’t lived on a Hellmouth all my life for nothing, you know.”

“It’s simple,” Esme said. She began to totter toward the opening. “We’re going to do a locator spell.”

She kept waiting for the older woman to stop, but it never happened. “But you just said the journal was gone.”

“It is.” Only Esme’s voice reached Willow now.

“So what are we going to locate then?”
“Not what. Who.”

Curiosity—and a serious lack of other options—finally drove Willow to follow into the alley. Esme was sitting on the ground, pulling items out of the bag she’d been carrying—a strip of aged silk, a broken pocket watch, a vial of freshly ground sage. “Do I get to know who it is you’re going to locate?” she asked.

The older witch pointed opposite her. “Sit.”

Willow’s nose wrinkled at the debris that was scattered on the ground, but stayed silent, taking out the small towel she’d brought to clean up afterward and laying it out before taking a seat. Once her legs were curled beneath her, she said, “You still haven’t told me what you need me for. You know, except for carrying around all your magic stuff since you’re so…so what do you want me to do?”

“You’re going to do the spell.”

Her smile immediately disappeared. “But I’ve never…you’re kidding, right? I can’t do that. Not without some serious research and mucho practicing, and even then, it would probably go wrong, because let’s face it, when it comes to the magic, I’m not always at the head of the class—.” Her voice trailed into a squeak when Esme suddenly grabbed her hand, yanking her forward across the tableau that had seemingly come from nowhere.

“That was incantation. Repeat after me.”

The Latin phrases that followed were only half-understandable to the redhead, though she caught enough to recognize that it really was a locator spell they were doing. What she didn’t expect, however, was the sudden tug in the pit of her stomach when the incantation was complete, nor the electrical flow that flowed from each of her pores and into Esme’s hand. Her breath caught as a dervish of images began saturating her senses, and she sat, bound to the elder woman, as they slowly began to settle into a discernible pattern.

“Finally, something in our favor,” Esme muttered.

As soon as the magic began to ebb, Willow tore her hand away, the breaking of the contact ceasing the tingling that had begun to burn her palm. “What was that?” she said, her breath suddenly failing her. “You…what did you do?”

“I used your magic,” came the calm reply.

“What? Why? What happened to yours?”

“If I knew the answer to that now, I wouldn’t need you, now would I?” With a wince, Esme rose to her feet. “Come,” she ordered. “We’ve got more work to do.”

* * *

She was bored. If she’d known it was going to be this boring, she would’ve packed more reading materials for her temporary incarceration. As it was, she’d been in the holding cell for less than twenty-four hours and she was already starting to think that she’d just about sell her soul to the first bidder if she could just get out.

She was re-reading the file she’d managed to sneak in when she heard the first noise in the hall. Freezing, she cocked her head as she strained to listen, but could hear nothing but the muffled sound of women’s voices. She was about to go to the door to see if pressing her ear to it would help in discerning who it was out there, when the knob turned, the lock that had been keeping her securely
inside falling to the floor with a clatter.

Her eyes widened at the elderly woman standing in the entrance. “Esme…” she said. “What did---? Oh!”

It was the sudden appearance of Willow Rosenberg behind the witch that surprised her more. “Hi,” the redhead said with an embarrassed smile and a waggle of her fingers.

“You’ve gone completely crazy now, is that it, Esme?” All she could seem to do was shake her head. “Mr. Travers will---.”

“Young will never know,” Esme replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. “But that requires you to stop talking, Lydia, and come with me…”
DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from
Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CXLIII.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Travers has destroyed William’s journal, forcing Esme---
with Willow’s help and magic---to resort to Plan B and release Lydia from Council
hold; Buffy has finally made the connection that William is Spike, and met up with
April at the same time…

She had no idea where to start processing everything. If she’d thought the morning had been
headache-y with the realness, and the Victoriana, and the waking up snuggled up to William instead
of by her lonesome back in the hotel room, Buffy was facing the mother of all headaches trying to
come to grips with everything she’d learned in the past two hours. The biggest thing, of course,
was…

William really was Spike.

Spike was William.

And because she’d slept with William, that meant…she’d slept with Spike.

Except…did she? Did she really?

Hadn’t Angel proved that having a soul made him a completely different person? And Willow’s
vamp self didn’t seem anything like Willow’s human self. And most of the time, William was
nothing like Spike. He was kind, and gentle, and so devoted, and smart, and he liked poetry, for
goodness sake. So, really, she’d only had sex with William, right?

Except she couldn’t shake the thought that she’d had sex with Spike. And loved it.

And, if she was being truthful, kind of loved William, too.

With a frustrated growl, Buffy rolled over in the narrow bed, watching the shadows dance on the
wall from the flickering candle at her side. Had Esme known who she was setting Buffy up with
when she’d left the journal to be found? Was this all part of some master plan that Buffy still didn’t
know? And if it was, what did the mess with the crystal collection and Richard and April have to do
with it all?

Her mind jumped at the opportunity to think about something other than Spike---William, she hastily
corrected. Learning what the mysterious April was---something that the Council had no clue about---
had settled a bunch of the puzzle pieces into place for her. A Slayer turned Vampire, and the entire
incident deliberately withheld from the Council’s records because Richard feared the retribution his
turned Slayer would face at their hands when they discovered the truth.

In spite of the troubles William had experienced at April’s hands, he’d still been sympathetic toward
Richard when he’d related what he knew. “He loved her,” he’d simply said. “I believe part of him
still does. And he can’t bear to have any remnant of what might remain of her to suffer unnecessarily
if he can help it. That’s why he’s spent so much of his life trying to find her and kill her himself. Because only then could he ensure that her death would be a swift one.”

“And now she sees you as some kind of messenger boy?” she’d asked.

He’d nodded. “It’s my own fault, really. I chose the name, and I let David run rampant over my interventions when she arrived. Of course, I had no idea who or what she really was at that point…” His voice had trailed off, a small frown darkening his eyes behind his glasses. “I must admit, I’m not entirely sure why she bears a different name now. I mean, Richard is the one who called her April first. Why would she continue such a falsehood when it’s not her true identity?”

She’d only shrugged, but inside Buffy had been nodding in understanding. She got it. She’d had the proof of it with Angel, aka Angelus, aka Liam. And with Spike.

Damn it.

Now she was thinking about Spike again.

William knew nothing. She’d deliberately refrained from physical contact for most of the day and it had been absolute torture, especially when she knew that simply holding his hand would alleviate some of her stress. After coming to the realization about Spike, however, touching had just seemed wrong---well, until he got sick in the street and then it had taken all Buffy’s self-control not to throw herself at him, he looked so disconsolate.

But what could she really say in explanation? That he was going to get vamped at some time in the future, only she didn’t know when? That his vamp self was a royal pain in her ass whenever he showed up in town and that he would try to kill her so many times, they’d both lose count?

That last question made Buffy bolt up in the spare bed she’d been given for the duration of her stay. Not once had Spike ever hinted that he knew anything about a past they might share, and somehow, she had a feeling that fucking a Slayer was something he’d consider fairly bragworthy. Had she already changed history by getting involved with William? Did all this prevent Spike from ever being?

It had to. Why else would the annoying vamp never mention their liaisons, or suggest that he might know more about her than met the eye? The innuendo that kind of knowledge would afford him would be too great of a gift for him to resist spilling, and Buffy couldn’t think of a single incident where his smirks or snark weren’t justified by the surrounding events. So, not saying anything could only mean that, for him, it never happened.

The possibility that she could be in a different timeline altogether raised its head as she mulled over what a Spike-less world would be like. Nothing had changed prior to her getting stuck in the past, and since she’d slept with William prior to that happening, logic suggested that maybe she’d been wrong in telling Richard that she wasn’t from some parallel universe or something.

Or maybe all those Hollywood movies and physics guys got it wrong, and traveling back in time didn’t really mess things up when you got back at all.

Too many options. So many, she wanted to toss them all into the wastebasket and start fresh. For now, though, Buffy was going to go with the one that she liked the most, mainly because it meant something good came out of this whole situation. There was no way the Spike she knew wouldn’t have gloated about bagging another Slayer, ergo, all of this stuff happening with William now couldn’t possibly affect anything in her world any more than it did prior to getting stuck in 1879. Which had been nothing.
She knew one thing for sure. She owed William an apology. As gracious as he had been from the start, as accommodating as he’d been throughout the day, her behavior toward him—-even in light of the fact that he’d withheld information from her that could’ve proven useful—-had been rude. Her mom would so have a field day with the How could you, Buffy?’s if she ever found out.

Pushing back the heavy duvet, Buffy forgot the slippers that were half-hidden by the bed and tiptoed for the door, straining to hear if anyone was out in the hall. When she was sure it was empty, she pushed it open, the sudden draft billowing her cotton nightgown around her legs, and quickly crossed the narrow space to rap on the opposite door.

“Yes?” she heard through the thick wood.

She waited for him to ask who it was, but when nothing came, she twisted the knob, peeking slowly around the edge in case she was disturbing him.

William sat at his desk, his journal open in front of him, his glasses tossed haphazardly aside. His shirt was untucked from his trousers, the collar undone, exposing the fine curvature of his clavicle, and the distinct downward slope of his shoulders as he rested his head on his hands all but screamed some sort of exhaustion.

“I won’t be needing my tea tonight, Meg,” he said without looking up.

“That’s a relief,” Buffy replied. The moment he heard her voice, William’s head shot up, twisting so sharply to see her in the doorway that she swore she could hear his neck crack. “I wouldn’t have a choice but to think that picking up future girls in your sleep was like a regular hobby for you.”

He rose to his feet, eyes darting past her to the open door. “Is there something wrong with your room?” he asked anxiously. “Do you need for me to send for something?”

“No, no, my room is just great.” Her hands were shaking in her nervousness—-though why she was suddenly so jumpy around William, she had no idea—-and her fingers played with the loose ties that hung from the front of her nightdress. “What about you?” Buffy asked. “Why aren’t you sleeping?”

“I find my mind refusing to cooperate with the rest of me,” he joked half-heartedly. “It has a tendency to do that, unfortunately.”

When she smiled with him, William tilted his head in curiosity for a moment before ducking his gaze. He was…embarrassed. It was then that Buffy realized that not only had her up-and-down behavior of the day left her mentally exhausted, it had also left William questioning just what to expect from her, driving him back to the shy young swain of their very first encounter. After everything they’d been through together, he no longer could predict with any certainty what she might do, and just waited shyly to follow her lead.

He’d never seemed less like Spike than he did right then.

“How’s your neck?” she asked gently, taking a step closer.

His hand automatically lifted to touch the scratches half-hidden by his hair. “Much better,” he replied. He looked at her through his lashes before adding, “Thank you.”

“Let me see.” Closing the remaining distance, Buffy took his hand in hers to pull it away from the small wound, getting up on tiptoe in order to look at it more closely. When her breath fanned across his cheek, she felt William’s fingers tighten as he steadied his nerves, and swallowed when her mouth suddenly went dry.
“It shouldn’t scar,” she pronounced, breaking the contact and stepping away. She looked up to see the color rising in his cheeks, his eyes riveted to hers.

“I hate that you saw me so.” His voice was low and rough, so contradictory to the gentle pleading for understanding that darkened his gaze. “This could all be over for Richard now if I’d only---.”

“If you’d done anything differently, you’d be dead. And that’s the last thing I want…William.”

As he searched her face for some sort of understanding of what exactly was going on, the silence between them stretched from seconds into minutes. “I can’t decide,” he finally admitted. “I know you have…details about my future that frighten you, and while I understand intellectually that knowing those would be wrong, in my heart, I’m desperate to beg you to tell me what you know. Perhaps then I can understand why it is I’ve lost you.”

“You think you’ve lost me?”

“Haven’t I?”

What could she say to that? Denying his feelings would be a slap in the face for him; Buffy was more than aware that she’d been bouncing back and forth in her behavior, and to try and disclaim it would only make things worse.

So she said nothing about his direct question, choosing instead to change the subject.

“I only came over because I wanted to say I’m sorry. About you having to deal with Bitchy Buffy all day. This has been just as big a shake-up for you, too, and it wasn’t fair of me to take out my frustration on you.”

He was shaking his head before she even finished speaking. “I have no need for apologies,” William hastened to say. “Today has been…climactic, to say the least, but you can be certain there are portions of it I’ll treasure to my grave. If anything, I should apologize to you for failing to divulge what I already knew. Perhaps then, you wouldn’t be in your current predicament.”

“Sounds like we should call it a draw,” Buffy said with a smile. “Because we’ve played this round robin game before, and to tell you the truth, it’s getting a little old.”

William nodded, and after a moment’s hesitation, stepped aside to clear a path toward the door for her. “I do appreciate your thinking of me,” he said, his eyes now averted from hers again.

“You want me to go?”

“Never, but you said---.”

“So, can I stay for a bit?” He looked up at that, and Buffy was momentarily flustered by the brilliance of the blue. “You know, just to talk. Like…before.”

“Always,” William replied. “For as long as you wish.”

“Good. I’m glad that’s settled.” The relief that suffused her body warmed the chill that had settled there earlier, and Buffy almost bounced as she perched herself at the foot of the bed. “There’s so much I want to ask---.” She cut herself off in mid-lotus when she saw him staring at her. “What?”

“Are you…comfortable?” he managed to say. He gestured toward the small chair near the window. “Perhaps it might be more…presentable for you to sit there instead.”
Her brows cocked as she looked from William to the straight-backed chair and back again. “Are you serious?”

His color rose again at her amazement, and he began to fidget where he stood, taking a small step toward her only to retreat again, all the while his hands dancing from his hair to his pockets to each other in an attempt to stay busy.

“I must ask,” William finally blurted. “If only not to completely lose my mind.”

“Ask what?”

“Rather than unnecessary apologies, I’d very much like to hear what exactly our situation is. You and I. Before this morning, we were…intimate, and there were moments today if felt as if none of that had changed. But there were so many more…where I wasn’t even sure if we were friends, Buffy, let alone anything beyond that.” He was pacing as he spoke, more agitated than she’d ever seen before. Obviously, this had been building in him for quite some time, and it was her casual ease with his personal space that had finally made him crack.

“You wouldn’t even let me help you into the coach,” William continued, “but now you come to my room, and you touch me as if nothing was amiss, as if…as if you haven’t spent the entire day treating me as if I was just some polite acquaintance.” He held up his hands to cut off any protestations that might ensue. “Which, if that’s what you want, is more than acceptable. I’ve told you this, time and time again. I’ll savor however I can get your company, whether it’s friendship or more, but, Buffy…you have to tell me what it is you want. I don’t know any more, and it’s tearing me apart.”

“What if I don’t know?” she asked. “What if I’m just as confused as you are?”

“Then tell me that. Don’t sweep it under the carpet and try to pretend it doesn’t exist. If you fear my reaction, don’t. I’m not going to run from you, simply because I may not like what I hear. I don’t do that.” He was in front of her in a flash, knuckles bearing his weight on the mattress on either side of her, eyes intent as he leaned in. “I. Am not. Your Angel.”

“No,” Buffy said quietly. “You’re not.”

The scent of his skin assaulted her senses, his nervous sweat combining with the sharp tang of his soap to make her nerve endings throb in a hunger that surprised her. She’d never seen him this forceful before, demanding to have his own desires satisfied first instead of hers, and yet none of it seemed particularly out of character. Because none of what he said was wrong or out of line.

Her admission seemed to cause his fervor to ebb, and the tension in William’s shoulders fractionally eased. “Answer me this,” he said. “And don’t try to avoid the question, or lie to me, because I’ll know. Does your uncertainty hinge on what you perceive my future to be?”

No lies. No avoidance. Was he trying to kill her with this?

“Maybe,” she admitted.

“You don’t wish to see me hurt,” he guessed.

“No, I don’t want to see me hurt,” she countered.

That took him by surprise, bowing him back so that he could more broadly scrutinize her face. “But I would never hurt you,” he proclaimed. “Haven’t I said it enough for you to believe me?”

“No, I believe you,” Buffy replied, but he missed her slight emphasis.
“And still you hold choices I have yet to make against me.” William shook his head. “Our futures aren’t set in stone, Buffy. I have to believe that I would do everything in my power to preserve you from harm. I must. I’ve given you my word, and that’s…it’s all I have.”

“No.” Lifting her hand, she cupped his cheek tenderly. “You have much, much more than that. You’re a good man, William. Don’t let anyone ever tell you different.”

“But is that enough?”

He didn’t have to elaborate. The quiet desperation in his voice, the love he couldn’t hide in his eyes, the slight tremor in each word as he spoke…and she knew.

“It is for me,” Buffy said.

The muscles worked in his throat as he visibly swallowed. “So,” he said, “I’m going to ask again, and I promise that this will be the last of my questions. Are we merely…friends now? Or will you let me love you, as you deserve?”

Every worry that had tormented Buffy since coming to the understanding about William’s potential future seemed to dissipate in the face of his sincerity. She had been able to distinguish between Angel and Angelus to love the former without qualm, even after his return from hell. This, with William, was no different.

“You’d love me even if I said friends, wouldn’t you?” she asked.

“How could I just stop?” he replied, just as quietly.

“You couldn’t.”

“So…are we? Just…friends?”

Slowly, Buffy shook her head. “I think we’ve come too far for that, don’t you?”

The shred of hope that brightened his eyes made her heart leap. “Does that…mean…?”

She stopped him with a kiss, leaning to press her lips to his. He jumped at the initial contact, but it took only a moment for William to surge forward, his hands cupping her face as he devoured her mouth. His tongue was hot, and frenzied, its hunger matched only by the ferocity of his fingers as they slid to tangle in her hair, and he maneuvered to sit at her side on the mattress, not once breaking the seal of the kiss.

The draw of his flesh was all it took for Buffy to slide her hands up beneath the tail of his shirt, kneading the muscles she found before pushing the fabric up onto his shoulders. He broke apart long enough for her to slide it over his head, dark eyes never breaking from the sculpture of her face, and as soon as she’d tossed it behind her, his mouth returned, this time to nibble and taste at the hollow of her throat.

Buffy gasped when his fingers grazed over her breasts, her nipples pebbled even through the cotton, and then squirmed when his hands settled on her hips. A firm tug took her by surprise, causing her bottom to slide forward, and before she could react, her nightgown was pushed up around her waist, her slick thighs exposed to the warm air of the bedroom.

“What are you---?” she started, and then stopped when William pressed his hand onto her stomach, preventing her from escaping as he slid down the length of her body.
His tongue was warm and wet in the trail it forged over her nightgown, searing her through the fabric and making her thighs tremble in anticipation. “Lie back,” she heard him murmur, just as his mouth found the first bare patch of skin along her leg.

“You still haven’t told me what you’re doing,” Buffy commented as she complied with his instruction.

“What I’ve been ravenous for since the first time I touched you,” William whispered against her skin.

Tiny nibbles down her inner thigh left Buffy panting for more, her mind a clamor of color that made the room spin, and she squeezed her eyes shut in a vain attempt to make it stop. This hadn’t been on her agenda when she came over, but damn if she was going to tell him to---.

“Oh…” she breathed when he finally moved his hand from her abdomen to trace the wetness glistening along her outer lips. It was followed almost immediately by the feather touch of the tip of his tongue, and the air in her chest escaped her control.

Though his boldness had grown in leaps and bounds with each encounter they shared, this oral exploration took Buffy by giddy surprise. She was sure that the combination of his earlier frenetic mood and the reiteration of where they stood was the impetus for his hunger, but it was still unsettling and astonishing, leaving her wondering just how far he would actually go, given the right circumstances.

It also left her grateful that she’d foregone the old-fashioned underwear and came to his room wearing only the nightgown.

“Oh, Buffy,” William murmured. She heard him inhale, and his hands quivered where they brushed across the soft skin of her inner thighs. “Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?”

It wasn’t a question that demanded a response, which was just as well, because speech wasn’t exactly possible when Buffy’s lungs refused to cooperate. His tongue had returned, and when it flicked over her clit, her hands clawed into his blanket from the sudden shock of pleasure that shot up her abdomen. It didn’t leave, either. It came back, again, and again, and again, to finally curl around the bundle of nerves in a flood of sensation that made the room reverberate around her.

The irony that her first experience with oral sex would come at the mouth of the least practiced man she’d ever known—well, he’d been the least practiced in the beginning; being a fast learner definitely moved him toward the front of the pack—didn’t escape Buffy. She didn’t care, though. His appetite seemed nowhere near being sated, his fingers roughening as an inadvertent rake along her skin made the Slayer audibly moan.

Unconsciously, she began pushing back against his insistent tongue, grinding against his mouth as William’s fingers slipped inside. Stroke matched with lick, over and over and over again, sliding in and out…up and down…driving Buffy closer and closer to the brink until a catch of his teeth against her clit sent her careening over the edge.

Her scream of pleasure was silenced when William abandoned the musk of her sex to stretch out on top of her and devour her cry with an eager kiss. His throbbing cock pressed against her pussy, but when she tried to reach down to free him, he grabbed her wrist, twisting her arm up and over her head.

He stayed mute when he reached to undo his trousers, breaking away from her mouth to look down at Buffy. Though her pulse was pounding along every inch of her skin, she felt herself falling at the intensity of his gaze, the crescendo of her orgasm still echoing inside her skull. “I love you,” she
whispered before she could stop herself.

William froze. “What?”

She couldn’t take it back now, even if she hadn’t meant to say it out loud. “You heard me,” Buffy said instead, and ground her hips against his, eliciting a groan from William’s throat. “Now…please. Don’t stop.”

His mouth was back on hers at that, taking what she so willingly offered, as he firmly and deliberately guided his cock past her slick folds. In and out he plunged, each thrust driving her into the mattress with a strength she didn’t know he possessed. It was maddening in its regularity, driving and pounding with an incessant rhythm that blurred the world around her, and all she could feel was the feverish thirst of his tongue, the hard column of his shaft.

The litany started the moment William finally began to quicken his pace.

“Buffy…love you…always…so much…love…always…oh, Buffy…so beautiful…” She knew he would complain later at his ineloquence, but in those seconds that stretched into forever, each syllable weighed just as inestimable as his poetry for her.

He came first, his shoulders arching away before bending back so that he could bury his face in the curve of her neck. “I love you,” William murmured again, his final thrusts driving Buffy to a second, or third, or whatever count it was, orgasm. Only when he finally stopped moving did he release his hold on her arm, and he seemed momentarily stricken when he realized how he’d been posing her.

“It’s OK,” Buffy soothed when he started to pull away. She tugged him back down so that his weight was full upon her, smoothing back the sweat-soaked hair that clung to his brow. “I liked it.”

Considering her words, William dropped his head to rest his forehead against hers. “Stay with me tonight,” he said.

She’d been hoping he would say something along those lines, but it didn’t stop Buffy from voicing her question anyway. “What about the maid? Won’t everyone, you know, talk?”

“I don’t care. Stay with me.”

She answered by placing a chaste kiss on the sharp line of his cheek. “What if I wake up back in my own time?”

“Then I’ll have had even one night of heaven. Stay.”

* * *

As soon as she saw the light disappear from the keyhole, Meg pulled back from where she’d had her ear pressed to William’s door, her face hot. She hadn’t meant to listen, but when she’d hesitated at the top of the stairs with his nightly tea and spied Miss Summers disappear into the Master’s bedroom wearing only her nightclothes, the desire to know what was happening had been too great.

Half of their conversation had been indiscernible through the heavy wood, but Meg had caught enough before the mood had changed to know the depth of the feelings between the two. There had been talk in the kitchen after dinner, when William had disappeared with the coach to take their new guest shopping, and while the speculation had been rampant, Meg was almost relieved to hear that it was as simple as a matter of love. Certainly, the shy young Master was worthy of such a thing. He was kind, and generous, and hardly, if ever, raised his voice.
And so far, she liked Miss Summers. The young American didn’t look down her nose at the staff, and more than once, Meg got the impression that Buffy would’ve wished to speak to her if she had the opportunity. Most people who came to the house didn’t even recognize her presence. Well, except for that dreadful Mr. Howard and his unwelcome advances, of course. But Miss Summers seemed like the sort who wouldn’t put up with such nonsense. She would be a good mistress of the house once Mrs. Freston passed on.

Being careful to avoid jostling the tray she’d left sitting next to his door, Meg chewed at her lip as she headed back for the stairs. There would be questions about her long absence, but somehow, telling everything of what she had learned about William and Buffy seemed…wrong. Perhaps a carefully edited version would suffice, one where she simply told of overhearing the declarations of their feelings for each other.

Surely, the truth of their circumstances would come to light soon anyway. After everything he’d done for her, Master William deserved the courtesy of Meg holding her tongue for a little bit longer.

* * *

Slowly, Rose finished brushing out her hair, her eyes weary where they stared back at her from the dressing table mirror. The day had provided more surprises than was normal, and after the unexpected inclusion of young William in the April debacle, she wouldn’t have said that was possible. Yet, Buffy Summers was here, and now Rose had to figure out what the Slayer’s presence meant for the completion of her plans.

Nothing could change. Rose couldn’t risk altering the timeline any more than she already had. She’d spent too many years watching over Richard Rhodes-Fanshaw, and while she’d never predicted falling in love with the Watcher she’d been sent to guide, she was here for a purpose, and that purpose couldn’t be sidelined this far into the game. April needed to be controlled. End of story. And though time travel was not normally accepted among her group, those women who watched the Watchers had deemed it necessary in this case. The cost of not had just been too high.

She started when she heard the light rap at the door, and turned in time to see Richard poke his head inside. “Aren’t you coming to bed?” he asked. “It’s late.”

“Yes,” she agreed with a smile. “I’ll be right there.”

It was late. Her deadline was nigh. Rose only hoped that she could meet it.

* * *

She desperately wanted to ask if there was a Plan C.

Because Plan B?

Scared Willow halfway around the moon and back.

Her hands shook as she lit the last of the candles, causing the flames to flicker in the ebony vacuum of space. She caught Lydia’s raised eyebrow, but the Watcher said nothing, choosing instead to turn her eyes to where Esme was scanning over the contents of the file. For a brief moment, Willow had considered running away from the whole escapade---after all, Esme had admitted that she couldn’t do this without the resource of the redhead’s magic, for some reason---but a sudden flash of Buffy’s still-sleeping body back in the hotel room had stopped her from doing so.

Esme said this was the only way they could get Buffy back.
She didn’t really have a choice but to pray that the older witch was right.

Looking around the bare warehouse where the spell was taking place, Willow announced for anyone who was listening, “I’m ready.”

Silently, Lydia picked up the weapon Esme had made her take from the Council, training it on the patch of floor that had been designated for the job. There were other means stationed around the space, and all Willow could do was hope that it was enough. And that the Watcher’s obvious excitement for the job didn’t impair her ability with the crossbow.

“Why didn’t you just do this in the first place?” Willow had asked after the plan had been explained.

“Because Lydia was the only one I could find,” came the impatient reply. “And she’s the only one I could think of who might have something I could use to focus the spell.”

“So use that for Buffy instead of---.”

“It’s not large enough to contain the magic,” Esme explained. “And besides, I have my own purposes that are of no concern to you.”

Except she was concerned, and it was too late now to do anything about it.

Within the circle of candles, Esme was now seated opposite her, and just as in the alley, Willow’s hand was held tightly in her gnarled grip. At least this time, she knew kind of what to expect, though the idea of the other witch somehow channeling Willow’s magic to cast the spell gave her the wiggins. And hopefully, it wouldn’t hurt as much this time, either. Her palms still itched from the last time they’d done this.

Carefully, Willow read out the incantation that had been written out for her, avoiding the unhealthy darkening of Esme’s eyes. The empty warehouse that had been selected began to fill with wind, hot and dusty as it swirled around and through their tableau. The candles remained lit, however, even when the invocation was complete, and she lifted her gaze to watch the waiting space.

“Is it working?” Lydia asked, speaking for the first time since arriving at the depot.

“It’s working,” Esme confirmed.

“And you’re sure this will help the Slayer?”

This had been a double bonus for Lydia. Aside from the obvious, she’d admitted that rescuing the current Slayer would likely help her regain some of her status within the Council. If Travers learned that she’d contributed to getting Buffy back into active duty from the stasis Esme’s spell had placed her, surely all her wrongdoings would be forgiven.

“For the last time, yes. In order to complete the circle, the Slayer needs an anchor in this time to draw her back. That’s what William’s journal provided, but with that gone, I need to enchant something else of his to give to her.”

The air in the waiting space was thickening, darkening with mass, and Willow’s heart thumped wildly inside her chest as she watched.

Black.

White.
More black.

And it began to take shape, until the unmistakable form of a man appeared crouched on the floor, most of its body hidden by the midnight leather that draped over it.

Esme smiled, slowly rising from her seat. “Or William himself,” she added gleefully.

A pale hand splayed to the concrete, steadying an uncertain balance, and as the wind died, a familiar bleached head shook as if to clear it.

“Bloody hell,” Spike muttered, the two words echoing inside the warehouse.
Give Me Welcome

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CX.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy and William have reconciled, while in present-day, Esme had summoned who she thinks will solve all of her current problems…

The contents of his stomach threatened to revolt as his fingernails clawed into the cement floor, only fractionally steadying the room’s incessant swaying. Spike knew he’d drunk a lot, but it wasn’t the cheap swill he’d nicked from the Chilean bartender that was responsible for his current discomfort. No, this was strictly the result of someone messing about with magics---on him, no less---and to say that he was little bit pissed off at being their guinea pig was like saying the soddin’ Queen was just a little bit English.

And just as soon as the floor stopped pitching, he was going to rip out the throat of the witch responsible.

Out of the corner of his eye, the flicker of candles was interrupted by a shadow passing in front of them, and he turned his head to snarl at whoever it was approaching.

“The sickness will pass, William,” the old woman said casually. She was completely unfazed by his attitude, and continued to advance until she stood just beyond his reach. “It’s best not to move until it does.”

Lip drawn back in a sneer, Spike deliberately shoved against the floor, propelling himself upwards until he was vertical and the gloom of the warehouse was visible all around him. He ignored the sudden desire to vomit across his boots and instead swallowed the bile back down as his vampire visage came to the fore.

“Don’t know what your game is,” he growled, “but the rules just changed.”

An arrow whistled through the darkness as he began to charge, embedding itself in his thigh. Howling in pain, Spike skidded to a halt and yanked it out, golden eyes intent on the figure that emerged from the shadows.

“That would be unwise, Mr. Freston,” the blonde woman said. A crossbow was trained on his chest, and she was expertly reloading another arrow as she gazed at him through her spectacles. Everything about her screamed Watcher, but it wasn’t that observation that cast a pall over the vampire’s anger.

“The name’s Spike,” he said slowly. It had been a long time since he’d heard anyone refer to his real surname; when he needed an identity, he always opted for something untraceable. He wanted nothing to do with the human sop he’d once been.

The old woman wrinkled her nose in distaste. “I would’ve thought you’d find that too common, William.”
It wasn’t that he disliked being called by his original name; it was the familiarity in which she used it that made Spike bristle. “Look,” he said, “I don’t rightly know what this is all about, but if you could just point me in the direction of the nearest pub, I’d be willing to overlook whatever insanity seems to afflict your little Addams family here.”

Her dark eyes locked on his face, so piercing that he would’ve squirmed if he didn’t know she was only human. “Don’t you know me?” she asked.

“Should I?”

“It’s been a long time for you, but…” Another pause while she continued her scrutiny, this time circling around him like she was appraising him for purchase. Spike followed the revolution with her, head lowered and eyes gleaming dangerously beneath his ridged brow, until they were both back in their original position.

“There’s no doubt you’re William,” she said. “A vampire now, but still…William. So it must be your memory that is suspect. You’re sure you don’t remember? You knew me as Miss Esme.”

“I’m sure you were a right catch, and if Dru or me ate your beau or something, well, that’s just the way the cookie crumbles, isn’t it? But I’m tellin’ you---.”

“No, you would’ve known me looking exactly like this.”

She seemed so sure that Spike actually stopped to look at her closely again. Only a little slip of a thing, skin wrinkled with advancing years but eyes still sharp and inquisitive. For a moment, the faintest of flashes made him pause, his vampire mask slipping away as his head tilted in contemplation, but then it faded, and he was left repeating his denial.

“Could we have made a mistake?” the Watcher asked behind Esme.

“No, but this certainly does make things just a bit more interesting,” she replied.

“Does interesting mean we still get Buffy back?”

The inclusion of the third voice---one he hadn’t anticipated in his concentration on the two women in front of him---made Spike’s attention jerk back to full-speed, his chin snapping up as his gaze slid around the old witch.

“You!” he exclaimed, finger pointing in accusation. Willow shrunk back further into the shadows, even though he hadn’t moved an inch closer to her. “I should’ve known the Slayer was behind all this! That fuckin’ little bitch! No wonder Dru was so nutso for thinkin’ she could see her all the time, floating and all that nonsense. Wait ‘til I tell---.”

“Ms. Summers isn’t responsible for your presence here, William,” Esme said evenly. “I am.”

His eyes darted between the cowering redhead and her elder. “And Red here’s joined up in the Future Wiccas of America Club?” he commented. “I don’t think so. Where the Slayer goes, she goes. And vice versa. Had enough firsthand experience of that not to fall for whatever line you’re tryin’ to hawk.”

“She’s telling you the truth, Spike,” Willow said. “Buffy has no idea we did this. Do you really think she’d let me be hanging out here all willy-nilly without her being around as back-up?”

The witch had a point, even if it was a small one. “But you said something about gettin’ the Slayer back," he said cautiously. “All this hocus pocus still’s somehow tied to her, isn’t it?”
“Yes.” Back to Esme. “I’ve brought you here to make you a trade. One you should find very difficult to refuse.”

Spike snorted. “Not like I haven’t heard that one before.”

“Has anyone ever offered you the opportunity to kill a turned Slayer?”

He had to give her credit; Esme sure knew her timing. “There’s no such thing,” he said, carefully watching the Watcher behind her for a reaction. “Council of Wankers makes sure of that when one of ’em bites the dust. Too unpredictable, I always heard. ‘Course, that’s half the fun, but then, they’re not exactly in it for the fun, now are they?” Another deliberate slide of his eyes over the Watcher, and this time, Spike would’ve sworn he saw her blush. “Not sharin’ with the whole class, are we?” he taunted her.

His tongue tsked in reproval. “Sneaky and double-dealing with the enemy. If you weren’t one of them, I’d almost like you.”

“We didn’t know—,” the Watcher started, but immediately shut up when Esme raised her hand.

“Lydia is all too aware of Council policy,” she said. “As am I. And the Council only destroys turned Slayers when they actually know of their existence.”

“You’re tryin’ to tell me one of them slipped past the Wankers’ radar? Find that a little hard to believe, luv.”

“It’s not that difficult when her own Watcher lied about the circumstances of her death for the official records. For them, April was just another vampire, and Masia was long buried. But, surely, you must remember that.” At his blank look, she added, “Richard Rhodes-Fanshaw? Does that name mean nothing to you?”

“Just that someone’s mum and dad probably had too many sticks shoved up their asses.” This game that she was playing about his memory was starting to wear thin. “Look, as fascinating as your little offer sounds, I think you got the wrong guy. I don’t know anything about—.”

“Do this for me, and I can return your love to you, once and for all.”

For being no bigger than a toadstool, she sure as hell knew how to take charge of a situation. And how in hell did she know that he’d been stewing over losing Dru? For a moment, Spike’s eyes flickered to Willow’s pinched face. She had to be the one to know that was a bargaining chip. She’d sat there and listened while he’d cried his drunken eyes out over his dark princess. More than anyone else, she’d know how much getting Drusilla back for good would mean to him.

And, he had to face facts…the prospect of going after a turned Slayer was certainly appealing, even if he did think Esme was a few cards short of a full deck. And having a Watcher in the mix—a not unattractive, obviously interested in him even if she did take a shot at him, Watcher—gave it an air of credibility that he might otherwise have ignored. Still…

Again, Spike’s gaze wandered to the redhead. Anything involving Buffy Summers never turned out in his favor. If he had half a brain, he’d walk away from this deal right now, before he lost a little bit more than his pride.

Unfortunately, it was the other half that seemed to be in control of his mouth at the moment.

“So far,” he said, “I seem to be the only one benefiting from this little arrangement. You said something about a trade. What is it exactly you want from me?”

“It’s not anything you haven’t done before, William,” Esme said with more than just a little
smugness. “I just need you to save a Slayer.”

* * *

She would giggle if she could hear his thoughts at that exact moment. But as William watched Buffy sleep, his fingers trailing up and down her arm—because not touching her for as long as he had the opportunity seemed inherently wrong—he couldn’t shake the belief that she had somehow saved him. Having her trust in him, for surely she had to in order to allow him the luxury of loving her, was the salvation from mediocrity that he’d always yearned for. No vile words from callous concomitants could harm him for as long as he knew Buffy saw him as a man of value.

Those had been her words, after all. “A good man,” she’d said. She believed it; why shouldn’t he?

Part of him was mildly ashamed for his coarse taking of her flesh, devouring the succulence between her legs that had driven him mad with want since the first time he’d touched her and then pinning her to the bed to ravish her as if only his physical needs were what mattered. A smaller part wanted to smile in pride for having the nerve to do so, even if it had mostly been provoked by his raging frustration at her dallying to respond to his questions, because just a few days ago, he would never have been secure enough in his desires to act on them in such a way.

And a much smaller part, one that he had to be certain to keep locked away from Buffy’s scrutiny lest it drive her to do something foolish, was whispering, “Please don’t ever leave me.”

Intellectually, William understood that she had to go. She didn’t belong in his time, just as he didn’t belong in hers. The world was ordered to proceed along certain paths, and the magic that had been used to bring them together was dangerously close to butchering those courses. Richard’s assessment of how careful they must be not to do anything that would further damage it was correct, as far as William could tell.

It didn’t mean he had to like it.

In fact, the longer she stayed, the more he detested the idea.

With Buffy gone, life would return to the mundane ritual of waking, and tending to his mother—and struggling with the verses that always seemed so clumsy and shallow beyond the Slayer’s presence. Gone would be the rush of excitement that made his spirit scamper like a newly-freed foal every time Buffy walked at his side, and gone would be the sense of satisfaction that hearing her laugh and smile with him brought to his heart. The days would again be cold and gray, and William would have no choice but to continue existing in them.

It shouldn’t be this way, he rationalized. They loved each other. She had told him, with her words and with her body. Surely, those with such commitment for each other deserved to be together.

But he’d read enough literature and poetry to know that that wasn’t always the case. How often did love go unfulfilled? How often did the hero have to sacrifice himself in order to preserve his paramour’s safety? For every tale with a happy ending, there was one that wept with tragedy, and William had a sinking suspicion that their romance landed in the latter category.

Gently, he allowed his fingertips to graze over the upper swell of her left breast, eliciting a soft moan from Buffy’s throat. A smile played on her lips while she slept, and as he continued to stroke her ever-so-soft skin, she turned her head so that it nuzzled deeper into the protection of his shoulder.

There would be raised eyebrows in the morning, William knew, and the gossip would surely spread throughout the community about how young Freston was carrying on with that American strumpet
who was staying with him, but he didn’t care. He hadn’t been lying to Buffy when he’d disclaimed the rumors her sharing his bed would generate; if he could, he’d marry her on the spot just to prove to one and all exactly what his intentions were.

The random thought made his hand halt in mid-stroke. Why couldn’t he marry Buffy? Not only would it be the honorable thing to do in order to legitimize the duration of her stay, but it would also prove to her once and for all that nothing she may know of his future could ever counter how assuredly he’d fight to protect her. Though he lacked specific details of what it was she feared—other than knowing she believed it would hurt her—William had to believe that having given her his word, nothing could deter him from it. In that, he’d been most sincere. If he didn’t have his word, then, really, what did he have?

Already, ideas were starting to take shape, plans began and schemes formulated. Nothing fancy, he decided. There wouldn’t be enough time for that. Just a simple ceremony where he could declare his love for her. Perhaps he could even write a little bit of verse to share. Buffy always seemed to appreciate that, and it would show everyone just how sincere he was in his feelings.

Impulsively, William leaned down and took Buffy’s mouth in a delighted kiss. There was no response at first, but as his tongue swiped over her lips, they parted to allow hers to tangle briefly.

“Mmmm,” Buffy moaned, rolling onto her side so that their torsos were pressed together. She pulled back from the caress as her eyes fluttered open, lids still heavy with sleep. “Is it morning already?”

“Not yet,” William whispered. His hand brushed back a tousled lock of blonde hair, hooking it over her ear before allowing his palm to cup the side of her face.

“I’m still here,” she murmured, letting her lids fall closed again.

“You’re still here.”

“Aren’t you tired?”

He chuckled. “If you’re asking me to choose between being aware of every minute I have with you, or sleep, you’re asking a very foolish question.”

Buffy smiled with him, letting her head drop back to the pillow. “I like your bed. It’s comfier than mine.”

“It’s yours for as long as you wish to stay.”

Her eyes opened again at that, this time slightly more alert as they scanned his. “We have to go see Richard and Rose in the morning about what they’ve figured out in getting me back. You know that, right?”

“Of course. That doesn’t negate my invitation, though.” Letting his hand slide down the side of her body, William stopped at her waist as he tugged her even closer against him. “I’m fully prepared to make the most of whatever I can get with you. One of these days, you might actually start believing that.”

The sadness was starting to return to her eyes, and before he could allow her to continue articulating that voice of Slayer reason that so permeated her existence, William bent in for another kiss, commanding her to silence with every taste of her delectable mouth.

“No more dwelling on what will be too bright to ignore come morning,” he whispered when he broke away. His lips skated across her jaw to the fine shell of her ear, and he breathed in the glorious
scent of her hair as he felt the room begin to spin beyond his control again. “For now, I just want to stay lost in you, where all that matters is you and I, and witches who do miracles by bringing you to me don’t regiment our every thought. Agreed?”

He felt her nod and promptly returned to drowning in her kisses. In the back of his mind, though, revenants of his proposal still stirred, congregating with the fears that Buffy would somehow either disappear before they could come to fruition or that her obstinacy in maintaining appearances and the timeline would bar them from happening. Surely, he could find a way. He was not a stupid man, even if he was a trifle impulsive. Convincing her to accept his vow just had to be possible.

* * *

Giles hesitated outside Anne’s door, exhaustion bowing his shoulders. He would’ve much preferred returning to her room with good news, and while he had more information than he had prior to leaving her side so many hours earlier, none of it was optimistic. If it weren’t for his assurance that he would return to her, Giles would almost have foregone knocking at all, choosing instead to return to his own accommodation and attempt to reason through their situation through without the cumbrance of a woman dragged straight out of time.

However, he did make a promise, and though he may not care for the creature her son would become, he already found himself liking Anne too much not to honor his word.

Please be asleep, he thought as he knocked. Those wishes were squashed when he heard the distinct sound of bed squeaking, followed by the soft padding of feet. She astonished him by opening the door, her face pale and drawn but her eyes alert in spite of being tired.

“You’re up,” he said redundantly. For some reason, barging in as he had earlier seemed rude in light of her improved health, and he lingered in the dark hall as she smiled up at him.

“As are you,” Anne replied. Her hands held the front of her dressing gown together, and though she kept the door between them, there was an ease to her demeanor that surprised Giles even further. “I’d thought you’d retired for the evening.”

“I’ve been searching our…” For a moment, he faltered. What did he call this place? Prison? Fortress? These were negative connotations and not ones that would be conducive to alleviating any stress Anne might be feeling regarding their situation. “…quarters,” he finished. “I’ve only just come back.”

Some of her weariness was stripped away at his words. “Have you found a way for us to return home?” she asked eagerly, and then hesitated as another, darker thought came to mind. “Is William here as well?”

“No,” Giles said. “To both questions, unfortunately.”

“Oh.” Anne’s face fell, and she quickly appeared her age again. “Do you know where we are, at least?”

He sighed, removing his glasses to rub tiredly at his eyes. “I wasn’t able to find a means out,” he explained. “We seem to be in a subterranean level of an ancient manor. The end of this corridor has a tall stairwell that leads upward, but I couldn’t find any means of power in the upper levels. What I could see before the light failed me was that wherever we are, it doesn’t appear to be inhabited. Except for us, of course.”

“But…if it’s a house, there’ll be doors. And windows.”
“None of them open. And the glass in the panes is unbreakable.” It pained to have to admit defeat. He’d spent too many minutes trying to find new and inventive ways to shatter the windows, all to no avail.

She quieted, obvious thoughts flashing through her head. “But the food,” Anne finally said. “It’s coming from somewhere. Surely, there’s a servant who’s taking care of such matters.”

“No,” Giles repeated. “There’s only us. I’m certain of that.” Taking a deep breath, he ignored his misgivings about the propriety of his upcoming question, and asked, “Do you believe in magic, Mrs. Freston?”

The transparency with which Spike had worn his thoughts and emotions was clearly inherited from his mother, he realized. If he so chose, Giles could literally catalog each disposition as it passed behind Anne’s eyes, the apprehension segueing into skepticism, only to be assaulted by a truth she couldn’t deny before merging into a timid concession.

“This might seem forward, Mr. Giles,” she said, stepping away from the door as she held it farther open, “but I’d very much like for you to come in. It seems as though there is much we need to discuss.”

* * *

The first thing she noticed when she stepped off the platform was that London smelled different.

A century earlier, the city’s scent was worn like a proud mantle—sweat, and blood, and sewage, and more blood, and the heat of thousands of bodies pressed together in tiny spaces. Walking through its streets had been an explosion of sensation, leaving a vampire so heady with power and desire that it was simple to forget to be smart about a kill. It was why the Council made London its home. The demons were drunk on their own stupidity.

Now, however, it was an entirely different matter. Now, April’s senses were assaulted by petrol fumes, and curry, and a mishmash of colognes and perfumes that made her eyes burn, and, even though sunrise was still an hour off the horizon, already the honks and exhausts of the vehicles of this time were shattering her eardrums.

“Tell me again why I bother with this city,” she muttered as she began heading for the exit. It was impossible to keep her disgust from her voice; even the aged security guard near the door heard her.

Nathan was right at her heels, their bags slung over his shoulder as he loped along to keep pace. “We could always cross the Channel,” he offered. “Think of how long it’s been since we’ve done Paris.”

“And you’re sure she came here? I mean, her scent was all over that Welsh train station, but she could’ve just used London as a pitstop. She might even be in Paris, for all we know.”

“She’s here,” April replied grimly. “You told me she needs a Slayer for whatever power mojo she’s lined up, right? That’s why she agreed to help you release me. And where else do you go shopping for a Slayer but Slayer Headquarters itself?” She stopped on the street corner to survey the familiar Council building in the distance, shaking her head at the sense of dread that was curling around the pit of her gut. “God, I hate this town.”
She kept her eyes glued to his back, every nerve ending on alert for a sudden shift where Spike might whirl around in a swish of black leather and decide to heck with the deal he’d struck with Esme and have himself a Willow-shaped Scooby snack. It wouldn’t be the first time, and just a brief flash of memory of that night in the Factory was all it took for Willow’s fist to curl tighter around the stake clenched in her hand. At least this time, she had a weapon. The crossbow would’ve been much more deadly, but she couldn’t carry that and her bag of magic stuff, and still have a smidgeon of hope to actually be able to use it without shooting herself in the foot.

“Why do you get Lydia?” she’d demanded when they were packing at the warehouse. “Why can’t I have the Watcher bodyguard?”

“Because I need protection,” had been Esme’s cool reply.

Willow’s eyes bugged. “And I don’t?”

A cool slide to where the vampire was smoking near the entrance preceded the shake of the witch’s head. “William knows we need you,” she said. “And by your own admission, you’ve survived encounters with him before.” She’d patted Willow condescendingly on the cheek. “You’ll be just fine.”

Fine she said, Willow groused silently. What’s so fine about walking through Underground tunnels with a hungry vampire who violently hates the person he agreed to do this for? Which made no sense, except for the fact that Esme had agreed to get Drusilla back for him and that made Spike all kinds of happy.

“So, Summers needs me, eh?” His smirk almost glowed in the darkness of the warehouse. “Guess some things never change.”

“Only because Mr. Travers is a grade-A poophead who seems to hate Buffy just as much as you do,” Willow couldn’t help but shoot back.

“Mr. Travers doesn’t hate Ms. Summers,” Lydia interjected. “Everything he’s done has been for the greater good. Surely you can see that.”

“Oh, yeah, because burning books is always for the greater good,” Willow commented. “Found any pretty swastikas lying around in his office lately?”

“You’re allowing your prejudices to color your opinions---.”
“My prejudices?” Now, she was getting riled, all her fears and all her frustrations about the situation with Buffy, Spike, and Esme focusing on the unsuspecting Watcher. “Listen here, missy—.”

“Lovely little crew you’ve got here,” Spike said casually to Esme, hands stuffed deep inside his pockets as he watched them bicker. “Feeling a little bit Bligh today?”

“That’s enough,” the witch said to the two women, who fell silent under her stern glare. “Now, William…have we got a deal?”

“Well, let’s see. I get to chock up another notch by killing a turned Slayer, I can put this Dru cheating nonsense behind me once and for all, and I get Little Miss Stick-up-her-ass beholden to me for pullin’ her outta whatever fire she’s got herself into this time?” He grinned. “Hell, yeah, you got a deal.”

Personally, Willow hated the deal. She’d hated the deal when Esme had first brought it up; she’d hated it when Lydia had jumped into the fray with both feet and so much gusto that the redhead had thought she’d have an orgasm on the spot at the possibility of being in such close proximity to Spike; and she’d hated it for every second Esme had stolen her magic to make it happen.

“Stop lookin’ like I just killed your best friend,” Spike said, shooting a glance back at her as he rounded a dank corner. “I’m the bloody cavalry, remember?”

“Don’t remind me,” she muttered. Out of the corner of her eye, a whiskery scuttling made her hands twitch, and she unconsciously stepped just a little bit faster, closing the gap between her and the vampire.

“Frankly, I gotta admit to bein’ surprised the witch brought you along for the ride,” he went on to say.

It was all she could do not to sigh in defeat. *Oh, great. Spike’s in one of his chatty moods. Lucky me.*

“I mean,” he continued, “I know your little dabblin’ helps out the Slayer back in Sunnyhell, but face it, that Esme’s a big gun to your little water pistol. I didn’t suss out anything was wrong back at that Chilean bar ‘til I was plastered to the floor of the warehouse. Granted, she’s a spot cracked thinkin’ I should know her—.”

“That’s because you do.”

It came out before she could stop it, mostly because she was tired of listening to him go off on the memory thing. Though she’d been holding on to that last vestige of hope that Spike really wasn’t Buffy’s William, seeing his reaction to his real name had been all that was necessary to squash the pipe dream flat. Willow didn’t understand why he didn’t remember what had happened—unless maybe it was some other-dimension thingy where Buffy was meeting a different William, in which case having *this* William wouldn’t work to get her back, and oh, she was going to stop considering that possibility right now because that way led to badness and loss of hope—but in the grand scheme of things, it didn’t make much of a difference, did it, because here she was, and there he was, and god, how could Buffy ever be in love with him? And whoa, was she going to wig out in huge massive quantities when she finally woke up and realized that it had been Spike all along. That was one show Willow did *not* want front row tickets for.

It took running into Spike’s motionless back for her to realize he’d stopped moving, and was watching her with that same intensity he’d leveled at Esme each time she’d brought up knowing him. “What?” she demanded, lifting her chin with a defiance she didn’t feel.
“Always thought you were the smart bird,” he said. “So I’m thinkin’...there’s a twist to this little bit of O. Henry that someone’s not sharin’.”

She felt the color leech from her cheeks. Both Lydia and Esme had warned her before they did the spell about not letting Spike know too many details about the situation; information gave him power, and he was one vampire they couldn’t afford to get the upper hand. Besides, what good would it do her anyway? He didn’t remember anything that had happened—or was happening, or whatever, and boy her head was starting to ache thinking of all the potential paradoxes—so it was better just to play it cool like Esme had said. They couldn’t afford for him to go off half-cocked for whatever reason until after he’d done what they needed.

Frankly, Willow was against any kind of cocking when it came to Spike, but then that came as a result of being on the wrong end of one too many broken bottles, now didn’t it?

“Oh, look,” she said, pointing at the sign on the wall with the brightest smile she could muster. “This is our stop. Time to go get you a room, Spike.”

And before he could stop her, she rushed past him to disappear through the exit, the first time she’d risked having him behind her and out of her sight since leaving the warehouse.

* * *

Something was up. Red knew it. That nutter witch Esme knew it. Hell, even the Watcher bird knew it. The only one out of the loop was Spike, and he was beginning to wish that he’d ignored the pain from the arrow and the disorientation from the spell and just killed the lot of them while he could.

Scratch that.

He was already there.

The look on Red’s face before she’d fled for the upper levels of the hotel had been all the confirmation he’d needed to know they were holding back on him. Considering his present circumstances, he was none too pleased with the idea of being in the dark on any of it. Sure, the prospect of taking on a turned Slayer made his body resonate with anticipation, and hell, hadn’t he already proved he’d do just about anything to get Dru back? It was the Buffy Summers part of the equation he was having problems with, and for some reason, Spike suspected that she was the root of whatever it was they weren’t spilling.

From the corner of the hotel lobby, Spike watched Willow wait in line to speak to the front desk about getting him a room near hers. He wasn’t too keen on holing it up in the pit of London, but Esme had been vague on when he’d be taking this April chit on.

“She’ll show,” had been all the witch had said, like it was fucking preordained or something. At least he’d laid his own terms out there, plain as day, that he wouldn’t lift a finger for Buffy until he got what he wanted. And that they’d be footing the bill for any roof over his head. And that he got carte blanche to do whatever the hell he liked during his off time.

Though why he had to stick with Red, he still wasn’t too sure on.

Wonder where the Slayer took off to, Spike thought distractedly while he fidgeted in his spot. And wonder why it is they need a vamp bloodhound to get her back.

His nose twitched. Something about the lobby was getting under his skin, and he shifted his weight once again, fighting back the urge to slip into game face. It was something in the air, a dynamic perfume of intoxicating vim that hinted with a promise of war. Not strong, but—-.
Spike stiffened.

It was Slayer.

More importantly, it was *Buffy*.

Well, that didn’t make any soddin’ sense. With a scowl, Spike’s gaze swept over the crowd, trying to discern where exactly the scent was coming from. Why would they need him to bring the Slayer back if she was right under their noses? It wasn’t very strong, but it was there, nagging and annoying now that he’d identified what exactly it was. His chin lifted when a turn of his head directed him to the hall that led to the ground floor rooms, his body stiffening and his cock hardening as he concentrated on the smell.

There it was.

Willow was still nowhere near the front of the line when he glanced back. *Can finish this here and now*, he thought. *Then they’ll have no choice but to follow through on their promises.* Not for a second did he doubt Red’s commitment to their deal. She may be the slaymate of the month, but she had that same sense of cockamamie fairness Buffy sported. She’d honor the contract that had been made, whether she liked it or not. And who could tell? Maybe she’d be all extra-grateful for his getting her best friend back so much sooner than they’d planned. Maybe he could add to his pot of goodies for this good turn.

For someone who’d been so skittish walking beneath London with him, Willow didn’t even notice when Spike slipped out of the lobby and into the proper corridor.

All it took was a matter of following his nose. Down the narrow hall twenty feet…make a left…another eight feet…and the scent that had been growing stronger with each step started to wane.

Spike stopped, swiveling to look at the door he’d just passed. A “Do Not Disturb” sign hung from the old-fashioned knob. From behind the heavy wood, the very slow, rhythmic thud of a heartbeat accompanied the Slayer smell there was no point in denying. He frowned.

*What’s she doin’ in there? Meditating? Never figured her for the cerebral type.*

He contemplated what his options were. If the lot didn’t know where Buffy was, that probably meant she was either hiding from them of her own free will or someone else was hiding her. Either way, knocking at the door probably wouldn’t do him a lick of good.

*God bless public places,* he thought as he twisted the knob in his tight grip, snapping the lock that held it in place.

The interior was dark, and Spike immediately switched into vampface in order to navigate down the narrow entryway. Oh yeah. This was Buffy’s room. The whole place stank of Slayer.

Never mind the fact that his entire body was rock hard at the prospect of seeing her. It had always done that in the presence of Slayers, the fervor at what was impending exciting him beyond belief. And, as much as he may hate her, Buffy had always been the worst of the lot, all sinuous gold and so damn vital that it made the poet in him threaten to rear his insipid head, while at the same time making him feel like there wasn’t anything he couldn’t do. It was one of the reasons why he was always so willing to take her on. For some inexplicable reason, he always went into a fight with Buffy convinced he could win.

*Fucking little bitch.*
The moment he saw her curled under the blankets, Spike froze, the other aromas in the room exploding into his consciousness.

Nutmeg and citrus so entwined it made his body soporific.

Blood and sweat, heady as if from a recent fight.

And the unmistakable scents of sex, both Buffy’s and another’s, mingling in a not-so-long-ago afterglow, that made Spike’s cock twitch and drip inside his jeans.

*Slayer got a boyfriend* was the first thought that was able to register past the initial onslaught, which immediately merged into *Where the hell is he then?* Her heartbeat was the only one in the room, and try as he might, Spike just couldn’t sniff out a male presence. Well, not a male body anyway. There was no mistaking the smell of semen that emanated from the bed.

Her face was flushed with sleep, and the slow, rhythmic pounding of her heart that he’d attributed to meditation was the result of a deep slumber. *She fucked herself out cold*, he thought, and then his lips uncontrollably quirked into a half-grin. *Not bad, Slayer. Not bad.*

He almost didn’t have the heart to wake her up, but he had a job to do and damned if he was going to give the witch an excuse not to pony up. Stepping forward to the side of the bed, he kicked at the stead bolted to the floor, nudging the mattress slightly as if rocking her would do the job.

“Slayer,” Spike called out. Not too loud. For some reason, he had an urge not to make it such a shock. When she didn’t move, though, he kicked harder, repeated her name just a little bit louder.

Still nothing.

“Bugger,” he muttered with a frown. What had happened here? She wasn’t stirring; there were no self-righteous protests about not wanting to wake or even an unconscious acknowledgement that someone was disturbing her rest. It didn’t seem like any post-coital nap he’d ever heard of. It was almost coma-like.

“Slayer,” he said softly, crouching down at the side of the bed. This close, he could see the gentle rise and fall of her chest, a measure that beckoned him to join in, and Spike had to ball his hands into fists not to reach out and push back the hair that had fallen across her cheek. God, she was beautiful. Breathtaking, even. He forgot that sometimes when his bitter thoughts turned to Sunnydale and the nightmare that had been his tenure there. Probably because she always had her mouth going, spouting off that Chosen dross or aiming well-honed sarcasm in his direction. Briefly, he flashed on what kind of California girl she’d be without the slaying badge, but couldn’t quite place it. For some reason, he saw her in a plain white dress, her hair tumbling freefall around her shoulders.

She’d probably hate it. Not couture enough.

Didn’t mean she still wouldn’t be magnificent in it.

Fuck.

Being so near to her was messing with his head. It was that, or the witch’s teleportation spell still making things go sideways and upside-down. He should just grab the Slayer and shake the life back into her. It wasn’t as if she couldn’t take it.

He really, really would if his muscles would just work.
But they wouldn’t.
And so he just watched.

* * *

OK.

Not wanting to have Spike hanging around had been mega bad.

Losing him was even worse.

_Esme’s going to kill me. Right after Buffy kills me. Except, oh yeah, she can’t, because she won’t come back, because I LOST SPIKE!_

He was nowhere to be found when she’d turned away from the desk. She’d immediately poked her head outside to see if he was having a cigarette under the front awning, and then spent the next five minutes rushing around from corner to corner inside the lobby, opening doors when she couldn’t see him right away and even venturing a daring dash into the men’s restroom to see if he was hiding in there.

It was only when she’d exhausted all the options minus the door to the tunnels that had led them from below that she realized the only other way out was the hall that led to hers and Buffy’s room.

_Please be OK, please be OK, please be OK._

Her sneakers pounded against the worn carpet as she rounded the corner, and she almost passed out when she saw the “Do Not Disturb” sign lying forgotten outside the slightly ajar door. “Nooooo,” she breathed as she pushed her way in, and froze when she saw the vampire crouching at the side of the bed.

“Spike!”

Her sudden shout made him jerk back as if scalded, whirling with a blaze of anger to glare at her. “Jesus, Red!” he barked. “Give a bloke a little warning next time!”

“Get away from her, Spike,” Willow warned, reaching for the stake she’d stuffed inside her pocket. Her attempts to look menacing were thwarted when the wood got caught on the inner seam, and she had to tug against the grain in order to free it from her pants.

Spike relaxed, rolling his eyes. “Save it,” he said. “Nothin’ wrong with your precious Slayer.” His head swiveled back to gaze at the blonde on the bed. “Except for the Sleeping Beauty routine, of course.”

“What were you doing?” Warily, she stepped around the far side of the bed, muscles tense and ready to play tug-of-war with Buffy if the need arose.

“Tryin’ to wake her up.” There was a sobriety to his response that she didn’t expect, and Willow frowned as she tried to find some double meaning in his words. “Had about as much luck as you did, I reckon.” He looked up then, and her breath caught in her throat at the naked confusion that lingered in the blue, blue eyes. “This your handiwork?”

“No. Yes. Well, kind of.” She exhaled, deflating from the sudden release of adrenaline in her limbs. “It’s a long story.”
“I’m beginning to see that.”

She couldn’t help but ask. “You didn’t kill her. She’s all defenseless and just lying there, and…why didn’t you kill her?”

Spike shrugged. “Well, that wasn’t the deal, now was it? S’posed to be ridin’ in on my white horse and all. That Esme doesn’t seem like the type who’d fall for the ‘oops, I accidentally ate her’ excuse, either, and since she’s got some serious mojo in gettin’ me here in the first place, it wouldn’t exactly be smart of me to go pissin’ her off, now would it?”

Willow refrained from mentioning that it was her mojo that had done the dirty work, and instead nodded in abstract agreement. It still didn’t satisfactorily explain why he hadn’t at least tried to hurt Buffy, but maybe it was better not to look a gift vamp in the mouth.

“Come on,” she said, holding out the key that she’d gotten from the hotel desk. “I need to show you where your room is.”

For a split second, she thought he was going to turn her down, but then he nodded and stepped away from the bed. “You bunking in here then?” he asked as they both walked for the door.

A quick glance over her shoulder was accompanied by a distasteful wrinkling of her nose. “No,” Willow replied. “I thought about it, but…it’s kind of…ooky, what with Buffy being out cold like that. It just seems…wrong. I got another room for me for now.”

Spike shook his head. “You humans. So fussed about a little sex. You shouldn’t hold it over the Slayer that she didn’t get a chance to shower before you knocked her out. Not like it’s not perfectly natural or whatnot.”

He was out the door and waiting for her in the hall before what he said sunk in. “Huh?”

* * *

Buffy watched him get dressed, pulling his trousers up over his slim hips, watching the fine cotton of his shirt stretch across the breadth of his shoulders. They had both slept in, far too long, but while she had rushed around like a madwoman to get ready for their meeting with Richard and Rose, William had been absolutely languorous in his grooming, humming under his breath while he washed his hands, playfully flicking some of the water in her direction when she teased him about dawdling. He was acting as if he didn’t have a care in the world, and while it was nice to see him happy instead of miserable, his loitering was maddening.

“Can afterglow be a little quicker, please?” she asked. “Rose and Richard are going to think something’s up if we don’t show soon.”

He smiled at her gibe, dropping the tie he’d been fighting with to the desk before curling his arm around her waist to pull her against him. The outline of his erection was obvious even before William pressed his pelvis to hers, and his breath was a tickle in her ear when he bowed to nibble her neck.

“Something already is,” he whispered.

Buffy could feel the embarrassed flush of his cheek against hers, even though his growing boldness meant that he kept a firm grip, and she couldn’t help but smile as she leaned into him. “I’m going to start thinking you only want me around for the sex,” she joked.

He went rigid, pulling back to look down at her with something akin to panic in his face. “Have I been too demanding?” he asked fervently. “You know I love you, don’t you? It’s not just—–.”
Her fingers on his lips quieted him. “I’m kidding,” Buffy said. “You’ve proven to me more than once what you and I are all about.”

Softening at her understanding, William lifted his hand to play with the loose tendrils that had already managed to escape her braid. “Before we leave…” he started, and then stopped, a small worry line drawing his brows together as he seemed to chew on his words.

“Before we leave…what?”

He took a deep breath. “There’s a matter…of some significance, that I’d like to discuss with you. And before you say anything about it not being appropriate, I’d just like to preface it by saying that I’m not mad, and I’m not being too impulsive, contrary to what you may think.”

“There’s something that I want to talk about with you, too.” She’d been waiting for an opportunity to bring it up all morning, and had decided that waiting until they were at the Watcher’s would do if it would hurry William up, but with him in such a conversational mood, Buffy figured it was probably better to get it done now rather than later.

His head tilted in curiosity, and though she could see the desire to opt for his subject matter battle in his eyes, his good breeding won out, and he merely nodded in acquiescence.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s about…last night. With April. About the fight.” It all came out in a rush, the bottling of how strongly she’d felt about protecting him the previous day returning to prominence in her mind as the words tumbled forth. “I want to teach you how to defend yourself in case it happens again. Being around Richard, and being around me for however long I’m here, and not knowing what the deal is with your mom…I’d just feel better if you knew what to do in case you got attacked again. One of these days, you won’t have anywhere to run to, and I don’t want to see you get hurt when that happens.”

Mentioning his previous flights? So not the way to go, Buffy thought when William stiffened and pulled away. Dark shutters fell behind his eyes, and his head ducked as he turned to his tie on the desk.

“This isn’t some macho thing,” she hastened to add. Her hand curled around his arm to force him to back. “I know you’d protect me if you could---.”

Oops. OK, that was worse.

“What I mean is---.”

“I know what you mean.” His voice was low, roughened by barely restrained anger and ache. “You don’t think I haven’t been aware of my shortcomings ever since you told me the truth about who you are? I know I’m a coward. I know my first instinct has always been to run, and to hide, because I’ve been trained very, very well, Buffy.” He lifted his head then, and his eyes burned her as they locked on her face. “But I would do anything to ensure your safety. I would die for you, because you’ve shown me what life could be like. I thought you understood that.”

She did. She really did. She just needed him to be safe. It was the only way she could leave him behind.

“You’re not a coward,” Buffy said softly. “You have no idea how brave you really are. Just because you don’t know how to kill a vamp doesn’t mean anything. But I am not going to let you be stupid, either. April is dangerous. She knows you. More importantly, she can find you. You can’t trust
vampires, William. You might think you’re safe because she’s decided you’re useful for now, but all it takes is for her to wake up one day and go, ‘Oh, I think I’m going to have a little poet for dinner tonight,’ and then, poof! You’re dead.’

“I’ll protect myself---.”

“By letting me show you,” she finished. She stepped closer. “I don’t know how long I get to stay here, but I do know that evil doesn’t take vacations, or sit on the sidelines while the good guys warm up. I can do this for you, but you have to let me. I can’t…I can’t go back knowing…” Buffy stopped, fearful of saying too much.

William was silent for far too long, regarding her with an odd mixture of disquiet and adoration that made her want to squirm inside her shoes. Finally, he asked quietly, “Do you know what one of the first things I ever noticed about you was?” When she shook her head, he said, “Your eyes. What an amazing shade of green, and how wondrously ancient they were. As if you’d seen the end of the world and lived to tell about it.”

Her smile was wan. “Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“Perhaps. Maybe…more of an observation. Last night, you were frightened to open up to me because of what you know. Today, you’re frightened for the exact same reasons when you have no need to be. I know you feel as if you carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, Buffy, but it doesn’t have to be that way. I’m willing to share any and all that you trust me with. You do trust me, don’t you?”

She nodded, mutely.

“And you trust that I’d do anything for you?”

Another nod.

This seemed to satisfy him. Bending at the waist, William brushed his lips across her cheek, allowing his mouth to linger near her ear as he murmured, “I refuse to be the source of any of your pain, my love. Promise that you’ll stop worrying about what hasn’t even happened yet in my life, and I’ll do whatever it is you ask of me. Agreed?”

The relief swelled inside her. “Agreed.”

He was slipping on his jacket by the time she remembered.

“What was it you wanted to talk about?” Buffy asked curiously.

There was a moment where he paused, his eyes shifting to the side before returning to her face. “It’s nothing,” William said, and settled his hand in the small of her back to guide her toward the door. “Come. Let’s not be even later than we already are.”
Whereof Are You Made

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet LIII.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: While being put up by Willow, Spike has discovered some of what is going on with Buffy, while William has agreed to undergo some defense training in order to appease Buffy’s wishes…

Every revolution of the carriage wheels tightened the crush around William’s chest, an escalating tempo that forced his heart to pulse so loudly that he was certain Buffy could hear it at his side.

Every revolution took them nearer to Richard’s home, nearer to the answers she sought, and nearer to the gaping loss William was convinced would be left in his life once she was gone. London had never seemed so small to him before that ride; briefly, he mused whether it would ever seem large enough for him again. How does one disappear in a city where borders no longer exist?

Every revolution sealed his fate just that much tighter.

Outwardly, William maintained a neutral mien, smiling appropriately when she would squeeze his hand in reassurance, commenting on the architecture she pointed at through the open windows, offering his handkerchief to cover her nose when they passed a particularly foul portion of town. It was simple to do; after all, he’d spent the greater part of his life keeping up appearances for his mother, and while they often didn’t fool the more astute gentry, Buffy was too wrapped up in her own little world to notice his distraction.

Because inwardly, William raged at the injustice of his entire situation.

Where was the equity in offering him a moment of blissful salvation, only to snatch it away in a fit of karmic pique? Prior to Buffy, not one person beyond his own household had ever bothered to look beyond the guise he presented, to see the passion of a man desperate for love but too frightened of spurning to risk asking for it. She had seen through his attempts at concealment, and liked him anyway---loved him, by her own admission. How could he be expected to just hand her back, to a world where the men in her life were blind to what she had to offer, where her responsibilities shaved shards from the moments she was allowed peace…

…to a world…where William wasn’t?

How he wished he had the fortitude to revolt against what was expected of him. Nothing would satisfy him more than to march into the Rhodes-Fanshaw home and announce in no uncertain terms that he was ceasing all communications with Richard’s precious Council, that Buffy was staying and that William was man enough to discover the truth about what had happened to his mother, and Richard and the rest of the world could just go to hell with their vampires and their demons and their magical teas that tore the fabric of time, because William had his own life to lead, with enough human monsters to shame their history books, and he was going to do it with the woman he loved at his side, damn it.

And Buffy would realize that she could stay after all. That this new and improved William wasn’t the
fool who needed to be rescued at every juncture. That he was worthy of standing at her side—not to lead the way, for Buffy had more than proven she was capable of doing just that—but to provide his support in helping her in any way he could. That they could be partners, in every sense of the word, and he could live out his days knowing the warm touch of the woman he loved.

It played out beautifully in his head.

Just like his fantasies always did.

Decorum kept him in his seat as the coach rolled to a stop in front of their destination. Though the desire to act may swell inside him, William knew he would never act on it. Buffy had made her wishes more than clear, and it was impossible for him to deny them. The prospects of marrying her that had kept his spirit so focused during the night had their polish slightly tarnished by her accidental dismissal of his ability to defend himself, but he nursed them, nonetheless. It would merely require careful timing, he reasoned.

He smiled as he held out his hand to assist her out of the carriage, and warmed slightly when she smiled back.

Now, however, was not the time.

* * *

She paced in front of the closed door, feeling kind of like one of those fathers from the fifties walking the length of a hospital waiting room waiting for news of an impending birth. All she needed was a box of cigars to pass around, and Willow figured she’d be all set. Except the news she was waiting for wasn’t nearly as cheery as a baby, and Spike was the only one she knew that smoked, and no way was she going to let him anywhere near Buffy until she absolutely had to.

She didn’t care what Esme claimed about Buffy being safe around him.

When an elderly hotel guest rounded the corner, Willow came to a halt in front of the room, plastering a wide smile on her face while she looked her best to appear nonchalant, and didn’t exhale again until after the stranger had disappeared. There was nothing wrong going on inside, but somehow, she just couldn’t shake the impending sense of doom that had settled thickly around her, like that Eskimo parka she still had hanging in the back of her closet back home.

Spike’s observation about Buffy had sparked all kinds of wrongness in Willow’s head, spurring her to call Esme as soon as she’d stashed the vampire in his room and locked herself in hers. The witch had seemed blasé about the potential of the situation, but agreed to have it looked into, mildly alleviating some of the stress that was wracking the redhead’s body into pre-final conniption fits. Now, all she had to do was wait, while the looking into got finished.

As if on cue, the door behind her opened.

“Are you done?” Willow asked, rushing forward. “Was he right? Please tell me Spike wasn’t right.”

Lydia’s lips were pressed into a thin line as she regarded the young woman. “What did Esme tell you about the spell?” she asked evenly.

“The one on Buffy?” A sharp nod. “Not a lot. Just that she’d charmed the book to act as the anchor to keep bringing Buffy back, and that the tea acted as the catalyst for the time traveling.” Her eyes widened. “Why? What’s wrong? What did you find out?”

“Not enough,” came the reply. “We need to get Esme here. As soon as possible. I don’t think I care
for the ramifications of this spell she’s done.”

“Oh, because doing it in the first place was such a brilliant way for Buffy to go,” Willow muttered as she followed Lydia into the room.

* * *

The silence was oppressive when they finished their tale, though Buffy thought that maybe part of that was because of the massive furniture that comprised Richard’s study, or the rows of dusty books that made the walls seem to loom twice as large as they actually were. There was more than a passing resemblance to the high school library in regards to the atmosphere, but that worked in the Slayer’s favor. It made it much easier to relax when relating the previous night’s adventures.

“Are you all right?” Rose was the first to speak, her eyes sweeping between the two younger people. While Buffy had accepted the offer to sit on the leather divan, William did not, opting instead to hover stiffly at its side. Every so often during their recounting, his hand would drop to settle on her shoulder, abstractly playing with the soft tendrils at her nape, before withdrawing again into the preoccupied mood that had kept hold of him since leaving the Freston home. Buffy wasn’t trying to press the issue of his distance; she knew he was still somewhat shell-shocked from what he thought of as his failing at her talk this morning about self-defense.

The query prompted William’s fingers to lift unconsciously to his neck, twin spots of color brightening his cheeks. The Slayer, however, was the one who answered.

“As good as can be expected, considering I didn’t even know there was a vamp Slayer out there,” she said. “Or does this Council have the same standards on what exactly is shareworthy information as mine does?”

“If I recall, you stated you wouldn’t be out after dark,” Richard said. “And we agreed that our realms of knowledge shouldn’t overlap any more than was necessary, in order to protect the timeline. Why should I apprise you of an issue that should never have arisen when I assumed William would keep his word to have you home before sunset?”

“Sir, I---.”

“It wasn’t William’s fault,” Buffy interrupted. She cast a glance at him out of the corner of her eye to see him retreat even further into his shell at her intervention. “You really think a teenaged girl out clothes shopping in a new city is going to pay attention to the time? It was totally because of me we were out so late.”

The Watcher’s lips pressed together for a long moment. “You are not here to sightsee,” he finally admonished, and then softened. “Though I’m relieved to see you weren’t gravely injured in your encounter. April can be…unpredictable.”

Buffy shrugged. “She seemed pretty high on the predictability to me. She’s strong, but if her boytoy hadn’t cut in, she would’ve been dust fairly quick.”

Both Richard and Rose sat up straighter at the casual statement. “You think you can kill her?” Rose asked.

“She’s a vamp, isn’t she? That’s what I do. I don’t know why you haven’t just sicced the current Slayer on her.” When she caught the guilty glance the two older people shared, she had her answer, and felt surprising anger bubble up inside. “How many did she kill?” she asked tightly.

“Just one,” Richard admitted, and then sighed as he turned to stare into the fireplace. “A year after
Masia was turned, I was in Batavia. The Slayer who was called after Masia’s death was positioned there, and I thought…I’d heard she was quite the warrior. So, I went there, knowing April would follow me, and hoped that the Slayer’s skills would be sufficient.”

“And?”

“Sofani was dead the first night April was in the city. She drained her, and then left half of her on my doorstep to find, and the other half at Sofani’s Watcher’s. I was on a boat the very next day. I never again allowed myself to be in the same city as a Slayer. I couldn’t have another death on my hands that I could possibly prevent.”

Flashes of Kendra filled Buffy’s head, and she swallowed to stop the rise of guilty bile in her throat. “Don’t worry about her anymore,” she instructed. “I’ll take care of it.”

Richard shook his head. “I can’t ask that of you.”

“You’re not asking. I’m telling.”

“It’s not your concern, Miss Summers.”

“Yes, it is. As long as she’s alive, she’s a threat to people I care about. She’s a threat to William. I’m not letting him get hurt again.” The silent thought that he’d get hurt by Drusilla soon enough made her chin lift even higher.

Beside her, William cleared his throat. “Buffy and I have agreed that she’s to teach me some elemental maneuvers in order to protect myself from another attack,” he said. “It would be simpler if we could get your aid in the matter, since training is your line of duty, but even if you choose not to help, we will do what we must to remove April from being a danger. She’s gone too long unchecked, and too many people have died at her hand. We can’t allow that to continue.”

Maybe it was his continued use of the word “we” that made Buffy smile. There had been no further discussion of her request to train him since their earlier argument, and while she’d tried chattering away on the ride over as if nothing was wrong, the distance that stayed between them was impossible not to feel. She hadn’t said a word about it, though; when it came to trying to make things better, she had an inordinate capability of saying exactly the wrong thing, as so adequately proven during her explanations regarding her reasons for teaching him. So, she kept mum on the subject of his mood, and smiled as much as she could, and hoped that William would forgive and forget before it was too late.

It looked like maybe he had.

Richard was regarding them with narrowed eyes, his uncertainty about their united front making him hesitate. “As much as I appreciate your…passion,” he said slowly, “and as much as I might agree with William’s need for training, that might not be possible, considering your extenuating circumstances, Miss Summers.”

“Well, we’ll just have to extenuate them back in our direction, now won’t we?” she retorted, and then stopped. A gravity had settled in the room, exacerbated by the increasing fiddling with her skirts that was occupying Rose, and Buffy couldn’t help the feeling that something was going unsaid. “You know something,” she accused softly. “You figured out something about the spell that brought me here.”

“Potentially,” Rose conceded.

“And when were you going to fill me in?”
“They’re merely…suspicions at this point,” the older woman said. “I’d prefer more information to substantiate what I think I’ve discovered.”

“So tell me who to shake down for this information so we can get the show on the road.”

“That would be you two.”

* * *

They were making her be watchdog.

Under other circumstances, Willow didn’t mind being the lookout. Her magic wasn’t yet solid enough to be a reliable weapon, and she was much better acting as a distraction rather than actually staking a vampire.

These weren’t those kind of circumstances, though. This was her best friend’s welfare, and the fact that Esme and Lydia were shutting her out was making Willow cranky beyond belief.

They were in the hotel room now, supposedly going over the details of the spell Esme had used on Buffy, so that the fears that Lydia refused to share with Willow could be allayed. She’d been ordered to stand guard in the hallway, and to prevent Spike from entering while they had their discussion.

It wasn’t exactly a discussion, though. Even though she couldn’t make out any of the words, the volume of the Watcher’s voice and the rapid tempo at which she was speaking were the only clues Willow needed to know that not all was peaches and cream between the two Council employees.

Lydia didn’t like something that was being said, and Willow would’ve given just about anything to know what it was.

With her ear pressed to the door, she didn’t even hear the presence come up behind her.

“Somebody forget your invite to the special ball?”

Willow jumped at the cool breath that tickled her ear, whirling to see Spike standing there with an inquisitive smirk on his face. “Stop doing that!” she hissed.

He pretended to pout. “And here I thought we were friends, Red,” he said.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” She stepped in front of the door with her arms folded across her chest, though both of them were more than aware that her slight frame would barely be a gadfly in stopping him. “You should be resting up for fighting April.”

“Got peckish. Thought I’d step out for a bite.”

Her eyes widened at the implication, but she lifted her chin in defiance. “It’s still daylight. And you’re supposed to be bagging it until we’re done, Esme said.”

“This the same witch who locked you out of your own room?”

Willow flushed. “It’s not my room anymore. It’s Buffy’s. And, and, they’re just talking out some of the details about…what’s going on.”

When a particularly loud shout from Lydia escaped from behind the door, Spike’s brows shot up. “Awful loud talkin’,” he commented. Her nerves jumped when he leaned closer to the door, cocking his head as he listened in. “Guess they don’t much care for the Slayer’s off-hours entertainment choices, either.”
“You don’t––,” she started, and then the reality of his words hit her. “You can hear them?”

Spike rolled his eyes. “How is it you lot always seem to forget I’m a vampire? ‘Course, I can hear them. Not like they’re bein’ subtle about their fight.”

She really shouldn’t do it. Spike was the enemy. Her job was to keep him out of the fray while Lydia got everything sorted. That was the only reason she was out in the hall.

And if they hadn’t locked her out of fixing her best friend, she might’ve actually listened to that tiny voice of reason in her head.

“So you can hear them?”

Richard melted into the background as William and Buffy focused on Rose. “There are certain spells,” she said carefully, “that present situations similar to yours. Where those who are enchanted utilize the charmed catalysts to meet in other dimensions. A…middle ground, you could say, that provides a neutral setting for them to interact.”

Buffy nodded. “The park. It was the same every time.”

“And, I would assume, completely benign,” Rose said. “Did either of you ever have a negative experience while in the park?”

“No. It was always…” Her cheeks warmed as she remembered the silken slide of her body against William’s, and felt the corresponding rise in his body temperature at her side. “No.”

“There are variants on the spell, and anyone who is practiced can always modify it to suit their own purposes. This Esme…if she worked for the Council as you said, she would be quite proficient. She’d be able to manipulate the spell however she wanted.”

“But that’s just it,” Buffy argued. “We don’t know exactly what she wanted. Nobody at the Council knew why she stole the---.” She had to stop herself from blurting out the whole story, her eyes darting to Richard to gauge his reaction at her near slip. “---stuff,” she finished.

“Perhaps she conceived you as a threat to her plans,” Rose said.

“But I started drinking the tea before I actually got involved.”

“Which suggests she had knowledge that you didn’t.” Rose took a deep breath. “When you were in the park, did either of you ever…notice anything odd? You say the park was always the same. Were there any details that varied from encounter to encounter?”

She was growing tired of the repetition of the questions. “I already told you no,” Buffy said. “Everything was always---.”

“Buffy.” He wasn’t getting her attention, and when the Slayer looked up at William in query, his eyes were locked on Rose’s rather than her.

“What about Buffy?” the seer asked.

“She was often…hurt. I even had to bandage her foot once because it was bleeding so badly.”

Buffy shook her head. “But that was nothing. I told you it was from the slaying. It was no biggie.”
“From your slaying?” She looked back to see Rose staring at her. “While you were awake?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s a physical manifestation of your corporeal body in what you thought was an unreal world, Buffy. That shouldn’t be possible.”

Why was it anyone connected to the Council had to make everything so hard to understand?

“English, please,” Buffy said. “What are you trying to tell me?”

* * *

“What do you mean, she’s not really here?”

Spike shrugged. “Just tellin’ you what the witch said, Red. If you’re lookin’ for sense of it, you’re not goin’ to get it from me.”

“But…that’s ridiculous. Her body is right in front of them. I even touched her when I was trying to wake her up. If she’s not here, then my name’s Joe Bob.”

“Well, that Esme seems pretty damn sure the Slayer’s not in residence.” He smirked before adding, “Joe Bob.”

“That can’t be right.” She pushed him closer to the door he’d inched away from. “Listen harder. And this time, get it right.”

He gave her the highlights as he listened to the conversation inside.

“The Watcher bird’s pissed because the Slayer’s been hurt.”

“Hurt? How? She was fine. You didn’t—.”

“Wasn’t me. Oh. Sounds like she thinks the Slayer’s been fighting. Something about knuckle abrasions.” He grinned. “At least that witch doesn’t believe in mollycoddling Summers like the rest of you lot. She’s the only one who doesn’t seem fussed about this.”

“That’s because it was her spell that did this to Buffy.”

“She didn’t know about the fucking, though. ‘Cept she sounds more happy about the Slayer gettin’ some than you were.”

“No. No happy. Happy isn’t good.”

Silence, except for the muffled arguing on the other side of the door.

“What’s she saying, Spike?”

He was frowning, the lines in his brow deepening as his concentration increased on the door. Finally, his head swiveled to stare at Willow.

“You sent the Slayer back in time? Are you completely barmy?”

“No! I told you, it was Esme.” She hesitated. “She actually said that? That Buffy was back in…time?”

Spike nodded. “Something about splitting her between time periods. That the mojo opened the door
for her but with whatever that kept bringing her essence back to this one gettin’ trashed, the Slayer’s in a kind of limbo.” He looked furiously at her, and she shrank away from his pending explosion. “What the hell did you do?”

* * *

William’s fingernails dug into his palms, leaving crescent-shaped hollows from the force. “You must be mistaken,” he bit out. He could barely see Rose through the fury-hued fog that had settled in around him at her words. “There is no doubt that Buffy is here. Your divinations are wrong.”

Rose shook her head. “She’s only partially here. Your claims regarding her injuries during your dreams support my research. The universe requires order, William. It requires balance. Time travel spells especially need careful attention. One can’t simply transfer a person from one time to the next without paying a serious price. Magic doesn’t work that way.”

“But magic works to put me in two places at the same time,” Buffy said.

“Your body,” Rose corrected. “Your spirit, what makes you you, your lifeforce…that is in this time. Without the journal, you no longer have the anchor to pull you back. You’re…on a loop, so to speak.”

* * *

She didn’t know why he was so pissed. It was her best friend in there, and it was her friend that was obviously having sex with Spike—no, William, and why didn’t Buffy tell me? Isn’t that what best friends are for?—and it was her friend that was currently stuck in limbo because of Esme’s spell and Mr. Travers’ pigheadedness. None of this had anything really to do with him because he didn’t remember, right?

Oh god. Spike didn’t remember…did he?

“What’s going on now?” she asked, desperate to distract him. Her hands pushed at the immovable wall of his chest as she tried to guide him back to the door, only to be stopped by the deadly squeeze of his grip as he grabbed her wrists.

“I think it’s time to crash this little party, don’t you?” Spike said. His humor about the situation had vanished with the arrival of the new knowledge, and she was helpless against his decision when he reached down and twisted the knob, snapping the lock that had already been replaced by hotel management.

Esme and Lydia were on either side of the bed when Spike dragged her in, but Willow wasn’t aware of the tension between them, or the surprise that clouded their faces at the abrupt entrance. The only thing she saw was Buffy, stretched out on the bed between them, her left hand held firmly in Esme’s.

“What’re you doing?” Willow demanded.

“Proving my point,” Esme replied. A flash of silver appeared in her free hand, and it was moving through the air before anyone—even Spike—could react.

* * *

“So, we break the loop,” Buffy said. “Problem—ow!”

William jerked as the hand Buffy had been gesturing with snapped back into her body, her attention diverted to her fingers. As he watched, a sliver of crimson welled in the fleshy pad of her thumb, tiny
beads of blood already spilling from the cut that had appeared from nowhere.

He was on his knees before she could respond, his handkerchief pulled from his pocket and pressed to the minor injury before she could protest. Behind him, the presences of Rose and Richard closed in on him, but all William could concentrate on was the disbelief that colored Buffy’s eyes.

“What happened?” he asked, though his gut was twisting from the potential of her reply.

It took her several moments to reply. During that time, her gaze flitted from his concerned aspect, to the pair that stood behind him, to her hand, all the while processing the implication of a wound appearing out of thin air in relation to the information Rose had just shared with her.

When she spoke, it was a single word.

“Willow.”

* * *

Not even Spike was bothering to hold her back as she rushed forward and grabbed the blade from Esme’s grip. “Ever heard of the power of speech?” Willow barked, forcing her way between the witch and the bed so that Buffy’s hand fell back to the mattress. “It’s this amazing thing where it’s possible to argue your point without slicing and dicing my best friend!”

Esme was entirely unperturbed by the attack. “Lydia was proving difficult to convince,” she replied.

“I’m afraid I agree with Ms. Rosenberg on this,” the Watcher interjected. “I never asked you for a personal demonstration. And I fail to see what exactly this is going to do.”

“Wait.”

All eyes followed Esme’s as she watched the Slayer’s slumber in the bed. Now that she was up close, Willow could see some of the things Spike had mentioned—the freshly broken skin on Buffy’s knuckles, a bruise on her shin that was too bright not to have been made within the past twenty-four hours. Mix that in with his observation regarding the recent sexual activity, the results of which had been confirmed by Lydia’s earlier physical examination, and Willow had no choice but to accept the fact that what Esme said was true.

Her breath caught in her throat when even more evidence started bleeding before her.

“Bloody hell…” Spike muttered.

She heard rather than saw him take a step away from the bed. Slowly, Willow crouched down, a gentle finger reaching out to trace the air over the fresh cut on Buffy’s thumb. “Not too bloody, thank god,” she murmured.

It was a shallow incision, crossing the first to make a distinguishable X. Short and clean, it looked entirely too controlled not to be deliberate, and as its implication sank in, Willow let out the breath she’d been holding in an audible stream.

“She knows,” she said triumphantly.

* * *

Little by little, his heart was breaking.

“She’s figured it out,” Buffy was exclaiming, her voice fast and pitched in her excitement. “I knew
Willow would do it. The girl’s got a brain as big as Texas.”

Her face was flushed, her eyes sparkling, and the handkerchief that he’d wrapped around her hand after watching her create the second cut in her thumb was long forgotten. The newfound enthusiasm made her teem with life, and though William thought she’d never looked more beautiful, inside, he’d never felt so insignificant.

He didn’t even hear most of her ensuing conversation with Rose. While he’d accepted that Buffy would have to leave at some point, the fact that her friend had already deduced the truth of her existence didn’t bode well for her departure being in the far future. In fact, if she was as intelligent as Buffy professed, he held little doubt that it would be much, much sooner, and all his dreams and all his fantasies of marriage and shared time were sent adrift in the forced wake of the blonde’s eagerness to proceed.

He felt Richard’s eyes boring in him, but one glance at the older man was all it took to send William scuttling back to his mental corner. I must be wearing my disappointment too blatantly, he thought. If Richard can see, then surely Buffy will, and I can’t blemish her goodwill on this.

Taking a deep breath, William eased himself from his kneeling position at her feet to sit beside Buffy on the divan, taking her uninjured hand in his and squeezing it in support. He smiled when she looked up at him in surprise, and said, “What is it you wish me to do?”

* * *

“There’s nothing you can do.”

Willow gaped at her in disbelief. “But there has to be. Buffy knows now. I can’t just sit back and wait.”

“We’ve already done what we can. It’s as I told Lydia. William is here to bring her back now that we don’t have the journal. Once he kills April, you and I will cast the spell that powers him to act as her anchor, and before you know it, you’ll have your friend back.”

“As long as Buffy drinks the tea on her end.”

“Which she will. She’s an intelligent girl. She’ll know what she has to do to return.”

Willow sighed. “So, we’re back to relying on Spike. Great.” As she turned away from the bed, she noticed for the first time since barging in, that the room behind her was empty. No vampire. No Watcher.

And the door standing wide open.

Fear swelled inside Willow as she ran from the room, only to plow into Lydia coming down the hall. The Watcher’s normally perfect bun was disheveled, and she was limping with her broken shoe in her hand.

“What...?” Willow started, just to have the question die on her lips when Lydia shook her weary head.

“He bolted while you two were arguing,” she said. “And I tried to chase him, but...he’s so fast. I’m sorry, Miss Rosenberg. William is gone.”
Temperature was normally of no consequence to him. Hot. Cold. Lukewarm. All the same. When it came to heat, only the searing simplicity of fresh pumping blood sliding down his throat elicited any regular reaction from Spike, making him hard, making him throb, making him alive.

Now, though…trudging through the sewers of London, he was all too aware of the pressing damp trying to cling to his pores, each draft around his ankles making him unexpectedly chilled. It was welcome. Like the blood that dripped from his shredded knuckles, the result of repeated punches into the stone wall he’d found after losing the Watcher bird, it distracted him for milliseconds at a time from the war currently raging inside his skull.

“This was deliberate? Surely, you had to know what the results would be?” Lydia. Outraged and more than a little bit surprised. Self-righteous bint.

“Of course. Though I could hardly have predicted she’d actually get physically involved with William, now could I?” The witch. Unruffled. Cool customer, that one. “Perhaps the Council should include some sort of ethics training for their Slayers. I don’t expect Quentin would be pleased to hear Ms. Summers is having relations with yet another vampire.” He could almost hear the smile on her face. “Of course, he’s not actually a vampire yet so maybe she should be given a bit of leeway, eh?”

For Spike, that had been enough to start the questions from earlier tumbling again. But hearing Red and the witch argue after the Slayer’s X marks the spot display had been the impetus for answering at least one of them.

The familiarity of the scent of semen that he’d been so quick to dismiss the first time around.

Familiar…because it was his.

After he’d left the room with Willow, the niggle that the aroma permeating the room had been known to Spike had been just that. A niggle. Ripe for tossing once the joy of being able to shock and surprise the easily led redhead with a meticulously over-detailed, too exaggerated tale of what exactly he’d sniffed out in the room had overtaken him.

But with the added information—sleeping with this William they kept talking about, the Slayer’s time traveling tricks, their conviction that Spike was what they needed to bring Buffy back—he couldn’t help but go back to it. And the answers he came up with made his flesh crawl.

Not possible, he silently raged. And as he tried to distance himself from the fiasco of the hotel, he continued the internal diatribe with the occasional shapeless scream, the odd kick at a crumbling
I’d bloody well know if I’d fucked the Slayer. Can’t just forget something like that. Wouldn’t just forget. But the miserable bitch wouldn’t spread ‘em for me so easy, anyway, right? Not because of the demon thing---certainly never got over her taste for a bit of cold comfort with Angel, now did she?---but ‘cause how many times did I have to put up with the holier than thou routine? Soddingstupidfuckingannoyingbeautifulgoddamn Slayer!

The last was punctuated with a ferocious growl and a slam of his fist into the nearest brick, a shower of stone and dust erupting from the force of it and the bones cracking in his hand. The pain was good. The pain was real. More real than fantasies of time games that would’ve made ol’ H.G. proud.

Of course, also real was his come dripping from the Slayer’s thighs.

He wanted to know what the fuck was going on. Though Spike had briefly considered doing a runner on the whole shebang, the need to understand how what he suspected could conceivably be surpassed his fleeting fetish for flight. It was bad enough having to be plucked about like Esme’s very own Pinocchio; being blinkered on a story that put him smack in the middle of his own Passions episode was too much to take.

His feet slowed. Though the witch and her odd crew weren’t spilling on details Spike thought he should know, that didn’t mean they were the only ones to be privy to the information. He’d been brought to London for a reason, and if they refused to bring him on as a full team member with all its inherent privileges, then maybe he didn’t want to be on their team anymore anyway.

It would mean foregoing getting Dru back so easily, Spike knew. And he wouldn’t get the pleasure of tucking a turned Slayer under his belt.

Well, not until he was done with what he needed from her, that is.

He just had to find this April chit first. “Demons of the world, unite,” Spike muttered as he took stock of his underground position for the first time since going on his rampage. His knowledge about the female vampire was sparse. Traveling with her boyfriend, had a hankering for Esme’s blood, been out of the city for quite awhile. Not really enough to go on, he realized. He had to think out of the box. He had to think like a vengeful turned Slayer. He had to try and put himself in her shoes.

A vicious humor curled his lips, and Spike chuckled as the idea sprang into his head. It was a long shot, but it wouldn’t take long to test. And if he was wrong, then he could just hit up a few demon bars he knew to see who was willing to share about a new power in town. His body was itching for a brawl anyway.

It just might help him to forget about the sight of a certain young blonde for a little bit longer.

* * *

Buffy watched him roll up his shirtsleeves, the surprising midday sun turning his unruly curls into honey. “Make sure you’re comfortable,” she instructed. “We’re going to take it easy at first, but you need to be prepared to move around.”

William nodded as he turned back to face her. Once the insight regarding Buffy’s situation had settled and the group had realized there was little they could do in the interim, the discussion had reverted to William’s training, culminating in Richard’s offer of all his resources. It was his suggestion they begin the process privately because, though the Council had a wider variety of weapons at hand as well as more extensive training rooms, there would be too many questions asked,
and William’s privacy would be threatened. That was why they now stood in the center of the Council Head’s private garden, surrounded by a tall fence that completely blocked anyone from casual spying. Rose was still inside, studying how to go about finding Anne Freston, but Richard sat on a stone bench at the edge of the green lawn, ready to help should the need arise.

William’s stiffness didn’t escape Buffy’s notice. “Relax,” she said as gently as she could, and gave him a smile of encouragement when he visibly lowered his shoulders. She wasn’t so stupid not to know that his tension was about her upcoming return, but for now, she couldn’t let either of them indulge his tender feelings. With April on the loose and no way of telling how much longer she had in this time period, Buffy had to get William up to fighting form as fast as she could.

“Your glasses,” Richard said from the side. Both young people turned to look at him. “If you don’t need them for distances, I’d suggest removing them. One blow to your face, and you could be blinded.”

Another nod from William, and he slipped off his spectacles, carefully folding them as he carried them over to the bench. His mouth was pressed thin, as if that was the only way he was going to be able to keep his words inside, but when he returned to the center and faced Buffy again, his eyes were clear.

“Come at me,” she said. “I need to see how you move.”

His hesitation was obvious. “I can’t…” he stammered, and for the first time since beginning, William looked as if he wanted to flee.

“You’re not going to hurt me,” Buffy assured. “Slayer, remember?”

She wasn’t sure he was going to listen to her, but after a long pause, William exhaled slowly. “I’m not sure what you mean when you say ‘come at me,’” he admitted. “You wish me to…hit you?”

“Well,” she said with an impish twinkle in her eye, “I want you to try.”

She knew not to expect much. He had no exposure to rougher elements, and besides the bullying he’d taken as a child, William knew nothing of hand-to-hand combat. When she easily sidestepped his broad swing, even the slight momentum he’d had was enough to send him sprawling, but as she turned around, Buffy noted with delight the grace and speed with which he picked himself up from the ground again.

He wouldn’t meet her eyes as he wiped the stray grass from his palms. Short, sharp breaths highlighted the bright pink of his cheeks, and she knew he was embarrassed for his ineptitude. “Can we try again?” he surprised her by asking.

“Yeah,” she agreed, and this time watched as he expected her duck to the side again, compensating with a twist of his torso and a shorter swing that, while it didn’t connect, came much closer to her shoulder and kept him upright.

“Perhaps hand to hand is not your best option,” Richard said.

William frowned at the discouragement. “I can do this,” he argued, a touch of vehemence in his voice. “I must.”

“Richard’s right.” She kept herself firm when his hurt gaze swung back to stare at her. “I’ve seen enough.”

“I’m not giving up!”
“I didn’t say you were. I’m just saying I don’t think your fists are your best weapon.”

He paused. “What do you mean?”

“You’re fast. Maybe you can use that to your advantage.”

“But I’ve seen April. She moves so quickly, I have no hope to keep up with her. How am I to get close enough to stake her?”

“You don’t. But staking her’s not the only way you can kill her. Setting her on fire, or shooting her through the heart with a crossbow, or cutting off her head…those all work just as good as an old-fashioned stake.”

“Have you ever fenced?” Richard asked. “Or tried your hand at archery?”

“My father…before he passed…forced me to take several fencing lessons,” William said slowly. “But I was quite young, and my mother ended them after his death.”

“But that’s a start,” Buffy jumped in eagerly. She turned bright eyes to the Council Head. “I don’t suppose you’ve got a couple swords lying around, do you?”

* * *

His heart hadn’t been in it, at first. Even with Buffy’s assurances to the contrary, William couldn’t shake the fear that he was going to hurt her in some fashion, and deliberately held back on his initial punch. But the anger that rose in his gullet at his awkwardness had spurred him to try again, and his second attempt had been much more determined, even if it had failed as well.

And then the issue of swordplay came up, and he began to flounder again. It had been years since he’d held an epee, his mother’s constant worries that he’d get hurt forcing him to abandon the mild thrill that fencing had brought him. It was a guilty pleasure, one of the few which he could share with his father, and he’d always held himself proud for having that one tenuous link to his sire. Severing it had been excruciating, especially since in the aftermath of his father’s death, he’d only desired to have at least one thing of his to hold onto.

The moment the weight of the hilt caressed his palm, William felt a solemn peace settle over his limbs. This was right. This would work. It might take time, but his body remembered the weapon. This would be his means to winning Buffy’s respect.

She held her own sword with a casual ease that made him bristle, much to his surprise. He knew she was proficient with smaller blades—-he’d witnessed her skill both in the dreams and here in London--but the petulant child within William wanted to claim superiority in the longer weapon. Combine that with his earlier frustrations and fears, and his first clumsy strokes smoothed within minutes, the fervor of his feelings driving his body harder, forcing him to fight to match Buffy’s expertise.

She never once raised her voice with him. As she danced around the garden, parrying his strokes, she guided him with verbal instruction on how not to drop the point of his blade, and how to stop watching his feet when they threatened to betray his balance. Even Richard’s occasional comment lapsed into silence under her composed tutelage, and together, she and William sharpened his long-forgotten skills, quickened his tepid initial pace.

Inside his chest, his heart thumped with a power that usually suggested his need to flee. It took William a few minutes to realize that it was the thrill of the fight that was surging through him, an insane desire to see it through to its natural conclusion that goaded him to begin experimenting with his lunges. A flash of Buffy’s ankle as she swirled away from his last attack was enough to send a
rush of heat to his groin, and he spun out of her direct line of sight so that she wouldn’t see his sudden erection.

Though his practical mind was dizzy from trying to comprehend what was happening to him, his emotions—and, more importantly, his body—were taking charge, drowning in the release the fight was offering, where all he could see was the glistening of Buffy’s skin as she moved like music in the sunlight, and all he could hear was the roar of his own blood in his ears as he edged her toward one of the hedges lining the garden.

He’d never felt so free in his entire life.

There was no win or lose in their match. Buffy’s proficiency made it impossible for William to truly get the upper hand—of that, he was more than aware. But she allowed him to test her boundaries, countering his occasional reckless stroke while her eyes never left his face. If he didn’t know better, William almost would’ve thought she was enjoying their contest beyond what he would’ve expected. Every so often, she smiled, as if she had a secret that she wasn’t willing to share, and it only served to drive him even harder.

She surprised him before he could get her to the hedge. When he took one too many steps in one of his advances, Buffy’s leg swept out in a broad circle, catching against his shins and sending him to the ground. His sword fell from his grip as he landed hard on his back, and before he could react, she was straddling him, her skirt hitched up around her knees as her thighs curved around his hips.

William’s breath caught when he felt her wet heat pressing into his erection. Staring up into her face, the world fell away around him, where even the grey-blue of the sky above melted into nothing and all he could see was the shine on her cheeks, the too-bright gleam in her eyes.

Without warning, she fell forward, hands splaying to the grass above his shoulders to keep herself supported, her breasts grazing his chest. “That was reckless,” Buffy said breathily. “Do that with April and you’ll be dead before you know it.”

Mutely, William nodded. Of their own accord, his hands lifted to grasp her hips, tugging her slightly against his body so that the friction sent tiny tremors of pleasure along his spine. She gasped, freezing against his hold for the briefest of seconds, eyes locked on his.

“Do that with April,” she whispered, “and I’ll be the one who kills you, got it?”

It was the possessive tone in her voice that kindled the return of his earlier emotions, pushing him to the edge of rashness as his arm slid from her hip to curl around her lower back. “You say that as if you care, Miss Summers,” he said, adopting a mocking formal tone so stilted she couldn’t help but know that he was teasing her. “Surely, you aren’t concerned about the dispensation of my affections.”

For a moment, her face clouded, and the fear that he’d overstepped the boundary of their game and hurt Buffy sliced into William’s gut. “I’ll always care,” she said softly. “Even when—even after I’m gone, don’t you dare forget that I care. I love you, and I’ll love you even if I’m not here to say the words when you need them. And if you insist on forgetting, I’m just going to have to find some way to come back and kick your ass. Is that clear?”

“Clear,” he repeated. His mouth was on hers then, demanding the kiss she had no problem giving, claiming Buffy in a hungry bid for possession. Only the sharp cough behind them was enough to break through William’s passionate exaction, and they simultaneously pulled apart to see Richard gazing at them sternly.
“It would be appropriate for us to return to the house,” he said, his tacit meaning urging them to their feet. “I believe we’ve accomplished all we’re going to today.”

He turned on his heel without waiting for a response, and William jumped when Buffy poked him in the side.

“Somebody got us in trouble with the teacher,” she teased.

He smiled when she linked her fingers through his. “I thought that was your role,” he replied as they followed Richard back to the house. Between the kiss and their dueling, much of his tension from earlier was gone, replaced with a quiescence in his heart that was remarkably liberating. Pulling her hand to his mouth, William brushed his lips across Buffy’s knuckles, adding, “Thank you.”

She only smiled, slightly squeezing his hand in hers when they fell back between their strolling bodies.

She had never looked more beautiful.

* * *

Though the pictures were spread out before him for his scrutiny, Quentin didn’t see them, lost in the same thoughts that had been plaguing him since Lydia’s mysterious disappearance the night before. He had no doubts as to who was the means to her escape; only Esme had the power to slip in and out of the Council’s radar like that. What troubled him was the lone report that corroborated his suspicions.

As per standard procedure when there were unusual occurrences within the Council building, Travers had had staff members quiz some of the local businesses for anything odd that might help them. Nothing unusual panned out, but a Paki news agent around the corner had volunteered his store’s video tapes for them to watch, in case anything jumped out at them.

And stills taken of the Paki’s evening customers had revealed a nervous-looking Willow Rosenberg entering to buy a box of matches and a small bottle of water.

Esme was nowhere to be seen on the tape, but Quentin knew that meant nothing. If she didn’t want to be seen, she wouldn’t. What was unsettling was thinking that she might have actually convinced the Slayer and her friends that the Council was their enemy. He didn’t want to be responsible for ordering their deaths, not when they were such powerful allies.

He didn’t look up when a quiet knock echoed throughout his office. “Yes?” he called out.

The door opened and Beryl stepped inside, leaving it slightly ajar behind her. “Security has just called up a report,” she said. She wasn’t bothering to maintain any semblance of privacy; Travers’ office was tucked away in a reserved portion of the building where he could work in peace and where risks of interruption were at a minimum.

His eyes flickered to her calm appearance. “Was it not serious enough for them to bring to my attention themselves?” he asked.

“They didn’t think so. But they called it up, just to be safe.”

“What happened?”

“There was a jump in the wards set up around the basement entrance. It flashed as if a vampire had broken in, but disappeared just as quickly as it showed up.”
He frowned. “Has anyone gone down to investigate—?” Quentin started to ask, only to have the question choke in his throat when smooth hands appeared from nowhere to wrap around Beryl’s head and give it a quick snap.

“No need,” the young woman said as she stepped over Beryl’s lifeless body. A lanky dark-haired young man followed her into the office, closing the door behind him and standing against it to prevent anyone from entering. “They won’t find anything but a broken door.”

He’d lived far too long not to know they were both vampires. Maintaining an outward calm, he leaned back in his seat, his hand dropping to his lap so that he could surreptitiously reach the weapon he had hidden underneath his desk. “I don’t believe I have you on my schedule,” he said calmly, and then froze when the female vamp was suddenly at his side, one hand blocking his hand’s path, the other in a talon around his throat.

“You Watchers never change,” she spat. Flecks of gold danced in her light brown eyes as she sneered in disgust. “The years pass, and your offices stay the same, just as your pathetic excuses for refuge never differ. I should just kill you now and be done with it.”

As the air became increasingly less in his lungs, Quentin’s head began to feel as if it was floating. Somehow, he’d always known he’d be dead at the hand of a vampire; he’d just assumed it wouldn’t be something as mundane as strangulation.

Then…her hand was gone, and she was sitting on the edge of the desk between him and his weapon.

“I don’t know why you’re being so antisocial,” she said, just as if she hadn’t just threatened to end his life. “From what I hear, you’ve been trying to find me for weeks now.”

Quentin shook his head. “I’m afraid you’ve heard wrong then,” he managed to croak. “I don’t even know who you are.”

Her smile didn’t reach her eyes when she thrust out her hand. “I’m April,” she said. “The Vampire Slayer.”
She looked weary, but Giles knew that was just as much a fault of their restless night as it was apprehension regarding their situation. Neither had slept well, the wild postulations of their discussions barraging both with awkward dreams, and though Anne hadn’t voiced what had troubled her enough to venture across the hallway to Rupert’s room for companionship, he recognized the vestiges of horrific visions in the dark shadows below her eyes when he guided her inside.

Now, she sat with him in his cell, her gaze concentrated on her worrying hands in her lap, the breakfast that had appeared from nowhere lying half-eaten on the floor at her feet. “I have been…thinking,” she said quietly. Each word was measured in careful allocation, her voice solemn. When Giles chuckled, a sound he just couldn’t contain, she flushed; both of them were more than aware that they had done nothing but think ever since sitting and discussing the possibility of magic the previous evening. “I can’t fathom what value holding me here could provide anyone. Magical or otherwise, what could someone possibly gain by separating me from my son?”

He had to bite the inside of his cheek not to say what instantly sprang to his lips. Though Giles had no clue as to why, there was no doubt in his mind that Spike was somehow at the center of their situation. Considering he’d been investigating a theft done by vampires prior to his kidnapping, and knowing who her son was going to be, the coincidences were too many to ignore. This wasn’t a shareable hypothesis, however, not when Anne Freston so clearly adored her only child, and so he feigned ignorance of where her question might lead.

“But they took you from your ward as well,” Anne pressed.

Giles nodded. Rather than go into specific details to Anne regarding his circumstances, he’d generalized his relationship with Buffy as a guardianship. It had seemed easier that way.

“So perhaps we’re here to be prevented from protecting them from something,” she concluded.

His mouth was open to disagree with her, but the simple logic of her statement made him stop. So focused on the Spike angle, he’d not seen this alternative, and in light of who Buffy was, this made infinite more sense.

“What could your son be involved with that he’d need protecting from?” Giles asked. “You described him to me as a scholar. He seems more the sort to be interested in his words than anything dangerous.”

“I don’t know,” Anne admitted, with a frown. “This is what troubles me so. It’s difficult enough to believe that magic could hold me prisoner, and yet, the evidence is too clear to ignore.” She sighed, finally looking up at him with such clarity, he couldn’t help but wonder how she could’ve borne
such a creature as Spike.

*Not Spike. William. There’s a difference.*

“What about friends? Buffy has several…acquaintances who would wish to isolate her from those who love and help to protect her. Is there someone who might wish the same on William?”

Anne’s flush deepened before she tentatively shook her head. “Don’t misunderstand me, Mr. Giles,” she was quick to say. “My William is a wonderful man. So intelligent and so loving. He’s just never…made friends very easily. They don’t understand his gentle spirit as I do. Since his father’s death, I’ve tried to provide him with other role models, making sure he’s had the opportunity to spend time with some of the more prominent of his peers, but not even the likes of David Howard was ever enough to distract William from his woolgathering. That’s why I can’t resolve the paradox of someone wishing to hurt him. That would require his active involvement in…something, but other than his writing, I’m aware of little that attracts him so.”

“Still, there must be something…” His words vanished as what she said sank in. Clearing his throat, Giles frowned, taking a step closer to where she sat on the bed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “What was that…name you just mentioned?”

Her eyes slid sideways as she silently replayed her earlier statements. “David Howard?” Anne finally replied, unsure that was the information for which he was looking.

He’d only noted the name in passing as one of the many unexplained details of the crystal collection’s original abandonment. He hadn’t expected to hear the same man mentioned as an acquaintance of Anne’s son. If William Freston knew David Howard—and the possibility that it could be a different man than the one the Council was aware of was just too farfetched, not when everything else seemed to point to the same set of circumstances—then her proposition was even more likely.

It also meant Buffy was probably in serious danger. A situation where his guidance would’ve been of some use. He only hoped that she was doing everything she could to approach whatever threat lay in her path with a modicum of common sense.

* * *

She felt like she was back in Sunnydale, back before her mom knew she was the Slayer, sneaking out of the house to go patrol or to hook up with part of the gang for something apocalypse-y or to meet Angel for, well, other stuff. Except she wasn’t sneaking *out* of the house in which she currently wandered, and she wasn’t even totally clear where exactly she was going. She just knew she wanted to find the room William was in and she wanted to do it without Richard or Rose becoming aware of what she was doing.

The shot of adrenaline at such a clandestine maneuver made her fingers itch in anticipation. Biting at her lip, Buffy pressed her ear to the third closed door she’d found, straining to hear any sounds from within. As soon as they’d returned to the house, Richard had promptly separated them, arranging for them to be taken to guest rooms in order to bathe and freshen up. His disapproval of their public displays of affection had silently radiated from his every movement, but if he had anything to say about it, he waited until they were out of earshot. Buffy attributed his prudishness to the killer Victorian/Watcher combo; she probably shouldn’t have expected anything less.

But…she had to find William. Sparring with him out on the lawn, watching his growing confidence bolster his inherent grace, had thrilled her beyond belief. At first, it had been formulaic, with his automatic responses to her instruction, but as the minutes passed, and as he began taking her notes
and adapting them for his own style, the training had…shifted.

She loved the fight; there was no way she could deny that when it was just her. Even when Faith had tried twisting it around and Buffy had wasted far too much energy arguing about their purpose, there had always been that lingering hunger for more in her slaying that the blonde had to struggle to keep hidden from the others. It left her pulsing, in a world of vibrant color—even in a dark graveyard, it was astonishing how many gradients of red and brown and green lurked about in shadows and lived under the moonlight—and for those seconds when she’d been atop William in the garden, she was convinced he’d felt it, too.

That was why she was seeking him out now. She just needed a few minutes alone with him outside of the Watcher’s presence.

The fifth door was where she finally heard him. With a smile curving her lips, Buffy listened to the muffled mutterings interspersed with the occasional splash of water. He was talking to himself, probably composing some new verse. She’d learned William had a hard time keeping his mouth shut when he thought no one was around to hear him, almost as if all the words he kept bottled up in the presence of others had to find escape in some way when he was free of them.

“William?” she called out softly, knocking at the same time.

Inside, everything stilled, and for a moment, she wondered if he was going to respond. “Buffy?” he called back. Uncertainty made him hesitant. She could just see the little lines between his eyes as he puzzled out why she would be at his door.

Pushing it open just enough to slip inside, it took Buffy a second for her eyes to adjust to the shift in illumination. Where the hall had been dark and heavy with mahogany—just as much of the Rhodes-Fanshaw home—the bedroom was awash in white and gold, the tall windows flung open to let the remaining afternoon sunshine come streaming in. A canopied bed overpowered the far wall, and the door to the adjoining bath stood open.

“Are you still in the bath?” she said as she stepped to the en suite’s entrance. She stopped in the doorway, grinning when she saw him stretched in the tub, his curls plastered to his head from the shampooing she had obviously interrupted. “I didn’t think you were that dirty,” she teased.

“I’ve only actually been in for a few minutes,” William admitted. His skin was pink from the heat of the water, a sheen of sweat making his shoulders glisten where they rose above the surface. As if to prove his assertion, he held up his hands to show her his smooth fingertips. “I got…distracted.”

She pretended to pout.

“If you tell me it was the maid who distracted you, we’re going to have to have a serious discussion about the boundaries of our relationship.”

His smile was shy, his head tilting as he gazed at her. “Surely you realize it’s entirely impossible for me to even consider any other woman after you,” William said softly. “In fact, I was so…invigorated from our lesson that I went straight to the desk and wrote another verse of your poem.”

“Oh!” Buffy brightened, twisting to look back into the bedroom. “Can I see it?”

“Later,” he promised. “The inks are most likely still wet.” His eyes were downcast when she turned to face him again, his fingers drawing lazy circles in the water that sent gentle ripples along the surface. “I was rather hoping you’d allow me the opportunity to read it to you. I had…plans for this evening I would very much like to surprise you with.”

“Plans are good. Non-fighty plans are even better.” Tentatively, she took a small step toward him,
letting her gaze flicker over his exposed skin. A bevy of bruising was already starting to mar his otherwise perfect skin, though Buffy was relieved to see that it would be covered by his clothing once he was dressed, and a nasty scrape along his forearm mottled him in red. “How do you feel?”

There was no hesitation in his response.

“Alive.”

“But…” Another step, and the beginning of a frown forming between her brows. “Are you in any pain?”

His chuckle surprised her.

“If I weren’t, you would believe that you had failed at your duty, would you not?”

“That doesn’t mean I want you all achy.” She was at the bath’s side then, and crouched to more closely examine his injuries. “You should’ve said something before it got so bad.”

His fingers wrapped around hers when she reached to touch his arm. “It’s not,” William said earnestly, and used his other hand to tip her chin up to look at him. “They hurt, yes, but it’s more than tolerable. It tells me that I’m on the path to help you, and I wouldn’t trade that for anything.”

“You should keep it up after I’ve gone,” she said. “You could get really good. I think you’re a natural.”

When his smile faded, Buffy wondered if maybe she shouldn’t have brought up her departure again, but quickly dismissed the thought. It was an inevitability they both had to face; pretending that it didn’t exist would only make it worse in the long run.

“I must confess,” William mused, “it was not what I expected. In fact, it was almost…”

“Fun?” she finished for him.

His eyes searched hers. “Do you think that makes me a scoundrel? That I enjoyed the combat as much as I did?”

“You could never be a scoundrel,” Buffy replied, and then paused, thinking. “Maybe a rapscallion—.”

She shrieked when he suddenly splashed her with water, the droplets of water darkening her simple white blouse so that her flesh became visible beneath it. “I just got dressed,” she complained through her laughter, but didn’t move from her seat at his side.

“Insult me and pay the consequences,” William said simply.

His feigned innocence made her smile, and some of the tension that had been weighing her down eased. Maybe he was starting to understand the truth of their circumstances. He’d been so down about her not staying, and she hadn’t been so caught up in her excitement about Willow not to notice that he was being all stiff upper lippy about the change in her situation. Buffy had no doubt that, given the choice, he would want her to stay with him, but that just wasn’t possible. She had a life to return to, and as much as it would hurt leaving him behind, taking him with her—even if it was possible—would be too much of a risk to the natural timeline.

It was easier if they could just enjoy what time they had left together. Not that she wouldn’t miss him when she had to go, and not that it wouldn’t half-kill her to leave someone she loved to a life she feared he was going to live, but Buffy would deal with it. Just like she’d dealt with every other loss
in her life. Because she was strong enough to bounce back from it this time.

William had taught her that.

He was watching her, the reflection off the water making his eyes seem even bluer, and slowly, Buffy leaned over the edge of the tub to brush a soft kiss across his mouth. When she pulled away, his aspect had darkened, pupils dilated to overwhelm the irises, and his breathing was most definitely swifter.

“I wanted to ravish you when we were outside,” he said softly. He lifted his hand to slide a wet finger along her swollen lower lip. “You looked exquisite while we were dancing.”


“Appropriate, don’t you think? The way you move…like liquid fire.” His touch slid to her jaw, down her neck, tracing the fine lines of her collarbone through the fabric of her blouse. “I touch you, and I burn. I wonder…will you consume me if I linger too long?”

His voice was a hot whisper as it blew across her cheek. Shivers of pleasure undulated through Buffy’s body as his hand suddenly fell between her breasts, taking a moment to cup a soft swell before gliding to her waist. “You’re getting me wet,” she murmured, aware of her top sticking to her skin in the path he left behind.

William looked back up into her face. “And I’ve been aroused since you so cunningly flashed your ankle at me in the garden,” he replied. “So I would expect that makes us even, don’t you?”

“But I’ve already had my bath. They’ll be expecting us.”

He was sitting more upright in the tub, allowing his long arms to reach out and around Buffy as he tugged her closer to the slippery ceramic. A glance down betrayed his rock-hard erection, but her attention quickly reverted to the hard wall of his chest when he pulled her into him.

“You came here for a reason,” William said huskily. “What was it?”

She was mesmerized by the casual flick of his tongue across his lips, only meant to moisten them but disclosing so much more. “I…needed to see you,” she answered.

“Just…see me?” Slowly, he took her hand in his and guided it beneath the surface of the water, a groan escaping his lips when she eagerly wrapped her fingers around his steel length.

“We shouldn’t,” Buffy said, though her hand began to squeeze and slide down his cock, the water acting as her best friend at the moment. “I don’t think Richard approves of our relationship.”

From where they had briefly closed, William’s eyes fluttered open to lock on hers. “Do you care?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Not really.”

“Neither do I.” With a sharp jerk, he pulled Buffy into the bath with him, her skirt tangling around her legs while he fought to stretch her out against him. His mouth was on hers just as quickly, hungry and devouring in a repeat of their kiss on the lawn—or a continuation, if either was willing to forget the thirty minutes that had lapsed in between. He hissed when she gripped his forearms to steady herself, but when she tried to pull back to make sure he was all right, William refused to let her go, lapping down her neck as he continued to struggle against her clothing.
“Here,” Buffy panted, and tugged the material up around her waist. The tub was wide enough for her to straddle him, and all too soon, the pair was mimicking their final pose from outside, her thighs around his hips, his erection pushing against her underwear.

“Not…enough…” William whispered against her skin. His hands slid beneath the white cotton to cup the globes of her ass, grinding her heat against his cock so roughly she moaned from the starburst of sensation that erupted inside her head.

Buffy’s blouse was now completely wet, the outline of her erect nipples clear beneath the fabric. The temptation proved too great for him, their proximity too enticing, and William bent his neck to take the nearest puckered bud into his mouth, sucking fiercely against the material so that it scraped across her skin. “Want you,” she whispered.

He released her long enough to give her a long, hard kiss. “Always want you,” he replied, and then went back to the task of suckling at her breasts.

The water was distracting as Buffy fought to slip her underwear off, though maybe not as much as William’s eager mouth, but she finally managed to lose the scrap of material that was keeping him from her. It landed on the wooden floor with a sodden slap, and Buffy giggled in surprise when his coarse hairs scraped against her inner thigh. “Think Richard will buy my excuse about falling into the tub after I was already dressed?” she said.

“Stop talking about Richard,” he growled. His fingers tightened to an almost painful grip as he pulled her up again, the tip of his cock nudging between her slick folds. With one smooth motion, William pushed her hips back down, forcing Buffy to take his full length in a single stroke, leaving both of them fleetingly breathless and quivering as they stayed suspended for what seemed like forever.

“Guess I’m not the only who gets a little jealous,” Buffy whispered before leaning in to kiss him again. This time, their tongues tangled in a slow weave, her fingers coiled in his wet hair to keep him close as she began riding him, up and down, using the slickness of the water to its full advantage with every squeeze and pull. Every instance felt like she was floating, her body buoyant beyond the force of the water, and every stroke filled her just a little bit deeper as she fought to make sure she didn’t lose the contact.

“Tell me.” William’s voice was ragged, choking on his need to pound into her but restrained by the gentility that refused him that release.

When she did the impossible and tore herself away from the pleasure binding their bodies to look into his face, there was no mistaking the anxious panic darkening his eyes, so disparate from the force of his flesh and yet so palpable that it made her chest hurt. “Tell you what?” Buffy said softly, not once breaking the rhythm of the in and out of his shaft.

“Tell me you love me.”

She smiled. “Always.” But when she tried to bend back down to kiss him, his sudden iron grip stilled her.

“No,” William rasped. “Say the words.”

He was speeding up their tempo, meeting her with increasingly rougher thrusts, but his eyes were locked on hers, yearning and angry all at the same time. Each slap against her thighs and each slam against her clit wanted to drive rational thought from Buffy’s head, but still, she found the wherewithal to collapse against him, her lips hot on his ear.
“I love you, William,” she whispered.

His response was a muffled cry as his body arched from the water, his cock jerking as he went rigid, the power of his thrusts lifting her with him. It took only seconds for Buffy’s orgasm to follow, and the unintelligible scream that tore from her throat seemed to echo against the walls.

William was grinning up at her by the time she came down from the high, and she squirmed against his still semi-erect cock, trying to get comfortable. “For someone so concerned about appearances,” he said, pushing back a wet tendril that clung to her cheek, “you seem remarkably determined to alert Richard to your presence in my room.”

She smiled as she rested against his chest, heedless of her clothes clinging and floating around her. “Not like it matters anyway,” Buffy said, a single fingertip circling the flat nipple so near her still-hungry mouth. “Watchers are too uptight as it is. A little modern thinking won’t hurt him.”

* * *

It nauseated her having to resort to such tactics, but as she smiled coldly down at the current Council Head, April quelled the growing sense of alarm in her gut and focused instead on the goal she needed to achieve.

“It’s understandable if you don’t know me,” she said. “I’m afraid my Watcher wasn’t very forthcoming about my presence.”

“Your…Watcher?” Quentin asked.

“Richard Rhodes-Fanshaw? Of course, he’s been dead for over a century, so you may not know who I’m talking about. Do they still make you suits study all the history before you can graduate to your little club?”

Mention of the name seemed to ignite something within the stuffed shirt, and his eyes gleamed in sudden understanding. “April,” he murmured. “Yes. I think I’m beginning to see.”

“Good, because I really don’t want to have repeat myself.” Lifting her foot to place it on the seat between his legs, April tilted her toe downward to exert mild pressure on the older man’s groin. To his credit, his face registered none of the pain she knew he was feeling. “I’m here to make a deal with you, Mr. Travers.”

“I don’t make deals with demons,” came the laconic reply.

She pushed down a bit harder, and this time saw the slight twitch in his facial muscles before he composed himself again. “I don’t think you have a choice in this matter,” she said. “See, you and I have a common goal, and my instincts tell me that we’re going to need each other in order to reach it.”

“And what, pray tell, do you think that goal is?”

“We both want Esme. Well, I want her dead. I’m assuming you’re not disagreeable to that, considering how much difficulty she’s been giving you lately.”

Travers’ eyes flickered to where Nathan was standing at the door before he shook his head. “I’m afraid you’ve wasted a trip. If I was able to find her, she would already be in my custody. As it is, we’re having difficulties keeping track of what exactly she’s trying to accomplish.”

She wanted to scream at his incompetency, but held her tongue. If he’d been better at his job, Esme
would never have been able to get her free from that damn spell. “What is it these megalomaniacs 
ever want?” April asked in annoyance. “She wants power. And for that, she needs a Slayer. Hence, 
getting me out of your clutches. Only I’m not interested in her little game. I just want my ties to her 
severed.”

Quentin was shaking his head before she’d even finished. “I’m sure you believe what you’re 
saying,” he said, “but the Council has never had a turned Slayer in its possession before. It’s the 
board’s policy to---.”

“Kill her, destroy her, get rid of her, whatever euphemism you want to pick, Mr. Travers. I know 
how it goes. Why do you think Richard lied about me? I’m going to bet it’s also why he couldn’t kill 
me in the end. Got that little bitch wife of his to play with her magic wand and bind me in that glass 
for the last hundred years instead.”

The far whisper of approaching voices caught both hers and Nathan’s attention at the same time, 
jerking their heads to stare at the closed door. “April---,” he started, the worry already leaking into his 
voice.

“Quiet!” she hissed. Leaping from her perch, she grabbed Quentin by the arm and began dragging 
him toward the far wall. “Time for us to fly, Mr. Watcher,” she whispered. “So say your abracadabra 
to get us out of here.”

“I don’t---.”

Her quick wrench snapped his little finger, eliciting the first sound of pain to come from the man. 
“Don’t play me for a fool,” April said. She let her vampire mask come forth, baring her fangs to him. 
“My Watcher was head of this place, remember? I knew exactly where to find you, and I know for a 
fact that you have a back door to your office. So, unless you want Esme to get her clutches on your 
current Slayer and totally fuck up the world order as we know it, I suggest you get us out of here 
before your stake-happy gang out there end up being afternoon snacks for me and Nathan.”

* * *

He’d been right. He hadn’t seen her yet, but even without visual confirmation, Spike knew he’d been 
bloody right about just where the bint was headed. Every step forward in the tunnels had 
strengthened the scent he’d picked up a few blocks away, that mingling of Slayer and demon that 
made it impossible for each to be separated from the other. A turned Slayer could be the only 
explanation for it.

To tell the truth, Spike was more than a little chuffed at having figured it out on his own. *Fuck you, 
witch*, he thought with satisfaction as he pulled out his pack of smokes from his duster pocket. *You 
should’ve known a bitchy vamp Slayer would have a hard-on for Watchers. Get my answers, and 
my Slayer notch, too, and you and your time travel fantasies can just bugger off.*

So he was going to wait for this April bird to finish up her little vengeance spree---and not once did 
he consider that she might not make it out of the Council headquarters alive; as far as he was 
concerned, if she had the stones to go in, she probably had the brains to know how to get out again--- 
and when she came back out, they’d have themselves a nice chat about just what the hell was going 
on.

He was on his third cigarette when he heard the splash of new arrivals in the tunnels. Stuffing his 
hands deep inside his pockets, Spike continued to lounge against the stone wall, face implacable as 
he peered into the murk. He saw the male vamp first---lean, a spot older than him, but still take-able 
in a fight---and then stiffened when the human rounded the bend. A souvenir? Not exactly the
brightest thing to do.

*She* was the one he was waiting for, though.

She wore her power like a second skin, and though the ridges in her brow bespoke what she’d become, there was no mistaking the animal grace Spike had seen on more than one Slayer. She didn’t walk; she glided.

And just the sight of her made blinding anger swell into his throat, taking him completely off-guard.

His hands were already curled into fists in his pockets, every nerve strung whipcord taut, by the time she noticed him. Her first glance didn’t even weaken her step, but the second, the one she cast him as the male vamp came abreast where Spike stood, that one sucked the air right out of the tunnel.

“You…” she breathed, and Spike knew even before she released her grip on the human that she was going to come at him.

*At least she didn’t call me William,* he thought as they went down in a tangle of fangs and leather.
All Kinds of Blood

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from
Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CIX.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: William and Buffy have spent the afternoon training and
making love, while April has gone to Travers to try and create a united front to get Esme
only to run into Spike when they leave Council Headquarters…

She had fingernails like Drusilla.

Long. Meticulously groomed. Sharp as razor blades.

And the bitch wasn’t afraid of using them.

Slamming his elbow backwards, Spike felt the talon grip she had on his side weaken when he
connected with her face, and took advantage of the break in her concentration to drop to the floor,
lowering his center of gravity.

It worked to unbalance her already precarious hold, and April’s clawed hand was wrenched from
Spike’s flesh, leaving behind tatters in his t-shirt and rivulets of blood dripping down his side. She
stumbled forward, and would’ve landed on his back if he hadn’t rolled away.

He didn’t get far, though. Just as the distance would’ve been enough for him to stand free of harm’s
way, a foot came down to snag the edge of his coat, jerking him backwards to land with a splash on
his ass.

“What’s your bloody problem?” Spike growled up at her. His leg swept backward to catch her
Achilles tendon, the force driving her rigid muscles to either snap or crumple from their dominion
over his leathery hem.

Using the momentum of his kick, April propelled herself to flip sideways, several feet closer to the
exit. “Interesting that you’ve joined the other team,” she commented, golden eyes blazing. “After
everything you did to try and get rid of me the first time, I would imagine your girlfriend would’ve
tried saving you from becoming what you despise so much.”

With his coat now liberated from her bondage, Spike kipped back into a standing position, wiping at
the blood trickling into his eye. “Think you’ve got your vamps mixed up,” he said, sucking at the
viscous fluid that clung to his thumb. “Don’t think I’d forget takin’ on a crazy bitch like you.”

“Yes, really, William?” She laughed when he visibly started at the use of his name. “You’re
underestimating me. Again.”

“The name’s Spike.” It was an automatic retort, filled with far more bluster than he actually felt. The
whole day was turning into a soddin’ Twilight Zone episode, and taking on the part of David
Gurney was the last thing he wanted. He would swear on Drusilla’s unlife that he’d never seen this
April bird before, and yet here she was, obviously recognizing him from somewhere, calling him by
the name he hadn’t used as a vampire in decades.
Her eyes glittered with hate as they flickered over him. “I’d say it suits you,” April remarked, “but that would mean caring enough to have an opinion.”

Fangs bared, she launched off the wall again, but this time, Spike was ready, and danced out of her path before she could connect with his skin again. “For someone who doesn’t care, you seem to be an eager beaver ‘bout killin’ me,” he said. He was beginning to think he needed a weapon, that hand-to-hand with a powerful vamp jonesing to mop the floor with him might not be his best option.

As his eyes darted around the dank space, though, April laughed.

“What’s the matter, William?” she taunted. “Still can’t face me without something sharp in your hot little hands? Don’t think I’m stupid enough to fall for the same trick twice. I don’t care how strong you think you are now.”

“Don’t think it. Know it.”

He spotted the broken staff half-jutting from the sludge, but the presence of her companion and human hostage practically on top of it made it completely inaccessible. What he wouldn’t give for a good old-fashioned rapier, Spike thought unexpectedly. A good poke was just what the bitch needed.

He’d have to settle for fists and fangs for the time-being, though.

She didn’t expect the full frontal attack, taking more than one blow before recovering enough to strike back. As the seconds dragged on, and as each vampire landed their hits, Spike began to realize that she wasn’t as good as he’d originally thought. Sure, she was fast---faster than any other vamp he’d fought---and she’d been trained well. But, truth be told, he could see the weaknesses in her style…how she favored the slice instead of the kill…the slight drag on her left side when she pirouetted out of his path…the fact that she seemed to be completely blind to blocking punches to her left side. He’d fought better opponents and won. And when it came to other Slayers, well…

*She doesn’t hold a candle to Buffy.*

The sudden intrusion of the current Slayer into his head made his last punch go wild.

The distant shouts and splashing of new presences in the tunnels made him flounder.

And the unexpected thrust of the broken staff into his back---shouldn’t’ve taken my eye off the boytoy---made him fall face forward to the ground.

As the wretched agony of the jagged stick he couldn’t quite reach sizzled throughout his torso, Spike saw the male vampire start pulling April away from the approaching sounds. “Leave him!” he barked. “The Watchers will finish him off!”

It was obvious she didn’t want to listen, but as the shouts grew louder, she snarled in frustration and grabbed her human hostage. “Be grateful,” she shot back to Spike. “They’ll probably just dust you. I wouldn’t have been nearly as quick about it.”

Her proclamation echoed against the stone, driving Spike to his hands and knees. *Not today,* he thought grimly, and threw himself back against the wall to drive the staff further through his abdomen. He screamed in pain, but it served its purpose. With sticky hands, he grabbed the length that was now available to him and yanked it out, noting the dark blood now staining the weapon.

*Bitch isn’t goin’ to win.*
The voices were clearer, and closer, and his head was beginning to swim from the cascade of sensations that were too heightened in his adrenalized state---rich copper curdling in the air, the maddening texture of each droplet tickling down his skin---and all Spike wanted at the moment was just to tear April's head off and piss down her gaping maw of a neck. Want lost to need, though, especially since the object of his enmity was no longer in the vicinity, and the pounding footsteps were all too close to it.

Lurching toward the unused exit for the Underground, he fell against the door and scrambled at the chain that kept it closed, his fingers made slippery from too many bodily fluids that had no right not being on the inside of his body instead of the out. It took all his remaining strength to snap the rusted links, and with a grunt of satisfaction, he fell through the small opening.

* * *

It was a deliberate maneuver on Richard's part to separate them, of that William was more than certain. As soon as dinner had finished, the Watcher had risen from his seat and informed both of them that he would be accompanying Buffy back to the Freston home, while Rose saw to William's injuries. Though Buffy had argued the point that they were both adults and Richard was not her father, she had quieted in the face of what she must've considered a salient point---that William was unaccustomed to such intensive training and if he didn't wish to suffer the consequences, it was best to allow an expert such as Rose to tend to him.

He hadn't even been able to kiss her good-bye, but one glance from Buffy as she followed Richard out to the coach was all he needed to know that she would wait up for him.

William's fingers fumbled with his buttons, his unease at having a woman who wasn't his mother or Buffy examine his bare flesh making him clumsy. From where she was preparing some sort of liniment near the fire, Rose chuckled under her breath, and the sound made him flush further in embarrassment.

"I'm fine, really," he said, even though he continued to disrobe. "The bath was quite...therapeutic."

Her chuckle was louder. "I'm sure it was," Rose said. "For both of you. Now. Lie down."

His movements were jerky as William stretched out on the table that had been set up specifically for this purpose, his braces hanging around his hips as he rested his cheek on his uninjured forearm. The fabric was soft against his abdomen, and it might've even been relaxing if it hadn't been for who he knew was now touching his back. With his head turned away, he couldn't see Rose while she poked and prodded the bruises he'd gained from his workout with Buffy, and it was just as well. The mortification would've just been too great.

"How do you feel?" Rose asked. "Are there any areas that are especially tender?"

He started to shake his head before he caught the awkwardness of such a motion. "My legs are tired," William said. "But other than that, I'm more than fit to return home."

"Not so fast, young man. Richard wants me to ensure that you won't suffer any ill consequences from such a vigorous bout with Buffy."

"Are you sure he doesn't wish you to lecture me?"

William knew he sounded like a petulant child, but the protectiveness of the Council Head and his wife was growing thin. He received enough such attention from his mother; he hardly needed to get it from near strangers as well.
“That, too,” Rose conceded. Her fingers were kneading the tight muscles of his back, eliciting an involuntary moan from William’s throat. “Richard fears what will happen when we return Buffy to her real time.”

His sigh was just as much a response to her words as it was to her massage. “Must we talk about this?” he said.

“Does it bother you to do so?”

“Frankly, yes.”

“Because you love her.”

“I loved her before she ever arrived here. I will love her long after she leaves.”

Rose paused, though her fingers never hesitated. “And Buffy’s feelings? How do you think she feels about you?”

“She loves me.” It was quiet, barely a breath. “She told me so.”

“How could he answer her when it was the very question he’d been unable to answer for himself?

“She has a duty, William,” Rose continued, still gentle, still massaging the kinks from his flesh. “She won’t shirk that.”

“I know. I would never ask her to.” Liar.

“Slayers are a very unique breed. Their time on this earth is so spare, and so precious, and while I understand you only want the best for Buffy, do you truly believe it’s in hers and the world’s best interest to try and sway her from her calling?”

He sat up at that, anger igniting inside him. “Is that what Richard thinks I’m doing?” he demanded. Her gaze never wavered. “Isn’t it?”

“No. I…whatever Buffy wishes, I’ll give it. And I know she wishes to return to her own time. So I’ll do everything in my power to make that happen. I’ve promised her that.”

“Promises are only words, William. They have no power.”

“I don’t believe that. Without my words, I’m nothing, so if that’s not power, I don’t think I know what is.”

“And you honestly believe you’re doing what’s necessary to help Buffy leave?”

“Yes.”

“But you want her to stay.”

“Yes.” He answered it before he could think, the crush in which he’d been responding to her interrogation driving away his ability to stall. Rose’s face softened as he shrank in on himself, tears welling in his eyes. “That doesn’t mean I won’t help her,” William reasserted.

Her touch returned, taking the arm he held in his lap and holding it so that the reddened scrape faced
upwards. She reached for the pot of cream that sat off to the side, and coating her fingers in it, gently spread it over the broken skin.

“Do you remember what I said about time, William?” Rose asked. “About how it needs balance?”

He couldn’t meet her gaze, shame at his foolish emotions taking the better of him keeping him distant. “You said the universe requires order,” he intoned. “That a serious price must be paid when it came to time travel spells.”

“Yes. Whether she realizes this or not, Buffy knows this. She faces death on a daily basis. She deals with otherworldly events as simply as she gets dressed in the morning. She knows that duty must be paid. And yet…she is willing to risk that. For you.” Rose nodded when his head snapped up, his eyes wide at the implication in her words. “Do you forget I see things, William? Not just the way things will be, but also the way things can be. There’s no doubt that Buffy loves you, but if the pair of you continue on the path you’ve chosen, where you offer to stay by her side in the eyes of the church---.” She held up her hand, cutting him off when his mouth opened to protest. “You wear your intent just as you wear your heart. I would be blind not to know of your objectives.”

“I wasn’t…I wouldn’t…I didn’t think---.”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that if Buffy should choose to stay here, for any reason, it will kill her. And the imbalance such an action would create could be catastrophic.”

Hearing the words “kill” and “Buffy” so close together was like a punch to his midsection, leaving William bereft of both wind and words as he gaped at her in disbelief. Only the soothing balm of the liniment on his arm seemed to keep him oriented to his seat.

Rose’s fingers disappeared long enough to retrieve the bandage she had waiting. “I like you, William,” she said, working to wrap his wound. “And I like Buffy. But there are greater forces at work here than you can possibly imagine. Forces, Buffy isn’t even aware of. All I ask is that you consider the grander scope of your situation before you act. Will you do that for me?”

Mutely, he nodded, though his mind still reeled from her suggestions. There was no doubt in his mind that Buffy was undergoing the same lecture with Richard; he only wished that he could be there to help temper the effects.

* * *

Her lips were pressed thin as she marched down the street, the growing wind whipping her skirt around her legs. Behind her, Buffy could hear the crunch of the carriage’s wheels as it rolled slowly down the road, keeping pace with her every step, but she betrayed nothing as she kept her eyes forward.

“You’re being unreasonable.” Richard’s voice floated on the breeze, loud enough to make it impossible for her to pretend he wasn’t there. “Get back in this coach, young lady.”

“If that was your attitude with your Slayer, it’s no wonder she’s coming after you now,” Buffy retorted. It was a low blow, and she knew it, but his condescension regarding her relationship with William made her want to lash out in the only way she knew she could. And hitting him when they were still trying to help find Mrs. Freston? Probably not the most productive maneuver on her part.

The sharp crack of a whip split the air, and the horses’ pace quickened to bring the coach door even with Buffy. “You know I’m right,” Richard said at her side. “You’re only angry because I’ve had to remind you.”
“I’m angry because you’re sticking your nose in things that aren’t any of your business.”

“Preserving the safety of---.”

“Mankind, yadda yadda, heard it all before, Richard. Why is it you Council guys can’t just let people be happy when they have a shot at it? It’s bad enough you’ve got such a stranglehold on your own people, but William doesn’t even work for you.”

“But you do.”

“Newsflash. I quit answering to the Council when they gave me that lovely birthday present in the shape of stealing my powers last year. I am not some kind of puppet for them to play with.”

“No, you’re the Slayer. And you may have ignored your ties to the Council, but you’ve admitted you still uphold your duties. That alone should be reason enough to listen to me.”

She stopped abruptly in the path and waited until the carriage had come to a stop several feet ahead. “I’ve listened to you,” Buffy said when Richard disembarked. “And now I’m done listening. I’m cutting you some slack because of the whole April sitch, otherwise you wouldn’t be conscious for this little part of our discussion. And don’t get me wrong, I am grateful for everything in helping William, and sorting out my mess. But William’s an innocent in all this. Leave him. The hell. Alone.”

The unspoken threat hanging in the air between them, Buffy whirled on her heel and resumed the trek toward the Freston home. She’d said her piece, and though part of her understood exactly what the Council Head was trying to do, the intervention only made her mad.

“We fight a war, Miss Summers.” He was still standing on the road behind her, and every step she took made his voice just a fraction farther away. “And you’re right. William is an innocent. But you and I are not. We both know that not all casualties are the result of blooded injuries. It would be a travesty to lose a gentle soul such as his because of your own greed.”

* * *

“…in the paper again. She reminds me of Cordelia, except you know, without a chest and oodles more money, and why is it they keep calling her ‘Posh’? I mean, ‘Becks’ makes sense, but even I know that the Spice Girls are so over…”

Willow’s voice was bright and clear in the small hotel room as she thumbed through the daily paper she’d picked up at the newsstand across the street, and though Buffy still slept on the bed beside her, the redhead was doing everything in her power to make things as normal as possible. She’d been left on watch duty again while Lydia and Esme went off in search of Spike, but this time, she was glad of the assignment. She’d had enough excitement for the day already.

“It’s a good thing Xander’s not here,” she continued. “I don’t think we’d ever get him away from staring at the page three girls. This one is definitely all silicon. Nipples were not meant to point in that direction.”

Esme hadn’t been happy about the vampire’s disappearance, and even angrier at Lydia for letting him escape. Personally, Willow wasn’t thrilled about it either---not when they needed him to get Buffy back---but she was doing everything she could not to think about the search for him. Her brain needed a vacation from worrying for the time being.

“Why do the British want to rhyme everything? This article keeps referring to ‘Marks and Sparks.’ What’s wrong with just calling it Marks and Spencer’s like it’s supposed to be? Unless…you don’t
think Marks and Sparks is like an outlet or something, do you? Do they even have outlets over here?"

Willow’s reading was interrupted by a loud thump in the hall. Stiffening, she rose from her seat, alert for further distraction, the question of whether it was a returning Esme at the forefront of her mind. There was another thud, followed what sounded like something being dragged down the door.

Buffy’s door.

Her skin was electric as she bolted for the entrance, but as soon as she released the latch, it fell against her with a heavy weight, causing her to jump back and out of the way of the object that had been leaning against it.

Not object.

Person.

More correctly, vampire.

Spike’s eyes fluttered open. “’Lo, Red,” he rasped, struggling to sit back up. “Long time…no see.”

The dragging sound she’d heard must’ve been his back, Willow realized as her gaze drank in the smear of dark blood down the door. It matched the small hole that had been sliced through the back of his coat, and she could see the splinters where the weapon had caught on the leather. Someone had tried staking him from behind, and failed obviously, but that didn’t mean Spike still wasn’t suffering from it.

Bending to allow him to throw his arm over her shoulder, she helped him finish rising to his feet. When his duster fell open, she saw the gashes that rent his tee, as well as the dried blood that dripped from the copious injuries, and asked before she could stop herself, “What happened to you?”

He laughed, but it was a wet, sticky sound, as if he had fluid in his lungs. “If it’s not obvious…” They began stumbling down the hall toward his room. “…then I guess I did it wrong.”

She mentally shook her head. She didn’t think in a million years she’d ever understand this death wish Spike seemed to have. She was just going to thank her lucky stars that he’d come back to them for help.

They reached his door, only for Willow to realize she didn’t have a key. “Um…Spike?”

He caught her pointed glance and began patting down his pockets with his free hand. Everywhere he touched, a crimson stain remained behind, but his search remained keyless.

“Bugger this,” he muttered, and before she could stop him, Spike had put his last remaining strength into his grip and snapped the lock.

He collapsed on the bed before she could stop him, arms akimbo as his cheek pressed against the worn duvet. Gingerly, Willow worked to free the leather from his torso, taking care not to aggravate the wounds into bleeding even more.

“I’m going to get you some blood,” she said after she’d hung the coat in the bathroom to drip into the tub. She’d already decided he could stay in the wet jeans and t-shirt until he could take them off himself; stripping Spike wasn’t supposed to be in her job description anyway.

His muffled grunt was the only confirmation she got that he’d heard her.
She was standing in the doorway when curiosity won out.

“Why’d you come back?” Willow asked.

The silence made her think he’d passed out. Just when she was ready to give up and head out for the blood she’d promised, he said, “’Cause you’re a straightshooter, Red, even if that witch you’ve hooked up with isn’t. Like the sound of my odds with you better than anything else right about now.”

“Oh. OK.”

“But…Red?”

She looked back to see a single blue eye glaring at her. “Yeah?”

“Just don’t call me William.”
He’d never thought of his home as large before. But, as William measured the length of his paces through the halls, listening to the slight echo that followed his footsteps, he was reminded of childhood nightmares where he’d run from room to room in search of his missing mother only to wake soaked in sweat, his heart pounding inside his ribcage, and no restitution from his frustrated pursuits. That sense of absurd loneliness that would swell inside---at least, until the morning meal when he’d walk into the dining room and see his mother’s smiling face waiting for him---was threatening to return, only this time, he knew that it would eventually be manifest.

Buffy was not in the house. William had burst through the front doors, wanting to spend a few more precious minutes with her prior to retiring for the night, and been greeted by the vacuum of a building left bereft of her presence. Meg found him on the threshold of the room Buffy had been given, staring inside at the immaculately made bed, at the nightclothes that had been laid out on the duvet, and explained that Buffy had returned from their day out and immediately announced she fancied a bit of a walk. No amount of persuasion would sway her otherwise, and she’d left without the benefit of a carriage or escort over thirty minutes earlier.

William understood the purpose of her flight. Given the opportunity, he would attempt to do the same, to try and outrace the arguments submitted by the Rhodes-Fanshaws, no matter how cogent they might appear. Buffy would not do well to try and sit while fathoming the results of her discussion with Richard; she relied far too heavily on kinesthesia to bring order to her world. She would walk, and she would run, and offered wings, she would likely even fly, to make the baffling credible in her eyes.

And right now, she roamed the streets of his London without him.

He didn’t fear for her safety---well, part of him did, but he more than believed that she would be able to handle whatever might cross her path---but the thought of her wandering empty paths with only the moon for company seemed all too close to the life she’d described in her own time. She would be returning to it far too quickly, and more than anything, William needed to be the one to give her something different. Buffy had to understand that she didn’t have to be alone when he was around.

It took him little time to prepare. Though his body was starting to ache from the strenuous afternoon he’d spent, adrenaline was still fueling his momentum, and he changed into more comfortable clothing with a tight efficiency. He was careful to transfer the contents of his pockets; though Rose’s words had dampened his enthusiasm for his prior plans, he saw no reason not to share at least part of what he’d contrived. The only thing missing was a weapon, for the twilight hour---though pretty---promised darker imaginings than a sewer rat scuttling across his path.

William settled for an ornamental dagger that hung in his mother’s private rooms. It had long ago belonged to his father, but since his death, had been sequestered to more personal viewing, locked
away from prying eyes and inquisitive young men. Anne Freston refused to speak of the significance of keeping such an item around the house, an action that was made even more odd by her incessant desire to protect William from anything dangerous or disruptive, but he was grateful for once that her need for it had surpassed any sensibility regarding weaponry in the home. He had no wish to sneak into the kitchen and try to steal a knife from there, and with his staking abilities still untested, it was better to have something with which at least he had some familiarity.

Meg caught him as he descended the staircase, standing at the bottom with her hands tucked behind her back. “Do you need me to have the coach brought ‘round?” she asked.

William shook his head. “I’ll be walking, Meg. You can let them know they can retire for the night.”

“Do you think that’s wise, sir?” She flushed at the impertinence of her question, but held her chin up. “After your attack last night, don’t you want to be a wee more careful?”

He felt his ears get hot at her verbal confirmation in knowing, at least generally, of his injuries the previous evening. “I will be,” he said stiffly.

She had the grace to back down. “Do you wish me to draw you or Miss Summers a bath for when you return?”

More heat flooded his body at the mention of the bath, though this time it was directed in a more netherly direction. “No, no,” William said. “That won’t be necessary.” He turned to the door, but paused, his hand ready to depart but his mind not quite there. “If you could, though,” he continued, his back still to her, “prepare some of my nightly tea. I think Miss Summers would…appreciate it after her long walk.”

“Yes, sir.”

He imagined Meg probably curtseyed upon agreement, but William didn’t see it, stepping out onto the front step without a glance back. Swallowing the sudden rise in his throat, he hastened down the stairs, not dwelling on the action that he’d just taken. It was done. The choice now belonged to Buffy.

* * *

Why he tried the banks first, William didn’t know, but the glimpse of silvery-gold where the trickling moonlight was catching her hair was all he needed to slacken some of the tension that had wound throughout his body.

She was standing at the edge of the water, staring at the obsidian ripples with the fascination of a child, when he approached. “I’ve been here before,” Buffy said without looking back to acknowledge him. “In my time. Funny how it hasn’t changed all that much.”

“Care for even more irony?” He waited until she tilted her head to see him, and then almost lost his train of thought for the sheer spectacle of her beauty.

“What?” Buffy prompted.

William pointed to the bench in the near distance. “This is where I come and do my writing when I need to escape the house,” he said. “And Esme put the spell on my journal in that very seat.”

The slide of her head to follow his finger made him shiver. “So, this is kind of our spot, huh?” She smiled. “Figures.”
When she began walking for the bench, William fell into step beside her, much like they did in the park of their dreams. Her mood wasn’t exactly what he’d expected. Knowing what Richard was most likely doing, he’d imagined Buffy would be ranting and raving about unnecessary manipulation, and that she was a grown woman capable of making her own decisions, and the like. William had certainly been witness to more than one display of her feelings on the matter during their dream conversations.

Yet, here on the banks, she seemed…meditative, as if she’d been given food for thought instead of vehement lectures. Perhaps his assessment of Richard’s methods had been incorrect. Perhaps the Council Head had approached the matter with reserve and thoughtfulness. Perhaps---.

“You know, Richard really is kind of an asshole,” Buffy commented.

Perhaps not.

“I presume he spoke with you about us.” William chose his words carefully. It was better to tread lightly so that he could best gauge her reaction than to forge blindly onward with the grace of a bull cow.

“I think there was speaking in there,” she replied. “A lot of the shouting kind of got in the way of actually hearing it.”

They were at the bench, and he waited until she was sitting before taking the seat next to her. Shyly, his hand crept to where hers rested between them, and when it met with no resistance, William laced his fingers through hers.

“At least, Rose didn’t yell at me,” he said.

“Oh, a lot of the shouting was mine. When it comes to being overprotective, Richard makes Giles look like my dad in the parenting department.” With a sigh, Buffy leaned back into the bench, tilting her torso so that she was pressed against his arm, her cheek resting on the curve of his shoulder. “Too bad I’m not as smart as you. Maybe then, I wouldn’t have such a headache from trying to keep all the potentials of being stuck back in time straight in my noggin.”

She sounded weary, much like she had during some of their earliest conversations, and a small knot of dissatisfaction began coiling in William’s stomach. “It’s overwhelming for both of us,” he said. “But I think you’re handling it beautifully. I think if I were to find myself in your time instead, I’d be struck dumb for the enormity of it all.”

“This is pretty big with the hugeness, too, you know.” She gestured toward the water, and the dim lights of the houses that could be seen on the opposite shore. “All those people, sitting inside probably doing something like…needlepoint, or candle-making. How do I know I haven’t changed their lives by being here? What if---?”

“You do what you must,” William interrupted. “Just like you always have.”

For some reason, that made her deflate. “My must really sucks sometimes.”

“Stop it.” His voice was harsh, causing her to turn to him with a frown, and William pulled his hand from hers to rise to his feet before her. “Since when do you pay any heed to what the Council of Watchers tells you?” he demanded. “You’ve faced them, and won, on numerous occasions. Why is it you’ve let one man undermine your confidence so?”

“Because he’s right. Because I keep making things worse by being here. I mean, look at you. Look at how---.”
“That’s right. Look at me.” Using both hands, William cupped Buffy’s face as he crouched to eye-level with her. “Tell me what you see.”

She didn’t know what he wanted, dark eyes wide and searching his for some kind of clue. “I see you,” she finally managed.

“And am I the same man you met those few weeks ago?”

“Yes.” At the questioning tilt of his head, Buffy colored, ducking her gaze. “Well, no.”

“Now, do you know why?”

“You want me to say because of me,” she said. “But that’s not true.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not. All the stuff that you keep saying… it was all there before I ever came along. It’s not my fault nobody could see it but me.”

“Exactly.” Leaning in, his lips pressed to hers in a firm kiss, thumbs caressing the hollows of her cheeks even after he’d moved away. “You believed in me, Buffy. In doing so, you helped me start to learn how to believe in myself again. And that’s only grown stronger since you woke up at my side. I don’t know what exactly Richard said to you, but I do know you. And nothing he nor Rose could ever say will make me regret a second that I’ve been fortunate enough to have with you.”

She fell silent in the face of his argument, pulling from his embrace to rise from the bench again. He straightened to watch her stroll back out to the water’s edge, her arms folded across her stomach, and had to fight not to follow her out there and drag her back.

“What if you could have more?”

It could’ve been a mere flutter on the wind for as loudly as she said it, but William heard the words as clearly as if she’d whispered them directly into his ear.

“What?”

His heart had suddenly decided to hammer against his throat, and he could only gape in disbelief when she continued.

“I just want to be happy again. I don’t think that’s such a big deal, do you?”

She was leading in a direction he’d only dared to envision, but for some reason, William was reluctant to follow. “You will be,” he said. “You have friends who care for you, and a mother who loves you—.”

She turned, and her eyes seemed to glow from the reflection of the moon off the water. “You love me.”

_How could he deny that?_ “Yes.”

“Shouldn’t that count for something?”

_Oh, god, yes._ “Buffy—.”

“Don’t tell me I have a responsibility, that my calling means I have to give up any hope for a real life. I gave it up once. I can do it again.”
“No, you can’t.”

Admitting it aloud felt like a hundred rancorous claws shredding him from the inside out, and William had to blink more than once to clear the sudden blurring behind his spectacles. All of Rose’s words, and all of the events of the past few days, and all of his naïve dreams of what could be came at him in a rush, making him shake even as he held himself straighter.

“Don’t you want me to stay?”

The hurt in her voice endangered his resolve to remain stalwart in her declaration. “More than anything,” William admitted. “But I’ve spent my entire life denying what I want. I’m more than prepared to do it again.”

“No!” She was on him in full force, the strength of her attack propelling both of them to the ground. It ended with her astride him, her face unreadable as she hovered outlined against the moon, her chest visibly lifting and falling from the fire of her emotions. “Don’t you get it? That’s not what I want for you.”

“You can’t stay, Buffy. You know that.” He needed to get it through to her; he had to make her understand, even if it hurt her as much as it was killing him. “You’re not really here, after all.”

She pretended to be insulted. “I’m not? So, who was that in the bathtub with you this afternoon, then? Huh? Felt pretty there to me.”

“And who was it that sliced your hand this morning? I don’t remember seeing the first knife that made you bleed. We both know Rose is right. It would be different if the magic had brought you completely here, but it didn’t. We need to be prepared to deal with those consequences.” He couldn’t resist pushing back the curtain of hair that covered her face. “It’s all right.”

“It’s not.” Hoarse from the sheer emotion that was sapping her strength, Buffy was still fighting his suggestions. “It doesn’t have to be this way, William. I can change things by staying. I can make it better.”

“But you already have.” Grabbing her elbows, he tugged her forward until her weight was pressing him into the earth, and he inhaled the fragrance of the hair that fell across his face when she buried her face in his neck. Until the day he died, he would never forget the way she smelled; it would forever mean happiness to him. “This feeling will pass,” he said, deliberately trying for a lighter tone. For his sake, just as much as hers. “You know you want to go back. You’re just rebelling against Richard’s wishes because you’re obstinate and you don’t know how to bend to Council demands.”

The playful slap at his chest told him he’d at least moderately succeeded. “Doesn’t mean he doesn’t deserve a good pop in the nose,” she groused.

William chuckled. “I’ve had that same desire on more than one occasion. Rose has the patience of a saint.”

“What did she say to you?”

He was glad she couldn’t see his face. “Nothing of consequence. She’s just a mother hen. You know that.”

“Yeah.” He could feel her smile against his skin. “She is.”

They rested there in silence for several minutes, the rhythmic rise and fall of his breathing lulling Buffy to a half-slumber while the growing warmth of her body enveloped him in peace. He hated
having to break the spell, but his decision had been made long before he’d found her at the water, and William didn’t want to lose what may well be his last opportunity.

“Buffy?” he said gently.

“Hmmm?”

Rolling onto his side, he eased her onto the ground so that he could sit up, though the loss of her flesh against his left him cold. “I know…this will seem…awkward, perhaps, in light of my earlier words…” He stopped. This would’ve been much easier if she’d been home when he arrived. Doing it now would make him seem like a hypocrite.

“What is it?” She sat up with him, waiting expectantly. “C’mon. Spit it out.”

Chewing at his lip, William stumbled to his feet, his muscles unexpectedly sore from having been still for so long. He held out his hand to her, and when Buffy took it, he pulled her back to the bench, positioning her on it before sitting again at her side.

“If…things could be different,” he stumbled, and cleared his throat, wondering why his palms were suddenly sweaty. “If…it had been possible for you to stay…as a…permanent part of my life…I would’ve…it would’ve been only natural for me to…”

He was positive she could hear his heart beating. Why did he think he could do this? This sounded so much more eloquent in his head.

“What I mean to say is,” William tried again, “I love you, and…I know I don’t have much to offer, and not that I will because…well, you know…but it would’ve given me great pleasure to…to…” His head fell, the pressure of the moment overwhelming him, even if it wasn’t completely real. “I sound like a fool,” he muttered.

Her hand was warm on his cheek. “No, you don’t,” Buffy murmured. “And just so you know, if you had asked me and it was possible for me to stay, I would’ve said yes.”

Yes. She would’ve said…

William’s head shot up, so quickly that she giggled at the abruptness of it, and before he could stop himself, he was kissing her, and she was kissing him, and they were laughing against each other’s mouth, as if the conversation of only minutes earlier had never occurred.

He was breathless when he broke away, and achingly hard, but he still had something else to do, the real thing, and he was going to get it done, if she would only stop touching him---.

“What’s this?”

Her hand had slipped into his pocket and found the paper he’d so consciously remembered to bring, and William froze as she opened it to scan its contents. She didn’t look up when she was done, but instead returned her gaze to the top of the page, swollen lips mouthing the words he’d written to complete the poem he’d composed during their first joining in the dreams. When she reached the final verse, he recited it aloud as she read.

“But I was lost in a place ‘tween the sun and moon,
Where firm and figment merged this June,
And even beyond that place ‘tween moon and sun,
My love that burns for her is legion.”
She was smiling when he finished, her fingers tracing over the careful script on the paper. “You changed it,” Buffy murmured, and looked up to see him frowning.

“You…remember what the original was?” he asked.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

When she started to hand it back to him, he folded her fingers around the edge and pushed it toward her. “It’s yours,” William said. “I wrote it for you.”

“But why would you change it?”

This was what he wanted her to know; this was what had spurred him to write so furiously after their fencing bout. The shift in tense in those few lines made all the difference to him.

“Because I’m not lost anymore,” William said softly. “No matter what happens, no matter where the next bend in our paths takes us, you’ve shown me that fear doesn’t have to hold me back. That I have it in me to forge onward, even if hindrances may try to prevent me from doing so. This is your true gift, Buffy. You make those who love you stronger.”

Emotion was quickly overpowering both of their self-control, so he tugged her to her feet. “Come,” he said with a voice that betrayed none of the battle that still waged inside him. “Let’s go home. It’s been a very long day.”

* * *

She had long ago sent Lydia back to the hotel to sleep, the Watcher’s passive-aggressive complaints about her sore feet finally growing thin.

Their search for Spike had been fruitless, though the most interesting tidbit of the day had come when they’d tapped into one of Lydia’s resources at the Council. Apparently, Quentin had gone missing and the surveillance in his office revealed that it had been April who had snatched him. Her Slayer-ness that remained after turning had been enough to subvert their early vampire detection alarms to allow her entrance, and the trail of dead bodies she left behind said all too clearly that she was tired of playing games.

The report concluded with their trek through the tunnels she’d used to escape. The trio had eluded capture, leaving behind copious amounts of blood that indicated further troubles in the sewers than the Watchers had given them. None of it had been human, though, so Esme’s hopes that Quentin had been removed from the picture were dashed. She wasn’t happy that April was finding a use for the Council Head that didn’t involve his direct death, especially since he was the one most familiar with Esme’s patterns and history. After all, it had been his specific influence that had first brought her into the coven’s fold, and it had been his lesser authority that had first garnered her attention in the Slayer artifacts. Though she hardly considered him a valid threat, if there was anyone who could subvert her goal, it was Quentin Travers.

He was not her present interest, however. While approaching a likely source for information, Esme had felt a familiar tingle begin burning along her spine, growing in prickling acuteness until her fingers were practically vibrating from the need to use them. Excitement made her temper shorter, so by the time she’d managed to finally dispatch Lydia, the witch was agitated to the point of near-sloppiness when she attempted her first spell since the incident in Wales.

Her teleportation landed her at a deserted Underground station, and though it wasn’t the destination she’d had in mind, the sign on the wall told her she was close. Already, though, she could feel her magical reserves starting to wane. It wouldn’t do to sap all her strength before she was back to normal, but to pass on the opportunity to check on some of her arrangements would be foolhardy.
Her next spell put her directly outside the house, its dark windows like empty eye sockets against the night sky. The magic that encircled it, keeping it in its temporal stasis, still remained intact, a revelation that left Esme shivering in satisfaction. This was her wild card. This was her insurance that Buffy Summers would cooperate once April was taken care of. With Rupert Giles and Anne Freston in her control, there was no way the Slayer would balk at Esme’s request.

She had to make sure, though. Tentatively, Esme cast a gentle seeking spell, probing the parameters of the temporal bridle that contained the house’s inhabitants, searching for weaknesses within the construct that could be exploited by the Slayer should she attempt to rescue her Watcher. Not that she’d ever find the house. Esme had made more than sure it slipped under anyone’s eye should they go seeking it. The temporal displacement helped in that, just as it most likely had saved it from whatever had temporarily stolen Esme’s magic as well.

Content that all was still well with the prison, the witch sagged against a tree in the front garden, her skin clammy with sweat. She was not strong enough to manage more magic any time soon, and probably shouldn’t have undertaken such a strenuous spell as the temporal check but the rush of having her powers back combined with the fear that her plans could unravel had driven her to push her boundaries.

It was time to return to the hotel. Perhaps her strength would be sufficient in the morning to use magic to locate the wayward vampire. Even if she didn’t need him to kill April any longer, he was still necessary to get Buffy Summers back. His purpose wasn’t gone. Not just yet.

* * *

The charge that surged through her body startled Rose awake, stiffening her muscles while she stared at the ceiling overhead. It wasn’t harsh like the previous experience with the Freston home had been, more like a warm wave washing across her skin, but it was still there, still unmistakable, still the same.

“Richard,” she whispered. She rolled onto her side to see her husband’s back and gently poked him between his shoulder blades. “Richard,” she repeated, this time a little louder. “Wake up.”

He grunted, but didn’t move. “What time is it?” he mumbled.

“I don’t know. Middle of the night some time.”

“Time for sleeping, Rose. Go back to sleep.”

“But it’s happened again.” She was sitting up now, her heavy braid hanging over her shoulder. “The temporal displacement. There’s been another occurrence.”

It worked as she imagined, jerking him from his slumber to roll over and face her. “Are you certain?” Richard demanded. “This isn’t a time for fanciful wishes, my dear.”

“I’m sure. Just as I’m sure that this has actually happened.” Already, she was pushing the duvet back and reaching for her dressing gown. “I just need to find out where. It was faint, so I’m not certain it’s within the city, but it has to be close. I know it.”

He matched her movements on the opposite side of the bed. “I shall have the coach go around to fetch William and Buffy---.”

“No.” She was shaking her head when he glanced up at her. “Leave them be, Richard. At least for tonight. We’ve said what needed to be said. We can’t encroach any further than we have or they’ll be defiant.” Rose smiled. “They’re young, and in love. Do you remember how you were at that age?
Push them too far, and they’ll start pushing back. Besides, they will be of no help until we have determined where exactly the displacement occurred. After, we shall get them. Not before.”

She was relieved when he simply nodded in agreement and finished getting dressed. His discussion with Buffy had left him at loose ends, unsure of how to proceed and questioning what was right and what was wrong. It weakened him, just as his obsession with April weakened him, and Rose detested seeing him so. Though she had deliberately been sent back in time to ensure he didn’t follow a certain destructive path, it hadn’t ensured not getting so emotionally involved with him. Falling in love with the Watcher she was meant to watch was all too similar to the many men throughout history who had done the same with their Slayers. It was one of the very things she and her kind had fought against across the millennia, and yet she’d succumbed to the same tragic malady.

She only hoped she had the strength to let him go when the time arose.

Which was probably why her heart was breaking so for poor William.
To Make of Monsters

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CXIV.”

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: An injured Spike has returned to the hotel, under Willow’s care, while Esme has sent Lydia back so that she can test the return of her powers in private, and April has escaped the Council’s clutches with Quentin in tow…

In spite of the pain in his wrists from the ropes that burned into his flesh, Quentin’s gaze was composed as he stared back at April. “You’re lying,” he said, his voice wintry. “If such things existed, I would know about it.”

She laughed, sprawled along the mattress with the knife dancing in her hands. “But that’s the beauty,” she said. “If you knew, it would make their jobs redundant. Frankly, I think it’s sheer brilliance. A collection of women come together to make sure the men who created Slayer power in the first place play nicely? It’s got a full circle charm to it, I think.”

“But artifacts that only Slayers can wield…” His lips were thin, and though he could see Nathan pacing around on the edges of the dusty room, Quentin ignored him, focusing on the female vampire who was so clearly in charge. “This is my domain. It’s inconceivable that I wouldn’t be aware of their presence, and even more impossible that Esme would.”

Rolling onto her stomach, April reached over the edge of the bed to grab the edge of a small box that rested on the floor, giving it a small shake so that its contents jingled. “I’m just telling the story as I’ve heard it,” she said. “And this should be all the proof that you need that I’m telling the truth.”

He didn’t even look inside to see the crystal shards. He believed that part of her story. “I can accept that Esme’s fascination would compel her to resurrect you---.”

“Free me. Big difference.”

“Free you, then. But she’s been a vital part of the Council’s coven for decades. I recruited her myself. I refuse to believe that she would subvert what we stand for, for her own personal gain.”

“Then why go to such lengths to find her then, Quentin?” Even in spite of her pallor, at that moment, she looked so much like any one of the hundreds of teenaged girls he’d seen during his tenure with the Council, that Travers’ disgust momentarily softened. She had broken his finger, and she had unmercilessly dragged him through the sewers of London to the grimy rooms she and her paramour were using as a hideaway, and she’d bound him with wicked glee to the chair that now imprisoned him, and yet…there was a flash of sentiment within him that summoned images of another Slayer, another time, when the years hadn’t quite steeled Quentin into the man he was presently, where another Slayer’s death just months before her Cruciamentum had dragged him back into the Council’s lap and away from the fieldwork he’d thought was his life.

Just as quickly as it had arrived, the wistfulness vanished, replaced by an emotion with which he was much more familiar. Hate. Cold, meticulous, exacting hate, for a creature that had stripped so much
from him, even if it wasn’t this particular demon that had done it.

His silence goaded her into sitting up. “I’ve got a theory, Quentin,” April said casually. “I think you want her back because you know that the possibility I’m speaking the truth about the Slayer artifacts being your witch’s motivation is all too real. That you’ve been worried about her making some sort of power play and you want her back under your bureaucratic thumb so that you can pillage her powers without giving her anything in return. Am I close?”

His nostrils flared, the only sign that she’d struck any kind of nerve. “Don’t be ludicrous.”

“Because that would be your job.”

“I don’t play those type of games.”

“You lie. All of you Watchers play games. It’s in your blood.”

“Was this your entire purpose? To talk me into submission of whatever whim has captured your fancy?”

She was a whirl as she flew from the bed, her hand a claw around his throat. It wasn’t tight enough to cut off his oxygen, but it was certainly enough to make breathing uncomfortable. “We need each other, Watcher,” April spat. “And I will use you to find the witch. I have no problems making your cooperation as bloody as possible, but it would suit my purposes to have you alive and conscious for the duration of our search. Do I make myself clear?”

He was barely able to move against the vise of her grip, but still, Quentin managed a small nod.

“Good.” Releasing him, she allowed her nails to drag over his cheek, leaving four light furrows in their wake. “Now. Let me tell you my plan.”

* * *

She didn’t know why she lied to Lydia when the Watcher appeared at her door. Maybe it was because of what Spike had said, about Esme not being a straightshooter. He didn’t like the older witch; he’d made that clear from the beginning. He was willing to make the deal with her for the sake of getting Dru back, but any more than that, and his distaste was more than apparent. Which was weird because, you know, he was a vampire and he was supposed to be all about the evil. He and Esme should get on like hotcakes. The fact that he didn’t trust her was all it took to get the seed planted.

That’s why she didn’t say a word to Lydia about Spike’s return when the other woman showed up at Buffy’s door. Willow had described the night’s events as non-eventful, and that had been that. Lydia had gone.

And now Willow was on her way to Spike’s room, with a plan in mind that gave her the jitters, even if it was hers. There was so much going on with all this—Esme’s plans, April’s imminent arrival, Buffy’s lapse into time, Giles’ unexplained disappearance—and Willow didn’t think that it was all that wrong to want a little order in the world. Order was good. Order kept things running, made proofs easier to proof, kept the universe explainable in a way that was wieldy. And darn it all, if she had to be the one to make her little corner just a little more controllable, then she was going to do it.

Even if it gave her the heebie jeebies considering the possibilities of what could go wrong if she miscalculated in any way.
...the clemency of golden sunlight tickling the nape of his neck...

...the rich scent of soil soaking into his pores, heady and earthen and alive...

...the slight pressure of another body laying next to him in the grass, touching but not, as if this was how it always was and always would be...

...and all he wants to do is sleep, because here is what he lacks elsewhere, here is where the tenuous is made firm, here is why the there is tolerable...

...here is peace...

* * *

“Spike!”

All vestiges of his dream scattered as the vampire was shaken from his sleep. He blinked against the gloom of the room before drawing a weary hand across his eyes.

“What’s worth wakin’ a bloke from the first good night’s sleep he’s had in weeks, Red?” he asked. He winced when he rolled onto his side and away from her, the pain in his midsection from his injury still too real not to ignore. “Less the building’s on fire and I’m about to go up in ash, bugger off.”

“You have to get up,” she whispered, her hand returning to his shoulder. “I need you to do something for me.”

“Tell me what else is new,” Spike muttered, and stayed exactly where he was. The goodwill that had suffused his body at the dream he couldn’t remember was starting to dissipate; all he wanted was to get back to whatever nirvana had left him feeling so good before it was too late.

Her footsteps were muffled against the carpet, and he smelled her presence in front of him again before he even opened his eyes. “I’m serious,” she said. Her breath fanned across his cheek, and when he opened his eyes, Spike saw her luminous eyes glued to him. “You said you trusted me, right? Then you gotta trust that I wouldn’t be here unless I had a really super-duper reason. You’re cranky enough when you’re awake. You really think I want to face you when you’re sleepy and pissed off?”

“Don’t forget hungry.”

She visibly swallowed, but didn’t move. “How are you?” Willow asked. “Are you healing up?”

“Up, down, all around. Still hurts like a bitch, though. Getting stabbed through the gut’s got a tendency to do that.”

“But…other than that, are you getting stronger? To do, you know, physical stuff?”

The corner of his mouth lifted as Spike resumed his position on his back. “Why, Miss Rosenberg,” he said, lifting his arms to thread his fingers behind his head, even though doing so made his stomach burn, “I do believe you’re tryin’ to seduce me.”

“Huh? What? Oh! Ewww!” A horrified Willow slapped at his torso, but when he flinched from the impact on his injury, she immediately dissolved into, “Oh! Sorry!”

He didn’t wait for her to speak again, swinging his legs over the opposite side of the bed and rising
to his feet. As she watched, Spike yanked his shirt up to look down at the wound, noting the fresh trickle of blood that was beginning to seep from it.

Willow’s eyes were wide. “Did I do that?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Red.” He shucked the shirt and used it to daub away the flow. “Did it when I rolled over. Just opened it up a bit, but…see? Gone already.”

“Oh, that’s good then. That means you’re better, right? You’re all rested and raring to get back to being grrrr?”

It was the last that made him halt. “You got someone in mind you want me to kill?” Spike asked in surprise. “Thought you said that was a no-no.”

“No, no killing, just…scaring. And…overpowering if we need it. But definitely no killing.”

His eyes narrowed in the dark, knowing she couldn’t properly see his face but more than capable of seeing the anxiety on Willow’s. Something was churning around in that red head of hers, and though he was dying to ask what it was, Spike also knew that she wouldn’t come to him for help in anything unless she really needed it.

“You’re goin’ to spill once whatever it is, is over,” he casually remarked.

“Oh, yes, definitely. I’ll tell you now, on the way. I don’t think we’ve got huge amounts of time.”

* * *

She couldn’t sleep, worry about what exactly she’d gotten herself into making it impossible for her to relax. She’d tried work to distract her mind, but she couldn’t concentrate. She’d attempted using tai chi, but her nerves were too jumpy to force her muscles to comply. She’d even given peaceful imagery a go, but the pictures that kept coming to her head were anything but tranquil.

It all left Lydia restlessly wandering about the hotel room she was sharing with Esme, waiting for the witch to return.

When the knock came at her door, she leapt toward the sound, the question of why Esme wouldn’t use her key not even registering as a possibility. Her mouth formed a small o, though, when she pulled it open and saw the injured vampire leaning against the jamb.

“’Lo, luv,” Spike said, in a voice roughened with pain. His hand was clutching his midsection, and Lydia gasped when she saw the blood seeping through the t-shirt.

“You’ve been hurt,” she said unnecessarily. “Were you in a brawl?”

He chuckled, and the savage rasp sent a wave of shivers down her spine. “Something like that.” He tipped his head toward the room’s interior. “Don’t s’pose I could trouble you for a minute, could I? Got a spot of trouble here, and something tells me if there’s anyone who knows how to take care of a vamp, it’s you.”

Those blue eyes, so intense and so intelligent, fixed on hers with a power that she’d only dreamt about prior to accepting Esme’s offer at partnership. This was the vampire she’d spent so many years studying, and absorbing, and now he needed her help. When he’d been hurt in whatever scrap his runaway adventures had led him to, William the Bloody had chosen to come to her for aid.

Lydia’s heart was pounding so hard in her chest, she knew he would be able to hear it.
Straightening, she stepped aside, clearing the path into the room. “You may come in, William,” she said stiffly, hoping desperately that feigning a stiff upper lip would distract him from her racing pulse.

He smirked as he stepped over the threshold, stopping directly in front of her to murmur, “Didn’t exactly need the invite, luv, but nice to know I’m welcome where you…sleep.”

She watched the muscles flex beneath his shirt as he strode inside, her eyes slipping unbidden to his hips until Spike glanced back over his shoulder. Snapping her gaze back up to his face, Lydia blushed when he said, “Can’t rightly check me out all the way back there, can you, pet?”

“No, no, of course not,” she stammered. Closing the door, she kept her hands clasped tight in front of her so that he wouldn’t see the trembling, and walked over to the bureau where she kept her supplies. Quickly, she checked his position at the foot of the bed, the hand that still clutched the injury in his abdomen and the slump in his shoulders as the pain weighed him down, before turning toward the mirrored dresser.

Nothing before, and she doubted nothing ever again, would match this moment, Lydia decided as she pulled out the bandages. She finally had William the Bloody right---.

* * *

She jumped when the door opened and Spike poked his head out. “Coast’s clear, Red,” he said, beckoning her into Lydia’s room.

Scurrying from around the corner she’d been hiding, Willow closed the distance as quickly as possible, lifting a warning finger in Spike’s face when she passed him in the doorway. “She better not be dead,” she said.

Spike snorted. “Bint’s too stupid to kill,” he said, following her into the room.

The first thing Willow noticed was an unconscious Lydia dumped ungraciously to the bed. Her hands were lashed behind her back with the cord from the curtains, and though the rise of her chest indicated that she was still breathing, there was unmistakable bruising around the front of her neck.

“She turned her back on me in front of a bloody mirror,” Spike said with a shrug when Willow turned expectant eyes to him. “Just cut off her oxygen enough for her to pass out. Not my fault she’s the type who goes black and blue just by gettin’ blown on.”

“Your mouth was close enough to blow on her? You weren’t all fangy, were you?”

“Figure of speech, Red.”

“Oh. Fine, then. We don’t have time to argue about this.” After a quick survey of the room, Willow marched for the dresser and began opening drawers, stopping when she pulled open the third and exhaled in relief.

“Hold this,” she said, pulling out the plastic bag she’d stuffed into her pocket and thrusting it at Spike. She began pulling everything out of the drawer and dumping it into the sack, ignoring any sense of order in her haste.

“You sure you’re up to doin’ the mojo?”

Willow nodded. “Esme already wrote out the spells for me to practice. And these are all the ingredients, so we should be all set. Except…”
His hand grabbed hers as she was about to drop in a skein of cotton wool. “You didn’t hold out on me, did you?” Spike gaze was deadly, his eyes violently dark, and she winced from the pressure he was exerting on her wrist. “You said you could do both spells. The one for you and the Slayer, and the one for me and Dru. Don’t think you’re cuttin’ me loose on this little deal, Red. Do that, and---.”

She didn’t wait for the threat she knew was coming. “No, no holding out. I’m all holding in. Or, you know, not holding in. Because that would be so not the straightshooter thing to do, and we can’t have that, now can we? I meant it, Spike. I can do the spells Esme taught me. The except is just… well, I know what the spell to help Buffy is all about, because that’s what got me into all this in the first place with Esme. But the one to help you get Drusilla back? That one’s all hers. All I did was memorize the words and they’re all in Latin, and frankly, my Latin sucks---.”

“Got it.” Releasing his grip, Spike dropped the sack onto the dresser and stepped away from her. “S’pose that should be my cue to go get the Slayer, right? Nothin’ else for me to do ‘round here?”

“No.” She didn’t even know she was holding her breath until he stopped in the doorway. “Don’t fuck this up,” he said, just barely turning his head enough to throw his words over his shoulder. “Both me and the Slayer are counting on you to come through for us.”

And then he was gone. And Willow was left holding the bag. Literally.

* * *

He went back to his room to get his coat first.

Well, stomped might be a better word for it.

The euphoria from playing off the Watcher’s starry-eyed crush had been squashed by the sudden fear that Willow just might not be up to giving him the same arrangement the old witch had.

He believed her when she said she could do the spell for Dru. And she’d claimed that Esme had given her the spell prior to his disappearing act, so no chance there that there was any double-dealing.

And if there was, well, after so many years as a scholar in his human life, Spike’s Latin most likely didn’t suck as much as Willow’s did. He’d just give the spell the onceover before going under her magical knife to make sure it was on the up-and-up.

Still didn’t mean he was in a good mood.

After all, he was about to play pack horse for the sleeping Slayer. And in spite of his assurances to Willow, his body still ached from the fight with April. He’d give just about anything to go crawl back into bed and sleep for the next week to recover.

He wasn’t sure why he’d told Willow he could do it. Technically, Spike knew it was possible. He’d pushed himself far harder getting Dru out of Prague, and he didn’t have an angry mob coming after him this time. Just one pissed-off witch whose powers seemed to be on the blink at the moment. But it still didn’t completely gel that he’d give so easily into the redhead’s scheme. Or that he’d accepted her version of his teleportation without any hesitation.

He must be going soft.

Didn’t stop him from going to Buffy’s room to fetch her, though.
She hadn’t moved from the position he’d seen her in earlier, her hair a riotous tangle around her cheeks. Standing at the side of the bed, Spike’s nostrils flared from the pungence of sweat and salt that seeped from her skin, and felt his body characteristically harden in her presence. Whenever she was, she’d been fighting. Too bad he’d missed the show. Watching her fight was the next best thing to being the one fighting her.

Right.

I can do this.

I can.

After arranging his coat closed in front of him to keep the worst of the blood from her, Spike bent and scooped her up, keeping her wrapped in the duvet as he cradled her against his chest. Her cheek fell against his lapel, causing her slow breath to float upwards along his jaw, and he tensed as the muscles in his cheek twitched.

The demon inside was screaming at him to take the advantage and finish her off for good. Even through the blanket, he could feel every rush in her veins as it raced from one end of her body to the next, and the prospective tang made his mouth water. Slayer blood would help me heal faster. Slayer blood would make this whole buggering trip worth it. Slayer blood---.

His teeth clamped down on his tongue, flooding his mouth with a familiar coppery flow while the momentary pain cut off the enticing thoughts. Going after Slayer blood now would muck it up with Willow, especially since she was so willing and able to help him in return for getting his aid. And Dru was worth it. Getting Dru back was worth any hundred deals he made with the Slayer and her band of not-so-merry men.

Tightening his grip around her, Spike was oblivious to the ache the added muscle brought to his midsection, concentrating on carrying Buffy into the hall and toward the door leading to the cellar and the tunnels. He intercepted Willow on the way, and her indiscreet glance to her best friend’s neck made his temper flare.

“No, I didn’t soddin’ bite her!” he snapped.

“I…I didn’t---.”

“Yes, you bloody well did.” His foot shot out and kicked the waiting door open, knocking it from its hinges and creating a minor din in the process. Ignoring Willow’s whispered warnings, Spike disappeared into the welcome darkness, quickening his step to distance himself from the witch before his ire got the better of him.

Made a deal, didn’t I?

Don’t particularly want to bite her anyway.

Want to---.

“Wait up, Spike!”

He was already at the tunnel entrance, so he forced his feet to finally stop, though he didn’t bother with looking back at her as she rushed to join him. “You got a destination in mind, Red?” he asked tightly, avoiding the issue of her confusion. “Don’t fancy carting the Slayer ‘round ad nauseum.”

“I figured we’d go back to Giles’ flat,” she said. “Esme won’t think we’d go back there after
“Well, unless you’ve started shacking up with the Watcher, you’re goin’ to have to figure different.”

“What? Why?”

Spike rolled his eyes. Wasn’t she supposed to be the smart one? “’Cause last time I checked, Rupert hadn’t sent me any sort of invite. Bit of a prereq to me carryin’ the Slayer over the threshold.” He began marching through the dank tunnel, not bothering to wait for her to catch up. “Leave it to me, Red. I’ll cozy us up, all safe and sound.”

* * *

His fingers trailed over her bare back, listening to the regular rhythm of her breathing as she slept against his chest. He could watch her all night, William reasoned. Something about the way Buffy slept was hypnotic to him.

When they’d returned from the park, she’d not even pretended to go to her own room. “If tonight’s our last night together,” she’d said, “the last thing I want is to spend it alone.”

His lips had twitched at her awkward syntax, but William had agreed, leading her to his chambers with their fingers still intertwined. She’d spied the waiting tea immediately, but stayed silent, choosing instead to focus on disrobing both of them. Gentle hands had slid his clothing from his body, and she’d guided him back to the bed where they had curled automatically around each other. The loving that had ensued had been soft and tender, and when it was over, he’d handed her the teacup without saying a word, watching solemnly as she drank it.

His still waited on the nightstand to be consumed.

If he was being honest with himself, he was afraid to go to sleep, for fear of waking in the morning without her in his arms. They could have this last dream to share, but the reality of a lifetime stretching out before him seemed barren, in spite of their final words in the park. William had meant everything he’d said to her—he truly believed that fear would no longer govern the mainstay of his daily activities—but it didn’t mean he wouldn’t grieve for her presence.

A tiny mew muffled against his chest brought him back to the present, and he glanced down to see a small line form between her brows. She was likely looking for him, he realized. If he didn’t show up and she ended up being gone in the morning, it would taint their last day together for her.

With a heavy sigh, William reached for his tea and swallowed it down as quickly as he could. At least they would have these last few hours to share. He needed to make them as memorable as possible.
The Center of My Sinful Earth

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CXLVI.”

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: April has plans for Quentin, William has drunk some of the tea in anticipation of this being his last night with Buffy, and Willow has convinced Spike to take the sleeping Buffy away from the hotel and make a stand on their own…

The witch was close to running on empty.

“You’re not doin’ any of us any favors, you know,” Spike commented as Willow struggled with the lock on the room. Her hands kept slipping off the ornate doorknob as she tried to wrest the skeleton key through the slot, her creeping exhaustion making her clumsy.

“It’s not me, it’s the key,” she protested.

“Right. And how many walls did you acquaint with your face on the way up here? Face it, Red. You’re beat.”

“I’m not beat.” With a grinding crunch, the lock finally slipped, the door flying free from its released tension. She turned a triumphant smile to the vampire at her side. “See? Told you I could do it.”

“Yeah, you’re a veritable whiz kid,” he said dryly. “You’ve vanquished the big, bad door. Mind if I get our package here inside while you celebrate?”

He didn’t wait for a reply, but instead pushed past, taking care not to jostle Buffy against the doorframe as he stepped inside the room. It was better than he expected. The bed was king-sized, most likely a deliberate choice since the pub he’d brought Willow to catered to the demon set, and swallowed up much of the small room. A looming wardrobe in the corner was the only storage in the place, but right next to the entrance, someone had set up a universal altar, complete with leftover ash from whatever sacrifice had last been made on it.

“Home sweet home,” Spike said as he edged around the edge of the bed. With a surprising gentleness, he set the Slayer down, pushing back the edge of the duvet when it covered her face, before turning back to see Willow hovering in the doorway. “Now what? Don’t tell me it offends your delicate sensibilities. You don’t exactly have the luxury of bein’ so dainty ‘bout where you’re hiding out, you know.”

“I know.” Her nose wrinkled as she caught the scent of whatever had died on the altar, and she made as wide a berth as possible to avoid it. “Hopefully I won’t have to stick around for very long,” she said, pulling open the wardrobe and dropping the sack of magical supplies into its bottom. She shifted the weight of her backpack and winced. “Now, I just need to take a shower.”

“Down the hall and on your left,” he replied automatically. He collapsed into the chair at the bed’s side, his eyes drifting closed as he tried to block out the worst of the ache in his gut. “And don’t forget to turn the light on before you go in. That’ll scare off the worst of the bugs. The ones that bite, that is.”
He heard her gulp and had to fight not to shake his head at her squeamishness. A soft footstep, the turning of the knob, and then…

“Do you need anything?”

Spike cracked an eyelid to see Willow pensively watching him. Her eyes kept darting between him and the Slayer asleep just inches away from his resting arm, but she was very obviously not saying anything about the situation. He reckoned her head was probably going to have to explode soon from trying to suss out just what he might or might not do. He bit back a smile. That might actually be fun to see.

“Need’s a big word,” he said. “How ‘bout let’s try a little spot of the truth. Consider it reckoning for services rendered if you want.”

“Truth? What kind of truth?”

“The kind where I’m not walkin’ in on this shindig completely blind.” His eyes opened fully as he sat up a little straighter. “Just answer me one thing, Red. No lies, no fancy schmancy doubletalk to get ‘round the question. Doesn’t seem like a helluva lot for a bloke to ask.”

She tried to force a grin, but her obvious dread over what might be coming next kept it from fully appearing. “Shoot.”

“Now, I’m not deaf. I heard you gabbling with that Esme about needing me to bring the Slayer back from whenever it is she’s gone and got her herself stuck. That the mojo you’re goin’ to cast on me is s’posed to replace whatever it was that was helping bring her back before. What I wanna know is… what was it? What am I doin’ proxy duty for?”

He’d considered asking her balls out if he was somehow involved in Buffy’s time-traveling games, but that had been short-lived. Spike already suspected he had the answer to that; after all, he’d smelled the proof of it with his own nose, and everyone and their uncle kept trying to pin his human moniker on him. Now, he was curious as to how this whole mess had been started.

He thought she was going to chew her lip off for as much as she was biting it. She really didn’t want to answer his question.

“It was…a journal,” Willow finally managed to say. She was pale---well, paler than usual---and he could hear her heartbeat announcing her anxiety. “The journal of…William Freston.” Two steps into the doorway, she stopped. “For what it’s worth,” she almost whispered, not able to look in his direction, “Buffy really likes your poetry.”

Then…she was gone.

All pretense at sleep fled. A journal, she said. His journal. A journal he’d not seen in over a century. And he knew that Willow wasn’t bullshitting him this time because she knew about the bloody poetry.

It was possible, of course, that Angel had said something about his previous life. Then again, if he’d let on to the Slayer at all about what Spike had been like as a human, or that he still dallied with the poetry after being turned—though not publicly, not after he’d caught Darla rifling through his writings and cackling like a madwoman possessed—Spike doubted that Buffy would’ve ever taken him seriously as an enemy, or that Willow would’ve been nearly as terrified of him either back on the Hellmouth or here in London. That pretty much discounted that theory.

His gaze fell on the sleeping Slayer. *Buffy really likes your poetry.* “What’s goin’ on, pet?” he asked
softly, as if she was in a position to respond. “When are you, and why in bloody hell can’t I remember?”

She didn’t move. Carefully, Spike turned the chair to better face the bed, and leaned forward to push the duvet away from her shoulders, exposing her more to his inspection. All he could smell was her, but how much of that was from carrying her the endless blocks to the demon pub and how much was something else, he didn’t know. “Maybe it’s some alternate dimension thing,” he mused out loud. His hand reached to curl around the slim line of her neck, arcing but not touching. “Heard of those, but I never expected to be part of one.”

His thumb dropped to rest gently on the quiet throb in the hollow of her throat. So familiar…like every other victim he’d claimed over the past century. Like…home.

“That’s gotta be it, right? Only explanation that makes sense. Your cronies know too much for them to be bluffing. And Red’s too bloody sure that I’m the key in bringing you back.”

Slowly, Spike’s hand drew down the center line of her chest, a single finger falling between the curves of her breasts as its mates made faint glides across the innermost swells. She’d stake him if she ever found out he’d touched her like this, and he was more than aware that if Willow chose that minute to walk in, he’d be fresh out of luck in having the spell done for Dru. But, in the infinite space of that single moment, Spike didn’t care. He’d been tantalized by the purity of her body ever since he’d first spied her at the Bronze, all power and death made somehow stronger by that pounding heart.

He just…needed to feel it.

“Still…can’t say it wouldn’t be interesting. You and me. Yeah, yeah, I hate you, you hate me, completely unnatural. But I gotta admit…it gets me hard just thinkin’ of fightin’ at your side. You’re bloody music, you know that?” He chuckled. “I’d call it poetry, but I guess we both know my poetry’s not exactly up to par, now don’t we?”

_Buffy really likes your poetry._

When his hand reached her stomach, it stopped, settling lightly on the firm muscles without going further beneath the duvet. His body was screaming at him for rest, but other than shifting to a slightly more comfortable position in the chair, Spike remained watchful of the sleeping Slayer.

“Hypnotic, you are,” he murmured. “Hate you for that. Should be healing up with a bit of kip, and instead, I’m sittin’ here, talkin’ to your bloody body like you can even hear me. Bet you’d hate this. Probably kick my ass good and proper if you were to find out.”

And then the next, even quieter…

“Just…whenever you are, pet…bein’ with that ponce…just…he’s fragile-like, see? Took me meeting Dru to finally grow some stones, but then, you never knew that. Couldn’t. Just…”

He sighed. Even now, he couldn’t say the words. He wasn’t entirely sure what was possessing him to speak with her this way, except that it was…well, safe was the only word that would come to mind.

Funny.

Safe and Slayer were two words Spike would never have dreamed of matching up.

Not before now.
She rushed back to the room as quickly as she could, her hair plastered to her head, water still dripping down her back beneath her shirt. Spike’s warning about the shower had been a good one, but at least she was clean now. And clean was one step closer towards a good direction in Willow’s book.

Quietly, she opened their room door and slipped inside. “Didn’t mean to…” she started, and then stopped at the spectacle that was before her.

Spike was still in the chair she’d left him in, except, for some reason, it looked like it was in a different position than when she’d left. Closer, and angled kind of funny towards the bed. He was sound asleep, his head resting on the arm he had propped on the chair’s side, but it was the extension of that arm that sucked all the air from Willow’s lungs.

The blanket covering Buffy had been pushed down her to her waist, and now, Spike’s hand was resting possessively on the Slayer’s stomach, the tips of his fingertips curling ever so slightly, even in his sleep, into her flesh. It was a curiously intimate pose, and left Willow feeling like she’d walked in on something she shouldn’t have. The question of whether she should move it, though, was dismissed quickly as she realized that would most likely mean waking Spike up yet again.

He’s not doing any harm. And really, what’s the harm in a little touching?

* * *

So soft, like an angel’s whisper as it floats above the breeze.

So warm, as if that angel had just come down from the sun itself.

And beneath it all…

William’s voice, heady and ardent and so so passionate, whispering the words he’d written just for her, over and over again until it became a tattoo into Buffy’s flesh…

Her back arched away from the grass when his thumb brushed over her clit, but just as quickly as it was there, it vanished, continuing its gentle exploration with a determination that belied its delicacy. As per his request, her eyes stayed shut, but the more he touched, the more Buffy wanted to throw caution to the wind and pull him onto her, to wrap her legs around his slim hips and feel him pumping in and out. She was already squirming against the firm ground, her fingers threaded through the blades of grass in a vain attempt to not reciprocate his palpations, and a slick shine of sweat was skimming across her flesh, but for his sake, she would hold out. It was his last request, William had said. She damn well was going to honor that.

His words stopped, though his fingers didn’t, and Buffy felt the sultry feather of his breath along her neck as his mouth pressed into the hollow below her ear. “I love the way you taste,” he murmured, letting the tip of his tongue tickle the outer curve.

“Are you going to let me taste you?” she asked breathlessly.

“Later,” came the promise. His teeth nipped at the lobe, making her giggle. “Not until I’ve had my fill.”

His hand was nudging at her hip, pushing her to roll onto her side. Buffy complied, but the moment she could feel him pressed into her back, her eyes fluttered open, momentarily disoriented against the dazzling sunlight flooding the park. “What’re you doing?” she said softly, and then gasped when she
felt his erection nudge the crack of her bottom, sliding downward to prod at the join of her upper
thighs.

“Do you mind…?” William whispered. “I’d like very much to try this.” His left arm slid beneath her
shoulders, his hand cupping her breast, while his other wrapped around her waist. “It lets me touch
you. You’re so beautiful, Buffy.”

She moaned when his mouth sucked at the curve of her shoulder and lifted her leg to allow his cock
to slide between her wet folds. “I’ve…never…” But she couldn’t finish, her lungs suddenly
boycotting their purpose at the firm press of his sliding length deep into her.

“So we’ll learn together.” William’s fingers found the hardened bud of her nipple, pinching it lightly
as he nipped at her neck. He chuckled when Buffy jumped within his arms, and splayed his fingers
across her stomach, his fingertips digging into the soft flesh, to keep her from moving further.

“Stay,” he commanded. The single word sent a surprise thrill through Buffy’s muscles, but when his
hips began to slowly retract, his cock unsheathing from her heat, each inch he deserted her made her
want to scream in frustration.

“Regardless of what may come,” he whispered, and began the intoxicating slide in and out of her,
measuring each length with a gravity that made her gasp, “promise me one thing.”

It took all her self-control to take command of her voice again. “Anything.”

“Don’t forget me.”

She wished she could see his face, because though his voice was low and moderated, the ache in it
made her start to think that the poise he’d held since joining her in the dream was only a façade. Is he
that afraid to look at me? Is that why he wants to have sex like this?

“You have so many wonderful years ahead of you,” continued William. “You get the opportunity to
further your education. Your whole world is opening up, and somewhere, there is someone who will
be worthy of sharing it all with you. Oh, how I wish that person could be me, but…” His sigh
warmed her cheek, and while it propounded the true state of his mind, his body was still relentless in
coaxing as many tremors and moans as it could from Buffy.

“I won’t forget,” she breathed. Her hand reached around to run a gossamery caress across his jaw. “I
couldn’t. Physically impossible.”

His arms tightened around her, molding her body to his as if to imprint the memory onto his skin. “I
only…have one regret…” he said, his thrusts beginning to quicken, his breath becoming more
ragged.

“No, no regrets—.”

“Yes.” The hand on her stomach crept lower, tangling in the coarse hair it met. “But…just the…
one…”

His finger pressed against her clit, the force matching that on her nipple, and Buffy exploded, her
eyes squeezing shut as a shower of sparks fireballed inside her head. Her inner muscles clamped
down on his cock, making him grunt in surprise, and she felt the familiar warming deep inside as he
lost control and came.

“Buffy…sweet…love you…Buffy…” William’s arms were desperate around her as his body
twitched with the throes of his orgasm, his face buried in her hair. Panting, he pressed his lips to her
neck as it subsided, and she had to fight to extricate herself enough from the embrace to swivel around and face him.

“No regrets,” she repeated, and leaned in to kiss him. He tasted of salt and sun-kissed beaches, but whether it was because of the sweat that made their bodies slick or tears he might’ve shed beyond the borders of her observation, Buffy didn’t know.

“It’s not…what you might think.” He seemed determined to look at everything but her eyes, thick lashes hauntingly lowered. “I made you a promise I can’t keep. I fear that you’ll…think ill of me once you’ve returned and realize it.”

“What promise?”

“Where I…never leave you. I have no wish to join the ranks of those who’ve hurt you so, but our circumstances…they seem to dictate otherwise, don’t they?”

She kissed him again, before he could take the breath to continue speaking. All she’d wanted for this dream was just to spend it like they had in the beginning, before she’d woken in his reality and not her own, so that if she did open her eyes to see Willow in her Beaker pajamas, both Buffy and William would have a wonderful memory to mark their last night together. She understood his grief--so much of it was mirrored in her own---but the timeline demanded that this sacrifice be made. She didn’t want him to dwell on the unhappy part of it.

“I want you to promise me something, too,” Buffy said when they separated. Her lips felt swollen from the power of the kiss, and though she was ready to go in for another, she wanted to get this out before they got distracted again. She wasn’t nearly as good at the holding a conversation during the actual sex act as William seemed to be.

“Anything,” he replied, mirroring her response from earlier.

“Don’t forget that you’re a good man.” Pressing her fingers to his mouth when he opened it to argue with her, she added, “I know, I’ve said it before. I’m a broken record on that song, but that’s only because I need you to believe it. Promise me you won’t ever forget that.”

Reaching up, William took her hand from his lips and pressed it to his chest. The steady rhythm of his slowing heart pacified the unrest that had settled somewhere inside her own, and she swallowed down the urge to tell him that she’d changed her mind again, that she was going to stay after all and he was just going to have to live with that.

“I swear to you,” he said solemnly, “with everything that I have, with everything that I am. You’ve made me strong, Buffy. Don’t you see that? I see you, and I think I can do anything. Because you believe I can. So how can I ever forget? That would be like forgetting to breathe.”

She nestled into his chest, taking comfort in the weight of his arm when he curled it around her. This was all she could do, Buffy realized. Though she wouldn’t be around to save William from Drusilla, maybe whatever time he had left would be happy. Maybe he’d be able to find someone to love him as much as she did, who could give him the things she couldn’t.

The irony that it was exactly what he’d said to her during their lovemaking escaped her.

* * *

From her seat inside the carriage, April watched Richard and Rose hurry from the house, coats clutched tightly around them as they headed for their waiting coach. “It’s a little early for a breakfast rendezvous,” she commented casually. Her eyes flickered to the lightening sky. Though it wasn’t
quite dawn yet, the hour was fast approaching. She would have to cease her watch soon if she wanted to make it back to the house before the sun rose.

“And it’s a little late for us,” Nathan murmured. His hand slipped between her thighs, rubbing at her pussy through her skirts as he nipped at her neck. “We should go home and sleep. Or maybe, *not* sleep.”

Distractedly, April batted away his hand, shifting sideways so that she could continue her watch on the Rhodes-Fanshaws without break. “Where could they be going, do you think?”

Nathan sighed. “It’s probably just Council business, my love. You know how they are.”

“But nobody arrived with a message. Something else has upset him.” She pointed to where he paused at the coach’s door. “See how he pulls at his fingers? That’s a typical Richard worrying signal.” Rapping at the draped window behind her, she twisted toward the door to wait for the driver to come around.

“Yes?” he asked, visibly shaking.

“I want you to follow that carriage,” April instructed, gesturing toward the vehicle now moving away from the house. “But you need to be discreet. They can’t know we’re watching them.”

The driver glanced nervously up at the sky. “But, the dawn,” she said. “Won’t you be wishing to get out of the sun?”

Her hand shot out and grabbed him by the throat. “You’ll leave worrying about the sun to me,” she snarled. “Your job is to follow…that…coach.” Disgusted, she tossed him to the ground, not even taking pleasure in the whimpers that finally escaped him or the haste of his return to the driver’s seat.

“We’re not going back?” Surprise colored Nathan’s voice, but she didn’t even cast him a glance as she settled back into her seat.

“No. Something has unsettled Richard. I want to know what it is.”

“But, April…darling…”

“If the next words out of your mouth are ‘he’s not worthy of the risk,’ I’ll toss you into the sunlight myself, Nathan.”

That quieted him, though his dissatisfaction with her emanated from his every pore. As the coach began to lurch down the cobblestones, April rested her hand on Nathan’s knee.

“I’m as weary of this as you are, lover,” she said quietly, though the control it took to restrain herself so made her even more furious. “I promise you. Tonight? I end this.”

* * *

Insistent knocking jarred him from his slumber, inciting him to call out before he’d fully wakened. “Yes?”

The door opened, revealing an anxious Meg. As soon as her eyes fell on William in his bed, though, her gaze dropped more respectfully to the floor, her hands folded in front of her. “Mr. Rhodes-Fanshaw has called, sir,” she rushed. “He says it’s of the utmost importance you come down as soon as possible.”
Groggy, William nodded automatically. “Yes, yes, I’ll be right there. Just…get him some tea while he waits.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied, dropping a quick curtsey before backing like a jackrabbit out of the entrance.

Rubbing at his eyes with the heel of his hand, William fell back against his pillow, remembering the last few minutes of his dream with Buffy. Bliss suffused his body, almost instantaneously replaced by the realization that he was actually awake. That it was over. That she was…

A small sigh at his side made him jerk, and the mattress shifted beneath him. When he turned his head to see, every inch of the motion achingly slow, relief washed over him.

That she was still *here*.

The duvet was tucked up under her chin, twisted from where she’d rolled onto her side to face him, and her lashes were dark against her cheek. Gently, William reached out to brush the hair back from her face, his heart pounding inside his chest.

“Buffy, my love,” he whispered. “It’s time to wake up…”
What We See Doth Lie

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CXXIII.”

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Spike and Willow have fled the hotel, leaving Lydia behind for Esme to find, while April in the past has followed Richard and Rose to William’s house; William was awoken at Richard’s arrival and learned that Buffy is still with him...

Shame was not an emotion that she often admitted to. It meant weakness, and years of stripping away her femininity in order to achieve the status with the Watcher’s Council that she so desperately desired had hardened Lydia to caring. Or, rather, it had girded her against conceding that she did. But lying to herself when she was too busy shredding the skin on her wrists trying to free herself was just too much.

She understood that it was entirely her fault. She’d given in to that schoolgirl fantasy about the bad boy vampire that she’d channeled into her thesis, and ended up strangled unconscious and left tied up on her own bed. For what purpose Spike had done it, though, she had no idea. When she’d come to, the first thing she’d done was sit up, and her reflection in the dresser’s mirror was the only confirmation Lydia needed that Spike had neither bitten nor raped her. The only marks he’d left were the bruises around her neck from where he’d come up behind her, and oddly enough, that made her angrier than if he’d actually violated her in some way. Fury had fueled her attempts at escape, and she’d worked like a madwoman, scraping the thin cords against the rough edge of the radiator, to try and free her bonds.

Esme had yet to return, which actually was the only thing in Lydia’s favor at the moment. Dawn was only just creeping over the horizon, and she breathed a heavy sigh of relief when the final fray disintegrated the cords around her wrists. Perhaps she could still save the situation. As long as Willow and Buffy were all right, Esme need never know that Spike had both returned and slipped through their clutches again.

She was almost ill when she found the Slayer’s empty room. But when frantic pounding at Willow’s door relinquished no response, Lydia knew that she was too late. Spike had absconded with both young women, most likely killing them. Esme would not be pleased about this latest turn of events.

The idea came to her as she walked past Buffy’s door. Without a Slayer to save, Lydia no longer had any use to associate with Esme. In fact, the elderly witch would most likely consider her a detriment and try to find some way to get rid of her. She’d already proven she could be more than ruthless if she needed to be. So, logic said that if Lydia couldn’t redeem herself in the Council’s eyes by helping Buffy, then perhaps she could do so by helping them finally apprehend Esme.

Not willing to run the risk of the elderly witch walking in on her, Lydia made the call to Headquarters from Buffy’s room. She wasn’t in the least surprised when it was picked up on the first ring.

“Marcus? It’s Lydia.” She spoke before he could even get his greeting completed, knowing that no one but he would answer his private line. When it came to friends within the Council, he was
probably the closest she could claim.

“Lydia? Where are you? What happened? How in heavens did you get out of here?”

“It’s a long story, and I don’t think I have much time, so listen to me. I know Mr. Travers’ been
kidnapped, but I also know you’ve probably tracked him by now---.”

“Well, we did, but that’s completely moot. He called here from his home just an hour ago.”

That stopped her. “What was that?”

“The vampire who kidnapped him encountered an enemy apparently. Quentin managed to escape as
she was being dusted. He called to inform us that he’d be working from home today.”

Lydia frowned. Mr. Travers never worked from home. Even when he’d been ill with the rogue
kularian virus, he’d still managed to help in recataloguing the Slayer transcripts in the archives. “Are
you sure it was him?” she couldn’t help but ask.

“Of course. The men we had watching his house for his possible return confirmed that they saw him
entering the premises. They even spoke with him for a few minutes before he dismissed them from
duty.”

“And he was all right.”

“As all right as he could be considering he’d been tortured and such,” came the reply. “He told us
he’d be seeking medical attention for his injuries later today.”

None of this was making sense. “But…did he say who kidnapped him?” Lydia pressed. “Were you
able to firmly identify who it was?” Having seen the videotapes, she already knew it was April;
Esme had confirmed it as such. It was inevitable that Mr. Travers would find out. It would be one of
the first things he would try and discover from a captor.

“He said he never learned her name---.”

She hung up before he could go on. Something was dreadfully wrong. Everything that had happened
with Mr. Travers went completely against what he represented; there was no doubt in Lydia’s mind
that he was still in some kind of danger. That meant April was somehow pulling his strings, but for
what purpose?

She paced as she thought. Piece by piece, strands of what she’d gleaned over the past twenty-four
hours began to weave into a tapestry she could manage, even if she didn’t fully recognize it.

She and Mr. Travers were merely pawns in this war between Esme and April. Both women were
bound and determined to destroy the other, and willing to sacrifice anyone to do so. Though the issue
had never been brought up, Lydia knew that Esme must somehow be responsible for Rupert Giles’
disappearance, which meant that she was hiding additional tricks lest her original plans failed. Or he
was the purpose for another plot entirely.

What neither opponent knew was that Lydia was now privy to where both of them were. Well, she
would be if Esme ever returned to the hotel. And she wasn’t completely sure that Mr. Travers would
be foolish enough to allow such a powerful vampire sanctuary in his home, but she was willing to
bet that if she wasn’t there, she was somewhere close. And fetchable, should a certain someone ring
a certain Council Head and tell him where he could find a certain runaway witch.

Maybe it didn’t matter that the Slayer and Willow were missing.
Maybe Esme and April would destroy each other…all on their own.

***

When the carriage lumbered to a stop, she dared a peek out the window, brows shooting upward when she recognized the familiar street. “Why would Richard need to visit that David Howard’s home?” April mused out loud. “We didn’t forget and leave somebody accidentally alive, did we?”

“Only that simp William you insisted be your messenger,” Nathan replied. His mood was foul. Everything about this trip to London was turning into a disaster, and the sense of doom that had plagued him since they’d first arrived was beginning to make his flesh fester. “Is your curiosity satisfied yet? Can we go home now?”

“I just don’t…Ohhhhhhh…” The last was almost an orgasmic exhalation, enough of a mood shift for his lover that Nathan couldn’t help but lean across to see what had captured her fancy so.

The street was deserted, the Howard home even blacker, but following her line of sight, Nathan saw the Watcher’s coach further down the street, and the quartet that were emerging from a neighboring home to embark it.

“That’s the--.”

“---Slayer,” April finished. She’d unconsciously slipped into her demon mask, a weakness she rarely succumbed to, and her lips were curled back into a snarl. “I should have known.”

He could see where this was going, and he didn’t like it. “There’s too many of them,” Nathan said, pulling her away from the pre-dawn light. “The Watcher will be prepared, and the Slayer--.” He didn’t say it out loud—no matter how much she claimed to love him, April would never forgive him for believing a living Slayer could defeat her—but it was enough for her to shoot him a glacial glare.

“So, we follow them to wherever they’re going, and then return later with more,” she said tightly. The rap she gave for the driver almost drove a hole through the wall, but quickly, the carriage was moving again.

Nathan settled back into the seat. The festering was turning to rot, and there was nothing he could do but go along for the ride. Ironic that a dead man would be so frightened of dying.

***

“You just…sense these things?” Buffy asked.

William had to bite the inside of his cheek not to smile at the frown that was drawing his love’s brows together as she regarded the older woman at her side. She had been questioning Rose’s abilities ever since hearing what the Rhodes-Fanshaws had learned, and for some reason, he was finding her every mannerism unbearably darling this morning. Perhaps it was the residual exaltation he was experiencing at knowing he was going to have her for another day, though she hadn’t seemed quite as pleased with the situation as he was once she’d been fully wakened. But whatever it was, it left him with a snug euphoria that made him feel remarkably invincible.

And amused as hell at everything Buffy was doing.

“Yes,” replied Rose, with a surprising patience considering how many times she’d been asked the question. Though the two women were seated on one side of the lurching carriage while the men sat on the opposite, she was turned enough to face the Slayer directly. It was almost as if she was studying Buffy, though why that would be happening today and not the day they had first met,
William didn’t know.

“I’m more sensitive to some magics than I am others,” she continued. “Esme’s, in particular, seem to draw my attention with quite a zealous fervor.”

“Probably because she’s so strong,” Buffy replied. “Strong enough that she can outfox my Council, but you work differently than she expects. She hasn’t figured out how to hide from you.”

“Or even that she needs to,” William offered. He smiled when a surprised Buffy met his eyes. It was obviously an observation that she hadn’t considered yet.

“Which works in our favor,” she said. “You can be our secret weapon.”

This seemed to startle Rose. “I’m not a weapon,” she hastened to say. “What I do---.”

“I believe Miss Summers may be correct, dear,” Richard interjected. “If it turns out that we must confront her, you will likely be the one who will be able to slip through her defenses.”

“You’re not asking that I kill her, are you?” She sounded aghast at such a suggestion. “Regardless of what she’s done, she’s still human.”

“She’s got a point, Dick.”

William choked trying to hold back his laughter. For some reason, just that morning, Buffy had taken to addressing Richard by this unfortunate nickname—which for some reason, coming from her lips, sounding undeniably profane—and he had a strong suspicion it was a direct response to whatever confrontation they had shared the previous night. While Richard colored at the label, however, she remained bright-eyed and artlessly collected every time she used it, and that only made it all the worse.

“She will need to be dealt with,” he said stiffly.

“So we’ll figure out a non-lethal way of doing it,” she replied. “I don’t kill humans. Even you should know that’s not part of the Slayer job description. Well, not until after they get themselves turned, that is.”

William’s mirth vanished at the decidedly scornful remark. It was a low blow, even considering what might have happened between them, but it accomplished what she had obviously wanted. It silenced Richard from the conversation.

“Do you think she took someone else?” Buffy asked, resuming her interrogation of the seer.

Rose cast a watchful eye toward her husband before replying. “I don’t know,” she finally admitted. “I wasn’t aware that Mrs. Freston had been taken when I sensed it the first time. And I most definitely wasn’t aware that you’d arrived at the second happenstance.”

This brought the frown back to Buffy’s face. “You don’t think it’s possible someone else has come back in time, do you?” She directed the question to William, who shook his head in response.

“That would require someone being in the park when we were, wouldn’t it?” he reasoned. “And I’m fairly certain we were alone.”

“Do you recognize the address or anything? Some long-forgotten relative she might be interested in snatching?”
Another shake of his head. “I’m not familiar with that part of London at all, I’m afraid.”

“Huh. Guess we’ll just have to wait and see, then.”

The carriage lapsed into quiet for the remainder of the trip, each lost in their individual thoughts. When the jostling stopped, the creak of wood from the driver’s seat followed by the slight rock of the coach’s body announced their arrival, and Buffy was the first to alight, nearly knocking over the driver when he tried to open the door for her.

William was the last to get out, and he blinked against the bright light. “This can’t be right,” he heard Buffy say.

He looked in the direction the others were staring, and blinked again. “Are we there?” he asked. A swivel of his head revealed that the surrounding area was just as deserted as the plot in front of them. There were houses in the far distance, back in the direction from which they’d come, but otherwise, only grass and scattered bushes occupied the allotment and its neighbors. “There’s nothing here.”

“There is.” Rose had paled, her gaze transfixed. Slowly, she took a step forward, and William noticed the sudden shift in her breathing, the instantaneous response from Richard when he grasped her elbow to steady her. “It’s so…potent…”

As he watched, Buffy inched closer to him, her hand reaching out to entwine with his. “Serious magic always wigs me out,” she murmured for his ears only. “Give me something to hit, and I’m fine. But this…” She shook her head. “What is she doing?”

He wasn’t willing to admit his ignorance and instead squeezed her hand, hoping she would see it as a reassuring gesture. He froze, though, the spider legs of disquietude creeping down the back of his neck, when the faint sound of breathless singing filled the morning air.

“Early one morning, just as the sun was shining…”

“Mother…” William whispered.

Richard shot a frown over his shoulder. “What did you say?” he asked over the murmured song still coming from a mesmerized Rose.

“That’s…one of Mother’s favorite songs,” he stammered. His eyes darted across the barren field that seemed to stretch before them before returning to the seer. So regular…like a carefully laid table…too uniform in its casualness…

Too good to be true.

William straightened. “She’s here,” he said quickly. His eyes were bright as he glanced at Buffy. “The magic that Rose is feeling…it’s hiding them. It has to be.”

Before Buffy could respond, Rose collapsed against her husband’s arm, prompting the younger people to rush forward and ease her back up. When her breathing evened, her gaze settled on them, more lucid than they would have imagined she would be under the circumstances.

“We have work to do,” she said quietly. “Get my things.”

* * *

The first demon appeared from nowhere.
Rose had found a place near the carriage, surrounding herself with a plethora of candles—*in daylight?* Buffy was having a hard time wrapping her brain around the efficacy of *that* one—that seemed to drive her into some sort of trance. For the past four hours, she’d remained frozen within the circle, while the remaining trio just watched. And waited.

And waited.

So, when the air seemed to thicken in the field in front of them, and the horned, seven-foot demon came snarling and drooling from a fold in the space, Buffy was almost grateful for the distraction, because it meant she had something to do at last.

Until it headed straight for William.

“*No!*” she screamed.

The cry broke through the concentration he’d been directing at Rose, and William turned in time to see Buffy rush forward and tackle the demon from behind, rolling into the brush with a flurry of skirts and fists.

It was big, but it was stupid, and as quickly as she’d landed on its back, the Slayer had grabbed its horns and given its neck a violent twist, tumbling with it to the ground when it fell over dead. She was wiping the scales from her hands when William bent to help her to her feet.

“Are you all right?” he asked. He held her out at arms’ length and looked her over, a critical eye on the hunt for any sign of injury.

“I’m fine,” she replied. She turned a knowing gaze to Richard, who had stopped halfway en route to the carriage for weapons. “Guess that’s our answer, huh?”

Richard’s nod only seemed to perplex William. “Our answer to what?” the young man said.

“That we’re on the right track,” Buffy said. “In my experience, if someone starts throwing big, tall, and uglies at you, you’re usually starting to piss them off.” She began walking toward the coach. “There’s going to be more. I need to arm up—-.”

She was forced to a stop when William’s arm curled around her bicep. “*We* need to arm up,” he said.

His chin was high, his eyes earnest, and she realized…she’d never loved him more than she did in that moment.

Buffy smiled. “Right,” she said. “*We* need to.”

* * *

For a demon bed, it was surprisingly comfy. As soon as Willow’s head had hit the pillow, she’d been out for the count, not even Spike’s presence in the room enough to keep her from dreamland. Her sleep had been surprisingly nightmare-free considering the recent events, so when she felt the first stirrings of consciousness swipe away the wool inside her head, she actually sighed in bliss.

“’Bout time,” Spike said from somewhere in the room.

Willow’s eyes shot open. He must’ve been up for awhile, because the vampire’s hair was still damp from the shower, curling into wayward curls that softened the black of his attire, and the t-shirt he wore was oddly clean and free of holes. At her side, Buffy was still unconscious, though the duvet was back up to her neck as if it had never been drawn.
“How do you feel?” she asked, sitting up. When the blanket fell down around her waist, she saw his cocked brow at the muppet on her chest, and promptly pulled it back up to her chin.

“Better,” came the terse reply. He began pacing at the foot of the bed, the rapid force of it making the mattress slightly vibrate. “Look. ‘Bout last night---.”

“Last night?” Willow deliberately affected her most innocent stare. She didn’t want to think about what she’d told him, and she certainly didn’t want to dwell on how he might’ve taken Buffy’s opinion of his poetry. That was between the two blonds. She would feel much more comfortable if they could just straighten it out themselves. “What about last night?”

A growl escaped Spike’s throat. It was then that she realized that she’d not once seen him look at Buffy. In fact, he seemed to be going out of his way to look at anything but Buffy. Her disposition grew darker. What exactly happened between them last night?

“I’ve been doin’ some thinking---.”

Oh, that’s never good.

“---and the way I suss it, the Slayer’s not goin’ to be too thrilled to see me hanging around when she wakes up. I trust you, Red, though fuck knows why sometimes, but when it comes to Buf---Slayer there, well…” His agitation was increasing, and Willow wondered just how long he’d been waiting for her to wake up.

“What is it, Spike?” she asked, trying for calm in hopes that might soothe some of the hurly-burly inside his head. “Just spit it out.”

He stopped in his tracks to stare at her, but the gleam in his eyes made her unexpectedly shiver.

“Think there has to be a new order to this mania of ours,” Spike said, his voice a menacing rumble. “My order…”
Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet XCVIII.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Rose is trying to bring down the magic surrounding the house containing Giles and Anne Freston, while Buffy and William are fighting off the demons that are being unleashed, while back in the present, Spike has decided enough is enough…

He said it with more force than he felt, but if Red cottoned on to just what a wreck he really was about this whole situation, she’d be too busy laughing her ass off to do any kind of mojo for either of them. Spike’s sleep had been split between nonsensical dreams about him and the Slayer playing pick-up-sticks in Victorian gardens he’d long ago forgotten, and nightmares where Dru and Buffy engaged in fights to the death, while he was helplessly tied up at the side to watch. The outcomes had been different every time—sometimes, the Slayer would stake his dark princess; sometimes, Dru would catch Buffy in a lethal grip and drain her dry, and there was that one odd combination where Buffy had dusted Dru with one of the pick-up sticks—but each and every one of them left him in horrific grief that drove him from slumber just a few hours after dawn.

So, he did what he always did when confronted with a situation he found unbearable. He took it by the throat and shook it until it settled into something a spot more manageable. Of course, half the time he ended up a little worse for wear, but the occasions where he came out on top more than made up for it.

“What do you mean…your order?”

He could smell the fear spring to the surface of her skin, and the unexpected delight made Spike’s mouth curl into a smirk. “Thought I was bein’ pretty plainspoken,” he said. “Seems to me, I’ve been letting you call too many of these shots, and that’s just not right. Natural pecking order puts me on top, Red, so I’ve decided to start acting like it for a change.”

“No, no on top. What happened to you and me, and being straightshooting partners, huh? Straightshooters don’t get on top of each other. Side by side. That’s what we agreed to.”

“You didn’t really give me much of a choice, though, now did you?”

She was already recovering from her initial shock, allowing the blanket to fall from those ridiculous pajamas. “You’re the one who came back, Spike,” Willow said sharply. It always amazed him how she could dredge up these unhidden sources of strength when confronted with danger. He’d been right to pick her side in this. “You were gone, and you could’ve stayed gone, but you were the one who showed up at my door asking for help. That sounds like a pretty firm choice to me.”

He growled and resumed his pacing. Thinking always seemed to come easier if he was moving. “Not the point,” Spike snarled. “The point is, I’m not happy with the current arrangement. I’ve done some thinking and I think I need to get paid up front—.”

“Huh? You want money now?”
She was trying his patience, really she was. “The mojo for Dru,” he said through clenched teeth. “You want to use me to get your Slayer back, you have to do my spell first.”

“What? No! We’re not even sure what your spell does. For all I know, it’ll whisk you back to South America and then what am I going to do about Buffy?”

“That’s your problem, then, isn’t it?”

He had to get out of this place. All he could smell was the Slayer---in the air, on his hands, under his skin---and it was clouding what should be a simple thing. Grabbing his wrecked coat from where he’d tossed it over the altar, Spike slipped it on, concentrating on not looking at the small blonde still asleep on the bed.

“What are you going now?” Willow asked.

“Goin’ to get a bite to eat,” he retorted. “I’ll be back in a couple hours. Make sure you’ve got what you need done ‘cause I’m expecting my payment as soon as I return.” He stopped halfway out the door. “And don’t think about bolting. I’m lettin’ the publican know I’ll be out. If you step one goody goody foot outside this room, I’ll tell him you’re free for eating.”

Spike didn’t wait to see her response. Letting the door slam shut behind him, he marched for the stairs that led down to the tunnels. He just needed some fresh air, that was it. And a pretty young thing for breakfast. That would clear his head of big green eyes and sinewy muscles just made for---.

Fuck.

Whatever he killed to eat, it wasn’t going to be blonde.

* * *

Buffy’s demon assessment had been correct, with another breaking through the magical barrier even before William could get his sword from its scabbard. That one had had multiple arms, but as soon as she had relieved it of two of the sets, its bloodlust seemed to wane, making it a prompt kill.

What she hadn’t anticipated, however, were the clouds roiling into venomous billows, or the sudden rise in temperature as if the land itself wanted to burn them off of it, or the wind whipping into frenetic convulsions, making it difficult to remain standing, let alone fighting.

“Keep them away from Rose, no matter what the cost!” Richard shouted above the din.

William’s agreement was silent, because a pair of vampires had emerged upon Buffy’s victory, and he was faced with the first mortal combat of his lifetime.

She would’ve taken them both on with no hesitation if he hadn’t stepped up to her side. After a long glance out of the corner of her eye, though, she smiled, and gripped the hilt of her own sword just a little tighter.

“Just don’t start practicing how to be a macho bull-head, OK?” she quipped.

He wasn’t entirely sure what she meant, so William just returned her smile with a, “Never.”

Though he had every intention of charging the fanged demon---how valiant would that appear? he thought gleefully---his feet thought otherwise, rooting him in the brush with a surety as if he’d used paste on his soles. At least he didn’t run, and when the vampire lunged forward, William instinctively lifted his sword in a riposte that had the blade sliding into the monster’s chest.
His brief exhilaration vanished when he realized the vampire was still standing, and William remembered in an annoyed flash that his weapon wasn’t made of wood, and that the creature’s head was still intact on his body. Considering those were the only two ways he knew how to kill a vampire, his job wasn’t done, so he stepped back, pulling out the sword with a sticky squelch, and readied himself for another attack.

It was both different and the same as fighting Buffy had been. Where Buffy had challenged him to push his body to the limits, the vampire was merely interested in killing William, and the separation of such goals sharpened his defense. He was not ready to die; he refused to believe that it would end for him so carelessly. Yet, it wasn’t nearly as simple as Buffy had made it appear. The vampire was willing to do just about anything to win, and when William found himself tripped to go sprawling onto his stomach, the weight of the demon on his back was almost enough for him to call out for help.

Almost.

When his head lifted, William saw her standing near the carriage, eyes intent as she regarded him. The vamp she’d taken on must’ve long been dusted, because she seemed unperturbed in spite of the elements, solemnity personified as she waited to see what he would do. Dangling at her side, her hand was ready on her weapon, but the blaze in her face told him she didn’t think she needed to use it.

The vampire thought it had won. William smelled its fetid breath as its fangs drew nearer, and braced himself against the sickness that rose in his stomach. Letting his body go limp, he melted into the ground, hoping he wasn’t making a serious miscalculation in his risk.

The instant he felt the teeth start to break through his skin, William slammed his elbow back into the vampire’s midsection, taking the demon by surprise and toppling him off. He rolled with the weapon raised, and in a clean slice, brought it down on the vamp’s neck.

The wind brought the dust up to clog his nose, and he was coughing when Buffy appeared at his side. She pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it into his hand, all the while grinning like the canary-stuffed cat.

“‘I knew you could do it,’” she said.

Only six little words, and not one of them unique, but their order and their timing were all that it took for William to puff up in pride. He had done it. For likely the first time in his short life, he’d taken charge of a situation and seen it through to its mortal end. The exhilaration was intoxicating.

“‘Keep your pants on, buster,’” Buffy said with a smile. She nodded toward the plot of land that was starting to appear thicker and more real with each passing second. “‘The game’s not over yet.’”

* * *

When they’d first heard the faraway tumult echoing from above their heads, Giles’ instinctive reaction had been to go investigate. It had only been Anne’s desperate plea not to leave her alone, unprotected, that had stopped him from venturing up the stairs.

He recognized those sounds. Three years with Buffy, and prior to that, countless years in training, and it was impossible for Giles not to recognize the clamor of battle. He didn’t tell Anne, though, not even when she naively asked him if he had any suspicions about what was happening. He’d merely patted her hand and made some vague reply about being safe if they remained together.
He didn’t feel safe. He felt bloody helpless. Frankly, he’d just about kill for a weapon of some sort.

The possibility that it was Buffy arrived to rescue him was perhaps the single thing keeping him from abandoning Anne’s side. In fact, he voiced that opinion for her, only to have her laugh and chide him about the silliness of a young woman besting the magics that surrounded the house. It prompted Giles to sigh. Though the Victorian manners were quaint, he was actually rather grateful for the more progressive thinking of his time. He would never admit so to Buffy, of course; that would only make his training of her even harder.

When the bedlam suddenly disappeared, Giles’ stomach knotted in fear, prompting him to rise from where he’d been sitting next to Anne and cross to the doorway. Pressing his ear to the wood, he strained to hear what might be happening outside.

Nothing.

“Is it over?” Anne whispered from the bed.

“It would appear so,” Giles replied. His hand dropped to the doorknob, and then froze.

Footsteps.

In the hall.

Damn it. He didn’t have a weapon.

Anne sensed his shift in mood. “What is---?” she started to ask, only to clamp her mouth shut when he waved at her to quiet.

Resuming his listening, this time the Watcher heard the soft click of doors opening and closing, the footsteps soft in between each action. When it neared, he took a step back, squaring his shoulders to do hand-to-hand, should the need arise.

Shock kept him motionless when the door finally opened. Not Buffy that would come to his rescue, then, Giles thought. How ironic that it would come to this.

He looked like he’d been through a warzone. The antiquated shirt was pulled from his trousers, random rips and bloodstains proclaiming the extent of the fighting that had been occurring overhead. Sandy-colored curls were plastered to his forehead with sweat, but the eyes were a brilliant blue, jumping around the room with the characteristic edginess that Giles associated with the vampire. This wasn’t Spike, though; his face was too flushed, his skin too pink, for him to be undead.

It could only be William.

“Step away from her!” the young man threatened, lifting the sword Giles only now noticed to aim it at the older man. He winced as he did it, though, causing the Watcher to wonder just how exhausted the new arrival actually was.

“William!” It was the strongest Giles had ever heard Anne speak, and he stepped aside to watch her approach her son. “Where are your manners?”

For a moment, William looked stricken. Like a child caught in not-so-innocent circumstances, he stared back at her for a long moment before letting the tip of the blade droop from where it had been aimed at Giles’ chest.

“Are you all right?” he asked her, apologetic in his propriety.
Another chill rippled through Giles’ body at the sound. Spike’s voice, without the forced London edge he had always suspected had been a put-on. It was simple to see the young man Anne Freston had spent the past few days describing, but at the same time, the eerie overlays of the hated vampire kept him unsettled.

And why does he hold the sword with his thumb splayed like Buffy does?

“I’m fine,” Anne replied. “Mr. Giles has been most helpful in keeping me company.”

The change was instantaneous. At the sound of his name, William’s head whipped to stare at the other Englishman. “Rupert Giles?” he asked.

Giles frowned. “Yes,” he answered slowly.

The weapon was dropped, and William bowed in a crisp salute. “It’s my sincerest pleasure, sir,” he said. When he straightened, he offered his free right hand in greeting. “I have to admit, it’s an honor I never imagined I’d be granted.”

Curiouser and curiouser.

He waited perhaps a fraction too long to accept the handshake. Of course it wasn’t the coolness of a demon that met his palm, but the too-sweaty, sweltering grip of a man who’d spent the better part of a day fighting. This is Anne’s bookworm son? A glance in her direction confirmed that she was slightly perplexed by her son’s appearance as well. Obviously, this wasn’t what she expected either.

“Have we met?” Giles asked. Caution was the better part of valor, he reasoned. Though it sounded as if the battle was complete above, it was entirely possible that this was just part of some massive test for them.

“No, not really,” William replied. He smiled, and it transformed his entire face, making him younger, softer. Human. “But Buffy has had only the most exemplary things to say of you. It’s my privilege to meet the man she so admires. You have done an excellent job with your guidance, sir. Buffy is an amazing woman.”

“Buffy.” In the bewildering oddity of the young man’s words, it was that that stuck out. “Is she---?”

“Giles!”

He reacted just in time to have the air forced from his lungs when powerful arms wrapped around his neck. She was laughing, and she smelled like blood and smoke, and he could see bugger all, but it was most definitely Buffy squeezing the life out of him.

He’d never been so glad to see anyone in his entire life.

When she slid back down, Giles noticed the old-fashioned blouse and skirt she wore. His mouth opened to say something, but the words failed him when she stepped back and took William’s hand in hers as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

“Rose is on her way down,” she was babbling excitedly. “She’s the one who broke through the spell on the house. You should’ve seen it, Giles. Every time it looked like we were getting through, more demons came out. It was like one of those cars at the circus, you know? The ones with all the clowns in them and you can’t for the life of you figure out where they’re all coming from? I haven’t fought that much since graduation, and god, did it feel good.”

“Buffy,” William said quietly, and there was no mistaking the gentle press of her hand as he directed
her attention elsewhere. “I’d like for you to meet my mother.”

Her mouth made a little circle as she breathed the “Oh…” Giles was transfixed as he watched Buffy metamorphose into the girl he’d seen her affect in front of teachers and her mother prior to the truth coming out about her calling, all smiles and politeness of the perfect persona. Now, though, it seemed remarkably sincere, and the reasons why that could be dampened his relish in seeing her.

“How do you do?” she said brightly. After a nervous glance at William—one Giles imagined she did not mean to be witnessed---she bobbed an awkward curtsey. “William’s told me a lot about you. I’m glad to see that you’re OK.”

Anne’s returning smile was polite, but there was no missing the curious lift of her brows as she looked over Buffy’s head to her son. “I wasn’t aware that you were acquainted,” she said. “Though, Mr. Giles has spoken quite fondly of you.”

“It’s a…long story,” Buffy stammered. “A really long story,” she added at Giles’ level stare.

She was saved from further explanation by another arrival in the entryway. “The magic is complete,” the older woman who stood there said. Her dark gaze swept over the group. “I’m assuming you’ve found them.”

Giles remained silent during the introductions, shaking the seer’s hand when it was his turn, listening to the astounding tale of temporal displacements and witches traveling through time and houses being hidden from scrutiny with the calm acceptance as befitting his title. All the while, he watched the possessive hand William kept at the small of Buffy’s back, and the way she leaned into the young man as she spoke, and the undeniable emotion that leapt between them with the propensity of youth not yet ravaged by time. Something had very obviously happened between them, and the longer he surveyed them, the more convinced Giles became that Buffy was in over her head.

“What I’ve done doesn’t supplant the magic that ties you to this time, however,” Rose was explaining. “For you, Mr. Giles, it will take leaving the house entirely. I imagine what will happen is that once you cross the threshold, you’ll find yourself back in your own time.”

“And Buffy?” he asked. “Is that how she returns as well?”

The trio exchanged guilty looks before Rose spoke again. “I’m afraid her situation is slightly… different from yours,” she said. “But we believe that her friend Willow is well on the way to rectifying it.”

“I know it’s all kind of wiggy,” Buffy jumped in. “Trust me, when I first realized when I was, I was all about the wig. But things are working out. Before you know it---.”

A loud crash from overhead cut her off, and all five heads jerked up to stare at the ceiling. “Stay here,” Buffy ordered. “That doesn’t sound good.”

William hesitated for but a moment before following after the running Slayer, leaving the three older people in silence. Rose was the one to finally shatter the quiet, with a heavy sigh.

“For as much as she might pretend otherwise,” the seer said, “Buffy is ever the optimist.”

“Are you saying she won’t be able to return home?” Giles asked.

“No, I’m saying she truly believes she can do so without any repercussions.”

“William loves her.” Anne’s voice was low, but boomed in the suddenly too-close walls. “I’ve never
seen him so…”

Rose’s concurring nod prompted Giles to add, “And she…feels for him.”

“It’s been…difficult,” the seer commented. “My husband and I have tried to speak with them, but they’re young and stubborn—.”

Giles snorted. “Yes, that they are.”

“I do…have a solution of sorts,” Rose said. “One I’ve not spoken to them about. I don’t believe it would be met with much…support.”

“And that would be?”

She took a deep breath. “I can make it possible to have everyone who’s been in contact with Buffy…to forget she was ever here.”

* * *

They found Richard crouching at one of the living room windows, staring outside with the gloom of a man facing his most dreaded nightmare. The cacophony was louder here, the sound of destruction emanating from outdoors, but inside, the house was deadly still.

“What is it?” Buffy asked. She leaned over his shoulder to peer out the glass, watching the dark shadows of bodies passing back and forth in growing determination.


“They seem a little put out about something,” she commented.

“Yes. Yes, they are.”

She frowned when she saw the empty street. “Where’s the coach? How are we supposed to get out of here?”

“I sent it away when I saw them approaching. I didn’t believe we could handle such large numbers, so I…I sent him to the Council and ordered an emergency meeting here. We shall have reinforcements soon.”

“And you expect us to just hide out in here until they get bored and walk away?”

“We’ve been fighting all day—.”

“And we’ll fight all night if we have to—.”

“Not all of us are Slayers, Miss Summers. We don’t all have your constitution.”

It was his tone that made her stop from pushing the argument. “What is it you’re not telling me here, Richard?” she asked.

“If I could retract my order to my driver, I would,” he said softly. “The last thing I wish right now is for my colleagues to arrive.”

“Why?”

His eyes never left the glass. “Because April is out there. She’s finally decided to stop waiting and
kill me.”
Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet XVI.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Spike has given Willow an ultimatum about the order of the spells, Buffy has found Giles and Anne, and April has arrived at the house to finish off Richard for good…

Even William didn’t expect Buffy to start marching for the door.

“Where are you going?” he asked, darting forward to stand between her and the exit. “Did you not hear Richard?”

“Uh…yeah.”

He matched her step sideways, continuing to block her way. “And don’t you think it would be wise to exercise just a little caution?” William said. “He has a valid point. They are freshly arrived, while we’ve been---.”

“---in the trenches all day, yeah, I was kinda there, remember?” This time when he mimicked her sidestep, Buffy sighed in exasperation. “Is there a reason we’re going with the Three Stooges routine here? Because last time I checked, there were vampires to kill and I am the Slayer.”

His eyes searched hers, his exhaustion forgotten as he tried to find reason to her actions. “It’s not safe,” he argued. No longer could he resist reaching and brushing back the loose tendril that had escaped just before the magic had fallen to reveal the house. It had eaten him not to feel free to do so in the cellars, but the sheer fact that he’d held Buffy’s hand had been as bold a maneuver as he dared in either his mother’s or her Watcher’s presence. Until they were formally told of William’s relationship with Buffy, it wouldn’t do to make them uncomfortable with improper displays. He’d had to settle for discreetly leaving his hand at the small of her back, all the while aching to take her in his arms and pronounce to the people he cared for the most how much he loved her.

“As long as we remain inside,” William continued, “they can’t hurt you.”

“As long as we remain inside,” Buffy countered, “we’re prisoners of our own fear. That’s not the way I work. You know that.”

He didn’t know if it was the silent plea in her gaze, or the affirmation of how well they understood each other that made him automatically step aside. He only knew that she was right, and if he stopped her from doing this, she would resent him.

“You’re a foolish little girl,” Richard said harshly when she opened the door. “April’s a killer.”

“Guess what?” Buffy said calmly. “So am I.”

When the door closed shut behind her, William heard the effects of her emergence long before he reached the window. Footsteps pounded up the stone steps, snarls and bellows filtering through the thick walls as they charged, and when he could finally see outside, he noted that five of them had
rushed the porch in their vicious attack.

“Foolish little girl,” Richard repeated under his breath.

It was an instinctive reaction. With the rapidity of a man incensed, William’s fist shot out and slammed into Richard’s jaw, taking both of them by pained surprise. The Watcher fell backwards and stared up at his attacker.

“Coward,” William spat. The venom shocked him, but it was a long time coming, and flowed from his tongue with a vitriol that made his veins burn. “And to think that I actually felt sorry for you, and what you’ve gone through over the past twenty years.”

“You have no idea—.”

“No, I think it is you who fails to understand, Richard.” A sharp finger jabbed toward the pane. “That woman is the bravest person I have ever known, and she is out there at this very minute, doing what you should have done all those years ago. She does so, without any thought of recompense, with no regard for whether she will survive or not, while you hide within the cover of these walls, cowering and complaining because your precious Council just might learn of your deception. Tell me how that makes her the foolish one here.”

Slowly, Richard rose to his feet, wary now of another attack. “Your love blinds you, William,” he said.

“You’re wrong. If anything, it’s opened my eyes.”

“To what? A lifetime of danger? A love that will only end in heartache?” He began circling the younger man, frustration fuelling his steps. “Prior to Buffy, you were safe, with your cozy little books, and your too-precious verses. You had the luxury of not having to walk in the paths I’ve traveled, and not having to witness people you love perish because of vile monsters with no concern but their own amusement. Do you honestly believe that, given the opportunity, Buffy would want you to face such danger every day for the remainder of your life? If you do, you’re a bigger fool than she is.”

The muscles in William’s jaw ached from clenching them so tightly. “I would do it,” he forced. “For her.”

Neither spoke for a long moment. It was only when the door was yanked open and Buffy came hurtling in, that either of them moved.

“Are you all right?” William asked, rushing to her side.

Her blouse was slashed across the forearm, a new cut creating crimson rivulets along her skin before adding fresh stains to the white cotton. “Better than the four vamps I just dusted,” she replied as he pressed his handkerchief to her wound. She frowned when she saw the stiff posture of the Watcher near the window, her eyes darting between the pair of men. “I didn’t interrupt a lover’s quarrel or something, did I?”

“No.” William glanced up sharply when Richard answered her first. “William and I were discussing what our best method of attack should be,” the older man went on.

“Oh.” She looked pleased with that response, smiling a little as she handed back the handkerchief. “What did you come up with?”

“The only thing we could agree upon was that you shouldn’t have to be out there alone,” Richard
“Is April still out there?”

“I think so. She’s acting like General Patton directing her troops. I think she’s waiting for you, if you really want to know.”

He didn’t know why the Watcher had changed his mind, but there was no time for William to dwell on the question. “You said you dusted four vamps,” he said. Using a clean edge of his handkerchief, he wiped down his blade as he spoke. “I counted five on the porch with you.”

“That little piggy went wee wee wee all the way back out to the road,” Buffy replied. “I figure there’s about eight or nine left, including April and her boytoy.”

“Enough to go around, then,” William said with a smile. It faded when he looked at Richard. “Ready?”

A grim nod from the older man. “Ready.”

* * *

It wasn’t a solution Rose thought she’d voice aloud. When the idea had first come to her, she’d believed it would have to be done covertly, for even Richard would be qualmish having his memory tampered with. But she saw no other way to avoid the pain that was inevitable with Buffy’s departure. And what of her effect on the past? All their intentions and well-spoken ideals about not tampering with the timeline meant little in the face of her direct involvement with April. How could Rose be certain that the restoration of each into their proper lives wouldn’t have catastrophic repercussions?

She knew at a glance that both strangers now regarding her were torn on the decision. The Watcher’s countenance, especially, was growing darker with each passing second, and she wasn’t surprised that he was the first to break the silence that followed her announcement.

“Those types of spells require serious magics,” he commented. “I’m not comfortable with my Slayer being subjected to such, regardless of the circumstances.”

“It wouldn’t be for Buffy,” Rose began to explain.

“You wish to alter William’s memories alone?” Anne interjected. “That hardly seems just.”

“It wouldn’t be only William. It would be everyone she’s interacted with. Your household staff, William, yourself. Even my husband. It’s the past we need to be careful in preserving, Mrs. Freston. I very much doubt that William was ever intended to meet with Buffy in the first place. It’s only Esme’s intervention that has clouded everything so, and I think it’s our duty to rectify the damage she has done if we can.”

“Yes,” Giles murmured. “Quite.”

“But…” Anne seemed perplexed by the argument, her eyes jumping to the door for a long moment before returning to gaze at the seer. “It will change him. I don’t know if you knew my son prior to his…involvement with Miss Summers, but…”

Giles stepped in when it became obvious she couldn’t complete the thought. “He’s not exactly the same boy you described to me, is he, Anne?”

“No.” She shook her head. “He’s…stronger, somehow. And I’ve never seen him disregard his
appearance so completely. It’s as if…”

“…something else was more important to him,” Rose finished softly. “That would be Buffy.” She took a deep breath. “I did see your son before she arrived, Mrs. Freston. So I know the changes you speak of. I can’t say that this option fills me with joy, because it doesn’t. As much as I feel it’s a necessity, I also regret taking away such a gift as his relationship with her has been.”

“Does he have to forget…everything?” Anne asked, her voice almost a whisper.

Rose frowned. “He would have to,” she said simply. “Or else, the spell is meaningless.”

“And his life would proceed as normal,” Giles said. “Along the path originally dictated before Buffy’s arrival.”

“Yes.” He was hiding something, and for a moment, Rose regarded the Watcher with curiosity. It was very much like Buffy’s own elusiveness when the issue of the timeline had been addressed; if she had to wager a guess, she’d say that one or the both of them knew more than they wanted to admit about William’s future. It would be interesting to discover just what that was.

“I’m not certain why you’re telling us this,” Anne said. “I get the distinct impression that you’ve already made your decision.”

Rose held her tongue. Anything she said now would exacerbate an already egregious situation, and she had a sinking feeling that Rupert Giles was far more discerning than Buffy may have let on. For a moment as those piercing eyes contemplated her, she had the absolute confidence that he even knew what she was, that he could see the vestiges of her previous life etched in her face. Did the Watchers in his time know of her kind’s existence? Were the ramifications of Richard’s lifetime felt even with her intervention? Of what value was her intrusion into the past if the deeds she’d coaxed from her husband were not enough to alter the future?

Just as quickly, though, the feeling was gone, and Giles was patting Anne’s shoulder, assuring her that everything would work out for the best. Rose took a step away from the pair, her gaze slipping behind to see the empty hallway, distancing herself from any further arguments.

“I’m going to see how things are faring upstairs,” she said. “The others…may need my help.”

“Wait. I wish to come with you.” Giles turned to Anne and offered her a courtly bow. “In the event I don’t see you again…it has been my pleasure, Anne. I sincerely hope that life treats you kindly.”

When he straightened, his eyes were deadly as they slid back to Rose. “Now, we may go.”

* * *

She’d hoped the vamps on the porch would finish off the Slayer, leaving Richard and his beloved whores of a second wife as easy prey. But when the fourth had exploded in a cloud of dust and the last had come scuttling back to safety while the Slayer resumed refuge in the house, April knew she would have to take matters into her own hands if she was going to get the retribution she sought.

“Mind the carriage,” she commanded as she began marching for the porch.

Nathan’s grip yanked her to a halt. “You are not leaving me behind,” he growled.

“No, I’m leaving you as my rear guard.” She pulled her arm away and gestured toward the remaining vampires milling about the plot. “I’m surrounded by incompetents! You are the only one I trust to ensure none of the humans escape. If you want this to be truly over between me and Richard, you’ll do it. No more questions.”
She knew he was reaching the end of his patience for her vendettas. Though he was younger than her—in vamp years—he sported no such ties to the human race. His turning had marked his liberation, he always said; Nathan felt no need to have any contact with the people who’d populated his other existence. She almost envied him the freedom.

“One hint of losing and I’m going to be at your side,” he warned.

April smiled and pulled him down for a quick and bloody kiss. “I don’t lose, remember?” she whispered in his ear.

She had switched to her demon mask before she reached the bottom stair. “Don’t tell me you’re frightened!” she called out as she climbed. “Or are you tired? Does the itty bitty Slayer need a nap?”

April smiled when the door opened and Buffy stepped out, stake at the ready. “Why does everyone have such an issue with my height?” she said lightly. She began strolling down the length of the porch, away from the door she’d left slightly ajar behind her. “I’m not *that* short. OK, not exactly runway material, but still, I can reach my own drinking glass most of the time.”

As she watched, Buffy leapt onto the railing, balancing for a moment before vaulting onto the ground. “Acrobatics won’t save you,” April warned, joining her back on the lawn.

“No, I’m pretty much relying on this to.” Her expert lunge forward drove the vampire back and out of her range, the point of the wood snagging on April’s bodice but otherwise missing its target. “You know, this would go a lot quicker if you’d just stop moving around.”

“This fight isn’t yours.”

“And you’d just let a tasty little morsel like me walk away?” Buffy shook her head. “Why do I find that hard to believe?”

“My interest lies in Richard.”

“And William. He told me all about your job offer. And just so that we have it straight? He’s *way* too smart to be a messenger boy.”

She didn’t understand why the Slayer was talking so much. Other than her first thrust—and April was’t so vain not to know that it had been a mere feint—and April wasn’t so vain not to know that it had been a mere feint—she seemed more interested in conversation than fighting. It was infuriating. It was distracting. It was—.

She heard the snap and reacted instinctively, twisting and diving out of the way as the blade whistled through the air. It still managed to slice through her collar, though, leaving a deep gouge along the back of her neck that surely would’ve succeeded in severing her head if she hadn’t moved in time. Golden eyes sought the weapon’s owner and met the burning blue of a brazen William.

“Looks like the little Watcher finally grew up,” April said, regaining her composure. Over his shoulder, she could see Richard fighting with two of her minions, while the others seemed torn between which battle to join. “I have to say, blood becomes you.”

“You know what?” Buffy said lightly. “I think I’m done talking now. I’m feeling more like kicking your melanin-deprived ass.”

Both of the humans charged at once, but April was ready, jerking her head toward the free vampires and shouting for them to join her. The call to arms drew enough of William’s attention for her to swat him aside with the back of her hand, leaving the Slayer as her only worthwhile opponent. “It would be my pleasure,” she snarled, and leapt toward the blonde.
She was waiting for him when he came stumbling back into the room. The glance she shot him was icy, but Spike caught the catch of Willow’s lip between her teeth when she saw the blood dripping from his hand. Still, to her credit, she remained silent, just watching as he grabbed the still-damp towel from his shower he’d left wadded up in the corner and wrapping it around the gash to stop the flow.

“You look like hell,” Spike commented, sprawling into the chair.

“That would be hunger,” she said. “I wasn’t the one who got out to eat today, remember?”

He grunted in response, returning his attention to his slight injury. It was just a flesh wound, but it had served its purpose, distracting Spike with his day of wandering and brawling, doing everything he could to not think about what was waiting for him back at the pub. The diversion had been superficial, though, for wherever he turned, a glimmer of blonde hair or a particular scent would drive his thoughts back to the Slayer, and Spike would have to bury himself deeper into the next fight to try and forget for just a few more minutes.

It didn’t take her long to crack. “Are you all right?” Willow asked, rising from where she had everything arranged on the floor and slowly approaching, as if he was a wounded wild dog.

“’S’nothin’,” he replied, but let her take his hand and look over the cut. He jerked his chin toward the display. “You got everything set up for my half of our dicker?”

“I still don’t like it, but you’re not giving me a choice, are you?” She sighed at his raised brow. “I want to get this over with. I’ve got the spell for Buffy ready, too, because if your butt is still in that chair when I’m done with the first one, I’m nailing you with the second, you got it, mister?”

“That was the bargain.” Spike closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the chair. “Lay it on me, Red.”

His body was a conflict of physical exhaustion from ten hours of roughhousing and a wire-strung coil of fretfulness over what exactly was going on inside his head. All he wanted was peace—or in its absence, a drunken haze would do—and he did everything he could to block out the sensations of the room around him. Every pulse of the Slayer’s breath underlaid the witch’s murmured words, themselves barely audible in the suddenly thick air, and Spike’s limbs seemed to merge with the worn fabric of the chair, rooting him immobile as the magic began to swirl around him.

He couldn’t have opened his eyes if he wanted. Somewhere, at the base of his skull, tiny fingers began to inch around his scalp, encircling with a staunch tenacity that made blood-red spots dance behind his closed lids, each exhalation around him whispering in growing volume until his body was vibrating in porous rhythm with the melody. Flashes of Dru on her supplicating knees, blood pouring from penitent wounds as she offered herself to Spike, made him growl in satisfaction. He deserved this. After the nightmares of the past few weeks, he was due this reward. He half-hoped the magic really would transport him back to South America. It would serve the Slayer bitch right to get stuck in her neverwhen after everything she’d done to him.

The fingers were probing his eye sockets now, finding purchase along the bone before slithering inside. It burned, and for an instant, the room became a vacuum, the only thing alive in it Willow’s voice.

“Deduxerit mortuus…”
Slow…

Sinuous…

Infestive…

The words themselves began to stretch and breathe with their own spirit. As he listened, a tickle of alarm began to fester somewhere in the recesses of his brain, but Spike wasn’t ready just yet to disrupt the proceedings.

“…capiebat furtim…”

That banished the fantasies of Dru, replacing them with a maelstrom of sound and color that refused to bend to Spike’s will. His fear mushroomed, and he fought to regain control of his muscles, forcing his eyes open to see the witch glowing on the floor before him. The magic cloaked her in its luminescence, but she seemed oblivious to its power as she continued to read.

“…meminisse…”

_No._

He knew that word.

He’d boasted that his Latin was better than hers, and yet, in his rush to get it over with, he hadn’t bothered to check over the bloody spell. And there it was, like the sword of Damocles ready to slice his throat.

That single word.

*To remember.*

“Noooo…”

His voice was a mere croak as he struggled against the magic to reach toward her.

“Red…stop…”

But she heard nothing.

And as Spike summoned the strength to lunge at Willow and break the incantation through sheer force, her head shot back, the paper in her hand flitting to the floor. The magic released to slam into the vampire, dragging him back into the chair with its undertow.

No more visions of Dru.

No more daydreams of bloody reconciliations with his dark princess.

Now, the pictures and voices in his head belonged to only one person.

Spike’s eyes fluttered shut. “Buffy…”
Heavenly Alchemy

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet XXXIII.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Rose has decided to do the forgetting spell on William; Buffy, Richard, and William are fighting the vampires outside the house; and Willow has done the spell for Spike, with a result he didn’t expect…

She was blonde, long hair waving loose about her shoulders, and she was dressed in what could’ve been one of his mother’s shifts if it wasn’t for the shortened skirt exposing the ripe curve of her calf. While the white fabric billowed around her legs, it hugged her torso, cupping the swell of her breasts and accentuating her slim waist. Even her arms were bare, the bodice held up by the thinnest of straps, and William colored as he jumped to his feet, wanting to lower his gaze out of propriety, but unable to look away from the vision that approached.

“Now why do I have a funny feeling that you’re William?” she asked, with a twinkle in her eye.

* * *

“Don’t go.”

His muscles tensed beneath her grip, but he didn’t pull away, his head tilting first to look at her fingers before lifting to gaze into her face. “Who are you?” William breathed.

This time, she couldn’t resist the smile. “I’m Buffy.”

* * *

There was no time to think, no time to react. The images were coming with infinite speed, playing out inside his head as the veil was lifted from Spike’s memory.

* * *

Lying on her side, her head was cradled in the crook of her arm, golden hair spilling over the tanned limb, her legs tucked up to disappear beneath the skirt of her dress. Her eyes were closed, and as he watched her chest slowly rise and fall, William realized that she had fallen asleep. Without thinking, he reached out and pushed back a stray lock from her cheek, allowing his fingers to ghost over her jaw before hesitating at the swell of her mouth. “You are truly the most beautiful creature I have ever seen, Buffy,” he breathed.

* * *

“You’re a good man, William Freston,” she murmured. Before the pleasure had registered in his eyes, she was on her tiptoes, her lips brushing across his jaw. Buffy’s eyes fluttered closed as she settled her cheek against his, her mouth hovering just below his ear. “And I am honored to be in any relationship with you.”

* * *
Buffy slid from the bench to kneel beside him on the grass. “Why can’t we both be happy?” she asked. “You deserve it as much as I do.”

“I haven’t saved the world.”

“No,” she agreed softly. “You’ve saved me.”

* * *

And then a flood of pleasure as the recollections of those dreams---those magnificent, torturous, orgasmic dreams---hit Spike all at once, hardening his body, sizzling his skin, almost making him come in his jeans just from remembering…

...sucking at her neck before following its delicate line to the hollow of her throat…

…his tongue circling the hard bud of her nipple, feeling its tense texture against the roof of his mouth…

…sliding into her heat, inch by inch, straining against the tightness until he was completely sheathed…

…and his voice throughout it all, whispering endearments and declarations disguised as poetry…

All the while…Buffy begging for more.

The euphoria that skated along his nerves was rudely elided when the memories of that first morning in his room---Buffy? In his room? In his bed? No no no, it couldn’t be possible---and their arguments about her presence in the past made Spike stiffen in a fear that shouldn’t be. Even the sound of his voice---

If I have any words worth sharing, I have them because of you. You’re the one who made it possible for me to capture the words that always proved so elusive, and you’re the one who heard them without contempt. You’re the one who helped me find my voice, Buffy---

---didn’t lessen the strain of reliving that wonderful, terrible day. It wasn’t until the flashback of that night, and the sight of Buffy in her cotton nightdress that became transparent when she stood in front of the candlelight, did ease begin to return…

* * *

“I love you,” Buffy whispered.

William froze. “What?”

“You heard me.” She ground her hips against his, eliciting a groan from his throat. “Now…please…don’t stop.”

And he could still taste her, his mouth flooded with the jolt of her juices, his body warm from the memory of pressing her into the mattress with his weight, but it wasn’t that that was slowly filling Spike with scorched serenity.

It was the inescapable knowledge that he had loved her.

Just as she’d loved him.

Trusted him.
Believed in him.

Wanted him.

The aftermath of having been in both places—watching the cut appearing on her thumb in a Victorian drawing room superimposing over the corresponding cut in that stale hotel room with the witch and the Watcher—would’ve been confusing had he paid minute attention.

The duel in Richard’s back garden, where Spike’s first skills had been honed and the liberating rush of the fight had first been introduced to him—and how ironic that she would teach him exactly how she fought, making it impossible for either of them to kill the other when they met a century later—would’ve been distracting if he bothered to focus his attention on the kaleidoscope of sensation that flew past him.

Even their lovemaking—and he could call it what it was, he could still hear her rasped declaration as he claimed her soul for his own—wasn’t quite enough to divert him from the conflagration consuming his heart.

It was the proposal.

* * *

“If...things could be different...If...it had been possible for you to stay...as a...permanent part of my life...I would’ve...it would’ve been only natural for me to...”

His pulse was pounding inside his skull, so loudly he was convinced she could hear it. Why did he think he could do this? This sounded so much more eloquent in his head.

“What I mean to say is...I love you, and...I know I don’t have much to offer, and not that I will because, well, you know...but it would’ve given me great pleasure to...to...”

And the words had failed him. For the first time in his shared existence with the woman who’d helped him find himself, William couldn’t get the words to come out for fear of what her response would be.

Then...she touched him. She’d looked at him. Those eyes, so old and so young all at the same time. And said those words that made it all worth it.

“Just so you know, if you had asked me, and it was possible for me to stay, I would’ve said yes.”

* * *

Hearing their final promises—for her not to forget him, for him not to forget his worth—made him want to scream and shout in frustrated anger. She had known. Of course, she had known, known all along about what path he would take. She’d practically admitted to it when she’d come to him that first night. Had she been laughing at his simplicity in making such an absurd request? But even as Spike wondered, watching the events of their final day on the outskirts of London play out in all its Technicolor gore and glory, he knew it was a ridiculous question.

Buffy loved William. She’d seen him, not as the weak-kneed Spike had always believed him to be, but as a font of strength and goodness. She would never have found mirth at his expense.

And in her own way, she’d tried to save him. She knew she couldn’t directly affect the future; she knew about Dru and a century of demonhood. She’d told him over and over and over again just how valuable he really was. The truth of the matter was that he’d believed her.
Until that night.

When they’d broken the spell on his mother’s prison.

When he’d met Giles for the very first time.

When his golden goddess had taken on that bitch April…

* * *

Buffy could see that William was only dazed from the blow, not unconscious, but as far as the fight was concerned, he was done. He was struggling just to rise to his hands and knees, his head hanging so low that his sweat-damp hair dragged along the earth, and his breathing was labored. Breathing meant still alive, though, and that was one state she had every intention of lasting as long as possible.

When April leapt toward her, Buffy dove out of her path, distancing the demon from the house and the others. “Richard!” she shouted. She didn’t wait to see if he heard her, too busy lashing out with her foot to sweep April off-balance. “Help get William back up to the house!”

“I’m…fine…” she heard William rasp.

“Your boyfriend is the stubborn sort, isn’t he?” April’s lips curled into a snarl when Buffy swung her sword at her midsection, missing contact by mere centimeters. “Stop that!”

“In case you haven’t noticed…” Buffy dodged left, avoiding another fist in the face. “…I’m trying to kill you.”

“And in case you haven’t noticed…” April smiled when a well-placed kick to Buffy’s wrist made the Slayer cry out in pain as her weapon went flying. “…you are outnumbered.”

Actually, she had noticed, and she was starting to worry that maybe it had been a mistake to let Richard and William join her in the fight. Not that more on her side wasn’t a good thing, but one of them was currently down for the count, and the other…

She allowed herself to steal a glance toward the Watcher. He’d managed to dust one of his attackers, edging closer to where William was still struggling to get to his feet, but several more of the vampires were starting to join in, finally obeying April’s command. They needed to get back to the house before it was too late. They needed---.

“Giles!” The sight of him standing in the doorway of the house made Buffy’s heart leap with hope. A makeshift stake was in his hand, and his eyes were darting around the yard, trying to determine where best he would be of help. Behind him, she saw Rose’s pale face, and sent silent prayers to anyone who would listen for sending back-up.

“How many Watchers do you have?” April complained. Her attention was diverted for a moment to the porch, a frown making her furrowed brow even more ridged—if that was possible—and Buffy took the opportunity to dart past her toward the group of vampires who were descending on a still-fallen William. She was stopped by a hand grabbing her skirt, and went sprawling to the grass, her outstretched hands just feet away from reaching his.

“Not so fast,” April growled.

Kicking back at the vamp, Buffy twisted to wrench free of her grasp, her heel connecting with April’s chin. She rolled onto her back, the blanket of stars suddenly blinking down at her, and kipped back up, cursing the skirts that tangled between her legs. One thing about getting back to her own
time. She was so looking forward to fighting in pants again.

“Buffy…”

Even if his voice hadn’t been so hoarse, he would’ve had her complete attention, and she scuttled back to help William get to his feet. Slipping her arm around his back, she took his weight against her, kicking out at the vamp who tried taking them down. It stumbled away, only to be replaced by another.

“This was a mistake,” she murmured, and felt William stiffen against her.

“Go,” he whispered. “Don’t mind me.”

Her arms tightened. “Right. Like I could just leave you here.”

“I’m an albatross.”

“Isn’t that a bird?” April was already on her feet, and Buffy crept away, green eyes jumping from demon to demon as she kept herself at the ready for another attack. “Why do you think you’re a bird?”

A blur rushed past them and the Slayer gaped as Richard charged the remaining throng, weapon drawn. He ignored the minions who clawed at him, and instead lunged for April.

“Finally,” April hissed. She grabbed the sword and yanked it vertically toward her chest, ignoring the deep slices the blade made into her palms.

The action pulled Richard tight against the vampire, but he didn’t struggle within her hold. Instead, he said, in a voice so low that Buffy almost missed it, “Let the others go, Masia. This is between you and me.”

Maybe it was hearing her birth name that made the demon freeze. The ridges in April’s forehead seemed to soften, and Buffy was convinced she was going to morph back into her human face. Even William was holding his breath, waiting to see what would happen.

“Dearest Richard,” April murmured. One hand released its hold on the sword, rising to cup the Watcher’s cheek. Even when her fingers left wet, red trails along his skin, he didn’t flinch, merely stared at her with the exhaustion of a man long-traveled. “Always the idealist.”

William’s snort of derision wasn’t enough to distract from the passion play before them, though Buffy did use the changed focus as opportunity to discreetly further themselves even more from its epicenter.

“This has been a long time coming,” Richard said. “We need to end this.”

“Yes,” April agreed. She was absorbed in the streaks of blood that stained his cheek. “Yes, we should.”

Her hand moved before anyone could stop it, sliding to the back of Richard’s head and yanking him forward. In a clean snap, her fangs sank into the flesh of his neck.

* * *

She was grateful she was tall enough to see over Giles’ shoulder, but it was still not enough for Rose as she watched the fight commence on the garden below. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw
Buffy standing off with April, but it was Richard who held the greater part of her attention, the tired slice of his weapon through the air as he decapitated one of his attackers in a shower of dust. He was weakening, fatigue from the long day of battles taking its toll on his no longer young body, and she knew him well enough to know that it was sheer will that was driving him at this point.

Buffy’s call to her Watcher helped Richard by diverting his opponents’ attention, and he made short order of their confusion to barrel past them to an unsuspecting April. When the vampire used his sword to pull her against him, though, Rose’s breath caught in her throat, and she pressed forward against Giles’ back in order to better see.

“What is he doing?” he said quietly, just as riveted to the scene as she was. He was reluctant to venture from the house, her warning about leaving its boundaries hindering his motivation, and was instead hovering on the chance one of the demons came close enough for him to fight.

“I don’t know,” Rose admitted. She could see their lips moving, and when April reached up to touch his cheek—a motion so intimate and so child-like all at the same time—she felt a flicker of hope that maybe it would work out right in the end after all.

She screamed when April bit him.

With the cry not even dead yet in her throat, Rose thrust Giles forward and out of her way, not cognizant of his vanishing the moment his foot crossed the threshold, her only concern to save her husband and the man she’d been so desperately trying to redeem for the past twenty years. Her scream galvanized the group, Buffy tugging William desperately closer to the house while the vampires bestirred from their sluggish daze at their leader’s actions.

But the only thing she saw was Richard slowly slumping against April.

The blood coloring April’s lips where they stretched against his skin.

And her fury erupted with the release of the binding spell she kept in reserve, her last and best weapon in an attack, the one Richard teased Rose about never using for fear of how it would impinge on those surrounding the target.

She no longer cared.

She was only interested in saving Richard.

* * *

He found himself in the middle of the street in front of the market, almost the exact same spot he’d been in when he’d first been magicked out of his time. With a half-stumble, the feel of Rose’s furtive hands still imprinted on his back where she’d shoved him out of her way, Giles tripped to the curb, slight disorientation from the time traveling he’d just done making the world careen around him. He fell to his knees on the walk, grasping the lamppost to remain steady while he sucked in huge gulps of air, and waited for the vertigo to right itself.

The seer had been correct, then. All he had to do was leave the house and he’d be returned to his London. It was probably a good thing he hadn’t attempted to help Buffy in her fight more directly.

The thought of his Slayer drove Giles’ eyes open.

Buffy. He had to help her.

She was still in the past---the explanation of times running concurrently, just at the space of the
century-plus separating them, had been more than clear—which meant Willow was here trying to bring her back. He had to help her. As he pushed himself up to walk clumsily around the corner, Giles thought that it was a very good thing he was so near the flat.

Or not.

He certainly didn’t expect to find it empty.

Or appearing as if it had been ransacked.

The musty smell of the apartment announced its longtime vacancy, sending Giles’ hopes plummeting as he slumped against the wall. Rubbing at his eyes, he tried to remember more of what Buffy had explained to him and Anne. Had she mentioned where they were in London? There’d certainly been no mention of why they might leave the flat, only that Quentin had not been entirely frank in telling her what exactly was going on. He only knew that Willow was in the midst of doing what it was going to take to bring Buffy back to the present.

But Giles had no idea where Willow was. It would take forever to try and find her without some sort of aid.

Quentin would know. It was inconceivable that he would let the whereabouts of the Slayer go unchecked. If he wasn’t a part of trying to coerce Buffy’s return, than he would at least be privy to where they were staying.

And at this hour of the night, Giles knew exactly where to find him.

* * *

She felt like a giant someone had picked her up and wrung her out like an oversoaked sponge, twisting and squeezing her body until all her bones were mush and every rational thought was jelly. Somewhere—a very distant somewhere that could’ve been a vacuum for as real as it felt—she could hear a deep voice speaking to her, but it took several solid minutes before any of it began to remotely resemble words to her ears.

“C’mon, Red,” it was saying. “There’ll be time for sleep after you’re dead. Time to wake up now.”

Willow’s eyes blinked open, the room dazzlingly white around her, and for a split second, she wondered if she was dead.

“Not dead,” came the response with a chuckle. “Though the way you look, you might wish you were.”

_Oops. Guess I said that out loud._

She blinked again—OK, a lot—and slowly, the room began to darken, taking shape into recognizable forms as awareness returned. The only thing that stayed white was Spike’s head leaning over her, and she grimaced as she tried to sit up.

“What happened?” she asked. “Did the spell go kaplooie?”

He pulled away from her, returning to his chair at the side of the bed, and Willow squinted as he began gathering what looked like first aid supplies off the seat. “Knocked you out,” Spike said. “Threw me for a good wallop, too, but I don’t have nearly as delicate a constitution as you do, it would appear.”
There was something about the set of his shoulders, a tenseness as he folded what she definitely recognized as bandages, that made her inexplicably want to go up to the vampire and give him a huge hug. “Didn’t it work?” Her voice was small. If his spell failed, there was no guarantee that Spike would stick around long enough for her to do the one for Buffy. What would she do then?

He shrugged. “Think that’s a matter for time to decide,” he replied rather cryptically, and then laughed as if he’d just said the funniest thing in the world.

**OK. The spell made Spike crazy instead of Dru. Not good.**

Eyeing him warily, Willow struggled to her feet, grabbing the altar for balance as she stepped past the candles on the floor. Only then did she notice that Buffy had been repositioned on the bed, stretched out on her back with the blanket folded down to her waist. A fresh bandage was wound around her forearm, and the unmistakable scent of blood hung in the air.

“Not to sound like a broken record,” she said, “but what happened?”

“Smelled Buffy’s blood. Patched her up before it got too bad on this end.”

She stared at him. “What? Why? It wasn’t so that you could, you know…lick her or something while you did it, was it?”

The eyes that met hers were black, all humor drained from their haunted depths. “Woke you up for a reason,” Spike said, ignoring her questions. “I suggest you get movin’ on whatever it is we have to do to wake Buffy up.”

“Oh. Right.” Willow was on autopilot as she walked back to the wardrobe for the incantation she was going to need. It was only when her hand was on the door that it registered she’d not heard Spike use his usual terminology in talking about Buffy. Just her name. He never used people’s names.

She stole a glance over her shoulder to see him sitting at the side of the bed, his inscrutable face half in shadow as he watched Buffy sleep, long fingers ghosting over the length of her injured arm as if he wanted to touch her but was afraid of the consequences. Willow’s mouth suddenly went dry.

*What in heck did that spell do to him?*
He could tell that the witch was more than a little unsettled about his behavior, but short of telling her to fuck off, Spike didn’t give a bloody rat’s ass what she thought about how he was acting. See how she liked having her noodle scrambled around with the double-edged equivalent of a magical blender and then maybe they’d talk. Until then, he was planning on just doing whatever the hell he wanted until the chaos that was his brain calmed down.

Something wasn’t quite right and it was more than having a shitload of memories about being with Buffy that he’d never had before. Those were the easy part. Those made a warped kind of sense. A delicious, halcyon, ruthless kind of sense.

What didn’t make sense was the conflict his demon was in. Oh, it was still there, all right, and pissed as hell at being played around with like he had been. He didn’t know for sure who it was who’d stripped him of his memories, but he had a clue, and if he didn’t know she had to be years gone dead, Spike would put her in a grave again for all her messing about with things that were none of her concern. He didn’t care for her lectures the first time around, and he didn’t care for her so-called solution the second time. What was worse, was William’s whisper at the base of consciousness, who told her to do it?, because the first name that popped into Spike’s skull was Buffy’s and somehow, the thought that she’d want to steal the memory of their time together from him after all her so-called declarations made him sick to his stomach.

No.

Couldn’t have been Buffy.

Buffy loved him.

And then the whispered correction from the Victorian voice that was suddenly in much more prominence…

…Buffy loved me.

Like he’d been scalded, Spike’s hand jerked back from where he had been outlining her shape in the air. That was the trouble. William was lurking about like a bad seed, so long ago absent that his demon had forgotten what it was like to have him about, and now…now it didn’t know what to do with him. It was different than those first few months after he’d been turned. Then, he’d been so green, plucked before he was ready to ripen under Dru’s and Angelus’ tutelage. William had been eager for the attention, desperate for the mentor he thought Angelus to be, because the attention they lavished on him had been exhilarating, so really, not that different than he’d been as human. It was just his hunger that had changed.
But time had driven the softness of William away, forced him to erect the façade that would make the
days and nights palatable, easier to pretend so it was harder to get hurt until the pretending was all the
time and he forgot that it was all just a game, all just a fakery, designed to protect that small cowering
poet within who just wanted to be wanted.

*Like Buffy had.*

It had to have been the magic that brought him back, Spike decided. Shucking the cloak that had
hidden the truth for over a century, it had released William in such a way that he wasn’t entirely
certain who it was wearing his skin anymore. He still felt like Spike. He still thought like Spike. He
still had Spike’s drives and desires. Damn it all, he *was* Spike.

But Spike was also William.

Because with the memories back, and seeing the man he had been before—*well, it had to be Rose,
now didn’t it? Nobody else in that damn scenario had the power or inclination to do it*—they had
been taken away, he recognized a core that he’d never seen before. He saw the beginning of a man
who had the power to be strong on his own. Because the love of an amazing woman had shown him
how.

“I’m ready.”

Even uttered so softly, the two words could’ve been a salvo for as much of an effect they had on
Spike. He lurched awkwardly back into the chair, driving even more distance between him and
Buffy though each inch further from the skin he ached to touch—*Is she warmer than I remember? Is
she as soft?—*made him tighten and sting.

“Sorry,” he muttered when Willow jumped just as sharply, and then kicked the William part of him
for the automatic apology.

“Are…are you sure you’re up to this? You’re not looking so spiffy either, you know.”

He wanted to throttle the worry out of her throat. “Just don’t bollocks it up ‘cause you’re off the
beam from the other,” Spike said. “Don’t be fussed about me. I can mind my own.”

Willow looked very much like she still wanted to argue with him, but the glare he leveled at her
made her drop her eyes to the paper in her hand. “This one’s a li-little different than the other spell,”
she said. “More…touchy-feely.”

“Does that mean you get to do the touchy, or I get to do the feely?” He accompanied it with his best
leer, though truly, his heart wasn’t in it. All he wanted was to get Buffy back. The pair of them
needed to have a talk before he combusted from confusion.

She pressed her lips thin and placed her hand flat on his chest. When the words came, Spike almost
ripped it off for the shock of *déjà vu* that overcame him—*

---*She wasn’t opening it. Instead, she was muttering under her breath—Latin, from the few words he
could catch, or a derivative thereof—and her fingers never stopped their exploration of the soft
leather. By the time he’d regained his wits enough to clear his throat, the old woman was already
looking up at him, her hand extended as she proffered the book—*

---and then it was done, and Willow was looking up at him with those cow eyes that had almost been
his undoing when he’d taken her for that love spell for Dru the previous year, and the spot on his
chest where she’d been touching was now enflamed from the heat of the magic.
“That it?” he croaked. “That the best you can throw at me?”

“That’s it,” she confirmed.

“So…now what?” The magic had done nothing to provoke Buffy to move, and Spike rose to hover again at her side. “I’m here and she’s not awake. Why isn’t she awake, Red?”

“She has to drink the tea in the time period she’s in. Hopefully, she’s figured that part out.”

“And I’m s’posed to…what? Stand here and look all manly?”

“I think it’s a…proximity thing. She used to sleep with your journal under her pillow.” Willow blushed when he glanced back at her, his only response a single raised eyebrow. “Not that you’ll fit under her pillow, of course.”

He just shook his head, turning back to look down at Buffy. A tentative hand reached out to touch her shoulder, but when she failed to react, it slid up to the sweaty crook of her neck.

The charge was immediate, cementing each memory into a golden mosaic that made him want to take her into his arms and never let her go. Before he could think otherwise, his grip slid beneath her neck, his other arm sliding under her legs, and he was repositioning her on the other side of the mattress, sliding into the balmy indentation she’d left behind.

“What’re you…? I don’t think Buffy’s going to like this when she wakes up,” Willow said.

“But she’ll be up, won’t she?” Spike retorted. Inhaling, his eyes fluttered closed at the ambrosia that assaulted his senses, curling his arm around her waist to pull her gently against him. The trembling started as soon as she nestled into the bend of his body, poised as perfectly as she’d been so many years before in the bed he’d always believed to be only his. It was too much, the reality of Buffy too close to the figments that had heretofore been but sublime specters tormenting him with their hints of something more, and he buried her face in the cloud of hair as he fought to regain control of his muscles.

“Spike---,” Willow tried again.

“Sod off, Red,” he growled. The moisture that threatened to leak from between his shut eyelids burned, and he swallowed as if that would steady his racing skin. “Get used to the chair,” he added. “Until Buffy wakes up, I’m not goin’ anywhere.”

* * *

The blinding flash made William stumble to his knees, his bowed head almost colliding with the earth as the strength seemed to be sapped from his very bones. He hadn’t seen where it might’ve come from, but the burn that made his skin sizzle didn’t feel natural, instead a phantom crawl that dulled his remaining senses. Beyond the realm of his touch, nothing else felt…real.

“Buffy…” he murmured. Where had she gone? One moment, she’d been helping him get back to the house, supporting his weight against her slight frame, and the next…

A flash of white glimmered at the corner of his eye, and slowly, William turned his head to see what it might be. He had to blink more than once to rid himself of the blurriness in his vision, and then gasped when the white took on the shape of Buffy’s unconscious body.

She was coiled into the grass, fallen from whatever shock had hit him, and there was a fresh cut across her forehead where she’d struck her head in her collapse. Blood dripped to mat her hair, and
he couldn’t help but wonder how it was that none of the vampires that had been surrounding them had yet to take advantage of the situation.

“Buffy,” he said again, and crawled to her side. Sharp stones in the grass cut into his palms and knees, but he was oblivious to them as he pulled her onto his lap. “Don’t do this to me, love. I need you. Please, wake up.”

Daubing at her cut with his handkerchief, William glanced up when he heard the rushing of fabric and saw Rose hurry past to crouch over Richard’s body just feet away. He wasn’t unconscious, but the blood that dripped from his neck was in stark contrast to the deathly paleness of his cheeks, and William was certain with more than a touch of queasiness that the Watcher was not long for this world.

“No…” Richard whispered, and scrabbled along his wife’s skirts to try and sit up. “Where’s… April…”?

“Ssshhh…” Rose murmured. Pulling him close, she cradled his head, brushing back the hair that fell limply across his brow. “She’s gone. It’s over.”

“Over?” Both men looked to the spot where the vampire had last been, and saw instead dancing glints as the cold moonlight captured the pile of crystal that rested in her place.

“I used my binding spell,” Rose explained. “It’s contained her. For now.”

“So she’s not actually dead?”

William could hear the disappointment in her voice when she confirmed April’s status for Richard. “It’s over,” she repeated. “We can rest now.”

April wasn’t the only one missing, William noticed. Now that he was looking, he could see the scattering of dust throughout the lawn, one or two additional crystal figures nearer where she had been, with the only vampires remaining scrambling for the road and the carriage that awaited there. April’s lover stood in shock at the door, but with a single glance from the humans, he too was running in fear, disappearing like shadows into the night.

“Not…yet…” Richard managed. Pulling from her hold, he struggled to his knees, meeting William’s eyes before letting his gaze fall to Buffy. “You must…get them out of here,” he said to his wife. “The Council…they’ll be arriving soon. And Buffy…she will need medical attention, I think.”

“What of you?” she demanded. “You’re hurt. You need---.”

“My job is not done here. You must do this. William and his…family deserve some peace.” He looked again to the younger man. “I am honoring our original agreement, William. My colleagues will never know of your involvement in this…this.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I’m not leaving you here on your own, Richard. I didn’t do this so---.” Her voice was growing strident, and William noted that he’d never seen her approaching such hysteria. It was as if she saw something coming that she was desperately trying to avoid.

“Someone has to see them home safely, my dear,” Richard interrupted. “I need you to do this. I have to ensure that nothing happens to…her.”

Her face fell, and for a moment, William felt a profound sense of sorrow for the seer. As much as
they loved each other, April would always come between the Rhodes-Fanshaws. There was something about loving a Slayer—whether as a mentor, a father, a friend, or a lover—that rendered it difficult for those on the outside to break through. He wondered if Rose was even aware of it.

“I will go fetch William’s mother,” she said softly, rising to her feet. She was carefully avoiding looking at where the crystal-bound April was lying on the ground, focusing instead on the wan visage of her husband. “Because that is your wish, not because I’m pleased that you’ve asked.”

He stayed silent, watching her turn and walk stiffly back into the house. “You may not like me very much right now,” he said when the two men were alone, “but I would like to make a request of you, William.”

“Yes?”

“Protect them. Both of them. I may not…approve of your relationship with Buffy, but I can’t deny it, either. She and my Rose are cut from the same cloth, and I fear it shall be their undoing.”

He nodded. “They are both a little…headstrong, aren’t they?”

Richard’s chuckle started a series of coughs, death rattles that echoed in the brisk night air. “That, they are,” he agreed when breath returned. He gestured toward the carriage. “Get your family home. You’ve had a long and wearying day. You deserve the opportunity to rest.”

From somewhere deep within, William gathered his last remaining reserves of strength and rose to his feet, Buffy still unconscious as he gathered her into his arms. He’d gone several yards toward the coach when he stopped, looking back at the Watcher gravely. “And you?” he asked. “Do you not deserve to rest as well?”

“When my job is done.” Richard sighed, his gaze on the crystal. “When my job is done.”

* * *

The moment his mother fell asleep in the swaying carriage, William bundled Buffy back into his arms, smoothing back the golden hair so that he could better see the delicate line of her cheek in the moonlight that streamed in through the window. More blood marred her skin, but when he tried to locate his handkerchief to better clean it off, he realized he’d left it back in the grass.

“She will be fine,” Rose assured him. “She’s strong, and they’re just superficial wounds.”

He nodded, but his eyes never left Buffy’s face. He stayed silent even when the coach reached the Freston home, carrying the young woman into the house and leaving Rose to guide Anne.

“Go rest,” the seer instructed gently once they’d crossed the threshold. “I will see to the staff and your son.” There was so much she had yet to do this evening, and not one part of it filled her with joy. Leaving Richard behind had been the hardest thing she had ever done, for she knew, without having the vision to confirm it, that if she did so, it would be the last time she would see him alive. That meant she had little time to accomplish what needed to be done. Richard was her tie to the past; once he was dead, the magic that bound her to him would be broken, and she would be hurled back into a future she wouldn’t recognize. Such was the price she knew she would pay for trying to mend events of the past.

“Have a pot of Mr. Freston’s special tea sent up to Miss Summers’ room,” she instructed the young maid who was hovering in the background.

“Yes, ma’am. And the Master, too?”
Rose hesitated on the bottom step. “No,” she finally said. “He won’t be needing any.”

Her tread was heavy as she climbed the stairs. Anne’s door was already closed, but William stood in Buffy’s open one, a lean hand on the jamb keeping him steady as he gazed inside.

“She’s waking,” he said softly as Rose approached. “You were right. She’ll be fine.”

She set a gentle hand on his arm. “You need to rest, William. You have injuries of your own and Buffy would not want you to tax yourself unnecessarily.”

“I wish…” he started, and then broke off, an embarrassed flush creeping up his neck. He didn’t have to say it; she knew what it was he wanted. “Will you tell her I’ll see her in the morning?” he asked instead.

“Oh course,” Rose lied, and smiled for as long as he remained in the hall, only letting it slip away when she was alone again. If Buffy’s assessment of her friend had been correct, the Slayer would not be around in the morning. It was just as well. Rose was gambling that the forget spell she would need to set in place would not be made awkward by a young woman’s unexplained presence in the Freston home. Buffy would not be pleased if she discovered the truth about what Rose was going to do.

The Slayer was mumbling when Rose entered the room, tossing on the bed as if she was in the throes of a dream. Quickly, the seer hurried to her side, perching on the edge of the mattress to press the young woman back down into the pillow. “Ssshhhh…” she soothed. It seemed that soothing was all she was doing this evening.

Buffy’s eyes fluttered open, but they were dark with an unexpected fervor. “Where’s William?” she asked. “Is he all right? Tell me he’s all right. I didn’t do all this for him not to be all right.”

“He’s fine. He’s resting. Relax.”

She exhaled heavily. “Good. He’s got enough bad stuff coming up. He doesn’t need this on top of it.”

Her words made Rose stiffen. “What’s that?”

Immediately, Buffy knew she’d said too much. “Nothing,” she replied, letting her eyes fall closed again. “It’s nothing.”

But it wasn’t nothing, and Rose knew it. There were terrible things in store for William’s future, things both Buffy and her Watcher knew about, and she was desperately trying to make his young life better while she could. For a long moment, she contemplated trying to prise the truth from the Slayer, but in the end, decided better of it. She did not have time for unnecessary dalliances.

Even those that might make this easier for them.

When the maid came in with the tea, Buffy was almost asleep again, only half-aware when Rose held the cup up to her lips. As the young woman fell back against the pillow, already lost in the slumber of the magic, a weight lifted from the seer’s shoulders. That was one thing done. Now, she just had the other.

The spell was nearly complete when she finally hesitated. Around her, the Freston household was slipping into what remained of the night, to wake in the morning knowing nothing of a certain Slayer’s arrival. Buffy would hopefully be gone, and life would continue as before for everyone else.
But William…

Anne’s words from earlier came back to haunt Rose.

“Does he have to forget everything?”

Everything was so…definitive. It wasn’t feasible that he be left to remember anything that might affect the future, but…

Not everything had to be remembered to be appreciated.

He had found Buffy in his dreams. Perhaps Rose could let him keep memories of her there. Allow his subconscious a peace even when his waking world may be chaotic. Dreams did not have to be remembered; they were often not. So, really, Rose would be doing no harm by allowing him this one gift.

In the wake of how she was losing Richard, and everything that she held dear, it was the least that she could do.

* * *

Waking surprised her.

After such a long and tiring battle, Buffy expected to wake up sore and stiff, with muscles dying for a long massage from someone named Sven. Instead, she was stiff, but except for the faint sting of the cut on her arm and some spot on her forehead, she felt remarkably OK, like she was just getting up from a really, really, really long nap.

That didn’t mean she wanted to get up, though, and she kept her eyes closed as she tugged the arm around her midsection closer. “Mmmmm,” she murmured, burrowing deeper against the familiar shape behind her. “Why are you so cold? Pull the blanket up or something.”

She didn’t remember getting back to the Freston house. Well, to be honest, she didn’t really remember very much once the flash thingy went off in the yard with the vampires, but they must’ve done all right because here she was, safe in bed, and William was right there with—–.

Maybe it was the scent that pulled her from the remainder of her sleep. The fresh linen scent of William’s bed was gone, replaced with a musty smokiness that smelled too much like the worst of London. Had they spent the night at the house that imprisoned Giles and Anne instead of returning home?

Her eyes blinked open.

A plain, dark wall stared back at her.

Not the Freston house, then.

At least she knew William was all right.

She glanced down at the arm that held her so tightly, in the bend of his body that she fit so well.

And froze when she saw the chipped black nail polish.
The Fools of Time

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss’, of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet CXXIV.”
PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Rose used the spells to bind April within the crystal and to have everyone forget Buffy was in the past, while Buffy has finally woken up back in her time…

He hadn’t expected to fall asleep.

How could he? His brain was a miasma of memories and feelings that should’ve been reserved for Dru, not for the woman he’d tried to destroy for so many years.

But his body knew. His body remembered.

It trusted this place, with her in his arms, even if the bed wasn’t the one they’d shared, and even if the time wasn’t exactly right.

It betrayed him in favor of sleep.

…And dreamt.

* * *

“May we not spar tonight?” She was watching him, a small inquisitive smile on her lips that erased a portion of the worry from her eyes, prompting William to take her hand and start leading her down the path. “I find myself more in the mood for a…gentler game this evening.”

Her fingers tightened around his. “Parcheesi or checkers?” she teased. “Although, you know, Giles taught me a killer king me move once. You don’t want to mess with my jumping.”

“I believe I’ve been privy to that jumping---.” Laughing, he ducked away from her playful slap to his shoulder, his step quickening to pull her closer to the pond’s shores. “Come. There’s something I wish to show you.”

He didn’t look behind as she followed him along, but even if he had, William knew what he would see. The gentle curve of her leg exposed by her white skirts. The bright sparkle in her eyes as she took in anything and everything with that capacious gaze. The smattering of freckles across her nose that made him want to kiss each and every single one. Buffy often complained—good-naturedly, of course—that she wasn’t going to have any skin left if he kept kissing and licking her the way he normally did, but he didn’t care. There would never be a dream when he didn’t delight in her taste, of her mouth, of her fingertips, of that delicious hollow at the base of her neck. Odd, really, how he’d never considered himself so orally fixated before meeting Buffy. She seemed to bring out the animal in him.

Releasing his hold on her when they reached the edge of the water, William kicked off his shoes, tugged impatiently at his socks, and then pulled her down to sit at his side. Without saying a word, he took her small foot in hand, slipping off first one sandal and tossing it to the grass behind them before
doing the same with the other, all the while ignoring Buffy’s curious gaze.

“What’s this all about?” she finally asked.

“It’s about getting your feet wet,” he replied with a half-smile. “Come here.” Spreading his legs, he helped her settle between them, and then nudged hers down into the water so that both sets of feet trailed beneath its crystalline surface.

“I thought you said you had something to show me.”

“I do.” He pointed across the pond, at the low-hanging sun leaving glistening kaleidoscopes in the gentle ripples. “Look.”

After several seconds of silence, where the only thing that breathed or moved in the park’s harborage was the pair of solitary lovers, Buffy said, “OK, I must be really blind tonight or something because I’ve got nothing here. What exactly am I supposed to be seeing?”

“The sun. Have you not seen how closely it clings to the horizon? I think it’s going to set.”

“And?”

His arm curled around her waist to hold her closer. It pronounced the scent of her hair even more firmly, and William inhaled its aroma before continuing with his explanation. “The sun never sets here, Buffy,” he said gently. “How long have we been meeting like this? Granted, these are only dreams, and you’re only a figment—.”

“I’ve told you to stop saying things like that. Real, remember? As real as we can get.”

“Real, yes.” Though he knew it wasn’t. Within the framework of his nocturnal encounters with her, William was more than aware that this wasn’t the same as their first meetings. In the beginning, it had seemed so, their sporadic rendezvous infrequent enough for him not to notice the similarities. But when one encounter was repeated, almost verbatim, he’d realized it was just a construct of his imagination. A glorious and wonderful construct, but a construct nonetheless.

But tonight had been different from the start. He’d arrived at an empty park, where for every previous time, Buffy had been waiting for him. Not always in the same place, but invariably, always there.

Tonight, he’d had to wait for her, and while he waited, he tooled with the inks that he’d found near their bench, dashing off a quick verse in hopes of sharing it with her when she arrived. He’d been trying to come up with a word that rhymed with Elysium when he’d glanced up and noticed the sun, glowing with a soft twilight gleam rather than its usual noonday brilliance. What it meant, he had no idea, but the change had overwhelmed him into quiescence until Buffy had arrived, and now, he was hoping that perhaps she might have some insight as to its propitiousness.

“Maybe it has something to do with what’s going on when we’re awake,” she mused. Her weight against his chest was like the warmest of blankets, and he sighed in satisfaction when she let one of her hands drop to his thigh. “Maybe we’re sleeping during the day so it’s nighttime here.”

“Maybe,” William said. The explanation was too simple to assuage his slight debate, but he was failing to come up with his own answers and was willing to settle for hers.

“Everything’s OK, right? Things aren’t too stressy for you?”

She asked this quite a bit when they met, and always, William gave her the same positive response.
Tonight, though, it felt somehow…wrong to fob off his usual assurances, and instead, he hugged her just a bit tighter to his body.

“Things are…changing,” he said softly. “I am…not sure how they are going to affect me.”

Buffy twisted in his embrace to look at him. “Changing good, or changing bad? Because you know, if it’s changing bad in a physical way, I can always come around and beat it up until it’s good again.”

He smiled at her small joke, and bent to brush a kiss over her lips. “Changing different,” he said. “Whether it’s good or bad remains to be seen.”

Her steady gaze drank him in, sucking him down with an effortlessness that still managed to astonish William. “You’ll be fine,” she finally said. “I’m sticking with the good will always triumph over evil motif on this one. You’ll come through this with flying colors.”

“And if I’m the one who’s evil this time?”

Buffy shook her head. “Not possible.”

“Ah, but anything is possible, my love.” His hand cradled her cheek. “Aren’t we proof enough of that?”

She said nothing, but instead kissed him again, a ticklish delight that only spurred him to want more, before settling back again in his arms. As the silence returned to join them in their contemplations of the horizon, William decided that she was right this time in choosing not to continue the conversation. There would be time enough for debate in future encounters.

For now…he merely wished to enjoy the view.

* * *

Spike wasn’t sure what woke him up, but the sense of pervasive peace that had suffused his limbs during his rest evaporated the moment he felt the tension in Buffy’s body.

She hadn’t moved from the position they’d obviously slept in for the course of the night, but she was completely rigid against him, her every muscle screaming with raucous conflict. It almost sounded as if she was even holding her breath, and Spike slowly eased his grip on her abdomen as if that might somehow let the air back into her lungs.

“Spike?” he heard her whisper. The single word was almost drowned out by the drumming of her heartbeat in his ears. It wasn’t excitement that tinged his name with red when she uttered it; there were no other signs in her body that she was aroused in any way.

No, he was entirely too familiar with the emotion now wracking her into unexpected submission, though it was one he had never before associated with Buffy, and, oddly enough, not one that gave him any pleasure now.

It was fear.

“Home sweet home,” he said quietly.

The words had the opposite effect than he’d wanted. With Slayer speed, Buffy bolted from the bed, stumbling just a mite as her legs grew accustomed to usage again, and whirled to see him lying on the bed, her eyes flickering from the indentations her body had left in the pillow and mattress before jumping back up to his face.
Neither said a word.

What did she see? he wondered. Did she see the fanciful William from when they’d first met? Or did she see the predator who’d stalked her around the dance floor that first night at the Bronze?

He knew what he saw. And though a part of him hated the weakness, and the sense of betrayal about Drusilla, Spike couldn’t help but revel in the satisfaction in seeing Buffy so strong. Alive.

*Here.*

His mouth opened to speak, but he was pre-empted by a rustle from behind him, and he shifted to see Willow sitting up in the chair she’d been sleeping in. The look of delight on her face clamped his lips shut, and he retreated to a comfortable distance when the redhead jumped and ran around the edge of the bed to snatch her best friend up in a hug.

“You’re back, you’re back,” she was babbling. “You have no idea how good it is to see you *not* sleeping.” Willow held the Slayer at arms’ length and wagged a disapproving finger in her face. “No more tea for you, young lady.”

Spike caught the glance Buffy shot him before putting on a bright smile for her friend. “No more tea,” she agreed. She looked around, noticing the room’s contents for the first time, and the smile was immediately replaced by a frown. “Where are we?”

“Such a long story---.”

“And my cue to bugger off,” Spike cut in.

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he was halfway up when she spoke.

“What? You’re just…leaving?”

Hope lanced through him as he turned to see Buffy waiting for his answer. “Done my job, haven’t I?” he said carefully. “Brought you back all safe and sound to the bosom of your loved ones.”

He had no idea how she was going to respond. All he knew was that Red’s show and tell had sounded like too much for him, driving him to try and escape. He didn’t want her party to what he and Buffy needed to discuss. It was going to be hard enough trying to sort it out with just the two of them, let alone tossing in a meddlesome best friend he’d spent the better part of his acquaintance terrorizing. He couldn’t afford to have that boat rocked any more than it already would be.

When Willow leaned in to whisper in Buffy’s ear, though, Spike couldn’t stop from rolling his eyes. *Still a vampire here,* he wanted to scold her. *Still can hear every word you’re bloody saying.*

But as he stood there waiting, he saw the change come over the Slayer’s face as Willow’s *he doesn’t remember anything* sank in. There was no denying the disappointment that flickered in those green depths, but at the same time, her relief could’ve been a two-by-four upside his head with as obvious as it was.

And it hurt a helluva lot more than if it had gone straight through his heart.

“I thought you might be interested in a deal,” Buffy finally said to Spike, chin lifted high.

Willow’s wrinkled brow confusion was nothing compared to his own, but he’d had a century of practicing disinterest to cover himself up better. “Already had my deal,” Spike said leisurely. “I’m sure Red’ll will fill you in once you’ve seen the back of me.” He reached for his coat, and sure
enough, Buffy’s voice was a better tether than any thrall Drusilla could’ve done on a best day.

“Guess you’re finally strong enough to just walk away whenever it makes you happy,” she said. “And here I thought being afraid didn’t hold you back.”

The room felt like it was spinning around him as he slowly turned his head to stare at her, and when he met her gaze, Spike realized he’d just failed her little test of him.

“Because I’m not lost anymore,” he’d said. “No matter what happens, no matter where the next bend in our paths takes us, you’ve shown me that fear doesn’t have to hold me back. That I have it in me to forge onward, even if hindrances may try to prevent me from doing so. This is your true gift, Buffy. You make those who love you stronger.”

She’d wanted to find out for herself if he didn’t remember, or maybe, just how much he did. And in a clumsy drop of his cards, Spike had given her at least a peek at his hand.

Willow had grabbed onto Buffy’s arm, pulling her away from the bed. “What’re you doing?” she whispered into the Slayer’s ear. “Let him go. We don’t need him anymore.”

But Buffy wasn’t paying Willow any heed, her eyes still level with Spike’s, daring him with that golden petulance that just last year had driven him to distraction. Now, it had an entirely different effect, and his mouth set in a grim line as he squared his shoulders.

That’s the game she wants to play, so be it.

“You think you’ve got an offer I might be interested in, Slayer?” he drawled, hooking his thumb through his belt loop so that his fingers splayed across his crotch. He secretly pleaded in the flush that rose to her cheeks, and watched her retreat behind an icy exterior he was all too-familiar with.

“Never mind,” she snapped. “Just go. Willow and I can take care of Esme on our own.”

He waited until she’d turned to her friend before speaking again. “You think you can handle April all on your lonesome, too?” he asked.

It was Buffy’s turn to look like a deer in headlights, and the way her head swiveled back and forth between Spike and Willow almost made the vampire laugh out loud.

“That’s part of the long story,” Willow confirmed. “She’s out there, somewhere, and dangerous. You should’ve seen what she did to Spike.”

He squirmed under Buffy’s scrutiny. “Wouldn’t’ve happened if it wasn’t for that fuckin’ boytoy of hers—.”

“Nathan? Nathan’s here, too?”

Even as she said it, Spike realized that he’d known the name, too, a flimsy mote that had been buried in the avalanche of the other memories. “Yeah,” he confirmed. “The pair of ‘em have decided to finish off Esme, for some reason. Guess they didn’t like the terms of the deal she made to break the bitch out of her crystal palace.”

“Same fight, different day,” Buffy muttered. With one last look at the vampire, she turned away, scanning the room. “Where are my clothes? We need to go find Giles. We’re going to need all the help we can get with this one.”

“Ummm…OK.” Willow rushed through a hurried explanation about the set-up, how they’d fled
from Esme and left most everything behind, all the while avoiding looking at a pacing Spike near the door. “And as for Giles, well, I’ve been so focused on getting you back that, well—.”

“Giles is here,” Buffy interrupted. She went to the wardrobe and began rifling through its contents, pulling out a pair of Willow’s pants as she spoke. “I found him when I was… when I was sleeping. There was this powerful spell holding him in some kind of time prison, but Rose broke that. He should be back here by now.”

“Powerful, huh? Do you think it was one of Esme’s?”

Buffy shrugged. “Don’t know anybody else with that kind of power just lying around, do you? It doesn’t matter anyway. Rose said all he had to do was leave the house to get back to his own time. I didn’t see it, but—.”

“He’s here.” The surprise in Willow’s quick glance was but a pinprick compared to the angry resentment in Buffy’s, and Spike shrugged as he tried to backtrack. “Watcher’s not completely daft. If all he had to do to get outta the place was go outside, something tells me he’s egghead enough to put one foot in front of the other. Not even Rupert is that pathetic not to suss that.”

Willow seemed to accept his rationalization, but the Slayer wasn’t nearly as forgiving, yanking the borrowed pants up before slipping on a pair of extra shoes. “He probably went back to the apartment to look for us,” Buffy said as she strode determinedly for the door. “I say we start our search for him there.”

Spike hung back, even after Willow had grabbed her backpack and stepped into the hall. Blue eyes never left the small blonde in the doorway, staying firm when she hesitated and looked back at him.

“Are you coming?” Buffy asked quietly. “I know it’s not your fight, and I don’t really have anything to give you this—.”

“I’m in.” He glanced out the window before sauntering forward. “Still some time before the sun comes up, and I got a score to settle with that April bitch.” Every step into the hallway was buoyed by her unflinching gaze, but he couldn’t fight the urge to stop in front of Buffy and lean to whisper directly into her ear.

“Can’t rightly stay inside, anyway. Do that, and I’m just a prisoner of my own fear. Not really the way we work, now is it?”

Her sudden gasp was the best reward he could’ve asked for as he pulled back and continued down the hall.

Well…

…Second best.

* * *

The sound of a key slipping into the lock was enough to draw Giles from his slumber, and he shot up from where he’d crashed on the couch to see the knob on the front door already turning. He hadn’t meant to fall asleep, but the fruitless trek to Quentin’s house combined with the events of the past several days had been enough to make him collapse when he’d returned to the flat, and even now, the desire to just shoot whoever it was coming in so that he could get a few more hours of rest was overwhelming.

Her slim hand on the jamb was all he needed to shed the last vestiges of his disorientation, and Giles
was at the door, pulling it away from Buffy’s grip, before she could say a word. Silently, he gathered her into his arms, grunting slightly when her squeeze began to border on the uncomfortable, and then reached out to include the waiting Willow in the hug.

It was only when he saw Spike lounging against the wall in the hall that he stiffened.

The vampire looked very much like he had the last time Giles had seen him over a year previously---though the coat certainly appeared a bit worse for wear---but when the two men met gazes, the Watcher’s stomach plummeted.

Haunted was the best word he could use to describe Spike.

*Did she actually do it? Does he remember what happened?*

But he mustn’t, Giles argued silently. He would never have attempted to kill Buffy last year if he still retained any feelings for her.

*But then…why is he here?*

“I think this is my new favorite day of the year,” Willow was babbling. “Buffy’s back, Giles is back, I’m no longer the only one trying to fix everything…”

“I take it, Rose was right?” Buffy asked, pulling away from the hug.

Giles nodded. “And a bit overzealous in getting me out of her way, it would seem. She literally shoved me out the door when she saw that man being attacked.”

“That was Richard,” the Slayer explained. “Her husband.”

“Does that mean---?”

“That the bitefest was courtesy of April? Yeah, that’s what it means.” She started to follow Willow into the flat, and then hesitated when she remembered the vampire still in the hallway.

“Would it be remiss to inquire why exactly Spike is here?” Giles asked before she could say anything.

Buffy sighed. “There are so many different answers to that question, I don’t even know where to start. But for now…I---we need him. You have no idea how much has happened here since we’ve been gone.”

“So…he’s here at your request?”

“Yes. Is there a problem with that?”

He ignored the sharpness of her tone, concentrating instead on Spike. There were no overt reactions to Buffy’s choice of words, his body still a casual study of indolence, but it was the precise measuredness of his pose, combined with the lack of his usual caustic retorts, that set the Watcher’s mind awhirl.

“Come in, Spike,” he finally said, stepping aside to allow him entrance.

No reaction.

Then, a single nod before shuffling past Giles. He stopped at the opening to the living room, surveying the ransacked interior, before choosing the farthest chair from the center of the room as his
seat. After tossing a leg over the arm, he merely waited for Buffy to enter the room, and then watched her every move as she settled on the couch with Willow.

*Something* was going on between the pair, but what it could be, Giles was unsure. For now, he would bide his time and watch, hopeful that answers would be forthcoming. What they might be, whether Spike was now a threat along the same lines as Angelus---and oh, dear lord, did he hope that they didn’t have to worry about killing another vampire obsessed with Buffy---or whether there were other circumstances dictating Spike’s odd presence, he would have to wait and see.

For now, there were more pressing issues at hand.

* * *

Explanations made the world go ‘round.

They didn’t do a thing for Buffy’s head, though.

Well, it wasn’t the explanations as much, because those were relatively effortless. *If* she took into consideration that she and Giles were sketchy on the time-past details in light of Spike’s professed ignorance of what had happened. And hearing just how Willow had teamed up with Esme hadn’t exactly been cheerworthy, either, but what was done, was done. They just had to move onward from there.

No, the head-spinning was courtesy of Spike. As usual.

When Angel had lost his soul, he’d looked mostly the same to her. So, Buffy’d figured that seeing the physical differences between Spike and William would make the separation of the two easier to manage. After all, there was so much changed---the bleached hair, the higher definition to his muscles, the added scars.

But when he’d spoken, and she’d leapt from the bed to meet his gaze, something inside her had come undone.

Because…he had William’s eyes.

The eyes were exactly the same.

It hadn’t been that way with Angelus. After the initial shock of learning he’d lost his soul, Buffy had picked up on the coldness and maniacal glee in his aspect every time she saw him, making it easier and easier for her to separate the man from the demon so that by the time it came to killing him for Acathla, she was ready. Of course, the getting his soul back at the last minute hadn’t been uber-fun, but by that point, it was too late. She knew what she had to do.

So she’d been preparing herself for the same thing with Spike. She could separate the two, no matter what the physical differences.

Except…

…He had William’s eyes.

And every time he looked at her---*which was all the time, damn it, and just who in hell did he think he was fooling by saying he didn’t remember anything?*---she had to fight the urge to go and curl into his lap, touch his face and tell him everything was going to be all right.

She didn’t know what all right was anymore.
“Buffy.”

Giles’ voice was gentle, nudging her from her reverie and snapping her head away from where she’d zoned into staring at Spike again. “What?” she asked, too chirpy, and then flushed at the kind reproof in his gaze. “Sorry. Just…I’ve spent too much time thinking lately. Not enough time killing things. My brain is going mushy.”

“I was just saying that I believe our best course of action at this point would be to contact the Council. With the information we can provide them now, it should be much easier for them to track April.”

“The Council? Giles, are you forgetting that they’re half to blame for this entire mess? And you said yourself that Mr. Travers wouldn’t even answer the door when you went to his house. That doesn’t scream ‘we want to help you’ to me.”

“That was before. Now, we have what they treasure most. Information. And as for Quentin, well, it is the middle of the night, Buffy. He was well within his rights to be in bed instead of waiting for my potential arrival.”

Her lips tightened. “All right, say we do spill to them about April. That doesn’t solve the Esme problem. I know Willow said she doesn’t have her magic right now, but how do we know that’s a permanent thing? She could get it back and then we wouldn’t be able touch her again, and neither could the Council. And we can’t just not deal with her. She’s got a big ol’ jones for Slayers, and hey, leader of the pack here.”

“I agree with Buffy,” Willow chimed in. “Especially since Spike and I, you know, kinda double-crossed her with sneaking out and everything.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Giles asked. “She’s still human. You can’t kill her—.”

“I can,” Spike offered. “Be my pleasure.”

The Watcher shot him a withering glance. “Like I said,” he continued, as if the vampire had never spoken up, “you can’t kill her. As far as we know, nothing we’ve ever done has harmed Esme. If she gets her powers back, we have no idea how to even approach disarming her again. We need allies, Buffy. We can’t do this alone.”

The voice from the front hall took them all by surprise, and every head turned to see Rose hovering in the living room’s entrance.

“I suppose this is the perfect opening for me to finally stop eavesdropping and start contributing, isn’t it?” she said.
The Wreckful Siege of Battering Days

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss', of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare's "Sonnet LXV."

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: Buffy has reunited with Willow, Giles and Spike, and while they are trying to figure out what to do next, Rose has shown up at Giles' flat…

She had been watching for much longer than they knew. Her arrival outside Giles' flat had coincided with Buffy's, and she'd held back, keeping her presence cloaked during their reunion and throughout their explanations of everything that had transpired. It was just as well. Rose had been at first too aghast at seeing William, and then melancholy at the changes that had been wrought in him, to do anything more than stare, and it had taken much of her determination to break free from watching the ex-lovers. Hearing their debate regarding the witch who'd placed Giles and Anne Freston in the prison was all she needed to reveal her presence to them.

Buffy was on her feet first, crossing half the distance before drawing to a halt and openly gaping. "You should be dead," she announced.

Rose smiled. "It's nice to see you, too, Buffy," she said evenly. Her eyes flickered to the Watcher who had stopped in his pacing. "Does it feel good to be returned to your home, Mr. Giles?"

He was put off by her politeness, and frowned as he said, "We're just letting, but, yes." He cleared his throat. "Not to be incredibly rude, but…Buffy has a point. It's impossible for you to be here."

"From your perspective, I would imagine it would seem to be." She stepped forward, brushing past Buffy to stand before the other young woman in the room, and held out her hand in greeting. "You must be Willow Rosenberg. I'm Rose Rhodes-Fanshaw."

"How do you…oh!" Excitement quickened her handshake, her eyes bright. "You're the Watcher's wife who went missing! Except, you're not missing, are you, because you're here, just not in your own time. Why aren't you in your own time?"

"Believe it or not, I actually am," Rose replied. Releasing her grip, she turned and faced the countenance that tore at her heart. "Hello, William," she said softly.

He didn't say a word, didn't extend a greeting when she offered one, his knuckles bone-white where they clutched at the arms of the chair. Rose had heard enough of the conversation to know that Buffy and Giles were being circumspect in the details they shared, and that they did so on the understanding that "Spike," as they called him now, wasn't privy to the events of the past. But as she regarded him, the dark blue eyes swallowing her down like a man starving for the truth, she knew. She could still feel the soft cloud of the spell she'd woven over a century earlier---or mere hours, if she chose to look at it that way---but the primary block had been removed. He remembered, and her appearance at the flat had merely been another confirmation of the memories that must have been fierce for him.

"OK, so we've got the intros out of the way," Buffy said, stepping back into the group. "Why don't we try some explanations now."
"Yes, the obligatory explanations." She sighed. "Richard died in front of that house, but then, you knew that would happen, didn't you?" The guilty looks exchanged between the girls brought a sad smile to Rose's face. "There's no shame in death. He died so that you could live. So that others could be safe. He wouldn't have wanted it any other way."

"But you…what happened to your lectures on time requiring a balance? Why would you follow me to the now?"

"It wasn't a deliberate choice, Buffy. I'm here because my tie to the past was gone. I was only there because of Richard." She gestured toward the seats. "Sit down. This will take some…trust in me. By all rights, I shouldn't tell you at all but I've been granted leave to say what I must in order to help you. Certain wrongs must be righted, and it appears that I'm your best hope in doing so."

Rose waited until everyone was settled before continuing. "As you've seen, I have…powers that I used to help Richard in his duties. They aren't wholly mine, but rather, powers I share with others like me."

"You're a witch," Buffy said.

"Not exactly. I belong to a line of women whose purpose throughout the centuries has been to…watch over the Watchers. Our responsibility is to see that the Slayer line is kept as pure as possible. That the Slayer's design is untainted by bureaucracy or corruption."

Giles' harrumph was accompanied by a shake of his head. "I would think you've failed then," he commented. "The Council has so many rules and regulations, it's lost sight of the true mission."

"Not entirely." Rose said. "Rules are necessary for order, and without order, the Slayers would perish much sooner than they already do. Each generation has molded the Council as it's seen fit. We have no qualms with the general propriety of its structure at this point. Our dominion tends to be more…personalized."

"Richard."

"Yes. Richard." She began to pace as she spoke, the movement keeping her distracted enough from the grief that still threatened to overwhelm her at the most inopportune times. "I'm not originally of this time. This era, yes, but your reality is altered from the one I knew. My reality was…darker than this one, primarily due to the corruptive influence of a very powerful group of vampires. They were systematically destroying large sections of the populace and it was decided amongst my line that we needed to step in and stop it."

"But you deal with Watchers," Willow argued. "What did…" Her question trailed off, understanding slowly dawning.

"In my reality, April caught up to Richard a year after she'd killed Sofani in Batavia. Instead of killing him, though, she turned him, and together, they left quite a bloody swath across the world. When April was slain at the turn of the century, it drove Richard mad, and hence, his very careful annihilation of the other world he'd known."

"So you went back in time to change that," Buffy said. "And all your talk about not messing with the timeline was just a crock."

"We did what we thought was necessary. I risked returning to an unknown world when Richard died."

"So what're you doing here now? Your job's done---."
"My job is never done, Buffy. You need my help with Esme. As you told me before, I'm the only one who has ever had an effect on her."

"You also said you wouldn't hurt her," the Slayer argued.

"My sisters believe there is another way," Rose said. "And I'm rather embarrassed to admit that my personal opinions on the matter were negated by your present need."

"But, in essence, it's been only a few hours since we last saw you," Giles interjected. "How did you know we needed your aid? Or even, how to find us?"

"Because of you." Her smile was kind. "It doesn't matter who your employer is, Rupert. In your heart, you will always be Buffy's Watcher."

"Does this mean you have a plan?" asked Willow. "Because so far, we've come up with bupkiss. Less than that. We don't even have bup."

"I'm interested in seeing the spell you used to detect Esme's magic," she explained. "And did I hear you left her with Lydia? Do you think you might be able to convince Lydia to help us?"

"I believe I could do that," Giles offered.

"And I'll get the stuff about the spell," Willow said, popping up to head for the bedroom.

The awkward silence left in the wake of the pair's departure had Buffy visibly squirming in her seat, but it was shattered when Spike stood and grabbed Rose's arm.

"Like a word," he growled, dragging her toward the kitchen.

She let herself be pulled into the adjoining room, ignoring the Slayer's worried frown as they disappeared. When he shoved her against the counter, she caught the edge in order not to stumble.

"You remember, don't you?" Rose asked as she turned to face him.

His nostrils were flaring in his agitation, and she couldn't help but marvel at such a curiously human thing for a vampire to do. In spite of the physical differences, this close to him, all she could see was William, and the guilt she'd had at her most recent lie to him returned with a vengeance.

"It was you." Not a question, because he already seemed certain of the answer, his voice so low, it was impossible to be heard from the other room.

"It had to be done---," she started, only to stop in sudden fear when his fist slammed onto the counter.

"You had no right," he hissed. "You and all your do-gooder Council talk. Between you and that bastard husband of yours---."

"Stop." Though she didn't raise her voice, the command in her tone was chilling, and she lifted a warning finger to his chest. "You will not besmirch his name like that. Richard died so that you could get Buffy to safety. She wouldn't be sitting out there right now were it not for his sacrifice."

Silence. Only the storm of his gaze as he stared at her. And then…

"Why?" A whisper now, and it softened part of the shell she'd thrown up in response to his attack on Richard.
"For your own good," she said quietly.

He snorted. "In case you hadn't noticed, not exactly playin' for that team anymore, Rose."

"Really? And you're here to help because...?" She let the leading question go unanswered, watching the doubt and confusion play across his face. "You know it was for the best, William. Would you have been able to bear a century of knowing she wasn't even born yet? Would you even be here today if you'd gone on with Buffy's memory? I had no choice. It was the only way to ensure that you would be able to continue and to preserve what I could of the timeline."

"You let her remember." It was the petulant retort of a child, eliciting a smile from Rose.

"And do you think that makes it easy for her? If I'd known she was coming back to seeing you...like this, I would likely have chosen to block her remembrances, as well."

"Because now I'm not good enough for her, is that it?"

"You're a vampire, William. What do you think is the answer to that question?"

The air crackled between them, but he didn't reply. Rose hated being the one so state it so bluntly, but she'd seen too many vampires in the time she spent with Richard to be able to believe anything good could come from a relationship between the Slayer and the demon.

"You think you got me figured out, do you?" Spike had backed off from encroaching her space, crossing his arms over his chest defiantly. "You were always underestimating me. You thought you could just talk me out of my feelings, like it was all just a big game. Let me tell you, you didn't know what I was like then, and you haven't a notion what kind of vamp I am now."

"What are you planning to do?"

A small cough from the entrance stopped Spike from replying. "Giles is off the phone," Buffy said quietly. "He's got news."

* * *

As plans went, she liked it. It was relatively simple---so bonus points for fewer things to go wrong---and strongly featured Buffy getting to beat the tar out of April. Even Spike had seemingly approved of the arrangements, describing his fight with the vamp in enough detail for Buffy to know the ex-Slayer's weaknesses and then boasting to one and all that his added muscle would most likely sway the battle in their favor. She would've made some comment about being too big for his own fists, but the fact was, he was probably right. She wasn't completely herself yet, and having an experienced fighter like Spike on her side could only help.

It also helped that they were going to be able to take on Esme and April at the same time. Lydia's information that the vampire was likely holding Quentin hostage in his home had sparked the initial thought of combining the battles, with the female Watcher eagerly consenting to get Esme to the house for them. She'd been fending off the witch ever since Willow and Spike's disappearance, and she admitted to Giles that she feared Esme's powers were returning. If that was the case, the time to strike was now, before she got back up to full strength.

So, it was pretty easy. Rest up through the day, go to Travers' house as soon as the sun set, kill herself a couple of vamps while Rose and Willow worked their mojo with Esme.

Easy, except for the fact that she couldn't sleep.
The flat was silent, curtains drawn against the London day, the air oppressive with a surprising summer heat. After setting some protective wards around the building, Rose had settled to bunk with Willow, while Giles retired to his room for the first good night's rest he'd had in days.

That left Buffy in her old bed, and Spike on the couch, and her head somewhere stuck between a hundred years earlier and a grungy pub room on the other side of the city.

She had no doubts that he remembered. In spite of Willow's assurances to the contrary, Buffy knew those words that Spike had uttered. She saw the way he looked at her. She'd witnessed how Rose's appearance had infuriated him. Though she hadn't heard what he'd said to the seer in the kitchen, the mere fact that he'd been driven enough to speak with her was damning enough in Buffy's eyes.

But he continued to stay silent, playing up to Giles' evasive intimations of the past and Willow's stammering roundabouts with what she knew.

It was driving her crazy.

Pushing back the sheet, Buffy padded silently to the door, cocking her head to listen for any stray noises. The living room was still. Is he actually sleeping?

She had to know.

As quietly as she could, Buffy turned the knob, slipping into the hall and slinking along the wall until she stood in the opening to the lounge. There were no lights on, the only ambience that which filtered harmlessly through the curtains, but rather than a blanketed vampire on the sofa, she was met by a sitting Spike in the same chair he'd occupied earlier, bent at the waist, forearms resting on his knees as he stared at the floor.

He looked up when she hesitated, and she felt her stomach tighten at the solemnity in his eyes. "You should be sleeping," he said softly.

"I think I've done enough sleeping lately, don't you?" she replied, just as softly.

Spike shrugged, as if his disinterest was more important than her answer. "Your funeral."

Buffy took a step closer. "You don't think we're going to win?"

"Don't know what to think anymore."

She couldn't help it. He sounded so much like William in that moment, so lost and so broken, that she was across the room before she could talk herself out of it, kneeling before him and resting a tremulous hand on his arm. "Just tell me," she whispered. "Tell me and stop pretending."

Though he didn't pull away from her touch, he didn't acknowledge it, either, dropping his eyes to the floor. "Don't know what you're talkin' about, Slayer," Spike said roughly. "Just tired, is all."

Not as tired as she was of the games, but Buffy moved back off anyway. "Sleep's more comfortable lying down," she said, trying a different tactic. "Is there something wrong with the couch? I didn't know vamps could be so fussy."

"And I didn't know Slayers could be so nosy. What's a bloke got to do to get a little peace around here?"

"I was just—."

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"I was just—."
"Just stickin' your nose in where it's not wanted, that's what you're doin'. Take a page from Red's book, Buffy. If I say shove off, you'd best do it."

His antagonism had quickly triggered her from sympathy to annoyance. "I guess playing make believe is more tiring than it looks," she snapped, rising to her feet. "You think you're so clever, and it might be working on Willow and Giles, but you can't fool me, Spike. I know you're not nearly as blind as you're letting on. I've seen you go into denial, remember?" Her eyes glittered in anger. "Oh, wait. You don't remember. My bad."

"What is it you want from me, huh?" Leaping from his seat, Spike started stalking her, driving her back toward her bedroom, step by step. "I'm here, right? I'm givin' you my fists and fangs for the fight without askin' for anything in return. You think bein' a turncoat has me dancing in the aisles? I hate the thought that I need to do this. I hate that I look at you, and I'm prepared to just chuck it all 'cause I can't shake you out of my skull. There's something just not right about that. So, tell me, Buffy." He stopped, though Buffy continued backward until she was pressed against the corridor's wall. "What. Do you. Want?"

Her eyes burned from the tears that suddenly sprang there. "I want William," she said hoarsely, and whirled to flee back to the sanctuary of her room.

* * *

It was a subdued group that left the flat at sunset. Sleep had done wonders for Giles, recharging him to a saber-sharpness that had him barking immutable orders at both Buffy and Spike. Willow was bowing to Rose's lead, jokingly asking when she slung the pack of magical supplies over her shoulder if there was a proper name for a witch's caddy. Even Spike seemed to have gained a stay in his temper, his mussed curls telling Buffy that he'd finally managed to sneak at least a couple hours of sleep.

She wasn't dwelling on what had transpired between them. Though she'd eventually succumbed to exhaustion, her rest had been fitful, leaving her fidgety and anxious for the fight to be done. Over and over, she repeated Spike's instructions---can't see a left-comin' punch or kick if her life depends on it, you can use that, you can beat her and she's quick, but you're quicker, stay on top of that and you'll best her no problem---while she did her stretches in the living room. For a brief moment, she'd considered asking the vampire if he wanted to spar to get her properly warmed up, but he was taking extra care not to be around, slipping outside for a cigarette as he waited for them to finish preparing.

"You think it's the first time anyone ever had to take a taxi to stop an impending demonic disaster?" Buffy joked as they squeezed into the back of the vehicle they'd ordered. The women were on one side, the men on the other, and she had to tuck her legs tight against her seat when Spike's sprawl placed his feet dangerously close to hers.

"It's not quite as charming as Richard's carriage," Rose mused. When the cabbie laid on the horn when another car cut him off on a roundabout, she grimaced. "Or as quiet."

"What time did Lydia say she was going to get Esme there?" Willow asked.

"As close to sunset as she could manage," Giles replied. "According to her, Esme has grown increasingly bold in their search for Spike and Buffy. She doubted she would have many problems getting her out after dark."

"Only natural," Spike said. "All amounts of evil crawl from under their rocks without the sun lurking about."
Giles' mouth opened as if to comment, but then snapped shut, leaving the car in an uneasy silence for the duration of the trip. It was a grateful reprieve for Buffy; she was having difficulty enough focusing on the upcoming fight and not the way Spike's hands kept flexing and tapping, tapered fingers she knew intimately, knew how he twisted his wrist to accommodate writing with his left hand and not his right, knew how they would fidget without something to do or something to hold. It was a characteristically William thing to do, and she had to avert her eyes to the road passing by her window in order not to dwell on it.

She was the first one out when the taxi pulled to a stop down the street, hopping in readiness as she worked out the kinks in her neck. Behind her, she felt Spike approach and then stop, the audible sound of his knuckles cracking as he did the same as she. The distant voices of the others merged into the noise of the street as Buffy became all too aware of the prickling at the base of her neck Spike's presence was causing, her pulse accelerating as a natural response to the threat.

"Save it for your real enemy," Spike said, his low words intended only for her ears.

Risking a glance at him, Buffy jerked her head toward the Travers' house. "I'm going to go scout ahead," she said. "Let Giles---."

"He'll suss it out on his own," came the reply as the vampire moved to her side. "Let's go."

He wasn't waiting for her to start, instead striding with bold steps along the walk, his coat billowing around his legs. Determination made his boots echo in the dark, and she had to sprint to catch up to him.

"Scouting usually goes hand in hand with stealthy," she said dryly as she matched his pace. "This is most definitely not sneaky."

"So I like a bold entrance," Spike said. "Sue me."

"Have you forgotten this is my fight?"

"Last I checked, April had taken a chunk out of my hide, too," he shot back, and then growled deep in his chest, exhaling in a long absolution of the tension still wound in his muscles. "But we'll play it your way. I've got your back as long as you want me there."

"Thanks."

"Well, well, well. Looks like little Willie came back for seconds."

The pair stopped at the male drawl behind them, turning in unison to see Nathan lounging against the streetlamp they'd just passed under.

"You even brought dessert," Nathan continued. "How thoughtful."

"Geez, you talk as much as your ho girlfriend does," Buffy said. Her fingers tightened around the stake she carried loosely at her side, while her gaze scanned their surroundings. As far as she could tell, he and Spike were the only vamps in the vicinity. Where did that put April? Was she in the house?

"You plan on doin' a runner this time round, too?" Spike taunted. "Without your little minions scrabbling under foot, Buffy should be able to take care of your honey this time with her eyes shut and her stake tied behind her back."

"How pathetic. Recruiting a little girl to help you defend your honor. I think you're almost as sad a
vampire as you were a human."

"Hey!" Buffy exclaimed, a bright faux smile on her face. "He doesn't remember me either. Looks like you two have something in common, Spike. You know, other than the fangs."

Both vamps looked at her with drawn brows, scrutinizing---though for different reasons---the meaning behind her words. This was better, she decided. This was Buffy back in control, keeping the demons off-balance as she did what she had to do. And without knowing April's exact whereabouts, she knew what that was.

Spike must've seen the decision in her eyes. A second before she grabbed the iron fence next to her, he dove at Nathan's street side, splitting the vampire's attention and giving them the advantage. Buffy used her momentum to swing around Nathan, grabbing him when Spike knocked him off-balance, and shoving him face-first onto the walk.

"Where's April?" she demanded, pressing the tip of her stake into his back.

He didn't answer, bucking up against her slight weight. Her bottom shifted backwards but as she fought to regain her equilibrium, Spike's heavy boot came down on Nathan's neck, pinning him down with an audible crunch.

"You heard the lady," Spike growled. "Suggest you answer her. She's not nearly as nice as me when she gets pissed."

Nathan's cheek was smashed against the concrete, his lips flexing in his best fish imitation as he tried to speak, and Buffy had to bite back the giggle that rose to her throat. "Not to discourage such enthusiastic interrogation methods," she said, "but I think he might be more apt to talk if he can actually, you know, talk."

Looking down at his foot, Spike nodded as he stepped back. "Looks like it's your lucky day, mate. Slayer's feelin' generous."

"Slayer?" Nathan croaked. He was trying to twist to look at the young woman still sitting on his back, but his neck was refusing to cooperate. His groan of pain was accompanied by the dead weight of his head hitting the sidewalk, and his eyes fluttered shut.

"Damn it," Buffy muttered. "I think you broke him, Spike. He's not going to be any use to us now."

"Well, then…" Crouching down, Spike curled his hand around hers on the stake, and gave it a violent shove downward, slamming through Nathan's chest and sending an explosion of dust upward around Buffy's legs. "One down, one to go."

* * *

Willow watched the fight from the distance, held back both by Giles' warning to leave the pair of blonds alone and by her own trepidation about getting caught in the sparks that were shooting between Buffy and Spike. Though she'd been pretending otherwise, she had a funny feeling that Spike was more than aware of what had happened to Buffy in the past, about his role in the battle that had freed Giles, and about the intimacy that had occurred between him and the Slayer. He'd looked like his head was going to explode when Rose had arrived, and though he'd been his usual snipey self during their planning session, there was a…diffidence in his contributions, as though he was unsure of what exactly his role was.

She was glad she didn't have to be in his head. Hers was wonky enough trying to come to grips with Buffy being in love with William.
"They did it," Rose murmured beside her. She'd been transfixed by the fight ever since it had started, watching them move in an innate synchronicity that almost sang in the night air. "They actually killed him."

"That's only one," Giles said. "And not April. They're not done yet."

Willow bit her lip to keep from talking. Giles had been referring to Buffy and Spike as a team all night; it was weird to the power of infinity hearing it, especially when half the time she caught him watching Spike with the same cautious scrutiny the vampire was bestowing on Buffy. Like there was a puzzle there he was still trying to fathom.

Yuck. More wonkiness. She needed to seriously reconsider trying to be the brainy one. Thinking so much about stuff like this was grounds for a serious headache.

At her side, Rose suddenly stiffened, turning to look at the deserted street behind them. Her hand closed around Willow’s wrist, forcing a surprised cry of pain from the young girl.

"She's coming," Rose said.

"We should get ready then," Willow argued, trying to free herself from her grasp.

"There's no time."

The next thing Willow saw, was blackness.

* * *

From his chair by the fireplace, Quentin watched April flit from window to window, peering out into the darkness. "He's taking too long," she grumbled. "Why is he taking so long?"

"Most likely, he's dead," Quentin replied. "Perhaps you should've done your own hunting this evening instead of insisting on standing guard." He winced when she flew to his side, grabbing his bandaged hand and squeezing until another bone popped somewhere inside. He really must start learning not to answer all her questions. Most of them were rhetorical.

"I'm going to take such pleasure in killing you when this is over," she said. "Watchers make the best meals."

Shattering glass cleaved the air, sending shards flying into the room as a stone came hurtling through the window. April's attention snapped in time to see a familiar bleached head poke into view.

"Personally, I always thought Slayers made the nummiest treats," Spike said from his vantage outside.

"You!" she hissed.

"Little ol' me. So, you goin' to hide in there all night, or are you goin' to come out and play? In the mood for a little rough and tumble, myself. Thought for a bit there I'd get it from your boytoy, but well, he just decided to go blowin' in the wind instead."

She took a step forward. "What've you done to Nathan?"

"Just gave back as good as I got. With the added bonus of bein' a better shot than him. I didn't miss the heart."

With a gurgled cry, April flew through the air, breaking through the rest of the pane to go tumbling
to the ground outside. Immediately, Quentin jumped to his feet, but before he could venture forward to see what was happening, the study door slammed open, revealing an armed Buffy.

"Get out of here," she ordered, heading toward the broken window. "Giles is outside, about four houses down. He'll help you get to the Council offices in one piece instead of on a vampire platter."

"Miss Summers," he stammered. She was, quite honestly, the last person he'd expected to see. "What are you doing here?"

"Saving your ass, in case it wasn't obvious." Her eyes were glued to the fighting he could hear outside, and when he didn't respond right away, she turned to glare at him. "Did she suck out brain cells, too? Go on!"

He felt foolish for obeying such an impudent young woman, but Quentin's feet did as they were told, taking him from the study and down the corridor toward the back exit. He had no desire to go out the front door, not with April and the vampire she'd fought the other day brawling in the garden. One thing was for certain, though. When this mess was over, he intended on having a long discussion with Miss Summers about her penchant for recruiting demons to aid her in her slaying.

* * *

The Watcher Lydia's assessment had been conservative, Rose realized as she teleported to within feet of where the two women stood. The air sizzled with the buzz of magic, leaving the same distinctive tang to the senses as had surrounded the house that had imprisoned Rupert and Anne. Esme was hiding it, however, only allowing the slimmest of fingers to go searching along the ether as she probed for demonic activity in the neighborhood. Why that could be, Rose didn't know, but she refused to waste precious time questioning her untold advantage, splicing together the threads of the spell she needed to incapacitate the elderly witch.

Willow was unconscious on the grass behind her. She regretted having to dupe the young woman in such a way, and was dreading Buffy and William discovering just what she had in mind, but Esme's power was too great to leave unchecked.

"She's here," Rose heard Esme say.

"I told you my sources said Buffy was---."

"Not her. April." Smug satisfaction coated her words. "She is---. Wait."

Licks of fear crept up Rose's spine as the witch suddenly turned and stared in the direction Rose had cloaked herself. Already, the magic she was tethering was augmenting under her control, preparing to be unleashed in ways unknown at the threat she could detect but not identify. Time was no longer a luxury Rose could cater to, and she muttered an apology to Willow for what she was about to do.

It was Willow and Giles' credit that she could do this at all. They were the ones who'd divined the original spell to gather Esme's magic. When Willow had told the story of the rod, how she'd used it to find the journal and then how they'd broken it to disarm the magic surrounding the Council building, Rose had known right away just what had been accomplished. She hadn't gone into details with them about what she planned to do---there simply wasn't any time for it---but it was the best solution she could discern that would cripple Esme without killing her.

Dropping the glamour that hid both her and Willow from their view, Rose knelt to place one hand on the young girl's chest, while at the same time, lifting the other to aim at Esme. Before the elderly witch could react, the words hung in the air between them, electrifying the air as an invisible conduit
formed, linking the three women in a daisy chain of magic that made Rose feel drunk.

It surged through her with a power that crested on voltaic waves, a life all of its own made temporarily incarnate as it drained from Esme, fought the tidal pull from Rose, and settled into the unconscious Willow on the grass. It was nothing like she'd ever felt before, magic combining years of specified training with an inordinate natural gift, and for the briefest of moments, Rose was tempted to channel a small portion of it away. What harm could it bring, she thought, but quickly shook it off, refocusing her energies on completing the spell.

When it was over, all three women were on the ground, spent and riven from the stress of the magic. Air was suddenly a precious commodity for Rose, and she swallowed huge gulps as she listened to the female Watcher shout at her from somewhere far, far away.

* * *

Buffy didn't know whether she should be annoyed or amused. From the middle of the yard---well, what constituted a yard in a city like London, at least---Spike was dancing around in circles, taunting and tormenting April with jeers on everything from her hair and her fighting technique to her lousy taste in boyfriends. It wasn't anything Buffy hadn't seen before---or, for that matter, not been on the other side of---but for the first time, she had a birds' eye view of what a psychological advantage it gave him when it came to the fight.

It wasn't that he wasn't an accomplished fighter. In fact, now that she could see him as an outside party, Buffy recognized a lot of her own moves in his style. But the fervor he threw into his words, choosing and selecting the most keenly honed barbs in order to do the most damage, that was an art all to itself.

It was working, too. Maybe being out of it for the last century had dulled April's sense of play, but Spike's gibes were hitting just as often as his punches were. He wasn't going for the kill, though; they had agreed before setting on with their plan to get Quentin safely out of the house that this one belonged to Buffy.

Taking care not to cut herself on the jagged shards of glass that still clung to the window pane, the Slayer dove out the window and rolled safely onto the grass, pulling the stake from her pants as she did so. Her presence was immediately noticed, and April swept her leg out to knock Spike from his feet as she whirled to face off with Buffy.

And froze.

"Miss me?" Buffy quipped with a bright smile. Her fist shot into April's jaw, sending the demon flying back.

She tangled with the edge of Spike's coat, and snarled when his foot connected with her midsection to free her. "Did you get caught in that damn spell, too?" April rasped as she staggered back up. "Is that how you can be here?"

"Nope," Buffy replied. She saw the faint list in the vampire's left side and struck again, this time driving a kick into her opponent's knee. "Got a cab. Lot cheaper and way easier on the time traveling sickness. I highly recommend it."

"Cartilage cracked and bone splintered. April cried out as her leg collapsed beneath her, but she rolled out of Buffy's way when the stake came plunging toward her. "Are your other Watchers vampires, too? Except they can't be, can they? I killed Richard myself."
Buffy's sudden fury blinded her to the ankle that hooked around hers, and she fell against a bush when April forced her from her feet. Her hand jammed against the wall behind the shrub, knocking the stake from her grip, and she bit back the shout of pain that threatened to erupt when she felt her wrist snap. When she heard the vampire move behind her, she tucked her hand into her stomach and pitched sideways, only narrowly avoiding a direct tussle.

"Buffy!"

His call was almost a surprise, and she looked just in time to see the stake he was tossing her sluicing through the air. Buffy's eyes caught Spike's, and the slight flicker of his gaze over her shoulder was all she needed to grab the piece of wood and twist around, driving it through the ribcage of a pouncing April.

The dust scattered, blinding her for a moment. Then, strong hands were pulling were away, hooking beneath her arms to set her gently down on the front step, and she looked up to see the platinum head bowed over her injured wrist.

"Now who's the stubborn sort," he commented wryly. His choice of words made her breath hitch. He was gently massaging powerful fingertips along the muscles in her arm, testing the strength in her wrist, but she was oblivious to anything but him. "You couldn't just stake her when you had her caught in your headlights. No, you had to go and---."

He was silenced by the slam of her lips to his.

She wasn't sure what she expected. There was no denying he tasted different; no longer the innocent honey of first kisses, Spike was smoke and ice and carnivorous hunger, hesitating only a fraction of a millisecond before responding to her caress. But where instinct tried to force Buffy to deepen the kiss, he held her back, releasing his hold on her hands to bring his own up to cup her face. He held her still, taking the time to make the kiss linger in zealous indulgence, tongue sweeping expertly with hers until she had to break away to breathe.

"I knew you remembered," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "I knew it. I knew you couldn't forget---."

"Buffy, don't do this."

She frowned as she met his eyes. They were dark with desire, but she could see him fighting to tear himself away. "Do what?" she demanded. "You kissed me, too. Don't deny it."

"How can I? But...you want William. You said so. And I'm not completely him, now am I? Not just the demon bit," he rushed to say. "It's the time, love. I've had a century to change from the man you met."

"But he's there," Buffy argued. "I've seen him."

"You're just all wound up from the fight." His thumb brushed over her swollen bottom lip before his hands withdrew and he rocked back on his heels, forcing the distance between them again. "You're not thinkin' straight."

"Don't tell me how I'm thinking," she started, but the sudden sight of Giles running up onto the grass captured her attention.

"Come," the Watcher said, his breathing ragged. "It's Willow."
She broke into a sprint when she saw her best friend lying stretched out on the grass, dropping to her knees as soon as she reached her side. Willow's face was flushed, her skin sweaty, and every breath that escaped her lungs sounded like it was being pulled out with a broken net, rough and jagged in every exhalation. Nearby, Rose was sitting huddled on the curb, while Lydia was jabbering away on her cell phone over the prostrate form of Esme.

"She'll be fine," Rose said when Buffy finally acknowledged her presence. "She's strong. She just needs to rest."

"What did you do?"

The seer's eyes fell to the street. "What had to be done."

"What...? No! You were supposed to use the spell to tap Esme's magic into a tree, or a rock, or a squirrel or something. Not my best friend!"

"It was never going to work that way. Her magic is too powerful to be held by something less than fully sentient---."

"So you were always going to double-cross us?" Buffy was ready for another fight. First the kiss with Spike---well, not the kiss itself, though she still wasn't sure what had been going through her head when she'd done that---and now Rose. What happened to teamwork? What happened to understanding what those people who promised to support you were actually thinking?

"I did what had to be done," Rose repeated, this time a little stronger. "Esme is no longer a threat, and yet she lives. That is the honorable way."

"So honorable you lie to us in order to turn Willow into a vegetable. Great. Just great."

"She's merely sleeping. When she wakes up, everything will be all right."

"*When* she wakes up? And when exactly is that going to be?"

Rose had no answer to that, leaving the night to its distant music of traffic and horns. With a shake of her head, Buffy stepped back to allow Giles to tend to Willow, making the redhead more comfortable on the grass while they waited for the vans Lydia had called for to arrive.

It was too much. Even with April's death under her belt, and even with knowing the threat of Esme was now gone, she felt like screaming and ranting in frustrated anger because how worth it could it be if she lost Willow at the same time? And then there was the whole issue of Spike, and the kiss, and the fact that differentiating between him and William had turned into something more nightmarish than finals she never studied for.

Automatically, Buffy's gaze swept around, looking for the bleached head as if it would give her the reassurance she needed. Her throat locked as she slowly turned, and she felt sick to her stomach as the awareness sank in.

Spike was nowhere to be seen.
I Could Not Love You Dearer

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The characters are Joss', of course, and the chapter title comes from Shakespeare's "Sonnet CXV."

PREVIOUSLY ON BUFFY: April and Nathan are dead, and Rose has used Giles' and Willow's spell to steal Esme's power from her and place it inside Willow instead; meanwhile, Spike has run off after the battle…

If someone had asked her on her first day in London if she'd miss it when she left, Buffy would have laughed in their face before reminding them that there were parts of the world that actually saw the sun during daylight hours and didn't put butter on all their sandwiches. If she was asked now, though, she knew she would just smile, nod, and mention something about how getting to see the non-touristy parts of the city could really change a girl's opinion of it.

The sky was uncharacteristically clear, the glow from miles of motorway lamps and streetlights softening the ebony into a midnight blue, and a warm breeze from the water whispered across Buffy's skin as she strolled along the bank. She'd walked this path every night since they'd killed April, excusing herself from the flat on the pretense of patrolling, and each journey had been uneventful, returning her to the bosom of her friends with more than a touch of melancholy. She shouldn't even be out now---their flight back to Sunnydale was scheduled very early the next morning, and Giles had been cautionary about staying out too late---but she didn't care. Something inside told her that if she stood any chance in finding Spike, it would be here.

There had been no sign of him since the fight. Eight days of nothing drove Buffy through the spectrum of emotion---anger at his running off, relief that she wouldn't have to face the decision that seeing him would force, even a shred of fear that he'd disappeared for good this time. It was the last that Giles had called her on, mentioning without ever saying William or Spike's name, that the people who truly cared for her would not wish to see her pining so. She'd laughed at that, which had only irritated him, but it was so similar to his words when they'd first left home for England, she couldn't help it. She'd gone on sabbatical to get over Angel's leaving, and was going back hung up on Spike's desertion. How ironic was that.

The one thing that was bolstering her through it was knowing William wouldn't like to see her this way. How many times had she listened to the lectures of how strong she was? That, yes, she was flawed, but that those flaws gave her a fortitude---his word, not hers, she thought it made her sound like the Alamo or something---that allowed her to walk boldly through her days? He was so proud of her independence; she needed to honor that by keeping her chin up.

"You're dropping your shoulder," a voice said behind her. "You could've been dinner ten times over by now if it weren't for me."

She halted in her tracks, taking a deep breath to quell the sudden rise in her heart rate, before slowly pivoting to see him standing there. His tone had been joking, but Spike's face was solemn, capturing the scattered moonlight from the water so that his skin almost glowed. She couldn't see his eyes, though. She wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

"I thought you'd cut out of town," she said calmly. Inwardly, Buffy was proud of her composure.
Look at me, she wanted to shout at him. *See me be the adult one for a change?* "You don't have any more obligations holding you here, right?" *OK, so maybe that was a little on the petty side.*

He answered her accusation anyway. "Tried," Spike said. "Actually stowed away on a boat headed across the Channel that first night. Made it about two miles downriver before I jumped out and swam back to the city."

"You swim? I didn't know that."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "Had to learn in the forties. Courtesy of a certain souled ex of yours who thought his sub wasn't big enough for the both of us."

"Oh." It was another reminder of the time that had elapsed for him, when everything for her was still so fresh, and it drove her to silence as she regarded him. He looked rested, more so than he had the night of the battle, and instead of his black tee, he sported what looked like a dark blue button-down with his regular black jeans. It made him look…softer, even with the coat, and that familiar pang of recognition stabbed Buffy's gut.

"How's Red doin'?" he asked quietly. "Is she really up to flyin' back already?"

"That's what the doctors say. That's what Willow says, for that matter. She's kind of tired of being poked and prodded and treated like a science experiment." She frowned as what he'd asked actually sunk in. "How'd you know about all that?" she said. "You didn't even stick around long enough to see me yell at Rose."

A grimace twisted his features. "Got a hold of that Lydia bird," Spike finally admitted. "She's the one who told me Red was up and out, and that you were hopping the pond for Sunnyhell tomorrow morning."

Lydia. Figured. But…

"I thought you'd left." It was a whisper this time, pain replacing the flare of jealousy she'd felt at his query about Willow. "I turned around, and you were just gone. I thought we were in the middle of something, and you…you didn't even stick around long enough for us to find out if we were or not."

"That's not—." He cut himself off with a growl, long fingers running through his hair and mussing the curls he'd let go soft the past week. "I'm here now, right? Can we…you can't begin to fathom what a wreck my head was, Buffy. I'm s'posed to hate you, remember? All that jazz with Dru, and Angelus, and the whole plan of tryin' to add you to my Slayer belt? Any of that ringing a bell to you?"

"And you think it was a bed of roses for me?" Anger was back. Anger was good. She knew how to deal with anger. "God, Spike, you listened to me talk for *how long* about what going through Angel and Angelus did to me, and you have the nerve to believe you've got exclusive rights to being confused? How arrogant is that?"

"But you knew. She didn't steal it all away from you." A step closer, Spike jabbed a finger at the air. "*And* you knew all about who I was goin' to be back in the day. You fucked me knowing---."

Her slap across his cheek was a clarion call through the night, shattering the peace of the water and leaving her eyes glittering. "We did not *fuck*. Don't you *dare* call it that, or next time, I don't care what's happened between us, you're going to get staked, do you understand?"

His head stayed bowed to her left, but she didn't know if it was from the power of her blow, or because he couldn't bear to look at her. "What does it matter what we call it?" he asked, his voice
low and rough.

"It matters," she simply said.

For a long moment, all she could hear was the broken sound of her breathing. Though she'd spent so many of her nights the previous week searching for Spike, Buffy'd never actually dared to contemplate what would happen if she found him. It had somehow seemed more important just to make sure he was still out there than to act out potential scenarios on what would transpire. And now...now that she'd found him, or rather, now that he'd found her---.

"Were you following me?" she asked.

Spike shook his head, stuffing his hands deep into his pockets. "Lydia said you'd been patrolling. I thought..." His lashes lifted then, dark eyes darting to the distance behind her, and she glanced over her shoulder to see the bench---their bench---only a few yards away. "There a reason you picked this spot?"

"You know the answer to that." She began walking again, heading for the seat as had been her original intent, and heard the soft swish of his coat as he fell into step beside her. "This is way harder than I thought it was going to be."

"What?"

"Talking. We were so good at it when..."

She heard him sigh. "When I was William, you mean."

"I wasn't going to say that."

"Right. And I'm not dead and good-looking."

"But...am I wrong?" She dared to sneak a peek at him, only to meet the same stealing glance he was shooting her. "Is this only hard for me?"

They stopped at the bench, both of them looking down at it as if they'd sink if they dared to sit on it. "It's not just you, luv," Spike said quietly. "I've been tryin' to do this since you bloody well woke up."

"What's so different now? Why can't you do it?"

His head tilted as he cocked a brow. "You mean, other than the fact that last time we had a deep and meaningful, I was on the breathing half of the team?"

This was getting them nowhere. Maybe they weren't ready yet for the deep, emotion-filled stuff. Maybe they should start with the simple questions first, Buffy thought.

"What was it like for you?" she asked, taking a seat on the edge of the bench. "Could you really not remember, or did it come in bits and pieces as it was happening to me?"

"Didn't Rose tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

Spike sighed, his shoulders slumping as he joined her on the stone. "That night with Giles and...my mum, I got you back to my house to rest up. Next morning, I get up...and it's like none of it ever happened. You were never there, I never met Esme, Cook never knew any recipe for any soddin'
magical tea. Even my journal was gone. My life was exactly like it was before we met and I was none the wiser that I'd had those weeks of bli--." He coughed to cover up the word that had almost slipped out, a harsh jangle in his chest. "Cept for the fact that that git Howard was dead. Could consider that better, at least."

She'd suspected something like this. Rose had hinted as much when she'd spoken to them on the way to the hospital with Willow. But the seer had been gone when Buffy had gone back to the flat the next morning, and hadn't been heard from since. She'd had no way to definitively find out the truth.

"So, the first spell Willow did…?"

"Got rid of the block," Spike confirmed. "The old witch knew, of course. I was up and down claiming my ignorance 'bout whatever it was she was scheming, so she sussed the truth right away. And suckered me into it with talk about my 'true love.' Thought she meant Dru, which was why I went into it like I did."

It was wrong to feel jealous of the crazy vampire, but Buffy did, and she had to knot her hands together in her lap to stop the itchiness that suddenly sprouted in her palms. "Makes sense," she said, staring out at the water. "Since she's the love of your life, and all."

She could feel his eyes boring into her. "That what you think?" he said quietly.

"You were with her for over a hundred years. And I seem to recall someone kidnapping my two best friends and conning my mom out of her best hot chocolate because he was so torn up about his girlfriend leaving him. Sounds pretty love of your life to me."

"That was before I knew about us."

Haltingly, his fingers stretched and slid, inching with a visible solicitude toward her, and then hovered for an infinite second before a single digit traced a feather line along the top of her bare knee. Goosebumps erupted along her skin at the faint touch, and her mouth was suddenly dry, but Buffy did nothing to stop the gentle caress.

"I don't get it," she said.

"Get what?" Because she hadn't rebuffed him in either word or deed, Spike grew bolder, dropping the other fingers that had been curled into his palm to stroke the soft skin of her inner thigh.

"Why you seem so much the same," Buffy replied. "When Angel…after, he was so different, and it got easier for me to separate my feelings from my duty. But you…you don't even have a soul, Spike, and I know I shouldn't be sitting here, talking to you like it's not possible for you to kill me, but…" She faltered when his hand withdrew, finally looking up to see the closed planes of his face.

"I'm not goin' to kill you," he said. "Couldn't. Thought you knew that."

"But you're supposed to. You're supposed to want to."

"I'm s'posed to not feel this way, too, but that doesn't seem to be of any concern to whatever cosmic joker orchestrated this little chain of events, now does it?"

"Is that what everything is to you? Just…some bad joke?"

Buffy couldn't keep the ache out of her voice, and watched Spike drop his head into his hands, pulling at his hair before bolting upward to begin pacing the length of the bench. "Why is it you always manage to pull out the one word from what I say and twist it 'round to make it sound so much
"You're the one who took off for lands unknown," she shot back. "I'm the one who's been sitting on this damn bench every night, wondering if I was going to get to see you again before we went back."

"Only 'cause I thought...I'm not what you really want, Buffy." He stopped in mid-pace, head cocking as he looked at her, and there was no hiding the gleam of hope that reflected in his eyes. "You were here every night?"

"Well...yeah." Squirming under his direct stare, she fell back onto the tried and trusted response when it came to Spike. "Don't get so keyed up about it. I needed to know what kind of threat you were going to be. Willow's not exactly up to snuff. Giles is all kinds of distracted worrying about me and her and keeping Travers' off our backs. And as far as I knew, you were off plotting some new half-baked scheme that makes the villains on Scooby Doo look like geniuses. I was just...taking care of my own."

"Once upon a time, I would've been on that list," Spike said. "Not the one you were needing to protect everyone from."

"Once upon a time, you weren't a vampire."

"Is it really that bad?" Dropping to a crouch before her, he placed his hands on either side of her hips, caging her from running without having to fight through him first. "If I wasn't a vampire, I wouldn't be here right now. And you and me? Wouldn't've had any shot because I'd be rotting away in my grave somewhere."

"What makes you think we have any shot at all?"

"The fact that you're sitting here. The fact that you could've just let it all go and said to hell with ol' Spike and got on your silver bird tomorrow without ever once looking back." When she rolled her eyes and tilted her head back to avoid looking at him, Spike's hand shot out and grabbed her chin, forcing her to return her gaze to his face. "The fact that you love me."

"I love William."

"And he's still here, and he remembers every word you ever said, and every promise he ever made, and every kiss we ever shared. I want that back. Took me all week to get it straight in my head, but that's why I'm here."

"Then you wasted your time, Spike. Because you and me? Can't ever happen."

"Why?"

"Have you forgotten that you're evil? I haven't."

"Evil's relative."

"And it's exactly _that_ kind of statement that proves why we won't work."

With a frustrated snarl, Spike stood and whirled away, marching down to the edge of the water and screaming at the top of his lungs. His spine arched backward as he bayed at the stars, venting in that one cry all his anger and all his pain and all his vexation with the situation, and when it was over, he fell to his knees, staring out over the darkened horizon.

More than anything, Buffy was fighting the instinct to rise and go to him, to soothe the tension away
from the brow she knew so well, to feel him relax against her as she held him tight. But she had
acquiesced to that instinct that day at the apartment, when she'd approached him in the living room
about whether or not he remembered, and he'd refused to accept her consolation with a ferocity that
had sparked her to unexpected tears. This wasn't William, she had to remind herself. This wasn't a
man who needed her to show him how strong he really was. This was a demon who'd killed
thousands of people, including two other Slayers, who was proud to denounce needing anything
except the woman he loved.

*Does Spike love me?*

He hadn't said so, though he'd hinted around the topic in more way than one. But the better question
was…

Did it make a difference if he did?

"Doesn't change anything, you know."

Spike hadn't moved, and with his words tossed out onto the water so casually, his voice sounded
oddly hollow, like he was talking to her from the bottom of a well. Buffy rose and took a few steps
closer to him---not to do anything reassuring, she hastened to say to herself. Just to hear him better.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Not quite as patient as I was back in the day---."

Buffy couldn't help but giggle, earning a sideways scowl when she said, "You were patient?"

"But it still doesn't change anything. Probably find myself on the wrong end of your stake for it,
but…"

"What is it you're planning, Spike?" When he didn't answer, Buffy dropped to the grass beside him,
grabbing his arm and jerking him back to force him to look at her. "Stop with the cryptic. It doesn't
suit you."

When he reached over, she thought he was going to pry her fingers from his arm. Instead, Spike set
his hand over hers, stroking the side with his thumb, while he slowly tugged his arm to his chest, his
eyes never leaving hers. It forced her to lose her balance, falling against him and across his knees.
His other arm curved around her back to hold her steady, and she felt the breath hitch in her throat at
the impending, not entirely unwelcome thought that he was going to kiss her.

"All I've done this week is think," Spike said quietly. "Hasn't been my pastime of choice for a bit
now, but seems you've got a way of bringing out the poet in me. But…" He glanced down when she
set her hand against his chest to stable herself, and through his thick lashes, Buffy saw a willful
determination reminiscent of a younger, less jaded man.

"Remembering everything that had happened," he continued, "living it all as fresh as if it was just
yesterday…both glorious and a nightmare, all at the same time, you know? Sure, you do," he
answered for Buffy before she could say otherwise. "Saw your face when you first woke up. All
self-righteous terror that it had really happened, and that you were shackled with your mortal enemy.
But then that fades, doesn't it? And you end up kissing when you get caught up in the heat of the
fight, and you start to think that maybe that enemy business is a load of rubbish."

"You've tried to kill me, Spike. Just like I've tried to kill you. Being enemies is what we are."

Spike shook his head. "That's Watcher-speak you're spouting, pet. Because this April affair has
changed all that. I've already told you I can't kill you. You think you can look me in the eye and tell me something different?"

Even before she met his challenge, Buffy knew the response she was going to give him. She'd known it, deep down, from the second she'd felt his arm holding her so protectively in that demon pub in which she'd woken from her time travels.

"So we agree that we can't kill each other," she said. "That doesn't prove anything. You're still a vampire, and I'm still the Slayer."

"We're also William and Buffy," he replied. "That was something else I spent this week considerin'. Before I got those memories back, I hated the prat I was when I was alive. Hated that I was so weak. So I spent a lot of time tryin' to change that, which is how I got to today."

"But…you said you weren't William. You made that very clear to me."

His hand came up to brush back the hair the slight breeze was tickling across her cheek. "I know. And that's still true, as far as I already said. A lot's happened to me since those days, luv, so, no, I'm not exactly the bloke you met the first time 'round. But what remembering did for me…what you did for me, was show that maybe William the Bloody Awful Poet wasn't such a milksop after all. You showed me how to be strong. I told you that, remember?"

How could she forget? It had been that same night he'd given her the almost proposal she'd almost accepted on the bench they'd just vacated. But she stayed silent, drinking down the solemnity of Spike's countenance as he continued with his explanations. Buffy knew she should probably get up off his lap, to force the distance back between them, but it seemed like too much effort, especially since she was convinced he had no intentions to harm her.

She didn't really want to, either.

"I told you a lot of things," Spike said. "But what sticks, and what kept comin' back to me every time I'd try to ditch this town and everything about it that reminded me of you, was what I promised. So, you can get sore at me as much as you want, and you can be a stubborn bitch about me bein' evil and the like, but it's not goin' to change a thing. I'm not goin' to let it."

Promises. He was speaking of promises made by a heart more innocent, to a girl desperately in need of their anchorage. Vampires didn't honor promises; they held to blood oaths and death threats with more tenacity than any desire to clemency, and yet, here he was, belying her notions about what constituted demon behavior, and speaking of pledges she'd acquitted him from the moment she realized who he was going to be.

"I'm not holding you to anything you said." Carefully, Buffy tried to pull back, but the iron bar of his arm at her waist kept her still. She would have to exert more than damaging physical force to escape the circle of his embrace, and so decided against it, because hurting him now was the last thing she wanted to do. "I know they were extenuating circumstances. I'm OK with that."

"I'm not. Told you once, I think Angel was a bloody fool to just walk out of your life like he did. He never could handle things in the long-term, always making decisions 'bout the right and wrong for everyone else like he was their fuckin' lord and master."

The path he was leading her down made her heart start to hammer in her chest, because the implications were chilling and wondrous and the last thing she'd ever allowed herself to think of. "Don't do this," Buffy whispered. "You don't want to do this."
"But that's the thing of it," Spike replied. He pulled her flat against him, so that the breath from his words was a soft echo as he spoke them out loud. "I do want to. I made a promise that I wouldn't ever leave you, luv, and whether you like it or not, I'm stickin' to it."

"Why?"

His lips swallowed the single word down, taking her mouth in a gentle kiss before sliding up her jaw to her ear. When Buffy heard the whispered confession, like a child's prayer sent out into the darkness, she squeezed her eyes shut against the sudden burning that blinded her. It would forever be William's words that undid her, she realized, shattering all resolve to hold true to what she'd been taught, driving her to chuck away the decisions she hadn't fully committed to when it came to how she would face her future. And maybe, part of it was that she wanted to believe him. Angel had ravaged an innocence Buffy knew she could never retrieve, and then he'd forced the stake even deeper into her heart by walking away as if he'd never cared.

William had helped the healing of that to begin. He'd shown her that she was worthy of love, that she was strong and better than how she'd imagined, and he'd done it with little to no regard as to what she would give him in return. And now here was Spike, who by all rights should've run from her even faster than Angel did because at least Angel had a soul that was supposed to help guide him along a moral path, helping with a battle that wasn't his, proving with his actions if not always his words that he still believed in those adages he'd vowed to her a century before.

Would it be so bad to let him do it?

He was watching her intently, a strong hand cupping her face as she played the arguments over and over inside her head. "Gone awful quiet there, luv," Spike murmured.

"I'm just thinking."

"Oh, I forgot." His lips twisted into a smile that was more teasing than mocking. "Your brain and your mouth can't work together at the same time."

Buffy slapped at his chest. "I'm serious," she complained. "This isn't…making a decision like this doesn't make the problems just go away. I still have a duty, Spike. And as far as everyone else is concerned, you're still William the Bloody, which means big-time bad news as far as the Council cares."

"You don't work for the Council any more."

"And we both know that means diddly when it comes to what they decide to stick their noses into. And…and…" She took a deep breath, though it did little to calm the sickening lurch of her stomach as she thought about it. "I have to do what I have to do, Spike. I may not actively want to kill you, but we both know that if there's an apocalypse in the balance, I may not have a choice."

"I know."

"And you're willing to take that risk?"

"Already said I would, didn't I? Why do you think it took me a week to come 'round to this? I'm not stupid, and I don't exactly have a deathwish, but in the long run, what's more important is that I'm there for you. In case you haven't noticed, I'm not half-bad in a bit of rough and tumble. If nothin' else, consider me some extra muscle when you need it. But I'm not changing my mind, Buffy. If you're in Sunnydale, I'm in Sunnydale. I promised you that."

"You're more than just muscle."
The hope that blazed in the blue, even in the shadows cast by the moon and water, made his face light up. "That right?" he said slowly. "What exactly am I, then?"

She didn't have an answer for him. But as she leaned in to press her lips to his, Buffy felt one of the knots inside her loosen. It might be a mistake to be putting her trust in Spike so readily, but she wouldn't know if he was genuine if she didn't give him a chance. And she owed that to William, for everything he had given her and for everything he'd done. He deserved the opportunity to be loved, in a manner that befit the man he had been.

Loved, as he still loved her.

Throughout the kiss, and into the long embrace that followed as the pair sat on the bank and watched the moon travel across the sky, Buffy continued to hear the words Spike had whispered in her ear at her query on why he was honoring his promise.

"Because I'm not lost anymore," he'd said. "And my love for you...still legion."

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